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I, Daniel W Jordan III, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in History.

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Socialism Gone Awry: A Study in Bureaucratic Dysfunction in the Armed Forces of the German Democratic Republic

Student’s name: Daniel W Jordan III

This work and its defense approved by:

Committee chair: Martin Francis, Ph.D.

Committee member: Edward Ross Dickinson, Ph.D.

Committee member: Katherine Sorrels, Ph.D.
Socialism Gone Awry: 
A Study in Bureaucratic Dysfunction in the Armed Forces of the German Democratic Republic

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by

Daniel W. Jordan III

M.A. Pepperdine University 
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Committee Chair: Martin Francis, Ph.D.
ABSTRACT

This dissertation establishes the existence of organizational dysfunction within a socialist army. It then posits a cause and outlines the tragic effects of that dysfunction on the average East German soldier. The East German Army (NVA) of the German Democratic Republic was a representation of the state in many different ways. Its demographic closely matched that of the general population, not only in terms of class, but also in educational levels. The army also closely paralleled the larger state in structure and in political ideology. As the state was militarized in the broadest sense of the word, the NVA represented in the development of its political-ideological discourse and its socialist consciousness. There were surprising continuities between state organs and its army, including its politicization, its training, and its structure. Like the army, the GDR closely paralleled the operational hierarchies of industry, business, and education with its national security equivalents. Like the political committees on the factory floor, the army also had formal and informal structures of political operatives who oversaw operational and managerial leaders, as well as the political development of the lowest workers and soldiers. Because of this sharp parallel, the records of the NVA provide a unique view into the effect of politicization and ideology on the lowest soldiers. Army records are detailed and filled with its own analysis for the causes of special incidents, including accidents, disciplinary problems, training problems, desertions, and suicides.

These records also provide rare insight into the operations and functions of a socialist bureaucracy. Clearly, Marxist-Leninist ideology had an impact on the progress of Soviet client states. What is new here is the ability to watch the ideology evolve into a political-military discourse that adversely affected the training and function of East German army officers. In turn, the reduction in effective leadership had adverse effects on traditional indicators of smooth-running bureaucracies or military organizations. High rates of desertion, accidents, suicide, and disciplinary issues were tolerated on a daily basis in the NVA. Consequently, the negative work environment and chronic toxic leadership of its political and military leadership adversely affected
the lives of their soldiers. The effect on the soldiers had long-term effects on the political stability of the East German regime and the eventual demise of the state.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Why did the GDR [the German Democratic Republic] collapse so quickly once the external props were pulled out?

Corey Ross, The East German Dictatorship, 2002.¹

On January 31, 1959 at 6:45 P.M., an accidental shooting occurred at the School for Political Officers of the National People’s Army only 17 kilometers southeast of the city center. The school’s armory had just issued weapons and ammunition to a squad of five young soldiers about to begin guard duty, and they had returned to their barracks to complete their preparations. As one soldier sewed a button onto his uniform jacket for their inspection, two others were wiping down their machine pistols with cleaning rags.

Suddenly, the sharp retort of a gunshot rang throughout the barracks. Naturally, everyone was startled; soldiers did not normally hear pistol shots in the barracks where they ate and slept, certainly not in barracks located in urban areas. Within seconds, as the soldiers realized that the shot had come from their own room, all hell broke loose:

...Private Klingemann² ran with a bleeding hand out of the room to the aid station as Corporal Becker, blood spurting out of his mouth...pressed his hands over his stomach and fell to his side.³

Private Gabler, probably the calmest soldier in the squad, scrambled across the room to aid the fallen Becker. A young soldier named Burkhard had incorrectly loaded his pistol inside the barracks and had accidentally shot Klingemann in the hand and Becker in the stomach.


² All names of private citizens are pseudonyms. For historical accuracy, the actual names of NVA and Party officials that signed official documents or were public officials were used.

Then, to the surprise of everyone—and less than 60 seconds after the first shot rang out—Burkhard placed his smoking pistol to his temple and pulled the trigger. Becker died immediately in the barracks room, and Burkhard died an hour and a half later at the local hospital.4

In the aftermath of this tragic accident, Colonel Beckmann, the school commandant and a mouthpiece for ideological doctrine, offered obligatory and predictable excuses to his superiors. While preparations for guard duty were normally routine, his soldiers had obviously failed to follow proper procedures. Nor had the sergeant-of-the-guard or the company commander properly supervised their preparations:

The practical training and instruction of [guard] watch orders and instructions, which had the force of law for all officers and soldiers, had not been carried out. Then, in accordance with his responsibilities as he understood them, Colonel Beckmann concluded:

This [incident] had its causes in insufficient ideological educational work. The significance of orders and their execution for the elevation of combat readiness and the improvement of military discipline are not yet completely clear [to all army members] [author’s emphasis].5

Beckmann directed that leading officers at all levels, including the unnamed company commander most responsible, must strive for “significant improvements” and “clarity” in military order and military discipline. How this was to be done was not specified.6

Unlike similar army reports, there were no witness statements attached to Beckmann’s report. There was no explanation for why the hapless Burkhard took his own life. The report also lacked the expected assessments of Burkhard’s character, his political standing, and his military performance as a soldier. We do not know about his family life or how well he got along with his fellow soldiers. Clues about the work environment in the school do not exit either.


6 Ibid. “Die nach der Brigadekontrolle begonnene verstärkte Arbeit zur Schaffung ideologischer Klarheit über den Befehl.”
The absence of critical information about Private Burkhard leads to one principal conclusion: Burkhard’s suicide and Corporal Becker’s fatal injury were a complete embarrassment to the East German Army’s flagship school for political officers. The fact that only two days elapsed from incident to signed final report also confirms the conclusion that the sooner Colonel Beckmann could rid himself of this embarrassment, the better.

Beckmann’s embarrassment notwithstanding, the incident raises troubling questions about the effects of Marxist/Leninist ideology on the work environment and the everyday life of the East German soldier. A soldier accidentally causes the death of a comrade; then, only seconds later, decides his life is no longer worth living. How is that possible? Had he already been thinking about suicide, or did he commit the act without premeditation? The answers to those questions cannot be found in a military history; East German soldiers never played the drums and trumpets of the battlefield.

However, Socialism Gone Awry, a history of everyday life (Alltagsgeschichte) in the East German Army, seeks to illuminate this and other important questions. It is the dramatic story of an institutional attempt to order, process, control, and suppress individual freedoms and initiative by enhancing the power and prestige of the state. Penetrating the state’s control mechanisms will unlock its traditional secrets while giving a voice to thousands of uniformed citizens of the former German Democratic Republic. Their voices will humanize and bring to life the Alltagsgeschichte of the soldier.

The history of the citizen-soldier is also the story of the East German people. The “grand-arc” of Marxism/Leninism created specific governmental policies that predictably affected the army as a major sector of the state. Those effects present themselves as measurable indicators of organizational health, including high rates of accidents and desertions. Within those indicators,

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each statistic represents the unique life of an individual soldier. Like the common citizen, life at the bottom of the East German Army was directly affected by political decisions from the top and by intermediate NVA commanders, whose instructions implemented those decisions.

THE RESEARCH QUESTION

The challenge, then, is to reveal the influence of socialist ideology on institutional processes. The working hypothesis is that the trajectory of Marxist/Leninist ideology, narrowly defined in time, influenced a discourse that directly and measurably affected the organizational health of the army. This is what Alf Lüdtke calls the process from the Begriff to its Vorstellen (from the idea to its implementation and performance). Unfortunately, as we follow this trajectory, many will sense a premonition of impending tragedy. We know how the story ends; we just do not know what happens along the way.

Understanding the Alltagsgeschichte of the soldier, then, requires understanding the context of his environment. The historical subject is the soldier; the environment in which he lived and worked is the venue that enables us to understand the subject. By using this methodology, the soldier avoids, as Eric Weitz observed, becoming a “mere pawn in a manipulative game of power brokers.”

For example, the case of Private Burkhard transforms him from a mere statistic to a young German man with a name and a voice. We want to ask him why he accidentally fired his machine pistol. Driven by impatience, our second question follows in rapid succession: “Why, then, after such an obvious accident, did you commit suicide?” Questions of this type transform the common soldier from a bureaucratic pawn and statistic into a historical figure with a voice.

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Other questions will certainly surface: how did the young men of the NVA make sense of their daily lives and how did they cope with the stresses they experienced? Soldiers of the same age as Private Burkhart, for example, assaulted their sergeants and officers in 1957 over 6,000 times.\textsuperscript{10} A few years later, those same soldiers formally complained and petitioned the NVA—that is, the Socialist Unity Party (\textit{Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands}, SED), over 74,000 times about issues critical to their personal welfare, including housing, uniforms, and food. This equaled approximately one formal complaint for every two soldiers.\textsuperscript{11}

Taken together, these extraordinary examples of organizational red flags and poor discipline raise even more questions. The most important one, though, boils down to an essential question of \textit{Alltagsgeschichte}: what were the effects of the Party’s dysfunction on the common soldier? Focusing on the soldiers’ everyday life is also an illuminating process, for it reveals an alternative means of control within a socialist society—a political-military discourse that had wide-ranging institutional, organizational, and personal effects. Understanding this mechanism of power is to understand how the memes, messages, and signification of a political-military discourse dominated the organization of the NVA.\textsuperscript{12}

Party control of the East German state’s sectors has been well documented. The state exercised its control and power in negative ways through the familiar Stasi (East Germany’s Secret Police or the \textit{Ministerium für Staatssicherheit}, MfS) and the less familiar investigations of its Party Inspection Commissions (\textit{Parteikontrollkommission}, or the PKK). As a historical source, focusing exclusively on Stasi investigations would have provided a skewed perspective about army life.


\textsuperscript{11} "Analyse der Eingaben und Beschwerden und ihrer Bearbeitung im Ausbildungsjahr 1963/64 (Vertrauliche Verschlussache)," ed. MfNV (Freiburg: BA-MA, 1964), 1.

Those investigations, in general, were in pursuit of crimes against the state or the Party. They are important investigations, and occasionally there are references to Stasi investigators or informants in NVA records, but those references do not appear in large numbers in NVA files.

NVA records, on the other hand, are prolific with the investigations and analysis of internal incidents by their inspection commissions. These reports are an essential source that informed a political-military discourse—a discourse that unified ideology, organizational dysfunction, and institutional lethargy with the everyday life of the NVA soldier. The discourse influenced the training of officers, as well as the daily operation of training establishments and operations. The leadership quality of those officers affected unit performance and the work environment of the soldier. We cannot read the soldier’s mind, but we can begin to understand his life from his actions and his responses to the military and political bureaucracy above him.

Developing the NVA’s Alltagsgeschichte has an additional consequence. Inevitably, the reader will wonder whether the processes of control applied to other areas of government and Party influence. Such questions will open up the GDR to further enquiry. In his attempt to understand the dissolution of the GDR, Corey Ross has already speculated why it continued to fall behind the West and why it collapsed after its props were pulled.13 Alternatively, we could ask, as Mary Fulbrook has, whether the demise of the East German state was simply a case of the “rise and fall of the GDR.”14

In pursuing answers to these questions, it is important to avoid an analysis that presumes to judge the ideology with a Cold War bias. This is not a moral debate about the correctness of Marxism-Leninism vis-à-vis Western liberal democracy. Instead, the questions being asked are relevant to the GDR and its army on its own terms:

What were the goals of the regime with respect to the army?
How did the regime expect to accomplish those goals?

12 Ross, The East German Dictatorship: 86, 135.
Did the regime accomplish the goals it set out to accomplish? The pursuit of answers to these questions may offer insights into the dysfunction of the GDR and the interplay and tensions between political and military power. The exercise of power in a hierarchical military organization is self-evident. What is not so evident is how the exercise of military power in a socialist army can be overwhelmed by the influence of the ruling Party and its ideology.

THE HISTORY OF THE GDR

The history of the German Democratic Republic, without putting too fine a point on it, was incredibly short. It existed as a political entity for only 41% of the 20th century and only 4% of the 2nd millennium. By 2020, an entire generation of German citizens will not remember why the Berlin Wall was built in the first place. Nonetheless, from its birth in 1949 to its dissolution in 1990, the history of the GDR was punctuated by serious military, economic, and political crises. Its purpose was to form a classless, egalitarian society in which its citizens could be freed from the “oppressions of capitalism.” Unlike other Eastern European countries behind the Iron Curtain, the GDR is now most often viewed as the failed socialist state of the European continent.

The end of World War II meant that the Soviets could insert its trained cadre of communist activists throughout the governments of Eastern Europe. Internally, these political systems conformed to a Stalinist model while all foreign relations were subordinated to Moscow. This consolidation and control applied particularly to the security forces over which the Soviets maintained strict control.

Even before its inception in 1949, the GDR experienced significant political and military events. The Berlin Airlift of 1948-1949 is generally acknowledged as the beginning of tensions

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15 Ibid., 89.
17 Ibid., 245.
between the major powers that started the Cold War. Internally, tensions reached a peak with the people’s rebellion on the 17th of June in 1953. This was the first and only signal of mass disagreement with the regime until its fall in 1989. Tensions between the major powers reached an unacceptable peak when the Berlin Crisis of 1961 brought tanks from both sides within yards of the border, an act culminating in the erection of the Berlin Wall that August.

External crises also had a great impact on the military and political status of Berlin during the Cold War. The Hungarian Invasion of 1956, the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, the Prague Spring of 1968, and the Vietnam War were conducted with adversaries cognizant of the problems that East Germany and Berlin posed.

The overall characteristics of the GDR regime, always influenced by Soviet Stalinism, followed familiar themes: the dictatorship of the Party, the help of the secret police, the ideological claim that the Party was always right, the principle of a hierarchic centralism, a system of Party-appointed positions called the *nomenklatura*, and the organizational, educational and information monopoly of the Party and the state.\(^\text{18}\) These are all well-known characteristics of the GDR.

The structural defects of the GDR regime appeared early.\(^\text{19}\) Before the June 1953 rebellion in East Berlin, the number of refugees escaping to the West averaged between 225,000 and 426,000 per year.\(^\text{20}\) That trend increased until the East Germans, with the permission of Nikita Khrushchev, built the Berlin Wall in 1961 and closed the border with the West. Only then did the government feel safe enough to begin universal conscription in 1962.

The diplomatic history of the GDR was marked by increasing recognition of its sovereignty and independence by the international community. In 1972, it signed a Basic Treaty with the Federal Republic of Germany. The following year it gained full membership in the United Nations.


\(^{19}\) Ibid., 13.

Cold War tensions were always high, but the 1979 decision by NATO to station nuclear missiles on German soil was a point of contention, not only diplomatically but also within the two Germanys. The eventual dissolution of the East German state in 1989-1990 has been documented extensively, but the high point certainly must have been the loss of support from Mikael Gorbachev and the East German government’s subsequent bungling of its policy with respect to visits to the West in October-November 1989.

The historiography of the NVA clearly shows that from the beginning the SED, with the help and direction of Joseph Stalin, wanted its own army for the new German socialist state. While there was no consensus in the West on whether to admit a militarized West Germany into the new NATO military structure, the Soviets had already been arming the East Germans under the facade of an “Alert Police (Volkspolizei-Bereitschaften (VPB))” succeeded by the Barracked People’s Police, or Kasernierte Volkspolizei (KVP). The quality of its armaments was not satisfactory, however, and that prompted Walter Ulbricht, the Party’s First Secretary, to send a series of letters to the Soviet Union requesting permission to manufacture better ammunition and receive more security assistance from the Soviet army.

The Soviets were in complete agreement with every announcement and armament decision throughout the development of the “Alert Police” and the “Barracked Police” into its final form as the East German Army. The incredible size and militaristic organization of the KVP into air, land, and naval branches provided a not-so-subtle indication of their intentions. More subtle hints begun earlier in the 1950s as the Politbüro and the Ministry of the Interior had already started


22 Ibid.

23 Walter Ulbricht, "Brief an das Präsidium des ZK der KPDsu, Moskau," ed. Moskau Präsidium des ZK der KPDsu (Berlin: SAPMO-BA, 1953). „Wir sind in Schwierigkeiten, weil für die alten deutschen Waffen, die vor einiger Zeit an die Deutsche Volkspolizei ausgegeben wurden, noch eine geringe Menge einsatzfähiger Munition vorhanden ist. Wir bitten um die Erlaubnis zur Herstellung von Munition, sowie um die technische Hilfe...“

characterizing the KVP as Streitkräfte, or “armed forces.” Fully three years before the NVA was legally formed by the East German Volkskammer, early oaths of office also brazenly referred to its national police as Streitkräfte. By the summer of 1953, the newly created, and by virtue of the Potsdam accords, illegal, army had reached a strength of 113,000. Thus, when the Nationale Volksarmee finally stood up as a force officially approved by the DDR Volkskammer in March 1956, it was already fully trained, in contrast to the Bundeswehr, which began with a mere 101 volunteers.

An important aspect of this institutional story of the NVA was its place within the larger defense alliance of the Warsaw Pact. Primarily in response to the integration of West Germany into NATO in 1955, the Soviets founded the Warsaw Treaty Organization. The treaty was important for its consolidation of joint military command among its Eastern European members. It was also the justification for stationing the Soviet Army in formerly occupied countries, particularly in Poland and East Germany. The military intervention in Hungary in 1956, as well as the intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968, revealed the true nature of the Warsaw Pact as a treaty organization to control internal strife before defending against external threats.

Party membership has long been viewed as one of the basic characteristics of a communist/socialist military officer. Not only did membership in the SED guarantee acceptance of the Party’s Leading Role, membership also enabled the Party to keep a close watch on its members. The military officer subjected himself to Party discipline and opened his private and professional life to Party scrutiny.

Like the civilian sectors, every echelon of every organization was subject to the influence of the Party. The extension of political power into army organizations ensured more participation by

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Party members and provided the Party with a ready-made means of control. Party groups and organizations were established down to the company level. By definition, a Party organization existed when at least three members of the Party were present, regardless of their rank or position. Party organizations also served as the connection between those in the Party and the **parteilos**, or those who were not members. These “basic organizations” (Grundorganisationen) were tasked, through their “model behavior and practical activities,” with making the "Leading Role of the Party" a reality.\(^{28}\) In other words, all Party members and candidates, whether they worked in an official Party organ or not, were expected to maintain a leadership role at all times. The Party also strengthened its hold on its members by vetting Party members in their units for political reliability and approving individual military promotions.\(^{29}\)

As an additional means control, the administrative offices of the Party, its “Party organs,” supported the activities of all “Party organizations.” The distinction between organs and organizations of the Party was simple: Party organs were formal offices with specific functions, but their principal function was to serve groups of Party members at whatever level of the army they were found. Party organs have been characterized as being **of** the army, while Party organizations were **in** the army.\(^{30}\)

The Party’s most important means of control, however, was the assignment of political officers at every level of command from the Ministry of Defense down to the battalion level. Political officers at these echelons of the army also served as the unit’s deputy commander, or **Stellvertreter**. The disadvantage of this framework will be discussed in Chapter Three, but suffice it

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\(^{29}\) Herspring, "Technology and Civil-Military Relations: The Polish and East German Cases," 131.

to say that political officers and political organs were at every level of command, as the following chart illustrates.

HISTORIOGRAPHY

The “Victory and Achievement of Socialism” by the East German State and its dissolution have been exhaustively researched and documented. One universally accepted reason for its demise was the lack of economic support from Mikhail Gorbachev because of the Soviet Union’s own economic problems. However, the problem of the Soviet economy merely draws attention to the economic problems of the GDR, which bring us full circle to its structural problems and


attempts to explain its collapse. Jonathan Zatlin has persuasively argued that the GDR’s economic problems were Eric Honecker’s fault because he tried to placate its citizens by buying consumer goods from the West that the GDR could ill afford.33 Mary Fulbrook has suggested that politically the regime was never completely accepted by its citizens, despite an unbroken record of SED election victories:

...East German society was, politically, deeply divided between those who actively sustained the regime, those who cooperated in some more minor way in its functioning, those who unthinkingly acquiesced and sought to live what they deemed to be quite normal daily lives, and those who in various ways made their disagreements felt—and suffered the consequences, minor or major.34

“...a lot of people,” Fulbrook stressed, “did not like the GDR.”35 While she accepts a certain level of low-key resistance, most people, it seems, simply wanted to be left alone.

Alan Nothnagle in his Building the East German Myth, argued that the SED maintained control through the passion and political motivation of a unique GDR mythology. The regime maintained a mythological discourse that was successful for forty years—until the regime lost all credibility in the forty-first.36 The mythology that Nothnagle describes forms the basis for a discourse of superlatives that is discussed further in Chapter Two.

The number of historical works on the NVA is slim in comparison to broader histories of the East German state. In fact, the comparison is striking. In the United States, for example, for every 80 books on the GDR, only one is available about the East German Army. In Germany, that ratio is an understandable 17:1 in favor of histories of the GDR.37 Scholarly articles reflect an even larger

34 Fulbrook, Interpretations of the Two Germanies, 1945-1990: 76.
35 Williamson, Germany from Defeat to Partition, 1945-1963: 105-6.
37 Comparisons of Amazon.com and Amazon.de as of Sept 24 2014.
difference. A keyword search on the JSTOR (Journal Storage) service revealed a ratio of 300 articles on the GDR for every one on its army.\textsuperscript{38}

The daily life of a soldier does not normally inspire the deconstruction of ideological and political ideas on military processes. That is why most of the works on the army fall into one of three categories: popular books on the armament and organization of the NVA, a few personal memoirs by its soldiers and officers, and a wide assortment of institutional histories that focus on organization, Party and military policies, and senior leaders.\textsuperscript{39} By far, the majority of these institutional histories are the product of efforts by the Military History Office of the Bundeswehr (the current German Army) in Potsdam. A 19-volume set of institutional history from that office covers every major unit and period of the NVA from the hidden army of the KVP before 1956 to indepth studies of the operations of the NVA within the framework of the Warsaw Pact.\textsuperscript{40}

Three of the most important works out of Potsdam apropos to this work have focused on the social or political aspects of the NVA. Stephan Fingerle’s \textit{Weapons in Workers’ Hands? The Recruitment of the Officer Corps of the National People’s Army and its Predecessors} focused on the recruiting of a socialist officer corps in its armed forces. Fingerle traced recruiting practices with a particular emphasis on issues after the building of the Berlin Wall and the commencement of conscription.\textsuperscript{41}

Frank Hagemann’s work on the Party’s mastery of the army was an outstanding contribution to understanding the relationship between the military and political domains within

\textsuperscript{38} Comparison from \texttt{www.JSTOR.org} as of Sept 24 2014.


\textsuperscript{40} Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt or MGFA in Potsdam, Germany . For a complete list of its publications about the NVA see “Publikationen des MGFA,” Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt http://www.mgfa-potsdam.de/html/publikationen/gesamtverzeichnis#links.

the GDR. His *Party Rule in the National People’s Army* explained in detail the political apparatus and organizations by which the SED controlled its armed forces. He also called attention to the tension between the political and military domains and showed how the Party could be harsh in its reaction to nonconformist officers.\(^4^2\) Hans Ehlert, along with Matthias Rogg, also placed the NVA in the context of a socialist society with their *Military, State, and Society in the GDR*.\(^4^3\)

In the same vein, *In Service to the Party: The Handbook for the Armed Forces of the GDR* is a comprehensive look at the influence of the SED on all its armed forces, including early versions of the KVP, the NVA, the Border Guards and other militarized organizations, such as the FDJ and the Society for Sport and Technology. Edited by Torsten Diedrich, Hans Ehlert, and Rüdiger Wenzke, *In Service to the Party* provides an institutional background to for the organizations and general polices of these organizations.\(^4^4\)

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This cross-sectional study of the soldier’s everyday life penetrates the NVA vertically, from the *Politbüro* through the Ministry of Defense (MfNV) to the soldier. Temporally, the research focuses on a relatively short period from 1953 to 1962, the period between the 1953 rebellion and the beginning of conscription in East Germany. It is a history of everyday life because it explores ideology, political control, and bureaucratic dysfunction as a means to understand the soldier’s life.

The holdings of the NVA in the Federal Archives in Germany are so vast that it would be difficult to conduct a comprehensive enquiry covering all of its units. On the other hand, because of the hierarchical nature of the army, military and political processes can be understood by viewing the records of a relatively small portion of the organization. The following chart illustrates the

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vertical structure of the Ministry of National Defense and highlights the selection of units used in this study.\textsuperscript{45} In general, the discourse was traced from the MfNV through the 3\textsuperscript{rd} Military District and the 7\textsuperscript{th} Panzer Division down to the lowest battalions. Occasionally, reports from other military units were used to confirm the pervasive nature of the political-military discourse, but the primary focus can be seen in the highlighted units.

In his seminal work *The East German Dictatorship*, Corey Ross urged future historians and students of the GDR to focus on the “complex dialectical relationship between the state and its citizens.” The key to understanding that relationship was to focus on empirical studies of culture.

\textsuperscript{45} Hagemann, Parteiherrschaft: 38.
and society. Look beyond the "limits of politics," he urged, to understand the way state political agendas interacted with the individual's sense of self-interest.46

To a great extent, Ross' call informs this research methodology. In ideological terms, this approach explores the impact of implementing Marxist/Leninist ideology on a military bureaucracy; that is, it looks beyond the "limits of politics" to understand its effects. However, the ideology is a concept, studying its effects is akin to throwing a custard pie to a wall and hoping it will stick—obviously a losing proposition. Therefore, our understanding of the ideology must be interpreted as a discourse that can be empirically traced down through the bureaucratic documentation of the army.

Defining that discourse necessarily relies on theoretical support from the theories of Michel Foucault. Foucault has showed the callousness of state power by focusing on the "domination" of its interests through laws and other bureaucratic means. For the NVA, the domination of the Party can be explored through the directives, regulations, and reports of its control mechanisms as well as the decisions and reports of its officers and commanders. As Foucault suggests:

Let us ask...how things work at the level of ongoing subjugation, at the level of those continuous and uninterrupted processes, which subject our bodies, govern our gestures, dictate our behaviors, etc.47

Power, Foucault argued, is "employed and exercised through a net-like organization" by which individuals are in a position to both "undergo and to exercise power."48 From this point of view, a political-military discourse would qualify as an example of Foucauldian power/knowledge that traced its discursive formations through the policies of government and the application of those policies in military directives, rules, and regulations.

Foucault's "net-like organization" within the bureaucratic NVA, however, was merely the means by which power was transmitted. As previously discussed, Party control was evident in its

46 Ross, The East German Dictatorship: 49-50.
48 Ibid., 214.
use pervasive use of political officers, organs, and organizations to maintain control. In this way, the instruments of political power became integrated with military power to transform its “system of systems (political and military)” into a control regime made even more powerful by uniformed Party functionaries.

If this net was the means of transmission, then what was the expression of political power? Foucault argued that “discursive formations” existed within a control regime that was composed of “epistemes.” These epistemes defined not only what was knowable, but also what was organizationally permitted.49 While Foucault’s research reflected the “systems of science” that he studied, his ideas can also be applied to the working hypothesis: the NVA developed a systematic discourse of power/knowledge that anchored political control of the military domain. This discursive formation of epistemes (which evolved into specific and observable memes, messages, and signification) defined what was politically possible in the day-to-day operations and training of the NVA.

A summary of the hypothesis is as follows. The means of ideological power, expressed by the SED in a political-military discourse, had significant and measurable effects on the institution of the NVA and the individual soldier. Understanding those effects at the bottom of the military hierarchy privileges the everyday life of the soldier. The political-military discourse also helps us understand the mentalités, or the mind-set, of the Party elite—its generals, political officers, and Party faithful. What could be understood only in general terms now finds expression in the transmission of discursive patterns throughout the organization. What was almost inexpressible except in broad conceptual terms, becomes a documented textual expression of ideology.

Ironically, the Party intended the memes and messages of the discourse to fortify, shape, and transform the NVA into a socialist cadre army. The discourse was the framework for developing the socialist consciousness of every citizen and soldier. The resistance to that

transformation, however, manifested itself in high numbers of accidents, disciplinary problems, and suicides. Thus, the efforts to make consciousness manifest (in accordance with Marxist theory) found resistance in social and individual forms that empiricist approaches to history would recognize.\textsuperscript{50}

Clearly, the political context of Marxism/Leninism is critical. Without context, an incident would be isolated from its particular causes; it becomes just one more statistic in a report. In the shadows of ideology and bureaucracy, though, we begin to see the ineffective sinews of power working overtime to solve problems. In that regard, the soldiers gain a vigorous voice. Through their actions, each soldier experienced the effects of organizational dysfunction and inadvertently became a distinctive part of the political-military discourse.

Implied in the hypothesis is the existence of organizational dysfunction. At its very essence, dysfunction in social systems is defined as “the consequence of a social practice or behavior that undermines the stability of a system.”\textsuperscript{51} Dysfunction is more than the simple inability to solve a problem, but rather a descriptor for repetitive practices that have negative effects. Alan Goldman describes the effects of organizational dysfunction as “characterized by markedly lower effectiveness, efficiency, and performance than its peers or in comparison to societal standards.”\textsuperscript{52} A key element of a dysfunctional organization, then, is the “inevitability of faulty decision making” with concomitant unsatisfactory results. In other words, organizational dysfunction is not about making mistakes in pursuit of a solution, but rather the inability to change modes of thinking in the course of solving large repetitive problems. The signs of organizational dysfunction in the NVA will be easy to see. High accident and suicide rates and out-of-control disciplinary problems are some that will be explored in coming chapters.

\textsuperscript{51} Dictionary.com, October 15, 2014 (http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/dysfunction?s=t)

The pursuit of this research question did necessitate certain conventions. Some were made to facilitate the analysis of the sources. Initially, the KVP and the Border Guards were not part of the Ministry of Defense but were nevertheless included for purposes of continuity. In addition, the reader should understand that the Nationale Volksarmee was in reality the “National Armed Forces” of the German Democratic Republic. Along with the Military Districts (i.e., the ground forces) the NVA also included the branches of navy and of the air forces. The two military districts, the 3rd and the 5th, were consolidated in 1972 under a “Land Forces” headquarters, but that was well after the period of this study.

Overall, then, amalgamation of ideology with bureaucratic activities have created a discourse that shaped the work environment of the NVA. The political-military discourse influenced senior commanders and restricted the manner in which they could solve practical problems. Within this environment, the commander, political officer, line officer, and sergeant could act in only so many ways. The effects of accidents, crimes, and suicides inevitably shaped the Alltagsgeschichte of the soldier.

SOURCES AND STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

Fortunately, the NVA functioned as a well-defined social and political organization with a military purpose. Studying the NVA sources, however, can be a challenge. Despite their essential military character, the documents are filled with repetitive ideological messages and pitfalls of logic and reasoning. Penetrating the ideology and deconstructing the evidence is therefore an essential task if they are to be useful as historical evidence.

This deconstruction can also touch theories of literary and textual criticism, for most of the documents are textbook examples of “constative” and “performative” utterances. The constative utterance is language claiming to “represent things as they are, to name things that are already there...” Such statements can usually be assessed as being true or false. In the context of the NVA, a simple report of a unit that did or did not pass an inspection would be a constative utterance.
On the other hand, the preponderance of the documents from the NVA are more indicative of “performative utterances,” the rhetorical operations and acts of language that impose “linguistic categories” in pursuit of a world brought into being. Performative utterances, in this context, bring the Leading Role of the Party into being and organizes NVA operations as the SED would have it exist. Viewed in this light, the drafting of government communiqués and their transmission throughout a hierarchical organization has implications for how the discourse was interpreted by Party and non-Party members alike. Every army document, including its own logbooks, had performative utterances; their existence in these documents effectively heightened the political power of the Party.

NVA documents provided a plethora of textual clues about their processing times, the level of the headquarters responsible, and the level of interest by senior officers. Among the most important indicators was the level of their security classification upon promulgation. The overwhelming majority of NVA and Defense Ministry documents were classified. Fortunately, every one of them was declassified after 1990. The level of classification offered general clues to the level of sensitivity of the data within. Some, however, appeared to be more concerned about not embarrassing the Party than protecting relevant military secrets. The following table gives examples of NVA classification levels, English translations of the terms, and examples of documents that were classified at that level.

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The documents of the NVA also came in a variety of formats. They included commander’s reports, political officer’ reports, statistical analysis by political organs, unit log books, and the virulent reports of the Party’s Inspection Commission. Some sources were completely political in nature, such as the reports from Party Delegates Conferences or the ideological assessments of senior political officers.55 Military reports tended to be less political, if only in degree. Reports with little ideological flavor were very rare, the best example being the reports of regimental surgeons who plainly communicated their message and sometimes chastised their commanders along the way.56 Nevertheless, all NVA documents, even accident and suicide reports, had some measure of ideology in the text.

The sources also included speeches by the Party First Secretary, the Minister of Defense, his political deputy, or the commanders of the Military Districts to their officers. The speeches at this
level were completely filled with political rhetoric punctuated by isolated incidents from throughout the army.  

The analysis of petitions and complaints were particularly useful as historical sources. First, they provided quantitative data that measured the relative dissatisfaction within the army. In essence, the number of petitions and complaints in a unit quantified the quality of leadership of those responsible—most often their commander and political officer. Petitions and complaint reports were also useful for their insights into the quality of life of the soldier, including their treatment by their sergeants and officers. The statistical analysis of data in Petition and Complaint reports was often informative and provided key insights into the work environment of the NVA.

Contrary to the perception we have of excellent German recording keeping, the primary rule in the NVA for statistical analysis was inconsistency. Indeed, most NVA sources suffered from inconsistent and disingenuous information. The reports from low-level battalions usually gave the appearance of consistency and veracity. On the other hand, the military and political staffs in larger units were masters of hiding bad news and presented statistical information accordingly. Just a few examples will suffice to explain this conclusion.

The first and most prolific way of hiding bad news was to manipulate the periods of comparison in unhelpful ways. One report analyzed data for petitions for only an eight-month period in 1961. Another report from the 7th Panzer Division used an important category of “Military Discipline” for analysis, but only compared the last six months of one year to last six months of the next. A report on discipline from one of its regiments also compared data between

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58 “Eingaben und Beschwerden, NVA, 1963/64,” 3.


the 1st Half of 1960 and the 2nd Half of 1961. Such comparisons would be reasonable and appropriate if seasonality was a factor, however, NVA reporting did not reflect distinctions in seasons in East Germany.

Reports on criminal and disciplinary statistics were particularly subject to these problems. Some disciplinary reports only referred to the numbers of arrests while other analyses focused only on the amount and types of punishments. Neither was mutually exclusive, as some soldiers could be arrested and never punished, while others could be punished, sometimes for multiple offenses, even though they were never arrested. Some reports were incredibly detailed and categorized Party and military crimes to varying degrees of turpitude, while different units changed the categories of analysis or changed the reporting period from quarterly to biannually and back.

Raw data was often ignored and simply presented in percentages. One Military state’s Attorney reported an increase of desertions by 15% but without context.

These odd comparisons and data manipulation often bespoke improvements in leadership by the Party. For example, an Office for Security Questions report complimented the reduction of punishments in the 8th Motorized Rifle Division in January and February of 1960 because it was the less than the same period the year before. In describing the reduction of Party punishments over time, the 7.PD conveniently ignored the 6-month period immediately before the period of analysis; nonetheless it saw positive gains:

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The decrease of pronounced Party punishments from 37 in the 1st half of 1960 to only 22 in the 1st half of 1961 can be assessed as an expression of better educational work.65

Another report from the Political Control Commission in the 7.PD exemplified this obfuscation by comparing the number of PKK punishment hearings between the first half of one year and the first half of the next. “This comparison,” the report concluded, “can be evaluated as an improvement in ‘educational work.’”66 Similarly, documented improvements in the state of discipline in the 1st Motorized Rifle Division were because of the “...improved realization of the Leading Role of the Party in the Army...”67

CONCLUSION

The dramatic suicide that opened this chapter would not have occurred without the fatal accident, yet no one posed the obvious question, why did Burkhard shoot himself? Something was very wrong. The documents already suggest ambiguities and contradictions that logically should not have existed, yet those ambiguities are coming into focus anyway. Already the NVA documents portend much that was inefficient. There is a reason that Burkhard’s story developed in the manner that it did; every chapter that follows will touch on some aspect of his fate.

In the next few chapters, the bureaucratic dysfunction caused by a political-military discourse will come into dramatic focus. Chapter Two will address that discourse and justify its position as the engine for organizational dysfunction in the NVA. Chapter Three ponders the important question of whether the discourse migrated into the training of new officers, the staff training of future commanders, and the combat training of the army as a whole. Chapter Four addresses the influence of the political-military discourse in the working environment of the tactical units and whether that environment could have affected the discipline of its soldiers and

66 Ibid., 5.
officers in negative ways. By the end of this chapter, we will have successfully negotiated the mentalités of the commanders and the officer corps as a product of the ideology and the day-to-day influences of the discourse.

Finally, the story of Chapter Five is completely focused on the common soldier. We explore the suicide rates of the NVA and how their investigative techniques may have diminished the effectiveness of NVA commanders. In this chapter, the theoretical trajectory will be complete. The power relationships hidden in the government texts will be validated. First, however, let us turn to the political-military discourse.
CHAPTER 2: THE IDEOLOGICAL BASIS OF BUREAUCRATIC DYSFUNCTION

The NVA of the GDR is the Army of the Worker and Farmer, which has freed the people from imperialism, capitalistic exploitation and oppression. It has the national duty, to be ready to defend the DDR at any time, to protect the peaceful work and the achievements of the working class and their contribution in the struggle against those who lead in West Germany a resistant and aggressive Militarism... Appendix to Politbüro Protocol Nr. 25/56, 1956.

Man simply cannot devour himself. Colonel Böhme, NVA, 1958

Troop leadership is leadership of the people. Waldemar Werner, 7PD, 1962.

In 1957, on the fortieth anniversary of Russia’s October Revolution, Erich Honecker, a rising star in the Socialist Unity Party of East Germany (the SED), proclaimed the glorious achievements of socialism:

Close to a billion people have stepped out on the path of socialism since the day when the Workers and Peasants of Russia, under the leadership of their glorious Party, planted the victorious banner of Socialism on a sixth of the earth’s surface. More than 700 million people have freed themselves in the same period from the yoke of colonial rule...

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69 "...man kann sich doch nicht selbst zerfleischen." Colonel Böhme, East German Army. This leader of the 9th Panzer Division’s political office expressed this opinion “contrary to the advice of his comrades.” Dölling, "Delegiertenkonferenzen und Vollversammlungen, 1958," 40.


A year later, Honecker, who would eventually rise to Party First Secretary, told a conference attended by senior Party delegates from the *Nationale Volksarmee (NVA)* a similarly optimistic message:

> There is no doubt that the imperialistic countries have all the reasons necessary to look to the future with pessimism while the socialist lands can look to the future with optimism.\(^2\)^2

From the beginning of the German socialist project, Marxist ideology articulated a progressive and proletarian future for the *Öst-Länder*, or eastern states of Germany. Socialist theory would prevail over the decaying bourgeois of the West. More practically, however, the SED would accept the mastery of its Soviet sponsors even while it faced a strategic conundrum: how to defend itself against the very state with which it wanted unification.\(^3\)^3 Nowhere was this message clearer than in Honecker’s declaration that

> ...the national task of the SED consists, in the fight for the preservation of peace, in creating the most important prerequisite for the reunification of Germany into a peace-loving, democratic state.\(^4\)^4

Through their “constant vigilance,” both the SED and armed forces of East Germany had important roles to play and objectives to achieve. Thus, in order to create the “right” conditions, East German defense rhetoric, with a touch of ideology thrown in, had to posit a clear and present danger from the West:

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\(^3\) Honecker, *35. Diskussionsbeitrag, 1958,* 194. „Das ist erforderlich zur Erfüllung der geschichtlichen Aufgaben unserer Deutschen Demokratischen Republik im Kampf..." Im Entwurf der Thesen zum V. Parteitag wird festgestellt, die nationale Aufgabe der Sozialistischen Einheitspartei Deutschlands darin besteht, im Kampf für die Sicherung des Friedens die wichtigste Voraussetzung für die Wiedervereinigung Deutschlands zu einem friedliebenden, demokratischen Staat zu schaffen...”
...the basic contradiction in Germany today is the contrast between the peace loving [East] German people and the [Western] military powers that practice, in their interests, a policy of revenge, and an imperialistic expansion by atomic armament. The NVA, and its predecessor the Barracked People's Police (Kasernierte Volkspolizei or KVP), was a response to the threat of Western expansion. However, before the army could be truly successful, said Honecker, it had to create the political and security conditions necessary for unification—albeit with one overarching and obvious caveat: only under a “socialist” mantel.

Honecker’s unwarranted optimism was very typical of ideological thinking in East Germany. It not only informed day-to-day decision-making but it was also the basis for the theory that a socialist East Germany, under the glowing leadership of the Party and its Soviet brothers-in-arms, could be a leading model for the world. The theory fed the basic dialogue of the state, a conflict mentality between them and us—the peace-loving peoples of the socialist camp and all other war-mongers. Dedicated Party members in all government ministries often portrayed the West German Army as a “mercenary army” that had an “aggressive character” against the “freedom loving peoples of the world.” Therefore, only the People’s Army could guarantee freedom. Another Party declaration went so far as to describe the NVA as belonging to the worker and the peasant, while the armies of imperialism exploited and suppressed the free peoples of the world.

These objectives—securing freedom from imperialism while reunifying Germany—were the fundamental strategic principles that affected the post-war years on the continent.


Stalin’s own proposals in 1952 would have accepted a unified but demilitarized, Germany.79 The West, however, was not inclined to deal with a recalcitrant and inflexible Soviet Union nor accept a unified and socialist Germany strategically centered in the middle of Europe. The Western powers had attempted financial reforms in the occupied zones only a few years before, but the result was a protracted and tense rescue of West Berlin by air. Yet to come were 40 more years of Cold War tensions between the superpowers, punctuated by the erection of the Berlin Wall and the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Left to its own devices, the Ministry for National Defense (MfNV) would have found the mission of strategic defense logical and achievable, save for one problem in the Party’s logic. While it made perfect sense to defend against the external threat, it also had to gird itself against a latent internal threat from its own army at the same time. The SED’s paradox can be summarized as follows: There was a military and ideological threat from the West that jeopardized the state and its “socialist and democratic” way of life. Failure to defend the State was unthinkable -- hence the necessity for a capable socialist army. That basic premise, however, fed a rational fear that trained soldiers led by competent officers could turn against the State. In other words, the Party viewed the army necessary to defend the state from external threats as an internal threat that had to be controlled. Neither objective was mutually exclusive, but the SED had an immense challenge in differentiating who the real enemy was -- the West or its own army.80

Still, there was a more ambiguous problem for the Defense Ministry—the army was defending the very social experiment of which it was a significant part. Like the Soviets, the East Germans believed that thorough socialist planning in both military and civilian sectors would solve

all their problems. Managed and executed correctly, the military could have served as a fertile ideological training ground for its soldiers and a future corrective to broader societal problems.

Every soldier would return to the national labor pool as a “trained socialist citizen.” Whether the SED ever thought in those terms is unclear. What is clear is that loyal generals, staff officers, and civil servants, believing the results would come quickly, labored tirelessly to translate the Party’s ideology and defense policy into pragmatic instructions for subordinate commanders and soldiers.

The results of their efforts incorporated obtuse ideological language and questionable statistical analysis to construct organizational and ideological progress that was illusory at best. The resulting political-military discourse demonstrated how well-meaning bureaucracies could lie to themselves on a daily basis in the false hope of long-term success. In that regard, the extensive documentation of the NVA offers researchers unique opportunities to observe bureaucratic dysfunction as few social institutions in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) can. When viewed as military records, they simply reflect the day-to-day routine of an army that never went to war. However, out of a population that averaged 17 million inhabitants from 1956 to 1990, approximately 2.5 million citizens served in the NVA. Thus, when viewed as a major social institution of the GDR, these records provide significant insight to a socialized and militarized East Germany. Truly, the life of the soldier reflected the trials and tribulations of the East German citizen writ large.

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81 Hagemann, Parteiherrschaft: 10.
82 Jan Lahmeyer, “German Democratic Republic (DDR, GDR, East Germany), Historical Demographical Data, Mainly from 1948-1990,“ (2002).
83 Pierre Bourdieu, “Structures, Habitus, Power: Basis for a Theory of Symbolic Power,” in Culture/Power/History: a Reader in Contemporary Social Theory; Princeton studies in culture/power/history, ed. Nicholas B. Dirks (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), 165. The idea of a political-military discourse builds on Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of structures, habitus and power: i.e., “a range of ideas which is expressed or understood as containing the whole matter under discussion,” encompasses an amalgamation of political ideology inside of military processes, procedures, and rhetoric. Michel Foucault in his Archaeology of Knowledge, has described discourse as an “entity of sequences, of signs, in that they are enunciations (or statements that communicate specific meaning).” Foucault and Gordon, Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977. In his “Two Lectures,” Foucault continues this thought of the importance of discourse within society: “…there are manifold relations of power which permeate, characterize, and constitute the social body, and these relations of power cannot themself be established, consolidated, nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation, and functioning of a discourse. There can be no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourses of truth which operates through and on the basis of this association.” Foucault, “Two Lectures,” 210-211.
In that vein, this chapter argues that three specific policies adopted by the SED were the pills of a discourse that intimately tied the political and military domains together: the Leading Role of the Party in the army, the pervasive demand for criticism and self-criticism in every bureaucratic process, and a particularly damaging policy of dual-command called Einzelleitung. The political-military discourse justified most decisions by referencing one or more of these policies. Taken to their logical conclusion (see Figure 1), I also argue that these policies endangered the state by hindering leadership, training, and combat readiness (discussed in Chapter 3) and endangered the individual soldier by creating a command climate that tolerated disastrous peacetime losses from desertions, fatal accidents, and suicides (discussed in Chapters 4 & 5).

Before analyzing these policies, however, a short review of the discourse between the political and military domains within the East German defense establishment is in order. Internally, this political-military discourse reflected the tensions between political and military leaders and their respective staffs. It also mirrored the interplay of ideological, political, and social forces within East Germany itself. In other words, the political-military discourse echoed much larger forces at play and provided a concrete framework to view the systemic bureaucratic dysfunction of East Germany’s largest sector.

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Rüdiger Wenzke also argues that there were other factors involved. These include the adoption of the Soviet military model, the principal of class in the selection of Party cadre, and the centralization of the structure and leadership of the Army. The policies selected for this analysis of the political-military discourse are consistent throughout the official records of the of the NVA, and thus lend themselves to an enquiry of organizational and bureaucratic dysfunction in East Germany and the resulting quality of every-day life for the citizen soldier. Rüdiger Wenzke, “Die Nationale Volksarmee (1956-1990),” in Im Dienste der Partei. Handbuch der bewaffneten Organe der DDR, ed. Torsten (Hrsg.) Diedrich, Hans Ehlert, and Rüdiger Wenzke, Forschungen zur DDR-Gesellschaft (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 1998), 423-424.
THE POLITICAL-MILITARY DISCOURSE

Literary theory holds that there are three different dimensions or levels to “meaning”: “the meaning of a word, of an utterance, and of a text...the text, which here represents an unknown spakr making this enigmatical utterance, is something an author has constructed, and its meaning is not a proposition but what it does, its potential to affect readers.”

What makes this statement important from our position is that first of all, the word “meaning” has a wide variety of meanings in and of itself. However, I am also talking about the meaning of texts that were not intended to be “literary,” but rather proscriptive on and to its readers. In that regard, we are considering texts that were not widely read or speeches with narrow audiences, but which had a wide and complex impact on the organizational and institutional framework of East German society. Instructions, regulations, policy speeches, press announcements are the more obvious examples of this sort of discourse. More importantly, however, is this acknowledgment by historians that while such texts had such a limited audiences, the mere utterance in this socialist society could have wide ranging and often-negative impacts on its citizens.

To understand the political-military discourse is to understand the political and social discourse in East Germany. The basis of that discourse, Marxism-Leninism, “limited the possibilities of research and expression.” It also constrained those possibilities by “ritualizing” language into a textual code. This ritualistic code was nothing new in Marxist ideology. However, as an expression of state power, the form and content of the discourse within the East German armed forces evolved into a very specific political-military discourse that assumed the characteristics of a Foucauldian construct and gave the Party its influence and authority over the armed forces. To understand this discourse is to understand the tensions between the military and

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85 Culler, Literary Theory: 56.
the political domains, the negative effects on subordinate tactical units, and its snowballing effects on the common soldier. Desertions, suicides, and high accident rates were its tragic effects—and symptomatic of a dysfunctional nation-state.

The political-military discourse in East Germany was singularly consistent and highly structured in both written and oral forms. Written discourse, besides the obvious plethora of regulations and instructions, included unit logs, accident and incident reports, criminal investigations, minutes of Party judicial proceedings, and other routine documentation. Verbal discourse, albeit recorded in written form, included speeches by leading commanders and political officers, classroom rhetoric, the records of unit/organizational meetings, as well as the records of private meetings between commanders, their staffs, and their subordinate commanders.

Several definitive patterns developed within these forms of discourse. As the external expression of a highly structured and authoritarian organization, the patterns were omnipresent and repetitious in their textual patterns, messages, and pronounced policies. As an expression of a Foucauldian framework within which power was exercised, its ubiquitous nature was extraordinary; even routine guidelines for educational and recreational activities reflected these patterns.87

Within this political-military discourse, there was also a singular tension at play. On the one hand, the Party’s continual attempts to control every aspect of its military were certainly expected. On the other hand, there were less obvious, but existential, efforts by the army’s line officers to function without the constant oversight of the Party.88 Both domains, the political and the military, clearly understood that they needed each other. Their day-to-day discourse, however, was not indicative of a healthy organization. Like the strands of a cancerous double helix, they reinforced


88 In this work, I make a distinction between political-officers and “line officers” or Fach-Offizier. While almost every line officer was also a Party member, their expertise in tactics and technical means distinguished them from officers whose function, and most of their education, was political oversight and training.
each other while simultaneously weakening the very basis upon which they existed. The evidence for this dysfunctionality is yet to come.

Before confronting the deleterious effects of the political-military discourse on the common soldier, an understanding of the methods the SED used to establish control in the NVA must first be explained. Figure 2 is a schematic presentation of the methods used to promulgate the political-military discourse. The bookends of this diagram have already been introduced; i.e., the domains and specific policies of the discourse. The next few pages explores three specific textual patterns used in the discourse: circumlocution, inductive reasoning, and the interrogatory which framed two messages, the \textit{discourse of superlatives}, and the \textit{discourse of deficiencies}.

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure2.png}
\caption{The Political Military Discourse}
\end{figure}

\textbf{TEXTUAL PATTERNS}

Although the NVA could be pragmatic, its directives, reports, and speeches were consistently filled with blanket formulaic statements, unfounded assertions, circuitous logic, and unproductive backslapping. Together, these fragments can be pigeonholed into three discernible textual patterns that had a unique rhyme and rhythm similar to the Soviet style: circumlocution, inductive reasoning, and the interrogatory.

To varying degrees, the military and political reporting of NVA offices carried substantial ideological messages that usually employed circuitous and ambiguous logic or \textit{circumlocution}.

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\textit{Historians of East Germany have tended to use metaphors of ill-health to describe the East German regime. Hagemann refers to a “virent conflict” between the domains. Another has taken on a life of its own when describing the East German state: sclerosis. Medically described as a “stiffening of organic structures,” it is a particularly apt metaphor for the organizational lethargy of the East German state. Hagemann, Parteiherrschaft: 64.}
While military reporting, despite the pervasive influence of convoluted political ideology, did tend to be matter-of-fact, neither domain could escape the use of the *circumlocution* necessary to solve a problem without actually doing so. *Circumlocution* was particularly palpable when the political-military discourse dealt with three specific situations:

- Describing from an ideological point of view practical problems that should not have existed,
- Providing ideological solutions to those practical problems, or...
- Drawing conclusions without supporting evidence.\(^90\)

Two specific examples from two different NVA offices illustrate the use of this textual pattern. In 1959, an “Estimate of the Political Consciousness in the NVA,” written by the Headquarters of the 3rd Military District (MB III), declared that:

> Army members welcome the decision of the 4th Plenum of the Central Committee of the SED and are in complete agreement with it.\(^91\)

In the same year, another assessment of “political consciousness” written by the Main Political Office (*Politische Hauptverwaltung* or PHV) of the Defense Ministry concluded:

> The principle of collective advice and personal responsibility has been further reinforced and strengthened by Individual Leadership [*Einzelleitung*] in the NVA.\(^92\)

Both cases can be challenged as ideological tautologies. Neither statement can be disproved because they are both assumed correct by virtue of their positioning within the political-military discourse. Neither report established the factual basis for such statements. In fact, they were blanket assertions by staff officers who were hoping to satisfy the expectations of their supervisors. The claims made at the 4th Plenum were the ideological utterances of the Party. Since the Party represented the hopes and aspirations of the people, how could any good socialist soldier or officer *not* be in favor of such obvious truths? Ironically, when the Party needed more evidence to justify its circulatory arguments, it then used either unsubstantiated statistical evidence or

\(^{90}\) For one example, see: Verner, “Halbjahranalyse 7.PD, Jul-Nov 1961.”


isolated individual cases, i.e., blatant *inductive reasoning*, to make their point. Of course, inductive reasoning, in and of itself, is not bad, but the Party’s pervasive use of it to justify itself negated the power of its message.

If *circumlocution* and *inductive reasoning* were ways to justify their reasoning, then the *interrogatory* was the means used to introduce ideological arguments. Simply put, Party organs and headquarters would ask rhetorical questions and then provide the predictable tautology to fit their own agenda.93 Examples abound, but one 1961 report about the “political consciousness” of the 7th Panzer Division (7.PD) illustrates this textual pattern. In describing the “deficient political consciousness” of the 7.PD, the division political officer framed his argument with questions that a Party functionary or commander might ask himself. Note how he shaped the questions to establish the credibility and importance of his own organization, the Party’s “Inspection Commission,” or the PKK:

How, and with what results, has the PKK led the struggle against apparent obstacles to the elevation of combat readiness in the troop units and formations?

How does the PKK assess the results of work to overcome the appearance of dogmatism and sectarianism in the work of the people?

How has the PKK contributed to overcoming these symptoms?

Are there appearances of revisionism? How does it manifest itself and what could be done to counter it by the PKK?94

Of course, the answers pointed to the PKK as the only organization capable of facilitating the ideological development of the NVA into a socialist army, a “knight in shining armor,” if you will.95

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93 In the political-military discourse, the distinction between “political organs” and “political organizations” can often be confusing. Sometimes they are used together to imply that all Party functions were targeted for instruction or criticism. In this work, “political organs” are formal offices of the Party within the MfNV and its military units. “Political organizations” generally mean the “Party collective” within a unit or office. Thus the “political organization” within an infantry battalion might include all of its officers and about 40% of its soldiers and NCOs. Similarly, a major “political organ,” such as the Main Political office of the MfNV would have a “Party organization” that functioned within it; a point that is often mentioned in the discourse.


95 Ibid., 89.
Questions were asked and answered. The PKK had thus served its function as watchdog and protector of the Party.

Notably, this all-too-common example shows the PKK slapping its own back while denying military commanders and senior officers any significant role in solving the Party’s pragmatic, institutional problems. Unless there was fault to be found, commanders and line officers were essentially technicians of war who did not play a part in the political-military discourse. They were considered necessary evils—incapable of transforming the NVA into a socialist army. The interrogatory reflected the Party’s fear of an unfettered army that could threaten the state. The message was clear: the NVA could not succeed by itself—only the PKK, to the exclusion of all commanders and other Party organs, could manage this worthy project.96

The interrogatory was a clever spin on the yet to be discussed policy of criticism/self-criticism. The decision maker, be he a military commander or a high-ranking political operative, would naturally have already answered the question in his own mind: “Are there appearances of revisionism? Yes! There are appearances of revisionism!” “Who is responsible? We are!” “How will we solve these problems? By using the PKK!” The report’s author would naturally anticipate these and other questions for his political and military masters:

What results could be reached in the fight to remove the appearances of liberalism?97
What appearances of subversion are there in the Party? How does it appear and what are the causes?
Which enemy influences are there in the Party? How could the struggle against it be led and what results would be reached?
What results have been achieved in Party education [efforts]?

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96 The PKK used its influence in other branches of the armed forces. For comments about the Bereitschaftspolizei, see: Hauptmann Wietusch, "Jahresanalyse zur Statistik über beschlossene Parteistrafen für das Jahr 1958," ed. BPKK (Bereitschaftspolizei) (Berlin: SAPMO-BArch, 1959).

97 In this context, the term “liberalism” is the ideological opposite of socialism and is based on the principles of liberty and equality. “Socialism” sought to overturn everything that was bad in liberal democracies, including individuality, poverty, and wealth inequality. The East German interpretation of liberalism also applied to systems of management and leadership that liberal democracies espoused within their armed forces. Thus the attempt to remove “liberalism” within the army in this reference is more about removing everything that was not “socialistic” than about truly understanding the fundamental distinctions of leadership styles available to NVA leaders.

While the Party’s enforcement arm probably had its focus in the right place, practical military matters were still central to the development of a combat-ready socialist army. Therefore, it made sense that the Party, through the PKK, would not resist meddling in questions of pure military discipline:

In which ways can political lessons be used and how would they contribute to raising combat readiness and improving the quality of military training for everyone?\(^99\)
How and with what results could the struggle against desertsions be conducted?\(^100\)
Would changing the context of these operational questions change the expected answers? A Western military commander, for example, would have asked, “How can we improve our training?” “How do we improve our combat readiness?” or, “Why is my desertion rate so high?” Had the commander of the 7.PD asked himself and his military staff these questions, some useful purpose might have been served. A functional staff would have leapt at the chance to provide practical solutions. In the NVA, though, it was not the military commander who asked these types of questions—rather a minion from his political staff.

One might argue that textual patterns of *circumlocution, inductive reasoning*, and the *interrogatory*, were unusual. In fact, these types of questions and their circular answers were often recycled in the political-military discourse. In the case of the previous PKK report, for example, the same style and content of questions was repeated in another political report on the 7.PD in the very next reporting period:

How and with what results have the Party Control Commissions led the fight against obstacles encountered in raising the combat readiness of the troops and units of the National People’s Army?
What results have been achieved in the struggle to eradicate the symptoms of liberalism?
Are there symptoms of revisionism? How does it manifest itself and what has been undertaken on the part of the PKK to counter it?\(^101\)

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\(^99\) As a general note, the distinction between the German terms Erziehung, Bildung and Ausbildung are important. For the purposes of this work, Erziehung and Bildung refers to education, while Ausbildung refers to training. In the political-military discourse, sometimes these terms are used interchangeably. One attempt at explaining this dychotomy can be found in Meyer, *Political-ideological Education in the NVA of the GDR,* 95.

\(^100\) Verner, *Halbjahranalyse 7.PD, Jul-Nov 1961,* 83, 97. „In welchem Maße wird der Politunterricht genutzt und wie trägt er dazu bei, um die Gefechtsbereitschaft allseitig zu erhöhen und die Qualität der militärischen Ausbildung zu verbessern.” „Wie und mit welchen Ergebnissen wurde der Kampf gegen Fahnenfluchten geführt?”
In a profound way, the PKK intended to enhance its organizational status while diminishing the importance of responsible commanders and line officers. By using the *interrogatory*, the PKK actively interfered with the traditional Prussian responsibilities of a commander and his officers to solve complex organizational problems. The additional assertion that only the PKK could solve the 7.PD’s problems, exclusive of other Party organs and organizations, only served to accentuate its arrogance and highlight the petty internal jealousies extant within the Party bureaucracy.

These tensions between the military and political domains were palpable. Their ebb and flow circumscribed a unique rhyme and meter to the political-military discourse. However, circuitous textual patterns introduced by dithering interrogatories merely provided a framework by which the Party communicated two ideological messages. The “State as superlative” dominated any possible concept of alternative governance while hypocritically insisting there was space for “individual responsibility.” At the same time, in an contradictory but consistent message, everyone below the level of “the state” was seemingly “dysfunctional and deficient.” Together, these two messages, the “state as superlative” and the “discourse of deficiencies,” enabled the Party to exercise subjective control over its armed forces.

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**SUBJECTIVE CONTROL THROUGH MESSAGES**

By fiat, the East German state was in a struggle with Western liberalism; therefore, it was the duty of every citizen to participate in that struggle. However, it was not enough for national power to be expressed in economic terms by the “proletarianism of its productive labor.” As Eric Weitz suggests, the state also needed its citizens to have a “profoundly masculine, combative ethos.”

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101 ________, “Halbjahranalyse der PKK 7.PD, Jun 1962,” 49, 53, 60. „Wie und mit welchen Ergebnissen haben die Parteikontrollkommissionen den Kampf gegen aufgetretene Hemmnisse bei der Erhöhung der Gefechtsbereitschaft der Truppenteile und Einheiten der Nationalen Volksarmee geführt?” „Welche Ergebnisse wurden in Kampf um die Beseitigung der Erscheinungen des Liberalismus erreicht?” „Gibt es Erscheinungen des Revisionismus, wie äussert er sich und was wurde von seiten der PKK dagegen unternommen?”

102 Weitz, Creating German Communism: 7.
and signaled the Party’s continuing struggle against both internal and external threats.\textsuperscript{103} It was only natural, then, that the Party would want to “enhance and nurture” every soldier’s journey “...towards aspirations for an improved mastery of weapons and technical combat means and...towards an unshakable confidence in victory.”\textsuperscript{104} The army would outwardly personify the nation’s “combative ethos.” For the soldier, it was merely sufficient for the soldier to “aspire” towards mastery in combat. Actual training and practice, it turns out, was incidental to the socialist end game, as will be explored in the next chapter.

Besides “attack” and “offensive work of the masses,” other descriptors and textual memes dominated the discourse that would establish the State as an all-powerful expression of people. The army had to serve the state. The state, as elegantly described by Alan Nothnagle, had to be superlative--to paint itself, in almost Kafkaesque rhetoric, as a peerless entity:

Everything relating to the Soviet Union was ausserordentlich (extraordinary), the Red Army was always ruhmreich (glorious), the Revolution always siegreich (victorious), every contribution was massgeblich (decisive), every certainty unerschütterlich (unshakable)...

By the same token, the GDR was always unsere sozialistische DDR (our socialist GDR) and Wilhelm Pieck always unser beliebter Präsident (our beloved president). The word our implied intimacy, and the words socialist and beloved suggested a self-evident unity of pretension and reality (emphasis in text).\textsuperscript{105}

By prescribing the use of these superlatives, the East German state also framed its superior relationship with all other sectors, in particular the defense establishment.

There was a shortcoming, though, to this discourse of superlatives. If the Soviets were glorious and the GDR was the model German socialist state, the discourse necessarily excluded the possibility that either the state or the ruling Party could ever be at fault. Naturally, this obviated the

\textsuperscript{103} Oberst Vogt, “Bericht über die in der Zeit vom 01.06. - 05.06.1965 in der 7. Panzer - Division durchgeführte Kontrolle mit Hilfe und Anleitung (Vertrauliche Verschlusssache),” ed. NVA; MBIII (Leipzig: BA-MA, 1965).


\textsuperscript{105} Nothnagle, Building the East German Myth: 29.
prospect that the State could ever be criticized by using its own policy of criticism/self-criticism. It was, as Nothnagle concluded, a “deliberate strategy to stifle discussion.”

As in all armies, the East German state exercised its power over the armed forces through its legal and political institutions. In democratic countries, that control was usually exercised “objectively” by subordinating an independent and professional army to democratic civilian authority. Unlike western democratic states, though, the SED exercised “subjective control” over the operations and functions of the NVA by using structural formations (dual chains of command) and bureaucratic policies such as Einzelleitung, Criticism/Self-criticism, and the Leading Role of the Party. It was through subjective control that the state guaranteed that the NVA had little or no room to maneuver on its own.

The Party’s subjective control of the NVA began in the late 1940s and early 1950s with the socialization of its uniformed police predecessor, the KVP. Police officers, whether members of the Party or not, were expected to carry themselves as “model members of the Party” who held a "narrow connection" with the "progressive democratic Party." Every police officer had to be a "champion of conviction" and a "conscientious and deliberate enemy of Imperialism" in lock-step with the Soviet Union. In 1957, the Central Committee of the Party’s policymaking body, the Politbüro, solidified its subjective control of the successor NVA by designating the “Political Organs of the National People’s Army” as the offices responsible for its political work. The Party’s de facto policy, along with its associated judicial and administrative processes, was now a matter of

106 Ibid.
109 Anlage Nr. 1 zum Protokoll Nr. 95 (II) vom 19.7.1948, "Protokoll Nr. 95 (II), 1948," 5-8.
law. It formally required the army’s political organs to report reported directly to the highest Party- and political-organ in the NVA, the PHV.111

With that decision came the legal authority for individual political officers to act with respect to their commanders. Unlike before, political officers were now formally authorized to “regularly analyze the political consciousness and morale of the formations and troop units.” They were also to “ruthlessly uncover faults and grievances as well as their causes” and, if necessary, they were to lead an “energetic struggle” for their removal. "Ruthlessly uncovering faults and grievances” became legal fodder for the political officer and the means by which the Party exercised its subjective control at the grass roots level. The success of the political officer would not be judged by how he supported his commander in the pursuit of his duties, nor by whether his unit achieved high standards of combat readiness. Instead, his success was measured by his ability to “aggressively and ruthlessly” seek out the deficiencies of his unit and the political errors of his own commander.112

While phrases such as “ruthlessly uncovering faults” implied the individual responsibility of the political officer with respect to his commander, by no means can one conclude that individuality as a characteristic was welcomed or encouraged. The State as Superlative adversely reduced the status of the individual throughout the GDR, much less within the army. The public message was “the citizen is a full member of the state.” True individuality, however, was subordinate to the state, especially within the armed forces. The very concept of individuality was anathema to a citizen’s full and complete integration into the imagined community of socialist consciousness envisioned by German Socialism; nor could individuality ever be defined by a person’s imagination, initiative, freedom of action or by some individual subjectivity—a person with rationality and independence

111 Wenzke, “Die Nationale Volksarmee (1956-1990),” 439. Wenzke suggests that that this bureaucratic move was formalized in 1961. The decision of the Politburo in 1957, above, certainly suggests that as a practical matter, the PHV’s formal authority to act was in place a few years earlier.

112 “Anlage Nr. 1, Protokoll Nr. 22/57, 1957,” 312. “Sie haben die Pflicht, das politische Bewusstsein und die Moral in den Verbänden und Truppenteilen regelmäßig zu analysieren, die Mängel und Mißstände und deren Ursachen schonungslos aufzudecken und einen energischen Kampf zu ihrer Beseitigung zu führen.”
of thought. Even though the state clearly expected individual initiative when necessary, the role of the individual was primarily defined by how the individual citizen or soldier satisfied the state’s needs.113

The suppression of the soldier’s individuality can be seen clearly in the soldier’s oath of office, or Fahneneid, from the late 1950s (see Figure 3). The oath, as in democratic armies, charged the soldier with a sense of mission, obligation, and duty:

1959-1961
I swear
To always and faithfully serve my Fatherland, the German Democratic Republic,
To protect it at the command of the Worker’s and Farmer’s government against every enemy under peril of my life,
To unconditionally obey and carry out the orders of military superiors,
To always and everywhere, protect the honor of our Republic and its National Peoples’ Army.

FIGURE 3 1959 OATH OF OFFICE

...to carry out the unconditional orders of the military superiors...and to...
...to always and everywhere protect the honor of our Republic and its National People’s Army.

Apparently, this early version of the oath was insufficient for the purposes of the Party. Unlike democratic armies, East German soldiers and citizens were also expected to develop a that was broader than its political conceptions. Creating a “socialist consciousness” would motivate army members towards an “unconditional fulfillment” of their oaths, orders, and regulations. In its broadest sense, the socialist consciousness, a core premise of Marxism-Leninism, was the basis for

113 The idea for this reflection comes from Culler, Literary Theory: 37. The difficulty the GDR had with suppressing individual voice will be explored more in Chapters 4 & 5.
human thought and action in a socialist society. Achieving this ill-defined socialist consciousness meant releasing their individuality to the collective while making a “solid connection with the working class in the city and the country” while also seeking a viable friendship with the Soviet Union and “all the peoples in the lands of the socialist camp.” In other words, the citizen with a socialist consciousness, or personality, would be so enamored with Marxist-Leninist principles that he, or she, would act independently with creative thought in accordance with those principles. The socialist consciousness was to be the foundation of creative activity. Marxism-Leninism would determine correct behavior and ultimately ensure successful performance.

Taken to its logical extreme, an army member with a “socialist consciousness” would theoretically develop “high moral-fighting qualities like mission-readiness, courage, fortitude, and perseverance.” NVA officers were directly responsible for instilling these traits in their soldiers as Generalmajor Rudolf Dölling, the Party stalwart who directed the NVA’s main political office, often pointed out. His officers would “…politically educate the young and prepare them to make sacrifices.” He also charged his officers to:

…train them militarily, and prepare them for the fulfillment of their huge tasks, including the protection and defense of the Workers-and-Peasants-State of the GDR.

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This was more than just compulsory awareness of their roles—it was about achieving high standards of “political vigilance.” Thus, these additional social responsibilities were incorporated into a new and improved Fahneneid in 1962 (See Figure 4).119

Developing a “socialist consciousness,” being “politically vigilant” and “politically educating the young people” were clearly political tasks of the highest priority. The Party demanded much of its officers and Party members. Yet, the very group held responsible for this work was often found deficient:

Some [line] officers still do not carry themselves as political functionaries and class-comrades [with respect] to their subordinate army members. They present their service as “experts” and take little part in the socialist education of soldiers, Unteroffiziere, and officers.120

The Party was immensely sensitive to this sort of liberal thinking—tactical and administrative work was definitely not a priority in the NVA. Experts (pilots, infantry officers, master technicians, engineers, etc.) were important to the tactical work of a large military organization, but technical expertise in the absence of “steadfast realistic conviction” was unsatisfactory. It might improve

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combat readiness, but it could never contribute to raising the "socialist consciousness" of the soldiers or the army itself.\textsuperscript{121}

There was another paradox with respect to this development of the socialist consciousness. Assuming that "raising the socialist consciousness" was a worthy objective, the army and the Party never quite seemed to grasp that a soldier had the same social status as a worker or farmer. Soldiers were rarely referred to as "workers and peasants" who defended the "Workers' and Peasants' State." Rather, they were boxed into a separate, unspoken category that distanced them from society as a whole. This particular discursive characteristic was common in routine discussions within the Politbüro and can be traced in the archival records of the MfNV all the way down to the smallest tactical units. To illustrate, one 1958 Politbüro meeting directed that the Party's role with regard to soldiers and officers was to: "...train NVA members to be conscientious and consistent fighters for the GDR and to establish a connection \textit{with} the working class... [author's emphasis]."\textsuperscript{122}

This statement speaks volumes about the subjective control of the army by the state and highlights a serious flaw in theoretical thinking of the Party. The "working man as an ideal" was an archetype to be praised and emulated.\textsuperscript{123} As 85\% of the soldiers in the NVA in 1956 were characterized as workers or peasants, one could conclude that the average soldier was already a member of the working class.\textsuperscript{124} Therefore, why would he need training to connect \textit{with} them? Had his unselfish, and voluntary, act of enlistment inadvertently separated him \textit{from} the very working class he chose to defend?


\textsuperscript{122} "Anlage #9 Protokoll Nr. 26/58, 1958."

\textsuperscript{123} Weitz, Creating German Communism: 7.

\textsuperscript{124} Hagemann, Parteiherrschaft: 56.
More startling was the glaring absence from the discourse that the NVA could be used as a socialist training program for the male population on a routine basis.\textsuperscript{125} The typical soldier, trained with the proper ideological credentials to maintain a “relationship with the working class,” would eventually return to the very same working class he had left. This may also explain why there was so little attention paid by the government to the role of the veteran after his enlistment was completed.

As the SED needed the male population to man the army and defend the state, this policy made no sense at all. Military service would have been difficult under the best conditions. Due to its extraordinarily high readiness state, soldiers in the NVA were only allowed a few weeks of military leave a year, which would have exacerbated their isolation from their home and also from the “working class” they were supposedly a part of.\textsuperscript{126} Ironically victimized by their own organizational fears, the Party assumed that enlistment in the NVA would drive the citizen-soldier further away from his roots.

On the other hand, if the army, and not just the individual soldier, was a threat to societal order, this sort of talk would appear perfectly rational to a decision maker. The soldier could never be trusted, particularly if he was not a Party member. Inevitably, he would be viewed as an “object to be controlled.” This objectification merely to satisfy the needs of the state may have exacerbated the Party’s fears of an unreliable army and planted the seeds for further revolution 30 years later.

Perhaps there really was only one function for the soldier: not to defend the state, but to serve as an

\textsuperscript{125} This might be a surprising statement to some. Torsten Diedrich held that the SED intended the KVP as a “social-political school” or as a “Life-School” for those who volunteered to enlist. See Torsten Diedrich, “Die Kasernierte Volkspolizei (1952-1956),” in Im Dienste der Partei. Handbuch der bewaffneten Organe der DDR, ed. Torsten (Hrsg.) Diedrich, Hans Ehrlert, and Rüdiger Wenzke, Forschungen zur DDR-Gesellschaft (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 1998), 339, 346. In fact, the goal of socialist education within the armed forces flow in the face of reality at home, thus creating a type of cognitive dissonance that was difficult to overcome. Notably, it is true that the concept was occasionally mentioned in the training manuals for political-officers. See for examples: “Handmaterial zum Vorschlag des Briefes vom 12. März 1954,” ed. Büro Walter Ulbricht SED ZK (Berlin: SAPMO-BA, 1954). “Chronik des PR-14 von 20.08.1956 bis 30.11.1962 (Geheime Verschlußsache),” ed. MBII NVA, PR-14 (Strausberg: SAPMO-BArch; MBII; 7.PD; Panzerregiment-14, 1956-1962). and "Soziale Zusammensetzung des Divisionsstabes, der Stäbe der Regimenter und selbständigen Bataillone (1.MSD) (1959)," ed. ZK Abteilung für Sicherheitsfragen (Berlin: SAPMO-BA, c. 1960).

\textsuperscript{126} Extensively discussed in Jörg Schönbohm, Two Armies and One Fatherland: the End of the Nationale Volksarmee (Providence: Berghahn Books, 1996).
“object of control” by a state that "had to dominate" as an existential necessity. All other considerations would be secondary to validating the “state as superlative”—including defending it.

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The elite clearly recognized the superiority of the state and the primacy of the ruling Party in the discourse. The NVA amplified this control and domination by turning Nothnagle’s “superlative discourse” into a second, more insidious form of organizational discipline—a “discourse of deficiencies.” Frank Hagemann described this focus on deficiencies as a “more or less hedged itemization of defects, grievances, and problems.”

The point, though, is that the Party and the NVA was doing very little “hedging” at all. The principal means they used to establish their superiority and primacy was to continually and openly attack the bureaucratic ineptitude of its subordinate structures and the ambiguous, often hapless, individuals trapped within.

As with the discourse of superlatives, the “discourse of deficiencies” followed a very recognizable textual pattern. First, the writer or speaker reminded the audience of the importance of Marx, Engels, or Lenin in the national discourse. He would proffer several positive statements about the state of affairs in the GDR, the army, or some local unit that was being commended. Then, despite opening on a positive note, a clear textual message signaled the yet-to-be-disclosed deficiencies of the unit or individual:

However, there are a few deficiencies (eine reihe von Mängeln).

Following a detailed discussion of these deficiencies, usually accompanied by ad hominem attacks, there was a clarion call to move East Germany towards the idyllic socialist state modeled on its archetype, the Soviet Union. Thus, the discourse of deficiencies entailed a positive overview of the unit, the identification of a few problems and their causes, and a summary statement that enjoined every citizen to continue the struggle to socialist nirvana.

127 Hagemann, Parteiherrschaft: 8.
128 Ibid.
While the phrase "eine reihe von Mängel" was the predominant textual code to signal imminent deficiencies, political and military reports also used other textual forms to signal the "discourse of deficiencies." Examples included:

...insufficient attention placed on appropriate Party documents or instructions, or
...not yet reached the level of their tasks, or
...the person, bureau, or unit ‘...demonstrated weaknesses.’

These textual patterns of the discourse of deficiencies were prevalent in almost every political or military document produced in the NVA in the 1950s and 1960s. The plethora of textual markers not only highlighted the pervasiveness of the pattern but also focused on how ready the Party was to hyper-criticize its armed forces, and by extension, its own social institutions.

Indeed, it was the rare Minister, commander, or Party functionary who could avoid mentioning some malpractice, error, or dereliction no matter how small, ill defined, or contrived it was. In 1958, for example, Minister of Defense Willi Stoph discussed a major disciplinary incident at a Party meeting using the expected discourse and its textual patterns:

The large majority of our Army members are good. The class-appropriate composition is outstanding. The overwhelming majority of our officers are members and candidates of our Party; the large majority of units have [experienced] no “special incidents.”

Eine reihe von Mängel then poked its ugly head. Stoph accused a “few” officers of having made trouble for everyone else.

We do not have to permit these...officers to constantly bring...discredit on the reputation of the Nationale Volksarmee.

Similarly, in a highly classified document from the Cadre Office for Political Administration, a high-ranking political officer highlighted in its Annual Report for Training Year 1957, the satisfactory military and political progress of political organs in the 5th Military District (MB V) and

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the NVA’s air and sea commands. He complimented the Party Secretary and other Party leaders for having "influence over all questions" and developing a "healthy Party-like atmosphere." However, while the 5th Military District was supposedly doing well, the 3rd Military District (MB III) had a "few deficiencies." The political office of the MB III had not exerted sufficient "ideological influence" over its vast command, even though the headquarters had been "correctly instructed" by the army’s Main Political Office. Unfortunately, the instructions from the Defense Ministry probably had had little effect. It seems that the political office of the 3rd Military District also suffered from a "few deficiencies," including the cardinal sin not being well supported by its own First Secretary. Put another way, the military staff was deficient because it did not follow the instructions of the political staff, which was also deficient because the duly appointed Party First Secretary did not follow the Ministry’s instructions either!

Such deficiencies also were also characteristic of problems in the subordinate units. During the same period, a unit subordinate to the 3rd Military District, the 4th Motorized Rifle Division (4.MSD), also had a few deficiencies. The leader of its Main Political Office had been fired because he "had not correctly organized Party work." He had satisfactorily created a "Party collective" within the 6000-strong division, but as the division’s leading political officer he had been negligent in creating the required "collective" within his own 20-man office. Astonishingly, a similar fate befell the political officer of another unit, the 22nd Motorized Rifle Regiment (22.MSR), who was also accused of a few, but analogous, deficiencies.


133 Ibid. "Die Leitung der Grundorganisation des Stabes, insbesondere der Sekretär wurde nicht genügend durch den Leiter der Politabteilung unterstützt."

Together, these reports suggest a trend in the late 1950s that was never satisfactorily addressed in the NVA’s short history—how could political work be “correctly and purposefully organized” if the Party offices did not set the very example they expected from the Party faithful? As a leading indicator, the inability of the NVA’s own political offices to affect organizational change foreshadows the mounting evidence of systemic dysfunction across the entire army.

Obviously, the discourse of deficiencies was not just limited to the failures of a few military or political officers; it also extended to entire operational units. A classified 1960 training report from the 5th Military District, for example, declared that because of its exceptional “political-moral situation” within the ranks, it was operating at a high level of combat readiness. Then, with a typically broad socialist brush, the report painted every soldier as a good socialist struggling “toward the realization of the decisions of the Delegates Conference, of Party members, and of the 9th Plenum.” Interest was growing, it claimed, “in all important national and international events.”

In addition, in the previous 6 months officers in important positions had successfully reduced desertions by 8% and absences without leave (or AWOLs) by an extraordinary 50%. Unfortunately, neither the “growing interest in current events,” nor the district’s wide-ranging political struggle, could not hide a few deficiencies that included alarming rates of criminality and increasing incidents of serious accidents. At that point, the report proceeded to vilify the officers and Party members of MB V for these problems.135

Party officials throughout the army, but particularly in the PKK, were also compelled to compare combat readiness with ideological metaphors having little to do with day-to-day problems. As an example, consider a 1961 report about material readiness in a tank regiment in the 7.PD:

The non-mission-capable rate of 50% for tank maintenance136 in the August alarm-exercise (mobility drill) can be understood in significant ways...in both the

136 The “mission-capable rate” of combat equipment is a simple indicator of readiness: the number of in-service (or operational) units as a percentage of total available. A mission-capable rate of 50% for an armor unit in the Cold War
considerable blunders in political-military leadership work as well as in serious weaknesses in the work-style of the leading organs of the regiment. Here the Party had cleverly juxtaposed military leadership with political leadership and found both wanting. The indictment against the regiment continued:

The Party leadership of the regiment [the political officers], as well as the regimental leadership [the commander and his line officers], behaved in liberal ways with regard to many questions. They cloak themselves in self-satisfaction, which then degenerated into political carelessness.

In other words, the commander was acting in a formal, authoritarian manner and focused exclusively on the military task before him, to successfully achieve the military standards of the alarm exercise. His focus, however, was misplaced; he was detached from “the respective military-political situation” and therefore, guilty of flawed political work. Since this was an unacceptable situation, the PKK administered a “reprimand” to both the commander and the Party secretary [the deputy commander] of the regiment.

Another aspect of this discourse of deficiencies was the predictable excuses generals and Party officials used to justify the chronic presence of a “few deficiencies.” They would first highlight the practical problems that needed solving and then sought to produce ideological solutions to those practical problems. The resulting calculus was counter-productive and had far-reaching negative effects across the NVA.

The excuses also followed very distinctive patterns. The phrase “The realization of the Leading Role of the Party has not been achieved in every case” was routinely used. Another pattern asserted that the existence of a serious threat from the West “should” have motivated all

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138 Ibid. “Die Parteileitung des Regimentes sowie der Regimentsführung verhielt sich in vielen Fragen liberal, hüllte sich in Selbstzufriedenheit, was sogar in politische Sorglosigkeit ausartete.”

139 Ibid., 85. “Der Kommandeur des Regiments, Oberstleutnant D., und der Parteisekretär des Regiments, Major F., wurde mit einer Verwarnung zur Rechenschaft gezogen.”

officers and soldiers to high levels of military performance: “A portion of army members, including officers, underestimate the danger of West German imperialism.” If army members truly understood the threat from the West, they would be sufficiently motivated to be trained and ready. However, “they [did] not recognize that a military conflict [could] come from West German militarism.”

A third pattern of excuse addressed the basic problem with all communist states—that not every citizen, or soldier, was a Party member. Of course, every army member should have been, but the Party’s own analysis of its failures was hampered by the ideological solutions it imposed on itself.

Remarkably, rarely in the discourse of deficiencies was the competence and shortcomings of organizational, military, or political leaders discussed as a possible problem for the NVA. Nor was there any practical analysis that could answer the basic question of why the NVA suffering from so many deficiencies? The practical competence of the officer corps could have been one of the problems. Yet, its incompetence and leadership was rarely blamed for the Party’s institutional problems. Nor, it seems, despite significant evidence to the contrary, were many officers ever accused of incompetence. One has to dig deep to uncover the Party’s own perceptions about what the problem was—and it had nothing to do with Party leadership, threat perceptions, or deficient military leadership. More often than not, the army instead blamed its deficiencies on the failure of its soldiers and officers to join the Party: “The expectation that every front-line officer is a political functionary has not been fully realized.”

142 In 1954, only 72% of KVP officers were members of the Party. “Handmaterial, 1954,” 138. In 1956, 79.5% of NVA officers were members or candidates of the SED. By the early 1960s, there were little or no officers who belonged to other “block-parties.” Wenzke, “Die Nationale Volksarmee (1956-1990),” 435. As a consequence of their propaganda and agitation efforts, by 1964, 97.7% of officers in the NVA were members or candidates of the SED. Hagemann, Parteiherrschaft: 56. Wenzke reported that by 1971, membership or applicants to the Party peaked at 98.2% and dropped to 96.3 by 1986 (Warrant officers were 95.4% and professional NCOs joined the SED at a rate of 56.6%. Wenzke, “Die Nationale Volksarmee (1956-1990),” 454; Gebauer, Remy, and Salheiser, “Die Nationale Volksarmee (NVA),” 2007,” 303. See also Herspring, “Technology and Civil-Military Relations: The Polish and East German Cases,” 133.
This is an important point. The old ways of leadership and training necessary for high levels of combat readiness in earlier iterations of the German Army were important, but no longer the primary path toward success. The way to combat readiness was through the Party. Party activities were the means by which the army would grow stronger. Practical training was important, but Party activities more so. Organizational success was through the Party and its representatives (See Figure 5). The Party would carry the day. Unfortunately, the result of such logic was a dysfunctional chain of command that saddled the East German commanders in the lower organizational units with a problematic command environment.

The frustration of military and Party leaders presents the researcher with a unique opportunity. If the Party leadership knew the army had problems, then ignorance cannot be blamed for their failure to correct them. The Party articulated clear objectives for the Army, yet was continually frustrated by its lack of progress. The resulting lack of trust and confidence in line officers and commanders would become the seed for other, more damaging bureaucratic behaviors that affected the common soldier. If their awareness of the problems was self-evident and their “objectives” were clear, i.e., improving combat readiness and developing the NVA into a political cadre-army, then we need turn in but one direction—the methodology the SED used to solve their problems.144

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144 As with so many terms in the East German political-military discourse, the term “cadre” was a code word with various meanings. In general, “cadre” could refer to any and all members of the Party in a unit. Thus, a “cadre-army” implied an army filled completely with Party members. On the other hand, to select Party “cadre” could also mean the selection of Party members to fill key positions within political organs at the various headquarters that required them.
THE LEADING ROLE OF THE PARTY: FORGING A PARTY CULTURE

You asked, the Party answered!
Political Office, MfNV, 1959. 145

In varying degrees, both Joseph Stalin and Nikita Khrushchev leveraged Soviet Communist Party (KPSU) control of the Soviet army in accordance with their understanding of communist ideology and their strategic situations. By instituting a policy of “single command,” or “edinonachalie,” Stalin’s control of the Red Army was well established by the early 1920s. During the Soviet Army purges in the 1930s, the KPSU further strengthened its hold by assassinating an entire generation of mid-to-high level army commanders, including their most brilliant strategist, Mikhail Nikolayevich Tukhachevsky. 146 Subsequent to those purges, the role of the Zampolit, or Political Commissar, was reinforced with enhanced status and responsibilities in a dual command structure, despite the sole qualification for the position being distinctively non-military; i.e., Party loyalty.

The near military disaster in the winter of 1942-1943 marked the low point of Soviet Communist Party control of the Soviet Army. The dual chain of command had worked fine in peacetime. It seemingly functioned during the early stages of war with the Germans when the Red Army held Hitler’s Wehrmacht to a stalemate near Moscow and Leningrad, but in the face of impending defeat at Stalingrad, Stalin deferred to his line commanders and relinquished political control by his Zampolits. Stalin’s senior military commanders had gained operational freedom for the short term.

After Stalingrad, however, Stalin slowly forced the Zampolits as a political force back on his commanders until he had regained full Party control of the Red Army. After the war, though, Stalin’s senior generals remained at odds with him. The resulting tension continued into the 1950s,


when Nikita Khrushchev found himself struggling to placate his generals’ desire for independent command authority at all levels. Khrushchev’s hold over the Soviet military remained tenuous until he seized control once and for all by declaring “the primacy of the Party in military affairs” in 1958.147

Implicit Soviet bullying notwithstanding, East German Party leaders always wanted to model the NVA’s political framework on their Soviet brothers-in-arms. Beginning with the NVA’s predecessor, the KVP, the Party performed an important de facto role.148 After the KVP’s abysmal performance during the June 1953 rebellion, the Party’s Office for Security Questions complained that “no real Party leadership or Party life existed” within most KVP units. Only one or two soldiers in many KVP companies were Party members. Worse, the office that should have had sufficient authority to act, the KVP’s Office of Political Administration, enjoyed “only a little authority” because its political instructions were “simply ignored.” This was a period when the situation within the GDR was still at “extraordinarily dangerous levels” while tactical KVP units were in a “deplorable state.”149 Such reports reflected the Party’s soul searching about the “public behavior of the members of the KVP” which foreshadowed later, more problematic, times. While this report was a reaction to the June 1953 revolt and the KVP’s failure to engage, it also portended a problematic policy, the Leading Role of the Party, which remained a consistent complaint throughout its existence.

There were consistent indications that this de facto policy of Party primacy did not always work, primarily because de facto rules in large organizations are open to interpretation. For example, a 1957 note from the Office for Security Questions confirmed the Party’s Leading Role during the KVP’s transition to the nascent People’s Army:

147 Ibid.


149 “Bericht der Abteilung für Sicherheitsfragen an das Politbüro über die ernste Situation in der Kasernierten Volkspolizei, 27.10.1953 (Persönliche Verschulussache),” ed. ZK Abteilung für Sicherheitsfragen (Berlin: SAPMO-BArch, 1953), 22, 29.
Since the 32nd Plenum, that is, since the consultation of the Politbüro with leading Party workers, the army has strengthened the Leading Role of our Party in the units of the Nationale Volksarmee [author’s emphasis].

If the policy of the Leading Role of the Party was to have any teeth at all, it needed stamina robust enough to withstand the ebb and flow of organizational stresses. Thus, strong laws and structures were essential to provide the framework for real social change while simultaneously providing a trained military force for defense. Something had to be done.

The legal framework for the Party’s leading role would go far towards taking care of the first objective. Toward that end, on January 14, 1958 the East German Parliament passed a resolution similar to the Soviet resolution that authorized the Leading Role of the Party in the NVA. The following year, the Fifth Party Congress reinforced that authority by using "the ‘aggressive preparations’ of NATO and the Bonn Government” as a pretext and directed the armed forces to “…decisively elevate the role of Party organizations in the NVA.” This second action institutionalized and formalized the authority and power of Party organizations already existent within the NVA—political officers had been a fact of life, now Party organs and organizations within the tactical units had more formal roles to play that resulted in a deceptive perception of amplified power. As Rüdiger Wenke put it, this narrow connection between Party and military was actually a symbiosis of the two that “formed a critical socialization function.”

The emphasis on leadership by Party members was a consistent theme, even as the KVP evolved into the NVA. In the now familiar report from the Office of Security Questions, the Party unquestionably blamed the officers of the KVP for not leading their army of police against the 1953

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revolt. A fair amount of that culpability also fell to the handpicked political officers within the Ministry of Interior (the KVP’s supervisory ministry at that time).\textsuperscript{154}

While this is a clear example of blame cast on its political officers, the issue of ideological leadership by Party members was actually muddled. When the Party spoke of leadership, it usually spoke from two different perspectives: the leadership of the Party (or its \textit{Leading Role}) and the expected standards of leadership by officers \textit{within} the Party. One perspective was organizational, the other unexpectedly individualistic.

As national policy, the Party’s organizational leadership was self-evident. Its problem was how to articulate its leadership responsibilities to its members and to the citizens of the state. Individual Party members, regardless of their rank or position, were expected to carry the burden of the Party’s \textit{Leading Role} in their daily lives. A 1958 memo on the “Role of the Party in the NVA” emphasized those expectations:

\begin{quote}
The members of the Party in the NVA carry a high responsibility for the strengthening of the \textit{Leading Role of the Party}, [as well as] the elevation of its authority and reputation.\textsuperscript{155}
\end{quote}

 Practically speaking, this meant that all Party members, not just the political officers, were expected to be official archetypes and models of Party-appropriate behavior within their units:

\begin{quote}
...each member of the Party in the NVA, in his political activities, in his personal behavior, and in the fulfillment of military tasks, must be a model...By demanding higher \textit{[professional]} activity of all Party members, the enforcement of these decisions will contribute to still larger success by improving the combat strength of the NVA.\textsuperscript{156}
\end{quote}

From a practical point of view, this directive targeted more than the 95% of officers, 80% of cadets, 45% of career-minded sergeants, 35% of civilian workers, and 32% of its career soldiers, all who

\textsuperscript{154} “\textit{Die ernste Situation in KVP, 1953}.” “Noch immer hat der Genosse Dolling nicht verstanden, das Prinzip der kollektiven Leitung zu verwirklichen und eine wirksame, operative Arbeit zu entwickeln. Die Arbeit der Parteiorganisation in der Polit-Verwaltung ist zum grossen Teil formal und nicht kämpferisch.”

\textsuperscript{155} “\textit{Rolle der Partei in der NVA, 1958},” 44. “\textit{Die Mitglieder der Partei in der nationalen Volksarmee tragen eine hohe Verantwortung für die Festigung der führenden Rolle der Partei, die Erhöhung ihrer Autorität und ihrer Ansehens}.”

\textsuperscript{156} Ibid. “\textit{Das bedeutet, dass jedes Mitglied der Partei in der Nationalen Volksarmee in seiner politischen Aktivität, in seinem persönlichen Verhalten und in der Erfüllung der militärischen Aufgaben Vorbild sein muss. Die Durchsetzung dieses Beschlusses, der eine höhere Aktivität aller Parteimitglieder erfordert, wird dazu beitragen, noch grössere Erfolge in der Erhöhung der Kampfkraft der Nationalen Volksarmee zu erzielen}."
were also members or candidates of the Party. Without exception, a Party member’s behavior and speech, in or out of uniform, was a reflection of the Party. So, by performing as a role model, by obeying the rules, and by performing in an exemplary way, the Party member, be he officer, sergeant, or soldier, would become the embodiment of the Leading Role of the Party.

The methodology the SED used to implement this core policy is becoming more apparent. When it infused Stalinist-Leninist leadership principles into every uniformed Party member, the Party essentially arguing that “leadership” was integral to membership; or, to use a hackneyed phrase, “leadership had its responsibilities.” However, the Party was left with a critical question: “Toward what ends were officers and Party members to act?”

They must accomplish...the systematic elevation of combat readiness, the consolidation of discipline, and the morale of the members of the NVA as well as the universal strengthening of the defensive power of the republic as a goal [emphasis in text].

As it turns out, Eric Honecker knew he had growing problems in this area. He told a Party audience in 1958:

Yesterday, a comrade had very correctly agreed with my opinion that a few officers had expressed an inadequate connection of the Party to the soldiers.

While understated, this sort of criticism served to highlight the lack of trust the Party had in its line officers. In fact, Honecker routinely criticized all NVA officers (line and political) for their lack of "Party-centered activities,” their lack of “attention to the political training of the army,” and their failure to accomplish “sufficient political work.” These problems were particularly accentuated in the tactical units (company level and below) where young and very junior officers were expected to instill Party ideology in their soldiers. The Party’s perspective was that many units conducted “very few Party activities.” When “Party activities” did occur, the Office for Security Questions argued

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158 “Sie muß die Erhöhung des sozialistischen Bewußtseins, die systematische Hebung der Kampfbereitschaft, die Festigung der Disziplin, und der Moral der Angehörigen der Nationalen Volksarmee, also die allzeitige Stärkung der Verteidigungskraft der Republik zum Ziel haben.”
that they were conducted using a “narrow organizational foundation”; i.e., superficially and perfunctorily. The failure to achieve an ill-defined standard inevitably led to the conclusion that there was a “poor” relationship between the Party and the soldier, a decidedly qualitative judgment.

Failing to correctly conduct “Party-centered activities” was just one of many indicators available to the Party to assess itself. Another measure of merit was to observe the natural organizational tendency of all men to place themselves within an institutional pecking order. NVA documents were very pointed in this regard. Officers and sergeants jeopardized the Leading Role of the Party when they relied too much on “rank and position” to lead their troops. In a few Party meetings, officers who were “unfriendly and not class-sensitive” had over criticized their soldiers and sergeants. Incorrect behavior such as this by officers was a “serious phenomenon”:

In political work there are still [officers] who use “administrative orders” without strong political-ideological discussions that are based on a steadfast, drawn-from-life belief in the elevation of socialist consciousness in [all] army members (author’s emphasis). It was not enough just to improve professional relationships between officers and soldiers; those improvements had to be in “Party-appropriate” ways that ideally eliminated pesky class structures.

The problem was that even with large enrollments in the Party (approximately 80% of officers in the 1950s), those same officers could not be trusted to create and nurture the expected Party relationships in their units. Many line officers had apparently objected to the policy of the Party’s leading role. They were the Army’s military experts and felt no obligation to indoctrinate their subordinates politically. They were particularly irritated at the obvious military

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161 Ibid. “In der politischen Arbeit wird noch immer administrativ befehlen und nicht durch politisch-ideologische Auseinandersetzungen und beharrliche lebensnahe Überzeugung zur Erhöhung des sozialistischen Bewusstseins der Armeeangehörigen beigetragen.”

162 Gebauer, Remy, and Salheiser, “Die Nationale Volksarmee (NVA), 2007,” p. 306, 313. By the 1980s, approximately 5.3% of officers were not members of the Party. Most of those were probably in the Navy or the Air Forces because it was easier in those services to reach the rank of Major without Party membership by virtue of their technical qualifications. In Gebauer’s analysis, 6.0% of the data cards for former NVA officers that were available for analysis did not have a Party affiliation annotated.
incompetence of the political officers they were forced to deal with.\textsuperscript{163} Firmer measures were clearly necessary said Honecker:

> It seems that we must assert the complete authority of the Party organizations so that the correct class-appropriate relationship between officer and soldier is guaranteed.\textsuperscript{164}

The political-military discourse had justified the superior position of Party organs and organizations over their officers and commanders and again reinforced the \textit{Leading Role of the Party} in the NVA."

Obviously, this policy flew in the face of old military traditions. Whether it liked it or not, the NVA was the historical byproduct of military traditions from the Prussian Army, the Weimarian \textit{Reichswehr} and the Nazi \textit{Wehrmacht}. These armies used more traditional hierarchical structures that depended on authoritarian leadership styles—commander to officer to sergeant to soldier. In this new socialist army, however, officers and sergeants were expected to lead model socialist lives while exerting a specific socialistic and egalitarian style of leadership over their subordinates. They were supposed to use "political-ideological arguments" in their leadership, knocking traditional authoritarian relationships on their heads—all while instilling a "socialistic consciousness" in their soldiers.

The Party also demanded that their military leaders be model socialists who proffered their guidance and direction through “convincing oral arguments” and by invoking the marvelous success of the Soviet state. That was the policy, but again, success was difficult to achieve. Some “divisions and independent commands,” for example, did not discuss “important social, economic, and military decisions of the state.” To facilitate that expectation, mandated agendas and lesson plans always included important topics such as the activities of the Soviet Communist Party (the

\textsuperscript{163} Wenzke, "\textit{Die Nationale Volksarmee (1956-1990)}," 439.

\textsuperscript{164} Honecker, "35. Diskussionsbeitrag, 1958," 201. “Es scheint, daß wir die ganze Autorität der Parteiorganisationen dafür einsetzen, damit durch eine parteimäßige Erziehung das richtig klassenmäßige Verhältnis zwischen Offizier und Soldat gewährleistet wird.”
KPdSU) and “...the improvement of Party-political work in the Soviet Army and Fleet.” It was not enough for East German officers to merely “accept” the Party line; the activities of their Soviet brothers-in-arms had to be “discussed and accepted,” thus validating the goal of ideological purity within the tactical units. No officer or commander was exempt from such criticisms. It was the ultimate paradox of institutional leadership: the Party wanted results—a trained socialist army—but only through the ideological means it thought appropriate.

The policy of the Leading Role of the Party also played a large role in civil-military affairs in ways that undoubtedly interfered with the normal military operations of its tactical units. In the political-military discourse, the relationship of the army to the population was nearly as important as the role of the Party within the army itself. The army was objectified as the recipient of the “strength of the political-moral unity of the population.” Therefore, it was essential that the Army develop a relationship with the citizens of the state, the wellspring of its political and moral strength. The result, if done correctly, would be a “growing socialist consciousness of army members” and develop into an even closer “connection of the army with the working population of our republic.” Troop units and local socialist businesses would nurture enduring partnerships through public celebrations of the NVA. Military exercises were useful not just for combat training but also as a way to improve civil-military relations. As civilians and military worked together, the “political-moral unity of the population and the army” would develop into a more complete, more perfect state. Working together socialist lockstep was the ultimate solution to realizing all “plans and tasks.”

165 “Rolle der Partei in der NVA, 1958,” 37. Also see the attachment to Ulbricht’s letter to the District First Secretaries concerning this same subject, pg. 219-223 (Protokoll Nr. 4/58, 1958).

What was extraordinary in the Party’s version of civil-military relations, however, was the increased authority in local military affairs given to civilian officials in the neighboring civil administrative districts. In one 1958 letter to district Party leaders, Walter Ulbricht called on the local civil administrators to fully support the decision of the Politbüro concerning the role of the Party in the NVA and from “time to time to occupy themselves with significant questions of the units stationed in their districts.” “It would be appropriate,” Ulbricht’s directed, “that the Party secretary, the political deputy of the commander (the political officer), and local Party members be invited to a staff meeting at the Headquarters.” Ulbricht’s goal was to raise the influence of the local Party organizations in the development of “all aspects of life in the army,” particularly by improving the “judgment of the officer cadre” through “political and worldly education.”

More startling was Ulbricht’s call to civil Party officials to occupy themselves with “the comprehensive activities of the commander.” Party Secretaries for the local districts could now become full voting members in the military councils of their districts so they could “insure that the decisions of the Party in the life of the army could become stronger....” This move by the Party First Secretary was extraordinary. In a striking attack on the authority of the commander, the civilian district leadership maintained its right to consult with and control the decisions of local commanders—and Ulbricht himself had made it so. There was apparently only one limitation to this authority—because there were already “a sufficient number” of supervisory political organs in the NVA, the local Party leaders had no authority over the work of the Party organizations in the

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units. Local Party leaders were approved to consult and control military commanders, but not the Party organs within the local barracks.\textsuperscript{168}

\textbf{ROLE IN EDUCATION AND TRAINING}

Part and parcel to the Leading Role of the Party was its responsibility “…to educate all members of the NVA in their love and devotion to the Workers and Peasants State of the German Democratic Republic and the SED.”\textsuperscript{169} While, this was a task decidedly incongruent with military training or combat proficiency, the two goals could have been compatible. Marxism-Leninism claimed to have a normative function that could answer such complex questions as “Where do we stand today, what will the future bring us, and what should we do in order to shape it?”\textsuperscript{170}

Historically, German armies, sustained by strong ideological principles and trained to high military levels, had been powerful arms of the state. On the surface, there was no reason that the NVA could not have easily fit into that model.

Unfortunately, the army’s technical and tactical tasks, the essential building blocks of a well-trained army, were dripping in tortuous ideological pabulum. For example, the Party’s own Central Committee confirmed the importance of the relationship between the political and the military domains in 1958:

\begin{quote}
The most important task of Party organizations in the NVA is the political-ideological and moral education of members and candidates, as well as all army members [who are not Party members] in the spirit of Marxism-Leninism, \textit{and} the protection of the unity of political and military training for all army members \textit{[emphasis in text]}\textsuperscript{171}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{168} Ibid. \textit{“Die Bezirks- und Kreisleitungen haben jedoch nicht das Recht, Beschlüsse über die Arbeit der Parteiorganisationen in der Nationalen Volksarmee zu fassen, da es in der Armee eigene leitende Parteiorgane gibt.”}


\textsuperscript{170} Meyer, \textit{“Political-ideological Education in the NVA of the GDR,”} 107.

\textsuperscript{171} \textit{“Anlage #9 Protokoll Nr. 26/58, 1958,”} 48. \textit{“Die wichtigste Aufgabe der Parteiorganisationen in der Nationalen Volksarmee ist die politisch-ideologische und moralische Erziehung der Mitglieder und Kandidaten sowie aller Armeeangehörigen in Geiste des Marxismus-Leninismus \textit{und} die Sicherung der Einheit der politischen und militärischen Erziehung aller Armeeangehörigen \textit{[emphasis in text]}.”}
Well below the *Politbüro*, the logbook of the 14th Panzer Regiment (PR-14) couched the relationship between military and political tasks in a similar way:

Party functionaries exerted more influence on Party organizations, and the Party organizations exerted more influence over the entire unit (PR-14). This had the result that target practice and the exercises of the driving school were completed with a good result.\(^{172}\)

The Central Committee had clearly reinforced the *Leading Role of the Party* policy; but it also articulated a *de facto* policy that had deep and powerful implications at all levels of the East German military. In unequivocal language, the Party directed that socialist education, and not military training, was the key to victory. At the regimental level, the influence of the unit’s Party organization on marksmanship made perfect sense—to a Party functionary. In reality, bringing that goal to reality would prove extremely problematic in the future.

Part of the problem was that bringing socialist education to society as a whole was also problematic. In a 1957 “Speech to Party Organizations about Socialist Education,” for example, the Ministry of Education argued that the political education of each child was an essential task. It was obvious, said the unnamed speaker, that many teachers, educators, and parents did not yet have a clear idea of what the nature of “socialist education” was. His long tedious speech read in part:

> The development of these programs demands clarity about a few basic important ideological and political questions. Many teachers, educators, and parents are not clear about the nature of education. They do not recognize that the education of children and themselves is unconditionally necessary for the existence and development of the people’s society. They also do not recognize that they must be purposeful and methodical in a well-grounded socialist education.\(^{173}\)

The 1958 *Politbüro* was so sensitive to this problem in the NVA that it also directed changes in its “socialist education policy.”\(^{174}\) Honecker responded by directing that his political apparatus

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\(^{172}\) *Chronik des PR-14 von 20.08.1956 bis 30.11.1962 (Geheime Verschlußsache),* 135, 144. „Die Parteifunktionäre übten mehr Einfluß auf die Parteiorganisation und die Parteiorganisation auf die gesamte Einheit aus. Das hatte zur Folge, daß die Schießübungen und Fahrschulübungen mit einem guten Ergebnis abgeschlossen werden konnten.“


\(^{174}\) Protokoll Nr. 10/58, der Sitzung des Politbüros des Zentralkomitees am Dienstag, dem 25.2.58 im Zentralhaus der Einheit, Grosser Sitzungssaal (Berlin: SAPMO-BArch, 1958), 5. „Der marxistisch-leninistische Unterricht in der Volksarmee
raise the "ideological and professional proficiency of the army, including its civil servants." Socialist education in the army was necessary "...so that all members of the NVA can be equal to the complex political and military tasks [they face]." The ultimate goal of socialist education within the army was a growing socialist consciousness that had to be constantly nurtured. "Dialectic materialism" would become an integral part of daily army life through the more frequent, and theoretically improved, lessons on Marxism-Leninism.  

Political organs and officers were to inspire "love and devotion of the ... GDR and of the SED" in their soldiers. They were supposed to develop a "spirit of patriotism, firm bonds with the working class, and a spirit of socialist internationalism" that inspired them to be "...conscientious and consistent fighters for the cause of the working-class, their Party, the SED, and the Workers and Peasants State of the GDR." The Party called on its functionaries to achieve "high political knowledge," and to "orient themselves" on a wide variety of ideological questions such as the "problem of the Party’s worldview," which was "narrowly connected with the problem of socialist rebuilding." Such guidance was prolific, and unfortunately, often confusing. The army's Main Office for Political Administration was warned that the theoretical question of "dialectic materialism" was probably too abstract for the common soldier or the young lieutenant.

The Party also found fault with the conduct of political education classes in the lowest tactical units. Soldiers and officers were supposed to receive 16 hours/month of ideological training whether they were in garrison or in the field on training exercises. To hold classes less
frequently was utterly unacceptable. Yet many units were often called on the carpet for violating this simple standard. One NVA tactical unit held only two half-hour sessions of political training in a four-week period, well outside of the norm. The staff of one division in 1961 had not held a meeting to discuss essential Party decisions in over four months. It seems that the division’s own political office had no time to discuss Politbüro decisions; decisions that would have helped the general staff conduct its work.

These problems are not reflective so much of "communications problems" but rather with the "ways and means" of the discourse and the tension between political and military goals. In other words, the individual Party leaders were never afforded the initiative and imagination necessary to spread the message of the Party on their own recognizance. Rather, Party-organs from outside of the chain of command were responsible for that function. This is an organizational example of how little the Party trusted its own processes and its people, thus raising questions of whether it would have ever been happy with socialist progress in the army. By 1961, the lack of faith in its own Party-organs and organizations was obvious, and it ultimately caused immense problems for unit commanders.

Even when the classes were conducted as often as required, the quality of training was often suspect. Investigators criticized unit political officers for not correcting the many "political-ideological unclarities" of their students. One observer was so frustrated with the "divisive falsehoods" of his comrades that he concluded essential and serious self-criticism was absent from deficient officers who did not prioritize outing the "causes of mistakes." Another political officer was so indisposed while performing his duties that it was difficult to discern what sort of lesson

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178 Usually held on two consecutive training days: Eberhard Haueis, "Die führende Rolle der SED in der Nationalen Volksarmee, eine kritische Nachbetrachtung," in Dresden Stuigengemeinschaft Sicherheitspolitik (DSS) e.V., ed. Ministerium für Volksbildung; Betriebsparteiorganisation (Dresden: SAPMO-BArch, 1997).
preparation he had done. Worse, young and inexperienced political officers in the lowest units reportedly did not have the necessary skills to fulfill their political functions in or out of the classroom.182

Inevitably, the criticism of the political-military discourse found its way into the training of the faculty and the development of the curriculum in the critical academies for the army's political officers. In 1956, for example, Party inspectors found "extensive weaknesses" and deficiencies at the Political Officer's Academy. Final exam results showed that student knowledge of military principles was "weak," and their awareness of current affairs and political developments was "partially insufficient." To the amazement of some inspectors, a few students did not know the details of the 6th Five-Year Plan of the USSR or did not answer examination questions in a "comprehensive way." Of course, it was not the students' fault. The instructors suffered from numerous deficiencies, including their failure to emphasize "hatred of the West" in appropriate ways.183 Other inspections concluded that many deficient instructors should pay more attention to their "systematic theoretical qualifications."184 In hindsight, the faculty at these schools did have a very complicated challenge: how to teach complex ideological and philosophical ideas to a poorly educated student body, of which only 12% had a college-preparatory diploma or an Abitur.185

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183 Hatred for the west was taught at all levels of schooling. Friends and enemies were consciously differentiated in the pedagogy. Karl Schmitt, Politische Erziehung in der DDR : Ziele, Methoden u. Ergebnisse d. politischen Unterrichts an d. allgemeinbildenden Schulen d. DDR [Political Education in the DDR], Geschichte, Politik. Studien zur Didaktik (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1980), 71.


185 Ibid., 32. For early reports on educational levels in the security organs see "Die ernste Situation in KVP, 1953." For average educational levels of cadets in the KVP/NVA, see Knud Neuhoff and Carmen Winkel, Die Zeit nach 1945: Armeen im Wandel, ed. Karl-Volker Neugebauer, 3 vols., vol. Band 3, Grundkurs deutsche Militärgeschichte (München: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 2008), 48. By 1957, 53% of potential officers had an average education of 8th grade or "8. Klasse" and below. By 1960, that number had grown to almost 80% of all officer candidates. In 1960, only 12% of all officer cadets had graduated from secondary schools.
Regardless, the Party’s criticism of its political officers did not bode well for the institution that should have been exemplars of ideological purity and pedagogical efficiency, the academies for their political officers.

Still, despite comprehensive guidance, implementing the Party’s ideological goals was difficult. This was especially true for its attempts to raise the “socialist consciousness” of the soldier. The high disciplinary rates and high numbers of accidents with weapons or vehicles suggest that infusing pragmatic training with socialist ideology was not working. Instructions were repeated ad naussum, often with no effect. Despite these failures, the “Office of Security Questions” in 1958 continued to emphasize this essential requirement:

...an essential prerequisite for removal of these [training] deficiencies is the strengthening of the Leading Role of the Party and its basic organizations, as well as the improvement of the political educational and training in the NVA.

Two years later, a 1960 Delegates' Conference illustrated this cause and effect by pointing to problems of “discipline and order” as an indicator that the Leading Role of the Party had still not been realized. The delegates emphatically declared, “Political educational work must be strengthened in the center of activities for every Party organization.”

The policy of the Leading Role pervaded every structural and bureaucratic process in the NVA. In 1957, the new political organs of the 7.PD, declared that the role of all Party organizations in the regiments and battalions was to:

a. Influence [appropriate] life in the units by raising the ideological levels of the members and candidates,

b. Criticize the Party leadership of the regiments in order to improve the work in the basic organizations,

c. Raise the level of political and military education,

d. Improve the insufficient organization of cultural mass work during free time,

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e. Educate members and candidates to be models for non-Party members and to win their trust, and
f. Strengthen the influence of the Party-organizations in the raising of combat readiness.\textsuperscript{188}

Therein lies the rub—raising the \textit{socialist consciousness} of the soldier, while undoubtedly commendable, had become more important that raising combat readiness. Rather than focusing on pragmatic training or technical problems, the evidence clearly shows a propensity to overemphasize ideology as a comprehensive practical solution. The MfNV and the Party knew it had serious organizational and operational problems, and the conventional wisdom absolutely believed the Party could solve them. By imposing the Party as the leading political organ within the NVA, the \textit{Politbüro} not only effectively eliminated the military as a power base but also complicated beyond measure the training and education necessary to make the East German Army an effective fighting force.

\section*{FULFILLING PARTY DIRECTIVES}

The Party’s efforts to instill the \textit{Leading Role of the Party} into army operations came in many forms. None was more laborious and repetitious than its insistence on “fulfilling Party directives.” Certainly, it is the nature of all organizations to rely on rules and directives in order to function, even more so in hierarchical military units. The Party’s constant emphasis on this point is the issue here—“fulfilling Party directives” was often emphasized over fulfilling the orders of the military chain of command. The minutes of the 26\textsuperscript{th} meeting of the Central Committee in June 1958 provide us one example of how this problem played out. Frustrated by the lack of ideological progress within the armed forces, the Central Committee reminded the MfNV that:

\begin{quote}
Complete political work must be focused on the fulfillment of the decisions of the Party and government and on the orders for ‘assigned tasks.’\textsuperscript{189}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{188} “Chronik 7.PD, 1956-58,” 63-64. \textit{“Hauptinhalt der Diskussionen: Einfluß der Parteiorganisationen auf das Leben in den Einheiten, Kritik an den Parteileitungen der Regimente zur Verbesserung deren Arbeit in den Grundorganisationen, Erhöhung des niveaus der politischen und militärischen Ausbildung, Ungenügende Organisationen der kulturellen Freizeitmassenarbeit...Erziehung der Mitglieder und Kandidaten zu Vorbildern der parteilosen Armeeeangehörigen...”}

\textsuperscript{189} “Anlage Nr. 1, Protokoll Nr. 22/57, 1957.” Also \textit{“Einschätzung der Lage in MB V,1960,” 126.}
The Central Committee’s response, however, probably made the situation worse. Party operatives were supposed to “fulfill objectives”; i.e., do as they were instructed, but these declarations seemed to cry out, “If only everyone did what as they were instructed, we would be completely successful!”

One problem was that obedient Party functionaries had to implement its objectives in a prescribed order of precedence—one that was arguably problematic:

Political work in the NVA [will] be organized and executed based on Marxism-Leninism, the statutes of the SED, the decisions of Party Meetings and the Central Committee of the SED, the decisions of the Government of the GDR, as well as the Orders and Directives of the Minister for National Defense and its Main Political Office. On the surface, this directive appeared to make a clear distinction between ideology, prioritized political work, and implied military work. In practice, all political operatives, in or out of uniform, line or political, officer or enlisted, were expected to know and understand Marxist ideology and the plethora of government and Party directives promulgated in its name. The directive above expected the political operative to rationalize (in the fullest sense of the word) all of the political theory necessary to implement every bureaucratic decision. The practical effect of this instruction, however, asked young line officers, political officers, sergeants, and soldiers to apply Marxist-Leninist principles to poorly written Party and governmental instructions. Given the low educational levels of the NVA’s Party members, the results were problematic. Ideology dictated that Party and non-Party members did what they were told. However, the very effort to rationalize bureaucratic decisions with an ideology that logically conflicted with such decisions became a real problem. Not only were the political dictates complex, but their execution was made complicated by coercing inexperienced and naïve political officers, most of whom had less than a high school diploma, into understanding and applying every socialist theory, law, directive, and regulation in the book.

The Leading Role of the Party was a core policy of the regime, but to implement it across the various sectors of the state necessitated a feedback mechanism. That mechanism was the policy of “Criticism and Self-Criticism.” Used in all aspects of socialist life, its purpose was to turn “theory into practice” as one civilian ministry put it.\textsuperscript{191} In the civilian context, criticism/self-criticism was a means to evaluate civil practices that could provide new, alternative, and socialistic methods to guide the progress of the citizens and their State.\textsuperscript{192} In other words, criticism/self-criticism was a comprehensive, mechanistic, and socialistic feedback mechanism.\textsuperscript{193}

Such a feedback mechanism was not unheard of in the West. W. Edwards Deming’s concepts in the 1960s and 1970s evolved into the well-known Total Quality Management and improved industrial and bureaucratic processes in the capitalist world.\textsuperscript{194} His influence on large organizations encouraged a culture of continual self-improvement within business and government. The rise of American and Japanese industry in the post-war era was attributed to Deming’s theories.\textsuperscript{195}

Notably, the process of continual self-improvement envisioned more participation by workers, a development that Deming later panned as so much “window-dressing.” Managers were responsible, he argued, for the achievement of organizational goals. Workers were important to the process, but they were still part of the process and not responsible for developing or implementing

\textsuperscript{192} “Anlage Nr. 7 zum Protokoll Nr. 116 (II), der Sitzung des Zentralsekretariate vom 27.9.48,” ed. Zentralkomitee (Berlin: SAPMO-BArch, 1948).
\textsuperscript{193} Also discussed in Herspring, “Technology and Civil-Military Relations: The Polish and East German Cases,” 130.
strategic goals. More to the point, Deming argued for a move away from statistical benchmarks for their own sake.\textsuperscript{196}

In the GDR, the basic problem was how to foist a policy of self-improvement into highly authoritarian and structured socialist organizations that did not appreciate the feedback that \textit{criticism/self-criticism} demanded. In these types of organizations, processes could be improved in only so many ways before there was little room left for real improvement. At that point, the feedback mechanism ceased to serve the alleged goal of achieving real German socialism and instead became the goal for the sake of itself.\textsuperscript{197}

Logic would also dictate that the focus on \textit{criticism/self-criticism} would result in balanced reporting from both the political and military domains. It was intended to encourage the discussion of socialist principles as a way to improve personal and organizational actions and responsibilities. It was all about learning from one's mistakes. If one were to criticize, one had to discuss and interact with the subject, process, or idea being criticized. The interaction of \textit{criticism} and \textit{self-criticism} would naturally lead to improvement. In other words, \textit{criticism/self-criticism} presupposed knowledge of the subject. Some organizations and organs would do well—others would not.

The reality was quite different. Rather than developing an even-handed policy, the Party developed its own calculus of \textit{criticism/self-criticism}. As previously discussed with regard to the \textit{discourse of deficiencies}, positive statements about other government organs in NVA documents were exceedingly rare. The first quarter of most reports had a positive tone, usually supported by a few isolated examples of individual or unit success. Sergeants at one Leadership School, for example, were complimented for their ability to integrate intense political work with military

\textsuperscript{196} Stratton, "Gone but Never Forgotten". Demming wanted to: "...eliminate slogans, exhortations, and targets asking for zero defects or new levels of productivity. Such exhortations only create adversarial relationships, as the bulk of the causes of low quality and low productivity belong to the system and thus lie beyond the power of the work force."

Another report praised the success of the 7.PD for implementing the *Leading Role of the Party* policy. The primary sources were consistent in this regard. Then, as if responding to socialist universal law, *criticism/self-criticism* quickly devolved into the *discourse of deficiencies* for the remaining 75% of the report or speech. No matter how glowing the initial platitudes, *eine reihe von Mängel*, highlighted by the policy of *criticism/self-criticism*, had to be corrected.

This expectation of bottom-to-top *criticism/self-criticism* prevailed throughout the East German State and was a patently obvious theme in daily NVA operations. The Party organizations and organs of the NVA had the responsibility to use *criticism/self-criticism* as a new socialist methodology. It was integrated into every military bureaucratic process so that it became a fundamental component of the daily life of every soldier. As in the civilian sector, *criticism/self-criticism* also became a bastardized methodology within the military that opened untold opportunities for unconstructive *criticism* and dysfunctional bureaucratic behavior.

In practice, the Party gave everyone in the armed forces, from the MFNV down to the lowest tactical units, the opportunity to criticize the bureaucracy or the individual performances of every soldier and officer. As with the teachers, soldiers and officers were expected to strive for continual personal and organizational improvement through such self-examinations.” One had to practice self-effacement in front of his peers, admitting one’s mistakes and "taking one’s lumps." The Party

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encouraged its members to criticize a wide range of personal performance failures, from failing to do their work to inadequate motivation. The State also expected criticism/self-criticism to be a scalpel that would cut the fat from this army. For example, Rudolf Dölling directed that Party organs strive for…:

...irreconcilable criticism against poor work preparation, poor leadership of individual [army] members, and deteriorating attitudes toward continued training. They are to strive for the perfection of military discipline [in the struggle against] moral offenses and offenses against Party discipline [author’s emphasis].201 This policy inevitably penetrated deep into the army’s units where Party leaders assessed that “critical discussions” needed to occur with comrades who had poor discipline and had failed “to complete their political and military tasks.”202 The collective would be the better for such criticism.

In other words, criticism/self-criticism was not just an ideological concept; very real results were expected from it, including significant improvements in training and discipline. Dölling’s directive also focused on some of the essential elements of combat readiness: leadership, preparation, training, and discipline. However, if the true purpose of an army was to defend the state, and the measure of an army’s ability to defend the state was high combat readiness, then Dölling’s directive missed the mark. Rather than focusing on the actual preparation and conduct of training, his implication was that the “irreconcilable criticism” of its elements would lead to high combat readiness. Unfortunately, this self-flagellation in front of one’s colleagues became a process that rarely improved the performance of any military unit.

No one was immune from participating in this criticism/self-criticism, including the highest levels of the MfNV: the minister himself, the Chiefs of the main political offices, and the senior leaders.

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commanders of the Military Districts, the Navy, the Air Force, and the Air Defense Forces.\textsuperscript{203} The Party expected these high-ranking officers to model criticism/self-criticism in their daily decision-making, thus setting an organizational and developmental standard for the rest of the army. Their goal, however, was not to improve the Army’s operational standards, but rather to raise “...the fighting power of the Party and its leading role.” Every Party member, particularly those who held senior positions, was expected to exemplify a model application of criticism/self-criticism “in all areas of political education and military training.”

The unity of Party discipline and the strengthening of criticism, and especially self-criticism, is a law of development for the Party...[author’s emphasis]\textsuperscript{204} In this way, the Party conflated two major policies: its primacy within the armed forces with criticism/self-criticism as an ideological “law of development.” Of course, the Party wanted the homeland defended. More important, the Party wanted its defense to be conducted in an “ideologically correct” manner. To accomplish this, it continually strove for a “critical atmosphere” which included being extremely judgmental, not just of officers and commanders, but of Party organizations that were not sufficiently critical of themselves. Party members soon came to terms with the requirement for “more criticism with [respect to] the situation of political and military work.”\textsuperscript{205} If commanders found solutions to military problems without using the ideologically correct process of criticism/self-criticism, then the commanders themselves were leaving themselves vulnerable to criticism and reproach.

\textsuperscript{203} Unlike western air forces, air forces behind the Iron Curtain were divided into two separate and distinguishable parts: Air Defence Forces whose sole purpose was to defend the state from an air attack, and Air Forces, whose job it was to attack the enemy on the ground, either independently or in coordination with Land Forces.\


There were many problems with this policy. First, it conflicted with the idealized image of the Party so well explained by Alan Nothnagle’s concept of “the state as superlative.” Criticism could certainly be a positive organizational experience, but if the regime was “decisive and unshakable,” and therefore could never be wrong, how could any organizational criticism see the light of day? Put another way, how could one ever dare to criticize the Party and the State if they were always “right”? In the end, though, perhaps the more important question was how the common soldier would respond under these conditions of organizational dysfunction?

Soldiers, and citizens, were also to use criticism/self-criticism in their struggle to “hate the West.” This depiction turned the West into a bogeyman whose presence was intended to motivate all citizens toward the ultimate victory of the socialist state. For example, after the people’s rebellion in June 1953, Walter Ulbricht directed that the national armed forces should “be consumed by hatred for American, English, and French imperialism...and the militarism of West Germany.”206 The Politbüro in 1957 expanded on that idea when it demanded all Party members were to “educate and train the members of the NVA in the irreconcilable hatred of imperialism and all enemies of the state.”207 All officers, sergeants, and soldiers were expected to be the “vanguard” of that hatred:

Political organs are the leading organs of the SED for the political work in the NVA...They develop in the members of the NVA an irreconcilable hatred against the militarism of West Germany, against imperialism and all the enemies of our people [author’s emphasis].208

A Party Delegates’ Conference two years later repeated the straw man:
...it has not always been recognized that it matters in the National People’s Army to educate the soldiers, sergeants, and officers to a hatred of German imperialism and militarism—that their purpose is to smash German militarism.209

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207 "Anlage Nr. 1, Protokoll Nr. 22/57, 1957," 7. “Sie erziehen die Angehörigen der nationalen Volksarmee zu unversöhnlichem Haß gegen den Imperialismus und alle Feinde unseres Staates.”

208 "Anlage #10 Protokoll Nr. 26/58, 1958," 60. “Sie entwickeln bei den Angehörigen der Nationalen Volksarmee einer ...Haß gegen die Westdeutschen Militärästen, gegen den Imperialisten...” Also in Welt, Creating German Communism: 235.

209 “Einschätzung Delegiertenkonferenzen 1960,” 190. „Im Zusammenhang damit wurde nicht immer erkannt, daß es in der Nationalen Volksarmee darauf ankommt, die Soldaten, Unteroffiziere und Offiziere zum Haß gegen den deutschen
There was no exception. At the policy level, there could never be any chance for reconciliation between East Germany and any Western government. At the visceral level, the hatred of imperialism, and by extension, all Western states, was every soldier’s duty.\textsuperscript{210} One’s mere association with the West raised suspicion; to be Western was to be imperialist and, therefore, an enemy. A citizen could not be a member of the Party or hold responsible rank or position if he had relatives in the West.\textsuperscript{211}

As one might expect, most soldiers did not meet this high standard of ideological loathing. “Capitalist thought,” said one report was “inadequately opposed by some army members.” It was not enough that a soldier might tacitly agree with this policy, he also had to outwardly demonstrate his hatred of the West through “oral arguments and heated debate”; i.e., through an outward criticism of the West. In addition, the Party expected all army members to faithfully criticize and question the conceptual creation of a reunified Germany, as well as such obscure topics as the "Oder/Neisse Freedom Border" and the “development of socialist agriculture.”\textsuperscript{212}

Party officials often asked themselves why their soldiers had so “little hatred for the West?” Its problem was one of pure data collection: if the soldier did not articulate his hatred, how would the Party know whether he did in fact, hate? In the absence of positive proof of that hatred, then the Party’s response, given the policy of criticism/self-criticism, was also predictable—the soldiers had an “unclarity about basic questions of Party and governmental policy.”

\textsuperscript{210} Party organizations down to the tactical levels were instructed to education the soldiers in the “hatred of the West or western militarism): “Chronik des PR-14 von 20.08.1956 bis 30.11.1962 (Geheime Verschlußsache),” 153.

\textsuperscript{211} According to Frank Hagemann, the depiction of the West as a class enemy deserving of hatred was no “flowery phrase,” but rather an expression of life experience by “old communists” from World War II. Hagemann, Parteiherrschaft: 61-62.

\textsuperscript{212} "Allgemeine Einschätzung, 1959," 124. „In verschiedenen Truppenteilen gab es ein Zurückweichen vor ideologischen Auseinandersetzungen, so daß der verstärkten ideologischen Hetze und Verleumdungskampagne durch die westlich Imperialisten und den Überresten des kapitalistischen Denkens bei einem Teil der Armeangehörigen ungenügend entgegengetreten wurde...Besonders in den Fragen der Schaffung eines einheitlichen, demokratischen Deutschlands auf dem Wege der Konföderation, der Oder/Neiße Friedensgrenze und der Entwicklung der sozialistischen Landwirtschaft.”
The word “unclarity” implied much more than a simple misunderstanding of terminology. This criticism inferred that the soldier, the army, and even society as a whole, was neither mature enough nor focused enough on essential objectives and goals. If they had been, so went Party logic, the soldier, and by extension the citizen, would have understood what was necessary and would have been able to execute the State’s prescribed plans in a superior manner.

It is very possible that criticism/self-criticism was valid methodology. However, for several reasons it could never have achieved the desired organizational success in the East German state. Besides failing to achieve the Party’s leading role, deficiencies in Criticism/self-criticism also became a common complaint to explain bureaucratic and leadership failures. This tendency could be characterized as the “Kritik-Paradox.” Rather than focusing on the content of the problem, criticism/self-criticism became the excuse; i.e., “We failed because there was not enough criticism/self-criticism by Party members.”

The development of criticism/self-criticism was an essential process in Party work that required the Leading Role of the Party for success. There could be no “Party work,” and therefore no Leading Role of the Party, without it. The Ministry of Defense tried to resolve this problem in 1957 when it observed that there was a:

...wide spreading attitude about the ‘peculiarities’ of Party-work that inhibits the development of criticism, self-criticism, and the work of the Party organizations [in the units of the NVA][author’s emphasis].\(^ {213} \)

As long as top-down criticism was more powerful and authoritative than bottom-up self-criticism, soldiers and other low ranking officers would be naturally reticent to do little more than the minimum necessary to satisfy their political officers. Of course, the superlative nature of the state also dictated that criticism of the State and the Party from the bottom would never be tolerated.

Despite these inconsistencies, the importance of the policy of criticism/self-criticism was routinely repeated in the political-military discourse. In 1958, a Party functionary reported to Erik

Honecker that a series of "defects and deficiencies" existed in the NVA's own propaganda newspaper, *The People's Army*. The scope of these widespread and focused exclusively on ideological issues:

- Inadequate treatment of basic questions of policy by the Party and the government,
- Inadequate "disclosure" of [West] German Militarism,
- Insufficient military-political commentary, and...
- Poor rationale for solutions to difficult political-ideological problems in military training.²¹⁴

It also seems that the paper's editorial offices suffered from the absence of a culture of *criticism/self-criticism*. “For a half year,” the report claimed, “there has been no Party-life within the basic Party organization [of the editorial offices].” Party members permitted an environment of “lazy liberalism” that led to “personal tensions.” In other words, a climate of *criticism/self-criticism* had been allowed to languish within the very offices that championed such a policy. More important, the normal personal tensions that cropped up, all too common in any organization, distracted from a “Party-appropriate and critical atmosphere.”²¹⁵ Had appropriate *criticism/self-criticism* protocols been enforced in the editorial offices, Party comrades would have not been bickering with each other.

These *criticisms* struck at the heart of the SED’s efforts to train and educate the East German soldier. As a propaganda arm of the NVA, the paper had many important functions, not the least of which was to explain government and Party policy to the soldier and to criticize the NVA itself if it drifted too far towards a poorly defined “[West] German militarism.” *The People’s Army* should have been a stalwart political publication and the outward expression of the bureaucratic *self-criticism* the Party expected of itself; it should have been an exemplar of ideology and socialist

²¹⁴ *Arbeit der Redaktion “Die Volksarmee”* (1958), 49. „Es konnte festgestellt werden, dass die Mängel im Inhalt der Zeitung: ungenügende Behandlung der Grundfragen der Politik von Partei und Regierung, mangelhafte Entlarvung des deutschen militarismus und ungenügende militärpolitische Kommentierung, schlechte Argumentation zur Lösung von Schwerpunkt ...in der politisch-ideologischen militärischen Erziehung u.a."

management style. Therefore, the appearance of these problems in the army’s principal propaganda organ would have alarmed high Party officials.

The Party had clearly stubbed its toe. Oddly enough, while the editors were criticized, they were not held responsible for this fiasco. Instead, it was the PHV, the highest political office in the Defense Ministry, which should have “mobilized the Party-organizations” and improved the editorial offices. At the very least, the PHV should have carefully vetted the editorial staff. It did not accomplish that basic task.

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Criticism by the Party itself cast a wide net across bureaucratic functions, organizations, and organs. The primary instrument of that criticism was the Party Inspection Commission (or PKK) within the NVA. As an enforcement agency for the Party, the Commission was authorized to investigate anything political—which also meant nearly every issue in the NVA:

...there are still examples of violations of Leninist norms in the Party life of some ground organizations...[including] the insufficient development of criticism and self-criticism as a means of struggle against all deficiencies and against all appearances of dissatisfaction and contempt...

The Party firmly believed that “an open and critical atmosphere” would always contribute to improvements in all aspects of life in the NVA, including its commanders, political officers, and political organs from the MfNV to the smallest units in the army.

Indeed, even the PKK in one of the NVA’s premier combat divisions was not exempt from criticism. In 1961, after the obligatory “all is well” message for the 7.PD, the division’s political officer declared that the division’s own PKK suffered from a few deficiencies:

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216 Ibid., 52.
The PKK [of the 7.PD] led an insufficient struggle in the education of the comrades to improve disciplinary practices, especially in the struggle against excesses in disciplinary measures and the incorrect application of disciplinary regulations.\textsuperscript{219} Such criticism was neither unusual nor isolated. In the same period, an inspector from the 7.PD observed that a few comrades “practice[d] no criticism against [their] superiors because they feared repercussions while in the service.” He continued:

Under these conditions, it is possible that the ‘moral swamp’ in the division’s staff, and especially in its technical offices, would not have been discovered.\textsuperscript{220} Moral turpitude was a Party violation that could be exposed by criticism/self-criticism. This meant that military and political officers should have been subject to rigorous criticism from below as well as from above. If the division’s own inspection arm was deficient, though, such violations would never see the light of day.

This is not to say that self-criticism at high levels was not possible. Dölling, as the army’s chief political officer, once set an example of self-criticism that would have been hard to surpass. In 1957, his blunt statements at a Party Conference should have opened up new avenues for organizational improvements if only they had been accepted. In a rare criticism of the Party itself, perhaps one that could have only been accomplished at his level, Dölling argued that the fundamental problem of ideological development was with the attitudes of Party leaders within the army itself:

A few Delegates’ Conferences and General Meetings have exposed and criticized a large number of deficiencies, especially in the working functions of individual administrative offices, including the Office of Political Administration [of the MfNV]. A whole series of deficiencies in the political schools, in military training, and in the daily routines of entire formations and troop units, show very clearly that the causes [of these problems] can be seen in the functions of a few offices in the Office of


Political Administration, as well as in the leadership of the Ministry itself [author’s emphasis].

The argument should be apparent—in a world where profound organizational and societal change was expected—Party leadership was failing to execute its most important polices. The senior leadership knew it had problems and it knew where those problems lay.

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The policy of the Leading Role of the Party placed the Party squarely in the middle of NVA operations and activities; it shaped the organizational structure and daily decision-making of the army. Criticism and self-criticism was the day-to-day expression of that influence. Theoretically, it exposed the organizational and procedural problems of this new army in ways that would solve daily problems. In practice, however, criticism/self-criticism was not viewed as one methodology in a kit bag full of management tools, but rather as a required methodology to be used.

The policy of criticism/self-criticism did have some merit. If a culture of exposing problems resulted in practical solutions, the NVA and the GDR would be the better for it. Integrating in practical ways the Leading Role policy and its singular criticism/self-criticism methodology with a pragmatic military chain of command would have been a powerful combination. Instead, it yoked the military chain of command with political deputies and then tried to normalize their bureaucratic behavior with Marxist-Leninist ideology. Stalin did it one way by using the concept of “individual command” or edinonachalie. Ulbricht and the SED did it slightly differently in East Germany with their own version of “individual command,” or Einzelleitung.

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Every commander [and] every supervisor must be aware that first and foremost he is a political functionary and conducts his work on behalf of the Party of the working class. “About the Role of the Party in the NVA,” 1958

Despite the policies of the Leading Role and criticism/self-criticism, the Party still had a huge problem—controlling the army while giving its commanders enough latitude to win if the West ever attacked. From the Party’s point of view, the military commander was certainly necessary, but only as a technical expert in the management of violence. Even though he was a Party member, the commander would never be trusted enough to enforce Party ideology—instead, that role fell to the political officer. In peacetime, Party control was primary, but military tasks could not be ignored. In wartime, military success was essential, but not so much that a highly trained army could overthrow the State. The tensions between Party control and the commanders’ freedom to act, then, had to be resolved and kept in balance.

Normalizing military leadership with Party leadership, while new for the SED and the NVA, was not a new problem for other socialist armies. The Soviets and the Chinese had already learned that fraternity and egalitarianism might work in civil society, but these qualities were the seeds of defeat if taken to extremes. Both had to acknowledge the inherent necessity of controlling violence by stratifying military leadership and technical expertise into formal rank structures and rigid command-and-control frameworks. In the not too distant past, the aristocratic class had filled an army’s officer corps. Now socialist armies found themselves again led by generals, admirals, and officers—clearly anathema to a classless society. In this framework, total military control would have minimized the role of the Party and thus left the government vulnerable to a military coup.


223 Whether the commander insisted on his independent authority or acquiesced to the Political-officer is open to question. See Hagemann for an initial discussion of this issue: Hagemann, Parteiherrschaft: 63-65.
Total political control, on the other hand, would have jeopardized military success on the highly anticipated nuclear battlefield. So how was the Party to give military commanders as much flexibility as possible without losing political control?

Structurally, the East Germans solved part of the problem by modeling their command structure after the preexisting dual chain of command of the Soviet Army. A ranking political officer who also served as his deputy commander, or Stellvertreter, supported every line commander. This occurred at every level of command: military districts, divisions, regiments, battalions, and companies (as well as the Navy and Air Force equivalents). Even the Minister for National Defense had his own political deputy. Companies averaging one hundred men or fewer were assigned a “part-time” political officer from among their platoon leaders, thus providing an entry-level opportunity for future political officers or quick promotion as line officers. Political organs were imbedded in the staffs of the MfNV down to the divisional level. This structure also mimicked the GDR’s civil administrative framework, a small army of “subservient functionaries” that followed the orders of very remote and self-appointed policy makers.

Political officers were Party functionaries—plain and simple. They served in both executive and supporting roles. As “executives,” they were the senior representatives of the Party at each bureaucratic level. In their supporting roles, the political officers provided the training and materials necessary for Party activities to function. When those duties and activities were large and extensive, formal Party Organs, such as the Party’s Main Political Office in the MFNV, also supported that function. Party Organs always responded to the executive authority of the assigned political officer cum deputy commander.

On the surface, the logical existence of a military commander paired with a political deputy seemed simple enough. If the political officer was the commander’s deputy, then he worked

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224 Kolkowicz, The Soviet Army.
225 Henry Ashby Turner, Germany from Partition to Reunification (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 64.
directly for him. While this was true, the basic problem was how to resolve the inevitable conflict between military command and Party supremacy. The East Germans solved this problem in a way that was similar to the Soviet approach. Both armies normalized military command and political influence and fused them into the “unity of political and military leadership.” The Soviets called their concept “individual command,” or edinonachalie. The East Germans called the concept “individual leadership,” or Einzelleitung.²²⁶ However, while Einzelleitung and Edinonachalie were linguistically similar, the SED would never permit the same freedom of action as Stalin permitted his commanders at Stalingrad. The term Einzelleitung prescribed “individual leadership” in name only; in reality, it was effectively a concept of collective leadership.

The German army’s traditional view of Einzelleitung was historically based on the rights and responsibilities of German commanders to lead their military units without political interference. Hitler’s influence over the Wehrmacht notwithstanding, commanders in and prior to World War I were remarkably independent from political control once they were in the field. As with the Soviets, however, the role of the commander in any German socialist army had to be reconciled with the Party’s scheme of political control. The influence of the Party on all matters military would be a natural result of that reconciliation and would thus provide a radical departure from the Prussian/German tradition of authoritative command in a single commander.²²⁷

First, though, the SED needed to resolve the inevitable conflict between Party and military leadership. It took several years for the Party to resolve the various interpretations of what Einzelleitung really meant. Until it was resolved, public efforts to explain Einzelleitung often sent mixed messages to those who had to implement the policy. For example, in 1957 the Politbüro issued the following directive:

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²²⁶ *Rede zum Offiziere des MB III, Feb 1962 (Vertrauliche Verschlussache),* 5.
²²⁷ See Robert M Citino, The German Way of War: From the Thirty Years’ War to the Third Reich (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2005). This book is an excellent discussion on the tradition of individual command in the German Army up to World War II.
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...the work of the political organs must be directed at the strengthening of individual leadership [Einzelleitung] in the formations and troop units of the NVA and, thus, strengthen the authority of the commanders and superiors [author’s emphasis].228 In this clear expression of policy, the individual position of the commander was strengthened and clarified. Einzelleitung was obviously intended as an outward expression of the commander’s primary position vis-à-vis the Party. It was the commander’s sole responsibility to improve the individual performance of his soldiers and to make his unit ready for future conflict. For their part, “consolidating the authority of the military chain of command” was an overt signal that Party organs in the units had a supporting role with respect to Einzelleitung.

This may have been the last time the Party relegated itself to a supporting role. If the Leading Role of the Party was to have any teeth, the Party had to clarify and enhance the role of the Stellvertreter. Therefore, in 1958, in probably one of the most succinct and directive policy statements in its history, the Politbüro established a clear organizational boundary for the Stellvertreter:

The Stellvertreter, with respect to political work, are under their commander and are accountable to him. In the same breath, however, it also declared that, “For disciplinary issues, [the Stellvertreter] are subordinated to the next higher commander.” In addition, the leaders of the political organs at each level of command did not work for their immediate commander, but rather:

...the leaders of the political-offices [i.e., the political organs at each level of command] are under the leading functionaries of the Party of the next higher political-organ [author’s emphasis].229 In his role as deputy commander, then, the political officer had de facto and de jure two bosses: his immediate commander and the political deputy commander of the next higher echelon of military command. In other words, a regimental Stellvertreter worked directly for his regimental commander and for the Stellvertreter at the division headquarters above him. Understandably, this


resulted in the dilution of a commander’s authority by the Party. Not only was he encumbered by a deputy commander with marginal military skills, but that same person reported to two different masters.

Despite this obvious empowerment of the political officers, many Party members in the army were actually dissatisfied with the unification of political and moral authority under Einzelleitung. In fact, they did not believe that the Party’s “Leading Role” went far enough. In 1958, Rudolf Dölling observed that some political officers falsely believed that:

...the principle of Einzelleitung...and the structure of the army, [were] not in agreement with the overall principles of Party work and inner-Party-like democracy.230

In other words, some political officers did not concur with the Party’s structural solution of a dual chain of command. To them, Einzelleitung watered down Party supremacy by giving too much power and authority to the commander. Dölling strongly objected to this thinking.231 “How could there still be officers who did not understand Einzelleitung?” he probably wondered?

The Party’s intention had always been to build an army on the Soviet model. Party influence could never play a secondary role to military decisions. Only a year later the Party published a revised interpretation of the concept of “individual leadership.” It still insisted on the “strength of Einzelleitung in the formations and troop units.” It also continued to insist that the “consolidation of the authority” of the chain of command was still important. Now, a subtle but critical change in wording emphasized a difference in the object of the work of the political organs. In 1957, the work of the political organs was focused on consolidating “the authority of the commanders” in the units. In 1958, however, their work was “guided by the strength of individual leadership” in the units of the NVA. In 1957, the policy was clearly focused on the chain of command. In 1958, the Central Committee of the SED, through the Main Political Office of the Army, redefined Einzelleitung as the


“unity of political and military leadership.” This unity was guaranteed through the “...collective consultation of the commanders with the political organs and political leadership for all important political and military measures.”232

By fiat, “individual leadership” was not “individual” at all, but an unfortunate blend of political ideology and military pragmatism. Now the SED and the NVA had a clearly stated expression of de facto policy. Even though the commander was a Party member—which they all were—he no longer had the freedom of action to make “important” decisions on his own; he must always consult with his political deputy.

Without using the words, the Party had refined the concept of Einzelleitung into “collective consultation.” In practical terms, this meant regular and routine meetings between the Commander of the unit and his Stellvertreter cum political officer. Whether an issue was an “important political and military measure,” however, was open to question. When was a political issue important enough to warrant the involvement of the commander? When did a routine military decision rise to such importance that the commander felt obliged to consult his political officer? Alternatively, when could the political officer demand to be involved in any decision made by his commander?

Thus, the political-military discourse created still another paradox: the commanders’ authority could be strengthened only by circumventing his traditional responsibilities and authority. The SED firmly believed that in order to ensure the survival of the East German State, every military commander at every echelon needed a watchdog to prevent abuses of power. Despite the traditional independent authority of German commanders in the past, NVA commanders were now only necessary for their technical expertise as managers of violence.

While the SED continued to insist that their military commanders were still in command and his authority was not diminished, he still had to confer with his political counterparts. Thus, a

232 “Anlage #10 Protokoll Nr. 26/58, 1958,” 61. „Die Einzelleitung in der Armee, die Einheit von politischer und militärischer Führung ist durch die kollektive Beratung aller wichtigen politischen und militärischen Maßnahmen der Kommandeure mit den Politorganen und Parteileitungen zu gewährleisten.” The phrase “formations and troop units” was textual code designed to insure that all directives were applied to all armed forces units regardless of their mission and level of command.
de facto declaration of command primacy conflicted daily with de jure policies. A commander’s authority did not flow from any specific constitutional authority, but from his “personal moral strength” and a euphemistic “consolidation of command” with the Party. A commander’s authority was “indivisible,” yet Party policy still directed that “individual leadership” and authority could exist only when it was consolidated with Party leadership. The Party, representing the “soul of the German people,” was really in charge.

Meanwhile, the Party worked hard at clarifying and enhancing the roles of the Stellvertreter, the political organs, and the Party organizations, all while watering down the responsibilities of the commander with respect to the policy of Einzelleitung. The “political-ideological and moral education of the members and candidates in the spirit of Marxism-Leninism” was one of the most important tasks of a Party organization. It was also required to “…fight for the single-minded attainment of the decisions of the Party meetings, conferences, and the Central Committee” and organize its work according to ”the statutes of the Party and the Instructions of the Political Offices.”

The political officers and their offices also had another, very specific, role: to improve the “individual performances” of NVA soldiers by “insuring the unity of political and military education for all army members [author’s emphasis].” The sum total of “individual performances” would collectively improve the performance of the unit, which, in turn, would strengthen the authority of the commander and the chain of command (see Figure 6). In theory, this well-intentioned concept could have worked. The problem was that the guidance the political officers received from the

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234 Ibid., 76. “Die Politorgane helfen den Offizieren und Kommandeuren bei ihrer ideologischen, militärischen und kulturellen Entwicklung. Sie erziehen allen Angehörigen der Nationalen Volksarmee ein Hohes Verantwortungsfühlen für die Erfüllung der ihnen übertragenen Pflichten gegenüber Partei und Regierung an, wirken für ein vorbildliches persönliches Verhalten.”
Party often directly conflicted with the traditional role of the commander in achieving a high state of combat readiness. This conflict is explicit in a 1957 Security Commission report calling for specific changes in the role of the Party organs:

The Party organizations and the Party secretaries in the units of the NVA will be given larger responsibilities and more authority. Their influence on the development of all aspects of life in the army, i.e., on the selection and judgment of [political] cadre, the evaluations of the activities of commanders, the fulfillment of the political and military tasks, the organization of Party [indoctrination] classes, and so forth, must be strengthened [author's emphasis].

This is an outstanding example of the tensions extant between command responsibility and Party leadership. The Party’s “leading role” was not a philosophy of leadership as the Party would have you believe; it was really about who had control. In principle, the commander was the leader, and the Party went to extraordinary lengths to emphasize his authority and responsibility. The political officer, however, controlled all the sinews of command in the unit. He selected cadre for the Party and “ensured the fulfillment of political and military tasks.” His most important task, though, was to evaluate the activities of the commander. Simply put, he had control over “all aspects of life in the army.”

The Party was comfortable with the concept of Einzelleitung. It had apparently worked for the Soviets; why should it not work for them? However, while the Party had no problem describing the responsibilities of its political officers and organizations, the balance it sought between the authority of the commander and the responsibilities of his Stellvertreter often clashed in ways that

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were difficult to rationalize. Take, for example, the following excerpt from _Politbüro_ Minutes in 1958:

The secretaries of the Party-organizations for the battalions, regiments, and independent units have the right to participate and speak their opinions at consultations with the military leadership of the concerned units or stations.\(^{236}\)

In an army where the Party had a _Leading Role_, this directive was perfectly sensible. If the military commander had to exercise _Einzelleitung_ by consulting with his political officer, then Party Secretaries, themselves leaders elected by Party membership within the units, needed the authority to speak. However, look no further than the minutes of a 1957 _Politbüro_ meeting to understand how the roles of all political operatives were expanded vis-à-vis their commanders:

In the unshakable pursuit of victory, the Political Organs raise all members of the NVA to a higher vigilance and complete mastery of [their] weapons and technical combat equipment. They train them in such high moral-fighting qualities as mission-readiness, courage, and steadfastness.\(^{237}\)

The Party expanded these duties and responsibilities for the elected Party secretaries in the units of the NVA. These uniformed Party officials could comment on a wide range of military issues:

...the Party organizations have the right...to judge the results of training and education, the status of _mission readiness_, the official and _social activities_ of all army members and civil servants, as well as, _to critically judge_ the results of implemented orders...[author’s emphasis] (See Figure 7).\(^{238}\)

Now a _de facto_ policy that had existed since the beginning of the _Volkspolizei_ had become a _de jure_ expression of state policy. This directive outlined a scope of authority that any NVA military commander would have found difficult to live with. If the Party organs and organizations could make judgments about mission readiness, which they routinely did, then the commander was


\(^{238}\) “Anlage Nr. 9 Protokoll Nr. 26/58, 1958,” 50. “Die Parteiorganisationen haben das Recht: ...Die Ergebnisse der Erziehung und Ausbildung, den Zustand der Einsatzbereitschaft, die dienstliche und gesellschaftliche Tätigkeit aller Armeeangehörigen und Zivilbeschäftigten sowie die Ergebnisse der durchgeführten Befehle kritisch zu beurteilen und Vorschläge zur Verbesserung der Arbeit zu machen...”
indeed trapped inside of a Catch-22. The commander shared responsibility for mission readiness of his unit with his deputy commander (political officer). However, mission readiness also meant training a unit where 35-50% of its enlisted complement were Party members—the very members the *Politbüro* had empowered.

Besides eliminating all deficiencies they saw in their units, political officers were also required to analyze, on a continuing basis, the “political consciousness and the morality of the units.” Of all his tasks, perhaps the political officer's most important, and most invasive, was to report “truthfully” to his commander and the next-higher political organs “the condition of the formations and troop units.”

This is an incredibly important point and strikes directly at the heart of the question of individual command. The subordinate, always junior in rank, supported and encouraged by institutional control mechanisms, was handed the authority to officially evaluate the combat readiness of that unit, which also meant evaluating the performance of the commander.

Consider how the actions of the Party organization within a single combat regiment in 1958 could have had a negative effect on the authority of its commander. The commander had apparently acted “in an arrogant and overbearing manner” and had commanded in a discernibly “unsocialistic way.” Therefore, the Party leadership within the regimental staff (all subordinates) “forbade” the commander from commanding in this manner. At this point, even though he apparently continued in the position, one could logically surmise that the regimental commander had just lost all credibility and authority to command. In this way, the Party eviscerated its commanders. Arrogance and “personal” command were out; consultation and *Einzelleitung* were

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in. Commanders would not have the total command authority that the word *Einzelleitung* implied. There could be no “personal command” in Party work.\textsuperscript{240}

For high-ranking Party officials, this was all very self-evident. However, when *criticism/self-criticism* was juxtaposed against *Einzelleitung*, the results could be bizarre. *Criticism/self-criticism* empowered the lowest soldier to criticize the official activities, the private lives, and the social activities of their officers and sergeants. If they were concerned about an order or a behavior, *Politbüro* directives empowered subordinate sergeants and soldiers to object to it, criticize it, and possibly even ignore it. Now, dysfunctional policy from on high cascaded down to the lowest East German soldier with a large and destructive impact. This Foucauldian control regime was concerned with controlling soldiers’ behavior, but it was also about failing to trust the commanders to stay within crucial ideological boundaries. The commander might get away with something without the Party’s approval, but not for very long.

As expected, if deputy commanders and Party organizations were to evaluate their commanders, then they could hardly report through the very commander they were criticizing. Alternative means of communications were necessary, which the Party was more than happy to provide:

> The heads of the political departments have a duty to report concerns, discrepancies in the issuing of orders, violations of Party decisions and the laws of the GDR by commanders, as well as serious special incidents, to the Chief of Political Administration [of the NVA]. [author’s emphasis].\textsuperscript{241}

The practical effect of this was that “all basic questions of political work in the NVA” could bypass the commander via a parallel communications channel. The political chain of command became an institutionalized conduit for political officers to report all problems, both military and political, outside of the military chain of command. Bureaucratic policy thus facilitated the speed of low-

\textsuperscript{240} “Rolle der Partei in der NVA, 1958,” 40. “In der Parteiarbeit gibt es grundsätzlich kein Kommandieren.”

level reports by Party functionaries directly to the *Main Political Office* of the MfNV, the *Minister for National Defense*, and even to the *Central Committee of the Politbüro*—faster and more efficiently than through normal military channels.

Clearly, the SED insisted on *Einzelleitung* with its eyes fully open. At the highest levels of the NVA, the SED willfully and purposefully created conditions that undermined the commander’s authority and responsibility. While the political officers had a rank and position one level below their commander, such subordination was mere subterfuge. Party policy was packaged in ideological doubletalk designed to camouflage the Political officer’s real authority.

In the end, the policy of the *Leading Role of the Party* in the NVA actually confused some commanders, which resulted in wide variances in implementation of the principals of *Einzelleitung*.\(^{242}\) Were they in command or not? Did the political officer share equally in both the successes, as well as the failures, of his command? Party leaders struggled with the correct doctrinal wording that would counterbalance military competence with political ideology. The following chart, based on the minutes of a June 1958 *Politbüro* meeting, illustrates the parsing of the text in the political-military discourse.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ideological Goals</th>
<th>Military Goals</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fulfillment of the orders of the Party</td>
<td>Fulfillment the orders of the chain of command</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political work of the NVA</td>
<td>Fulfillment of oaths and orders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raising of socialist consciousness</td>
<td>Raising combat readiness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consolidation of morale</td>
<td>Consolidation of discipline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievement of a higher political vigilance</td>
<td>Mastery of weapons and technology</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These distinctions are important. The consultative nature of command meant that specific roles and boundaries had to be delineated so that the synergy of collective consultation could be optimized.

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\(^{242}\) “Information über die Auswertung, 1958,” 47.

\(^{243}\) “Anlage #9 Protokoll Nr. 26/58, 1958.” Also see analysis in Hermann Weber et al., *Jahrbuch für Kommunismusforschung, 2002,* in *Jahrbuch für Kommunismusforschung, ed. Marek Jäger* (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 2002), 11. The political goals in the above table are similar to the SED’s goals for the East German State: the development of the “consciousness of the working class,” “the rebuilding of communism” and the increasing consolidation of the “power of the state.”
In fact, it was not until policy met practice that what appeared mutually supportive was often mutually exclusive, much to the annoyance of the lowest soldier. True, “defending the state” and “achieving very real socialism” could be viewed as mutually supportive security interests. On the other hand, the “orders of the chain of command” could conflict with the “orders of the Party.” “Raising the socialist consciousness” often interfered with practical military training. “Failing to achieve a higher political vigilance” eventually became a formulaic excuse for desertions, training mishaps, and accidental deaths.

In Western armies, the responsibilities above would have been delegated to the commander in every respect. In the East German army, however, the Party and military chain of command shared critical responsibilities, which can be graphically illustrated in the adjacent figure. It was the political officer’s responsibility, and not the commander’s, to motivate every soldier to the “unshakable pursuit of victory” and to elevate all army members to “full mastery” of their weapons and tactical skills. “Moral courage” was clearly a political officer’s responsibility, but instilling “steadfastness” was a joint responsibility that was conflated with the more technically oriented goal of “mission-readiness.” Ironically, despite the extraordinary

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attempts to defuse command authority, it was never the job of the political officer or the Political organs, nor would it ever be, to actually train soldiers—that role fell to the Commander.

In short, "individual command" was not individual at all, but a euphemism for "collective leadership"—the forced marriage of military and political leadership that fused like oil and water. The SED understood the need for commanders to command, but it wanted that responsibility to be shared with the Party as embodied in the political officer. Figure 8 illustrates this circuitous process. If the commander did not consult, there could be no "collective leadership"; nor could there by "collective leadership" if the political officer was not effective. For the same reason, the discourse demanded that the commander would not be worthy of consultation were it not for the "moral strength that flowed from the esprit de corps of the soldiers." Therefore, if the commander had no "moral strength" then the unit would have no esprit de corps and there could be no "collective (individual) leadership." Einzelleitung was code for "Collective Leadership."

For some in the Party, amalgamating power in the policy of Einzelleitung watered down its own influence. Honecker had an answer for this.

He explained to a May 1958 meeting of NVA Party delegates his own interpretation of the issue:

It is no secret that in connection with the decision of the Politbüro [of January 14 1958] ...different comrades think that the general development of the Leading Role of the Party in the units of the NVA would lead to a weakness of the "concept of individual leadership" in the army. Experience shows that these comrades are not right. They do not understand that only in this way can Einzelleitung be strengthened...[author’s emphasis]."245

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To the Party, *Einzelleitung* was about the amalgamation of military expertise with Party authority. To the NVA commander, day-to-day responsibilities and authority was eroded. By fiat, the policy of the *Leading Role of the Party* would never reduce the authority of the commander in the NVA.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Using the SED and NVA’s own documents, this chapter presented a framework for a powerful East German political-military discourse. The practical effect of that discourse was to implement three government policies that directly affected the combat readiness of the NVA: the *Leading Role of the Party*, *criticism/self-criticism*, and *Einzelleitung*. The argument is that these policies became memes within very specific discursive formations that governed the rules of decision-making and bureaucratic action. As these discursive formations constrained the bureaucratic possibilities decision makers could employ, they became sources of bureaucratic dysfunction within the East German Army. The consequence of this dysfunction was the Party’s failure to resolve and normalize the tensions between the political and military realms as evidenced by high rates of desertion, fatal accidents, weapons incidents, and suicides. These statistics were the observable and measurable effects of dysfunction that resulted in a negative command climate.

The political-military discourse set the tone for Party and governmental policies within the armed forces. The Party saw itself as a disciplined tool of the state that also disciplined the state itself. It clearly felt it was capable of leading any of its national institutions, in particular, its army. The Party faithful had a very clear understanding of how they were to implement socialism in the new German state. The Party provided appropriate and articulate guidance on strategic and organizational objectives. It also provided boundaries and limits on the authorities of its staffs and commanders. In this regard, the Party achieved its goals—the state was never in danger of a military coup.
The Party had a firm grasp of its *Leading Role* and successfully redefined *Einzelleitung* to fit that paradigm. *Einzelleitung* did not reflect the independence of military command found in Western armies, but it did reflect the unity of the political and military domains. As with the rest of the East German state, all important decisions required consultation with the political organs and the political leadership. In formalizing the *Leading Role of the Party* in the NVA in 1958, the SED leadership merely confirmed what had already been common practice.

The next few chapters will explore how the command structures of the NVA responded to these policies. *Einzelleitung* enhanced the prestige and the role of the Party at the expense of the traditional role of the commander, who lost his ability to solve real problems in pragmatic ways. The propensity to try to fix every problem by using ideologically based tools guaranteed failure. Shared command responsibility caused very real leadership problems. All good intentions aside, the SED negligently undermined the effectiveness of its commanders and its officer corps.

The soldier suffered because of it.
It stinks to high heaven!  
Willi Stoph, 1958.¹

There can be no doubt that the majority of all members of the National People’s Army are faithful to the cause of the Workers and Peasants and to the Party, that they have endeavored, especially through the development of best practices, to raise fighting and operational-readiness.  
Erich Honecker, 1958.²

In periods of elevated combat readiness, the PKK must strengthen the fight for the purity and the unity of the Party.  Neglecting the PKK should no longer be permitted.  
NVA Political Officer, 7.PD, 1961.³

In the mid-1950s, an American helicopter accidentally penetrated the airspace of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), landed, and subsequently returned to the West.  Willie Stoph, the first Minister of National Defence, was not pleased.

By the time the reports of the actual landing arrived, [it was] so late that it was no longer possible to take special [counter-] measures [to shoot it down or capture it].  Stoph, who could be rather pragmatic when he needed to be, used this incident to demonstrate that “a few weaknesses [in unit training] … must be overcome.”⁴ They certainly did.

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As an essential first step to understanding the dysfunction of the NVA, the political-military discourse is now in the foreground.  This chapter argues that the discourse directly affected the practical decisions of the NVA’s command structure in the training of officers and large-scale units.

¹ Stoph, “34. Diskussionsbeitrag vom 21.5.1958,” 183. “…es stinkt zum Himmel.”  
² Honecker, “35. Diskussionsbeitrag, 1958,” 197. „Es besteht kein Zweifel daran, daß die Mehrheit aller Angehörigen der Nationalen Volksarmee treu zur Sache der Arbeiter und Bauern und zur Partei steht, an sie bestrebt sind, die Gefechts- und Einsatzbereitschaft zu erhöhen insbesondere durch die Entwicklung der Bestenbewegung.“  
The Party’s goals, always filled with hopeful ideals, directly influenced the daily efforts to solve real and pragmatic problems.

This fact bears continual emphasis. Party leaders and NVA commanders knew they had problems. For example, Defense Minister Willi Stoph once reacted harshly to a drinking incident in the 5th Artillery-Regiment.

And yet Comrades, I must still say...this thing has nothing more to do than with responsibility... it rather stinks to high heaven! Good socialists and Party members did not drink to the point of intoxication. His officers should have been able to control their soldiers’ behavior. A single incident in a long series yet to come, Stoph’s sense of frustration was palpable; the more so as the promise of socialism should have brought universal optimism and organizational success in its own right. Stoph was not just upset at the drinking incident—alcohol abuse was rampant in the NVA—he was also referring to early signs of institutional neglect by his commanders—symptomatic of poor leadership. Stoph had to be worried. These reports were daily reminders that more “political work” was still necessary.

Party and military commanders also tried very hard to solve their institutional problems. NVA records show that the Socialist Unity Party, or Sozialistische Einheits Partei (SED) and the NVA were exceptionally impotent in solving their problems. Indeed, the evidence strongly suggests that despite operating within a hierarchical military organization closely allied with a powerful Soviet sponsor, the Party was so focused on ideological solutions that individual NVA commanders, line officers, and political officers were unable to implement practical solutions to very serious problems.

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5 Ibid., 183.
6 For a discussion of alcoholic intoxication as a Party crime, please see Chapter 4.
8 For purposes of differentiating between political-officers and other officers, I use the term “officer of the line” or “line officer” to refer to officers in the NVA who were not formally trained as political officers.
In spite of their efforts, Party leaders and NVA commanders were unquestionably discouraged and dissatisfied at the NVA’s lack of ideological and organizational improvement.\(^9\) The 1959 “Estimate of the Political Consciousness in the NVA” illustrates this frustration:

There still seems to be a series of deficiencies in the leadership and socialist education of army members that awkwardly obstructs further strengthening of the socialist consciousness [author’s emphasis].\(^10\)

Two years later, Walter Ulbricht noted his Party’s ponderous struggle for the duality of ideological purity and combat readiness:

The measures necessary to raise combat readiness and the great expectations that have been placed on our comrades after Aug 13, 1961 have, however, exposed a series of deficiencies and weaknesses [author’s emphasis].\(^11\)

In the light of these two declarations, the theme “bureaucratic dysfunction” is persuasive. The SED knew it had problems but had great difficulty affecting substantial organizational and social change. The question is why?

Perhaps the some of the earliest appearances of dysfunctional political influence appeared in the NVA’s frustrating attempts to train its units. Despite their best intentions and efforts, the archival evidence strongly suggests that not one colonel, general, or admiral was satisfied with the ideological and military progress of the army. It seemed there were always a “few deficiencies,” or eine reihe von Mängel.\(^12\) There was no order or directive in the history of the NVA that did not have the stamp of the Socialist Unity Party on it. No other institution had a more pervasive influence over the army, its commanders, or its officers. There was no discreet aspect of a soldier’s life that

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Note: Aug 13, 1961, the day the Berlin Wall was built is often referred to in the political-military discourse simply as a date. There is little or no mention of the Wall in association with that date.

\(^12\) As a continuation of the themes from Chapter 2, I have taken the liberty of highlighting key words that are important to our understanding of the political-military discourse. The objective of this complete work is to show how the discourse affected the entire bureaucracy and negatively affected the life of the soldier. The key words emphasize those threads as the discourse and its effects are traced.
the Party did not affect with cascading, conflicting, and overwhelmingly dysfunctional policies. So pervasive was the Party and its political deputies that in a Foucauldian sense what the commanders thought and how they commanded was practically irrelevant.

Outwardly, the Party exercised control through a dual chain of command. Inwardly, the methods by which the Party maintained control was through the patterns of discourse: the preeminence of the Leading Role of the Party, the insistence on "criticism/self-criticism" as a reflexive self-correcting mechanism, and the employment of Einzelleitung as the solution to the inherent conflict between the domains of ideology and the military. These discursive patterns merely framed the way the ruling elite controlled the armed forces. Through these patterns, the discourse guided the instructions and regulations of the MfNV in comprehensive ways. In other words, with a nod to Michel Foucault, the Party "homogenized and normalized" the content of the discourse throughout the width and depths of the armed forces to accomplish its ends.13

The next chapter will focus on the impact of the political-military discourse on the “command climate” of the NVA; but first, the stage needs to be set. It was no accident that tensions existed which kept the development of the socialist consciousness and the state of military readiness at unsatisfactory levels. This chapter explores the effects of the discourse on the professional development of NVA officers, the leadership qualities they learned, and the quality of military training of the units they led. Inevitably, this will open the door to other questions: Did organizational dysfunction occur because the ideology was flawed or because the implementation of the ideology into MfNV policies and practices was seriously defective? What was the impact of the discourse on the state of discipline and the command climate in the NVA? In the end, can we consider the socialistic development of the NVA as a foreshadowing to other problems with regard to the political transformation of the East German state?

Fortunately, the NVA’s own inspection analytical and inspection reports are uniquely positioned to show the negative effects of its policies. An old military saw holds that any inspector or staff officer can walk into any organization and find something wrong if he looks hard enough. Inspections in the NVA were no exception and became valuable sources for understanding how it implemented ideological solutions to practical problems in the military milieu.

Inspections in the NVA came in many forms. They could be administrative in nature and focused on regulatory and political compliance. They could be routine, such as yearly divisional exercises, or they could be unscheduled and at the whim of higher commanders. Inspections were also a major evaluative tool that established the readiness of the unit and its political reliability as a snapshot in time. As such, inspections served as a corrective mechanism that theoretically brought a unit’s performance up to expected standards. Inspections also provided feedback to similar units so they could improve. In other words, the mistakes and errors of one unit should not have appeared in the subsequent inspections of sister units. The evidence for such a claim starts with the pervasive influence of the Party’s control regime over army training and operations.

**TRAINING A SOCIALIST ARMY**

Political work must be closely connected with military tasks.
Commander’s Log, 7.PD, January 1959.\(^\text{14}\)

A few Comrades consider political [ideology] classes uninteresting and even annoying.
Military State’s Attorney Advocate, 1961.\(^\text{15}\)

The operational transition in 1956 from National Police to National Army was a massive effort made to appear simple and uncomplicated. There were new unit nomenclatures modeled

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\(^{14}\) “Chronik 7.PD, 1956-58,” 102. „Die politische Arbeit muß eng mit den militärischen Aufgaben verbunden werden.“

after the Soviet Army and new uniforms fashioned from the uniforms of Hitler’s *Wehrmacht*. Army leaders also knew they needed a coherent plan to accommodate new challenges; the potential for nuclear war imposed on their new army “extraordinary physical and psychological demands.”

While army leaders were concerned with the immense operational and logistics challenges before them, they also had to transform the NVA into a socialist army, which proved difficult. Willi Stoph expressed striking frustration with the army’s combat readiness in a speech to officers of the 3rd Military District (MB III):

> Without a doubt, it is true that there are very many deficiencies...in large part, Party members [have failed to address] in their activities particularly difficult questions of combat readiness [author’s emphasis].

He noted that commanders, in particular, needed to conduct better military evaluations and inspections. Like his superior, Party First Secretary Walter Ulbricht, Stoph suggested that the NVA’s real problem was not poor military training, but the slow pace of its social and political development. He held all Party members, not just the officers and military commanders, responsible for the NVA’s poor training and readiness. In essence, this meant that every party member, be they officer or soldier, was held directly responsible for the combat readiness of their units and the soldiers they worked with.

The next three years did not see noticeable improvements in this situation. A 1959 assessment of the “*Socialist Consciousness and the State of Discipline in the NVA*” concluded that educational and training work was deficient and blamed all commanders, officers, political organs, and political organizations. Walter Ulbricht also revealed his disappointment and disgust when he chided NVA officers about their laborious progress. “There should be,” he said:

> ...a struggle for the unconditional execution of given orders,

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16 Norden, "Anlage Nr. 8 zum Protokoll Nr. 15/57, 1957."; "Protokoll Nr. 4/58, 1958," 15. For a discussion on the transition from the KVP to the NVA see: Diedrich and Wenzke, *Die getarnte Armee: Geschichte der Kasernierten Volkspolizei der DDR 1952 bis 1956*.


...the education of members and candidates [of the Party] towards a model fulfillment of their duties and military tasks,
...the creation of a critical and partisan atmosphere in the political organizations, and
...an improvement in collective [political] educational work.\textsuperscript{19}

A concerned Ulbricht already knew what should have been self-evident—obedience and training were an imperative. What was truly remarkable, however, was a head of state compelled to remind his officers to obey their orders, much less to properly train them in military tasks. A modern equivalent would have the German Chancellor telling \textit{Bundeswehr} commanders to “obey your orders and train your soldiers.” Ulbricht’s instructions also suggest an obsession with ideology as the essential antecedent to solving serious organizational problems.

In fact, the leap from socialist ideology to practical military training was over a chasm the Party itself created. The socialist admixture of ideological education with combat training was potent—and seriously flawed. Second-rate weapons or not, good training can make up for bad equipment; good training is worth its weight in gold. Conversely, a poorly trained army, despite superior equipment and weapons can sow the seeds of future defeat. Nowhere is this more obvious than in training directives and evaluations that clearly reflected the integration of ideological tasks with combat training. These directives created conflicts and tensions that blossomed in entry-level officer training and flourished in the day-to-day operations of large and small units alike.

Most assuredly, training large armies, navies, and air forces is a complex undertaking. At its most basic, there are tasks that every military force performs and are distinguished by who performs them, the unit or the individual soldier. For example, a soldier’s marksmanship or an airman’s technical skills at repairing a jet engine are basic military and technical tasks that only the individual can learn and perform. In order to bring these individual skills to a high level, an entire

training apparatus had to be organized to provide that training. Weapons ranges had to be scheduled for marksmanship practice. Similarly, technical schools scheduled and conducted classes on the maintenance and repair of aircraft or armored vehicles. Soldiers continue to hone and improve on these basic skills in the barracks, on the base, or at sea.

There are also "group tasks' which military units are expected to perform if they are to be successful. Pedantic examples include a company's ability to seize an objective, a regiment's ability to conduct a river crossing, a fighter squadron's ability to defend its sector of airspace, or a flotilla's ability to defend the coastline. These group tasks require that everyone in the unit be proficient at his own particular skills while working together as a fighting collective. The NVA routinely practiced this training at the battalion or squadron level.

Training larger units, such as regiments or divisions, required detailed and complex coordination between themselves and other units. They required large staffs to control training scenarios over hundreds of square kilometers of land and thousands of square kilometers of sea or airspace. Large unit exercises between the NVA and the Soviet Army, or the “Group of Soviet Forces in Germany,” would have been even more complicated due to the large amount of training space involved and the complex command and control arrangements between the two armies.

This tedious explanation of unit training in East Germany is intended to illustrate its complexity. It also glosses over the Gordian knot created by the political-military discourse. Make no mistake; ideological training and “political work” had a higher priority than combat training. In other words, the necessity to train individual skills and group tasks was in direct conflict with the

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20 In this paper I use the term “tactical units” to describe organizations from platoon to battalion, generally fewer than 1000 soldiers. “Large units” then, are regimental size and larger.

21 Training space may have been at a premium. One Office for Security Questions report suggested that in the 5th Military District there was not enough maneuver space to exercise a Regiment or higher and requested coordination with the Group of Soviet Forces in Germany. See "Erfahrungen und Schlußfolgerungen aus dem Brigadeinsatz des Zentralkomitees der SED im Mot. Schützen-Regiment 2, Mot. Schützen-Regiment 3, Panzer-Regiment 1 und Stab der 1. mot. Schützendivision," ed. ZK Abteilung für Sicherheitsfragen (Berlin: SAPMO-BA, 1960), 37.

fear that Marxist-Leninist principles would be forgotten or ignored. \(^23\) Since the Party chose not to unravel ideology from military training, political tasks necessarily became integrated into the NVA’s entire spectrum of training. The thread of ideology established the quality of “training and education” army members received; thus, NVA units had to complete their ideological tasks in order to successfully conclude their military training. The goal was to train an army to defend the State, but the path to that goal was not just through individual or collective training, but also by “clarifying an enemy” so as to “hate it” and by placing the \textit{Leading Role of the Party} ahead of combat readiness.

One has to reach deep to see the subtlety of this argument. As far back as the NVA’s predecessor, the MfNV/MdI reported deficiencies in combat training as ideological failures. \(^24\) Even if performance in military training was exceptional, high inspection marks would be diminished if the proper political work was lacking. Inspectors routinely blamed commanders and their officers for inadequate unit training because of their insufficient “political leadership activities” or for their “formal, liberal, and superficial behaviors”—an indicator of the influence of ideology in daily operational matters. \(^25\) Other commanders were reticent “…to see the [importance of] ideological connections to weaknesses in the training [of their units].” \(^26\)

Party hacks had no time for such heresy. They criticized line officers who did not think a war would come, who had an “increasing propensity to separate political and military training tasks,” or who had problems connecting their “deficient combat training” with their “deficient

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\(^{26}\) \textit{“Chronik 7.PD, 1956-58,”} 101.
perceptions.” Fortunately for the West, the army’s solutions to these problems were inconsistent with highly trained armies, air forces, and navies. An early symptom of this dysfunction would have been the army’s understanding of where its first, and most important, tasks were.

THE FIRST—AND MOST IMPORTANT—TASKS

The lack of focus on military matters in the Politbüro suggests the many challenges the SED had in shaping the NVA to its own vision. 1957 Party guidelines illustrate this point in a striking way:

The totality of political work must serve the fulfillment of those prescribed [military] tasks pursuant to the Training Orders of the MfNV, which are to be resolved for the troops.

[Political work] must be aimed at the systematic elevation of combat readiness, the consolidation of discipline, the improvement of political consciousness, and the morale of the uniformed members of the NVA [author’s emphasis].

The Politbüro thus confirms the “totality of political work” as the essential prerequisite to improving combat readiness, discipline, and morale. Its ultimate goal was the development of the political (or socialistic) consciousness.

The Party was absolutely convinced that “political work” was the essential ingredient to combat readiness. “Raising combat readiness,” said Eric Honecker, “…demands a new quality of ideological training-work in the Party organizations.” Political work was the first, and most important, prerequisite for everything else. Major General Rudolf Dölling, Political Deputy of the KVP/NVA and a man who rarely held back punches when it came to the NVA’s political and military


28 That is not to say that the Politbüro did not participate in decisions and activities concerning the NVA. Observing military exercises was a frequent event by Politbüro members. In 1958, a large-scale division exercise between the 7.PD and the 4.MSD in the 3rd Military District was observed by Minister President Otto Grotewohl and “many members of the Politbüro.” Ernst, “Chronik des Militärbezirkes III zusammenfassung für die Jahre von 1956- bis 1962 ((Geheime Verschlusssache und Geheime Kommandosache),” 8.

29 “Anlage Nr. 1, Protokoll Nr. 22/57, 1957,” 8. „Die gesamte politische Arbeit muß der Erfüllung der im Ausbildungsbeфаehl des Ministers für Nationale Verteidigung gestellten Aufgaben dienen, die…den Truppen zu lösen sind. Sie muß auf die systematische Hebung der Kampfbereitschaft, die Festigung der Disziplin und die Erhöhung des politischen Bewußtseins und der Moral der Angehörigen der Nationalen Volksarmee gerichtet sein.”

progress, passionately believed he could solve the NVA’s problems with ideological solutions. The most important task was to reduce the confusion about socialism in the army by securing the Party’s Leading Role. “We need to address these serious deficiencies,” he said:

The basic question of the policies of our Party have often been explained ‘abstractly’ and detached from the concrete situation of the units. The reports of revisionism and other enemy views argue for an indecisive accountability without principle.

“This political work,” he argued, was “...the most important demand in the ‘struggle of classes.’”

The socialist education of army members, particularly of non-Party members, was first and foremost the “...most important requirement for the solution of all military tasks [author’s emphasis].”

The problem the Party had to overcome, however, was that in the 1950s Party rolls were filled with men whose education was barely better than the non-Party members they were leading. In 1955, the Party reported that only 18% of Party members and candidates had an education better than primary school. These members also lacked the requisite experience, as more than half the members and candidates of the Party in 1956 had been members for less than 2 years. Thus, no matter how the Party hoped to accomplish it, those who had a difficult time understanding the ideology were also teaching the undereducated.

Nevertheless, a few years later, the Politbüro emphasized the priority of the First Task in its “Basic Principles of Political and Military Work in the NVA for Training Year 1961:

The first duty of the leadership cadre of the NVA is ideological education, the political and military training of the troops in the leadership of modern combat operations. All other measures are subordinate to these tasks [author’s emphasis].

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31 Dölling, "Delegiertenkonferenzen und Vollversammlungen, 1958,” 31-32, 36-37. This objective can be traced down into the units of the NVA where political organizations were given political tasks in fulfillment of military tasks. “Chronik 7.PD, 1956-58,” 91.


Note how “political and military training” are usually couched in the same breath, but ideological education is usually mentioned first. This particular document articulated the relationship between the political and the military domains in terms that were more precise than previous declarations:

The raising of combat readiness in the NVA requires a thorough improvement in political-ideological work.

The strengthening of military discipline and order demands the strengthening of daily political-ideological education for the people, the energetic struggle for the consistent fulfillment of assigned training tasks and the strict compliance of orders and service regulations [author’s emphasis].

Political work was a tool of leadership and an essential prerequisite for combat readiness for all commanders.

Military training that was not interlaced with political work was not effective, no matter how efficient and productive the training was. In 1958, the official log of Major General Hans Ernst, the Commander of the 3rd Military District (two levels below the Politbüro), reinforced this concept—the combat readiness of the units absolutely depended on the “enforcement of the Leading Role of the Party in the NVA.” Later, Ernst was so concerned that his commanders did not understand their proper roles he told them that “concrete, aggressive, and convincing arguments” were still necessary to explain the policies of the Party and the state.

General Ernst’s subordinate, the commander of the 7th Panzer Division, echoed the same sentiment by imposing this political task on his officers:

...as a basic precondition for the highest military mastery and success, we must create political clarity in the minds [of all army members].

Two years later, the political Stellvertreter for the 7.PD further confirmed and clarified this policy:

Ibid., 3, 6-7. „Die Erhöhung der Gefechtsbereitschaft der Nationalen Volksarmee erfordert weiterhin eine gründliche Verbesserung der politischen-ideologischen Arbeit.“ „Die Festigung der militärischen Disziplin und Ordnung erfordert die Verstärkung der täglichen politisch-ideologischen Erziehung der Menschen, den energischen Kampf für die konsequente Erfüllung der gestellten Ausbildungsaufgaben und die strikte Einhaltung der Befehle und Dienstvorschriften.“


precondition for the achievement of higher combat readiness in the troop units and formations. The connection between politics, the economy, and combat readiness will still be correctly considered in ideological work [author’s emphasis].

Still lower in the hierarchy, one NVA officer participating in an officer exchange program at the regimental/battalion level, echoed the same priorities:

While these expectations [of personal examples of responsibility] have been partly fulfilled, there still exists...deficient political work; that is, there has been no connection established between military training and political educational work.

The army was getting the message; it was just unable to make a course correction. Even mechanics in maintenance and repair battalions could not escape the demand of the ideology in their routine work. Take for example, the direct connection between the practical tasks of mechanics and electricians and their deficient political education in 1962:

...there are still (unspecified) weaknesses in technical education, especially in the question of technical servicing, electrical systems, and propulsion training. The causes lie here in the deficient political education of technical personnel [author’s emphasis].

In 1965, when Lieutenant General Sigfrid Riedel, the Stellvertreter to the Chief of the General Staff, made a plain unequivocal statement of the NVA’s First Task, he was merely repeating what had been de facto policy since 1949:

The most important task towards the elevation of combat training is the effective political-ideological-moral education of army members, the strengthening of their will to win and their confidence in victory [author’s emphasis].

In the NVA, the “first and most important task” for any military training or operation was political work and ideological training. The Party First Secretary insisted on it; the Minister of Defense demanded it; the political deputy to the Defense Minister implemented it; and the combat commanders were forced to live and breathe it. Because of this priority, every practical military...

40 “Auswertung 7.PD, 1962,” 34.
The problem the NVA faced was caused by “inadequate or deficient political work.” This conundrum first pokes its head in the struggle to improve officer schooling and professional development.

THE FRUSTRATION OF OFFICER DEVELOPMENT

Most junior officers are missing [practical] Party experience, as well as pedagogical knowledge and capabilities. This often leads to false and heartless behavior towards subordinates. Political Analysis of the DGP, 1960.  

The present level of technical qualification and scientific-technical training is not proficient enough for the scope of [technical] tasks of the MfNV... Politbüro Office for Security Questions, 1961.

The SED had high expectations for its officer corps. It wanted its officers to be both military leaders and political instructors in the fullest sense. The new stress on improved technology and the threat of nuclear weapons gave officers increased impetus to be technical specialists. The Politbüro had a firm grasp on these realities and sought to develop multi-talented officers:

...the officer corps must have a high qualification in all political, military, military-scientific, natural-scientific-technical, general training, and pedagogical expertise.

Of course, expertise in just one of these areas would have been a challenge for any officer. For an officer corps as poorly educated as the East Germans, this was an unreasonable expectation, even if the army's officers were highly motivated.

The first problem with training officers was finding sufficient candidates with appropriate education and experience. The extraordinary amount of inexperience in the early officer corps of

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44 Wenzke, "Die Nationale Volksarmee (1956-1990)," 480.
45 “Bericht der Brigade des Zentralkomitees der SED in der Verwaltung Kader des Ministeriums für Nationale Verteidigung vom 1960 (Vertrauliche Verschlusssache),” ed. ZK Abteilung für Sicherheitsfragen; Sektor Nationale Verteidigung (Berlin: SAPMO-BA, 1960), 284. Wenzke, "Die Nationale Volksarmee (1956-1990)," 480. These educational and professional objectives were not very different than those of the KVP 7 years earlier: “highly trained political, specialized, and cultural experts and members of socialist society.” See Torsten Diedrich, "Die Kasernierte Volkspolizei (1952-1956),” ibid., 346.
the KVP was of great concern. World War II had already decimated entire cohorts of ranking officers from the Wehrmacht. Of the KVP's 13,000 officers, only 32% had experience in Hitler's Wehrmacht, and most of them were weeded out of the NVA by 1960.

Nor were their many junior officers of university caliber from which to select. In 1954, 75% of the KVP’s junior officers did not possess an education that satisfied the Ministry of the Interior and 5% of the officers had not completed primary school education. Over 800 KVP officers could not produce a certificate from elementary school. In 1956, ¾ of the officers in the KVP had a 8th grade education and only 6.3% of officer recruits had completed a secondary education; most of whom chose to be functionaries of the Party. The vast majority of officer candidates were recruited from factory floors (61.1%) and the agricultural sector (12%).

Educational levels did not improve as the KVP transitioned into the new army. In 1958, Willie Stoph described the educational levels of the NVA as “good.” Yet, of all army members, 56% were still only educated to the 8th grade level. The air force and the navy were marginally better with 80-85% of its members graduating at the 8th grade level. In 1960, a dedicated Colonel wrote a letter to the Central Committee’s Office for Security Questions that highlighted the low numbers of officer specialists in logistics and engineering. Fewer than 2% of officers in the technical specialties, he noted, were graduates of a university, an officer’s academy, or a special training course. Only 28% were graduates of a one-year “professional qualification course,” and only 44%

48 Eric Hoffmann, "Auskunftsbericht, 1954," ed. Büro Walter Ulbricht SED ZK, Chef der kasernierten Volkspolizei (Berlin: SAPMO-BA, 1954), 129. For purposes of this work, all entry level institutions that trained cadets or officer candidates to be officers will be referred to as “academies.” Any follow-on schools that are short-term or focus primarily on training will be referred to as “schools.”
50 Ibid., 435. Bauer also noted similar ratios, although slightly different than Wenzke: 3.8% of officers had less than a 8th Grade education, 73.5% completed 8th Grade, 10.4% middle school, and 10% had completed high school. Bauer, "Bundeswehr und Nationale Volksarmee," 215.
had a high school education of between one and three years in length. A startling 14% of engineering and logistics officers had no high school education at all.\textsuperscript{52}

The next chart illustrates the distribution of educational achievement by officers in the 11\textsuperscript{th} Motorized Rifle Division (11.MSD) and the Border Guards in 1960. These low educational levels were also reflected in the training of officers in professional courses.\textsuperscript{53} Officers on the staffs of the 1\textsuperscript{st} Motorized Rifle Division (1.MSD) had the same relative proportions of education: 82% of the officers had graduated from elementary school and only 12% had a secondary certificate.\textsuperscript{54}

Stoph did note that the quality of officer applicants did not meet their expectations.\textsuperscript{55} One training class had an attrition rate of 36% because of their poor academic work. Even these young men could not escape the political-military discourse though, as the Party blamed their failures on a “lack of personal motivation.” The causes, according to the Main Political Office of the Defense Ministry, was poor selection procedures and “deficient [political] educational work at the schools.”\textsuperscript{56} The implication, of course, was that if “political work” had been more effective, the cadets would have succeeded in other academic areas.

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\textsuperscript{52} Oberst Fleißner, "Vorschlag eines Systems zur Qualifizierung der Offiziers- und Unteroffizierskader der Nationalen Volksarmee entsprechend den Forderungen des Parteiaktivs.," ed. Abteilung für Sicherheitsfragen (Berlin: Bundesarchiv Berlin, 1960), 2.


\textsuperscript{54} "Soziale Zusammensetzung des Divisionstabes (1.MSD), 1959," 170.

\textsuperscript{55} Stoph, "34. Diskussionsbeitrag vom 21.5.1958," 182.

Beyond the entry level academies, the military qualifications of senior KVP/NVA officers in 1956 was also a problem. That year, none of the generals and officers in the KVP possessed the education of a professional military academy or school. Of the 26 generals and admirals who transitioned into the NVA in 1956, only a few had “sufficient military knowledge” from World War I, the Spanish Civil War, or from WWII. The remainder received their training while serving in the KVP or in military schools in the Soviet Union.57

So poor was the overall level of military skills among senior officers that a classified document titled “Principles of the Military and Political Work of the NVA in Training Year 1961” called for raising the basic military skills of all “generals, admirals and officers”:

Tactical and military-technical knowledge...is to be raised [so that] such characteristics as logical thought, initiative, independence, responsibility, and organizational abilities can be developed.58 This is a troubling assessment and calls the combat capabilities of the NVA into question. More to the point, the discovery by a junior officer that he was more proficient at military skills than his superiors would have strained all credibility.

This lack of experience and training was palpable and affected training throughout the entire army. In the transition to the NVA, only 25% of its officers had any professional training beyond a cursory introductory course.59 The percentage of officers with professional training improved by 1959, but even then 28.8% of all NVA officers had no professional military training whatsoever.60 To compensate, the MfNV developed an extensive program of training establishments and training courses for their officers. This included a one-year course for officers at a Hochschule (Professional Academy) in East Germany or in the Soviet Union.61 The Party, of

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57 The poor experience level was not helped by a chronic fear of former officers from Hitler’s Wehrmacht. By 1959, the MfNV released 293 experienced officers from active service. Wenzke, “Die Nationale Volksarmee (1956-1990),” 434.
course, did increase their recruiting efforts, but the number of university graduates in the officer corps improved to only 14% by 1960.62 By the 1980s, only 34% of them had a university diploma and only 24.9% of officers had an education past the 10th grade level.63

From the perspective of a division commander, the low numbers of educated and trained officers was a significant challenge. The 1st Motorized Rifle Division (1.MSD) reported in 1960 that 5.8% of its total officers and 13% of their staff officers had NO military schooling. One of its specialized battalions, the 1st Intelligence Battalion, needed educated and trained officers, but 20% had no military schooling.64 In 1960, the Border Guards reported that only 66% of their officers had graduated from an NVA technical school.65 Clearly, NVA officers were desperately in need of technical training and professional education.

Even the acquisition of basic technical skills was a problem for some officers. In the 11th Motorized Rifle Division, only 42% of the officers in one regiment and 37% in another had a permit to operate a transport or combat vehicle.66 While it is true that the NVA assigned soldiers as drivers for most officers in East Germany, the lack of driving expertise speaks to the overall lack of technical expertise by officers in the ways of modern warfare. As the Office for Security Questions put it:

...it is irresponsible that...a leader of a tank platoon...would not be in possession of a driver's permit, even though he is responsible for a complicated piece of tank equipment.67

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67 Ibid., 60, 87. It was not until 1961 that the mandatory requirement for a driver’s license for all officers at the Officer’s Schools was even suggested.
Another symptom of the army’s training problems was its chronic shortage of trained officers. On a large scale, the officer manning in the 5th Military District (MB V) was so bad that 271 sergeants were used to fill officer vacancies. The following year the number improved a bit to approximately 150 sergeants in officer positions.\(^68\) That same year, the 1st Motorized Rifle Division also discharged 29 officers for cause and transferred another 71 to the reserves for “deficient qualifications and aptitude.” As a practical matter, this meant that there were 102 officer vacancies in a front line combat division of the NVA.\(^69\) These too were filled either with brand new and inexperienced lieutenants or with middle ranking sergeants.\(^70\)

In May 1957, the 14th Panzer Regiment (PR-14) was manned to only 79% of its authorized officer strength and to only 56% for its sergeants. This problem became worse a few months later when 13 sergeants and soldiers were released from duty due to inaptitude for military service. It was not until February of 1960 that officer strength in the regiment reached full manning, but even then the manning for sergeants only reached 62%.\(^71\)

The impact of these vacancies were magnified in low-level units where there was less flexibility in who was available to fill a position. For example, in 1960 the 7th Motorized Rifle Regiment (MSR-7) had “three quarters of [its] officer positions...in flux” as it had transferred to a school course or discharged 137 of its officers.\(^72\) While these vacancies are less indicative of poor discipline than of poor officer management, the implications are clear. It would have been difficult, if not impossible, for a regimental commander to train his unit for combat when three quarters of his officers were gone at one time.

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\(^70\) "Bericht der Brigade, 1960," 285.

\(^71\) "Chronik des PR-14 von 20.08.1956 bis 30.11.1962 (Geheime Verschlußsache)," 25, 33, 35, 40.

\(^72\) "Bericht der Brigade, 1960," 281, 283.
The Border Guards had similar problems. While they reported to the Defense Ministry that their officer staffing was at 86% in 1960, they had already released 218 officers in the previous year for deficient officer aptitude (39%), moral turpitude (19%), and poor health (42%). A considerable portion of the replacements would have been brand new lieutenants, which again would have reduced the overall experience level of the officers. Nor did it help the Border Guards’ readiness that almost 15% of its platoon leader positions went unfilled by officers.73

One of the solutions available to NVA commanders was to increase the training requirements on their officers. The biannual training requirements for officers in the 11.MSD provide some insight into this solution. The commander expected his officers to participate in a five day training course that covered tactical and political questions, twenty hours of military intelligence training, six hours per week of self-study, and 24 hours of training annually in weapons and technical means.74 The NVA also conducted large-unit training to solve some of these problems. One training objective for a 1962 exercise clearly illustrates an awareness by senior commanders of the poor quality of officer training:

To improve...the capabilities of all officers in the correct judgments of the military-political situation, their skills in leadership, and the improvement of the training and education of the sergeants and soldiers... [author’s emphasis].75

Although this sounds structured and organized, in fact one rarely finds any emphasis on learning purely military skills for officers, much less the necessary technical skills. Nor did it seem to matter. The Office for Security Questions once noted that as a matter of routine, training, especially weapons training, was routinely ignored. In the end, a large portion of NVA officers simply may not have had the technical training necessary to operate and maneuver complex weapons of war. Part of the problem was the disparity between military and political training in the officer corps.

75 “Auswertung 7.PD, 1962,” 4; ibid.
At this point, it is important to make a distinction between the training and professional development of political officers with the more numerous numbers of line officers. On one hand, the Party expected their political officers to be loyal and trustworthy. Theoretically, they had already proven themselves before their selection and revalidated that trust through their successful completion of a formal political-officer course. In 1956, almost 3000 political officers (16.8% of total officers) had already received the Party's trust. On the other hand, the Party intended the political training of line officers to secure their loyalty. The line officers had to accept the fact that they were, in fact, not fully trusted. These basic facts informed the training protocols for both categories of officers.

The process of training political officers was straightforward. Once vetted, a candidate attended professional schools designed to produce a politically reliable officer who could conduct three major tasks: train and educate soldiers in the ideology of the SED, lead their charges in the cultural work of the Party, and provide continuous oversight of their immediate commander in accordance with the directives of the SED.

The journey to accomplish those objectives was filled with potholes. Philosopher and political dissident Rudolf Bahro once characterized the doctrinal schooling of the Party Cadre in the


whole of East Germany as “disastrous.” The same conclusion could be made about the political cadres of the NVA. Inspection agencies continually criticized major aspects of training at the political officer schools, including its curriculum, its quality of instruction, and the professional conduct of its classes. At one point, the entire system of schooling had become so doctrinaire that the Office for Security Questions concluded that “dogmatism” had become a pervasive characteristic.

Part of the problem was the quality of the faculty assigned to the political training courses. Party stalwarts pointed to the “old mistake” of using “politically inexperienced officers” as faculty. Some instructors set poor examples with their “formal communication of expert knowledge and the superficial execution of political classes.” An analysis from one “Complaints and Petitions Report” argued that

...educational work in officer schools [did] not yet correspond to the demands that will be placed on [the cadets] as socialist officers.

In other words, the Party criticized the faculty for teaching too much “expert knowledge” while glossing over the required ideology.

This lack of experience by political instructors and the low educational levels of the students undoubtedly exacerbated the implementation of socialist theory in the NVA. Courses taken by FDJ secretaries titled “Dialectical and Historical Materialism” were surely not helpful. More disturbing was that by 1958, 13.6% of political officers had not received any political officer training whatsoever, and fully 70% had only received a “basic qualification course” at the entry

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84 "Eingaben und Beschwerden, NVA, 1963/64," 12.

level. These were the officers who were supposed to indoctrinate the soldiers in the lowest tactical units.

One solution to this problem was to recruit strong candidates for the political cadre from the ranks of the NVA. Apparently, that recruiting message did not fall on the correct target audience, if it landed at all. The Politbüro’s Office for Security Questions once blasted the Defense Ministry for not providing “clear information and argumentation” to NVA political organizations about the wonderful opportunities available to up-and-coming political officers. Being a uniformed hack for the Party, however, was not an easy sell. Since “official privilege” was not an accepted selling point, recruits had to believe the de facto advantage: being a Party member did have its advantages, “but, we just can’t tell you.”

The obvious result of poorly trained political officers was that political education in the tactical units was a problem. The Party criticized many of its political officers for their lack of ideological knowledge, poor instructor skills, and for leading “formal” classes that did not contribute to the raising of the socialist consciousness. Lecturers in the political schools had “talked completely over the heads of their students.” Now, the newly minted functionaries were talking “...completely over the heads of army members.” New political officers were teaching young officers, sergeants and soldiers ideological doctrine which they barely understood. The problem was so bad in the 7.PD that its political officer judged the ideological courses taught by young political officers to be the “weakest of their ideological work.” By 1962, the Party’s inspection arm, the Parteikontrollkommission (PKK), complained about the quality of “educational work” at the battalion level:

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... political schooling was largely neglected. Of all the [expected] political mass-work, hardly any was observed. Decisive documents and decisions of our Party and government had been assessed insufficiently and were not reflected in the foundation of the program. Criticism and self-criticism has been underused [author's emphasis].

The response was predictable. Soldiers and sergeants began characterizing the indoctrination classes taught by their political officers as "red-light exposure" (or irradiation).

Compared to line officers, it appears that political officers received very little training in their military specialty until after their departure from Political Officer School. Unless they had previous experience as sailors, for example, political officers reported to the navy with few nautical skills, save what they learned before attending school or what they learned "on the job" after arriving dockside. However, the expectations of that training was often much lower than that of the line officers. The absolute reliability and trust of the Party was sufficient military qualification.

However, if a political officer was to become a deputy commander, or Stellvertreter, then some modicum of basic military training and leadership was absolutely necessary. This would have been particularly important in the first days of war, when the chances of a tactical commander surviving first contact with the enemy were exceptionally low. Under these conditions, the Stellvertreter would have had to assume the position of commander which should have warranted additional military training. This was clearly not the case. Political officers in the NVA reserves, for example, were expected to have only a "familiarization" with tactical principles and leadership.

This policy was easy to satisfy.

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By its own admission, of 2842 political officers in the NVA in 1957, 1734 (or 61%) had no entry-level military education. Of those, 265 political officers had no military training whatsoever in the branches of the NVA to which they had been assigned. In 1960, only 53.1% of all political officers in the NVA were militarily qualified. In the 5th Military District, while 95% of line officers had completed their “basic military qualifications,” 36% of the political officers had not. The problem was considered “debilitating” on the staffs of the regiments and divisions where 30-50% of assigned political officers were not qualified militarily. This lack of experience was exacerbated by posting young political officers into party specific jobs such as club leader, library worker, instructor, and FDJ secretary.

By comparison, line officers were not only expected to be good at their profession, but also proficient in the theory and practice of socialist ideology. Their training was steeped in military and technical skills and augmented by the 2-4 hours of political training all officers received every week. When the Party changed that requirement to 40 hours/month during duty time, the clash between political schooling and military training became readily apparent. Inevitably, the only way to solve the time problem was to place increasing emphasis on off-duty time as a place for line officers to improve their political and military expertise.

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As it turns out, whether or not the NVA trained their officers properly may have been immaterial; the more serious problem in the professional development of NVA officers appears to have been a chronic lack of motivation. In the aftermath of the 1953 Rebellion, the Party reported

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95 "Stellungnahme zu Entwicklung des Politoffiziersbestandes, 1960," 112.
97 A directive from the PHV of the MfNV directed that line officers receive 40 hours of political classes between August and December 1958. Soldiers were to receive 80 hours of political schooling in that same 5 month period. See Goßens and Geppert, "Durchführung der Parteischulung," 53-55.
that many candidates sought military service to focus only on their “material interests” instead of to improve the State. Naturally, these young officers were scorned as “politically indifferent.”

It also appears that many East German officers were also unmotivated to improve their basic military skills, much less attend required training. Line officers in one tank regiment were graded deficient in their knowledge of tank operations. A division commander was so unmotivated he could not complete his most basic responsibilities to obey the orders and directives of the Ministry. The Office for Security Questions could not have stated the problem any plainer:

The desire to gain concrete operational-tactical knowledge does not yet exist in many officers. A large number of officers are of the opinion that their school course [note: initial training] was sufficient to qualify themselves militarily and do not recognize the necessity to learn operational-tactical material.

This lack of motivation by NVA officers, together with their chronic absence from their units, might have sent an unintended signal to their soldiers and sergeants that training was not very important. By one account, 30% of the officers in one unit had not attended their training. In one infantry company, only 28% of its soldiers and sergeants had attended their required training. During the same period, the attendance rate for ideological training in an air force radio-technical company was only 40-50%. This particular incident set such a bad example that Erich Honecker addressed the issue himself a year later. While the NVA had its unique challenges, nothing should have been simpler than getting their own officers and soldiers to attend required training.

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103 Ibid. The attendance rate improved to 89% in the first half of 1960.
The Party was particularly disappointed in the performance and progress of its political officers. In 1957, Defense Minister Willi Stoph chastised the political officer of a flak-regiment for “damaging the narrow connection between the population and the NVA.”107 This particular political officer had led a mock attack on a business at night with his drunken subordinates. Indeed, Stoph’s frustrations with his own political officers were legion. In 1961:

Principal weaknesses exist in the execution of the decisions within the Party organizations and Party leadership. Many comrades often do not penetrate deep enough into the essence of decisions and documents...they wait on instructions from above; the period between a final decision and implementation is too great [author’s emphasis].108

The Party expected their apparatchiks to delve into Party decisions, to parse them out, to understand them backwards and forwards. If they followed this process, they would understand that political solutions to military problems were clearly circumscribed and available in Party documents, if only they would take the time to analyze the doctrine critically and understand the discourse more. From the Party’s perspective, low-level Party functionaries were too willing to satisfy themselves with "superficial decisions and directives." It would not be easy, great endeavors rarely were, but the Party expected every political officer to be able to understand its policies and implement them.

Related to these problems was a noticeable lack of initiative on the part of many political organs in the army. They were always "waiting on instructions from above," a clear symptom of bureaucratic malaise. When one feared criticism and punishment for making their own decisions, inaction would be a normal bureaucratic response, even if doing so stifled imagination and initiative. In a climate where criticism was a standard of leadership, and self-criticism opened one up to personal attacks that inhibited promotions, “waiting for instructions” was a safe place to operate.

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There were also indications that officers who should have known better were lax in their studies of Marxist ideology. In 1957, the Main Political Office of the NVA identified a “general weakness” in the study of “Marxist-Leninist schooling.” A few years later, the Politbüro instructed every senior commander, Stellvertreter, and political organ to participate in the “systematic self-study” of Marxist doctrine. These were commanders and leaders who had proven their loyalty to the Party a hundred-fold, yet the PHV instructed them to return to their studies and relearn the socialist principles they had apparently forgotten. This was an effort to reestablish the Party’s trust in its senior officers and to instill in subordinate officers a new vigor in “their collective educational efforts.” Whether it was effective or not is not open to question. Three years later, the 11.MSD rated 80% of its officers “unsatisfactory” in their “social-scientific” efforts.

MOSCOW

Probably no evidence illustrates the problems the GDR had with the professionalism of its officers than their performance in Moscow in 1956-1957. East Germany was eager to receive Soviet style training and education. The professional schools in the Soviet Union were an essential solution to the professionalization of East German officers, as well as the officers of other Warsaw Pact countries. In turn, the Soviets benefited from training officers they would work with in the event of war.

By the middle 1980s, approximately 2400 East German officers had received training and education at Soviet military schools and academies. Of those, 283 officers attended the “K.E. Vorošilov Academy of the General Staff of the Soviet Armed Forces” in Moscow. Only the

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military and Party elite selected for future promotion to senior command and staff positions would have attended this school.  

The first indication there was a problem probably came from several high-ranking NVA officers who were in Moscow at the time: Generals Heinz Hoffmann, Rudolf Dölling, Heinz Keßler and Vice Admiral Waldemar Verner. Whether they did or did not is unknown. Regardless, the report from the Soviet High Command and its Military Attaché in Berlin would have alarmed the East German government. A single NVA officer sent home from the Soviet Union for cause would have raised eyebrows, but 57 officers over a 2-year period was something of a diplomatic crisis. The supposed cream-of-the-crop, young Captains and Majors between 28-35 years old, had become a significant embarrassment to the GDR. To understand the magnitude of the situation is to comprehend the title of the applicable report: “Report about the Political-Moral Situation of Student-Officers...in the Soviet Union.” The gravity of the situation can also be confirmed by where the report was archived—in Eric Honecker’s personal papers.

To be fair, there were acceptable reasons for the early return home for some student-officers. Many returned because of their health or the health of their family (56%). Less acceptable would have been the 9% attending the Soviet Artillery Commanders Academy and the Frunze-Academy who had “deficient student discipline”; i.e., they were failing in their studies. Honecker’s attention, however, would have been focused on multiple violations of the Party’s “moral directives.” Drinking, carousing, and sleeping with prostitutes were not acceptable behaviors for any East German officer; particularly for those handpicked to attend professional schools in the Soviet Union. These officers would have been acutely aware of these standards and

114 Ibid., 429-430.
115 The record is unclear but many military and Party careers were stymied because up and coming officers or Party members had near and distant relatives in the West.
116 The Frunze Military Academy in Moscow is still a mid-level staff college roughly equivalent to the British Army’s Staff College at Camberley, England or the US Army’s Command and General Staff College at Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas. The Artillery Commander’s Academy was probably the Mikhail Kalinin Military Artillery Academy in Saint Petersburg/Leningrad.
cognizant of the repercussions of their behavior. Nevertheless, of those who returned early, 35% were for “crimes against the Party” (see next chart).\textsuperscript{117} If these were the NVA’s best officers, then the selection process for officers back home was a problem.\textsuperscript{118} A socialist army sponsored by the Soviets should have developed and implemented a better vetting process.

So distressing was the problem that the investigating committee sent to Moscow was comprised of senior officers from the Politbüro, the MfNV, the PKK, and the GDR’s Military Attaché in Moscow. Probably irritated that they had to come at all, they were undoubtedly shocked to discover that many officers exhibited “moral deficiencies.” In addition, many of their best students also had “ideological unclarities.” These ranged from their “inadequate knowledge of the problems of the GDR” to “political-ideological unclarities” about the Soviet Union and its place in class warfare, the “incorrect understanding of their relationship to the working classes,” and to a “lack of clarity about the superiority of socialism over capitalism.”\textsuperscript{120}

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 26-27; “Der Lage in den Offiziersgruppen, 1958,” 42-51. Political unclarity was a cliché that transcended the NVA into the other armed forces of East Germany. In 1960 a policeman in the Deutsche Volkspolizei (DVP) questioned why they needed to practice marksmanship: “What are we going to do with carbines and machine pistols against atomic weapons?” The bureaucratic response was that the very question demonstrated a “lack of sufficient clarity about the danger of German imperialism.” The implication was that if all their political tasks were accomplished, then, amazingly, such practical training as pistol marksmanship would also improve. This was not the first, nor the last, time this theme appeared. “Einschätzung des Standes der militärischen Ausbildung der DVP,” ed. Hauptverwaltung Deutsche Volkspolizei Hauptabteilung AS (Berlin: Bundesarchiv Berlin, 1960), 5.
The committee blamed these disciplinary problems on the poor leadership of the “Party cadre,” which coincidentally was comprised of the very same officers being investigated. The committee made recommendations to improve their preparatory courses in East Germany and called for a more “enthusiastic approach” to political studies by the officers they would send to Moscow in the future.\textsuperscript{121} The message was very clear. Political education was the key to military discipline. Ideology was more important than leadership or professional potential.

However, if the committee hoped that their solutions helped, they were sadly mistaken. A year later a returning committee found positive improvements (as always), and the usual “few deficiencies” as well. The committee’s criticisms sounded like a broken record—there had been no improvement in the rate of disciplinary problems. The “improved” preparatory courses in Dresden had little effect on the quality of student-officers sent to Moscow the following year.\textsuperscript{122} The "...careful selection of cadre [the same officers] with cadre-political, professional and healthy points-of-view was still inadequate." In spite of increased scrutiny and screening, 74 NVA officers had problematic backgrounds, including having relatives in the West. New student-officers still had not demonstrated a "universally strengthened discipline and moral [behavior]" or accomplished “sufficient political-ideological educational work.”

The review committee noted other problems as well. Some officers chose the Soviet courses so they could pursue Russian wives. Married officers shamelessly had secret affairs. Others had serious problems with alcohol abuse. What were clearly disciplinary issues were transposed into ideological problems: the obvious lack of discipline and morale was because of the irksome lack of discussion about the Leading Role of the Party in Party collectives (again, composed of the same officers).\textsuperscript{123}

\textsuperscript{121} “Der Lage in den Offiziersgruppen, 1958,” 49.
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., 49-51.
\textsuperscript{123} “Politisch-moralischen Zustand, 1959,” 69-70.
The East Germans had two resources available in Moscow to supervise their officers better. The military attaché in the East German Embassy was a valuable resource that could have been used. By virtue of his position, he would have been the senior East German military official in the Soviet Union. Apparently, though, the attaché did not have those responsibilities assigned to him. Nor, it appears, did the future leaders of the NVA in Moscow take action. Whether because of ignorance, laziness, or professional misconduct, this speaks to the lack of initiative that was already endemic across the entire officer corps.

The second resource would have been the NVA officers who were teaching on the faculty of these Soviet schools. As an East German and a faculty member, they would have outranked the students who were attending and normally be responsible for them.

The record, however, does not show that the MfNV held anyone, except the students themselves, responsible for their disciplinary problems. The sum total of the committee’s solutions were focused on the proper screening and training of potential students before they departed the GDR and the operation of the student collectives after they arrived. The bureaucratic response was turning into a pattern; blame the collectives, the cadre, and the screening process.

Although training and education was the backbone of the NVA in peacetime, the Party’s own documents demonstrated it had enormous difficulties achieving its objectives. Student-officers in Moscow should have been the elite of the army. A few disciplinary and academic problems could have been expected, if only due to youth and inexperience; but the high number of disciplinary problems by the NVA’s “elite students” pointed to larger professional and organizational problems.

The problems in Moscow were also symptomatic of larger problems in the GDR. There, mid-career officers also attended professional schools to prepare them for greater leadership responsibilities. The quality of their training there, however, may have been no better than the entry-level academies and schools. In 1960, the senior faculty at one of the NVA’s premier staff-

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colleges, the Friedrich Engels Military Academy, was chastised for not maintaining a "firm military leadership collective, "for not maintaining a Party-like atmosphere, for permitting liberal behaviors, for unfortunate attitudes of resignation, and for losing control of the faculty and its professors."

Even in East Germany, much was expected of its military commanders. The sum total of problems in educating mid-career officers on the way to becoming commanders, however, portended even greater problems in the combat units. More to the point, if elite student-officers representing the lead nation in the Soviet hegemon matriculated with sub-standard professional and political skills, why would it be any easier for young soldiers and inexperienced officers in the tactical units of the NVA?

**MILITARY COMMAND AND LEADERSHIP**

Every Party secretary, every commander, must know the political climate in his unit...Every commander must so raise the operational readiness [of his unit] that on any given day, if it is necessary, the army would be ready to fight... Minister of Defense Willi Stoph, 1958.126

Nevertheless, we could not be more dissatisfied with the current direction of leadership activities [in MB III]. Major General Hans Ernst, 1962127

The leading [military] organs of the division must implement timely political-ideological work with the leading organs of the troop units...in order to enable and develop a multi-layered [multi-sided] work of the masses in all army members. 7. PD Stellvertreter, 1965.128

Poor instruction in professional schools, officers with no formal schooling, limited university education, little or no mentoring, embarrassing, and deficient behavior by select officers

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in a foreign country—these indicators suggest a pattern of poor leadership within the officer corps of the NVA. The pattern of poor leadership directly and unequivocally informs the development of command responsibilities within the senior commanders of the NVA.

These problems appeared early in the KVP. In October 1953, the Party excoriated KVP officers for their lack of action during the national rebellion the previous June. The KVP’s failure to put down the rebellion in the cities was unacceptable and certainly embarrassed the SED vis-à-vis the Soviets. The Office for Security Questions’ harsh assessment was an indictment on their leadership.

Mission failure, however, was not the only flaw the rebellion exposed. The more basic problem was the requirement that KVP officers should have lead their soldiers as good socialists. That expectation was illusory, however; KVP officers treated their soldiers in “degrading ways,” including distancing themselves from them:

In many units, there is not one conscientious and responsible officer with a sympathetic ear to whom a soldier can turn with [his] concerns and distresses. Many young soldiers have turned for help on this or that personal question, but in many cases, they were brusquely snubbed. When they asked their officers for help on a personal matter, they were often derided or insulted. 129

If this were not enough, the Party also criticized staff in the KVP headquarters for failing to “fulfill their roles as leading [political] organs.” The staffs paid little attention to critical aspects of organizational development; including national political objectives, attending to the education of their soldiers as good socialists, and—almost as an afterthought—failing to train their soldiers properly on the pistol range. 130 The leader of the Political Office for the headquarters of MB III was once chastised because he had “not correctly lead the work of the Political Office” or correctly supported the leader of the basic Party organization within the staff. 131

130 “Stand der politischen und Kampfausbildung, 1954,” 159-162.
This was merely a taste of the poor military leadership the NVA inherited. Countless speeches, meeting minutes, and inspection reports by commanders and Party functionaries at all levels consistently decried the lack of ideological progress, constantly complained of poor combat readiness, and unfailingly disparaged the deficient leadership of individual officers. Policy makers such as Walter Ulbricht and Willi Stoph, senior NVA commanders such as Heinz Hoffmann and Hans Ernst, or highly-ranked political officers such as Waldemar Verner and Sigfrid Riedel, were not shy about publicly calling out officers and units for "serious weaknesses and deficiencies" in leadership.

This question of "serious weaknesses and deficiencies in leadership" is an essential one. What does a unit look like when it has no deficiencies in leadership? In combat, a government would award the commander of a victorious unit with promotion and other honors. Conversely, failing in a combat mission would automatically trigger accusations of the "failure of command" that resulted in a widespread bloodletting. In peacetime East Germany, however, the question of "good" or "bad" leadership is more difficult to discern. In other words, how does one judge the effectiveness of leadership in the peacetime socialist milieu? What are the indicators that determine whether an officer would, or would not, progress in his career?

Two concepts anchored in the political-military discourse do present themselves for analysis: the nature of socialistic relationships and the responsibility of command and leadership. Both are intimately connected and are key to understanding the NVA's bureaucratic dysfunction.

Party leaders were responsible for the success of the NVA. Commanders were responsible for executing the policies of the Party. No matter how successful the commander was, however, the commander would be judged a failure if he did not nurture the proper socialistic relationships.

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SOCIALISTIC RELATIONSHIPS

The Party education of the Comrade officers and that of the Comrade sergeants presents a coherent problem. Political Analysis of the Border Guards, 1960.133

The basic expectations of the high political directives of the Chief of the PHV had been violated or ignored. Hans Ernst, 1964.134

The social composition of the East German Army was supposed to be different from “capitalist armies.” Capitalist armies were reflections of their societies, sensitive to class distinctions, imperialist in their outlooks, stratified socially between an aristocratic officer corps and a soldier class as oppressed as the working class they came from.135 Socialist armies would have no such encumbrances. Communist ideology foresaw the eventual victory of the proletariat and the assimilation of society into a single class. The army could never be an exception to “very real socialism.” Therefore, it had to transform itself into a socialist ‘fighting collective.’” If officers and soldiers could nurture the correct relationships and develop into real socialists, then “…the strengthening of the *socialist consciousness* would arise from a real and genuine socialist relationship nurtured between superior and subordinate [author’s emphasis].”136

The next chart presents a model of this rhetoric. The fighting collective of the Peasants and Workers was the goal. Every individual interaction between an officer and a soldier had to occur in the correct fashion. The officer and the soldier could then build fighting collectives filled with willing soldiers and omnipresent officers. Absent a *socialist consciousness*, however, fighting collectives could never be effective and the army would fail.

135 According to the PHV, by 1960 79% of all new officers had parents from the working class and 3% had parents who were farmers. “Bericht der Brigade, 1960,” 273.
The idea of socialist consciousness as a motivator for combat readiness was not a new one; it harkens to the prelude to World War I and Henri Bergson’s tragic concept of élan vital. In the French context, élan was all that was necessary for victory. Training was important—élan even more so. Unfortunately, élan was a significant factor in France’s six million casualties during that war.

As with the French and Soviet Army’s experience, the élan of the East German Army—its zeal, its spirit, its will, and its socialist consciousness—was more idealistic than realistic. Training was good—the socialist consciousness even better. Marksmanship was good, but incorporating the socialist consciousness would make the soldier’s aim all the better.

Nevertheless, before there could be a socialist consciousness in a fighting collective, there had to be a socialist relationship between the officer and his soldiers. The Party recognized this relationship as two sides of the same coin. The superior and subordinate were interchangeable, the only distinction being the degree of responsibility assigned to each participant.

Officers and soldiers are equal in this relationship. [However,] the rank of officer gives to the relevant people higher tasks and responsibilities.

Achieving a socialist consciousness within the fighting collectives would not be easy. The challenge the SED faced was how to develop leadership skills in both the officer and the soldier so they could lead each other in proper socialistic ways. The SED had to purge the old and very traditional relationships between superior and subordinate, for such leadership styles were
associated with the “jargon and airs of the fascist Wehrmacht.” The early KVP was renowned for these irritating appearances of old “fascist-militaristic methods of treating people.” Some officers used the disciplinary regulations as a “weapon of personal power.” Fascist, and thus Western, styles of leadership would inevitably lead to the “hatred of the soldiers against the officers” and would certainly interfere with the development of a “socialistic climate.” Such methods hid the “insecurities and weaknesses” of aberrant officers which could not be tolerated.

Soldiers also had a responsibility in this model. As “Workers and Peasants,” they would interact with their officers “...not as superiors, but as class comrades; workers as themselves; as...friends, who stand next to them.” Naturally, this meant that the traditional autocratic ways of leading, reminiscent of the Prussian Army, the Wehrmacht, and contemporary Western armies, was superfluous.

The respect and authority of a socialist officer is [not] based—as it is today in the imperialist armies [of the West], on his rank and power as a superior, [but] rather on his knowledge and his capabilities, his qualities as a political trainer and military leader—on his [socialistic] relationship to the Party and to army members [author’s emphasis].

As clear as this guidance might have been, nurturing the socialist consciousness by improving the relationship between the officer and the soldier proved elusive. On the one hand, socialist doctrine expected the soldiers to know their officers in more personal ways:

As to socialistic relationships: this question is one of the most important questions in our collective work, because only through the socialistic relationship of the

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140 “Die ernste Situation in KVP, 1953.” While the NVA acknowledged very early they needed the expertise of former “Fascist” officers from the Wehrmacht, the SED was actively biased against them and sought their dismissal as quickly as possible. In 1959 they released 108 former Wehrmacht officers from active service. This left 82 still serving across the army in rear area headquarters or schools. See “Bericht der Brigade, 1960,” 273-274.

141 “Stand der politischen und Kampfausbildung, 1954,” 189.


soldier to his superior can trust be gained...One must also ensure that our soldiers receive clarity about that.\textsuperscript{145}

On the other hand, officers were supposed to lead by convincing their soldiers of the righteousness of their tasks, not by ordering them in an autocratic military manner. The leadership of officers was about “leading the people” as embodied in the soldier.\textsuperscript{146} The only authorized leadership style was consultative; officers had to be skillful at building “Party-like” and socialistic relationships. In theory, army officers were supposed to provide a “scientific connection between Theory and Practice” for their soldiers.\textsuperscript{147} In practice, the high number of petitions and disciplinary problems by soldiers pointed to the difficulty of changing the leadership culture of the NVA.\textsuperscript{148}

The “directive leadership” of the fascist West was antithetical to the “consultative leadership” of this socialist model. Therein lays the rub. If they successfully completed their mission, but not in appropriate socialistic ways, they were faulted. On the other hand, commanders were still held responsible for mission failure; even if they used proper socialist methodologies. Mission success, could be validated only when accomplished in the proper ways. The Party berated officers through criticism/self-criticism who tried to solve organizational problems in pragmatic ways.

Toward that end, the Party certainly accused some supervisors of setting poor examples in their official duties, but the problem was more basic than that; i.e., simply getting their leaders “to make the effort and walk among their soldiers.”\textsuperscript{149} Even though the soldiers were a captive audience, the officers still had to make conscious efforts to be physically present to build relationships and lead their units. Such a goal was remarkably difficult to achieve. Even Willie

\textsuperscript{146} “Grundsätze NVA, 1961,” 14.
\textsuperscript{147} “Rede zum Offiziere des MB III, Feb 1962 (Vertrauliche Verschlusssache),” 18-19.
Stoph criticized his commanders for not spending enough time with their soldiers. Indeed, he declared what should have been an obvious maxim of good leadership in East Germany:

Comrades, of the commanders that have spoken, no one has spoken of how seldom they have been in their units. How can one report about the soldiers in the troop units if he has not been personally there? It is a fact that a great portion of our commanders are not with their units for half the month....

In case his commanders had not gotten the point, Stoph could not have put it more bluntly:

Naturally, that brings discredit in such cases in which real command must be carried out [author’s emphasis].

I think the work has not been systematic enough for a long time and therefore we have lost a lot of time; time we could have used more appropriately to be with the troops.\(^{150}\)

Stoph’s tirade is most instructive. He focused on an essential aspect of successful tactical and managerial leadership: the importance of personal presence and interaction to lead and command successfully. If they participated more, the officers would know their soldiers better. If they knew their soldiers better, a proper socialistic relationship would flourish. Then, when necessity required it, when the proper conditions in the heat of battle demanded an authoritative method, the commander could use “real command” to greater effect. “When in command; command,” Stoph seemed to be saying.

Nevertheless, the lack of Party influence in the units was already a universal complaint.\(^{151}\) Senior officials had already noted that discipline suffered when there were no Party members in the platoons, the army’s lowest units.\(^{152}\) As Party members, the officers were supposed to provide that essential Party influence, unfilled vacancies notwithstanding. Yet, absentee officers were becoming a systemic problem, and not just in the tactical units. Rudolf Dölling once severely criticized the


“entire Defense Ministry” for failing to involve themselves in the training of soldiers. “Stop focusing on meetings and conferences,” he demanded, “and start helping the common soldier and the small tactical units.”153 The staffs at other major headquarters were also criticized for exerting “insufficient” support and influence on the commanders and officers in the subordinate units.154

Despite the reticence of staff officers to leave their desks, the Party still expected commanders to fill the void. They did not. In 1958, some officers were not “comradely or class-appropriate” to their soldiers and sergeants.155 That same year in the 7.PD, Party functionaries called on upper staff officers to walk through the barracks during free time, “so they could explain political questions and important orders.”156 After a shoving incident between a soldier and a junior sergeant, regimental officers were blamed because they did not routinely walk through the barracks.157 Put into perspective, the division commander expected every member of his senior staff to walk through barracks areas two levels of command below them in order to correct disciplinary errors on the spot. This was something that might have been appropriate during exercises or intense training sessions, but not normally seen on a day-to-day basis. It suggests a chronic failure to place leadership responsibility on the appropriate commander.

In 1961, the 7.PD reported “…supervisors only partially knew their subordinates.”158 Another report blamed a regimental commander for the desertion of one of his soldiers because he “did not know his soldiers well.”159 Four years later the commanders of two battalions, the 7th Intelligence Battalion and the 7th Pioneer Battalion, were each criticized because “they limit

159 “Unbefriedigende ideologische und individuelle Erziehungsarbeit, 1961,” 4. In his defense, the record showed there was no political officer assigned to him and the company commander that was responsible was not charged.
themselves to being present only during training. One does not feel the serious and constant attention to detail [necessary] to achieve a high level of training.”

Numerous memoirs by former NVA soldiers confirm this phenomenon; they rarely mention their commanders and officers at all. In 1956, the head of the Minister’s Main Political Office reported problems that should not have existed: lackadaisical saluting by soldiers, lazy and unprofessional behavior, negligent attention to uniforms, and poor personal hygiene were common complaints. In 1957, the criticism of commanders and officers had extended to “the deficient ideological clarity of a portion of officers,” including deficiencies in:

...irresponsibility, callousness, heartlessness, arbitrariness, deficient organization of duty, incorrect use of disciplinary instructions, and mistakes in the organization of material provisioning, especially in provisions and uniforms.

Commanders who were engaged with their soldiers were supposed to attend to these problems. Absentee officers and commanders became a chronic problem, one that resulted in more responsibility for sergeants and the inevitable creation of an informal enlisted privilege called EK-Bewegung, or the “Discharge Candidate Movement.” Commanders and political officers were “helpless” to control the independent, and sometimes sadistic, actions of conscripts in their 3rd trimester of enlistment, especially after duty-hours. The obvious loss of control by army officers must have been frustrating. Absentee officers who did not know their soldiers could not develop appropriate socialist relationships with them. The predictable response by the soldiers would have been “lack of discipline, irresponsibility, negligent performance of duties, and contempt for more junior ranking soldiers, As the problem was a common one, were the officers themselves

\[160\] Vogt, “7.PD Kontrolle, 1965,” 133. „Der Einfluss der Battalionsleitung wird nicht spürbar...“


\[163\] Müller, Tausend Tage.

responding to this situation by refusing to act? Or were officers and commanders viewing “absence” from the unit as a discrete and earned privilege with the predictable, and unfortunate, consequence for the common soldier?

Privilege, however, was not supposed to exist in a socialist society, much less in the NVA. The officer, said Dölling:

...is not permitted to consider his rank and his position as a privilege. He must understand, rather, that he is just as [much] a worker’s son as every soldier and that he must...distinguish high tasks and responsibility as compared to the working class...

Dölling’s warnings about privilege seem apropos. This was exactly what socialism was about—the denial and eradication of all traces of aristocratic privilege. Officers could not accrue privileges that others could not also have:

In our Republic, such ideologies have no place; there is no basis for special privileges for officers...

Today, each officer must understand that he—[who is] a worker and a farmer—can have no privileges compared to soldiers in the fulfillment of their duties...

Obviously, birthright no longer guaranteed rank and privilege.

It is not permitted for them... to look on their rank as personal privilege. Officers are called, with respect to the Party and the people, to have more responsibilities than soldiers.

The distinction of responsibilities, and only responsibilities, was what differentiated rank in the NVA. The officer could not abuse his position with “unseemly and inappropriate airs.” Of course, the irony was that Party members, military or civilian, did receive privileges unavailable to non-Party members and most of the population. Overtime, the civilian population did notice the accumulation of privileges by the Party elite of the NVA, and they resented them for it. Whether they were larger flats, access to Party commissaries, or simply a request for the next Trabant in 10 years, membership had its privileges.

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166 Ibid., 45.
167 Ibid.
Developing the socialist consciousness in the NVA was a slow process and the Party’s ideologues knew they were getting nowhere fast. By 1959, the Party claimed that the ...socialistic relationship between officers and soldiers still does not yet correspond to the expectations of our Party in spite of previous successes [author’s emphasis].\footnote{4}

There were few signs of improvement over subsequent years; nor did efforts to improve military leadership by improving the Party’s Leading Role help either. Two examples will suffice.

In 1962, Hans Ernst, the commander of MB III, used his discourse of deficiencies to praise a single company commander before transitioning to his disappointment: “Nevertheless, we could not be more dissatisfied with the current direction of leadership activities [in MB III].”\footnote{4} Over the next few years, analyses of “Complaints and Petitions” concluded that NVA officers were still not meeting the daily expectations of the “basic principles of socialist troop leadership.” Large numbers of officers and sergeants, the NVA claimed, were not leading using the “correct tone.” More often than not, officers and supervisors exhibited “heartless behaviors” towards their subordinates.\footnote{4}

The accepted solution to any problem in the NVA, much less in the GDR, was never about discipline and training but about the Party and its ideological straitjacket. After one particularly disappointing marksmanship exercise in 1964, Hans Ernst called to account the responsible commander from the 11.MRD. In other words, he wanted them to self-criticize, and thus flagellate themselves before him. Surely, this was not a very pleasant place to be. Yet Ernst, as the Military District commander, was not just calling out his subordinate commanders—he was ridiculing them. Woe to the young platoon leader who focused on marksmanship to the exclusion of socialist ideology! The young NVA officer, be he line or political, must have been incredibly frustrated. The

\begin{footnotes}
\item[4]“Allgemeine Einschätzung, 1959,” 4.
\item[4]“Rede zum Offiziere des MB III, Feb 1962 (Vertrauliche Verschlussache),” 4.
\end{footnotes}
Party strived for a magical symbiosis of military leadership and ideological purity but could never achieve it.

Building socialistic relationships was always about transforming traditionally hierarchical relationships into collaborative and socialistic ones that began at the bottom of the military hierarchy. However, the concept of command and its operational responsibilities was necessarily a top-down process that introduced a fascinating tension.

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**COMMAND AND RESPONSIBILITY**

“Similarly deficient are the operational collective-reports. They are almost without content. Why squander this precious time for such empty reports? Party-information...has been written purely for what the comrades, by chance, believe to be correct.

*Willie Stoph, 1958.*

Fundamentally, in Party work, there is no commanding.

*ZK, Beschluss des Politbüros in der NVA, 1958.*

God created people and animals, the devil [created] officers.

*Soldiers’ axiom, 7.PD, 1962.*

The second area for analysis of the NVA’s command doctrine is the responsibility a commander has to perform his mission. Consider now the responsibilities of a NVA commander to train and prepare for a war against the West. The commander’s presence in his unit or his ability to construct a socialistic relationship was minor in comparison to this operational necessity. Even in the NVA, being a commander was much more than holding the position and title; it was about assuming “personal responsibility” for the preparations necessary to secure victory, a task that was sacrosanct and should have preempted all others.

This important issue frames the conundrum in which the Party placed its military commanders. Their objective was combat preparedness and readiness in peacetime and victory if

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173 "Anlage Nr. 12, Protokoll Nr. 4/58, 1958," 220.

174 Verner, “Halbjahranalyse der PKK 7.PD, Jun 1962,” 53. „Gott schuf Menschen und Tiere, der Teufel die Offiziere...“
war presented itself. The resources they hoped to use to accomplish that objective were well-trained armed forces. The methods they would have the commanders use to achieve the ends, however, were contradictory, and they began with the Party’s own perceptions of who was responsible for what.

Despite the Politbüro’s vetting of over 300 key command and political positions in the NVA, the Party had a well-founded disappointment in its commanders. Minister of Defense Willie Stoph, who was not reluctant about such matters, routinely accused NVA commanders of failing in their command responsibilities. “The circle and district HQs, and also the commanders,” he said, “have not always correctly understood that they...do not always [perform] their appropriate functional duties.” The officers and sergeants in the 4.MSD, while very knowledgeable, had a difficult time organizing their training for their small units. Because of these “large defects in instructor-methodological training” the quality of shooting was poor, routine orders and instructions were not being followed, and deficiencies still existed in military order and discipline. It is possible that much of the problem came back to their chronic shortfalls in critical positions. When one battalion could not provide a company with a trained political officer, the battery commander was severely criticized for not providing the required amount of political-ideological classes himself.

A few years later, a series of petitions and complaints pointed to the daily failures of officer leadership:

A portion of the supervisors, especially the younger officers, still do not sufficiently understand how to factor in the content of petitions into their leadership activities.

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175 Wenzke, “Die Nationale Volksarmee (1956-1990),” 455. The Office of Security Questions in the Central Committee personally approved the promotions and placement of all key officers and political officers from the Minister of Defense, through the military district and division commanders, down into the regimental level.


A number of the grievances show that in a few units and formations... cadre principles and service regulations have been violated. The care for the official and personal lives of the army members was still not yet meeting the day-to-day basic principles of socialist troop leadership of all commanders and superiors.179

Two years later, the 11.MSD suggested that the cause of the many leadership failures they experienced was the “deficient personal influence of the leaders and commanders over their subordinates.”180 Another division, the 1.MSD, found “considerable weaknesses in the routine decisions” of commanders at the lowest levels (primarily captains and majors) where concrete decisions are made for training and education.” In addition, these low-level officers did not always possess the “proper forms”; i.e., they did not consult enough, had “deficient political levels,” and failed to give “sufficient help to the political-organs.”181

The 7.PD complained that “...deficiencies in leadership of senior officers came to light, especially in the inadequate readiness of equipment.”182 During another staff exercise, commanders in the 7.PD despite “good theoretical knowledge,” were said to have “unclarities about the beginning stages of a war.” Because of these unclarities, many regimental commanders “took insufficient personal influence in the pursuit of the fulfillment of their orders.”183 In other words, commanders did not follow up to insure their orders were carried out. It appears that the NVA did understand the obvious—deficiencies in military leadership, especially at the junior level, did contribute to mission failure.

One source of expertise young officers traditionally rely on for guidance and expertise is their senior sergeants. They bring a wealth of experience and judgment from their years as soldiers and mid-level supervisors. The sergeants in the NVA were another matter. One unit decried their “lower and middle ranking officers and sergeants” who did not yet have “model behaviors and

attitudes.”¹⁸⁴ A 1959 training assessment for the 7.PD concluded that their sergeants did not yet meet the standards they were looking for; i.e., as “helpers of the officers.”¹⁸⁵ Another assessment completely denigrated the sergeants in the 7.PD when they directed their political organs:

...to clarify the role of the sergeants, to strengthen their deficient consciences, and to lead them by qualitative instructive-methodical training in the fulfillment of their functional duties [author’s emphasis].¹⁸⁶

The West had always suspected that the armies of the Warsaw Pact had a weak sergeant corps, but they never suspected that the Warsaw Pact knew it also.¹⁸⁷ Before these units marched to the field, they were already dealing with chronic leadership and planning issues.

Obviously, poor leadership had very negative effects on the development of the socialist consciousness. Döllin complained of the leadership problems of NVA officers at a 1958 Party Plenary Assembly. Line officers and Party functionaries, he claimed, were still leading in a “liberal manner”; i.e., in a manner reflective of Western socio-economic systems. This was an indictment that all Party members could understand; it was an indictment on the effectiveness of their collective leadership. If every practical problem had an ideological cause and an ideological solution, then officers who led in a “liberal manner” were logically the cause of every leadership failure.¹⁸⁸ Liberalism found its way into the causes for one failing exercise in the 4.MSD:

Liberalism in the military leadership inhibits the development of the regimental staffs and aggravates the implementation of ordered demands in the face of subordinates. The training work of all officers, especially the regimental leadership, was insufficient.¹⁸⁹

But this was also a classic “Catch-22.” The second a soldier or an officer disobeyed an existing “regulation or order,” the “socialistic relationship” was broken. Now the commander had to

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¹⁸⁴ “Stand der politischen und Kampfausbildung, 1954,” 159-162.
“enforce regulations,” which inherently demanded a “directive form” of leadership for which he could be criticized. In situations like this, the commander could not win.

Second only to the Stellvertreter in shared responsibility was the commander’s political and military staff. The staff, acting in the name of the commander, always had a large role to play in military organizations. It was no different in the NVA. They were responsible for the planning of high quality training and operations. Because they were his strong “right arm,” the staff was expected to “strengthen and guarantee” his authority. But that was not always the case. In one regimental exercise in 1957, the staff of the commander was chastised for not performing as the “leadership organ of the regimental commander.” In another, the work of the staff was characterized as “bad,” having displayed no initiative, or as “having large weaknesses in the cooperation between the staff and the subordinate units.” Staffs and commanders could also be graded down for not reacting quickly enough to “changing combat conditions or the actions of the enemy.” It was the responsibility of the commander to train his staff, yet some commanders did not understand that, or were put off by other agencies interfering with their efforts.

The issue of poor leadership in the lowest units was so significant that many inspections by military and political functionaries specifically studied the “leadership and managerial activities of the commander, staff, and political-organs.” This was a normal goal of military inspections—finding and fixing leadership errors and problems before they reached the crisis stage. It was also common for inspectors to offer “help and instructions” to improve the “leadership of the inspected unit.”

So important was the staff that their actions were often the subject of extensive inspections and evaluations by outside agencies. The PKK, for example, might want to evaluate staff

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“preparation and progress in teaching political and combat training.” Other inspectors sought to improve staff performance in very specific areas:

... strict scientific political-military leadership activities through the broadening of exact knowledge of military-political, military-tactical, and military-technical areas, and to strengthen and guarantee...the plans and quality of the training of the troops.

This statement neatly encapsulates the importance of the symbiotic relationship between a staff and its commander while emphasizing the juxtaposition of the ideological with the practical. Driven by the ideological influence of the Leading Role of the Party, these intertwined objectives permeated the MfNV and seeped down through the services and military districts into the tactical units.

In the NVA, the proficiency of a commander’s staff could be a problem. Well-trained staffs were the “strong right arm,” but when they failed, the repercussions were very real. The Office for Security Questions claimed, for example, that the “...insufficient mastery of service regulations and the deficient training of the staff officers” caused training problems in one unit. Other analysts blamed the problem of poor staff proficiency on the lack of experience in the command ranks, pointing out that 66.5% of regiment commanders and 51.5% of staff officers at the regimental staffs were in their first year in those positions. The chief of staff of one regiment was so inexperienced that his coworkers “intrigued against him.” This may explain many of the complaints about the quality of staff work at the various headquarters. At times, the problems

194 Ibid., 114.
198 "Erfahrungen, MSR-2, 1960," 6. Also “Soziale Zusammensetzung des Divisionsstabes (1.MSD), 1959,” 3. This particular complaint may have been a smoke screen. It is only an issue when command postings are for three years or more. Otherwise, with two year command tours, it would be normal to expect between 45% and 55% of commanders to be replaced every year.
were so frustrating that the Minister himself sent “suitable officers” from the Main Political Office of the MfNV to solve staff problems in lower units.\textsuperscript{201}

These problems extended down into the very bowels of the NVA. Very few staff officers in the 7.PD completely understood the meaning of Politbüro decisions. Others, harking back to their lack of military training, hardly understood the “specific tasks” of the NVA. As they had accomplished only 50\% of their assigned tasks, political work had still not reached “satisfactory levels,” and the quantity of work by Party cadre in “working circles” and political offices was “insufficient.”\textsuperscript{202}

The commander was always responsible for these issues, no question. Sometimes, though, the Party apparatus went to extremes to isolate commanders who were not commanding in a Party-like manner. The principal tasks of the political organizations in PR-14 was the education of all members and candidates, as well as the “consolidation of Einzelleitung as a principal of troop leadership” and the “consolidation of the Leading Roll of the Party by their model behavior and increased influence in leadership activities.”\textsuperscript{203} Such objectives contributed to the confrontational atmosphere in the tactical units. In June 1961, a “Party collective,” comprised of the staff of MSR-7, confronted the commander of a tank battalion and labeled him an Alleinherrscher, a dictator or autocrat who did not carry himself as an Einzelleiter. Party collectives and Stellvertreteren had full authority to criticize and label commanders who acted “independently,” did not nurture the proper socialistic relationships, and did not consult with the appropriate Party organs. Measured against


\textsuperscript{203} “Chronik des PR-14 von 20.08.1956 bis 30.11.1962 (Geheime Verschlußsache),” 150.
the Party standard of *Einzelleitung*, commanders who commanded by themselves were not “true commanders.”

The Party’s criticism of poor leadership by their officers nonetheless reflected a core understanding of the responsibility of command. That criticism also missed the mark. For example, the causes of deficient equipment might be because of major “deficiencies in leadership”; but the causes of those deficiencies were “…large deficiencies in political-military thoughts [as] demonstrated by the leading [commanding and senior] officers... [author’s emphasis].” In other words, had there been no weaknesses in political thought, there would not have been any military faults and errors. If there was a problem with leadership, it was because of ideological failures and not because the commanding officer was isergeant incompetent or because the relationship between the commander and his *Stellvertreter* was problematic. A special committee from the *Politbüro* declared that despite the tremendous workloads of the commander and his staff, there still existed “no strict and unified political-military leadership.” In any case, accusations of “large weaknesses in military-political thoughts” would have been the professional kiss of death for any commander.

Clearly, the NVA expected its commanders to meet certain minimum standards of command. Willi Stoph once asked his commanders to “take personal responsibility according to their functional duties.” However, the Party did not normally exhort their commanders to improve the working conditions or command climate of their units. Rather, the NVA expected their commanders to enforce military and Party rules and “suppress incidents” by improving the “watchfulness and measures necessary to observe the troops 24 hours a day.” This was clearly a


*de jure* expectation that flew in the face of *de facto* realities—officers and commanders did not want to be present 24 hours a day.

In the aftermath of a series of shooting incidents in 1959, the commander chastised his officers for taking “...an inadequate conscious responsibility” and failing to adequately enforce “existing regulations and orders.” A few years later, a military district commander expressed the same concerns about the seeming lack of leadership by his commanders:

> The noncompliance of orders in various cases is an indication that a portion of commanders in the NVA have not yet comprehended the need to use all powers to strengthen the army.

> Besides “leadership by walking around” and “enforcing regulations,” another essential skill expected of NVA commandeers was the ability to communicate. Without good communication skills, few commanders could be successful. All commanders had to communicate at two different levels: informally at the interpersonal level and more formally in the drafting and transmission of his reports and orders. For example, reporting military status is a traditional task of every commander. While he usually delegated the task to his staff, the commander is nonetheless responsible for every communique, be it verbal or written. At its best, good communications by a commander was essential for success. At its worst, confusing, incorrect, or untimely reporting had potentially devastating consequences.

Despite the requirements of this essential skill, however, a significant number of NVA officers were incapable of articulating “clear and concrete command language.” Contributing to this problem was the NVA’s understanding that basic communications skills was a problem in all their officers. That is to say, their officers lacked the ability to communicate to their units in simple and direct ways using their mother tongue. The Chief of Staff for the NVA pointed out that “our
officers have a poor command of the German language,” with the resulting conclusion that there was a “direct relationship between mastery of language and the efficient burden of command by supervisors.”

One inspector noted that all the company commanders during a tank exercise were unclear about their roles; the battalion commander had not articulated clearly their missions and roles. Willie Stoph also criticized the poor quality of written communications by his many commanders:

Similarly deficient are the operational collective-reports. They are almost without content. Why squander this precious time for such empty reports?

Stoph was similarly disappointed in the reporting from his political organs: “Party-information...has been written purely for what the comrades, by chance, believe to be correct.”

It seemed that writing what the boss wanted to hear was not unique to Western armies.

Another senior NVA commander complained that essential reporting by his subordinate commanders was so bad “as to be worthless.” A division commander reported that required reports from the regiments and battalions were neither “purposeful nor complete.” One regimental commander was the cause of “worrisome concerns” because he had not completed official journals and reports. These were not new problems, but their repetitive appearances should have sent chills throughout the Defense Ministry and the Politbüro.

All these reports give a sense of the expectations the Party and the NVA had for its commanders. They were supposed to be present, involved, and knowledgeable of their soldiers.

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212 Willi Stoph, "Kollegiumsprotokoll Nr. 3/56," (BA-MA, 1956), 8, 18+. As quoted in Bauer, "Bundeswehr und Nationale Volksarmee," 216. These simple problems can be found in regimental and battalion logs: "Chronik des PR-14 von 20.08.1956 bis 30.11.1962 (Geheime Verschlüsselsache)," 123, 126.

213 "Chronik des PR-14 von 20.08.1956 bis 30.11.1962 (Geheime Verschlüsselsache)," 56.


They were not. They were supposed to be articulate in their personal and professional communiques. They had difficulty in meeting that standard.

Besides criticizing NVA commanders and their officers for their communications skills, the Party also censured them for leading in a pragmatic or “liberal” fashion and exhibiting “one-sided” or “one-dimensional” leadership. Soldiers’ complaints focused on the “heartless supervisor” whose negligence of his work with the people led to “indignation, mistrust, discontent and a lack-luster execution of his duties, which in the end weakened mission and combat-readiness.” The Party also fought long and hard against the pride and arrogance of many officers and instructors. Later analyses of complaints focused on the “existing inadequacies of officers in their work with the people.” Many officers were challenged for not being proper role models or for failing to stand “...at the point of [ideological] struggles.” They were too preoccupied with “organizational-technical questions” while neglecting political-ideological ones.

The commander of the 18th Motorized Rifle Regiment (18.MSR), Major Haak, is another case in point. Although the Party described him as “intelligent and militarily capable” who led his regiment with a strict discipline, he was nonetheless severely chastised for not meeting Party standards of leadership. He was “heartless” toward his subordinates and tried to maintain his authority through yelling, exaggerated punishments, and demeaning their dignity. He was once heard to say: “Without punishments is educational work fallacious.” So authoritarian was Haak that “no comrade (or soldier) would dare to criticize him.” In this manner, Haak slowly lost the trust of all his subordinates.

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220 “Eingaben und Beschwerden, NVA, 1963/64,” 91.
221 “Rede zum Offiziere des MB III, Feb 1962 (Vertrauliche Verschlussache),” 8.
Perhaps another cause for these leadership problems was the unsatisfactory knowledge of service regulations, instructions, and procedures by officers. Numerous petitions and complaints confirm that “a few commanders” acted incorrectly on important “Inner Service Regulations, Base- and Watch Service Regulations, Disciplinary Instructions, and Pass and Leave Rules.” Their junior officers were equally incompetent because of their “unsystematic work with regulations.” Of course, this in no way explained why officers as experienced as commanders would have such problems.224

All of these worrisome issues were serious in and of themselves. However, when Rudolf Dölling publicly charged two officers for their poor leadership and “liberal manners,” he brought the question of leadership to the forefront of his commanders. He charged Lieutenant Colonel Lohse, a regimental commander in the 11.MSD, of commanding “the worst regiment in the 3rd Military District.” His “uncritical and petty bourgeois behavior” had interfered with his regiment’s combat training. Dölling also accused Lohse of behaving in decidedly “un-Party-like” ways. That is to say, his style was unbefitting a senior officer and a Party member.225

The second officer, Major Köhn, was a supervisor and instructor for Party work in the 11.MSD. In this position, his superiors expected him to maintain even higher professional standards than other officers. Unfortunately, said Dölling, Köhn hindered “the progress of his own political office through his un-Party-like, dishonest, and ‘liberal’ behavior.” He also “intrigued against his comrades” and behaved in an “uncritical and arrogant manner.”

Like Lohse, Köhn’s comrades knew of his “ideological unclarity and behavior.” Like Lohse, Köhn’s comrades elected him to represent the collective at a Party conference. This was a high honor for both but a situation that irritated Dölling no end.226 Both cases, Dölling argued, were symptomatic of bigger problems within the officer corps. Neither officer had developed “socialistic

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224 “Eingaben und Beschwerden, NVA, 1963/64,” 86.
226 Ibid.
relationships” with their subordinates. The graver problem, though, was that their comrades in the collectives had accepted their inappropriate behaviors. In other words, the “collective” that worked for Lohse, and probably with Köhn, failed to correctly criticize them and correct their behavior. The Party, Dölling argued, should never have permitted this—and yet it did.

Dölling’s attack on Lohse and Köhn for liberal behaviors was merely a single misdemeanor in a long list that NVA commanders routinely dealt with. They could also be accused of keeping “attitudes and airs” unbefitting a member of the Party. When one regiment in the 7.PD failed its alarm exercise, the division staff blamed the regimental commander and all his officers for their “arrogant attitudes.” Notably, it was the PKK, not the higher commander, which administered the “reprimand” to the regimental commander and his Stellvertreter.227

A collateral venality to “liberal behaviors” and “attitudes and airs” was the unfortunate accusations of “laziness” that some officers received. Officers in one regiment conducted their political work in a “…formal manner, detached from the respective military-political situation and the real lives in the regiment.” Because of these deficiencies in political work, there was a “lazy leadership” and a distinct lack of combat readiness:

The Party leadership of the regiment [i.e., the political deputy and the Party-organs] as well as the regimental leadership [the commander and his officers] behaves liberally with regard to questions...covering themselves in self-satisfaction which degenerates into political carelessness.228

The commander and his officers of the 11.MSD (11th Motorized Rifle Division) discovered they treated essential Party documents and declarations as too “formal and often detached from the concrete situation” they faced. Thus, their lack of a serious discussion that would lead to immediate changes in political and military leadership was hindered.229

228 Ibid., 84.
After another unit failed to achieve the required time standards during an alert exercise, Stoph accused the regimental officers of sitting in their offices instead of leading their soldiers:

Comrade Commanders from the battalions and regiments should consider whether it had been successful...First, a report was handed over...a sergeant had set off an alarm without the [knowledge of a] commander or superior. No one had checked the report. The comrades are very annoyed about that...In this connection there were still officers with a Beamtenideologie (or “bureaucratic attitude”).

This attitude must have migrated to other units. The Party accused the commander, Stellvertreter, and chief of operations of the 11.MSD for letting “departmental work” dictate their schedule over other, more important, work. “They found no time to schedule or discuss in a [Party] collective the decisions of the Party and the State leadership nor the Orders and Directives for resulting tasks...” Clearly, the Party concluded, the decisions of the Party were neither the starting point nor the guiding theme (Leitmotiv) for their collective work.”

Perhaps being accused of having a Beamtenideologie was more insulting than being charged with incompetence. What was going on here? Was it possible that junior and mid-level officers were tolerating the socialist experiment, but not really excited about it? Were senior officers unmotivated and only going through the motions of doing their duties? Was it possible that as early as the 1950s sworn NVA officers had not yet subscribed to the socialist concepts necessary to transform their army and their nation?

Of course, nothing was as important to the success of Einzelleitung as the relationship between the commander and his Stellvertreter. Any dysfunctional relationship between the two would have had significant consequences for the readiness and training of their unit. Taken to extremes, these tensions would have a major impact on unit combat readiness, as was the case in

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one panzer battalion. When the commander could not cooperate with his Stellvertreter, the resulting climate was certainly discordant with the ideal of Einzelleitung:

Between both comrades, there was a measure of personal differences, which had an extremely negative effect on the leadership of the battalion. The Party leadership of the battalion was a bad collective.

There existed no openness and honor within the leadership. In leadership meetings of the Party there were no open Party-like discussions because of mistrust.

Because of their deficiencies and mistakes, the leadership of the basic organization behaved liberally and falsely [author’s emphasis].

It is hard to imagine that this unit was well trained and ready to defend the homeland. The battalion staff was no help, probably because they did not want to be viewed as taking sides. It was supposed to act as a “Party collective,” but they failed to exercise the required level of criticism/self-criticism. Fearful of the possible repercussions, Party members had assumed the same behavior as their problematic commander and Stellvertreter; thus, they acted in a “liberal manner.”

Such conflicts might have been common. 57% of all political deputies at the battalion level and below were ensconced in their jobs for four years or longer. Thus, NVA political officers would have already worked for one, if not two, commanders at every level they were assigned to. As the average company and battalion commander experienced a turnover every two to three years, the tensions between the two could logically be blamed on more than living up to Einzelleitung. Rather, this could be about the very real tension between a new commander and a lethargic political officer who was used to having his way.

Indeed, most commanders took very stern measures to establish a disciplined, Party-like environment. After an isolated shooting accident in a flying squadron in 1959, one officer was put under arrest and another sent to an “officer’s council.” Normally, such actions would have been

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233 Ibid.
adequate in the aftermath of the incident. However, the commander, Major Brandt, was not satisfied with leaving the issue alone. He continued his investigation into the climate of his squadron and highlighted other problems in ways that accentuated his callousness towards his own officers. Brandt noted that there were still a series of deficiencies in the squadron:

A portion of responsible officers in the squadron heard the complete evaluation [of the incident], but draw no correct conclusions for their own work.

The education of the supervisors toward enforcement of all regulations and orders is still unsatisfactory.

A portion of the officers act irresponsibly, attempting to cover up their mistakes and are, therefore, dishonorable.

Arrogance exists towards certain training experts...at target practice as well as [in] other ineffective training.

Routine work on certain portions of equipment [was conducted] without using the correct instructions/manuals.

There is unclarity about the role of officers in the NVA, as well as superficiality and carelessness in their daily business [author's emphasis].

As most of the officers in this flying squadron would have been pilots, perhaps the arrogance was expected. On the other hand, given the small number of officers in the squadron, this commander's bloodletting made a broad statement to his subordinate officers. This is exactly what the NVA leadership was looking for: a commander who could command in Party-appropriate ways. Brandt concluded:

The cause of this unusual incident lies in the insufficient political clarity about the meaning of live fire exercises and of the situation with weapons and munitions [author's emphasis].

By 1965, the quality of leadership and professionalism exhibited by NVA commanders and staffs must have been disheartening. Nothing seemed to work; even the most basic of tasks proved difficult to accomplish. If the division Stellvertreter for the 7.PD was to be believed, all the officers in the division were hopelessly incompetent. Commanders and staffs did not understand the


\[236\] Ibid., 10.
decisions of the *Politbüro*, nor could they provide adequate and sufficient guidance to facilitate officer development. As if trapped in a time warp, front-line combat officers still had “no feel for thorough and well thought-out formulations.”

Certainly, one solution was to fire responsible officers when necessary. In 1957, the leader of the Office of Political Administration for the 4th Motorized Rifle Division (4.MSD) and the political deputy of the 22nd Motorized Rifle Regiment (MSR.22) were relieved of duty for failing to achieve all of their “objective tasks.” Relieving a commander, however, was an exception. The commander of the 2nd Panzer Battalion (2-PzB) was not fired even though his battalion was deficient in two-thirds of its inspected areas. Similarly, the 7.PD in 1965 accomplished only one-third of its 111 training tasks. Instead of calling the division’s commander or its training officer on the carpet, the inspector criticized the division’s political deputy for failing to bring the staff, the officers, and the “Arbeitsgruppen” of the division to a “higher political awareness.”

The PKK and the political organs did criticize commanders for practical failures, such as losing focus in their military training:

The fact is...commanders have insufficient ideas about the purposeful training of their personnel, function with difficulties, and do not have a complete appreciation of their troop units and the formations of our division.

The simple fact, though, was that commanders, as if they were on a pedestal, were rarely relieved. These inconsistent and inconsequential criticisms only served to highlight the NVA’s dysfunction. They had difficulty developing their leaders and holding them accountable for their performance. Nine years after the founding of the NVA and 13 years after the founding of the KVP, the Party and the MfNV were still not satisfied with their military and political progress, yet they still expected the political ideology to be the engine of military progress. Perhaps no evidence is

more damning than the Party’s sustained attempts to coerce commanders, line officers, and political officers to improve their political work in order to “make their collective [military] training stronger.” All Party functionaries and members were essential to this effort, declared the Central Committee in 1958:

   The political-organs must occupy themselves with all questions of military and political education and take up timely measures to eliminate deficiencies that hinder the raising of the combat readiness of the troops. Einzelleitung in the army, the unity of political and military leadership, is to be guaranteed through the collective consultation of the commander with the political organs and Party leadership for all important political and military measures [author’s emphasis].

The Politbüro’s guidance did not work. Seven years later, regimental and battalion commanders still had to be reminded:

   ...to concentrate their concrete efforts on political-ideological training. They must place the treatment of ideological problems, more than before, in the center of their [military] work.

   And still it did not work. By 1970, the MB III commander noted that a series of complaints had shown that much improvements were still necessary by officers and sergeants:

   Heartless behavior towards subordinates, especially by deficient knowledge of their family situation.
   Insults and abuses toward subordinates, especially by sergeants.

   The Defense Ministry’s laser-like focus on political work as the center of a commander’s responsibilities had one single and all-important effect—political/ideological work became more important than everything else did—even if it meant reducing leadership and combat training to the standing of a joke.

LACK OF MENTORING

In Western armies, lieutenants traditionally received close mentoring and supervision by supervisors and senior sergeants. As a result, they could correct mistakes in basic competencies.

early in their career. There is strong evidence, however, that the NVA had great difficulty with this concept. Mentoring junior officers was burden for most NVA commanders. Why this is so is not clear. Without the one-on-one development of young officers that comes from mentoring, the professional progress of entire cohorts of young officers was bound to be problematic. This had significant implications for the NVA and the GDR's future and senior Party and military officials were at a loss to turn the problem around. One obvious solution was to have an aggressive training and mentoring program that brought their young officers to high levels of competence and leadership, but that turned out to be problematic.

In 1964, senior officers were criticized for making no effort to know their junior officers, thus making it more difficult to train and mentor them.245 This was not a new complaint, as in 1953, the Office for Security Questions challenged commanders who ignored their newly assigned officers.246 Similarly, in 1961, “experienced officers” in the DGP were instructed:

...to convey to their younger officers their leadership experiences because it is particularly there that the younger officers have trouble in their educational work.247

One senior officer accused his commanders of not making “realistic evaluations” of the political and military performance of their officers.248 This trend must have been very irritating even though it was easy to explain. The officers who had made it to the rank and position of commander were more likely intellectually and emotionally to remove themselves from the “officer collective” for which they were responsible. Their commanders had not mentored them, and yet they had been promoted. Why should they make the effort? Despite efforts to the contrary, it appears an element of elitism and privilege had surreptitiously crept into the NVA.

245 “Eingaben und Beschwerden, NVA, 1963/64,” 92.
246 “Die ernste Situation in KVP, 1953,” 5.
Many commanders treated their responsibilities to mentor and guide entire cohorts of junior officers in "bureaucratic and cynical ways," thus missing the opportunity to further their professional qualifications and competence. 249 547 officers in TY 1963/64 filed official complaints against their supervisors. Many of these complaints declared a loss of trust in their superior officers, particularly after they received “superficial answers or empty promises.” 250 By far the worst criticism, though, was that senior officers lacked a “clear and convincing commitment” toward their junior officers. 251 A few years later, struggling to understand the rise in disciplinary offenses by officers in MB III, the head of its Cadre Office suggested that more attention needed to be paid to their officers’ “pedagogical-psychological qualifications” as well as to their “personal development;” i.e., to their mentoring. 252

Another possibility for their lack of mentoring of junior officers might have been the difficulty that many commanders apparently had with evaluating personal performance. The NVA expected its commanders to comment formally on the professional evaluations of their junior officers. Commanders needed to comment on professional characteristics such as decision-making abilities, mission-readiness, and their “affinity for Party work.” Instead, many commanders gave “insufficient and perfunctory guidance” or did not acknowledge the “deficient characteristics of their junior officers.” Others dodged their responsibilities to make “critical and regular assessments.” 253 They provided “little feedback,” described their subordinates with “minor expressions of characteristics,” and demonstrated “no feel for thorough and well thought-out formulations (or constructions).” If the claim that NVA commanders were militarily incompetent

249 Ibid.; "Eingaben und Beschwerden, NVA, 1963/64," 86.
250 "Eingaben und Beschwerden, NVA, 1963/64," 91.
251 Ibid., 12.
253 "Eingaben und Beschwerden, NVA, 1963/64," 12.
holds any water, then their inability to mentor their junior officers makes inimical sense and sets the stage for understanding what life was like for the soldier.

If the commanders could not mentor their young officers and if Marxist ideology did not allow for strong leadership by senior line officers, then who could do it? In a move that probably made ideological sense, the Party relegated mentoring responsibilities to the very soldiers the lieutenants were commanding, the "Party collective" within the unit. It was these “basic Party organizations” in the small tactical units, the Grundorganisationen, which was expected to compensate for and correct deficiencies in officer leadership. In other words, the Party collectives evaluated the political consciousness of the officers who were making, in their opinion, “unsatisfactory and routine decisions.”

As one might expect, these basic organizations were not paragons of professional development either. Party functionaries often criticized them for not “correcting mistakes” or being “...sufficiently analytical” of their own officers. They were supposed to “continuously evaluate the situation of the changing political consciousness in all officers.” The irony in this expectation was that the composition of the collectives was fragile. The collectives at the small unit level were composed of the least trained and educated soldiers and sergeants in the NVA; but because they represented the socialist consciousness of the nation, the collective wisdom regarded their judgments as nearly infallible—that is, when they made those judgments. The result was an absurdity of the political-military discourse—criticizing those who were responsible for their welfare and training doubtlessly interfered with general combat readiness and detracted from the command environment.

From the earliest days of its history, the NVA failed its young officers. Rather than having a solid mentoring relationship with senior officers, commanders left lieutenants and ensigns to negotiate the shoals between ill-trained political officers and rudderless Party-collectives. Twenty

years later, those same lieutenants, now majors, lieutenant colonels, and colonels, were making the same mistakes they made as lieutenants. The results could not have been more predictable.

**IDEOLOGICAL CAUSES OF MILITARY DEFICIENCIES**

“The quality of Party work in the NVA shows itself first and foremost in the elevation of fighting readiness, in their discipline and morale.”
*Central Committee of the Politbüro, 1958*

“...soldiers, sergeants, and officers [need to] be trained to a higher combat performance through effective combat training appropriate to the conditions of a modern war when weapons of mass destruction are used.”
*ZK Abteilung für Sicherheitsfragen, 1960*

The 7.PD is combat ready and in a position to fulfill its battle tasks.
*Hans Ernst, Commander MB III, 1961*

The state of training and discipline is the yardstick for collective Party work.
*FDJ Slogan, 14th Panzer Division, 1962.*

If the Party was not happy with the quality of leadership in their officers, they were doubly disappointed with the quality of combat training in their front-line units. As the KVP transitioned into the NVA, its Ministry was already harshly criticizing its commanders, staffs, and instructors for their inability to train the nascent army. The trend continued into the NVA. Despite finding only a “few deficiencies” in the discourse, the reality was that an extraordinary number of operational problems existed that needed correcting. More often than not, though, these problems were

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257 “Analyse von Eingaben, MBIII, 1961.”
258 “Chronik des PR-14 von 20.08.1956 bis 30.11.1962 (Geheime Verschlußsache),” 150, 153, 156.
couched in ideological terms that devolved into excuses rather than evolving into rational plans for improvement.\textsuperscript{260}

Broadly speaking, the NVA’s readiness problems were never logistical. Since the founding of the KVP, the Soviets had supplied the East Germans with a sufficient quantity of arms and equipment, albeit mostly second-hand.\textsuperscript{261} Nor was the problem its operational doctrine. Soviet and East German operational doctrine was highly respected by NATO forces.

An argument could be made that some of their readiness and training problems were related to manpower, although the issue was neither total strength nor force structure. From its inception, the government manned the NVA with 90,000 to 100,000 soldiers and maintained an impressive alert rate—85% all year and every year of its short history.\textsuperscript{262}

Their officer shortfalls notwithstanding, the early NVA had all the means and resources necessary to satisfy the GDR’s need for national defense. They also had clear ends, or objectives, that defined its organizational existence. However, the methods to accomplish its objectives, specifically the political-military discourse, caused practical problems when the tactical units actually left the marshaling yards and marched into the field.

The NVA’s first task was to ensure that they seamlessly integrated the Party’s ideology into its processes and directives. Their efforts inextricably linked ideological education and combat training into regulations and operational instructions. “Systematic and effective political-ideological educational work” was not only an essential tool of the commander to improve combat readiness but also “the basic question prerequisite to collective military work.”\textsuperscript{263}

Consequently, the Party excused military ineptitude with ideological failure. A pedantic summary might look like this: “If the airman was truly a good socialist, the aircraft accident would

\textsuperscript{260} “Rede zum Offiziere des MB III, Feb 1962 (Vertrauliche Verschlussache),” 17-18.

\textsuperscript{261} It is true that the KVP had problems achieving a high standard of military proficiency and readiness. Torsten Diedrich holds that the KVP was never militarily capable of defending the East German State. See ———, “Die Kasernierte Volkspolizei (1952-1956),” 229.

\textsuperscript{262} Schönbohm, Two Armies: xx.

not have happened.” If the leading officers had a proper “sense of doctrinaire enthusiasm” during an alarm exercise, the unit would have departed from the marshaling area on time. Poor military performance did not indicate poor training protocols but rather insufficient Party work as nebulous as not attending to “the honor and dignity of the people” or as grandiose as failing to nurture the “brotherhood between the NVA and the Soviet Army.” Alternatively, leaders would place unreasonable demands on a unit in order to motivate them to succeed. The complete repetition of the NVA, for example, once depended on the success of a combat division during a field exercise. At more basic levels, poor performance on the rifle range was not solved with more training and practice but with more ideological education. A good socialist would have done better at the gunnery range.

When two- and three-star generals directed improvements in individual soldier skills, they inevitably adapted their instructions to appropriate Party messages. Major General Ernst once issued new plans for “the improvement of political- and combat training” by directing that marksmanship and “military discipline and order” would be handled in the same training sessions. As if they were considered similar tasks, marksmanship and “discipline and order” would be improved through better “political and combat training.” While NVA officers were becoming used to this awkward combination of ideas, the results would have been specious at best. A regiment achieving only 63% of its required training goals would have jeopardized its ability to succeed in combat, put the competence of the commander in serious doubt, and threatened the successful defense of the nation.


Adding to the madness was that most political officers were boring and therefore ineffective instructors. The unintended effect of boring content and instruction probably resulted in their inability to control their students. The distinction between “large mistakes and deficiencies” and a well-run class often manifested itself in how the political officer punished misbehavior:

Little harassments and violations of discipline occurred almost daily. Therefore, groups performed “pushups” or marched long stretches at parade cadence because of [the behavior] of a few comrades.

What should have been an exceptional event in a socialist army, i.e., unit punishment, was apparently a common every-day occurrence. Instructors punished “innocent students” so that they would bring the “guilty students” into line—a clear example of how the collective was more important than the individual soldier.

Problems in individual and small unit training inevitably became bigger problems in large unit exercises and training. Commanders and their staffs designed and programmed their training with specific objectives in mind. They selected their objectives to guarantee that their units could successfully complete larger training exercises under the stern eyes of their division and military district commanders. Necessary training events such as classes, reviews, smaller exercises, etc., would have been placed on the organizational training calendar in preparation for these larger events in the field.

Sometimes their training focused on broad military tasks as the 11.MSD did in one exercise:

The organization and execution of combat training.
The military-technical accomplishment of all military tasks.


Similarly, a 1958 exercise by the 7.PD directed that the very complicated training objective would be:

From a night march, the Panzer Division will conduct a movement to contact, overcome a water obstacle by force, and then organize and conduct the defense of the bridgehead.270

The armed forces of any country in the world would have been completely satisfied with these objectives, but the NVA intended large-scale exercises to train large units in ways that would correct both military and political deficiencies. This would be the rough equivalent of holding political education classes on the factory floor in the middle of a work shift, and then being upset because the shift did not meet its production quota. If the commander and his staff had to integrate “concrete arguments” into the training plans for field exercises, then clearly something had to give—either ideological training or practical military training. Under such institutional pressure, could division and regimental commanders do anything but respond as Party lemmings?

Obviously, the political objectives also had to be included; there was no getting around that. In the aforementioned exercise for the 11.MSD, the political task was to appreciate “the situation of military order and discipline.”271 In Western armies, commanders dealt with "military order and disciplinary issues" in the barracks area.272 Dealing with “military order and discipline” was not a training objective, but a disciplinary one.

This was obviously not the case in the NVA. Just as in the barracks, the political element was intertwined into field exercises and training. The result was an attention-grabbing political objective such as the following: “the elements of combat training [in the 7.PD] are to be closely connected with the question of [political] education.”273 A 1960 exercise in the 4.MSD assessed


272 "Western Armies," in this context, refers to the Western European, Canadian, and American Armies, most of the members of NATO or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

combat readiness by assessing their “political-moral condition” and determining whether the batteries and companies have developed a political-moral, cultural, and athletic center.”274 Another large-scale exercise between 4.MSD and 11.MSD went so poorly a grade of “accomplished” was assessed, but the District Commander complimented the 11th for its “good mass-political work with the civil population, thus solidifying relations with the NVA.”275 Others were assessed as “accomplished” (as opposed to more typical grades of good, satisfactory or outstanding) because the soldiers, sergeants, and officers had performed the exercise “very enthusiastically.”276

The political-military discourse completely supported this integration of military and political objectives. For one large-scale military exercise, the commander directed all units in the field to concentrate on the following political goals:

- The treatment and explanation of the goals of the Central Committee (ZK) of the Politbüro for the 15th anniversary of the GDR.
- The treatment of problems of the Friendship Treaty for the Brotherhood between the GDR and the USSR.
- The introduction of new systems of political schooling.
- The proof of the development of offensive political-ideological work in the troop units and formations... [author’s emphasis].277

These objectives highlight the NVA’s organizational immaturity. There is not a military unit in the world that would not want to optimize its training opportunities on military tasks during precious and limited field time. Using field exercises for ideological training would have stuck in the craw of any commander and effectively appeared to the common soldier as obligatory distractions from the task at hand. Dale Herspring noted the same problem with respect to the challenges of training a modern army when Party activities interfered with technical training and study.278

275 Ibid., 11.
276 Ibid., 16; “Chronik des PR-14 von 20.08.1956 bis 30.11.1962 (Geheime Verschlußsache),” 70, 75-77.
Nevertheless, this was how the NVA structured its training. Officers, sergeants, and soldiers were often consulted as a *Partei-aktiv*, or group of Party members within a unit. One regimental commander had to consult such groups in order to “guarantee the combat readiness of their Panzers during frost conditions.” When training or exercises did not go well, the “entire collective” of officers in a battalion could be criticized. The Party was extremely happy with this situation. “Many worthwhile suggestions were made to the military leadership of the Regiment, which significantly contributed to the raising of combat readiness.” The political-military discourse defined the training objectives, how those objectives would be accomplished, and the manner in which deficiencies would be reported. Because they also measured their success by this convoluted process in large field exercises, their training was often inefficient and wasteful. They routinely found problems in such large collective military tasks as equipment preparation, crossing a chemically contaminated area or a large water obstacle, or conducting a surprise attack. The findings after an exercise in the 14 Panzer Regiment (PR-14) starkly illustrates its military deficiencies despite all efforts:

Noncompliance of light discipline in the assembly area.
Insufficient conduct of combat procedures.
Noncompliance with rules for camouflage in the defense.
Insufficient leadership and control of the combat companies during a movement to contact.
Inadequate control by the commander of the direction of attack.

Notwithstanding these obvious deficiencies in military performance, the PR-14 assessed itself in 1961 as being able to conduct all its combat tasks.

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279 “Chronik des PR-14 von 20.08.1956 bis 30.11.1962 (Geheime Verschlußsache),” 68.
282 “Chronik des PR-14 von 20.08.1956 bis 30.11.1962 (Geheime Verschlußsache),” 71, 78.
283 Ibid., 73, 112-113.
Of more concern for Strausberg, though, was the Party’s perpetual disappointment in the primary indicator of combat readiness for the ground forces, the reaction times to “alarm (or alert) exercises.” Such exercises were extremely important. Failing an alarm exercise meant not being able to deploy to the front line fast enough to repel a NATO attack.\footnote{Honecker, “Honecker Speeches 1957,” 16.} Failing to complete an alarm exercise in a satisfactory way would have been a red flag that reverberated all the way to the Ministry of Defense. Willi Stoph noted as early as 1958 that most units failed to meet the time standards for alarm exercises.\footnote{Stoph, “34. Diskussionsbeitrag vom 21.5.1958,” 181.} Yet this simple problem of getting from point A, the barracks and marshaling yards, to point B, the line of defense, was logistically difficult and mined with ideological double-talk.\footnote{Ernst, “Chronik MB III, 1963-1964,” 34.}

When, a few years later, the entire 7.PD failed to mobilize properly from its barracks to its defensive positions, the senior inspector determined there was an appalling failure of leadership by the division’s officers. They had failed to accomplish some very important and critical tasks:

- Bringing the ‘technical means of combat' into service in a timely way.
- Executing the concrete and exact orders of the commander at all levels during the alarm.
- Loading logistical reserves in a careful and timely way.
- Departing the barracks area quickly.
- Formulating complete situation reports, including logistics reporting.\footnote{“Aufgabenstellung, 7.PD, 1962,” 1.}

Another report by the 7.PD’s Stellvertreter found additional operational problems dealing with procedures and logistics preparation:

- Inadequate security of barracks, assembly areas, departure points, and leadership positions.
- Deficient procedures in the barracks which created a hindrance to the quick departure of units and created [potential] causes for accidents.
- Insufficient knowledge of standard signals.
- Incomplete equipage with poorly maintained equipment (especially for protective masks, field flasks, service uniforms, and personal equipment).\footnote{“Auswertung 7.PD, 1962,” 19.}
All of these “military deficiencies” required aggressive leadership to correct. In Western armies, the solutions to these types of problems would be pragmatic—improve security. Rewrite procedures to facilitate quick egress from the barracks. Increase training to improve signal recognition, etc. Short but quick mobility exercises would be repeated *ad nauseum* until the commanders had corrected the problems. These were practical and pragmatic solutions—not ones that were particularly obvious to the NVA officer.

A weapons inspection in the 11th Motorized Rifle Division (11.MSD) once showed that the division had serious deficiencies in weapons, particularly in their technical condition as well as the soldier’s knowledge of their weapons. Nevertheless, the inspector awarded a “satisfactory” grade.²⁸⁹ Similarly, the 4.MSD was pronounced combat ready with a grade of “good” under “complex conditions in the beginning period of a war.” The assessors, however, conveniently ignored weak artillery shooting and noted that the “behavior of the soldiers, squads, and platoons on the battlefield was not yet satisfactory.”²⁹⁰ Both incidents demonstrated the tendency to find a few deficiencies, but failed to hold officers and commanders responsible.

When a regiment from the 7.PD could muster only 50% of its tanks from the barracks during a major alarm exercise, the chief inspector concluded that there were

...large errors of political-military leadership work as well as serious weaknesses in the work-style of the leading organs of the regiment. The regimental commander and his officers had failed to accomplish the most basic of all military tasks: full deployment from the barracks. The principal cause was not the failure of the commander and his officers to do their jobs, even though they were criticized for that as well, but because of deficient political-military work.²⁹¹

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Three years later, Hans Ernst, the commander of MB III, found significant and recurring deficiencies in the divisions he commanded. Some of the problems could have been fixed in the barracks and in staff exercises. Other problems required more fieldwork and practice by sub-standard units. All of them required the active involvement of their commanders to reverse trends in very basic military and leadership tasks:

- Insufficient work with preparatory orders.
- Insufficient consideration in training [and] preparations for winter conditions.
- Insufficient effort in combat maneuvers, resulting in holes in the flanks.
- Lackadaisical attacks through water obstacles.
- Careless observations [of enemy air threats] by air defense units.
- Inadequate cooperation between tanks and artillery.
- Dilatory individual [soldier] training that was accomplished too late [to be effective].

These were indeed very serious military problems, but Ernst also discovered that many of his divisions had conducted large unit combat exercises without publishing a training plan. A livid Ernst would have expressed his anger in the strongest terms. Even in the NVA, staffs designed training plans to optimize limited resources such as classrooms, instructors, and maneuver space. The most basic of units could not efficiently and satisfactorily practice essential tasks, military or political, without a training plan. In 1961, the 11.MSD, most likely because it had no plan, was graded “unsatisfactory” in its preparations for a major joint exercise with the Soviets. Ernst’s units had flailed in the field without making any measurable progress.

Ernst’s anger did not have the intended effects. A year later, the commander and staff of one of his units, the 16th Panzer Regiment (PR-16), failed to explain their training goals or improve the “efficiency of their planning.” Nor had the regimental staff ensured the conformity of their

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training plan to the objectives of the division.\textsuperscript{295} Just as the 7.PD had ignored the plans of the military district, the battalions had predictably ignored the instructions of the intermediate regiments.

The irony in all this is that when positive training results were to be had, the Party had no problem claiming credit. In PR-14, positive Party work, according to the Party leaders in the regiment (and not the positive leadership efforts by the Commander and his officers), resulted in good gunnery scores by the tank companies and flak batteries and good progress in battalion exercises, which resulted in the regiment being named the top regiment in the 7.PD.\textsuperscript{296}

Whether their training was good or not, and whether the tactical units were combat ready or not is hardly relevant to the question of dysfunction in the NVA. The fact is that the height of training and exercises in East Germany also coincided with fall planting and spring harvest. In 1957, soldiers in the NVA worked 335,000 hours of volunteer work worth approx. 1 million DM within the infrastructure of the army. In 1958, the NVA used 680,000 hours of volunteer work by army members in the construction of educational “foundations and infrastructure (\textit{Ausbildungsbasis}).”\textsuperscript{297} The next year, army members “volunteered” another 83,000 hours for national reconstruction and socialist agricultural efforts and an additional 350,000 volunteer hours on the reconstruction of “apartments, streets, and bridges.”\textsuperscript{298}

In the first years of existence, the 7.PD contributed almost 95,000 man-hours of free labor to the agricultural or industrial sectors of the economy. This included disaster relief and repairs to a badly damaged railroad line between \textit{Pirna} and the towns of \textit{Gottleuba} and \textit{Bad Schandau}.\textsuperscript{299}

\textsuperscript{295} Tokarski, \textit{"Gefechtsausbildung im PR-16, 1965,}“ 99-100.

\textsuperscript{296} \textit{“Chronik des PR-14 von 20.08.1956 bis 30.11.1962 (Geheime Verschlußsache),”} 152-154. Also seen in other documentation: \textit{“Chronik 7.PD, 1956-58,”} 75.

\textsuperscript{297} \textit{“Allgemeine Einschätzung, 1959,”} 2.


\textsuperscript{299} \textit{“Chronik 7.PD, 1956-58,”} 13, 72, 82.
Based on the available manpower within the division, this equated to 5% of lost training time in a new military unit that was lost to projects helping the economy.

Over the course of 4 years from 1958-1962, PR-14 was detailed to help the harvest or the local industries with sizeable portions of their soldiers and officers. In the fall of 1958, over 70% of the FDJ in this regiment helped to construct corn silos for the agricultural sector, which helped a “large portion of the regiment to understand the correct understanding for economic tasks.” The previous summer, members of the regiment provided the local industry and agricultural sectors over 4000 “voluntary” hours of free labor. For five weeks in the fall of 1962, 354 officers, sergeants, and soldiers from PR-14 helped with the potato harvest and other state owned business near Frankfurt am Oder.  

Other units were also similarly tasked with this social obligation by a military unit. The 16th Panzer Regiment in 1956, for example, also helped with the fall harvest in the districts of Löbau, Görlitz, and Delitzsch. This regiment provided over 27,000 free man-hours that fall to the agricultural sector. Between August and November 1957, 152 army members participated in the harvest in the district of Löbau. In September 1958, over 100 members helped to build corn silos. By order of the commander of the 7th Panzer Division, the regiment continued to help the agricultural sector in 1960. Its 22,000 work hours succeeded in threshing 40 tons of grain and harvesting hundreds of acres of cabbages.  

Notably, during this period, grades and assessments for infantry and tank shooting, as well as other training exercises were never graded higher than a “C” with most units receiving a D or F in their training. Despite these individual unit grades, the overall regiment graded itself as “satisfactory.” In 1962, members of the regiment harvested 296 hectares of potatoes.  

As Wenzke points out, when half of an army’s regiments are busy providing

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301 Seefeldt, "Chronik des Panzer Regiment 16 (1956-1962 ) (Geheime Verschlußssache),“ 13, 18, 23, 41, 50.
302 Ibid., 50-52, 136.
labor to the economy, it would be hard to imagine how combat ready the army truly was or how accepted the armed forces were by the population they were designed to protect.\textsuperscript{303}

As the first task, political work was not only more important than combat readiness; it was viewed as its essential prerequisite. “The quality of Party work in the NVA shows itself first and foremost in the elevation of fighting readiness, in their discipline and morale.”\textsuperscript{304} Thus, the Party could never overcome the cycle of organizational dysfunction. The measure of merit for the quality of Party work was improved combat readiness, discipline, and morale. If combat readiness was a problem, morale was bad, and discipline atrocious, it was not because of poor leadership or training by their officers but because of the poor quality of Party work.

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has traced how Ulbricht’s Gordian knot of ideology and military competency affected the daily operations of the NVA. The Party naturally assumed that its Leading Role policy would positively affect the individual soldier and his unit. Like a weed’s long dendrites that sneak into every crevice of a building, the policy influenced every aspect of the NVA, including its essential leadership doctrine and essential combat training. As a result, the measure of merit for good Party work was not improved “socialist soldiers,” although that was much appreciated, but improved inspection and training results. When improvements did not occur, blame shifted to military and Party leaders for not performing political work up to Party standards. The practical results of this might not have been obvious, but it would certainly have been critical. In the event of war, officers’ leadership in the tactical units would have been hamstrung by the constant anxiety that tactical decisions in the heat of combat would be second-guessed by Party officers with little military training. The initiative of the German officer, long emphasized in the 19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{th} Centuries, was completely emasculated in the NVA.

\textsuperscript{303} Wenzke, “Die Nationale Volksarmee (1956-1990),” 511.

\textsuperscript{304} “Information über die Auswertung, 1958,” 55.
In 1954, Walter Ulbricht received a negative report about the state of “political and combat training” in the KVP. The report comingle political and military objectives in confusing ways, but there was no doubt about its indictment: “The December 1953 decision of the Politbüro for expected changes in political training has not been realized.”

The political-military discourse did not consist of catchy ideological phrases used exclusively by high Party officials and military commanders. Commanders of every combat unit at every level consistently applied the same themes in their directives and instructions. Inspection reports routinely blasted units for not putting the Leading Role of the Party in the foreground of their work. The drama of criticism/self-criticism in the chain of command caused such overwhelming critiques of subordinate commanders and political deputies that one wonders how anyone survived professionally. Einzelleitung created patterns of dysfunctional behavior—grandiose and decisive statements that fixed very little. What is mystifying is not that these policies of control existed, but that their influence was so pervasive in NVA training processes and decision making that the resulting bureaucratic lethargy could not be overcome.

The NVA was clearly an unpalatable place to work. There was a pervasive culture of distrust—the senior leaders of the army and the Party did not believe that their junior commanders understood their responsibilities. They proved that to themselves in inspection after inspection. This faulty state of leadership was further amplified by the common complaint from inspectors and observers that senior officers and Party leaders were often absent from the lowest and smallest units. This closely parallels the factory manager who is infrequently seen on the factory floor. Officers could not accede to the advice and contributions from their soldiers; therefore, past errors

305 “Stand der politischen und Kampfausbildung, 1954,” 159-162.
could not be overcome. Under such conditions, the officers shirked their responsibilities, and the soldiers in this fuzzy relationship often did not understand what they were supposed to do.\textsuperscript{307}

For all the players in this dance, the junior officers were caught in the middle. They learned by trial and error rather than through the good mentoring they should have received. This was NOT learning inside of a program of professional development, but more akin to experiencing hot stoves—learning what was not acceptable by burning oneself. Junior officers, however, would not be the primary victims; that role would be reserved for the soldiers at the bottom of the food chain.

Despite the facts before them, the Party rarely viewed the reported causes of any problems as a lack of training or inattention to detail. One telephone and telegraph operator in the 11.MSD, for example, told a visiting Politbüro committee that in two years of service he had received only 22 hours of actual electrical and telecommunications training.\textsuperscript{308} Instead, the Party viewed failures as inadequately prioritizing the \textit{Leading Role of the Party} or not incorporating the policy of criticism/self-criticism. “The ideological basis of these \textit{deficiencies} lay in the incorrect assessment of the military-political situation and a political carelessness toward the international situation.”\textsuperscript{309} The “scientific connection between Theory and Practice” that was supposed to exist, simply did not.\textsuperscript{310}

The cycle of dysfunction was clear: the Party wanted increased control and an ideological influence over all matters military. Exercises and inspections clearly identified their problems. The cure, however, was worse than the bite--more focus on ideology and less on pragmatic solutions.

\textsuperscript{307} \textit{Ibid.}, 6.
\textsuperscript{308} \textit{Borning, "Bericht, 11. mot. Schützendivision, 1961,"} 63.
\textsuperscript{309} \textit{“Auswertung 7.PD, 1962,”} 16, 19.
\textsuperscript{310} \textit{“Rede zum Offiziere des MB III, Feb 1962 (Vertrauliche Verschlusssache),”} 19.
As there was a close connection between political work and military discipline, all officers were called to be more “creative” in order to solve these serious problems. Creativity did not help:

In spite of visible and conscientious efforts to improve political work and training, and tighten military order and discipline, the disciplinary situation in all units is not satisfactory.

The two concepts had always been connected; now the Party reinforced the close relationship between military discipline and Party political work. Instead of technical and combat training, the soldiers received more political training, which did not improve their perishable technical and tactical skills. In the end, this only served to reinforce an attitude among the lowest soldiers and sailors that the new GDR was not about solving its problems in pragmatic ways.

To understand the existential world of the common soldier, it is necessary to understand how the tensions of the ideological and the practical affected the command climate in the tactical units of the NVA. If discipline was poor, it was not because of the poor level of leadership by the sergeants, officers, and commanders but because they had not infused their instructions with appropriate Party work. By the time Ulbricht raised the Berlin Wall, the Politbüro’s assessment of the NVA training environment had not changed and augured problems that were more serious. Nowhere is that more obvious than in the “command climate” of the NVA. The next chapter will explore other signposts that should have told the political elite that the NVA was in deep trouble.

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312 Ibid.
CHAPTER 4: THE COMMAND CLIMATE OF THE NVA

All Party members in the NVA...without exception and without regard to person, rank, or office, will be held to a uniform Party discipline in accordance with approved statutes, laws, and duties.
Rudolf Dölling, 1958.¹

In spite of visible and conscious efforts to improve political work and training, as well as tighten military order and discipline, the disciplinary situation in all units is not satisfactory.
Director, Politische Hauptverwaltung, 7.PD, 1965.²

The question of discipline in an army is as old as civilization. Ancient kings and emperors wanted an army that could do their bidding. A disciplined army led by the iron will of its officers won the king’s wars and became a powerful arm of the state. Without strong leaders who were backed by the force of law, however, an army could devolve into an armed and undisciplined mob that threatened the state’s existence. Disobedience challenged the authority of the King’s officers, desertions weakened the army’s strength, and mutiny challenged the authority of the state. Thus, in the formative years of modern armies, Kings and parliaments legislated into national laws the military crimes of disobedience and insubordination, desertion, and mutiny. With the demise of the aristocracy and the rise of democratic states, military discipline was still necessary, but officers of ability, rather than officers-by-birth, now administered military justice.

The armed forces of East Germany, as with its military predecessors, the Deutsches Heer (1871-1918), the Reichswehr (1921-1935), and the Wehrmacht (1935-1945), also expected its officers to maintain discipline, albeit using prescribed ideological tools. The NVA’s leadership doctrine required its officers “to engage their soldiers in all matters, especially in all political questions” in order to create the iron discipline necessary to win. Without a doubt, the “leadership

and management activities” of the officers, particularly the Stellvertreter and the commander, had a palpable effect on the efficiency and effectiveness of NVA units and on the lives of their soldiers. 3 If that effect was positive, the discipline would be good, the training better, the socialist consciousness would be instilled in all members, and the entire army would be combat ready. If the effect was negative, however, then iron discipline would be fleeting and poor discipline would manifest itself in frequent complaints, high numbers of accidents, and unacceptable disciplinary rates.

This chapter introduces the concept of the work environment, or the command climate, of the NVA. Social and labor historians have studied the work conditions of businesses and societies in this manner for years. They have explored the interdependencies of management, employment patterns, pay, and safety issues on its productivity. In a market economy, the manager’s measure of merit is the profit margin within the business space. In a socialist economy, the market’s measure of merit is production, usually at the expense of other factors. In both economic models, managers are directly responsible for the work environment within which their workers function and produce. In both cases, the manager’s responsibilities are usually limited in time and space; it stops at the end of the workday at the door of the concern. Unless there is lost productivity the next day in the form of absenteeism, late arrivals, or other problems, what happens outside of the gates is not normally the business of the manager. Studying these issues from a business perspective improves work productivity and profit. From a historical perspective, studying the work environment gives a voice to the nameless and faceless worker. Likewise, studying the work conditions in the NVA also gives a voice to the nameless and faceless soldier. It also penetrates the prevailing Cold War myths of the overwhelming power of the East German armed forces.

The work environment of the NVA was the direct result of two forces. First, it was the product of the political-military discourse of the Socialist Unity Party (SED) and the Politbüro as

interpreted by the Defense Ministry. This was discussed in Chapter 2. Next, it was the natural result of routine decisions by unit commanders and political officers at each discrete echelon of command. The results of those decisions were high accident rates and disciplinary problems that contributed to a picture of bureaucratic dysfunctionality, a challenging work environment, and poor combat readiness.

The political-military discourse tried to transform the army into a political army that reflected the nascent socialist Germany. The act of transformation, though, was never quite achieved. The soldiers that returned to their homes and professions after service did not bring home the optimism of a functioning socialism, but rather the shattered memories of a system that never quite got it right. The tensions that occurred between the Party, the army, and the soldier surfaced as visible fractures that presaged the demise of the socialist state in 1989.

Unfortunately, understanding the dysfunctionality of a socialist dominated society is like looking through a glass prism. The current image changes as one rotates the prism. The consequent perspective, mutating colors, and ephemeral reflections challenge the viewer’s understanding of what they just observed juxtaposed with what they are viewing in the present. Looking through the socialist prism requires stamina and a cynical eye—it is a dark view that gains clarity in the repetitive act of fitting disparate images into a coherent whole.

The first step to understanding the work environment in the NVA is to understand the continuities between the civilian and military work environments. The health of a military working environment is as essential to its success as the health of a civilian work environment is to profit and production. Civilian accident rates, absenteeism, and employee sickness are no different from questions focused on military accident rates, desertion, AWOLs (absence without leave), and malingering. Both environments are factors essential to the core missions of each endeavor—earning a profit, producing a product, or defending the state.
For the military environment, however, the scope of the commander’s responsibilities is much more extensive than that of a civilian manager. The commander is responsible for a comprehensive environment that commands all aspects of his soldiers’ lives. It is a commander’s authority and his personal leadership style that can so completely affect, alter, and even transform the military working environment. Thus, military cultures around the world often refer to the work environment the commander creates as the command climate.⁴

A formal definition of command climate varies among the world’s armed forces, but they all suggest the commander’s responsibility for every aspect of his soldiers’ lives. The idea is inherent in the primacy of the military’s core mission; for the commander is responsible for its success. Less understood is that his routine responsibilities can be just as challenging in peacetime as in times of war. For in peacetime, the military commander must still concern himself around the clock with routine life and death situations directly related to the proficiency and efficacy of his unit. Because of this, his responsibilities also extend to the less well-known private and off-duty lives of his soldiers.⁵

Ideally, soldiers, sailors, and airmen work together as a coherent whole within a unit. They usually live and eat together in barracks, ships, or in the surrounding communities. What happens outside of the military working day affects the efficiency and routine of the barracks during the workday. Regardless of ideology, off-duty drinking incidents quickly migrate into the workday as detractors of mission success. Fighting among off-duty soldiers, sergeants, and officers, evokes dislike, hatred, and a lack of cooperation between comrades-in-arms. Petty theft breeds distrust and a sense of personal violation. Physical abuse by supervisors breeds insubordination and the

⁴ Until the 1980s, the combat forces of the GDR was filled almost exclusively with men. Even then, women were assigned primarily to rear area logistics units or to the medical service.

⁵ For example, one American source defines the command climate as “a perception among the members of a unit about how they will be treated by their leaders...” “Establish a Positive Command Climate,” http://www.armystudyguide.com/content/powerpoint/EO_Presentations/establish-a-positive-comm-2.shtml. See also Col. Stephen Jones, “Improving Accountability for Effective Command Climate: A Strategic Imperative,” ed. Strategic Studies Institute (Carlisle Barracks: US Army War College, 2003); For the leadership philosophy of the Bundeswehr, please see: Bundesminister der Verteidigung, “ZDv 10/1, Innere Führung, Selbverständnis und Führungskultur der Bundeswehr,” ed. Bundesministerium der Verteidigung (2008).
refusal to obey orders, whether in peacetime or in times of war. Desertions affect combat strength and put the burden of daily routine on those who remain. The health and welfare of soldiers, while never the exclusive object of their commander’s efforts, have always been an essential element of mission accomplishment and combat readiness. The effects of these problems in the command climate are so serious that any military commander who ignored the health, morale, and welfare of his soldiers did so at his peril.

Fundamental to the concept of the command climate is the leadership style the commander uses to create that climate. In both academic and popular literature, there is a presumption that all military organizations are rigidly hierarchical and led by autocratic commanders. If so, a reasonable conclusion would be that all military organizations, regardless of service, nationality, or ideology, have similar autocratic and hierarchical organizational characteristics.

Emphatically, that is not the case. Autocratic leadership and management styles do not necessarily imply that the efficiency and productivity of military organizations are predictable. Just as in business, industry, or academia, military organizations are just as vulnerable to the vagaries of leadership styles, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and interpersonal relationships.

These vagaries are no different in the East German army. NVA military commanders still reacted to the same interpersonal and bureaucratic stressors as their counterparts in the West. Bureaucratic, military, and ideological standards had to be maintained. Poor performance by the unit placed great pressure on the commander to correct it. Yet NVA commanders did not always see eye to eye with the Party, each other, nor with their political deputies. Every relationship depended on the effectiveness of interpersonal communications between bureaucratic players—how the commander related to his political officer could spell the difference between success and failure.

As with Western commanders, the NVA commander created a command climate that significantly affected the health, morale, and welfare of his soldiers. In peacetime, a unit with good
discipline would be a good fighting unit that would prevail in wartime. A healthy command climate would exhibit signs that showed the success of his leadership: low rates of accidents, little or no disciplinary problems, and very few special incidents, or *besondere Vorkommnisse*, in the garrison. In other words, a proficient and properly led NVA would have few minor offenses and even fewer instances of major offenses that resulted in a court-martial. If this argument holds true, a healthy command climate in the NVA would have recruited large numbers of young soldiers to be Party members, demonstrated high standards of military performance and would have been a military force to be reckoned with. Soldiers and officers returning home after their enlistments would have been certainly exemplars for social change. Naturally, good morale in a well-run socialist army would have flourished.

Some NVA commanders were successful at creating a healthy command climate. This is evident in the countless statistics the NVA collected. There were good units with good socialist commanders, but not very many. But, the records show that many units had very serious problems, as their high numbers of complaints, accidents, and disciplinary problems demonstrated.

During the Cold War, the West's focus on May Day parades in the Eastern Bloc impressed us with images of well-drilled and disciplined armies. However, military discipline is not just about parade ground dramatics; a disciplined and effective military is ready to defend the homeland or effectively perform any other assigned function. The Party had reasonable expectations that it would command a disciplined, socialist, army. Therefore, understanding what the Party *expected* and how well the NVA *met that expectation* would be a useful measure of merit for understanding the NVA's command climate. Otherwise, our own biased perspectives would unfairly judge the NVA with more modern organizations 60 years later.

As boring as they might seem, the mundane statistics of complaints, accidents, and disciplinary problems in the peacetime NVA, actually signaled the standards it hoped to achieve. Nevertheless, the frustration of the commanders and Party leaders to meet their own standards
was palpable—and buried within the NVA’s comprehensive, but flawed analyses. The evidence shouts what was concealed behind *eine Reihe von Mängel*—an unhealthy command climate existed within the NVA.

Of course, as Chapter 3 argued, the political-military discourse neatly watered down the traditional authority of NVA commanders with regard to required education and training, thus hindering the NVA’s seamless transformation into a socialist army. Left to their own devices, though, those training deficiencies could probably have been overcome. However, the dysfunctionality of collective leadership also watered down the order and discipline of the NVA, which of itself proved to be a much larger challenge.

It is possible to argue that the SED and the Defense Ministry did not expect its commanders to create and maintain a climate of trust, safety, or security where trained soldiers and officers could work together to defend the state. After all, was not a tough life in the NVA the cost of doing business? Did not enlistment in the NVA eventually become a social “rite of passage?” In other words, all this talk of a healthy command climate would be ludicrous because the Party and its hacks could have cared less about its citizens, much less the common soldier.

*Overwhelmingly, the evidence suggests otherwise.* The political-military discourse framed what was institutionally desired and theoretically possible: an army with a *socialist conscience* organized using socialist principles and trained to defend the state. Without directly using the term, Party and military leaders understood the importance of creating a healthy command climate to achieve their political, social, and defense goals. In their own way, the emphasis on the Party’s *Leading Role*, criticism/self-criticism, and *Einzelleitung*, was about defining the command climate using socialist principles. The proof is in their reaction to the unending negative indicators they received—complaints, accidents, disciplinary problems, suicides, and other *besondere Vorkommnisse*. Negative measures in these categories suggested that the *Leading Role of the Party*
was not working and that army commanders and political officers were not using the principles of *criticism/self-criticism* or *Einzelleitung* as envisioned:

> Therein lies the cause—a portion of army members had no solid personal connection to our Workers’ and Peasants’ State. The desertions, special incidents, and lack of discipline are a manifestation of this. Inspections show that a few officers see only their military tasks, concern themselves insufficiently with political-ideological educational work, and do not know the sentiments and opinions of their subordinates.⁶

The failure of the Party and its functionaries to correct their problems actually clouded the socialist prism even more. The documentary evidence is extensive and speaks to the daily tensions within the KVP/NVA. The KVP experienced extraordinarily high rates of accidents, disciplinary problems, desertions, and other “special incidents.” These indicators continued into the NVA, which also experienced high rates of the same indicators. A cynic would even argue that the command climate was so negative and the effects on the soldier were so negative that the NVA could never have been anything but a giant speed bump that hindered the progress of the socialist experiment. Torsten Diedrich’s analysis was spot on—the Party wanted a soldier who was socially aware and disciplined, but the actual command climate “stood in stark contrast to that claim.”⁷

This begs the question, when a military unit has high rates of complaints, accidents, and disciplinary problems, what should the appropriate political and military response be? Western armies would place responsibility squarely on the chain of command. Senior leaders and commanders would ask questions such as, “How effective is the command environment?” Had the commander or his officers properly employed disciplinary measures within their unit? Were his directives sound or had his subordinate leaders failed him? Were conditions so bad that the unit needed to be disbanded and reconstituted under new leadership? In the civilian sector, high-level

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managers would ask the same types of questions. Yet, when senior leaders of the Party and senior commanders in the NVA did the same thing—they came to significantly different conclusions.

To date, there has been limited enquiry into these issues. Frank Hagemann’s *Party Mastery of the National People’s Army* does explore many aspects of the command climate, including its disciplinary and desertion rates. Christian Müller’s *Thousand Days in the Ashes*, provides a comprehensive look at life for the *Unteroffiziere auf Zeit (UaZ)* (short-term enlistment sergeant) during the last 25 years of the NVA’s existence. In fact, Müller’s treatise describes a major aspect of the command climate in the NVA; i.e., the failure of commanders and officers to prevent the harsh mistreatment of soldiers by sergeants and senior conscripts and thus relegateing their responsibility to care for their soldiers to the Party. This study builds on Müller’s thesis: the demise of sergeant authority and the rise of an informal leadership structure among conscripts in the 1980s. What were the institutional causes in the 1950s and 1960s that would have allowed senior conscripts and short-enlistment sergeants in the 1970s and 1980s to bully, abuse, and steal from junior soldiers? The beginnings of such abuse appear in the complaints that soldiers submitted to the NVA in the 1950s and 1960s.

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8 Hagemann, Parteiheerschaft.

9 Müller, Tausend Tage; Wenzke, "Die Nationale Volksarmee (1956-1990)." There is anecdotal evidence that senior conscripts stole pay from new conscripts, usually with the rationalization that it was done to them when they were new recruits.

10 Müller, Tausend Tage.
THE ROAD TO THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE GOES ONLY OVER MY DEAD BODY.
Political Officer, 1953

I have thrown your complaint in the trash.
Major Haak, Commander, 18-MSR, 1961

The overwhelming majority of supervisors have concluded that the processing of petitions and complaints has been conducted conscientiously. Thus, we have contributed to the consolidation of trust by the Workers and army members to the “Party of the Working Class,” to the Workers’ and Peasants’ State, and to the National People’s Army. “Analysis of Petitions and Complaints,” 1964.

As blatant indicators of the problems the NVA was having, it would be hard to deny the importance “Petitions and Complaints,” or *Eingaben und Beschwerden*, received from its soldiers and officers. Petitions and complaints were the only officially sanctioned outlet for the soldier and therefore provided early access to the existing command climate of the NVA. Their quantity indicates an underlying discontent while their content provides exceptional insight into its organizational problems from its historical roots. The Party endorsed petitions and complaints because “answering the mail” fit comfortably into the Party’s political discourse—it would answer all petitions and complaints from its citizens and affirmed the responsibility of the socialist state for its citizens. In turn, the sheer numbers of “solved complaints” showed in quantitative ways how the Party justified and validated its importance to the soldier and to the citizen.

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11 "Die ernste Situation in KVP, 1953," 32. „Der Weg zum ZK geht nur über meine Leiche."


Therefore, in a bizarre sort of way, the Party expected and officially endorsed petitions and complaints from its army members and citizens. The right to complain or present a grievance was absolute within the disciplinary regulations of the NVA and the GDR. By responding to complaints in a timely manner, the Party hoped to create a "trust relationship" between the soldier, the commander, and the Party that would be reflected in rapid improvements in discipline, combat readiness, and even family relationships. Within the organization of the NVA, those complaints were accepted, tabulated, and analyzed in the hopes that such suitable solutions would satisfy the soldier or officer, improve the NVA, and validate the Leading Role of the Party.\textsuperscript{15} The problem was, though, that "complaints responded to" did not necessarily equal "complaints that were solved."

Processing petitions and complaints was the "key solution to many basic problems within the NVA."\textsuperscript{16} The essential component to its success was the effectiveness of the commanders and political officers in solving their soldiers' petitions and complaints. Good NVA commanders actively engaged in "complaint activities" that were "inseparable from leadership activities:"

The conscientious processing of petitions and complaints was an effective means to consolidate the socialist relationship between commanders and their military collectives.\textsuperscript{17}

Petitions and complaints became not just a means of solving problems, but also "...an important means for reaching unity and cohesion in the troop units of the national armed forces."\textsuperscript{18} The Party was particularly convinced that the "correct processing" of petitions and complaints would improve the army's combat readiness on a grand scale and:


\textsuperscript{16} "Bericht der Eingaben- und Beschwerdestelle...im Bereich der Nationalen Volksarmee, 1962," 53. "...ein Schlüssel zur Lözung vieler anderer Grundsatzprobleme, innerhalb der NVA, liegt."

\textsuperscript{17} "Eingaben und Beschwerden, NVA, 1963/64," 81. "Die gewissenhafte Bearbeitung von Eingaben und Beschwerden war ein wirksames Mittel bei der Festigung der sozialistischen Beziehungen zwischen den Kommandeuren und ihren militärischen Kollektiven."

\textsuperscript{18} Verner, "Halbjahranalyse der PKK 7.PD, Jun 1962," 52. "...ein wichtiges Mittel zur Erreichung der Einheit und Geschlossenheit in den Truppenteilen der Nationalen Streitkräfte."
...had a direct influence on the morale, fighting power, mission, and combat readiness of the soldiers, sergeants, and officers, as well as on the relationships with family members in the NVA.\textsuperscript{19}

While they were always treated the same in the discourse, petitions and complaints were actually separate categories distinguished primarily by their function. A complaint was just that—voicing an objection or expressing unhappiness at the situation that generated the complaint. Solders and officers lodged complaints against the Party, the army, their commanders, officers, and sergeants for a wide assortment of reasons, including mistreatment, recruiting, and enlistment fraud or to complain about Party members who damaged the reputation of the NVA.

Petitions, on the other hand, suggested a desire to change one’s circumstances. Not only did the soldier feel wronged, but he also wanted that wrong corrected by the army, the Party, or both. Petitions tended to be requests for better living quarters, early discharges due to family difficulties, or for health problems. Other petitions also suggested improvements in organization and training, the efficient use of bases or equipment, military conditions, and service regulations.\textsuperscript{20}

Answering these petitions and complaints provided the Party with the proof necessary to show that the unhealthy command climate was being improved and that the Party was treating its soldiers fairly. The Party saw petitions and complaints as a reflection of essential “trust relationships” between superiors and subordinates. Every complaint answered by the state became further proof of the state’s faithfulness to its soldier and thus to its citizens. It demonstrated how successful the Party was in implementing “real socialism.”

From the point of view of the army member, petitions and complaints reflected just how unhappy the soldiers and officers were. Reports like \textit{The Effectiveness of Petition-Activities on the Improvement of Troop Leadership and the Solution towards Training and Educational Tasks of the}...

\textsuperscript{19} “Bericht der Eingaben- und Beschwerdestelle...im Bereich der Nationalen Volksarmee, 1962,” 52. „Die Bearbeitung der Eingabe und Beschwerde wurde mehr zum Ausgangspunkt in der täglichen Arbeit mit dem Menschen, nahm direkten Einfluss auf die Moral, Kampfkraft, Einsatz- und Gefechtsbereitschaft der Soldaten, Uffz. und Offz. Selbst, als auch auf das Verhältnis der Familienangehörigen zur NVA.” Also in “Eingaben und Beschwerden, NVA, 1963/64,” 83.

\textit{NVA in Training Year 1963/64} were common.\textsuperscript{21} For the soldiers, the practical effect was another backhanded way for the Party to congratulate itself to its comrades.

The next chart is a compilation of petitions and complaints by soldiers and officers in the NVA between July 1961 and November 1964 (the first two columns reflect the last half of 1961 and the first half of 1962). The largest category of petitions was for deferments from the newly legislated conscription law of 1961. Many recruits requested release from conscription for health, family, or occupational reasons. The high numbers of deferment requests also reflected the widespread disagreement within the population over the basic question of conscription.

There were petitions that were probably helpful to the development of the army and its socialist consciousness. These would have been a different type of petition altogether—usually not made by malingerers, misfits, or dissatisfied soldiers—but rather by soldiers who were genuinely interested in improving the NVA. In 1961, there were 64 petitions to improve training, the


\textsuperscript{22} “Bericht der Eingaben- und Beschwerdestelle...im Bereich der Nationalen Volksarmee, 1962.” 48; “Eingaben und Beschwerden, NVA, 1963/64,” 81, 87. Due to the vagaries of NVA reporting, the totals do not equal the subcategories above. However, all totals and subtotals are documented in NVA reports. As the Concription Law did not go into effect until 1962, the total for the second half of 1961 reflects only petitions and complaints about the command climate.

\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
\textbf{Category} & \textbf{1961/2} & \textbf{1962/1} & \textbf{1962/63} & \textbf{1963/64} \\
\hline
Deferment Application from Conscript & & & & 41022 \\
Waiver to Conscript Laws & 2582 & 2657 & 2668 & \\
(Discharge from Active Duty) & & & & \\
*Questions of Accommodations & 1349 & 2706 & 2777 & \\
(Dwellings) & & & & \\
*Work with People and Cadre-Work Transfers and Discharges & 973 & 1544 & 1158 & \\
*Breaches of Regulations, Military Articles & 942 & 512 & & \\
Financial Claims & 315 & & & \\
Logistical Questions & 148 & & & \\
Suggestions & 243 & & & \\
*Medical Issues & & & & 388 \\
Other Petitions & & & & 1413 \\
\hline
\textbf{Total less Deferment Applications} & 4399 & 8477 & 13092 & 19353 \\
\hline
\textbf{Total} & 74247 & 60375 & & \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
preparedness of equipment, or the “vigilance for combat readiness.” By 1964, those numbers had dramatically increased to 2000.  

On the other hand, several categories of complaints are windows into the fragile command climate. These include living quarters, interpersonal relationships, medical questions, and supervisory abuse. These categories provide great insight into the problems that soldiers and officers encountered in the course of their service. The data also suggests that raising the Berlin Wall and closing the borders to the West had wider effects than merely shutting down emigration; petitions and complaints in the months afterwards more than doubled.

This conclusion is more readily apparent in the analysis of petitions and complaints from the 3rd Military District during that period. Since MB III represented 27-30% of the total NVA strength in 1960, its analysis of petitions and complaints provides even better insight into the problems of NVA officers and soldiers. More than eighty percent of the complaints in this chart were from NVA active members or reservists.

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23 “Eingaben und Beschwerden, NVA, 1963/64,” 83.
24 Ernst, “Analyse über Eingaben und Beschwerden für das Ausbildungsjahr 1963/64,” 2.
### Types of Petitions and Complaints, MB III, 1961-1964

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<td>Replacement of Damages (Indemnification)</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>313</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>293</td>
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<td>Medical Care</td>
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<td>158</td>
<td>146</td>
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<td>Pension Questions</td>
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<td>379</td>
<td>348</td>
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<td>Questions of Conscription</td>
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<td>244</td>
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<td>Discharge for Temporary Release</td>
<td>656</td>
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<td>Transfers/ Discharge for &quot;Familial Difficulties&quot;</td>
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<td>Premature Release Prior to Enlistment</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>510</td>
<td>269</td>
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<td>Damages to the Reputation of the NVA in Public</td>
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<td>Questions of Cadre Work</td>
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<td>649</td>
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<td>Strengthening Combat Readiness</td>
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<td>644</td>
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<td>Work with the People</td>
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<td>557</td>
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<td>Crop Damage Caused by Exercises</td>
<td>54</td>
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<td>Introduction of Compensation Measures</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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<td>3531</td>
<td>2619</td>
<td>5737</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Almost 45% of complaints concerned the living conditions of the soldier or officer. Only 7% of the complaints concerned training problems. About 10% of the complaints concerned the actions and behavior of the Party cadre, a complaint category that theoretically should not have existed at all. Another 7% concerned disciplinary problems of some sort, from damaging the reputation of the NVA (normally a Party crime), to “violations of rules by superiors,” or to violations of the “Regulation Concerning Discipline and Complaints (DV 10/6).”

By 1964, the reasons that soldiers wanted to terminate their enlistments early had evolved into a menagerie of excuses that were reflective of the soldier’s state of mind. From 1962 to 1964,

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26 Complaints about living quarters were not new. In 1952-1953, officers in the KVP were separated from their families and forced to live in tents during the winter. “Provisions, uniforms, and equipage,” were also huge problems for the KVP. See Diedrich, “Die Kasernierte Volkspolizei (1952-1956),” 349-350.
there were 5,315 petitions for early termination of enlistment. Many of these complaints were for false recruiting promises by the district recruiters or because of their general disappointment in the quality of military training and “educational work.” Others, however, complained of “basic personal difficulties” and their worsening health.²⁷

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Despite specific instructions from the Politbüro, five years of complaints by soldiers and officers allude to the failure of local Party officials to build or renovate sufficient buildings for army members and their families. Admittedly, the housing within NVA bases could not cover the needs of NVA families. In cities damaged by Allied bombing during WWII—Dresden, Halle, Karl-Marx-Stadt (currently Chemnitz), Erfurt, and Leipzig—newly assigned professional army members could not bring their families with them. This problem became more acute as the NVA struggled to find family housing for soldiers who had accepted an additional enlistment as a junior sergeant (UaZ) in the People’s Army. Of 329 applications for apartments in the city of Cottbus, for example, none were satisfied. In the City of Halle, only 18 out of 260 applications were filled, and then only using “temporary quarters.” New reservists in Halle made 175 applications for non-existent housing. Because of its remote location, housing difficulties were most acute on the border; the Border Guards had great difficulty convincing officers to accept assignments without their families because of this lack of housing.²⁸

The problem seemed particularly irritating when army commanders accused callous local officials of not following their own rules vis-à-vis construction and the equitable allocation of local housing.²⁹ “The cause for a portion of the living space problem exists in the still unsatisfactory

²⁷ “Eingaben und Beschwerden, NVA, 1963/64,” 88. “...begünstigten aufgetretenen persönliche Schwierigkeiten, mangelhafter Arbeit eines Teiles der Wehrkreiskommandos, besonders der Musterungskommissionen...der Verschlechterung des Gesundheitszustandes des Wehrpflichtigen...“


²⁹ Ernst, “Analyse über Eingaben und Beschwerden für das Ausbildungsjahr 1963/64,” 2-4.
work of a few local Housing Committees. These particular committees were neither “purposeful” nor effective enough compared to the efforts of the local organs. The “thoughtless promises” of commanders created unjustified hopes in those soldiers who were seeking apartments, thus causing even more petitions and complaints. By 1961, there were over 7,000 soldiers and officers actively looking for living quarters off military bases and in the East German civilian sector. 2,200 of these requests were considered “urgent.” In 1961, the Party predicted that 3,000 army members in the NVA would have no living quarters at current rates of expenditure. That prediction was not too far off the mark. Between 1962 and 1964, there were 4,853 complaints about inadequate or insufficient living quarters.

Despite a building plan that would have built 4000 additional units of military housing, the NVA was noticeably inept at providing any suitable housing at all. The 3rd Military District in 1961 identified the largest category of complaint by far to be deficient or insufficient living quarters at 43.6%. It also described the high number of complaints as “characteristic” of living conditions for their soldiers in the southern half of East Germany. By 1964, the NVA was admitting there had been “no progress” solving the problem of apartments for the professional soldier (Berufssoldat).

Part of the problem was the army’s expectation that the local Party officials would build family housing adequate to army needs. However, in many cases the Party had neither the funds nor the materials and expertise to build large neighborhoods of family quarters. Officers and sergeants with large families had even more acute problems as only 2- and 2.5-room apartments

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30 “Eingaben und Beschwerden, NVA, 1963/64,” 95. „Eine Ursache für einen Teil der ungelösten Wohnraumprobleme bestand in der noch ungenügenden Arbeit einiger Standortwohnungskommissionen.“
31 Ibid., 15.
32 Borning, “Bericht, 11. mot. Schützendivision, 1961,” 84. „Das bedeutet, daß bei Beibehaltung der jetzigen Planzahlen, ohne Berücksichtigung der neu hinzukommenden Wohnungssuchenden, ca 3,000 Armeeangehörige bis 1965 keine Wohnung erhalten werden.“
33 “Eingaben und Beschwerden, NVA, 1963/64,” 94.
36 “Eingaben und Beschwerden, NVA, 1963/64,” 95.
were available in most cities. Their frustration with not being able to knock a crack in this problem is obvious, particularly since the NVA and SED claimed to have established an “Apartment Exchange” to aid army members. The system also experienced “special difficulties” providing living accommodations to soldiers who had been discharged into local districts.  

The apartments for junior officers were also a problem. One lieutenant told a senior sergeant that:

I have worked for the Republic for ten years and served in the KVP for three. I still do not have an apartment yet.

Many complaints about living quarters and conditions came from the spouses of officers and sergeants. The wives of professional officers submitted a number of petitions to the members of the Defense Ministry and the State Council concerning needed quarters. When officers were sent to assignments without their families, the Party blamed its own cadre for leading “formal and superficial” discussions about the necessity for the assignment and the associated separation from their families.

*****

A number of complaints addressed the abusive power exercised by military supervisors who did not follow proper socialist principles or who violated service regulations. From 1962 to 1963, 525 soldiers in MB III submitted complaints because they were not treated as “class comrades,” or as equals, in the barracks. The following year, 547 officers in MB III complained directly to the Minister of Defense about a loss of confidence in their immediate supervisors or commanders; some supervisors had overstepped or exceeded their disciplinary authority, while

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38 “Eingaben und Beschwerden, NVA, 1963/64,” 94. I use the American usage for “separated” or “retired” when referring to military members returning to civilian life. To be “retired” implies that the former military officer or soldier is receiving a pension or retirement pay from the government. To be “separated,” however, implies a separation from military service, be it voluntary or involuntary, before the member has reached retirement age or achieved an appropriate “years-of-service” standard.

39 Matz, “Abschlussbericht [Maas], Harry,” 44.

40 “Eingaben und Beschwerden, NVA, 1963/64,” 94-95.

41 “Bericht der Eingaben- und Beschwerdestelle...im Bereich der Nationalen Volksarmee, 1962,” 51.

42 “Eingaben und Beschwerden, NVA, 1963/64,” 82.
others tried to cover up complaints. Officers were particularly upset when their commanders answered their petitions and complaints “superficially or with empty promises.” By 1973, the Party determined that 2/5 of the sergeants and 1/2 the officers had not responded to suggestions from subordinates in a “Party-like way.” Perhaps nothing speaks more to this reticence for “petition and complaint work” than the response one officer received from his commander, “I have thrown your complaint in the trash can.”

The Party also cast scathing criticism at junior officers for not solving the problems that led to the original complaints. The Party accused their young and poorly educated officers of not complying with, much less knowing, the laws and regulations for which they were responsible.

Party youth organizations and other political organs were also taken to task for not correcting visible “inadequacies” or for not being sufficiently involved in the “corrective process.”

So high was the number of complaints about abusive power that the NVA recognized there was a double standard developing—responsible officers were receiving the benefits of their position while ignoring their responsibilities. In only 6 months in 1962, there were 512 violations of “regulations, military instructions, or service procedures.” Supervisors “at all levels” did not follow written procedures or had overstepped their disciplinary authority. Inspectors and political organs saw “large deficiencies” in the work of senior sergeants and officers. “The rights of army members are injured” claimed one Politbüro report, “because complaints are not processed in a timely and proper way.” Some headquarters staffs handled complaints “very superficially or not at all.” “Petition work,” a 1964 report declared, “could be more effective in its political and military work.” “A few supervisors,” it seemed, still did not have the “correct attitude towards petition

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43 Ibid., 91.
46 “Eingaben und Beschwerden, NVA, 1963/64,” 2.
47 Ibid., 82, 87, 91.
48 “Bericht der Eingaben- und Beschwerdestelle...im Bereich der Nationalen Volksarmee, 1962,” 51.
activities” or believed such work was a burden. What was worse, these “unhealthy attitudes” abused and inhibited the initiative of all army members.49

There were two aspects to this problem of the double standard. First, soldiers saw the violation by a supervisor and used it as justification for not obeying the rules themselves. The second, and much more important aspect, points to the question of ignorance and incompetence by officers and the subsequent loss of their credibility. If the officer or senior sergeant did not know the rules but acted as though he did, he very quickly lost all credibility as a leader and jeopardized his role in creating a socialist consciousness in the smaller units.

This growing double standard also migrated into the NVA's help to the economic sector. Similar to the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China, the NVA provided free labor and support to the agricultural, industrial, and mining sectors of the GDR economy. Here too, the arrogance and callousness of NVA officers reflected the growing double standard. When complaints from farm and factory managers increased in 1970, the commander of MB III blamed officers who “still do not have ideological clarity about their roles and tasks as socialist trainers and educators.”50

Unfortunately, the Party's response to these complaints was predictably bureaucratic and unhelpful. While it did try to root out problem officers, default political policies still pushed collective solutions; the Party called on all loyal and true Party members to reject “all sloppiness and bungling with respect to petitions.”51 In other words, using criticism/self-criticism, the Party collective was supposed to hold the chain of command to a higher standard.

The high number of complaints, in and of itself, was never a red flag for the Party or the leadership of the NVA. Like the crew of a merchant ship that was constantly painting over its rust

spots, the NVA’s efforts addressed only the symptoms of their problems and never the real causes. The claimed successes by the Party in reducing complaints was not because the total numbers of complaints had been reduced from one year to the next; in itself, that would have been a definitive indicator of an improving command climate. Instead, because they had successfully answered the high number of complaints, the Leading Role of the Party had again been validated. Their measure of success was focused on “answered complaints” and less so on their actual resolution, but no analysis ever suggested actual improvements in the lot of the soldier.

The NVA exploited its success in interesting ways when they solved their soldiers’ problems. The occasional commander or officer might be complimented, usually because of his “aggressive attacks” which improved “party-appropriate relationships between officers and sergeants.” More often, though, the Party attributed its success to the “continual consolidation of the Leading Role of the Party,” the rise in “leader activities throughout the Party organizations (as opposed to the military chain of command),” and to the “single-minded political-ideological work and elevation of responsibility in the education of Party members and probationary candidates”.

The Party sanctioned the petition and complaint system, but its implementation as a tool for commanders was a problem. Not only did the Party and army leadership gloss over the high number of petitions and complaints, but they also missed the opportunity to use petitions and complaints as a means to improve the morale and living conditions of their soldiers. The Party and the MfNV viewed the process as positive, but not once in the documentary evidence was there any indication that they understood or were cognizant of the fact that the sheer numbers of complaints was a negative indicator. The Party may have consolidated “trust and confidence,” but the NVA’s unique perspective on petitions and complaints artificially minimized rather than consolidated.

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their problems. The result was that predictable reports were filed—commanders, officers, and party organizations were criticized—but very little was ever accomplished to improve the living conditions, the quality of life, or the discipline of the NVA soldier. More important, the Party’s efforts to solve these problems had a significant secondary effect made obvious after the fact—it relieved the officers and sergeants of responsibility for their soldiers’ welfare and deflected traditional command responsibilities onto an inept and dysfunctional Party.

MIT TÖDLICHEM AUSGANG: ACCIDENTS WITH DEADLY CONSEQUENCES

While petitions and complaints were an expression of a soldier’s discontent with his circumstances, accidents were the very real expression of poor training and leadership. For example, on March 30 1961, an officer of the 14th Panzer Regiment (PR-14) was accidentally killed. This fact, chronicled in the logbook of the regiment, was routinely inserted between two otherwise innocuous entries: a periodic strength report and an analysis of graduates from a sergeant professional school. The name of the unfortunate officer was not revealed. Nor did the log attribute a cause for the accident.53

On June 17, 1958, while Staff Corporal Wolter was refueling the liquid oxygen in a MIG-17, a modern jet fighter, a spark ignited an explosion and fire. The explosion threw Wolter into the air. Showing remarkable presence of mind, he then drove the mobile, but burning, cart 40 meters away from the endangered jet, whereupon he lost consciousness from the shock of the original blast. The material damages cost 5,000 DM or about $20,250 at that time, to repair. The investigator focused on the installation of the cylinder head, which had not been supervised correctly by the supervisor, Senior Lieutenant Stauss. Coincidentally, a similar occurrence had occurred in a sister battalion only two months before, but Stauss had not implemented the new procedures for the proper servicing of liquid oxygen. Because of these deficiencies, the Air Force correctly punished the battalion commander with a reprimand for not insuring the procedures were followed, and Stauss

53 “Chronik des PR-14 von 20.08.1956 bis 30.11.1962 (Geheime Verschlußsache),” 40.
was punished with 5 days house arrest for not following the proper procedures. Appropriately, Staff Corporal Wolter was promoted to sergeant because of his unselfish actions in saving the “people’s property” at great risk to his safety.  

On November 19, 1958, three young members of the air force, including Airman Gorman and Sergeant Hofer, were directed to transport broken radio equipment from a distant listening post to the nearest repair facility. During a rest stop, the three airmen decided to take pictures of themselves while holding their automatic pistols. Two of the three pistols were empty, although Sergeant Hofer had loaded his with live ammunition. While two of the soldiers were posing for the photograph, the loaded pistol “accidentally” fired off five shots and shot the hapless photographer, Airman Gorman in the forehead, whereupon he died. To make matters worse, in the act of driving the deceased Gorman to the nearest hospital, Hoffman lost control of the heavy vehicle and drove over an embankment. The “proximate cause” of the shooting incident was negligence and “their deficient knowledge of weapons.” The proximate cause of the vehicle accident was Sergeant Hofer’s nonexistent training as a driver on any vehicle. However, officially, the “principal cause” for the entire incident was “the insufficient development of their political consciousness:”  

The political-military unity in the leadership of Radio Technical Company Dessau has not been realized. The Company Commander, Senior Lieutenant Dieter, is militarily and politically incapable of leading the training and education of the company.  

The investigator also blamed the company’s political officer for neglecting his political and military duties and for being overly influenced by his company commander. That is to say, the unnamed political officer did not properly criticize his company commander. Senior Lieutenant Dieter was punished with 3 days arrest in jail, the political-officer was strongly reprimanded, and

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the platoon leader was given 3 days barracks arrest.\textsuperscript{56} Even regimental staff officers could not escape blame:

\textit{Above all, the special incident shows that regimental staff officers have not satisfied their responsibilities to train their officers to be comrades with a high socialistic consciousness (Author’s emphasis).}\textsuperscript{57}

These vignettes illustrate three possible consequences of an accident in the NVA. In one case, the fatal accident was merely a footnote in a logbook and almost lost to history. In the other two incidents, the Party punished the chain of command from battalion commanders down to the immediately responsible party. Weapons, technical, and traffic safety rules were broken, but so also was the lack of political-ideological education and training—supervisors were consistently faulted because attendance at ideological classes were not up to Party standards. For example, in the home unit for the soldiers involved in the third incident, only fifty percent of the soldiers had attended political-ideological classes in the two months prior to the accident. Even Sgt. Hofer, the responsible party, and the deceased, Airman Gorman, were criticized for not attending political training. This suggests that the political-officer and his commander had not enforced mandatory attendance.\textsuperscript{58}

As the organization of the NVA matured, the accident rate tended to fall. In 1952/53, for example, the KVP suffered 300-400 deaths or injuries from unnecessary accidents involving weapons of all types. Another 114 KVP members were crippled that year, 53 from accidents and 61 from weapons misuse.\textsuperscript{59} While the number of fatalities went down in the NVA, the overall total of vehicular accidents did not.

More importantly, a young man in the NVA, whether he was a driver or a passenger, had a very high probability of being injured or killed in a vehicle accident. This was particularly true in the Border Guards, an organization of equivalent size to the military districts. In 1959, the Border

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 11.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 28.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 9.
Guards suffered 402 injuries and 36 deaths from 738 vehicular accidents. In 1960, the number of accidents increased to 939 with 550 injuries and 32 deaths (see next table). Commanders in the Border Guards blamed 65% of these accidents on their young soldier-drivers.  

Put into perspective, the Border Guards averaged over two vehicular accidents per day every day for two years in a row. The average headquarters district or Border Troops Brigade (12 total) averaged a vehicular accident every two to three days. As if the frequency of accidents were not serious enough, a border guard involved in a vehicular accident as a driver or as a passenger during that period had a 60% chance of being injured or killed.

The problem was not limited to the Border Guards. In 1957, 46 deaths resulted from tragic vehicle accidents. In 1957 and 1958, MB V experienced 463 motor vehicle accidents, or one accident every two days. By the beginning of 1961, vehicular accidents were costing the NVA DM 574,256/year, or $2,300,000/year.

For an army not at war, this extraordinarily high rate of vehicular accidents was caused no doubt by poor road infrastructure, unsafe traffic controls, speeding, and intoxication. However, the army also directly attributed these accidents to training deficiencies and poor supervision at its lowest levels. Nor was there any evidence of preventive accident programs or awareness by the

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**Vehicular Accidents in the Border Guards, 1959-1960**

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1959</th>
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<td>939</td>
<td>1677</td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Private Vehicles</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>DGP Culpable</strong></td>
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<td>1127</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Injuries</strong></td>
<td>402</td>
<td>550</td>
<td>952</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Deaths</strong></td>
<td>36</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Damages State Property (DM)</strong></td>
<td>203,260</td>
<td>272,810</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Damages Private Property (DM)</strong></td>
<td>22,240</td>
<td>35,160</td>
<td>57,400</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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61 Ibid.
chain of command that the frequency of accidents could damage morale or that the high cost of repair affected combat readiness.\textsuperscript{65}

Just as dangerous as driving heavy vehicles and tanks in the countryside or on unpaved narrow roads through ancient villages, so too were injuries from a wide spectrum of military weapons. Weapons incidents and accidents could be as simple as a pistol misfire or be as complex as friendly fire from an artillery tube into an area where soldiers were maneuvering or civilians were living. In 1953, 17 KVP soldiers were killed and another 61 were crippled from weapons accidents.\textsuperscript{66} Unfortunately, the rate of such incidents did not taper off with increased organizational experience. By 1956, the NVA experienced 86 fatalities, of which 16 soldiers lost their lives in 46 separate weapons accidents.\textsuperscript{67} The following year eleven of the 120 NVA fatalities were from weapons incidents. One soldier accidentally shot another to death during his guard watch in 1957.\textsuperscript{68} With 42 suicides that year, the total deaths in 1957 in an army that was not at war totaled 162.\textsuperscript{69} By 1967, MB III experienced 81 separate weapons incidents, most of which were caused by the negligent handling of weapons, munitions, and explosives.\textsuperscript{70}

Of course, not all accidents were fatal. Two regimental surgeons, Drs. Dohman and Sander from the 14\textsuperscript{th} Panzer Regiment reported that some minor accidents were also sports related. The reports were completely suspect, though, as both surgeons complained about the dearth of fidelity in reporting—too many accidents were either not reported or attributed to “miscellaneous causes”

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{65} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{66} “Die ernste Situation in KVP, 1953,” 32.
\item \textsuperscript{67} “Quartalsberichte des Haupstabes über besondere Vorkommnisse und den Zustand der Disziplin,” (BA-MA, 1958), 1-75. As quoted in Hagemann, Parteiherrschaft: 113.
\item \textsuperscript{68} “Bericht des Stellvertretenden Chefs des Haupstabes zur Anordnung 70-57 vom 31.10.1957,” (BA-MA, 1957), 7. As quoted in Hagemann, Parteiherrschaft: 113-114.
\item \textsuperscript{70} “Einschätzung der Aufbewahrung, der Sicherheit und des Umganges mit Waffen, Munition und Sprengmitteln in den Truppenteilen und Einheiten des Militärbezirkes (Vertrauliche Verschlußsache),” ed. MBIII (Leipzig1968).
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
which could not be analyzed. Dr. Sander was so suspicious of the reported numbers he even questioned their worth to NVA commanders.\textsuperscript{71}

Doctors Dohman and Sander painted an interesting tale. These regimental surgeons repeatedly chided their regimental commander for not bringing their accident rate down to more acceptable levels.\textsuperscript{72} They also believed that over 40\% of the accidents were caused by “careless accident prevention” and 37\% were caused by “failing to train properly.”\textsuperscript{73} Both causes could be directly attributed to poor leadership.

If true, then the next chart is a clear example of underreporting by military officials. The chart focuses on the two collocated units for which Dohman and Sander were responsible: a tank repair facility and the 14\textsuperscript{th} Panzer Regiment. In only three years, the two organizations together experienced 268 accidents. 25\% of the accident victims were new soldiers, which supports the claim that many accidents resulted from poor supervision and safety instruction.

\textsuperscript{71} A. [Dohman], "Medizinischer Auskunftsbericht 38a des 14.PR + PZW.7 für die Zeit vom 1.7.61 bis 31.12.1961 (Vertrauliche Verschlußsache)," (Militäararchiv der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik; MBII; 7.PD; PR-14, 1961), 12; Hauptmann Dr. (med.) [Sander], "Medizinischer Auskunftsbericht 38a des 14.PR + PZW.7 für die Zeit vom 1.7 bis 31.12.1962 (Vertrauliche Verschlußsache)," (MBII; 7.PD; PR-14, 1962), 17-18.

\textsuperscript{72} [Sander], "Medizinischer Auskunftsbericht 38a des 14.PR + PZW.7 für die Zeit vom 1.1 bis 30.6.1963 (Vertrauliche Verschlußsache)," 26.

\textsuperscript{73} Hauptmann Dr. (med.) [Sander], "Medizinischer Auskunftsbericht 38a des 14.PR + PZW.7 für die Zeit vom 1.1.62 bis 30.6.1962 (Vertrauliche Verschlußsache)," (Militäararchiv der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik; MBII; 7.PD; PR-14, 1962), 1; ———, "Medizinischer Auskunftsbericht 38a des 14.PR + PZW.7 für die Zeit vom 1.7 bis 31.12.1962 (Vertrauliche Verschlußsache)," 16-18; [Sander], "Medizinischer Auskunftsbericht 38a des 14.PR + PZW.7 für die Zeit vom 1.1 bis 30.6.1963 (Vertrauliche Verschlußsache)," 25-27.
The statistics for PR-14 show that an accident of some type occurred every three-calendar days. If only duty-related accidents are considered, there was an accident every four days, or about once a week. A serious training accident caused by deficient maintenance or poor supervision occurred once every two weeks. At that rate, accidents became a routine, if unwanted, distraction.

Besides the common flu, the most significant cause of lost duty time was due to injuries and property damages from preventable accidents. Like most industrial factories, the NVA tracked the number of days a trained soldier was away from duty because of accidents. A sick or injured soldier could not train. A severely injured soldier became a burden on his fellow soldiers. For a regiment only 602 strong, the loss of 10,000 duty days/year is an extraordinary and unacceptable number that detracted from readiness—either their vehicles needed repair or their soldiers were in the hospital for largely preventable accidents—or both. Dr. Sander challenged his commander to take more responsibility for these unnecessary accidents:

...a systematic reduction of accidents, as required by the order of the Division Commander, is obviously [necessary]...We therefore conclude that in order to

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74 PR-14 and the Tank Repair Yard for the 7th Panzer Division (PW-7) were colocated. Thus the regimental surgeon serviced both units. [Dohman], "Medizinischer Auskundsbericht 38a des 14.PR + PZW.7 für die Zeit vom 1.7.61 bis 31.12.1961 (Vertrauliche Verschlußsache)," 12-13; [Sander], "Medizinischer Auskundsbericht 38a des 14.PR + PZW.7 für die Zeit vom 1.1.62 bis 30.6.1962 (Vertrauliche Verschlußsache)," 1-3; ———, "Medizinischer Auskundsbericht 38a des 14.PR + PZW.7 für die Zeit vom 1.7 bis 31.12.1962 (Vertrauliche Verschlußsache)," 16-18; [Sander], "Medizinischer Auskundsbericht 38a des 14.PR + PZW.7 für die Zeit vom 1.1 bis 30.6.1963 (Vertrauliche Verschlußsache)," 25-27.

75 Regimental strength numbers are difficult to find. Regimental chronicals generally recorded strength as a percentage from an unknown number. Seefeldt, "Chronik des Panzer Regiment 16 (1956-1962 ) (Geheime Verschlusssache)," 4.
elevate efforts at accident prevention, concerned commanders at all levels should instruct and caution all to improve their efforts....

This surgeon was stating the obvious: commanders at every level could ignore the problem, but they were ultimately responsible for their soldiers’ welfare. Whether Doctors Dohman and Sander were immune from Party repercussions because of their bold initiative is unknown.

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All accidents have a cause, and all organizations try to minimize the impact of those causes. The NVA was no exception in trying to lower the accident rate. Army leaders knew and understood what caused most accidents: “failing to comply with service regulations,” the careless performance of soldiers, or deficient supervision by sergeants and officers. However, while Doctors Dohman and Sander were willing to state the obvious, the organizational response was inadequate. Not once in the political-military discourse, for example, did any commanders accept responsibility for the incidents that occurred within their units. When forced to, some commanders blamed leading subordinate officers for a “series of incidents” or a general lack of a “sense of responsibility.” Commanders also cast blame on sergeants and officers who were responsible for following orders, regulations, and instructions. However, it was not that simple. Like the always rotating socialist prism, the political-military discourse had a significant effect on officers’ perceptions of the problem and the manner in which the command climate could be improved; what should have been a mandate for improved training and supervision became a call for improvements in the Party’s Leading Role and the socialist consciousness of the army.

Take, for example, the tragic weapons accident in April 1960 that occurred in an armory in East Berlin. While cleaning their rifles and pistols, two soldiers were “playing around” without

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77 Hagemann, Parteiherrschaft: 113-114.

supervision. Unfortunately, one soldier accidentally shot and killed the other. This incident was even more astonishing because it occurred in one of the elite regiments of the NVA, the Wachregiment.

Despite its unique role in Berlin as a “show regiment,” the unit did not receive any sympathy for their special status. The soldier whose negligence caused the fatality received 10 days “severe arrest.” However, the investigators accused the regiment of supervisory error—there should have been officers or sergeants on duty in the weapons cleaning room. Consequently, the regimental commander also issued reprimands to the squad leader and the Company Commander.79

The point is that the regimental commander also pointed to several deficiencies that conveniently cast blame away from himself and onto his subordinate officers. He claimed, for example, that “the comrades” suffered from:

...deficient educational work...[and that] insufficient class-appropriate relationships existed between the comrades with each other and between the supervisors and their subordinates.

From the point of view of the NVA, the Wachregiment had an unhealthy climate in which “political training and educational work” was not effective.80

The fact that the Wachregiment was the most elite unit in the NVA is highly significant. Barracked in the heart of East Berlin, the unit was not just a showpiece, but also the regime’s equivalent to imperial guards. Wachregiment soldiers maintained guard at Berlin's principal war memorial, the Neue Wache (New Guard House), less than 250 meters from the seat of government and the parliament. The regimental commander and his principal officers would have been hand-selected by the Minister of Defense himself. Soldiers who volunteered would have been vetted for military and political reliability and competence. Therefore, military and ideological errors in the Wachregiment, self-proclaimed by its own commander, would have been a dire sign for the NVA


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and the regime. The regimental commander, Major Richter, had no choice but to direct additional ideological classes to emphasize the “further consolidation of the collective in the squads, platoons, and companies.”

The whole process of establishing cause and affixing blame, however, could also be very counter-productive. After one motor vehicle accident resulted in total vehicle damage, the Party collective in the unit came together to discuss and decide how to “prevent its recurrence.” The Party members all loftily agreed that “all forms of casualness and deficiency” by Party members should be eliminated and no Party members should tolerate any violation of service regulations. However, since non-Party members were not allowed into the meeting, over half the regiment failed to receive this important safety message.

THE BASIC QUESTION OF DISCIPLINE

In spite of visible efforts to improve educational work and the implementation of a strict military order and discipline, the present disciplinary situation in the units [of the 7.PD] is not satisfactory. 


...the orders and initiated measures to consolidate military order and discipline were not yet effective. 


In the days after the Soviet army’s suppression of the workers’ uprising in 1953, the Party conducted 101 disciplinary hearings against 83 officers, 7 sergeants, and 4 soldiers of the KVP.

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While these hearings were no doubt a backlash of the failure of the KVP to perform its basic duty during the uprising, it was also reflective of the bigger challenges the successor NVA had with order and discipline.

The command climate of the NVA is now in sharper focus. Petitions and complaints highlighted housing and leadership problems. High accident rates pointed to a culture of poor leadership and lackadaisical attitudes towards safety and technical training. These all point to chronic problems with training, supervision, and leadership. These indicators, however, provide an incomplete picture of the command climate. No matter the propensity to treat every individual as a member of a collective, East German soldiers, like their civilian comrades, were not stupid. They were aware that they were not being taken care of, that their concerns were marginalized with verbal platitudes, and that their officers were callous and often absent. Under such conditions, the signposts of disciplinary problems sprung up like weeds in the disciplinary statistics of the NVA.

All soldiers and officers in the NVA were subject to military law. What complicated the picture, however, was that this socialist army subjected its members to two different disciplinary protocols—a military system and a political adjudication process run by the political organs and basic Party organizations. Determining how these protocols affected the command climate is the challenge before us.

The Politbüro and the Ministry of Defense completely understood the importance of obedience in all aspects of the militarized state. The security of the state was at risk and demanded uncompromising obedience to the Party and to all military and political superiors. To have military order was to insist that all military commands had the force of law and were to be obeyed without discussion. Absent instant obedience, the state’s citizen-soldiers would become “human sacrifices” on the nuclear battlefield.86

Measures of crime and punishment in the NVA were outstanding indicators of the poor level of discipline of the East German soldier and the army's inability to control him. Disciplinary statistics recorded violations of regulations, military hearings and trials, as well as the number of punishments levied against NVA members. High numbers of criminal acts pointed to the failure of commanders, political deputies, junior officers, and sergeants to control their soldiers. Most important, the high numbers of line officers and political officers the Party charged with disciplinary violations pointed to the difficulties the Party experienced inculcating socialist leadership within its officer corps.

Just as complaints and accident rates are visible indicators of the health of an organization, so too are disciplinary statistics a direct reflection of the state of discipline within the NVA. Low rates of disciplinary violations suggested a highly disciplined and well-led army—and therefore, a very healthy command climate. High rates of violations were indicative of a poorly led and undisciplined army with a very unhealthy command climate. Making sense of the disciplinary records, however, can be daunting. As discussed in Chapter 1, the collection of data was never a problem for the East Germans. What was a problem, however, was the inability to collect the data in standardized analytical categories and reporting periods. This is one reason why looking through the socialist prism is so difficult. However, by comparing specific categories of crimes over various periods, it is possible to obtain a clearer picture. The first category is quantitative. How many crimes were committed and of what type? The second category is qualitative: which crimes did the military chain-of-command process and which ones were left to the political collectives to process? As it turns out, about 25% of all violations were “political” in nature and processed as Party crimes. The third category is causal: to what factors did the NVA and/or the Party attribute disciplinary and criminal acts and how could they be mitigated in the future?

Despite this seemingly comprehensive coverage of criminal activity, the data was actually a patchwork that was difficult to confirm and analyze. Three different staffs in the NVA and MfNV
collected and analyzed disciplinary data on overlapping areas of concern. The military staffs collected and published reports dealing primarily with military crimes. The political staffs collected and published reports on both military and political crimes. It is very difficult to differentiate the data and separate crimes that were double reported. Together, these crimes and violations could overlap with reports concerning the more serious and formal cases adjudicated by the Military State’s Attorney (the equivalent of the JAG or Judge Advocate General in Western armies) before a court-martial.

Some reports referred only to the total numbers of arrests, while other analyses dealt only with the number and type of punishments. Some soldiers could be arrested and never punished, while others could be punished, often with multiple offenses, even though they were never arrested. Complicating the problem, Military State’s Attorney’s reports included hard criminal acts, serious military disciplinary violations, and serious Party crimes. Some reports were incredibly detailed and categorized Party and military crimes with varying degrees of gravity, while other sources changed the categories of crimes or the reporting periods from monthly, to quarterly, to biannual, and back. Every analyst was just as guilty as the next in manipulating the data to make the “facts” appear better or worse as needed to fit the agenda of each analyst.87

87 For the Committee: This sub-section on sources, as with other discussions in other chapters, I anticipate consolidating in Chapter 1.
MILITARY CRIMES

Still, the quantity of offenses, which affects the operational readiness of the units, remains very high. *State of Political and Military Training in the KVP, 1954.*

Our army members are all workers and peasants. Whether officer or soldier—there are no antagonisms between classes. Major General Rudolf Dölling, 1959.

Disciplinary violations and military criminal offenses are a serious obstacle in the consolidation of military order and discipline and the provision for combat readiness. Lieutenant Colonel Helbig, Military State’s Attorney, 1967.

The protocols of military justice in any army are an unpleasant fact, no less so than in the NVA. For the most part, crimes and disciplinary offenses were similar to any other army. There were high instances of petty theft, insubordination, and desertion. Like other armies, the NVA punished its minor offenses administratively with reprimands, warnings and cautions, house arrests, or similar actions. Cases that were more serious required harsher judicial action with commensurate punishments, such as a military discharge or prison.

Given the high expectations for having a disciplined socialist army, then, it would be disconcerting to discover the extent to which the KVP/NVA was undisciplined. In 1954, the KVP conducted hearings for 70,576 disciplinary violations. As the KVP was 93,577 strong that year, this equated to three KVP members punished out of every four (see next table). During the transition from the KVP to the NVA in 1956-1957, the scope of the problem did not change; three out of every four army members were also disciplined during that period. So high were the...
disciplinary violations and special incidents that by 1958 the Defense Ministry described the situation as the “beginning of demoralization in the NVA.”

On the face of it, the list of offenses is perhaps no different from disciplinary problems experienced by any other army. Drunken soldiers or sailors on a weekend pass or leave who get into brawls are social stereotypes around the world; so too are the soldiers who overstay their holidays or violate vital procedures for guard duty. However, the table paints a stunning picture of criminal and disciplinary violations from 1954 to 1957 in the KVP/NVA. The NVA expected a disciplined force and used a heavy hand in its attempts to achieve it.

The number of violations of guard duty seems small in comparison to other categories of offense. However, given that the NVA was on a war footing for the duration of its existence, 4,700 guard violations in a year would have been extremely troubling to any commander. This means that on average, 13 violations occurred every day for a two-year period in the NVA. Such high numbers call into question the NVA’s vigilance in the defense of the state.

As expected, the rate of violations in NVA as a whole closely matches its subordinate units. The 5th Military District (MB V) reported that in one quarter of 1960, it had levied 4,192 punishments, a number that was “decidedly too high.” A total of 73.9% of those charged were members of the FDJ and 27% were officers and sergeants. That quarter, MB V also separated from active service 310 army members for disciplinary reasons. These numbers suggest that MB V

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<tr>
<td>Refusal to Obey Orders</td>
<td>16,563</td>
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<tr>
<td>Violations of Guard Duty</td>
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<td>Drunkenness and Fighting</td>
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<td>n/a</td>
<td>3,239</td>
<td>5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other Infractions</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>10,328</td>
<td>17%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>70,576</td>
<td>64,416</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>61,629</td>
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\(^93\) Hoffmann, “Anordnung des 1. Stellvertreter, 1958,” 1. „Zur Verhinderung weiterer Fehleinstellungen und Entfernung solcher Angehöriger...die standiger Anlass für besondere Vorkommnisse und beginnende Demoralisierung der Truppe sind...”

\(^94\) “Stand der politischen und Kampfausbildung, 1954,” 189; Dölling, “Jahresbericht 1957 vom 18.1.1958 mit Anlage,” 19. Hagemann, Parteiherrschaft: 106. The totals will not necessarily add up because the basic data was not compiled correctly.
imposed 16,000 punishments in 1960, by which it discharged approximately 1200 soldiers, sergeants, or officers for cause. In other words, it is entirely possible that in 1960 alone the long arm of military justice reached out to one out of every two soldiers in MB V.95

Other combat units had similar problems. In 1959, the 1.MSD punished 178 officers, 887 sergeants, and 4,052 soldiers. That year, members of the 1.MSD were under arrest for almost 1800 days.96 In just a two-month period in 1960, the 1st Artillery Regiment in the 1.MSD reported that one out of every four uniformed members of all ranks was punished.97 A different division, the 11th Motorized Rifle Division (11.MSD), processed 6203 military disciplinary punishments in 1959, a number that increased to 6410 in 1960. Its members accumulated 6200 days of barracks arrest in that two-year period. This conservatively equates to six to seven out of ten uniformed members in the 1.MSD and the 11.MSD receiving a punishment of some sort during that period. In the Ministry of National Defense, the Office for Security Questions noted the high number of disciplinary cases and concluded in its typical understated way that “this was not in accordance with our political development.”98

The scale of crime and punishment in the 7.PD was no different. In 1960, the 7.PD assessed approximately 4200 punishments, of which 369, or approximately 17%, were against Party members or candidates. Almost 10% of the punishments were against officers.99 The following year, the 7.PD recorded 3,883 punishments, 1133 arrests, and assessed 5034 days of “barracks arrest.”100 Based on its strength in 1960 of 6,566, three out of every five uniformed members (or


in the 7.PD received punishments in a two-year period. At least 17% of the 7.PD committed disciplinary violations and crimes that were serious enough to warrant arrest.\textsuperscript{101}

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By 1965, not only were disciplinary problems not disappearing, but an increasing “resistance to authority” was becoming more common. Three or four soldiers out of every five were in disciplinary trouble, but one out of every five were disobedient or insubordinate to their superiors.\textsuperscript{102} The political office of the 7.PD in 1965 noted this trend:

Disciplinary violations...have climbed alarmingly. Above all, this is a matter concerning assaults, insults, slurs, and ill-disciplined acts towards supervisors, deficient educational work, negligence of official duties, and violations against orders and instructions.\textsuperscript{103}

The relationship between the order and discipline of the NVA and the high rates of insubordination is obvious. While refusal could be against written instructions, regulations, or laws, the most common form of insubordination was the willful refusal to obey a verbal instruction. A high incidence of refusal to obey orders and instructions directly countered Party expectations for a socialist army. A soldier who willfully refused to do his duty or to obey his orders was resisting authority and risking serious punishment, yet it occurred all too often.

Did the NVA breed insubordination on a large scale? The evidence certainly suggests so. A certain amount of insubordination occurs in any army. When the command climate breeds insubordination, however, worse violations are not far behind. The NVA recorded over 33,000 refusals to obey orders in a two-year period, or 24-29% of the NVA’s total violations. When those

\textsuperscript{101} Ernst, “Chronik des Militärbezirkes III zusammenfassung für die Jahre von 1956- bis 1962 (Geheime Verschlusssache und Geheime Kommandosache),” 30-31. Calculation based on “assigned strength” and assumes that the number of punishments was approximately the same in the second half of the year.


incidents grew into an occasional refusal to obey on a mass scale, the leadership challenges would have appeared insurmountable as when a large group of soldiers refused to obey their superior in the 7.PD in 1966.104

Party and military commanders would have put this in context with the greater problem of chronic insubordination in day-to-day routine; especially since Party organs probably realized that the number of unreported incidents was much higher. This was a serious challenge to the authority of the officer corps and the regime. Every officer understood the importance of fixing these problems and developing a healthy command climate. Whether they were motivated or not to fix the problems was completely dependent on the training and education they received and on the professional mentoring of their senior officers—all of which was problematic.

It is possible that the frequency of insubordination was directly related to the high incidence of fighting between army members. In 1954, the KVP recorded more than 3,500 fights.105 Nine percent of the fights in 1953 involved officers, and 73% involved either a member of the Party or of the FDJ.106 The transition to the NVA apparently provided more structure and control as assaults on supervisors dramatically improved. In 1956, the NVA recorded 36 incidents of “fighting and damaging the reputation of the NVA.”107 By 1966, the number of verbal and physical assaults against officers or sergeants in MB III averaged as many as 100-120 per year.108

Most units like PR-14 experienced isolated incidents of drunkenness and fighting.109 Other units, however, experienced mass brawling between soldiers and officers. In February 1956, 1

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106 Ibid.


officer and 17 soldiers were injured during a mass brawl at a winter encampment area. The report does not state the cause, but the regiment punished the company commander and the battalion commander for not providing the controls necessary to prevent the fight and for callously ignoring the incident.\textsuperscript{110}

To be sure, fighting was common between soldiers. Graver still would have been the physical attacks of soldiers on officers and sergeants. The sheer number of complaints about the abuse of power by superiors suggests that soldiers probably lashed out from anger and resentment rather than as a form of resistance. This one crime speaks to the failure of the chain of command to prevent assaults on themselves.

Officers were not pure on this point. In general, while officers had fewer problems with petty crimes such as drunkenness or theft, they did fight, and most often with their own subordinates.\textsuperscript{111} Hagemann reported that 80\% of the fighting incidents in 1956 were not between soldiers but rather between officers and sergeants. The high incidence of fighting between officers and sergeants was all the more remarkable because theoretically it should have been an exceptional event.

A related problem would have been the 161 cases against officers in one year for “insults or assaults on [their] subordinates.” When an officer initiated the assault, it probably reflected more on the power the officer thought he had earned rather than on his obvious disrespect for his soldiers. According to the PHV, however, the statistics did not accurately reflect the high incidence of fighting, as only “significant violations were reported and disciplined.”\textsuperscript{112} In the 4\textsuperscript{th} quarter of 1958, two of three cases of fighting in the 1.MSD were between officers and their subordinates.\textsuperscript{113}

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{112} “Quartalsberichte des Haupstabes über besondere Vorkommnisse und den Zustand der Disziplin,” 72. As quoted in Hagemann, Parteiherrschaft: 113. The KVP was also extremely concerned with the high numbers of alcohol consumption and fighting among its members. Diedrich, “Die Kasernierte Volkspolizei (1952-1956),” 351.
\item\textsuperscript{113} “Soziale Zusammensetzung des Divisionsstabes (1.MSD), 1959,” 180.
\end{itemize}
When fighting did occur, particularly in public, it further damaged the good reputation of the armed forces and continued to set a poor example for their subordinates.

Insubordination, fighting, and assaults on superiors were bad enough, but another indicator of an unhealthy command climate would have been the high number of thefts that NVA members committed.\textsuperscript{114} Thefts came in two forms: thefts against the “people’s property” and “thefts against comrades.” Theft of the “people’s property” could be as basic as stealing vehicle parts for resale to as serious as stealing weapons and ammunition for nefarious purposes. In 1956, there were 58 separate incidents of theft or actual loss of weapons and ammunition.\textsuperscript{115} In 1968, there were 13 incidents of stolen weapons in MB III.\textsuperscript{116} Together, these reports suggest not just a propensity to steal for unknown purposes, but also a problematic security and accountability system for critical weapons by a nation’s armed forces.

The theft of personal property by “comrades,” however, would have stuck in the craw of any decent-minded soldier. The theft of personal equipment or property would have been for purely selfish reasons: to resell on the black market or to replace lost equipment for which the soldier was responsible. However, no soldier would have had much money or many personal items worth stealing. The lockers in the barracks were small. More importantly, theft from one’s comrades was a violation of the trust soldiers needed to have for each other and a serious violation of the socialist consciousness the Party was trying to inspire. The thefts were petty, but the high numbers of incidents certainly warranted more attention than they received. In 1959 and 1960, the Border Guards recorded over 478 cases of theft from comrades.\textsuperscript{117}

In the big picture, petty theft was indeed trivial, but not to the soldier who was violated. In December 1955, Soldier Lothar G. stole a personal item from a fellow soldier. After the unit

\textsuperscript{114} Helbig, "Vorlage zur Leitungssitzung am 11.11.1967," 24-27.
\textsuperscript{116} “Einschätzung der Aufbewahrung, der Sicherheit und des Umganges mit Waffen, Munition und Sprengmitteln in den Truppenteilen und Einheiten des Militärbezirkes (Vertrauliche Verschlusseshe).”
\textsuperscript{117} Rosenbusch, "Politische Analyse...über durchgeführte Parteiverfahren, 1960," 283.
commander sent him to the Party organization for punishment, he had to face his comrades in what was probably a raucous and contentious hearing. Six days later Soldier Lothar G. deserted. In February 1956, a 20-year-old soldier stole from his comrades on multiple occasions. His punishment was a year and 8 months in prison. In Feb 1956, Soldier Günter H. was arrested for stealing the wristwatch of a fellow soldier. He was sentenced to 3 months imprisonment. In August 1956, Lieutenant Gerhard L., a 24 year old platoon leader, was accused of 26 separate counts of theft, most of which were from his own soldiers. Surprisingly, instead of going to prison, the records shows that he was punished by the Party with only 10 days arrest and a reduction in rank to soldier.

Certainly, strong leadership by sergeants and officers could have fixed these problems. One NVA officer, Major Bzdak, painted a disturbing picture of a unit rampant with poor discipline. He was appalled at the leadership vacuum and the lack of Party influence in the units he visited. Bzdak pointed to blatant absences from the barracks without permission, serious violations of guard protocols, and interminable arguments about orders. Bzdak also documented numerous appearances of “egotism,” the disturbing signs that comrades were not treating each other in a Party-like manner, particularly with “thefts of gold, fuel, and bicycles” as well as selfish efforts to take “passes and holidays” at some cost to other comrades. These were clear signs of a poor command climate caused by a chronic lack of leadership by unit officers and sergeants.

119 Ibid., 16.
120 Ibid., 60-61.
121 Ibid., 79-80.
122 Bzdak, “Bericht—Dienst als Soldat, 1959,” 154. The “Officers as Soldiers” Program was a little known experiment intended to put senior officers in the shoes of their soldiers. It did not last.
Unexcused absences, [unauthorized] extensions of holiday, and desertions, have taken on a frightening dimension.
Office for Security Questions, 1953.\textsuperscript{123}

Desertions are still relatively high...revolutionary vigilance with regard to enemy influences is unsatisfactory.
\textit{Political and Combat Training in the KVP, 1953/54.}\textsuperscript{124}

The high numbers of deserters in the division shows that the enemy influences our comrades...Not every Comrade has understood or internalized the great optimism of the Moscow Declaration....
PKK, 7.PD, 1961.\textsuperscript{125}

In 1967, a border guard on patrol told his patrol partner that he was going cross the border—now; whereupon, he chambered a round in his weapon. “You can leave me alone, or you can come with me...but if you shoot at me, I will shoot back.” In response, his partner crossed over with him. After the two successfully crossed, the American guards on the Western side of the border told him “we knew you were going to cross.”\textsuperscript{126}

Governments consider the act of desertion one of the most egregious military crimes a soldier can commit. It is tantamount to walking off a civilian job, but with much greater consequences. In the civil sector, quitting employment usually implies intense job dissatisfaction, but the contractual bond broken between the employer and the employee is limited to those two actors. When the soldier violates his oath of enlistment by deserting, he also gives a strong signal to the regime of his own dissatisfaction with military service. Unlike the business sector, however, the

\textsuperscript{123} “Die ernste Situation in KVP, 1953,” 18. „Die unerlaubten Entfernungen, Urlaubsüberschreitungen, Desertionen haben ein erschreckendes Ausmass angenommen.“

\textsuperscript{124} “Stand der politischen und Kampfausbildung, 1954,” 160. „Die Desertionen sind noch relativ hoch. Das ist im wesentlichen ein Ausdruck dafür, dass das Bewusstsein eines Teiles der KVP-Angehörigen nicht genügend entwickelt ist und andererseits die revolutionäre Wachsamkeit gegenüber feindlicher Beeinflussung ungenügend ist.

\textsuperscript{125} Verner, “Halbjahres-Analyse 1.HJ (7.PD) 1961,” 38, 43. „Die hohe Anzahl der Fahnenufluchten in der Division beweisen, dass der Gegner auf unsere Genossen einwirkt...Besonders der grosse Optimismus der Moskauer Erklärung und der 11. ZK-Tagung wurde nicht verstanden, in jeden Genossen hineinzugetragen."

\textsuperscript{126} Volker Englemann, “Personal Interview,” (2010). The perpetrator of this event eventually became Englemann’s Father-in-Law. Englemann is currently a serving Lieutenant Colonel in the German Bundeswehr.
state must depend on a fully manned and well-trained army to defend itself. Legally, the soldier has broken a contract between himself and the employer, which is the state. Many countries also consider “desertion in the face of the enemy” in wartime a capital crime.

By the early 1950s, the GDR was already showing early signs of rupture from the large numbers of its citizens escaping to the West. In 1956, the flood to the West had reached over 300,000 East Germans. In a population of only 18 million, an exodus of this scale would have touched every town, village, and work center in the country. By comparison, army desertions were merely a symptom of the bigger problem, accentuated by the role the KVP/NVA played in national defense. Taken as an indicator of an unhealthy command climate, however, desertions represent the extreme of disciplinary issues. Low desertion rates suggest a healthy command climate, one in which commanders actively take care of their soldiers and the soldiers are relatively satisfied with their circumstances. Under these conditions, the occasional deserter represented an individual’s incompatibility with military service rather than a general disgruntlement with military service or the regime as a whole. High desertion rates, on the other hand, are indicative of an environment so demoralizing and uncompromising that a soldier would violate military and civilian law in order to improve his circumstances. Juxtaposed next to complaints and accident rates, high desertion rates and AWOLs (absent without leave) became red flags that commanders in the NVA could not take lightly. For the Party, it signaled that their educational efforts and basic policies were not working. Together, high desertion rates signaled the failure of the Party to provide for its soldiers’ needs.

When a soldier deserts, he weighs two options to a very serious personal problem—face an intolerable life in the army or commit a state felony by deserting and living a life on the run. The fact that a significant number of soldiers in the GDR did take such risks and chose the latter speaks

to the NVA’s unhealthy command climate. Until the building of the Berlin Wall and the closing of the borders with West Germany, however, NVA commanders were unable to fix the problem.

Desertions from military service in the GDR should be viewed from two different perspectives. First, the soldier was dissatisfied with his military service and deserted in order to improve his situation. This was commonly called Fahnenflucht, or literally “deserting the unit flag.” When the soldier exacerbated his crime and “fled the Republic” like so many of his compatriots, he participated in Republikflucht. Desertion, together with Republikflucht, represented his dissatisfaction with life in the army and his unhappiness with the socialist regime. For many soldiers, the NVA provided them with the means and the opportunity to escape they would not have had otherwise. Hagemann’s assessment was on target. In comparison to the emigration hemorrhage the GDR experienced before the building of the Berlin Wall, the ratios of Fahnenflucht to Republikflucht were relatively small. Indeed, compared to these numbers, desertions from the NVA were trivial. In 1952, 1218 members of the KVP deserted. In 1953, the number rose to 1667, of which 62 were officers. With improved supervision and organization, only 350 cases of desertion occurred in the NVA in 1956. The Office for Security Questions reported that in the first half of 1961, 270 officers and soldiers deserted or tried to desert from the armed forces. Of that number, 44 failed in their attempts and were arrested. The NVA, including the Border Guards, claimed 180 of that total. Desertions dropped drastically in the NVA in the period leading up to and after the building of the Berlin Wall. The rates of desertions climbed back up, though. In the

129 Hagemann, Parteihierrschaff: 114.
131 "Protokoll Nr. 29/56, 1956." As quoted in Hagemann, Parteihierrschaff: 114.
years from 1965 to 1967, the number of desertions by soldiers from the 3rd Military District averaged 20 per year. 133

This reduction in desertions merely means that the regime's control of their citizens and their soldiers was effective. The small desertion numbers paint an incomplete picture of the command climate. The bigger picture must be filled with the number of AWOLs (UEs or Unerlaubter Entfernung von der Truppe). The NVA defined AWOLS as being absent from duty for up to 3 days. The soldier was absent from duty for both desertions and AWOLs, the only question was how long was the absence? In 1953, the KVP reported over 14,596 AWOLs. 134 In 1956, however, 12,686 AWOL violations actually meant that almost 15% of the NVA was late in returning to duty at one time or another during that year. 135 MB III reported in 1955 that over 886 AWOLs occurred, of which 71 were by first term enlistees. By 1958, the ratio of desertions to AWOLs was roughly two AWOLs for every desertion. 136 In a 1967 report, the Military State's Attorney for the 3rd Military District attributed the excessive number of AWOLs to the excessive use of alcohol—implying that sometimes the decision to go AWOL or desert could be made impulsively. 137 While the NVA viewed desertions as a major judicial problem worthy of imprisonment if the person was caught, AWOLs were processed as an administrative problem with minor consequences. Nevertheless, the frequency of AWOLs spoke to the high number of soldiers who did not want to return.

By no means can one claim that the Party members did not desert. Despite the fact that 50% of desertions occurred in a soldier's first year of enlistment there was a significant number of desertions by uniformed Party members. 138 In 1960, 17% of desertions from the Border Guards

136 The ratio of desertions to AWOLs in 1956 was 233/559 and in 1957 the ratio was 180/329. Ibid., 16. "Analyse der Fahnen- und Republikfluchten, 1960," 152. Also quoted in Hagemann, Parteiherrschaft: 118. According to the PHV, there were 48 "desertion attempts" in 1956 and 64 attempts in 1957.
were by Party members and candidates. That year, 90 officers and over 3000 sergeants and soldiers from the NVA fled to the West. Between 25 to 30% of those desertions were by Party members. A total of 77% of the deserters in the first half of 1961 were sworn members of the FDJ. By 1967, the majority of deserters from MB III were either Party members or members of the FDJ. If there were one indicator of the poor command climate in the NVA, it would be the sheer number of desertions by officers and Party members. Officers and soldiers had first joined the Party to gain privileges, and then discovered that not even being a Party member brought all the benefits promised.

However, it was not just the rate of desertion by Party members; the fact that any Party member would desert was an embarrassment. Every desertion was a defeat for socialism and an opportunity to provide military and state secrets to the intelligence services of the West. The deserter had joined hundreds of thousands of fellow citizens who fled to the West and “fell into the clutches of the American Intelligence Services.”

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Until the regime closed the border in 1961, the SED was unsuccessful in dealing with desertions in the NVA. Walter Ulbricht once chastised the KVP for its high desertion rates:

Huge problems exist in educational work. Inner Order is not established. The high number of desertions, and the fact that a few members and candidates of the Party are among the deserters, is alarming. The work of the Party organizations points to large weaknesses and does not correspond to expectations, or, [for that matter] to the decisions of the Party [author’s emphasis].

139 Rosenbusch, “Politische Analyse...über durchgeführte Parteiverfahren, 1960,” 268.
Willi Stoph also called for a "strong military discipline" in the chain of command that would no longer permit any more desertions.\(^{145}\)

Part of the problem was that generals, colonels, and other senior leaders rarely discussed the problem of desertions as a principle topic in high-level meetings. Instead, the subject of desertions was usually buried inside of larger discussions or reports and discussed only in relative, rather than absolute, terms. For example, desertion and AWOL statistics in 1959 were buried in a report titled the "Overall Estimate of the Social Consciousness and the Military Discipline of the Members of the NVA:"

> The number of disciplinary violations and special incidents have been reduced compared to Training Year 1957...desertions have been reduced by 37% and unexcused absences [AWOLs] have been reduced approximately 21%.\(^{146}\)

The political-military discourse still relied on tried and true textual signals to explain their faults and to blame subordinates. Most Party organs agreed that the causes for desertions lay outside the GDR—soldiers deserted because of the “political-ideological unclarity” or the “subversive activities of the class enemy.”\(^{147}\) These activities included the “massive efforts” by the West German government in Bonn, who “coordinated large defections and desertions to prolong the Cold War.”\(^{148}\) In other words, it was West Germany and other Western countries that conducted “subversive activities” and caused mass emigration and desertions from the regime.

The “influence of the enemy” or “having contact with the enemy” was the bogeyman of the SED. In 1961, the NVA blamed the high number of desertions on the “influence of the enemy.”\(^{149}\) The term was used not just to describe the causes of all manner of organizational and disciplinary


\(^{146}\) “Allgemeine Einschätzung, 1959,” 123. „Die Anzahl der Disziplinarverstöße und besonderen Vorkommnissen sind gegenüber den Ausbildungsjahr 1957 im allgemeinen zurückgegangen. Zum Beispiel beim Fahnenfluchten um 37% und bei unerlaubten Entfernungen um 21%."


\(^{148}\) “Protokoll Nr. 29/56, 1956.” As quoted in Hagemann, Parteiherrschaft: 116.

\(^{149}\) “Analyse der Fahnen- und Republikfluchten, 1960,” 153. „Offensichtlich liegt hier eine Verstärkung der Feindarbeit vor.”
problems, but the Party conveniently used "the influence of the enemy" to excuse commanders from actually doing their jobs. In other words, "enemy work" in the political-military discourse became code for incompetence and negligence. A few regiments in the 7.PD exhibited signs of enemy work, for example, which proved that "...the enemy operates on our comrades." After numerous special incidents and problems occurred within the 7th Motorized Rifle Regiment (MSR-7), the PKK concluded that the regiment must strengthen its efforts because of the growing signs of "enemy influences and operations." This enemy influence appeared in many forms, including "criticism of orders and senior officers," "opportunistic operations," "lack of trust in the SED," "deficient watchfulness," and the simple "hatred of officers." Similarly, the desertion of 33 civil servants in the first half of 1961 generated this response:

...the strengthened pressure of the enemy by means of ideological diversion and a policy of enticement affect a portion of [our] civil servants. Political and ideological educational work does not yet conform to political imperatives (author's emphasis).

Five border guards deserted in 1962 because 23 soldiers in their company had "contact with the enemy." The 7.PD attributed three deserters to having relatives on the border or to having previously traveled in West Germany. The desire to join their families in the West, as well as their longing for rock music and Western life styles, was the bane of the Party and often reflected in internal propaganda efforts.

Over time, the character of excuses by the Party did not dramatically change, even though the "ideological diversions of the enemy" had become more successful. Citizens were more
vulnerable to Western radio programming and propaganda, as had been so ably demonstrated by the pervasive wiretaps of the East German Secret Police (Stasi). While such incidents were commonplace in the civilian sectors, enforcement should have been easier within the East German armed forces. Instead, NVA documents routinely attributed misbehavior and un-Party-like behavior to listening to illegal Western radio programs. In 1961, most of the soldiers and sergeants in one battery in the 29th Motorized Rifle Regiment (MSR-29) were accused of listening to Radio Luxembourg. A sergeant and two conscripts from the 15th Panzer Regiment (15-PR) were also caught listening to capitalist radio programs. In 1962, the 7.PD brought 54 cases against soldiers who dared to listen to “enemy” radio stations; including soldiers who listened to that year’s broadcasts of the World Cup. The problem was ubiquitous. One political officer admitted to doing nothing when he discovered that soldiers in his unit were listening to Western radio.

One sergeant from the 14th Panzer Regiment (14-PR) admitted to being very influenced by Western radio stations. In a note to his fiancé, discovered after his Republikflucht, he wrote:

Mostly, I dawdle away in the tediousness [of service] by listening to radio programs. Only a few have access to a radio station...If you ask what my Fatherland is, so I respond to you—with Germany. A so-called GDR does nothing for me. This sergeant placed his desertion and defection ahead of his relationship with his fiancé, his family, and his friends.

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This focus on the “influence of the enemy” was not unique to the Defense Ministry. After a series of fires in “important locations,” a memo from the Ministry of the Interior (MdI) concluded that the fire brigade’s ineffective prevention measures, as well as “heightened enemy work,” were the causes.\footnote{Aus der Jahresanalyse der Parteikontrollkommission beim Ministerium des Innern,” ed. Zentrale Parteikontrollkommission (ZPKK) Zentralkomitees, Mitglieder und Kandidaten des Politbüros (Berlin: Bundesarchiv Berlin, 1960), 131.}

If blaming the enemy was not appropriate, the Party could attribute the desertion problem to the general political atmosphere in the units, which, of course, was the responsibility of their officers. Two lieutenants from the Border Guards deserted because they had “insufficient class consciousness” and extensive “unclarities over the basic questions of the...Party.”\footnote{Gruppenbildung im Bereich der NVA seit dem 13. August 1961,” 212-213. „Die politisch-ideologische Erziehungsarbeit, die klassenmässige Erziehung der Armeangehörigen wird teilweise nur ungenügend zielstrebig, vielfach noch formal und vom Leben losgelöst durchgeführt.”}

One Military State’s Attorney in Schwerin claimed that three soldiers who had listened to Radio Luxembourg deserted from an artillery battery in 1961 because of “deficient political-moral work” and because “ideological work was insufficiently organized” in their unit.\footnote{Unbefriedigende ideologische und individuelle Erziehungsarbeit, 1961,” 181. Radio Luxembourg was a commercial radio station that serviced a primarily British audience. The fact that this station, rather than propaganda stations like “Radio Free Europe,” was most often mentioned in NVA documents is intriguing. “Dagegen war in der 18. Batterie der polit-moralische Zustand äusserst mangelhaft. Die ideologische Arbeit ist in der Batterie nicht genügend organisiert.”}

When four officers, who were also Party members, fled to the West from the staff of MB V, the Party characterized their departure as an “expression of liberalism” and blamed their colleagues for failing to create a “pugnacious atmosphere” that would have prevented it.\footnote{Einige Probleme zur Auswertung des Ausbildungsjahres der Nationalen Volksarmee 1960 sowie zu den Aufgaben für 1961,” ed. ZK Abteilung Sicherheitsfragen (Berlin: SAMPO-BArch, 1961), 193; “Einschätzung des Arbeitsplanes, 1960,” 323; Also discussed in: Hagemann, Parteiherrschaft: 119. „...nur durch kämpferische Auseinandersetzungen in den Parteierorganisationen, besonders in denen der Stäbe, ist des teilweise noch vorhandenen liberale Verhalten zu überwinden...Die relative hohe Anzahl von Fahnenfluchten...wurden erleichter bzw. möglich, weil es keine parteiliche kämpferische Atmosphäre in den Parteiorganisatien der Stäbe gab.”}

A year later, the 7.PD came to a similar conclusion about this irritating problem:

“Revolutionary vigilance is insufficiently developed...The stronger use [of revolutionary vigilance]
could have prevented a few desertions.” Similarly, when desertions in one division rose 100%, the staff of MB III blamed the situation on the failure of “class vigilance and political carelessness in the units.”

These themes pervade documents of the NVA and the GDR’s other armed forces. “If only the Leading Role of the Party had had the desired effect!” was the implied exclamation. Unfortunately, while the “influences of the enemy” may have been a consideration, the Party’s exclusive attention to “revolutionary vigilance” ignored the bigger problem of dissatisfaction with the regime by its citizens and its soldiers.

One of the few leaders who actually understood that the care of East German soldiers was important was the Defense Minister himself. When seven soldiers deserted from a unit near Erfurt, Willi Stoph blamed the responsible officers for their “inadequate political educational and awareness training.” Thus, he asserted a principle that must have shook the army—officers must attend to the needs of their soldiers. As Stoph so eloquently put it:

Soldiers were badly treated and abused, military order and discipline was inadequate, and there were too many violations of written regulations and instructions by supervisors.

At times, the Party’s political organs begrudgingly agreed that there were “objective grounds” to explain why any soldier or officer would want to leave. For the most part, these reasons were completely unrelated to the larger issue of emigration to the West: the lack of food and nutrition due to the misappropriation of funds for food, the disrepair of furnishings in the barracks, the poor quality uniforms, and the never-ending shortages of equipment. Others, the

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168 “Rede zum Offiziere des MB III, Feb 1962 (Vertrauliche Verschlussache).” 7. „Die Steigerung der Fahnenfluchten um 100% gegenüber 1960 und das Ansteigen von Verbrechen gegen unseren Staat...zeigt, ist der Ausdruck der noch ungenügend entwickelten Klassenwachsamkeit und der politischen Sorgfaltigkeit in den Truppenteilen und Einheiten der Division."


171 Hagemann, Parteiherrschaft: 117.
Party admitted, deserted for perfectly pragmatic reasons: to avoid military service or to avoid onerous punishments for their own misdeeds.\textsuperscript{172}

However, such excuses rarely saw the light of day in the political-military discourse. More often, excuses were constructed that were ideologically based. Officers, for example, deserted because of the influence of relatives in the West, because of their aversion to military service, or, more often than not, because they led an “immoral life style.”\textsuperscript{173}

East German sergeants deserted for similar reasons: their loss of authority because of their disciplinary offenses, because of their failure to resist the influence of Western propaganda, because of the negative influence of parents and other relatives in the West, and because of their dislike for military service.\textsuperscript{174} Five years later, the excuses had not changed in content so much as in degree. Some attempted deserters blamed their desire to leave on the “hard living conditions” in the army. Others claimed that they could “not grow in their responsibilities as trainers and supervisors.”\textsuperscript{175}

The Party’s insightful analysis notwithstanding, Party leaders were still perplexed as to why any citizen, much less a trained soldier of the state, would want to flee the nirvana of “real German socialism.” Therefore, the MfNV’s Office for Security Questions concluded that soldiers suffered from the disappointing failure of the supervisory apparatus. Many officers had an “insufficient knowledge [of their soldiers],” had conducted unsatisfactory “educational work,” or had exhibited “insufficient vigilance and monitoring.”\textsuperscript{176} Desertions also occurred because supervisors had made poor selections in the composition of work details or patrols. “Desertions,” claimed one political

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\textsuperscript{172} “Analyse der Fahnen- und Republikfluchten, 1960,” 156.
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\textsuperscript{173} Ibid., 155. „Bei den Offizieren: Beeinflussung durch Westwerwandtschaften, Unlust am Dienst, Angst vor einer disziplinären Bestrafung, unmoralischer Lebenswandel.”
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\textsuperscript{174} Ibid., 156. „Bei den Unteroffizieren: Entziehung der Verantwortung bei disziplinären Vergehen, negativer Einfluss durch das Elterhaus bzw. durch Westwerwandtschaften, Unlust am Dienst, und Beeinflussung durch westliche Propaganda.”
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See also “Bericht über die Fahnenfluchten in den bewaffneten Kräften, 1961,” 227-228.
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\textsuperscript{175} Helbig, “Vorlage zur Leitungssitzung am 11.11.1967,” 22.
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office, “were the result of poor individual preparation and the poor selection of soldiers for [border work].”

While the Party had voiced an unexpected understanding that the leadership of officers and sergeants was essential to understanding the desertion question, a conscientious effort to understand the real problems of NVA soldiers never thrived. Instead, they defaulted to ad hominem attacks against individual soldiers and officers. A common accusation, for example, was to blame deserters for their “serious deficiencies in military order and discipline and their gross neglect of revolutionary vigilance.” When a soldier from MSR-7 escaped to the West in August 1962, the PKK claimed he had obviously fled because he was “not interested” in a higher Party position. Another soldier who deserted, Dietmar U., was said to have had a “delicate character and often succumbed to political fluctuations.” Other soldiers either ignored their orders or had “unsure attitudes toward completing their military duties.” Still others suffered from “moral weakness, excessive alcohol abuse, instability of character, and a weak will.” If an officer drank excessively and acted immorally, there was no hesitancy at labeling him “weak,” as the 7.PD did with one major in 1961.

Throughout these efforts to understand the desertion phenomenon, the Party never offered one analysis that established the responsibility of the Party and the army to take care of their

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177 Ibid., 156; Verner, “Halbjahranalyse 7.PD, Jul-Nov 1961,” 97. „Die Ursachen dieser Fahnenflucht lagen in der ungenügenden individuellen Vorbereitung und Auswahl des Personalbestandes für die Grenzsicherungsarbeiten im Regiment.“


179 “Brief an Kästner, 1957.”


181 Helbig, “Vorlage zur Leitungssitzung am 11.11.1967,” 22. „Als Ursachen und Motive für die Fahnenfluchten geben die meisten Fanenflüchtigen an, dass ihnen der Dienst in der Nationalen Volksarmee zu hart sei...Der größte Teil der Täter besass eine ungefestigte Einstellung zur Erfüllung ihrer militärischen Pflichten.“

182 Verner, “Halbjahres-Analyse 2.HJ (7.PD) 1961,” 24. „Seine charakterliche Labilität, sein Hang zum Alkoholgenuss, seine Willensschwäche, sein Ausweichen vor Schwierigkeiten und vor der Verantwortung (sic), seine ungenügende politische Festigkeit waren die ausschlaggebenden Faktoren für seine Fahnenflucht.“

soldiers in any practical way. Compared to the overall population emigration to the West, the NVA’s problem with desertions was not significant. For good reasons, though, it gave the impression they were hemorrhaging at the seams. Unfortunately, no amount of excuses, no amount of political indoctrination or criminal investigations, however apt, could improve the lot of the soldier.

These statistics point toward serious problems within the command climate. They either indicate that 60-70% of the army was undisciplined, which was doubtful, or that the chain of command had failed to create and foster a healthy command climate in which service members felt respected and valued. In any case, it was the responsibility of the Party and its Leading Role to correct the situation. If the Party could not do that, then it was the traditional role of a German officer to maintain discipline. Neither could he do that.

How was this growing trickle of desertions to be stopped? The Military State’s Attorney refused official responsibility, which put the military chain of command at a loss. The Party had to bear the brunt of responsibility. Fortunately, for the Party, its PKK gladly assumed that role. The PKK would not just stop “the effectiveness of enemy activities,” it would “liquidate” it. Their success was obvious.

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After [the events of] August 13 1961, the Political Organizations must employ stronger measures, as well as Party penalties, because a few members and candidates spread utterances hostile to the Party and refuse to fulfill the high expectations given to them...

Oberst Verner, 7.PD, 1961

Party justice provided the socialist control regime an opportunity to impose its will in ways not seen in Western armies. The Party’s Leading Role was more than just maintaining influence over the military chain of command; it was about establishing and maintaining control over every aspect of every soldier’s military life. The political officer was an essential, but disconnected, element of that control. The Party certainly depended upon his skill and competence to make its control regime work by enforcing Party discipline. On the other hand, by virtue of his obvious deficiencies, particularly his important military skills, the political officer became an unwanted distraction that had to be dealt with on a daily basis. This distraction would have been particularly flagrant in the daily processing of Party crimes by members and candidates within the unit.

Just as high arrest rates within a society could be an indicator of oppression, high numbers of arrests for political crimes in a military unit give equally important insights into the power of the regime over its soldiers.188 In 1956 and 1957, 22% of army members who were punished were members of the Party.189 The combat divisions reported similar ratios. Approximately 17% of punishments assessed in the 7.PD in 1960-1961 were against Party members and candidates190 By comparison, while only 9% of those disciplined in the 1st Motorized Rifle Division (1.MSD) were Party members or candidates, over 58% of those punished were members of the Party’s youth

187 ——, “Halbjahres-Analyse 2.HJ (7.PD) 1961,” 26. „Die PO mussten nach dem 13.08.61 in stärkerem Masse auch Parteistrafen anwenden, weil einzelne MxK parteifeindliche Äusserungen vorbereiteten und sich weigerten den erhöhten Anforderungen nachzukommen, die das Parteileben an sie stellte.“

188 High arrest rates were nothing new for the East Germans. By the end of 1953, over 40,000 people had been imprisoned in violation of the Law to Protect Public Property. Fully a fourth of that amount was arrested between Oct 1952 and March 1953. Werkentin, “Jahrbuch 2002,” 34.


organization, the FDJ. Indeed, NVA statistics showed that if a young soldier or officer was in the FDJ in 1957, he stood a 60% chance of being formally punished by the chain of command or the Party.

While approximately 20% of all punishments were against Party members, the more telling statistic is the degree of punitive actions taken against Party members as a whole. In 1960, the Party punished 7,344 (or 15%) of its own in the army. This total included all members and candidates regardless of rank. In some combat units, though, if you were a uniformed member of the Party you had a one in four chance of being punished for a disciplinary violation.

The increase to 25% of Party members punished in the lower tactical units is to be expected. As new entries into the officer corps, young officers normally would not be assigned to the headquarters staffs or the Defense Ministry, but rather into the lower tactical units. Since the preponderance of punishments in the tactical units would have been assessed against junior officers-cum-Party members with all their attendant problems, the lower units would have suffered a disproportionate share of those punishments.

The frequency of crimes and disciplinary violations by Party members and candidates did not appreciably improve by 1963. The Party recognized that the numbers were “relatively high,” but continued to blame the Party organizations in the lowest units for their deficient educational efforts and the “still existent weaknesses in inner-Party life.” When one group of sergeants from

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191 Borning, "Bericht, 11. mot. Schützendivision, 1961," 52. Based on 5117 total punishments with 439 Party members or candidates and 2990 assessed against the FDJ.

192 Dölling, "Jahresbericht 1957 vom 18.1.1958 mit Anlage," 19. In 1957, 74,000 FDJ members were punished.


195 Party strength in the NVA for 1960 was approximately 48,000. The numbers do not completely agree between reports. "Bericht der Brigade, 1960," 276; Officer strength numbers from: Diedrich, Ehler, and Wenzke, Im Dienst, 454.

the 7.PD was arrested for “actions hostile to the Party,” the causes were determined not to be their individual decisions and choices, but rather the “negative influence of their parents and their friends in the civilian sector,” as well as “the deficient political-ideological educational work of the Party organization within the battalion.”

TYPES OF PARTY CRIMES

The Party mandated and exhibited a wide breadth of control through its criminal codes in the army and in civilian life. The top three Party crimes in the 7.PD during this period were violations of military discipline, behavior damaging to the Party, and violations of Party discipline. Together, these accounted for 76% of the total hearings. Similarly, the Border Guards processed an average of 645 Party crimes per year from 1958-1960 (see adjacent chart). A total of 75% of those cases were for immoral behavior, “behavior damaging to the Party, injury to the Party and state discipline, “unprincipled attitudes and behavior towards orders and regulations,” political blindness, and criminal acts.

The following table illustrates the wide spectrum of crimes to which a member or a candidate of the Party was vulnerable in 1957 and in 1961. A few offenses are clearly redundant with the military criminal code: i.e., making a false statement, treason, corruption, or failing to follow orders and instructions; thus, they could be adjudicated under both political and military codes. The Party also processed public drunkenness, immoral acts, and theft as Party crimes.

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<tr>
<td>Enemies of the Party (+Desertion)</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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198 Rosenbusch, “Politische Analyse...über durchgeführte Parteiverfahren, 1960,” 281.


because they brought discredit against the Party. Party punishments could also be levied for simple errors of judgment, such as charges against one sergeants because he would not permit his men to kneel in the mud during marksmanship practice. When a Party member was punished by both military and political criminal codes, an unacceptable form of double jeopardy resulted.

The point is that the Party cast a wide net with Party-unique violations sufficiently vague as to defy definition or standardization. The code from 1957 crimes included “leading an immoral way of life, violations of state discipline, spreading enemy ideology, the loss of Party documents, the injury to “inner Party democracy,” and of course, “political blindness.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Crime Group</th>
<th>1957</th>
<th>1961</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Behavior Hostile to the Party</td>
<td>Treason of Party and State Secrets</td>
<td>Agents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Spreading of Enemy Ideology</td>
<td>Spies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Betrayers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Opportunists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Revisionists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Fractionists (Faction building)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior Harmful to the Party</td>
<td>Violation of State Discipline</td>
<td>Injury of the Party and State-discipline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Criminal offenses</td>
<td>Criminal offenses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Corruption – Abuse of Power</td>
<td>Clique building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>False Statements</td>
<td>Intriguing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Injury to Inner Party Democracy</td>
<td>Careerism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Political Blindness</td>
<td>Falsification of a Questionnaire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violation of Party Discipline</td>
<td>Violation of Vigilance</td>
<td>Concealment of Damaging Behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Loss of Party Documents</td>
<td>Political Blindness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Failure to follow Orders/Instructions</td>
<td>Appeasement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inmoral Behavior</td>
<td>Immoral Conduct in Way of Life</td>
<td>Violations of Vigilance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Loss and Negligent Handling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>of Party and State Documents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Abuse of Regulations and Orders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Contempt and Suppression of Criticism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Immoral Behavior of Lifestyle</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the Party increased its influence, however, its formal boundaries of behavior also evolved and expanded. Compare the evolution of Party crimes between 1957 and 1961. The Party...

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201 “Chronik des PR-14 von 20.08.1956 bis 30.11.1962 (Geheime Verschlußsache),” 139.


refined and broadened the scope of categories by which it charged and processed crimes.\footnote{204} The increased focus and specificity of potential charges illustrates the Party’s power over the private and professional conduct of uniformed members as well as Party members outside of the armed forces. The criminalization of organizational characteristics such as opportunism, creating intrigue, etc., were actually attempts by the Party to control the negative side of human behavior in organizations. Nonetheless, most of the charges were ill defined and were open to wide interpretation.

In retrospect, these and other crimes seemed more vindictive than expressions of military jurisprudence—tools used to bully hapless soldiers by the Party faithful. Now a Party member could be charged and judged for being “liberal,” for “suffering from opportunism,” or for behaving in an “appeasing” manner. When there was an “insufficient critical atmosphere” in the political organs, organizations, and units, these sorts of crimes kept cropping up, probably because Party leaders in the smaller units ignored such problems.\footnote{205} The “loss of Party documents” as a Party crime, broadened to include state secrets, seems on its face to be a straightforward violation, but who was to say that not every government or NVA document, every regulation and operational order, was also a Party document?

For the same reason, “violations of vigilance” and “injuries to inner-Party Democracy” were very broad categories indeed. Was a soldier’s lack of military vigilance on guard duty any more or less serious than the political crime of loose and dangerous talk at the local kiosk or at the \textit{Gasthaus}? How, exactly, was an “injury to the democracy of the collective” assessed? Similarly, the charge of “political blindness” could be used not just against Party members who “should have known better” but also against anyone who did not have the intellectual wherewithal to understand the ideological impact of his statements.

MORAL AND ALCOHOL VIOLATIONS

The moral depravity inside of the KVP continually grows. Report on the KVP, 1953.206

The Report of the Military State Prosecutor’s Office reveals for the 1st Quarter of 1960 that the preponderance of criminal offenses was crimes against property and against morality. MfNV Party Report, June 1960.207

However, there is also a tendency in a portion of Party organizations to underestimate the danger of leading an immoral life. Oberst Verner, 7.PD Stellvertreter, 1961208

After Lieutenant Albert from the 7.PD deserted and fled to the West in early 1961, the Party naturally searched for the reasons why he did so. His divorce was of some concern. He had also been “dishonorable towards the Party,” and had no “initiative in political-social work.” Of more concern was that Albert led an immoral lifestyle filled with alcohol and “dubious women.” After a meeting with Party members failed to convince him of the error of his ways, he deserted and fled to the West. It was his immoral lifestyle, claimed the Party, which drove him into the “hands of the enemy.”209

The evidence clearly suggests that the Party’s standard of morality was more akin to Victorian England than to post-war Europe. It challenged the private behavior of its uniformed members on a daily basis. Officers received the preponderance of charges for immoral behavior. This was probably a function of opportunity and privilege, since most soldiers rarely left the

206 “Die ernste Situation in KVP, 1953,” 21. „Die moralische Verkommenheit innerhalb der KVP wächst ständig.“
207 “Bericht der Brigade, 1960,” 275. „Der Bericht der Militärüberstaatsanwaltschaft für das I. Quartal 1960 weist aus, dass bei allen kriminellen Delikten Eigentums- und Sittlichkeitsdelikte überwieg.“
208 Verner, “Halbjahres-Analyse 1.HJ (7.PD) 1961,” 42. „Es ist jedoch auch die Tendenz in einem Teil der Parteiorganisationen zu bekämpfen, die die Gefahr, die ein unmoralischer Lebenswandel in sich trägt, unterschätzt.“
209 Ibid., 44. „[Albert] war unehrlich gegenüber der Partei und zeigte in der politisch-gesellschaftlichen Arbeit keine Initiative. Er führte einen unmoralischen Lebenswandel und wurde von seiner Frau geschieden...Er zog daraus keine Schlussfolgerungen und neigte immer mehr dem Alkohol und zweifelhaften Frauen zu.“

243
barracks areas, and most officers either lived in the surrounding towns or had routine privileges to be there. No one was immune from the penetrating eyes of the Political Officer, the Party's enforcement arm, or, unfortunately, their own comrades.\(^{210}\)

Criminalizing immoral behavior was also about prohibiting Western behavior. Despite its prevalence, though, the Party considered immoral behavior to be a serious crime, whether the perpetrator was a member of the Party or not. These problems began early in the KVP when “groups of low and middle ranking officers and sergeants rejected the principles of morality and discipline” and sullied its “inner order.”\(^{211}\) Immoral behavior signaled extensive disciplinary problems that needed weeding. In this regard, the Party exercised objective control over the private lives of every army member.

In 1959, the NVA released 25% of its officers (of 1,568) for “moral violations, loss of interest in military service, or non-compliance of orders.”\(^{212}\) By the 1960s, incidents of immoral violations had escalated as much as 40% over previous years.\(^{213}\) A total of 25% of Party hearings in the Border Guards between 1958 and 1960 dealt with “immoral behavior.” In 1960, one Border Guards regiment removed 40 soldiers and officers from Party rolls because of immoral behavior.\(^{214}\)

As it turns out, the majority of cases against young officers in the 7.PD in 1962 were for “immoral behavior” or for offenses against a “Party-appropriate way-of-life.”\(^{215}\) In one incident, seven officers charged with immoral behavior were from a single battalion staff. Unfortunately, this particular incident caused so much stress and anxiety that one of the officers attempted suicide. These officers received the full range of Party punishments, including three who were “strongly

\(^{210}\) Ibid., 40-41.

\(^{211}\) “Stand der politischen und Kampfausbildung, 1954,” 161. „Vor allem ein Teil des niederer und mittleren Offizierskaderbestandes, aber auch der Unterführer, verstossen selbst gegen die Prinzipien der Moral und der Disziplin.“


\(^{214}\) Rosenbusch, “Politische Analyse...über durchgeführte Parteiverfahren, 1960,” 268, 270.

reprimanded” and two who were banished from the Party. While the Party was very strict about immoral behavior, it was often at a loss to explain how such behavior could continue to exist. The following year, commanders in the 7.PD had to know even more frustration when nine more cases of immorality surfaced.

The Party also tended to group alcohol offenses with sexual crimes by combining them into “political-immoral offenses.” Indeed, the NVA had a habit of associating most disciplinary problems or special incidents with “above-average alcohol abuse.” A 1961 Party report claimed “the causes of most [disciplinary] violations are the excessive use of alcohol and a petit-bourgeois life-style....” It was common to hear how soldiers could be influenced to desert while under the influence of alcohol. When one soldier in an artillery battery deserted, the Party blamed the unit chain of command for allowing excessive alcohol use that damaged the unit’s discipline. In the 7.PD, 50-60% of its disciplinary violations involved either alcohol use or involvement with

217 ——, “Halbjahranalyse der PKK 7.PD, Jun 1962,” 64.
ubiquitous “dubious women.” Driving-while-intoxicated was also a serious problem in the 7.PD. 27 army members, predominantly officers and sergeants, were charged with driving-while-intoxicated in 1966 to 1967.

*****

Besides the military and political incidents and crimes handled by the military chain of command, there were also more serious cases investigated and prosecuted by the Military State’s Attorney. Only crimes that warranted imprisonment were forwarded to the attorney assigned to divisional or higher commanders. Therefore, a view into these cases is a window into the most serious crimes in the NVA. As such, their numbers can be counted in the hundreds instead of the thousands.

Army leaders were wrong if they thought their disciplinary problems would improve with time; soldiers, sergeants, and officers were committing serious court-martial offenses in increasing numbers into the 1960s. MB III’s own analysis showed that serious crimes prosecuted by the States’ Attorney averaged 340 per year between 1962 and 1967 (see chart below). The number of serious cases for the entire NVA would have been three to four times greater.

Over the course of 3 years in MB III, 27% of the prosecutions were for military crimes including desertion, AWOL, violations of watch regulations, and the sabotage of military equipment.

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224 The State Military Lawyers Offices were the rough equivalent to a Staff Judge Advocate (JAG) in many Western armies.

225 Helbig, “Vorlage zur Leitungssitzung am 11.11.1967.”

The state prosecuted another 32% of its cases for damaging state or personal property and 21% for assault and battery, a crime that was becoming more frequent.\textsuperscript{227}

Relatively speaking, the 7.PD experienced similar ratios of court-martial offenses. In 1962, the division conducted over 75 criminal investigations, the result of which 96 sergeants and 24 officers, “including a few staff officers,” were charged with serious criminal offenses. As only the most serious cases were forwarded for prosecution in a court, these prosecutions represent the most egregious cases of vehicular accidents with military vehicles (24%), crimes against military discipline (24%), “theft from comrades” (20%), and assault and battery (8%).\textsuperscript{232}

\begin{center}
\textbf{Authorized Punishment Actions, 1957}\textsuperscript{228}
\end{center}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Punishments Applied To</th>
<th>Enlisted</th>
<th>sergeants</th>
<th>Officers</th>
<th>Generals/Admirals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reprimand</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strict Reprimand</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra Service Duty up to 3 times</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra Service Duty up to 5 times</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra Work Duty up to 5 times</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restriction to Barracks for one to three weeks</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X\textsuperscript{229}</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple Arrest up to 10 Days</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X\textsuperscript{230}</td>
<td>X\textsuperscript{229}</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strict Arrest up to 10 days</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X\textsuperscript{230}</td>
<td>X\textsuperscript{231}</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barracks Arrest up to 15 Days</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduction in Rank</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X\textsuperscript{231}</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discharge from the NVA with or without Rank</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{227} Vorlag zur Leitungssitzung am 11.11.1967,” 19. The remaining 19.9% of the cases were for “miscellaneous reasons.”

\textsuperscript{228} Hagemann, Parteiherrschaft: 109. Quoting from Disziplinar- und Beschwerderordnung der NVA vom 27.6.1957, Section 1, page 198-199.

\textsuperscript{229} Only for Lieutenants and Captains.

\textsuperscript{230} Only middle-ranking NCOs.

\textsuperscript{231} Not for Generals and regimental commanders.

\textsuperscript{232} Auswertung 7.PD, 1962,” 7-8.
punishments, albeit used less frequently, included fines, house arrest (or confinement to quarters/barracks), and reduction in rank.

The previous chart illustrates the administrative punishments available to the commander and to Party collectives for use against offenders. Sergeants and officers received varying degrees of punishments, depending on their position and the nature of their offense. For example, a lieutenant could receive a reprimand from his commander, but that commander could not use “extra duty” as a punishment option.

The types of punishments levied for Party crimes were similar to military punishments. The next table illustrates the types of punishments that Party organs levied against Party members in the NVA during a 3-month period in 1957. Over 55% of the total punishments were levied against officers, 11% of whom were political officers. Over 80% of the punishments levied were varying degrees of reprimands or cautions. More serious crimes received more serious punishments, such as being “returned to candidate status” or complete dismissal from Party rolls. The Party levied these about 20% of the time.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Punishment</th>
<th>Off</th>
<th>Polit-Off</th>
<th>Cadets</th>
<th>Sergeants</th>
<th>Soldiers</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caution</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reprimand</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong Reprimand</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Return to Cadets</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Exclusion” from the Party</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| %                           | 43.7| 11.4     | 4.1    | 17.7      | 34.3     | 64.6   |

There is some irony in this punishment. Party membership theoretically brought no privileges. Returning a member back to probationary “candidate” status or removing them completely from Party rolls implies privilege that had been granted was now removed. The privilege of membership in the SED was something that could be taken from a citizen, much as a lollipop can be taken from a child.

As expected, officers punished by the Party process most often received punitive forms of administrative punishments: the reprimand, the strong reprimand, or the caution. Besides being

easy to administer, these punishments would also return the officer back to their units sooner, a logical objective in light of the army’s officer manning issues.

However, besides administrative punishments and judicial punishments like imprisonment, an army member was vulnerable to two other serious punishments. The first was “discharge from active service,” a punishment that could also be found in Western armies. Soldiers and officers could be honorably discharged from active service for health or familial reasons. They could also be discharged as a punishment for being unfit for military service or as the result of a serious disciplinary violation. In 1958-1959, 157 sergeants and 546 soldiers from the 1.MSD were discharged for “disciplinary, criminal, familial, and health reasons.” In 1959, the NVA “summarily discharged” 93 officers from active military service, clearly the most incompetent of an increasingly inept officer corps.

As an administrative option to a criminal offense, “discharge from the NVA,” would have been used as a last resort prior to trying an army member by court-martial. It was an option that would have been particularly useful for saving the regime the embarrassment of putting a senior officer on trial. Notably, as in many armies, the higher the rank, the less vulnerable he would be to administrative punishments. Thus, there were three ways to punish a general or an admiral severely: issue a reprimand, discharge from the service, or subject him to a court-martial.

In these cases, though, the consequences of summary discharge had to be weighted. In Western armies, a discharged officer was more likely to recover economically and socially. In the NVA, discharge would not only have meant a loss of official prestige, but also dismissal from the Party, which probably guaranteed that the officer would never have a position of responsibility in the GDR again.

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234 “Soziale Zusammensetzung des Divisionsstabs (1.MSD), 1959,” 179.
Party members were also vulnerable to two additional administrative punishments: the reduction from “membership” to “candidate status” in the Party and “total exclusion” or banishment from the Party. In the first case, the Party member, who was most likely an officer, was put back on probation. It was his choice to recover professionally or to leave the Party knowing the ramifications of doing so.

The most serious punishments levied by the Party was the “deletion from Party Rolls,” which meant banishment from the Party. In 1960, the Party removed 160 members and candidates from their rolls in the Border Guards, including 16 officers (10%). This was a significant improvement. In the previous two years, the Party struck over 400 members and candidates in the Border Guards from Party rolls. Similarly, in 1960-1961, the 7.PD removed an average of one member a month for 18 months from Party rolls. In 1962, the 7.PD separated 12 officers from Party rolls. This included one platoon leader in PR-14 who was dismissed from the Party and discharged from the army for a decided “lack of aptitude and repeated violations against the honor and worth of the officers of the NVA.” In other words, he could not work well with his fellow officers. Consider the implications of such an action: reduced possibility for promotion, increasing isolation from fellow officers, reduced job opportunities outside of military service, and even less priority for health care or living accommodations. Under such threats, the pressure to remain a Party member in good standing would have been even greater.

The NVAs military justice system also punished officers by transferring them “from active service to the reserves” for “deficient political and military capabilities and aptitude” or for simple disciplinary offenses. For example, the NVA transferred 1023 officers to the reserves in 1959.

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236 Rosenbusch, “Politische Analyse...über durchgeführte Parteiverfahren, 1960,” 270.
While a few were transferred because they had reached the age limit for active service, 20% of the officers were transferred for not having a “cadre-political perspective” and another 19% were transferred because they had “weak political and military capabilities.”

One punishment that was not used in Western armies was indeed the specter of mind control and ideological brainwashing—banishment to “treatment in a military collective.” MB III banished 30 officers in this manner in 1966/1967. The evidence suggests that for every officer released for ideological ineptitude, the NVA retained others because of their potential for “political rehabilitation.” The implication was that officers could be rehabilitated by segregating them with like-minded officers.

CRIMES BY NVA OFFICERS

...an increasing tendency of disciplinary violations by officers still exists.

*Analysis of Disciplinary Offenses by Officers, 1966/1967.*

In June 1958, the Party leadership in PR-14 demoted Lt. Bähr to candidate status for “insufficient trust in the Party” and admonished Lt. Schnoor, the Stellvertreter of a rifle company, for neglecting the political work of the company. In so doing, the Party claimed to have “successfully eliminated appearances of liberalism” in one of its tank battalions. In 1961, the Party members...
of a flak regiment reduced their best battery commander to “candidate status” because he was absent without permission and spent several hours at a Gasthaus, or local inn.244

These cases illustrate the single most important requirement in creating a healthy command climate in a military unit—officers and leaders who do the right thing. The state commissioned its officers not just to be directors of violence but in the most profound ways, to be leaders of men prepared to perish for their country. Unfortunately, NVA officers committed a significant portion of the disciplinary offenses, which, by virtue of the collective adjudication process, would not have been treated in confidence at the commander’s level. Therefore, officers who committed disciplinary violations inadvertently sent a message to their sergeants and soldiers that it was permissible for them to be undisciplined also.

Delinquent officers were also responsible for another problem that directly affected their units. All soldiers know—it is a military axiom—that to some degree, they will resist the leadership of any officer who has lost his credibility. Any officer who was charged with disciplinary violations also lost credibility as a leader and as a member of the Party. Indeed, officers who were charged would have had a difficult time satisfying the Party’s leadership doctrine of “convincing” their soldiers rather than ordering them in the performance of their duties.

In this regard, the record of discipline of the officer corps in the NVA was not pretty. In the 1950s and 1960s, the NVA’s military and political arms punished approximately 20-25% of its officers for violations against military order and discipline.245 Since the largest segment of Party members and candidates were officers, it made sense that the majority of Party judicial hearings were also against officers. However, since the Party had vetted the vast majority of its officers


twice, once for professional potential and again for political reliability, it is curious that the punishment rates for officers were not less.

In 1960, the NVA punished 703 officers for party crimes. The preponderance of this group received “reprimands and censures,” but significantly, 146 officers (or 21% of those punished) were returned to candidate status or completely removed from Party rolls. By 1967, the ratio of punishments was consistent in its distribution. A total of 85% of crimes committed by officers were minor and punished with censures, reprimands, and strong reprimands, as depicted in the next table.

The remaining 15% of punishments were much more serious. For example, a reduction in rank or position would have been very serious for the recipient, but with different consequences. An officer “Reduced in Duty Position” would lose prestige and privilege but without a corresponding reduction in pay. Normally used for poor performance, lower ranking commanders and staff officers would have been most vulnerable to this punishment. Loss of rank, on the other hand, would have also resulted in a loss of position and a commensurate loss of prestige and pay. In these cases, the loss of pay would have been particularly injurious. Unlike an immediate fine, the loss in pay would have reduced total wages over the course of a full military career, not to mention the value of his pension after service.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Punishment</th>
<th>#</th>
<th>% of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reprimand</td>
<td>348</td>
<td>47.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong Reprimand</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>26.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Censure</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>13.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House Arrest</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>8.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caution against Neglect of Service Duty</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduction in Duty Position</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduction in Rank</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discharge from Active Service with or without a reduction in Rank</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals:</strong></td>
<td>740</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

246 Wohfeld, “MB III Disziplinarvergehen der Offiziere, 1966/67,” 16. Includes 5 staff officers who were also reduced in rank.

By far, junior officers bore the brunt of Party processes and courts (see next chart).\textsuperscript{248} Why this is so is not difficult to understand; cadets would have been heavily supervised and rarely allowed to stray far from established norms. Only 35-50\% of soldiers and sergeants were Party members and thus were more likely to handle problems on a personal basis rather than subject themselves to a Party hearing. Senior officers above the rank of captain who were charged with a Party crime would have been an exception. The few senior officers who strayed from Party standards of discipline would have let their guard down or generated the animosity of subordinates by running a “tight ship.” Nevertheless, 98 senior officers who were punished by the Party in 1959 would have been a lead indicator of an unhealthy command climate. Not only did senior officers know better, they would have been the very officers that junior officers were looking to for mentorship and guidance.

The hapless junior officer, who bore the brunt (almost 50\%) of Party punishments in 1959, had few skills or resources with which to fend for himself. Adrift in a world without mentors, vulnerable to the accusations of vindictive peers and power-hungry political officers, the young officer was a prime target of blame for bureaucratic and organizational failures throughout the Party.

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|}
\hline
\textbf{7th PD Punishments Of Party Members} & \textbf{(First Half Year 1960 & 1961)} & \\
\hline
\textbf{Rank/Position} & \textbf{Jan-June 1960} & \textbf{Jan-June 1961 (w/o June)} \\
\hline
Staff officers & 5 & 5 \\
Lt. - Captain & 87 & 82 \\
Sergeants & 82 & 68 \\
Soldiers & & \\
Total & 369 & 242 \\
Avg/Mo & 61.5 & 48.4 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}


\textsuperscript{249} Verner, “Halbjahres-Analyse 1.HJ (7.PD) 1961,” 35.
Officers did commit military or political violations uniquely appropriate to their position as leaders at a rate that was consistent across the NVA. In 1958 and 1959, 42.5% of the punishments levied in the Border Guards were against officers. The reasons for these punishments were as serious as desertion or immoral behavior to as innocent as having a beer after a haircut in the town instead of coming straight back to the barracks. In this same period, the Border Guards dismissed for cause over 210 members and candidates from the Party, including 25 platoon leaders and 16 company commanders.

The disciplinary problems of the 7.PD were very similar. In the first eight months of 1957, the PKK of the 7.PD conducted 39 Party disciplinary hearings. A total of 23% of those hearings were against officers of the division. A year later, the PKK held 161 disciplinary hearings in the first 9 months.

The ratios of punishments for officers compared to the overall totals were very consistent. In 1960-1961, officers received 42% of Party punishments in the 7.PD (see adjacent table). A total of 87 junior officers in the 7.PD received Party punishments in just 6 months, or about 180 in one year. An additional 10 officers were sent to courts-martial that year for grievous crimes. As the 7.PD had an officer strength of 987 officers, the Party punished 20% of the officers in the 7.PD in a single year.

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250 Rosenbusch, "Politische Analyse...über durchgeführte Parteiverfahren, 1960," 267, 271. The following year, the number had decreased to 33%.


These startling numbers became worse over time. By 1967, Party officials assessed at 27% the chances of an officer being charged with a disciplinary violation in the 7.PD. For those who are skeptical about how serious this assessment is, consider that the percentage of officers at the rank of captain and below in a combat division would have been around 50%, or 483 officers. Thus, the percentage of officers at the rank of captain and below who were punished in the 7.PD now approaches 38%. Given the previously discussed manning problems, this situation must have been extremely frustrating, even more so since it did not improve. Four years later, the commander of the 7.PD stood by as over 270 of his junior officers were charged and punished with Party crimes.

In 1967, 819 officers (or 18% of the assigned) in MB III were also charged with disciplinary offenses (see next table). This included 24 top officers from the headquarters staff. The three major combat units in MB III, the 4th Motorized Rifle Division (4.MSD), the 7.PD, and the 11.MSD, together accounted for 68% of the officers charged. In a two-year period, an additional 175 sergeants and 44 officers were also sent to courts-martial for particularly heinous crimes: desertion, AWOL, attacks against supervisors or police patrols, insults against superiors, violations of watch regulations, and intentionally damaging military vehicles.

Of all the violations by officers in MB III, though, the most interesting offenses might well be the 42% for “deficient training work” and “neglect of

<table>
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<th>Types of Violations by Officers in MBIII (1966/67)</th>
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<td>Deficient Training Work and Neglect of Service Duty</td>
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259 Wohfeld, “MB III Disziplinarvergehen der Offiziere, 1966/67,” 16. Includes 5 staff officers who were also reduced in rank.


service duty” (or “failing to perform one’s duty”). Western armies would not generally consider the “failure to train” their subordinates a criminal offense; rather, such failures would be considered a training or professional deficiency to be corrected in the course of events. The soldier had either not practiced enough, or he needed more training because he did not have the aptitude or the necessary skills. No question that the officer was responsible for ensuring his soldier was trained correctly. Yet, when serious injury or death resulted from training accidents or a soldier deserted, the responsible officer, even if he had not been present at the incident, could not avoid being accused of negligence, of “failing to do his duty,” of “failing to follow cadre-principles,” or of “failing to follow instructions or regulations.”

For example, when an airman in the Air Force was injured during weapons training, the supervising lieutenant received 5 days of barracks arrest.

Similarly, a soldier on guard watch in 1960 fired his pistol at his Sergeant. Of course, senior commanders became upset at the apparent lack of military discipline in the regiment:

...the expectations of strong military discipline and order, as well as obedience, had been grossly neglected. There is no healthy socialist relationship between superiors and subordinates; a strict education has not been demanded. The regimental commander, Lieutenant Colonel Dobert dealt with this incident superficially and politically irresponsibly. Consequently, Dobert received a “Strong Reprimand” for the actions of a soldier on watch. Thus, the NVA treated leadership and training deficiencies as disciplinary violations worthy of severe punishment. In doing so, they highlighted the fallacy of the First Task—paying more attention to political-ideological education and to “pedagogical-psychological qualifications” than to actually achieving practical training results.

As difficult as it was for junior officers to stay out of disciplinary troubles, neither were political officers paragons of “party-appropriate” behavior and discipline. In fact, political officers had disciplinary problems just as serious, if not more so, than the line officers. In 1959, the NVA

262 Ibid., 15.
discharged without notice (fristlos entlassen werden) 15 political officers for such crimes as failing to obey orders, moral offenses, or desertion. Another 21 political officers were separated for deficient political or military skills, and immoral behavior. In 1960, for every three political officers released from service for honorable reasons such as age, enlistment limits, or health, four were released from active service with prejudice, probably dishonorably. The Party tried to minimize these statistics while frankly admitting that its Leading Role function was in jeopardy since most political officers with disciplinary violations were also “deputy commanders in the line units.”

For any officer, dealing with the investigation, subsequent hearing or trial, and possible punishment was a time-consuming process that would have distracted any officer from his daily duties; i.e., he would be more focused on his personal and professional survival. He would also worry about what his superiors, peers, and relatives thought about him while he defended himself. If about 25% of a unit’s junior officers were charged with disciplinary violations, then one out of every four platoon leaders, company commanders, and, to a lesser extent, battalion commanders and above, were distracted from their responsibilities by the necessity to defend themselves in a legal hearing of some type. If those hearings were scheduled during intense preparations for exercises or while on alert, then many soldiers were training without their officers and had to rely on their sergeants for critical leadership.

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267 Rosenbusch, "Politische Analyse...über durchgeführte Parteiverfahren, 1960," 271. „Es handelt sich dabei hauptsächlich um Polit-Stellvertreter in den Linieinheiten."
CAUSALITY BY IDEOLOGY: SOME CONCLUSIONS

I, myself, had learned during [my] activities as a soldier, how formal, how dogmatic, how bureaucratic we are sometimes as we approach many problems. NVA Major, 1959.

Twenty days after a sergeant and his companions expressed slanderous comments against the Party and the state, the commander of the 3rd Military District, Major General Hans Ernst, essentially blamed the incident on the commander and the Stellvertreter of the sergeant:

The inadequate political-ideological educational work by the company commander and especially by the Stellvertreter, the weak Party and FDJ-work, the deficient military order and discipline in the 3rd Company, as well as the carelessness and the irresponsible behavior of the officers, are to be considered the main causes of the incident.

Instead of holding the soldiers themselves accountable for their treasonous statements, Ernst blamed every officer in the company including the commander and the political officer.

A Military State’s Attorney contributed to the discourse by blaming the chain of command itself for its disciplinary problems. Commanders, he said, “should increase military vigilance to higher levels by increasing garrison police patrols and barracks watches, as well as increasing the presence of staff officers.” Commanders were also supposed to insure that the “influence of the supervisors, especially the officers, was strengthened by intervening when violations occur…”

The supervisors of deserters were held responsible for not sufficiently knowing their soldiers or for not having a “personal relationship” with them.

The beginning of this chapter introduced the idea that numbers of complaints, accidents, and disciplinary problems could support a negative assessment of the command climate within the


270 Helbig, “Vorlage zur Leitungssitzung am 11.11.1967,” 23. „...Zur Verbesserung der militärischen Disziplin und Ordnung und des Auftretens der Armeeangehörigen in der Öffentlichkeit ist u.a., die Qualität der Standortstreifendienste zu erhöhen und der Einfluss der Vorgesetzten, insbesondere der Offiziere, durch das Einschreiten bei auftretenden Verstössen zu verstärken.“

NVA. That assessment has been proven many times over. According to their own reports, the command climate of the NVA was indeed unhealthy and dysfunctional. Rarely did the chain of command attribute criminal acts to the perpetrators of safety or disciplinary violations. Instead, their analysis of causality was much more obtuse and focused on “sloppy work...noncompliance of regulations, and violations of supervisory responsibilities.”

Yes, to commit an unsafe or criminal act was the responsibility of the criminal; he was properly punished for it. Rarely, however, did it stop there. From the NVAs point of view, the responsibility for most disciplinary issues lay with the junior officers leading their smallest units; their “lack of leadership” caused many of these problems. Because of the failures of the junior officers, the Party did not exercise the influence it hoped to have that could have prevented most criminal acts and special incidents. While the Party’s Leading Role was well established at the Ministry and the major HQs, its lack of influence in the lower units continued being a chronic problem.

Making this case is simple enough. When three sergeants and a corporal were charged with refusing an order in 1960, their officers were criticized for failing to correctly educate their soldiers in ideological ways. One lieutenant “still possessed large deficiencies in character” and his “political-ideological work was largely ineffective.” In addition, all the unit’s officers were “inconsistent in their appearance and behavior” and had “gaps in their influence over their subordinates.” The Military State’s Attorney also blamed the regimental and battalion commanders who had performed their duties in a “formal manner.”

That is to say, they performed according to the rules, but not in accord with what a proper socialist consciousness demanded.

The military and Party disciplinary statistics of the NVA were strikingly bad and often hard to fathom. The data also provides clear and unequivocal indications that SED and NVA leaders

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272 Rosenbusch, “Politische Analyse...über durchgeführte Parteiverfahren, 1960,” 269. „Die Untersuchung von Parteiverfahren wegen krimineller Delikte u.a., dass in vielen Fällen Schlimpelei und Unordnung, Nichtbeachtung von Kontrollvorschriften, Verletzung der Dienstaufsichtspflicht Ausgangspunkte für solche Vorkommnisse waren.“

273 Kunath and Winter, “Befehlsverweigerung 7.PD, 1960,” 2. 4. „Die Offiziere sind oft unkonsequent im Auftreten und in der Durchsetzung ihrer Forderung...Die groben Verstösser gegen Dienstvorschriften und Befehle zeigen, dass die politisch-ideologische Erziehungswarbeit noch ungenügend wirksam ist."
knew problems existed but could not get their commanders and their political deputies to lead in effective ways. They were never able to penetrate the organizational dysfunction they themselves had created and continued to nurture; nor would it improve because of Ulbricht’s, Stoph’s, Ernst’s, or anyone else’s, tirade.

It is common knowledge that life for soldiers in any army can be harsh, but particularly so in socialist armies. Disciplinary statistics should reflect that harshness. On the other hand, the extraordinarily large numbers of army members who were punished reflects their poor training as well as the lack of mentorship, of and by more senior officers. In reality, the exemplars of the Party, the officers and political officers, were not role models at all.

Almost 10% of the total officer strength in the NVA was lost annually to poor performance, disciplinary problems, or death. This number discounts normal attrition rates for routine termination, the end of an enlistment contract or career retirement. Depending on the unit, another 25-40% of junior officers were disciplined for offenses over which they often had no control. A total of 40% of officers charged with a violation were accused of “deficient training” or “neglect of duty.” These high numbers signaled a lack of discipline on the part of its officers. It was also indicative of officers who did not set the example for their sergeants and their soldiers on a daily basis. No one should be surprised at a soldier’s response when 20-40% of a unit’s officers were charged with crimes, pettiness notwithstanding. If the leadership was judged to be so incompetent as to be unable to follow basic Party instructions, why would anyone expect subordinate soldiers to perform to a higher standard? Put another way, if the officers were not fulfilling their responsibilities, how could anyone expect the soldiers to rise to an idealistic standard of performance that was clearly impossible for their own officers? Regardless of the conclusion, the NVA was an army whose complement of officers was in constant turmoil.

The picture of everyday life in the barracks, the Alltagsgeschichte, is beginning to take shape. Inadequately trained line and political officers were neither knowledgeable nor competent
enough to lead their soldiers in the barracks, much less in combat. They were required to enforce non-specific criminal codes, including the criminalization of immorality. In its most basic and dysfunctional form, the causes for all their problems were ideological—the organization could not do the ideological heavy lifting necessary for success. In the act of solving practical problems, ideology became the cause of more complex problems.

The most difficult obstacle to overcoming their accident and disciplinary problems, however, was that Einzelleitung, intended to consolidate the Leading Role of the Party with the traditional authority of the commander, which was in fact, counterproductive. The Party continually insisted that the “entire power of the Party organization [was] necessary to steer the army toward an improved military order and discipline.”274 However, if the Party was to “consolidate” its disciplinary practices and solve these problems, then the officers and the commander needed a new focus to their daily activities:

...in the system of leadership and management activities of commanders at all levels of political-ideological training, more attention must be paid to the care for personal development and the pedagogic-psychological qualifications of officers [author’s emphasis].275

Political-ideological solutions, so it was believed, would improve everything.

Of course, this solution was awkward and dysfunctional. Except for actual combat, the commander’s traditional roles were subservient to the Party in almost every respect. Instead of seeking practical solutions that could have supported and nurtured the socialist system, they expected ideology to solve their problems. If an actual war had come, the training and disciplinary issues that confronted the political custodians of Einzelleitung would have completely interfered

274 “Abschlussbericht über die Vorbereitung...der Berichtswahlversammlung (1959),” 439. „...ist es notwendig, die ganze Kraft der Parteiorganisationen auf die Verbesserung der militärischen Disziplin und Ordnung zu lenken, um eine entscheidende Verbesserung zu erzielen."

with an effective defense against the West. With the “enemy at the gates,” it would have been much too late to make up for lost time.\(^{276}\)

Most soldiers just could not, or would not, meet the demanding high standards of ideological purity expected of them. The Party’s apologies for this were centered firmly in the political-military discourse—soldiers complained, caused accidents, or disobeyed their instructions because of their “political-ideological unclarity.” Soldiers were “unclear” about the basic questions of Party and governmental policy. “Unclarity” implied much more than a simple misunderstanding of terminology. It suggested that the soldier, the army, and, by implication, society as a whole was not focused on the proper objectives and goals. If they had been, they would have understood what needed to be done. In reality, the political-military discourse did cause “unclarity” in the life of its army members.

The political-military discourse did cause the problems in the NVA’s command climate; it was the outright result of ideological theories inefficiently implemented by tedious bureaucrats. In their minds, the ideology was the solution to all problems. It colored almost every decision made by the chain of command from the Defense Minister to the lowest platoon leader. Similar to the pointlessness of recreating a view through a moving prism, parsing those decisions from their ideological overtones can be an exercise in futility. At the end of the day, though, both political and military leaders completely missed the cornerstone of their enterprise, the sergeants and junior officers were not achieving and maintaining control of their ranks, which directly affected combat readiness and interfered with the socialist experiment.

In retrospect, there were an impressive number of mistakes made by the political and military leaders in the 1950s and early 1960s. Whether army leadership improved in the 1970s

\(^{276}\) For a discussion of Auftragstaktik, the leadership doctrine of the 1930s that focused on a “mission-oriented command system see: Martin Van Creveld, *Fighting Power: German and US Army Performance, 1939-1945*, Contributions in Military History, (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2007). This is the leadership doctrine the East German Army gave up in favor of Einzelleitung and the Leading Role of the Party.
and became more professional, as some have argued, is open for discussion.\textsuperscript{277} The leadership examples exhibited by senior officers in the beginning would have been hard to counter as young lieutenants became captains and majors and colonels. Since 15 years was the average time of service for officers, by the 1980s they would have experienced the dysfunction of the early days of the NVA and been powerless to improve the situation in their later careers.\textsuperscript{278} While the SED certainly made concerted efforts on its part to mitigate their mistakes, the basic causes of their problems, the policies of the \textit{Leading Role of the Party}, criticism/self-criticism, and \textit{Einzelleitung}, were never corrected. The resulting dysfunctionality framed by the command climate had wide-ranging effects on the leadership, discipline, and military readiness of the NVA. The effect of that dysfunctionality on the common soldier is the story of the next chapter.

\textsuperscript{277} Wenzke, "Die Nationale Volksarmee (1956-1990)," 424.
\textsuperscript{278} Ibid., 454.
CHAPTER 5: THE SOLDIER AS TRAGEDY

...the commanders and Party organizations still do not fully understand that increasing the demands on the soldiers requires...a greater concern for the welfare of the people and the elimination of a thousand trifles that needlessly complicate the life of the soldier. 


I am no longer able to fulfill my tasks.  
To this end, I am too weak.  
My wife should forgive me.  
It is better so.  

Captain’s suicide note on the day of construction of the Berlin Wall, August 13, 1961.  

On April 7, 1956, Corporal Harry Maas was under arrest while he awaited an investigation for the charge of raping his fiancé, Fräulein Rehberg. On the 10th day of his confinement, Maas escaped his detention and deserted from his unit in Schwerin, East Germany. The journey that followed was masterful in its planning and execution. He travelled to his parents’ home near Schwerin and then on to an uncle’s house near Hagenow, a walk of about 20 km. He then borrowed his uncle’s bicycle and rode to the home of another uncle in Lübtheen, a ride of about 25 km; all the while he was getting closer to West Germany. After spending April 18 and 19 with this second uncle, Maas rode 20 more km toward the village of Bitter, a town on the Elbe River that divided the GDR from West Germany.  

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1 "Erfahrungen, MSR-2, 1960," 22. „Eine Ursache für diesen Zustand besteht darin, dass die Kommandeure und Parteiorganisationen noch nicht voll begreifen, dass die Erhöhung der Anforderungen an die Soldaten zugleich eine grössere Sorge um den Menschen erfordert und die Beseitigung der tausend Kleinigkeiten, die das Leben der Armeeangehörigen unnötig erschweren, verlangt.“  
By now, Corporal Maas had successfully crossed a large section of East Germany without being caught. His journey so far was flawless and on the verge of success. Tragically, on the morning of April 20, between 1 A.M. and 5 A.M., Maas swam across the Elbe River, emerged from its west bank, and then collapsed and died from overexposure in the frigid waters. While walking along the bank of the river, a West German citizen found Maas a few hours later. Every desertion was an embarrassment to the NVA, but having to deal with the West Germans for the recovery of Maas’s body must have been particularly embarrassing.³

The record is mute on the suspected reasons for Maas’s desertion. Whether it was to avoid punishment for his accused crime, or because he had always intended to desert and emigrate to West Germany, or both, is an open question. In the context of the final report, though, these questions appeared inconsequential to the Party; its sole focus was not on the “why” of his escape, but rather on the “how,” probably so that those responsible for his escape could be punished.

The traces followed to this point have taken us deep into the lives of soldiers in service to the state. Private Burkhard’s instantaneous decision to take his own life, as described at the beginning of Chapter 1, was a tragic action that contributed to the political-military discourse in a non-verbal form. So also was Corporal Maas’ desertion and last-ditch attempt to find freedom. The deserter, the criminal, the accident victim, and the suicide victim also committed discrete actions that contributed to the political-military discourse in significant ways.

The previous chapters made a strong case for how incoherent national policies implemented by poorly educated and often-untrained officers created a problematic command climate. These officers could not protect the physical and the emotional well-being of their soldiers. Since most officers did not seem to care, there was no incentive to improve the treatment of their soldiers.

soldiers. In hindsight, this culture of toxic leadership had foreseeable effects—the loss of initiative and individual responsibility in favor of self-righteousness, self-justification, and abusive power. Every bureaucratic and political decision had significant deleterious effects on every individual soldier, some of whom are given a voice in the pages that follow. Their vignettes, in and of themselves, do not constitute the primary evidence of the army’s dysfunction; rather they stand as supporting evidence for the concrete data already presented.4

We have been building up to this—the effects of bureaucratic dysfunction on the common soldier. The institutional history described in Chapters Two through Four culminates in the Alltagsgeschichte of the common soldier. As subjects of enquiry, the NVA soldier was the product of a complex historical reality.5 He tried to shape his life within a confining hierarchical and militaristic environment.

This chapter highlights a selected number of unnecessary personal tragedies caused by toxic leaders functioning in a dysfunctional command climate. In the ideal socialist state, these tragedies never should have happened. That they saw the light of day at all was an ironic byproduct of bureaucratic inflexibility. These victims found their voices, not because the Party was proud of them, but because it sought to justify its flawed decision-making. As much as 70% of soldiers and 40% of young officers experienced disciplinary problems. A hundred percent of them knew a soldier who had gone AWOL, who had deserted, or who had experienced some other disciplinary trouble. Those who were punished and imprisoned were not the hooligans and misfits the SED wanted history to portray, but rather honest sons of hard-working German families who sought to function in a work environment that was dysfunctional and toxic.

In light of this, Colonel Beckmann’s conclusion about Private Burkhard’s suicide and Corporal Becker’s accidental death was particularly callous. Burkhard had accidentally killed

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4 As with previous chapters, the use of the word “soldier” can specifically mean an enlisted man in an army unit, or it can mean, more generally, any enlisted man in the armed forces of the GDR.

5 Kaschuba, “Popular Culture and Workers’ Culture as Symbolic Orders: Comments on the Debate About the History of Culture and Everyday Life.,” 172.
Corporal Becker, but Beckmann’s report was not one of calm analysis seeking causality. Instead, Beckmann, like the loyal comrade that he was, relied on the comfortable political-military discourse to cast blame and to justify his future actions:

...all comrades must recognize that every incident has its causes in the violation of orders and instructions. The enforcement of orders and instructions is not an administrative—but rather an ideological—question [author’s emphasis].

The SED and the NVA viewed suicides and other major incidents not as military or medical issues, but as ideological problems. It is in this light that the following vignettes should be read.

**THE SOLDIER IN THE NVA**

In the matter of care for the people, there is no general improvement within the KVP. As before, the soldiers and NCOs are treated heartlessly and, in part, inhumanely.

*The Serious Situation in the KVP, 1953.*

The daily care by every commander and supervisor for the official and personal lives of Army members was still not [in accordance with] the fundamental principles of socialist troop leadership.

*Analysis of Petitions and Complaints, 1964*

Almost 2/3 of the 26 pages of the Maas investigation consisted of witness statements and assessments concerning the performance of the officers and guards on duty the day of his escape. The Officer of the Day, Lieutenant Kurt Schaefer, was absent from the changing of the guard at the beginning of his watch. He also failed to inspect the safety and security of the soldiers detained in the jail; consequently, Maas’s escape was not noticed for several hours. Once the guards did

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6 Beckmann, ”Fahrlässiger Umgang,” 33-34. ”...mit dem Ziel, dass alle Genossen erkennen, dass jedes Vorkommnis seine Ursache in Verstösse gegen die Befehle und Dienstvorschriften hat. Denn die Durchsetzung der Befehle und Dienstvorschriften ist keine administrative sondern eine ideologische Frage.”

7 “Die ernste Situation in KVP, 1953,” 30. ”In der Frage der Sorge um den Menschen ist bei der KVP allgemein noch keine Besserung eingetreten. Nach wie vor werden die Soldaten und Unteroffiziere herzlos und zum Teil menschenwürdig behandelt.”

8 ”Eingaben und Beschwerden, NVA, 1963/64,” 82. ”Die Sorge um das dienstliche und persönliche Leben der Armeeangehörigen war noch nicht das tagtägliche Grundprinzip sozialistischer Truppenführung eines jeden Kommandeurs und Vorgesetzten.”
discover Maas’s absence, the Sergeant of the Guard gave Maas an additional 7-hour head start by failing to start an immediate search. The rape of his fiancé turned Harry Maas into a felon, but the lackadaisical manner and gross neglect by supervisors at the jail turned the whole episode into a tragedy writ large.

Harry Maas’s successful escape was due in no small part to the support of his parents and relatives. One uncle lied to the police so that the manhunt would proceed in a different direction, while another uncle denied hiding his nephew for the two nights before he swam across the Elbe. Together, these facts suggest that Maas’s relatives knew of his intent to desert well before his incarceration and that they planned to protect him in the hopes of his success.⁹

The report on the death of Harry Maas is just one of thousands in the political-military discourse that continued to confirm how the game was to be played. The Party established the political-military discourse, and the military chain of command went to extraordinary lengths to implement it. The archives repeatedly show that post-incident analysis was never about the injured or deceased soldiers, or even about preventing future incidents, but rather about affixing supervisory blame through the lens of ideology. Ideology was the essential element for justifying all actions and goals. Ideology was the basis for all leadership activities by officers and sergeants with their soldiers. The Party was the source of moral conviction and will; therefore, it was the only possible source of socialist consciousness, class-consciousness, and military readiness.¹⁰

In spite of the discourse, however, the soldiers of East Germany were not dense. They could discern absent and callous leaders when they encountered them, and by the Party’s own admission, many officers were callous. How could the soldiers not feel at a disadvantage when the Party treated them as the object of their own propaganda efforts?

⁹ Matz, “Abschlussbericht [Maas], Harry.”
It is still not understood that our young people require overwhelmingly convincing arguments to explain their place and their personal responsibility for the protection of the socialist homeland.¹¹

Actually, the situation was much worse. Soldiers were also expected to inform on their comrades when they deviated from the “Party line,” all the while suffering the indignity of being called “pigs” and other profanities by their officers. Under such conditions, most soldiers understandably refused to share their personal concerns with any officer or with their own friends.¹²

Trust definitely cut both ways. Few examples illustrate this lack of trust better than a 1961 incident in the 7th Pioneer Battalion, a unit of combat engineers assigned to the 7th Panzer Division. The soldiers of this unit hoped to create a motto that would elevate their morale and contribute to their success in training and in combat. As the sappers and minelayers of the division, they would have been the vanguard of any future military operation against NATO. By virtue of their expertise and their tactical importance, they were proud of their unique role in the division and hoped to display their pride in visible ways. Therefore, these proud young men gave considerable thought to their recommended motto:

**We are Pioneers—We Command a Rough but Sincere Tone.**

Here was a heartfelt expression of their desire to belong to a unit with *esprit de corps*, cohesion, and unity. This motto implied a sense of mission and their readiness to accept mortal danger.¹³ If ever there was an example of the initiative and responsibility the Party wanted from its soldiers, this was it.

Unfortunately, the motto was quickly suppressed by the battalion’s own political officer and the Party’s inspection office from the 7th Division. These functionaries claimed that because of

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¹¹ *Rede zum Offiziere des MB III, Feb 1962 (Vertrauliche Verschlussache),” 12. „Es wird noch zu wenig davon ausgegangen, daß wir junge Menschen zu erziehen haben, denen wir durch eine systematische und vor allen Dingen überzeugende Argumentation ständig ihren Platz und ihre persönliche Verantwortung für den Schutz der sozialistischen Heimat erläutern müssen.”


unacceptable political work, poor military order and discipline already existed in the Pioneer Battalion and this motto would encourage more problems. Clearly, these young soldiers were trying their best, but they were essentially told that their best was not to be trusted. The implication was that such a mantra would give these young Pioneers license to become even more unruly.\textsuperscript{14}

This incident is symptomatic of what life was like for the soldier. The Party explicitly wanted their officers to encourage initiative and openness, but it categorically rejected any new idea that was not firmly grounded within the discourse, regardless of its practicality or utility. Contrary to the Party’s intent, the result was that young and immature officers unintentionally suppressed the initiative of their soldiers. This foundational problem bespeaks the frustration of the Party and helps to explain the lack of trust between Party members and non-Party members in the GDR.

Breakdowns of trust also developed just as young soldiers entered the army. Recruiters presented the NVA as an attractive alternative to civilian life. This was certainly a fair distinction. Recruiters crossed an ethical boundary, however, when they deliberately misrepresented the conditions under which potential recruits could enlist. The army’s own records showed that recruits complained of “deceptive promises” by recruiters. These promises included serving in specific branches of the armed forces, coveted elite units, or favored locations near their hometowns. If the Party did not trust its citizens, then idle promises to new recruits were easy to make.

Realizing that he had signed up because of a lie, the recruit’s trust in the state quickly evaporated. One recruiter promised a young man an enlistment in the navy if he would sign a 3-year contract. However, since the recruiting officer had not annotated this promise on the

\textsuperscript{14} Ibíd. „Hinzu kommt, dass es im Bataillon eine schlechte militärische Ordnung und Disziplin und eine ungenügende Führungstätigkeit durch die Bataillons-Leitung gibt. Die politische Arbeit durch die Vorgesetzten ist unbefriedigend.”
enlistment papers, the NVA assigned him to an artillery unit in the land forces. “I had believed the officer, and signed the agreement for a 3-year enlistment,” he wrote bitterly in his complaint.\textsuperscript{15}

This problem also subverted efforts to reenlist experienced soldiers for a professional career in the army because some recruiters used methods ranging from “unauthorized promises to deceit.”\textsuperscript{16} Soldiers were promised placement in professional training courses for which they were not qualified.\textsuperscript{17} Others were deceitfully guaranteed automatic promotions to rank and positions that required experience and educational levels not available to young soldiers.\textsuperscript{18}

Recruiting fraud can be partially attributed to a lack of basic knowledge about the NVA by local recruiting boards and recruiters. The NVA had a corps of recruiters in the local recruiting districts, but many boards were composed of Party functionaries and not uniformed recruiters; consequently, they were not familiar with the benefits of enlisting or of serving the state in a professional career.\textsuperscript{19}

Enlistment fraud struck a dagger in the heart of the socialist ideal. Once the recruit realized that he had been lied to, very little could be done to correct the injustice, even when the Party’s public pronouncements condemned the outrage. The soldier’s resentment increasingly grew as he came to understand his plight; not only were his personal goals shattered, but the state had purposefully compromised itself and betrayed the citizen at a very personal level.\textsuperscript{20}

Some citizens discovered that to avoid the pressures of the local board, it was best to enlist “...just to get some peace.” One former NVA soldier, Rainer Awiszus, recalls his 1955 recruitment into the NVP/NVA as a stressful experience. Awiszus was working in a factory while waiting to

\textsuperscript{15} “Eingaben und Beschwerden, NVA, 1963/64,” 89. “Ich habe dem Offizier geglaubt und unterschrieb die Verpflichtung auf 3 Jahre.”

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 89-90. “Überwindung dieses Mangels nicht genügend wirksam war. Die Methoden der Werbung von Soldaten auf Zeit reichten von unberechtigten Versprechungen bis zur Täuschung.”

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 89.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 9.

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 90. „Die Ursachen für diese Arbeitsweise bestanden sowohl in der ungenügenden Kenntnis der Qualifizierungsmöglichkeiten in der Nationale Volksarmee und der Dienstlaufbahnordnung durch Mitarbeiter der Wehrkreiskommandos, als auch in ihrem formalen Arbeitsstil bei der Erfüllung des „Solls“ von Soldaten auf Zeit.“

\textsuperscript{20} “Bericht der Eingaben- und Beschwerdestelle...im Bereich der Nationalen Volksarmee, 1962,” 52.
enter university when he was summoned before the local recruiting board. The board consisted of the local Party Secretary, the director of a local factory, the leader of the Party Cadre Office, the Secretary for the FDJ, and three other Party members.21

The interview did not start well. Explaining that he wanted to attend university instead of joining the army, the committee responded by berating him and calling him a "freeloader, a defeatist, and an opportunist." "Shame on you!" exclaimed one Party member who was a veteran from the war. When he agreed to enlist two weeks later, the committee viewed Awiszus in a different light. Now, instead of being a "selfish and cowardly citizen" he was "one of the best sons of the German people and a worthy representative of the working class."22

The Defense Ministry did try to correct these problems with numerous directives. In 1964, the MfNV used particularly harsh language in its efforts to stop these deceptions:

...The Deputy Minister and Chief of the General Staff are compelled, with the guidance and monitoring of the military districts and military district commands, [to exercise] energetic influence on the workers in these departments, so that when talking with potential recruits, especially in the recruitment of career soldiers, no promises and concessions are made which have not been authorized.23

The regime subconsciously understood that a relationship of trust between the soldier and the state was essential—but its directives highlighted its inability to correct the problem. The political-military discourse deeply affected the inner life of the soldier. The climate of ill-discipline and toxic leadership tolerated a trust-vacuum that did not end when the soldier returned home after his


23 “Eingaben und Beschwerden, NVA, 1963/64,” 90, 99. „...der Stellvertreter des Ministers und Chef des Hauptstabes veranlasst, bei der Anleitung und Kontrolle der Wehrbezirks- und Wehrkreiskommandos energischen Einfluss auf die Mitarbeiter dieser Dienststellen zu nehmen, damit sie bei Gesprächen mit wehrpflichtigen Bürgern, besonders bei der Werbung von Soldaten auf Zeit, in keiner Weise Versprechungen und Zugeständnisse machen, wozu sie nicht befugt sind.“
enlistment. In the meantime, the dysfunctional command climate militated against proper care of its soldiers.

LIVING CONDITIONS WITHIN THE BARRACKS

The situation and the organization of clothing and equipage are unsatisfactory.


Because of all the incidents, suicides, fatal accidents...desertions, and brawls that had their origin in this restaurant, the Forest-Restaurant Barnsdorf is off-limits to the members of the regiment.

Commander, 29th Motorized Rifle Regiment, 1960.

The living conditions [of our soldiers and officers] have lagged behind changes in living conditions in civilian life.


The daily concern for the professional and personal lives of army members was not yet meeting the basic principles of socialist troop leadership by every commander and superior.


No matter how much trust existed between the army’s leaders and its soldier class, the quality of life for the East German soldier was harsh. He lacked proper uniforms and equipment. New soldiers often shared a cold room with 14 other soldiers. In some cases, the rooms were lit with 40-watt bulbs that challenged the eyesight of its occupants. Commanders in the 1st Motorized Rifle Division concluded that the light in some barracks was so dim that if allowed to continue, the

27 “Eingaben und Beschwerden, NVA, 1963/64,” 82. „Die Sorge um das dienstliche und persönliche Leben der Armeeangehörigen war noch nicht das tagtägliche Grundprinzip sozialistischer Truppenführung eines jeden Kommandeurs und Vorgesetzten.”
eyesight of the soldiers would deteriorate in a few years. In hindsight, one might also wonder about the long-term mental health of soldiers in dimly lit barracks.

Such problems probably took second priority to the issue that all soldiers are always concerned with—the quality of food in the mess halls. The complaints of soldiers often focused on the quality of the food, its poor preparation, and the hygiene practices of the cooking staff. In the first half of 1962, the 3rd Military District processed 148 complaints about the overall quality of meals and the lack of fresh vegetables and bread. The staff officers who processed these complaints also found serious problems with the organization and the performance of the kitchen staff. For example, junior officers responsible for the care and feeding of their soldiers were often completely unaware of proscribed culinary standards. Being keenly aware of how bad the food was, the army’s Chief Political Officer called for “the food to be prepared correctly and in tasty ways.”

These problems had lingered since the founding of the KVP. Yet by 1959, the army had still not corrected this basic problem. In June that year, Major G. Bzdak, a dedicated army officer and sworn Party member, chose to eat with his soldiers in their dining hall. As he progressed through the serving line, Bzdak was served fresh, but unwashed, cherries in his hand. Appropriately, Bzdak asked the server, “Where are the bowls?” The cook on duty, standing next to approximately 500 neatly stacked compote bowls, replied, “We have no bowls.” The cook then seemingly punished Bzdak for his daring question by serving him a “conspicuously small piece of beef” to eat with his

30 “Politisch-ideologischen Arbeit, 1. Mot. -Schützen-Division, 1964,” 67. „Anlass zu zahlreichen Beschwerden gibt jedoch die häufig mangelnde Qualität und die weitaus zu geringe Verarbeitung von Frischgemüse, an dessen Stell überlagertes und wenig schmeckendes Trockengemüse trat...Das stösst bei den Soldaten auf grosses Unverständnis und belastet die Diskussionen. In Burg überzeugte sich die Arbeitsgruppe auch davon, dass das Brot in schlechter Qualität geliefert wird.”
31 “Bericht der Eingaben- und Beschwerdestelle...im Bereich der Nationalen Volksarmee, 1962,” 51. „Der Inhalt der Eingaben und Beschwerden auf dem Sektor Verpflegung bezieht sich weniger auf die Verletzung der zustehenden Verpflegungsnormen, sondern vielmehr auf die ungenügende schmackhafte Zubereitung der Speisen, die Organisation, Hygiene be der Esseneinnahme. Ursachen hierfür sind die mangelnde Erfahrung und ungenügende Erfüllung der funktionalen Pflichten einiger junger Offiziere auf diesem Gebiet sowie teilweise nicht befriedigende Qualifikation eines Teiles des Verpflegungspersonals:.“
cherries. The soldiers who had observed this exchange could not help muttering among
themselves, “...and so it goes, whenever you say something.”

Six days later, Bzdak was again eating in the battalion dining hall when he was served his
meal of wurst and smoked fish on a buttered slice of bread. When he asked where the plates were,
the cook’s curt retort was immediate, “Sunday evenings there are no plates. We normally use
paper, but we have no paper.” So Bzdak and his soldiers ate the fish and wurst as finger food
without plates, paper, or napkins for the tables. Of course, this resulted in an “indescribably dirty
table.” When he complained to the duty officer about the unhygienic situation, Bzdak again
received a reply characteristic of the NVA’s bureaucratic lethargy:

I am aware of this situation, but I can do nothing different. I have no people to wash
the plates and paper is scare.

Then, as if to show that only a little imagination and initiative were necessary, Bzdak scrounged
enough wax paper from the pantry for his soldiers to use.

Such problems were common. In their role as health inspectors, regimental surgeons found
that commanders and senior sergeants rarely conducted required health inspections and rarely
disciplined their culinary workers for violating hygiene protocols. Appropriate sanitary
instructions were not posted in conspicuous places, and monthly training lessons for cooks and
food preparers were not properly conducted.

In the end, it took Bzdak’s complaint to the battalion commander before the duty officer was
reprimanded and the food situation improved in that battalion. More important, Bzdak, an officer
on temporary assignment to this particular barracks, should never have had to say anything at all.

33 Bzdak, “Bericht--Dienst als Soldat, 1959,” 155-156. „Dazu nahm er das normale Stück Fleisch wieder vom Teller herunter
und legte ein auffallend kleines Stück darauf. Die umstehenden Genossen sagten dazu, ‘so geht es Dir immer, wenn Du
etwas sagst.’”

34 Ibid., 156. „Sonnabends gibt es keine Teller, da gibt es Papier und Papier haben wir nicht.’ Da jeder Genosse versuchte
den Fisch auseinanderzunehmen, waren die Tische in Speiseraum unbeschreiblich schmutzig... Das ist mir bekannt, ich
cann aber nichts ändern. Zum Abwaschen der Teller habe ich keine Leute und das Papier is knapp.’”

35 [Sander], “Medizinischer Auskunftsbericht 38a des 14.PR + PZW.7 für die Zeit vom 1.1 bis 30.6.1963 (Vertrauliche
Verschlusssache),” 29. „Auf dem Gebiet der Küchenhygiene hat sich immer wider gezeigt, daß die verantwortlichen
Genossen der Küchenleitung (Offz. F. Verpflegung, Küchenleiter, Oberköche) nur wenig Einfluß, entsprechen ihren
funktionsellen Pflichten, auf die strenge Einhaltung der gesetzlichen und vorschriftlichen Bestimmungen nehmen.”

The permanently assigned officers were responsible, but they had ignored their responsibilities and accepted the status quo as “socialist normal.”

By themselves, these dining hall incidents should have been insignificant oddities and exceptions that the army could have easily corrected. The lack of concern by the cooking staff and their commanders would have been troubling, but normally not an issue. Taken as an isolated incident, one might conclude that the chain of command in that particular battalion was failing to do its job. In light of the broad evidence already presented, however, the incident puts the life of the NVA soldier in a different light.

That light certainly extends into a little known but essential aspect of military life and the command climate—the medical care of the soldier. Like food preparation, a soldier’s medical care affects his short-term morale. In the long term, the medical health of the unit affects its combat strength and effectiveness. In the NVA, there were 388 complaints from soldiers in 1963 and 1964 about their medical care. The number probably represented only a small percentage of actual problems.

Soldiers’ complaints intersected two major aspects of military medicine: the medical care of the soldier and the public health of the unit. Some doctors were deficient in the medical training necessary to minister to large numbers of soldiers. One officer was discharged in 1953 after an unsuccessful surgery for appendicitis led to paralysis of his lower extremities. Naturally, because of the medical errors that occurred during surgery, the officer requested compensation and financial support from the state. Unfortunately, his request for disability benefits was denied with this bureaucratic and unseemly response: “Appendicitis occurs for every person. That is why your case does not fall under the National Pension Scheme.”

Problems like this were compounded by the lack of concern commanders paid to the health of their soldiers. It was common, for example, for commanders to completely forget or ignore sick

37 “Die ernste Situation in KVP, 1953,” 31. „Blinddarmentzündung bekommt jeder Mensch und deswegen fällt Ihr Fall nicht unter die Versorgungsdienst, denn diese findet nur bei ihm Dienst zugezogenen gesundheitlichen Schäden Anwendung.”
soldiers once they were transferred into the custody of the medical services.\textsuperscript{38} The numerous complaints in 1963 led the Defense Ministry to conclude that previous efforts to improve medical care were failing.\textsuperscript{39}

As a symptom of deep problems, these incidents foreshadowed the observations of Bundeswehr Lieutenant General Jörg Schönbohm 30 years later. Schönbohm had the unenviable and very challenging task of consolidating the NVA into the West German Bundeswehr when the two Germanys were reunited in 1990. As part of his responsibilities, Schönbohm inspected NVA compounds throughout East Germany; in some cases he noted that combat vehicles were stored in heated storage areas while their soldiers slept in cold barracks without hot running water for showers.\textsuperscript{40}

Schönbohm also visited NVA mess kitchens in 1990 that were, without exception, unhygienic. Kitchen staffs, for example, had not cleaned the grease traps for years. This caused the kitchens to be so unsanitary and greasy that he and his staff had to hold onto the walls of the kitchen to keep from unceremoniously sliding to the floor.\textsuperscript{41}

Schönbohm also discovered that despite Party policy to the contrary, by 1990 Party membership and the attainment of rank had segregated the haves (the uniformed nomenklatura) from the have-nots. In contrast to the coarse facilities where the soldiers routinely ate, Schönbohm noted the clean kitchens and white tablecloths in the dining rooms of commanders and political officers—a reflection of privilege rather than of socialist egalitarianism and leadership.\textsuperscript{42}

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 30. „Das trifft insbesondere dort zu, wo auf Grund der bürokratischen Arbeitsweise mancher dienststellen, solche VP-Angehörige, die in Krankenhäusern liegen, einfach „vergessen“ werden. Das heisst, diese kranken Soldaten erhalten oft weder ihr Gehalt noch irgendwelche sonstige, ihnen zustehende, materielle oder ideelle (sic) Unterstützung.“

\textsuperscript{39} „Eingaben und Beschwerden, NVA, 1963/64,” 96-97. „Die Analyse der Eingaben und Beschwerden im Ausbildungsjahr 1963/64 besagt, daß dennoch auf diesem Gebiet keine spürbare Verbesserung erzielt wurde. Immer hoch (?) war die Organisation der medizinischen Betreuung durch einen Teil der Truppenärzte und Kommandeure unzureichend (sic).“

\textsuperscript{40} Schönbohm, Two Armies.


\textsuperscript{42} Schönbohm, Two Armies.
Similar to life in the civilian sector, life in the NVA was a constant affront to human dignity and individuality. Army life was not made better when the callous disregard of officers for their subordinates escalated into abusive mistreatment. While this mistreatment was often verbal, there were often cases of physical abuse that served little military purpose except to feed the sense of power officers and sergeants exhibited over their soldiers. On one ship, for example, a sailor berated his petty officers with the phrase “Rote Hund,” or “red dog.” This was a common expression and reminded the soldier that many sergeants and officers were sycophants to their commanders and to the Party.43

In 1960, the duty officer, navy Lieutenant Siegfried Rosenberger, intentionally fired his pistol and seriously injured a drunken sailor, Dieter Tiedemann. Without a doubt, Tiedemann was inexcusably drunk in public and had already “embarrassed the reputation of the NVA.” The local police had arrested him and delivered him to the navy station in Zinnowitz, a small town on the Baltic Sea. After taking custody of Tiedemann, Lieutenant Rosenberger had the situation well in hand—that is, until the drunken sailor defied Rosenberger’s orders and moved to go outside. Tiedemann punctuated the subsequent confrontation by calling Lieutenant Rosenberger a “god-damned dog” and spewed, “Now it’s your turn!” Not only had Tiedemann challenged Rosenberger’s manhood and status as an officer, but he also used the familiar form of “you,” du, to deny Rosenberger the status of an officer of superior rank.44

At this point, Tiedemann ran out of the station and onto the street. Lieutenant Rosenberger quickly followed and proceeded to pistol-whip the sailor. Rosenberger, apparently believing that he needed help, then called out to a civilian bystander. The man, however, stood aghast at the

43 Elmenhorst, “Körperverletzung durch Oblnt. [Rosenberger], 1960,” 40.
44 Ibid., 5, 23. „So, Du verfluchter Hund, jetzt bist Du dran! ...gottverfluchter Hund.“
unfolding events and offered no hand as Rosenberger continued to beat Tiedemann. Drunk, injured, and bleeding on the street, Tiedemann then yelled up at Rosenberger:

I am no longer a member of the Army! [You] pigs of officers hit the youth of the Working Class!45

Believing he was being personally threatened, Rosenberger then pulled his pistol and fired two warning shots into the sand. When Dieter Tiedemann ignored the shots and continued his belligerence, Rosenberger shot Tiedemann in the leg.46

While Rosenberger felt completely justified in his actions, navy investigators naturally concluded that there were “other means available” to control Dieter Tiedemann. From their perspective, this was not just a simple case of abusive power by an officer but a glaring example of “significant ideological unclarities” held by Rosenberger and by other naval officers who had not demonstrated the correct “class-appropriate relationship” with his subordinates:

His exclusive means of power are threats and violence as evidenced by unnecessarily putting his magazine in his pistol, hitting [Tiedemann] three times with his fist and then hitting him twice with his pistol before firing it. The use of the firearm itself is considered the final link in a chain of harmful and non-class appropriate behavior by Comrade Rosenberger.47

Nor was Rosenberger’s failure in judgment considered the only cause of this incident—his ship commander, as well as other ship commanders in the flotilla, was also accused of “deficient service organization and the inconsistent enforcement of orders, instructions, and regulations.” Their leadership of the flotilla was “one-sided” and focused only on their military training tasks. Since these commanders failed to inspect their units as expected, they “had contributed to a

45 Ibid., 25. „Ich bin kein Angehöriger der Arme mehr, die Schweine von Offiziere schlagen einen Arbeiterjungen.“
46 Ibid.
perception of neglect." In other words, had unit commanders inspected their units for these problems, Rosenberger’s unacceptable behavior would never have occurred.

The NVA correctly frowned on physical violence and labeled it as “non-class appropriate” behavior. Nevertheless, their superiors still frequently subjected soldiers to physical violence. Lieutenant Gladow, a naval commander of Boat 643, for example, once struck down a drunken sailor named Arndt. In outrage, Arndt then yelled that he would complain to the navy about this unacceptable treatment. He may have been successful in his complaint, but only after Gladow repeatedly assaulted Seaman Arndt on the way to jail.49

Sometimes, a subordinate lashed out against the abuse. Nineteen-year-old Cannonier Eckhard Brüning was smoking in the hall of his wood-frame barracks when Sergeant Flemming walked by and ordered him to put out his cigarette. When Brüning laughed in response, Flemming promptly knocked the cigarette out of Brüning’s hand. Brüning’s immediate reaction was to assault his sergeant.

Over the course of the next few months, Eckhard Brüning had even more conflicts with his sergeants and often refused to obey their orders.50 In one act of defiance, Brüning threw his rifle on the ground during drills and stomped off as he yelled at his squad leader, “Such nonsense!”51

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48 Ibid., 2-3, 15. „Eine weitere Ursache ist die einseitige Orientierung der 1. Flottille seit Beginn des Ausbildungsjahres auf die Erfüllung der spezialfachlichen Ausbildungsauflagen, insbesondere der Einführung und Durchsetzung der neuen Gefechtsausbildungslehrgänge in den operativen Einheiten, was zu einer Vernachlässigung der Kontrolle der Dienstorganisation und der Wahrnehmung der Dienstausführungspflicht in den, den Flottillen und Brigaden nachgeordneten, -landgebundenen Einheiten führte und auch zum grossen Teil der Ausgangspunkt für eine Reihe anderer im Dienstbereich der 1. Flottille auftretender Vorkommnisse ist.... Wie wenig in der 1.Flottille die Fragen der militarische Disziplin Beachtung finden, beweist die mangelhafte Arbeit mit der disciplinaren Praxis.“


50 Krajewski, "Abschlussbericht Brüning," 5. „Am 03.05.60 [Brüning] verweigerte der Befehl während der Ausbildung gegenüber Gruppenführer, warf waffe weg und führte in gegenwart anderer Soldaten reden, sie – so ein Unsinn -.“

51 Ibid. „Am 03.05.60 [Brüning] verweigerte der Befehl während der Ausbildung gegenüber Gruppenführer, warf waffe weg und führte in gegenwart anderer Soldaten reden, sie – so ein Unsinn -."
Do with me what you will...The peasants have all been forced into the factories. It is all lies what they teach us!

Brüning then called his sergeant a "cigarette machine" and an automaton. Eckhard Brüning's reference was to his "smoking fiend" of a sergeant who was a Party hack in every sense of the word. "Don’t you know anything outside of the Party newspaper?" he yelled. "Do you have any idea what the outside world looks like?" 52

Brüning’s sergeants, who assaulted him twice in an effort to enforce discipline, probably sparked this resistance. In the following five months, Brüning refused to obey his instructions on six separate occasions, all resulting in 20 days of arrest and nine extra work periods. Each violation grew gradually more serious as higher levels of command, from Brüning’s platoon leader to his regimental commander, imposed progressively more severe punishments. The more trouble he created, the more the army regarded him as a buffoon and a troublemaker. He had lost his individuality, constantly lashing out at the army to obtain the unobtainable—his sense of identity as a person. Within a few months of the first assaults by his own sergeants, the Military State’s Attorney recommended Eckhard Brüning’s discharge from the army. 53

In hindsight, Brüning had a difficult relationship with his divorced parents and chose the army as a way to escape familial tension. He may have initially desired to enlist and may even have wanted a career in the army. His early application to be a member of the Party validated those intentions. However, after the initial beatings by his sergeants, his attitude changed and he began to realize that military service was not for him. Consequently, Brüning identified less and less with his friends and colleagues, his unit, and with the state he was defending. Yes, the two sergeants

52 Ibid., 10. "...was willst Du mir denn...Wissen Sie denn überhaupt was Sie für mich sind? Kennen Sie einen Zigarettenautomaten? Und zum Anderen können Sie auch nur aus der Zeitung Politunterricht halten und haben keine Ahnung wie es draussen aussieht. Die Bauern sind alle nur in die LPG gezwungen worden. Es its alles Lüge was sie uns lehren."

53 Ibid., 1-2, 15.
were disciplined, but despite the toxic environment they created for Brüning, neither suffered the gravity of his fate.\textsuperscript{54}

In fact, officers and sergeants rarely received more than light punishment for abusing their soldiers. For example, after a soldier in the 7\textsuperscript{th} Motorized Rifle Regiment was clubbed severely with a metal rod, the assaulting officer, Senior Lieutenant Mittmann, received only a reprimand for the assault.\textsuperscript{55} Similarly, 30-year-old Senior Lieutenant Heinz Pätzel was summoned to a Party hearing for assaulting a sergeant and his fiancé near a popular tavern one night. Instead of receiving a harsh prison sentence for his crime, the army demoted Pätzel to private and summarily discharged him from the NVA.\textsuperscript{56}

Despite the apparent underhanded and tacit approval the regime gave officers and sergeants for such behavior, many of the NVA’s senior leaders knew what was necessary to nurture a climate of trust:

...the essential causes for the ineffective educational [and training] activities [are that the]...initiative and open-mindedness of the soldiers are often insufficiently expected or developed.\textsuperscript{57}

The \textit{Politbüro}’s Office for Security Questions had reached the same conclusion soon after the 1953 rebellion:

We are of the opinion that the biggest percentage of desertions, as well as requests and actual discharges from service, would be avoidable if the soldiers could receive advice and help for their personal concerns and needs, and thereby begin to trust their officers.\textsuperscript{58}

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 9.
\textsuperscript{57} “Einige Probleme, 1960,” 149-150. „Dadurch wird die breit vorhandene Initiative, Aktivität und Aufgeschlossenheit der Soldaten oft nur ungenügend und entwickelt.“
\textsuperscript{58} “Die ernste Situation in KVP, 1953,” 30. „Wir sind der Meinung, dass ein grosser Prozentsatz von Desertationen, Entlassungsgesuchen und tatsächlichen Entlassungen durchaus vermeidbar wäre, wenn die Soldaten von ihren Vorgesetzten Ratschläge und Hilfe bei ihren persönlichen Sorgen und Nöten erhalten und dadurch Vertrauen zu ihren Offizieren gewinnen würden.“
Unfortunately, “recognizing the initiative and open-mindedness of the individual,” much less creating an environment of trust and confidence, was simply not a strength of the officer corps.

At one point, army leadership was so frustrated about the treatment of its soldiers that it uncharacteristically published a harsh indictment against its own officer corps:

The heartlessness in the treatment of the soldiers, the NCOs, and subordinate officer cadre has led to a strong bitterness by the large portion of KVP [NVA]-members. This [bitterness] is apparent because confidence in the leadership of the KVP [NVA] is gradually slipping away.59

Ten years later, trust and confidence within the army were still absent. In 1963, one colonel accused his officers of not showing a “narrow socialistic relationship of trust” with their subordinates. Officers and sergeants continued to abuse their soldiers, thwart their initiative, and ignore their petitions and complaints—all the while creating the illusion of helping them. When dealing with young soldiers who had personal or professional problems, supervisors often responded superficially with empty promises. Under such conditions, soldiers quickly became disheartened and cynical when they realized that their officers were not to be trusted.60 Trust was the means to accomplish the socialist objective in all areas of socialist life—its absence would be the foil that would destroy it.

Some officers did exhibit great insight into their soldiers. Major Hans Wieck, for example, found much that was positive about the soldiers with whom he associated:

Through my collective experience with the lives of the soldiers, I had the opportunity to precisely study the ordinary people. It confirmed the certainty that we have wonderful people who are ready...to serve everyone in the Workers’ and Peasants’ State.61

59 Ibid., 32. „Die Herzlosigkeit in der Behandlung der Soldaten, Unterführer und der unteren Offizierskader hat zu einer starken Verbitterung bei grossen Teilen der KVP-Angehörigen geführt und trägt mit dazu bei, dass das Vertrauen in die Führung der KVP immer mehr schwindet.“

60 „Eingaben und Beschwerden, NVA, 1963/64,” 82, 86, 91. „Eine Anzahl von Beschwerden bewies, dass in einem Teil der Einheiten und Truppenteile die Rechte der Armeeangehörigen, die Kaderprinzipien, Befehl, und Dienstvorschriften noch verletzt werden...entweder oberflächliche Antworten erhielt oder leere Versprechungen gemacht wurden.“

Another officer, Captain Portner, also concluded that many of the army’s leadership problems were caused by a lack of open-mindedness and understanding on the part of their own officers:

I could see how dogmatic and formal our collective education and explanatory work has progressed. I saw that superiors do not correctly understand the opinions, morale, and desires of the soldiers and pass off political measures without educational value to our soldiers.62

Assuredly, there were officers who made heartfelt efforts, but in the culture of the political-military discourse, isolated successes were never enough to nurture a climate of trust. The Party accused supervisors in one work center of having “absolutely no relationship” with their soldiers.

Hardly [anyone] can speak of the individual work with the comrades. Nobody knows the personal circumstances of the comrades—from the work supervisor on the line to the battalion leadership. Not one responsible comrade from the battalion has walked into the workspaces...in over six months in order to know their concerns and desires.63

When the Party collective did meet, there was very little self-criticism that might have improved the command climate.64 The failure of officers to perform their most basic supervisory duties followed these patterns. Under such circumstances, there was little hope that a “trust relationship” could ever develop between NVA soldiers and their superiors; the breakdown of trust had significant debilitating effects on the way soldiers coped with the command climate.

The soldiers’ responses to these conditions are the main point. The sum of these problems could have been corrected with good leadership, but the officers and sergeants were either absent or abusive. The upbeat, albeit repetitive, messages from endless streams of political officers could not change the fact that barracks life was rough, tedious, and challenging to even the most sociable of soldiers.

62 Ibid., 76. „Lernen konnte ich, wie dogmatisch und formal doch oftmals unsere gesamte Erziehungs- und Aufklärungsarbeit wird. Ich sah, dass die Vorgesetzten die Meinungen, Stimmungen und Wünsche der Soldaten nicht richtig kannten, wie viele politische Massnahmen ohne erzieherischen Wert an unseren Soldaten vorübergehen.“


64 Ibid., 58-59.
SIGNS OF RESISTANCE

We have not forgotten our Silesian homeland; no one can forbid us from singing the old songs of our homeland.  
NVA soldiers, 1961.65

Many soldiers resented the way they were treated. This resentment grew into resistance in a variety of ways, including muttering utterances and slurs against their superiors, often under their breath. The breadth of those slurs illustrated in dramatic ways their own perceptions of their officers and the regime that they served.

The majority of soldiers, even those who signed on as Party members, performed just well enough to avoid calling attention to themselves. While they reported for duty on a daily basis in the proper uniform, their behavior and attitudes reflected a lack of respect for the regime. Most soldiers used every opportunity to shirk their duties or take unwarranted privileges. Others acted as if there were no disciplinary standards and no socialist consciousness that bound them together as they “…pressed to the front during meals or at the kiosk without consideration of other comrades.”66 The socialist collective was not in the forefront of their minds—they defaulted instead to a very self-centered and very normal realm of preservation and survival.

The resentment of the regime and its ideology by some soldiers escalated into private rebellions. Such rebellions should not be attributed exclusively to immaturity, as a surprising number of soldiers did understand the contested political space they lived and worked in. They were very cognizant of what was going on in the West and often held the heretical opinion that life in West Germany was better than in East Germany.67

In 1962, the PKK in the 7th Panzer Division suppressed a group of four soldiers who called themselves “the Community of the Stateless.” This group had become chronic troublemakers in

their unit since the building of the Berlin Wall in August 1961. The culmination of that resistance came when they proudly stood outside of their barracks and yelled:

| We hereby declare that we are stateless. |
| There are no borders and walls for us. |
| Free movement within and outside the barracks! |

Sergeants Ackermann and Viertel and corporals Vogel and Paschen proudly expressed their desire for political and individual freedom that transcended the walls of the barracks and the borders of East Germany. The four soldiers were either members or candidates of the Party; therefore, they should have known better than to express themselves in such an inflammatory way. Their utterances became even more offensive when their drunken escapade, interspersed with besotted shouts of Kristallnacht, included calls for a unified Germany as they smashed their beer bottles in front of the barracks.68

The probable cause for the behavior of these soldiers was a genuine disappointment in military service and a heartfelt desire for a reunified Germany. Nevertheless, the Party denounced their behavior and punished them by terminating their membership. It concluded that the group was probably influenced by two factors: Western radio programs and the negative influences of their parents and friends.69

This was not an isolated incident. About five weeks after the building of the Berlin Wall, Private Pesch and two others deserted to the West. The subsequent investigation revealed that Pesch had unashamedly harbored a “special sympathy for the Western life style” and had often announced to his comrades that West Germany was a better place to live than East Germany. Despite having been punished once for this attitude, Pesch continued to follow his passion by collecting pictures of Western actors and pop singers. Fortunately for Pesch, his commander, Major Wiegand, and his political officer, Major Schirmer, were aware of Pesch’s predilections, but they


69 Ibid.
made no effort to deal with these "political problems." By ignoring their responsibilities in this way, both officers “grossly neglected” the required ideological work vis-à-vis Private Pesch.\textsuperscript{70}

Continued incidents of political resistance caused consternation in the power centers of the Party. During the 1953 rebellion, a placard appeared on the door of a toilet in a barracks in Zittau, a small town in the southeast corner of East Germany. The placard was notable for its location and the message it communicated:

\begin{center}
| Down with Wilhelm Pieck!\textsuperscript{71} |
\end{center}

Wilhelm Pieck was the first and only president of the GDR and a symbol of government repression during the June rebellion in 1953. A few years later, the \textit{Stasi} (East German Secret Police) arrested two soldiers from the 7th Panzer Division for soiling a picture of Pieck’s successor, Party First Secretary Walter Ulbricht.\textsuperscript{72}

In 1960, another incident occurred that illustrated this awareness of contested political space by NVA soldiers. A group of corporals and sergeants had left a field exercise without permission to celebrate the birthday of one of their own, Sergeant Krüger. As they collectively drank the case of beer that Krüger had purchased, their conversation turned seditious. “What does the GDR mean? What does Korea mean?” Corporal Hoffmann responded to his own questions with an “exceptionally defamatory” statement that equated the GDR with the Soviets and the former Nazi state. Hoffmann jokingly said that the German acronym for the German Democratic Republic, the DDR, stood for “the Three Russians (\textit{Die drei Russen}).”\textsuperscript{73} This evoked a completely unexpected and inappropriate response by the other participants who raised their hands and twice yelled “Heil


\textsuperscript{73} Just as “Russen” or “Russian” was a derogatory term for the Soviets, so too was the even more insulting label of “Ivan.” Bzdak, “Bericht–Dienst als Soldat, 1959,” 148.
Hitler!” Later, when questioned by an officer, Corporal Hoffmann revealed his awareness that political freedom in West Germany was more than just a slogan, “…a man in West Germany is able to publish caricatures of leading personalities without being prosecuted for it.” In other words, why should someone in the GDR be punished for doing the same thing?

The utterances of these soldiers had obvious political overtones. In their minds, the GDR was an illegitimate Soviet variation of the former Nazi state, not the natural evolutionary “synthesis” the socialist dialectic would have them believe. Of the seven NCOs involved in this incident, four were Party members or candidates. The sergeants who were Party members should have used their positions and well-honed skills in criticism/self-criticism to prevent further sedition, but no one in the group stopped the discussion’s dangerous thrust. Eventually, Corporal Hofmann and Sergeant Scheidig were demoted and discharged from the army. The other participants received three days arrest and restriction to their barracks. Naturally, the Party believed that using the Nazi salute would never have been possible if it were not for the political officer’s “deficient political work” and the commander’s failure to maintain good order and discipline. Both were also punished with five days house arrest for the “deficient education” of their soldiers.

Other NVA soldiers also associated the GDR with Nazi Germany or with the communist Soviet Union. Such was the case when a remarkably sober Sergeant Westram of the 15th Flak Regiment wrote “fascist graffiti” around a swastika affixed to the walls of the barracks’ washroom on March 3, 1960:

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Strike the communists dead!
Long live freedom and the CDU [Christian Democratic Union]!
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74 “Vorkommnis in der 3. MSK, 1960,” 2, 4. „Was heißt DDR, was heißt Korea...DDR = Die drei Russen, Komme runter, euer Adolf, oder ähnlich.“ „Ursachen: mangende politische Arbeit und schlechte Disziplin u. Ordnung in der Kp.“

75 Ibid., 4. „Er sagte weiter, daß man in Westdeutschland sogar Karikaturen über führende Persönlichkeiten veröffentlichen dürfe, ohne darum verfolgt zu werden.“

76 Ibid., 2, 4, 5-6. „Ursachen: mangende politische Arbeit und schlechte Disziplin u. Ordnung in der Kp.“
The juxtaposition of three messages in Westram’s graffiti was significant: the visual symbol of the Nazi Party, the textual message against communism, and the political slogan supporting a West German democratic political party all communicated a powerful political message. Westram later admitted drawing another swastika on a barracks wall with an equally dangerous caption:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Communists out!</th>
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<td>In another case, regimental commander Major Poscher was confronted for his “political blindness and carelessness” in a public bar. He had told political jokes that insulted the Soviet Party First Secretary, Nikita Khrushchev, and defamed the Soviet Union. It would have been incredible if he had continued to be in command of his regiment and remain in the army.</td>
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A few months later in the same regiment, intelligence officer Senior Lieutenant Thondke also defamed the SED and the government. Besides neglecting his political studies, which was already a serious violation, Thondke stood up in a Party meeting and expressed “doubt about the correctness of the policies of the Party and the government.” He also had the incredible gumption to question whether the Party First Secretary, Walter Ulbricht, was a good communist or not. Fortunately for Thondke, the PKK was able to have a conversation with him:

In a very long discussion and party-like confrontation with the PKK, Comrade Thondke recognized his faulty behavior and the impact of his waverin attitude. [The PKK] helped him overcome [his] weaknesses.

77 Oberstlt. Schettler, “Untersuchungsbericht der Parteikontrollkommission des Kommandos der Luftstreitkräfte und Luftverteidigung über die besonderen Vorkommnisse im Flak-Regt. 15 der 1. Flak-Art. Division,” ed. ZK Abteilung Sicherheitsfragen (Berlin: SAMPO-BArch, 1960), 18. „Schlagt die Kommunisten tot! Es lebe die Freiheit und die CDU! Kommunisten raus!” The CDU, the Christian Democratic Union, was a political party that found great strength in West Germany, but was a socialist political party that supported the SED throughout the existence of the GDR.


79 ———, “Halbjahranalyse 7.PD, Jul-Nov 1961,” 96. „Dies kam besonders dadurch zum Ausdruck, daß er die Landwirtschaftspolitik innerhalb unserer Republik anweißelte und der Meinung war, es kann niemand dafür geradestehen, ob Genosse Walter Ulbricht ein ehrlicher Kommunist ist, denn Stalin wurde seinerzeit auch als guter Kommunist populärisiert, seine Fehler aber stellten sich erst wesentlich später heraus.“

80 Ibid. „In einer sehr ausführlichen Aussprache und parteilichen Auseinandersetzung mit der PKK erkannte der Genosse Thondke sein Fehlerhaftes Verhalten und die Auswirkung seiner schwankenden Haltung. Ihn wurde geholfen die Schwächen zu überwinden.”
What made these incidents significant were their targets: the leaders of the Party, their historical association with the Nazis, and their alliance with the Soviets. As individual expressions, they raised the hackles of the regime, even if their expression was no more dangerous than the actions of thousands of East German citizens who fled to the West.

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Whether it was rock-and-roll or simply the “negative influences of their parents and friends from the civilian sector,” NVA soldiers, like their civilian relatives and friends, were always vulnerable to “disruptive influences.” Some soldiers focused on news programs from the West to “discover the truth.” In that regard, the propaganda efforts from the new NATO countries were having the desired effect. Such was the case of Senior Sergeant Andreas of the 7th Intelligence Battalion, who shared his assessment of the depressed economy and living standards of the GDR with his comrades. In response, the Party convened a full investigation into Andreas’ “revisionist attitudes.” What the Party did not count on was that Andreas was a keen observer of the political and economic situation of his country. Even though he was severely punished, he based his courageous defense on the “false policies of his Party and government.”

Of course, many soldiers succumbed to “disruptive influences” by blatantly listening to forbidden music. In April 1960, Cannonier Eckhard Brüning was on duty at the barracks enlisted club where he played music from a Western radio station as loudly as possible. When his sergeant told him to turn the program off, Brüning turned the volume down only a little and then complained:

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I listen to music when I want, and I listen to the station that I want. I also turn the volume loud enough that the guard posts outside have music.\textsuperscript{84}

When the sergeant repeated his instruction, Brüning responded in an insubordinate tone: “What do you want of me?” His anger now escalated as he yelled at his sergeant while turning the radio volume as loud as possible:

Such a dump here! A farce! You should release me to the Bundeswehr (West German Army). It is certainly better. And, if not them, I’ll join a mercenary army [i.e., another Western army]...\textsuperscript{85}

The NVA eventually discharged Eckhard Brüning because he “threatened and undermined the fighting strength of his unit.”\textsuperscript{86}

Corporal Hans-Werner Senft loved to dance and spent much of his free time in the neighboring villages of Döbern and Schwarzheide, where he held court on the virtues of Western culture. Senft’s comrades, knowing that he had hung Elvis Presley’s picture inside of his locker, routinely referred to him as the “Rock-and-Roll King.” Senft was also a cad, having corresponded with six different women by letter and bragged to his mates about his conquests. Because of these all too human diversions, unrestrained by proper “educational influences,” Senft’s commander determined that he had detached himself from the social and political life of his unit and, therefore, he operated “outside of the collective.”\textsuperscript{87} Corporal Senft was not an anomaly.

Corporal Schirmer of the 7\textsuperscript{th} Panzer Division was arrested in 1961 because he spoke of his hatred for the GDR, often while playing forbidden tapes or listening to Western radio stations.\textsuperscript{88} Another soldier named Schenck was also well known for hanging his radio around his neck in the

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid. „Ich höre Musik wann ich will und höre auch den Sender den ich will und mache den Kasten so laut, das die Posten draußen Musik haben.“

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., 10. „Was willst Du mir denn?...So ein Schuppen hier, Sauladen, sollen mich entlassen, in der Bundeswehr ist es bestimmt besser und wenn nicht, dann gehe ich in die Söldnerarmee...“ In the political-military discourse, any western army could be referred to as a „mercenary army.“

\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 14.

\textsuperscript{87} Kessler, “Abschlussbericht zum besonderen Vorkommnis “Beteiligung an Sexualverbrechen” durch Gefr. [Senft], Angehöriger des FTB 4, am 3.1.1959 (Vertrauliche Verschlusssache),“ 53-56.

\textsuperscript{88} Borning, “Bericht über die Fahnenfluchten, Erscheinungen der Hetze, 1961,” 251.
washroom and listening to rock-and-roll music. Sometimes, his comrades watched Schenck fall into a dance-frenzy they called his “rock-and-roll ecstasy.”

In their defense, these “criminals” claimed that the Party did not adequately explain the harm of Western radio programs and rock-and-roll music. Elvis Presley’s rumored 1959 concert in the Berlin Sports Palace generated even more questions from soldiers who wondered why the East German press depicted Presley as a nemesis of the state.

The Party’s best response was to argue that rock-and-roll music in general, and Elvis Presley’s discography in particular, represented “…an underestimation of the importance of ideological questions in the workplace.” In other words, Presley and other rock-and-roll musicians were dangerous because their music replaced the thoughts and beliefs that good socialist citizens and soldiers should otherwise be having. Apparently, the sinful and impure thoughts represented by rock music could be replaced by thinking the virtuous and pure thoughts of Marx and Engels. Unfortunately, the Party’s efforts were often marginalized when NVA officers were aware that their soldiers were listening to Western radio but did nothing to stop them.

The regime successfully suppressed the resistance by its soldiers. That resistance was a reaction to an unsatisfactory level of care by its officers, a breakdown of trust with the Party, and the lack of basic necessities that every citizen had a right to expect. Major Bzdak’s experiences in the mess halls of 1959 presaged Schönbohm’s experiences 30 years later. The unhygienic conditions that shocked Schönbohm had been socialist normal for years. The state of living conditions in the NVA at the end of the 1980s confirmed the worst fears of the Federal Republic: the machine was more important than the man. Never mind whether the Warsaw Pact could have won

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the Cold War; the sons of good German families were living in squalor, and the Party expected its soldiers to endure the situation in the name of socialism.

SUICIDES

“The characteristic causes of suicide are immoral acts (involving affairs, alcohol, and financial debts) and the fear of punishments for punishable acts.”
Report of the Main Political Office, 1958.92

...the increasing incidents of suicide in recent times have been discussed in detail. It was pointed out, in particular, that when young people in the ranks of our National People’s Army see no other way [but suicide], it is always an expression of unsuccessful political and military education [author’s emphasis].
Major General Heinz Kessler, Final Report of the Suicide of Corporal Haber, 1958.93

He alone carries the blame.

To this point, the lives of the soldiers and junior officers have been traced along an arc ranging from poor training, unsafe work conditions, unpalatable food, and absent or abusive leadership. Without any further evidence, a case could be made that NVA soldiers in the 1950s and 1960s were victims. Although the Party refused to admit it, the treatment of soldiers by their officers and sergeants was more akin to leadership through fear and intimidation than by actions that motivated and inspired the German citizen to strive toward a socialist ideal. In this treacherous environment, the lives of soldiers fluctuated from boring to unforgiving and dangerous.


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When they were mistreated, the soldiers could not complain to their sergeants and lieutenants lest they suffer even worse treatment. They could not complain to their friends, any of whom could be an informant for the PKK (Party Inspection Commission) or the Stasi. Nor could they write home about their problems out of fear the local Party apparatus would look suspiciously on their parents. The rigidity of socialist norms, buttressed by an inflexible ideological model, artificially caused individual anomie, or the unfortunate isolation from societal norms. Political theorist Hannah Arendt perfectly described this environment:

Isolation may be the beginning of terror; it certainly is its most fertile ground; it always is its result.  

For the common soldier, the abusive power of the state made military service even more challenging and fed his isolation.

The East German citizen was not supposed to experience anomie. Socialism was a rebirth! The economy would be better; the people would be healthier and happier; and communities would be little pockets of socialist nirvana. That myth was shattered whenever the soldiers left their barracks for a beer in the local community or returned home on holiday.

Most soldiers did not live isolated lives within the barracks. They had opportunities to smoke in a group, to have a beer at the local bar or kiosk, to spend idle time in the canteen of the barracks—these were all outlets for the soldier. They were also opportunities to compare their understanding of the regime’s propaganda with their cognitions when they walked through the barracks gates. In other words, humans avoid inconsistency in their realities by comparing their observations and attitudes with others. If necessary, they then change their attitudes in order to deal with those inconsistencies.  

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That is exactly what happened in the toxic command climate of the NVA. Their understanding of socialism, taught to them on a weekly basis and crudely modeled by their sergeants and officers, was in harsh contrast to their cognitions—that is, their awareness and understanding of reality. Regardless of how they were treated in the barracks, there was little good to be said about the towns and villages they visited when they left their barracks. Consumer goods were nonexistent, and food was hard to come by. Streets and schools were in dire need of repair. Visits home accentuated the large, colorless, brick apartment buildings called plattenbau (or Russian khrushchevki) which sharply contrasted with the “socialist reality” they heard in their political classes.97

Since the soldier could not change his circumstances, he changed his attitudes relevant to those circumstances.98 Some soldiers saw the inconsistencies between ideology and reality, but still joined the Party in the hopes of making their lives better. Other soldiers could not square their cognitions with reality, so they turned to other means of survival—goldbricking and lethargy, disciplinary troubles, desertion, and suicide—all in order to deal with the conflict between competing cognitions.

The SED and the NVA were well aware that there was a suicide problem. Red flags were unintentionally, but routinely, strewn by functionaries across the bureaucratic landscape. These flags fluctuated between passing afterthoughts of suicide incidents in some reports and logbooks to meticulous criminal investigations.99 Nevertheless, it is also fair to say that there were absolutely no psychological resources available to contribute to a systematic program of suicide prevention.

Our worldwide understanding of the relationship between psychological illness and suicide prevention was still in its infancy in the 1950s and 1960s.\textsuperscript{100}

Nonetheless, in its own unique way, the regime created its own cycle of suicidal behavior through its political-military discourse. It created a dysfunctional command climate where discipline was out of control, military crimes were rampant, and accidents were prolific. Given the bureaucratic handcuffs that bound them, the officers were singularly incapable of changing this culture. Their own personal contribution was to ignore the problem, or simply default to physical and emotional abusive. In this climate, the soldiers could find no help from anyone in authority, including their medical doctors.

This cycle is not hard to describe. The dysfunctional command climate, a byproduct of the political-military discourse, had a strong influence on the development of junior leaders. These young officers and sergeants did what they were told, but were provided little or no tools to be successful as leaders. The medical corps was the logical choice to fill the gap, but it was 20-30 years away from developing a concept of suicide prevention. The investigative process could have proved useful as a feedback mechanism, but it actually fed the political-military discourse in very disturbing ways. Inevitably, the suicide act became prolific in the absence of good leadership and appropriate medical support. The result was not an improved command climate led by good

\textsuperscript{100} “Dept of Health and Human Services”, “Appendix C: Brief History of Suicide Prevention in the United States,” in 2012 National Strategy for Suicide Prevention, ed. US Surgeon General (2012), 94-95. The International Association for Suicide Prevention was not formed until 1960. Serious efforts in the United States to prevent suicide did not occur until 1970 and did not gain momentum until the 1980s. The first active suicide prevention program in the US military did not begin until 1996.
socialist officers, but rather a maddening reinforcement of the discourse and a new depressing cycle of self-murder until the regime self-destructed (see graphic).

TOXIC LEADERSHIP

How could toxic leadership have contributed to a high rate of suicides in the NVA? Eighteen-year-old Cannonier Gerhard Jaeger joined the army on July 22, 1958. Three months later, on October 28, Jaeger was so morose that he shot himself in the chest while on guard duty.\textsuperscript{101} There was no obvious reason to explain his actions, except Jaeger had told his friends that he was deadly serious about killing himself, “...if I have to pull guard [duty] this evening, a misfortune will occur.” Later, Jaeger told Cannonier Hauer and three other soldiers, “I am going to shoot myself. Should I not return, take my things to my house.” Unfortunately, this simple declaration of his intent, called today suicidal ideation, was ignored. His friends knew him to be a jokester and did not take his suicidal utterances seriously.\textsuperscript{102}

Predictably, since there was rarely any post-incident diagnosis of mental illness, most investigators turned to blaming the victim or his supervisors for the suicide. In Jaeger’s case, the investigation found deficiencies in in his character, his family life, and his professional life. The most important factor they determined, though, was that Jaeger lived and worked in a particularly toxic command climate:

...something is not right [in this unit] in the relationships between superiors and subordinates and in the relationships between officers and sergeants to the soldiers.\textsuperscript{103}

Central to this observation was the toxic leadership of Sergeant Kalb had contributed to Gerhard Jaeger’s demise. Kalb’s leadership style was harsh and characterized by “false educational methods.” In fact, more special incidents occurred in Kalb’s battery that in the other 11 batteries of

\textsuperscript{101} Bleck, “Stellunghahme [Jaeger].” 6.

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 6, 9. „...ich werde mich erschießen. Wenn ich nicht mehr wiederkommen sollte, schicke bitte meine Sachen nach Hause... wenn ich heute Abend auf Wache ziehen soll, passiert ein Unglück.”

\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., 8. „...zu der Schlußfolgerung dass im Verhältnis Vorgesetzter und Untergehender, in den Beziehungen der Offiziere und Unteroffiziere zu den Soldaten einiges nicht in Ordnung ist.”
the regiment combined. However, instead of blaming Kalb for being an ineffective leader, he was blamed for the "poor political-ideological work being done." Ideological work was the key to the Party's success:

Otherwise, these cases of non-compliance...the incorrect methods of education, and the cases of bureaucratic and heartless behavior toward the soldiers would not have been possible.

Just as significant as the toxic command climate was the isolation Jaeger felt within his own unit:

...because of his constant restriction to office duty and compulsory restrictions on his freedom, [Jaeger] felt that the conditions in the unit oppressed him and isolated him. He stood alone with no friends, nor was there anyone to look out for him.

Jaeger’s regimental commander, Major Mandel, also concluded that Jaeger’s poor relationship with his parents was a factor. His isolation from his family and the anomy he felt by his comrades and supervisors made his life in the army even more oppressive. Major Mandel could have turned the circumstances of Jaeger’s life into an indictment on the policy of the Leading Role of the Party in the NVA; but such a claim could never have been made by any career-minded officer. Therefore, Mandel concluded that the “...the socialistic relationships between superiors and subordinates” had to be improved with strengthened “individual educational work.” Put another way: his officers had to fix the relationships between superiors and subordinates, i.e., they had to fix the toxic environment by being more involved with the soldiers.

Signs of toxic leadership in the officer corps of the NVA also surfaced in other cases. The Chief of the Army Staff once blamed the unit’s toxic environment for allowing a soldier to commit
suicide. Were it not for "the heartless behavior of a few supervisors...their deficient pedagogical aptitude," and their "insufficient regard for the character of the people," the suicide would not have happened. In other words, this general identified the importance of front-line commanders and supervisors in suicide prevention. In its own convoluted way, the army was discovering a direct relationship between toxic leadership and the frequency of special incidents. The Party had it right—good leadership could have reduced the frequency of suicides in the NVA.

Similar factors may have influenced the suicide by self-inflicted gunshot of Sergeant Bodo Sachs in March 1956. Sachs’ typed suicide note apologized to his wife and blamed his suicide on the harassment he received from his commander and other officers. His regimental commander in Erfurt, Colonel Guenther, seemed to agree with this premise—up to a point. He concluded that a cause did not exist for Sachs’ suicide, but then he acknowledged the responsibility of all commanders to prevent the harassment and bullying of soldiers by their officers and sergeants:

The nurturing of a high political consciousness and discipline is the task of all commanders. This can only be achieved if the elevated demands for political and individual work are not confused with personal harassment... [author’s emphasis].

One officer’s valuable political and educational work was another’s bullying and harassment. Nevertheless, Sachs killed himself because of the toxic leadership in his unit.

The case of Private Gerhard Dahl also illustrates how soldiers responded to toxic leadership. In October 1958, this 18-year-old soldier in the 11th Panzer Regiment was sleeping on guard duty when the officer-of-the-guard, Lieutenant Werner Hausler, found him. Hausler woke Dahl up and asked, “What would you have done if a hostile person had taken your pistol and shot you?”

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110 Ibid., 8. “Die Anerziehung eines hohen politischen Bewußtseins und Disziplin ist die Aufgabe aller Kommandeure, was jedoch nur erreicht werden kann, wenn neben den erhöhten Forderungen die politische und individuelle Arbeit mit den Menschen fortlaufend geleistet wird, damit diese auch die Wichtigkeit der einzelnen Maßnahmen erkennen und diese nicht als persönliche Schikane auffassen, so wie es der KVP-Angehörige der KVPD Erfurt IX ansah.”
few more minutes of questioning, Hausler left to report Dahl to the company commander.

Tragically, Dahl was so disturbed at being found asleep that he shot himself in the chest 20 minutes later.

Until his final moments, there had been no obvious reason for Dahl to kill himself. He certainly had the right pedigree. Since both his parents were members of the Party, the investigators incorrectly concluded that they had raised Dahl in the proper socialist manner. Both parents were supportive of Dahl’s decision to enlist and routinely sent him letters and packages, indicating a strong supportive relationship. Dahl’s brother was also a proud officer in the NVA. The weekend before his suicide, Dahl had visited his home to celebrate his brother’s birthday. Overall, Dahl had given no sign to his family or his comrades that he was depressed or sought to kill himself. He did not drink or smoke and he was prudent with his money. In fact, his supervisors considered Dahl as one of the few who did not complain about his orders—he was considered one of the best soldiers in the company.

Naturally, when confronted with these facts, the Party struggled to understand his motives and find a cause. Why did Gerhard Dahl make a last-minute decision to kill himself? Was Gerhard Dahl afraid of the harsh punishment that he would receive for sleeping on guard duty, or were there other issues involved? All the evidence pointed to a significant absence causality that the Party could approve of; even the division commander believed there was no obvious cause for Dahl’s suicide. On the other hand, the investigators gave little weight to several facts. First, he unfortunate Dahl had attended school only to the 5th grade—for which he struggled to keep up with


Ibid., 1.

his peers. His friends also considered him a gentle, even effeminate, person who was “soft and
delicate” with a “highly suggestible personality.”

In the Party’s eyes, the absence of an approved cause meant it had to find a scapegoat.
Therefore, the investigators and the chain of command defaulted to the discourse to focus blame
where there may have been none. The educational work of the company may have been faulty, so
the commander convened a meeting of the officer collective to discuss Lieutenant Hausler’s role in
the death of Gerhard Dahl. The meeting was so important that the Stellvertreter two levels of
command higher took the unusual step to attend.

At some point, the meeting of the comrades devolved into a loud and vocal confrontation
between Hausler and everyone else. Many Party members expressed their dissatisfaction,
personally criticized Hausler, and accused him of being ambitious and of failing to conduct himself
in a Party-appropriate way. Hausler strongly objected and rejected any suggestion that he had
done anything wrong. He emphatically denied that he had threatened Dahl in a manner that would
have ever induced him to commit suicide.

Hausler was resolved to defend himself, but he had a personal history that he could not
overcome. He was well known for a leadership style of fear and intimidation. He threatened his
soldiers with a visit by his brother, who happened to be an officer in the Stasi. He was also
arrogant and objected in the strongest terms to the training methods of condescending political
instructors. “I am a German officer,” he would declare, implying that he was above such treatment
in his political classes. His colleagues and subordinates also characterized him as cynical leader
who often sought the worst in his peers and subordinates while highlighting his own superior
capabilities. His own sergeants had criticized Hausler for not being a “class-conscious trainer and

\[114\] Ibid., 2-6. „aufgrund seines weichlichen Gemüts...Soldat [Saller] sagte aus, daß [Dahl] in seinem Charakter sehr weich
und empfindlich war."

\[115\] Ibid., 3,5,7, 10-11. „Das werden Sie noch bereuen.“

\[116\] Ibid., 2, 7. „Seine groben erzieherischen Mängel beruhen auf seinen nicht parteimäßigen Verhalten und seinem
mangelnden Klassenbewußtsein.”

\[117\] Ibid., 11.
supervisor.” Hausler’s “pedagogical ignorance and incompetence” were particularly obvious when he yelled at his soldiers. Because of these incidents, his superiors had already cautioned him regarding his reputation as a toxic leader.

Nevertheless, the company commander suspected, but could not prove, that Lieutenant Hausler had intentionally threatened Dahl with a parting shot as he walked off, “You will come to regret this.” This suspicion contributed to the collective’s decision that Hausler suffered from “an inappropriate and narrow-minded Party attitude” and a “deficient class consciousness” toward his subordinates. Consequen}tly, his comrades quickly recommended that Werner Hausler be demoted from his officer rank and released from the service. The division commander reached the same conclusion. Like it or not, Hausler had become the “poster child” for everything inappropriate in a socialist officer.

THE DISCOURSE OF SUICIDE

The basis of all official analysis of suicides was the fundamental belief that the problem of suicide was exclusively an ideological question. To emphasize this point, in 1959 the Party directed the Chief of Main Political Administration in the Defense Ministry to develop a “Political and Enlightenment Training Program” that would eliminate suicide in the armed forces. Toward that end, the army decreed that suicide was the result of...

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118 Ibid., 8, 11. „Es ist ein bezeichnendes Beispiel für seine pädagogische Unkenntnis und Unfähigkeit, daß er des öfteren wegen verschiedenen Dingen die Soldaten anschreit und später stellt sich deren Unschuld heraus...daß Leutnant [Hausler] bei ihnen keine Autorität besitzt und die Soldaten in ihm nicht den Klassenverbundenen Erzieher und Vorgesetzten sehen.“

119 Ibid., 2, 7. „Seine groben erzieherischen Mängel beruhen auf seinen nicht parteimäßigen Verhalten und seinem mangelnden Klassenbewußtsein.“

120 Ibid. „Seine groben erzieherischen Mängel beruhen auf seinen nicht parteimäßigen Verhalten und seinem mangelnden Klassenbewußtsein.“

121 Ibid., 7-8.


...the insufficient awareness of the soldier's role and position in our societal order; as well as an inadequate perspective about a soldier's current life in the socialist State.\textsuperscript{124}

The responsibility for preventing suicides was placed squarely on the supervisors. As with other “special incidents,” the NVA assumed that its officers and sergeants could prevent suicides by increased political awareness, supervision, and personal involvement. If an accident or incident occurred, it was because educational efforts were weak, because the collective consciousness was not strong enough, or because the junior officers were not sufficiently linked with their soldiers. By elevating “Party work through the collective and [unit] leadership,” the high number of special incidents would be significantly reduced.\textsuperscript{125} If they knew their soldiers better, if they understood “the soldier’s place,” the problem could be solved.

This philosophy of leadership and “incident prevention” was very clear and it found its way into the discourse as an informal policy on suicide prevention. The Party firmly believed that faith in the ideology would actually prevent suicide among their soldiers. From the beginning, there were subtle elements of suicide prevention in the Party’s actions, even if those elements were uninformed, rudimentary, and sometimes punitive. Unfortunately, there were several problems with this concept of suicide prevention.

The first problem was that the subject was considered a taboo in East Germany. The very idea of suicide was anathema to the creation of a \textit{socialist consciousness} and, therefore, a blight on the future of the socialist state. Consequently, in public it was best to ignore the problem altogether—as was the case in 1963 when the regime stopped recording suicides as a specific cause of death in its Annual Statistical Yearbook.\textsuperscript{126}


\textsuperscript{125}“Abschlussbericht über ein besonderes Vorkommniss ([Kappel], Werner) (Vertrauliche Verschlusssache),” ed. Ministerium für Nationale Verteidigung (Dresden: Ministerium für Nationale Verteidigung, 1956), 124. „...erhöhung der gegenseitigen erziehungsarbeit durch das gesamte Kollektiv und der Vorgesetzten. Verstärkte Aufklärung über die folgen bei übermäßigen Genuß von Alkohol.”

Perhaps nothing expresses this perception of suicide in the GDR more graphically than the German word for it: Selbstmord, or literally, self-murder. Today, newer terms such as Selbsttötung (self-killing) and Suizid (a cognate for the word “suicide”) have evolved in ways that change the cultural connotation of the word from a criminal act to one more suited to medical diagnosis and treatment. Nevertheless, in the short history of the GDR, the Party used the term Selbstmord exclusively in military investigations and statistical reports. In that regard, the term encapsulated the cultural and political biases of the East German regime that regarded suicide as “self-murder.”

The second problem that interfered with a systematic solution was the NVA’s propensity to treat suicide as a subcategory of “special incidents.” This was one of the most powerful indicators of how the NVA perceived suicide. In this way, the suicide act was diminished and minimized to a level on par with other accidents, incidents, and disciplinary problems.

Categorizing suicide as an “incident” also depersonalized a very personal event that encompassed a wide range of victims. The primary victim was the soldier or officer who committed the suicide. This much was clear. Little understood, however, was the fact that the act of self-murder also created secondary victims in its wake: parents, close relatives, friends, lovers, and comrades in uniform all suffered a grief as great as any other did.

While there was very little room for the victims in the political-military discourse, the Party did carve out a space that demanded an answer to the question, “How could he [the person who committed suicide] have violated the Party?” His parents and comrades, on the other hand, would have responded with a response that fluctuated between anger and guilt. Those who were angry would ask, “How could he have done this to us?” Secondary victims also experienced great guilt for failing to help their loved one when it was most needed. They would have asked themselves, “Why did we not notice? Why did we not see?”

As one might expect, it was very difficult to determine any single simplistic cause for the suicides of their soldiers. There were a few cases that referenced the psychological problems of the victim, but they were rare. Sometimes investigators or analysts suggested a non-specific, non-medical “psychological or character weakness,” but this textual device did little to help the Party explain the phenomena. Thus, in the absence of proven medical theories on the causes of suicide, the Party defaulted to superficial excuses that whitewashed the actual causes. For example, in 1958, the army’s Main Political Office claimed that:

The characteristic causes of suicide are immoral acts (involving sexual affairs, alcohol, or financial debts) and the fear of punishments for punishable acts. Having a “weak personality” or “insufficient awareness” was also a common excuse to explain what at that time was unexplainable.

In and of themselves, any of these “approved causes” could have been a significant factor in a suicide, but “an immoral way of life” was probably insufficient to justify a soldier taking his own life. On the other hand, knowing that he had broken the rules regarding morality, alcohol, or money, together with the fear of subsequent punishment, would have been decidedly stressful. Today, we know these to be significant symptoms of an ailment whose predominant condition is the loss of hope brought on by a wide variety of personal and professional stressors. Certainly one of those stressors would have been the dysfunctional command climate within the NVA.

There is some precedent for this possibility. The idea implies that suicide could have been an escape from the military environment, but also a defiant act against toxic leaders. Twenty years after the end of the GDR, Dr. Dave Matsuda Ph.D., a cultural anthropologist working for the U.S. Army, identified a key factor in the frequency of soldier suicides in the war-weary U.S. Army:

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defiance of its leaders by combat-weary soldiers. The same was true of the East German Army. The case of Private Dahl illustrates this in dramatic ways.

There is also an aspect to suicides in the East German Army that bears mention: the unplanned suicide. As we would normally expect, most suicide cases showed evidence of prior planning. One cannot kill oneself by hanging or gassing without considerable planning. On the other hand, one of the unforeseen characteristics of suicides in the East German army was the number that were unplanned. These cases had several characteristics in common, including: a specific trigger that resulted in the suicide act, the noticeable absence of a note, and the use of a weapon of convenience, the firearm.

An excellent example of this was the tragic case of Private Burkhard at the beginning of Chapter One—a young soldier so shocked at accidentally killing a comrade that he shot himself. Gerhard Dahl’s suicide after his Lieutenant discovered him asleep while on watch was also clearly unplanned.

Corporal Günter Rademacher’s death from self-inflicted gunshot wounds may also fit this classification. After an officer severely chastised him, Rademacher shot himself in a refueling station in Dresden on April 30, 1956. The investigators noted that he was “weak of character” and “took all criticism to heart.” Therefore, they concluded that he was afraid of the punishment that would inevitably follow his poor work performance. Of course, the commander also punished the lieutenants on duty for not preventing Rademacher’s death.

130 Ibid.
Such bureaucratic responses were as good as it got. Attributing suicide to alcohol, finance, or relationship problems was common—because it was easy. The absence of psychological understanding created a causal vacuum that could be filled only by the discourse. Consequently, senior leaders defaulted there as a means of analysis and as a panacea for prevention.

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Some might have surmised that many suicides in the NVA were the result of the victim’s angst over Party ideology. However, of the cases reviewed, not one could ever be attributed to that cause. Udo Grashoff’s research (“In a Fit of Depression—”: Suicides in the GDR) has validated this finding. In a seminal work that examined the causes of suicide in East Germany, he concluded that ideology and political oppression were not the proximate causes of a high suicide rate.132

Grashoff also did not find any difference between suicide rates in the civilian population and the armed forces of East Germany.133 In theory, the NVA’s resources, its hierarchical structure, together with the optimistic hope of socialism, should have reduced its suicide rate lower than in the general population. In fact, the suicide rate for the East German Army, an army that never saw combat in its short history, fluctuated as high as 40/100,000 in 1961 and leveled to a rate of 26/100,000 in the 1980s.134 The suicide rate for NVA soldiers between 20 and 24 years of age averaged almost 30/100,000 during its history.135 These are extraordinarily high numbers for a peacetime army and sharply contrast with the rates of suicide for modern armies in combat.

For example, the suicide rate for the entire U.S. Army between 1950 and 1952, the first two years of the Korean War, was 12.0/100,000. That rate was five points higher, 17.2 in the Korean

132 Udo Grashoff, "In einem Anfall von Depression—": Selbsttötungen in der DDR, 1. Aufl. ed., Forschungen zur DDR-Gesellschaft (Berlin: Links, 2006), 179-180. The former socialist eastern states in the reunified Germany had a rate 1.6 times higher than the western states (21.4 in the East compared to 15.6 for the West).
133 Source?
134 Grashoff, "In einem Anfall von Depression—": Selbsttötungen in der DDR: 27, 48, 83, 120-121.
135 Ibid., 77-85.
theater of war. In other words, the rate of suicide for the NVA in peacetime was nine points more than the U.S. Army’s average in the war zone of Korea. At its peak, the suicide rate for a peacetime NVA was twice the rate of the U.S. Army in combat in the early 1950s.

Now make this comparison to the suicide rates of the American Army 60 years later. During the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars, the U.S. Army reported an overall suicide rate of 18.5/100,000. For troops who deployed to the combat zones of Iraq and Afghanistan, however, the rate sharply increased to 24.8/100,000. This was arguably the highest rate of suicide in the history of the U.S. Army, yet it was still lower than the NVAs. The combat-weary American Army of the 21st Century had a suicide rate lower than the peacetime East German Army.

In a sense, comparing the U.S. Army of the 21st century with the NVA of the 1950s and 1960s is unfair. The Americans had seen continuous combat from 2001 to 2014. The socialist NVA never experienced a single day of combat. Logic would dictate that the suicide rates of the Americans would have been higher, if not equal to, the NVA’s peacetime statistics. The stress of combat would have exacerbated the rates and caused them to skyrocket. In fact, the NVA’s numbers were shocking. The army that did not see combat during its history had a higher suicide rate than an army that had seen constant combat for over 14 years. This suggests the possibility that the NVA’s rates were high because of the toxic leadership of its officers and the treatment of its soldiers. The political-military discourse that should have reduced the suicide rate in East Germany probably contributed to and sustained a higher rate. Using ideology to prevent suicide, in hindsight, may not have been the best methodology.


Of course, that was not the Party’s viewpoint. It was totally convinced that solving the suicide problem, as with their accident and disciplinary problems, was completely achievable. Only by overcoming “…considerable weaknesses in socialist educational work” with “formal cadre-work” could the Party overcome the “carelessness of the [sergeants and officers] in its dealings with the comrades.” Only by emphasizing the Leading Role of the Party could its functionaries overcome the culture of toxic leadership that it had inadvertently created.

THE INVESTIGATIVE PROCESS

As expected, the investigative process could uncover such weaknesses. It is also here that the political-military discourse gained momentum. Commanders wanted quick results. In turn, incompetent and untrained investigators fed their commanders and their political officers what they wanted to hear. In this process, the blame game started almost immediately. There were no medical or psychological lessons to be learned. The only leadership lessons to be had were reinforced with punishment. The soldier was vilified and the supervisor was punished for not preventing the suicide.

Unfortunately, since there was no formal legal or bureaucratic framework to investigate such matters, the investigations, and subsequent reports of suicides and suicide attempts, were inconsistent and often poorly conducted. This inconsistency is readily obvious in the wide quality of reports—from obscure entries in unit logs and medical summaries to more comprehensive reports and analyses by the Party Control Commission and unit political officers.

For example, Sergeant Bernhardt Bachmeier’s death by hanging on February 2, 1958, was reported in a half-page telex report with no subsequent investigation on record. From that limited information, we know that Bachmeier hanged himself while home on a holiday after an argument.

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with his fiancée. Unfortunately, we know little else about the nature of his military service or the quality of his family life.

Telexes reflected the immediate reporting of an incident up the chain of command. Dutiful unit clerks also recorded special incidents in unit logbooks. The entries in these logbooks often seemed trite and judgmental, devoid of empathy at the loss of human life. Nineteen-year-old Private K. Heinz Jans died by gunshot while on guard duty in 1956. Since he had three children out of wedlock, with one more on the way, the short log entry recorded the cause of his suicide as his “immoral lifestyle.” Today, health care professionals would have probably noted that the financial stress of supporting four children may have also been significant, but the Party’s analysis had to rely on the discourse to record an acceptable cause.

In many cases, log entries recorded the suicide act without including a cause. In December 1955, Private Fritz Havener’s suicide by gunshot was recorded in the logbook of the 3rd Military District in Leipzig. This blunt fact was not colored by any other details. Nor did its place in the log indicate any precedence or priority over the weapons incident recorded before it or the petty theft from an army lorry recorded after it. Between 1956 and 1958, there were four cases of suicide with little detail recorded in unit logbooks of the 3rd Military District. Privates Kaspar, Günther Heidrich, Arnold Oelberg, and Völker Heintze were all soldiers whose names live on, if only because they became historical footnotes in unit records.

Unit surgeons also drafted medical summaries that could be just as pithy as unit logbooks. Providing few details, these reports did provide some insight into individual cases even if their conclusions was often clouded by Party discourse or unsupported medical conclusions. Twenty-six-year-old Lieutenant Walter Groos, for example, was found in the morning hours of June 7, 1963,

140 “Spitzenmeldung, Selbstmord [Bachmeier],” 1-2.
142 Ibid., 4-7.
143 Ibid., 24-25, 60-61, 64-65.
after poisoning himself with natural gas. Groos’ suicide earned a mere 52-word entry in the surgeon’s report, considerably less than the surgeon’s analysis of a flu outbreak in the unit. In Groos’ case, the surgeon, Captain Sander, found no specific cause and therefore assumed that Groos had suffered from an unspecified and decidedly unmedical “conflict situation.”

Such conclusions were common. A recipient of 11 citations for good performance, Corporal Klaus Samson had received no reprimands or disciplinary actions. Therefore, his suicide attempt in April 1960, just two weeks short of his 21st birthday, was perplexing. It was true that Samson had been drinking the night before and became involved in a fight with sailors from the merchant marine ship *Bertoldt Breck*, but by itself that should not have triggered a suicidal response.

We do know, however, that until he received a “Dear John” letter in November 1959, Samson had been engaged to be married. The day before he attempted suicide, he had received another letter from his former fiancé, but investigators claimed they could not determine whether that was a factor in his actions. Nor could Samson’s father shed any light on the mental state of his son. In the end, perhaps the best explanation might have come from a decidedly unscientific coroner: Klaus Samson had not “consciously” shot himself since he was “clouded in the brain.”

Suicide cases also received short shrift in the texts of political reports. After he committed suicide in 1961, Private Bieber received a passing mention in a four-sentence paragraph of a political report from the 7th Panzer Division. The division *Stellvertreter* concluded that while Bieber was a good soldier who faithfully performed his duties, he was also a loner who had “chosen to remove himself from the unit collective.”

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144 [Sander], “Medizinischer Auskunftsbericht 38a des 14.PR + PZW.7 für die Zeit vom 1.1 bis 30.6.1963 (Vertrauliche Verschlusssache),” 28. „Das Ereignis fand in den Morgenstunden des 7.6.63 aus noch nicht ganz geklärter Ursache (vermutlich Konfliktsituationen) statt. In medizinischer Behandlung hatte sich der Genosse zuvor nicht befunden.”


146 Ibid., 5-6.

147 Ibid., 1-5. „Nach Ansicht des Gerichtsmediziners, Prof. Dr. [Dürr] besteht die Wahrscheinlichkeit, dass dadurch eine Gehirntrübung eingetreten ist und [Samson] die Tat im Unterbewusstsein durchführte.”

The NVA did conduct more in-depth investigations of suicide cases. In such cases, it treated suicides as a criminal act, ostensibly to rule out murder as the cause of death. The reports of these investigations often included witness statements from fellow soldiers, friends, and relatives. However, the titles of these investigations often privileged some soldiers while minimizing the existence of others. For example, victims such as Private Wolfgang Schäfer or Petty Officer Muhlfeld were buried inside of official reports innocuously titled “Final Report of a Special Incident.” In so doing, leaders made their deaths seem no more or less important than accidents or drunken brawls in the streets.\(^\text{149}\)

In contrast, many reports were very specific and detailed. In January 1956, Lieutenant Manfred Scheer deserted from his air force unit for unknown reasons. Four months later, two teenagers found Scheer’s body in shallow water on the edge of a lake. The investigation revealed that he had shot himself while standing on the edge, collapsed, and then drowned in three feet of water.\(^\text{150}\) As with other suicide reports, this was an extremely incomplete and condescending report that filled only one and a quarter pages. There were no interviews recorded with his colleagues, his chain of command, or his family. The paucity of effort by the air force for this investigation confirmed that it had essentially treated Manfred Scheer as a pariah since his desertion.\(^\text{151}\)

The NVA also demonstrated its lack of diligence for the victims and their families by the appallingly short investigations, sometimes as short as two days. Commanders often demanded that suicides investigations be concluded as soon as possible—investigators responded in kind. In contrast, depending on its complexity, suicide investigations in today’s militaries average from two


\(^{151}\) Ibid., 119-120.
weeks to several months.\footnote{Linda Card (Office of Special Investigations), Email, May 8 2014.} Investigations lasting only two days in the NVA screamed, “Be done and be gone” by NVA commanders who quickly rid themselves of an annoying and embarrassing situation. The short period between the occurrence of the incident and the final signature confirmed the regime’s general taboo against suicides, as well as a lack of bureaucratic investment by the chain of command.

The conduct of the case involving 23-year-old Petty Officer Helmut Muhlfeld was a case in point. Muhlfeld worked as a vehicle driver seconded to the local office of the \textit{Stasi}. On the night of April 30, 1956, he had access to the unguarded \textit{Stasi} armory, stole a pistol, and then shot himself in his barracks room.

Because Muhlfeld was having an affair in Rostock while his wife was expecting their second child, the investigation concluded that Helmut Muhlfeld was suffering from depression. He had also been driven to excessive drinking, for which he was “harshly judged” by his comrades. We know this because immediately after his death, Helmut Muhlfeld’s behavior was discussed and duly recorded by the Party collective of his unit.

As with other cases, the investigators confirmed that the navy did not want to be bothered with the investigation or its conclusions. In only two days, the investigators wrote a three-page report and gained approval from the local Party functionary, the ship commander, the flotilla commander, and finally, the navy’s commander, Rear Admiral Felix Scheffler, an extraordinarily fast conclusion to their work.\footnote{Scheffler and Neukirchen, “Abschlussbericht, [Muhlfeld] 1956,” 107-109.} The only way this was possible was to carry the report by hand from one level to another until the final signature was obtained. This speaks to the \textit{pro forma} attempts to settle an embarrassing incident as quickly as possible and raises questions about the accuracy of the report. The superficiality and brevity of this investigation also lends credence to the possibility that, in fact, the NVA did not care about its soldiers.
Another sign that the regime did not take suicide investigations seriously was the questionable expertise of many investigators. Rather than investigations by the police or its military equivalent, the military commanders chose officers with little formal training in investigative methods and techniques. To be sure, there was the occasional allusion to Stasi or National Police interrogations, but the involvement of these law enforcement agencies was rare. A case in point was the investigation of Cannonier Gerhard Jaeger that was not conducted by medical or police experts, but by a political Stellvertreter from a tank regiment (a lieutenant colonel), a “propagandist” from an artillery regiment (a major), and the commander of an artillery company (a captain).154 Similarly, the case of Corporal Konrad Hoefler was investigated by four officers—the chief of the battalion staff, the chief of the office for cadre questions, a Party “propagandist,” and an officer representative from the air force headquarters.155

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SUICIDES: THE COST OF DYSFUNCTION

Is Karl-Heinz still alive? Or has he deserted?
The Mother of Karl-Heinz Kahler, 1956. 156

In 1956, Seaman Walter Färber committed suicide one month short of his 18th birthday. Although he was a loner with few friends, the navy viewed him as a good sailor who performed his duties well, did not have relatives or friends in the West, and did not exhibit any of the immoral behaviors the Party despised. Thus, Färber’s suicide was widely viewed as having “no cause.” In the absence of a target to assign blame, all navy petty officers (sergeant equivalents) and officers were called to pay closer attention to their sailors and “to strive for improved socialistic relationships with them.” 157

We also know very little about officer-student Hugo Scheinberg, who hanged himself in March 1958 at the NVA’s Panzer School. Like other cases, this suicide investigation was very superficial. Witness interviews may have been conducted, but no statements were attached to the report. We know that Scheinberg left three separate suicide notes declaring "...he no longer felt worthy to be a member of our society." Because he also doubted “the competence of the East German State,” the investigators concluded that Scheinberg probably suffered from low self-esteem. Almost as an afterthought, they discovered that he was also afraid of being charged and punished for a second incident of immoral behavior. 158

No doubt, the officer candidates at the Panzer School were comforted to learn of their commandant’s assessment of the incident:


158 Kommandeur der Panzer-Schule, “Besonderes Vorkommnis Offz.-Schüler [Scheinberg], Hugo geb. 20.08.27,” ed. Kommando Panzer-Schule (Nationale Volksarmee, 1958), 2. „Sch. hatte drei Abschiedsbriefe hinterlassen, in denen er zum Ausdruck bringt, daß er sich nicht mehr würdig fühle, Mitglied unserer Gesellschaft zu sein.“
The readiness [of the Panzer School] is not compromised...The struggle by the Party to improve socialistic morality will continue.159

There was nothing to worry about; even if the cycle of suicides continued, this commandant would make sure that all his instructors and students would lead moral lives.

In defense of the chain of command, it was sometimes possible to determine a factor in a suicide that would be considered causal today, even if the Party was reticent to use it as a causal finding. Corporal Konrad Hoefer, for example, had an unmistakable family history of suicides.160

His case stands out from other suicide cases because of the extraordinary disclaimer that introduced the report:

In spite of extensive investigations by the leadership of [Intelligence Battalion 12] and [investigations] from the Headquarters of the Air Force and Air Defense, the Military Prosecutor’s Office, and the offices of the Ministry of State Security [Stasi], no specific causes have been discovered that could have resulted in suicide.161

While three separate agencies of the state could not find a proximate cause for Hoefer's suicide, they noted a significant family history of suicides. His maternal grandfather had committed suicide by hanging, and his mother had committed suicide in 1939 by throwing herself onto a train track in the same manner as her son.162 The investigators concluded that Hoefer suffered from the same unnamed “pathological disease” as did other family members:

The Commission could not determine circumstances that favor the offense [of suicide]. It can be assumed, based on the [history of] suicide in the family, that [Hoefer’s suicide] is due to a pathological condition.163

Of course, the commission was not equipped to name this unspecified pathological condition.

The vast majority of cases were not so obvious. In the absence of a clear understanding by medical professionals of the psychological causes of suicide, the political-military discourse relied

159 Ibid. „Die Einsatzbereitschaft ist durch dieses Vorkommnisses nicht gefährdet. Der Kampf der Partei um die Verbesserung der soz. Moral wird weiter fortgesetzt.“
161 Ibid., 13, 21. „Trotz der umfangreichen Untersuchungen durch die Leitung des Bataillons, eine Kommission des Kommandos der Luftstreitkräfte und Luftverteidigung, die Militär- Staatsanwaltschaft und die Organe des Ministeriums für Staatssicherheit konnten bisher keine konkreten Ursachen gefunden werden, die zum Selbstmord geführt haben.“
162 Ibid., 13. „Die Mutter auf die gleiche Art wie [Hoefer].“
163 Ibid., 23. „Umstände, die die Tat begünstigen, wurden von der Kommission nicht festgestellt. Es ist anzunehmen, auf Grund der Selbstmordfälle in der Familie, daß es auf einen krankhaften Zustand zurückzuführen ist.“
on tried and true excuses for why soldiers chose to become their own victims. Other soldiers like
Private Dieter Unkle and Captain Lothar Hellewege, made their choices because they were in
financial debt to their families or their comrades.\textsuperscript{164} Hellewege supposedly committed suicide
because of his prideful refusal to seek help:

\begin{quote}
His arrogance and his uncritical behavior prevented him from coming to his
superiors with his difficulties [who could] have taken a number of measures to help
with his personal affairs.\textsuperscript{165}
\end{quote}

His commander, Lieutenant Colonel Schermer, simply endorsed the report by vilifying Hellewege:

\begin{quote}
Because of his philistine and petty bourgeois way of thinking—which he expressed
through his arrogance, his rejection of criticism, his inability to trust his superiors,
and his inadequate connection to the Party—I consider suicide quite possible.\textsuperscript{166}
\end{quote}

If Hellewege had a better connection to the Party, he would not have killed himself. This was a
serious situation, and warranted serious repercussions. In his concurring remarks, Colonel Franke,
the division’s political officer, launched into an \textit{ad hominem} attack on Hellewege and placed even
more emphasis on the Party as the solution to these difficult problems:

\begin{quote}
This suicide proves that Hellewege had little loyalty to the Party. He had cowardly
evaded responsibility for his life. Because of his arrogance and his selfishness, he
ignored the help of his Party organization and his supervisors.\textsuperscript{167}
\end{quote}

This single-minded campaign to establish blame was symptomatic of the army’s dysfunction
and toxic leadership. It would have sought to blame Hellewege’s supervisors and commander,
except that, unlike most victims, Hellewege was an officer and should have known better. Had
Lothar Hellewege not been so selfish and arrogant, had he been more courageous and more loyal,
he would still be alive. That was the establishment’s view of him. In fact, it was probably

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{165} \textemdash, “Selbstmord des Hauptmann [Hellewege],” 32. „Seine Überheblichkeit und sein unkritisches Verhalten hielten
ihn davon zurück, mit seinen Schwierigkeiten zu seinen Vorgesetzten zu kommen, trotzdem von diesen eine Reihe von
Maßnahmen ergriffen wurden, um ihm, soweit das bekannt war, bei der Regelung dieser persönlichen Angelegenheiten zu
helpen.”
\textsuperscript{166} \textemdash, 37. „Auf Grund seiner spießerhaften und kleinbürgerlichen Denkweise, die in Überheblichkeit, Ablehnung der
Kritik, mangelhaftem Vertrauen zu seinen Vorgesetzten und wenig Verbundenheit zur Partei zum Ausdruck kam, halte ich
einen Selbstmord durchaus für möglich.”
\textsuperscript{167} Ibid., 39. „Der Selbstmord beweist, daß [Hellewege] wenig Bindung zur Partei hatte. Er hat sich feige der
Verantwortung für seine Lebensweise entzogen, weil er auf Grund von Überheblichkeit und Egoismus die Hilfe der
Parteiorganisation und der Vorgesetzten ignorierte.”
\end{flushright}
Hellewege’s increasing isolation from his parents, his wife, and his colleagues, together with his financial woes, that influenced his decision to commit suicide.

Senior Lieutenant Wolfgang Tangeman’s family situation was also a significant factor in his demise. The army characterized Tangeman’s marriage as a “chain of disagreements interrupted by brief reconciliations.”168 The situation was so destructive that the political officer for his company became involved and advised Tangeman to improve his marital relationship rather than file for divorce.169 The senior political officer for the Panzer School also inserted himself into the situation. Merging marital counseling with ideology, he spoke to Tangeman about the "leadership of his marriage and the political training of his wife.” Had his political consciousness been stronger, this senior officer believed, Wolfgang Tangeman would have performed “...in a consistent way and acted as a conscientious comrade.”170 Unfortunately, this was not to be. Tangeman was

...predisposed to weakness...the active social and political work of Senior Lieutenant Tangeman was not enough to consolidate his consciousness. Thus, he [chose] the insane escape of suicide.171

Some cases may have been copycat suicides. The cases of Senior Sergeant Küchler and Captain Protz, addressed in a political analysis of the 7th Panzer Division in 1961, may have been just such an example. Both were asphyxiation cases, although Protz survived his attempt. Both also had poor relationships with their families, both had affairs with other women, and both drank excessively. Since both men had rejected any help from the Party, it concluded that neither soldier had “made service in the NVA an important role in their lives.” In the Party’s eyes, Sergeant Küchler

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169 Ibid., 9. „Von seiten der Parteileitung der Kompanie wurde ihm geraten, in seiner Familie klare Verhältnisse zu schaffen.“

170 Ibid., 23. „Sein politisches Bewußtsein war noch nicht gefestigt. Unsere politische Erziehung hat nicht gereicht, ihn so stark zu machen, daß er den konsequenten Weg geht und als bewußter Genosse handelt.“

and Captain Protz were obviously cowards who had “escaped their responsibility and atonement” for their acts.\(^\text{172}\)

Two suicides that occurred in Cottbus on April 29 and April 30, 1956, also suggested a close connection between them. Private Dieter Meier hanged himself on April 29, 1956. Since he was about to begin a 7-month sentence in a labor camp for striking an officer, his suicide suggested that fear of military punishment was greater than his desire to preserve his own life.

In the course of his enlistment, Meier had grown increasingly obstinate and belligerent over the orders and instructions he was given. On more than one occasion, he had also objected to the decisions of the government of the GDR. By the time he assaulted an officer, he had already accumulated a record of cursing at his officers and sergeants, usually by calling them “officer-pigs” or “SS-bandits.”\(^\text{173}\) These references to the Waffen-SS of the Hitler Wehrmacht forced his commander to conclude that Dieter Meier was susceptible to “the negative influences of others” and sentenced him to a labor camp for his assault.\(^\text{174}\)

Meier also had a mean streak in him that defied control. He had a terrible relationship with his parents. On his most recent holiday, he assaulted his father and fled his home after an argument. In spite of episodes like this, Meier denied that he had any problems. Nor did his closest friends claim to have noticed any signs of depression even though Meier had taken to drinking heavily (whether these comrades were being evasive is an open question).

Despite his troubles with his officers, Meier seemed optimistic. One roommate testified that Meier hoped to have his sentence reduced for good behavior so that he could enlist in the East


\(^{173}\) Obltn (Chef des Stabes) Sommerfeld, “Abschlussbericht zum besonderen Vorkommnis “Selbstmord des Soldaten [Meier], Dieter am 29.4.1956” (Vertrauliche Verschlusssache),” (Cottbus: Nationale Volksarmee, Luftstreitkräfte, 1956), 75. „Offiziersschweine und SS-Banditen."

\(^{174}\) Ibid., 69. „In moralischer hinsicht zeigte der Genosse [Meier] große Schwächen. Er war leicht erregbar, eigensinning und unter Alkoholeinfluß halblös...Die mutmaßlichen Ursachen zu seiner Tat sehe ich in den nicht normalen Familienverhältnissen, in seinem Hang zur Trunksucht, in der negativen Beeinflussung anderer aus der Haft entlassener Soldaten und in seinem unüberlegten Handeln selbst.”
German navy. Failing that, he still wanted a discharge from the army to pursue a civilian career. It appears that before his suicide, Meier held a very optimistic view of his future.\textsuperscript{176}

Meier’s optimism notwithstanding, his suicide caused repercussions throughout his unit. The commander blamed all of Meier’s supervisors for failing to prevent his death. Even though his sergeant encouraged Meier’s comrades to accompany him into town and provide a “positive influence,” every attempt to keep him sober had been unsuccessful.\textsuperscript{176} Nor had his company commander formed a “close relationship” with Meier or taken “all appropriate measures” to prevent his suicide. In that regard, the Military State’s Attorney observed that it was the responsibility of the Party and all its political organs to “personally pay attention” to cases like Meier’s.\textsuperscript{177} In other words, the discourse wanted every officer to maintain a close personal relationship with every at-risk soldier. Dieter Meier’s suicide was tragic and unnecessary, yet, one day after his suicide, Corporal Werner Feigenbaum, assigned to the same battalion, and living in the same barracks, killed himself by hanging.

Professionally, Werner Feigenbaum was a good soldier and was considered “open-minded.” Personally, however, he had significant financial problems related to the large child support payments his fiancé demanded of him. Although a few weeks earlier he told his supervisors he had no financial problems, Werner Feigenbaum was still obliged to borrow money from his fellow soldiers in order to pay his debts.\textsuperscript{178}

As with Meier, the battalion commander blamed Feigenbaum’s company commander, Senior Lieutenant Heinz Seidel, for failing to have enough “educational influence” over Feigenbaum. Seidel vehemently objected to that characterization! Although he believed Feigenbaum was

\textsuperscript{175} Ibid., 74.
\textsuperscript{176} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{177} Ibid., 75, 79.
“dishonorable,” Seidel asserted that he paid more attention to Feigenbaum than he deserved and had often corrected Feigenbaum's behavior and his attitudes toward the collective.\textsuperscript{179}

In the end, the regimental commander had a major problem on his hands. Within 24 hours of each other, two soldiers assigned to the same regiment and living in the same barracks had committed suicide. Nevertheless, the official report concluded that there was no connection between the suicides of Werner Feigenbaum and Dieter Meier. Yes, they knew each other, but they were not close friends; therefore, it was concluded that the suicides were not connected.\textsuperscript{180}

That conclusion may not have been justified by the facts. As it turns out, only a few hours after Meier’s suicide, the unit’s senior sergeant, Staff Sergeant Hellmuth Diefenbach, had discussed Meier’s suicide with Feigenbaum. Feigenbaum’s documented response was not indicative of his fatal actions a few hours later: ”Such a stupid dog. [For me] to do such a thing would be out of the question.”\textsuperscript{181} Yet he did. Without knowing anything else, this fact alone raises questions about the veracity and integrity of the two investigations.

\textbf{PUNISHMENT OF THE CHAIN OF COMMAND}

Perhaps nothing demonstrates so clearly the ineffective nature of the political-military discourse than its use in the aftermath of a suicide or suicide attempt. Even though the idea of suicide prevention was not introduced in the West until after 1960, the Party did have a single-minded view for how suicide could be prevented.\textsuperscript{182} The state wanted its ideology to prevail in every political space and every personal interaction; thus, almost every suicide report concluded with an ideological analysis of the event and the scapegoating of all parties, whether they were

\textsuperscript{179} Ibid., 81, 86-87, 89, 102-103.

\textsuperscript{180} Ibid., 80, 87. „Es ist festzustellen, daß ein Zusammenhang mit dem Selbstmord des Soldaten [Meier], am 29.4.56 nicht besteht.“

\textsuperscript{181} Ibid., 92. „Am Vortage gegen 9.00 Uhr habe ich Fesutel gesehen und auch gesprochen besonders hinsichtlich des Selbstmordes des Gen. Sold. [Meier]. Er sagt sinngemäß, „so ein blöder Hund, so etwas käme bei mir überhaupt nicht in Frage.“...Sein persönliches Verhältnis zu dem Gefreiten Meinhard, der am 29.04.1956 Selbstmord beging, war nicht tief freundschaftlich.“

\textsuperscript{182} “Brief History of Suicide Prevention in the United States,” US Surgeon General, \url{http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK109918/}. The International Association for Suicide Prevention was founded in 1960. The first suicide crisis center in the US was not certified until 1976.
responsible or not. In other words, despite clarion calls to improve the leadership of their officers and sergeants, the single most important method of suicide prevention was punitive.

In the case of Private Gerhard Dahl, his platoon leader, Lieutenant Werner Hausler, became the scapegoat who departed the NVA under a cloud. The Party clearly sought vengeance on someone, and Hausler was its most convenient target. In hindsight, though, members of the collective may have hoped to eliminate Hausler because they disliked him and Dahl’s suicide was merely the opportunity to do that.

Hausler was not unique in that regard. Punished with arrest or dismissal for failing to do their duty, other officers and sergeants essentially became secondary victims in the aftermath of a suicide. The Party was single-minded in its efforts to punish any supervisor associated in any way with a suicide—whether they could have prevented the suicide or not.183

Sometimes the consequences were widespread and affected hundreds of soldiers. After Klaus Samson’s attempted suicide, the regimental commander restricted his soldiers from visiting the local bars in Rostock. Instead, he expected them to fill their “free time...with sporting and cultural occupations.”184 His rationale for this policy was that the environment around Rostock was a “negative influence on the behavior and appearances of our soldiers and NCOs.”185 He also blacklisted the Guesthouse Forest-Restaurant in neighboring Barnsdorf and prohibited his soldiers and officers from visiting it. This particular den of iniquity had experienced large numbers of “...incidents, suicides, deadly accidents, attempted and successful desertions, and fights.”186

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185Ibid. „Wir sind dir Meinung, dass die Umgebung unserer Soldaten und Uffz. während der Freizeit einen bestimmten positiven oder auch negativen Einfluss auf das Verhalten und Auftreten unserer Genossen in der Freizeit ausübt.”
More often, however, the official repercussions of a specific suicide affected only a few officers and sergeants. Such was the case when Corporal Wolfgang Schäfer died of a self-inflicted gunshot after stealing a pistol from an unguarded unit armory. Except for noting his problems with his fiancé, who wanted a son by him, the investigators provided very little insight into Schäfer as a victim. On the other hand, we know much more about the duty officer who left the armory unsupervised and provided Schäfer unfettered access to deadly weapons. This officer probably would have been punished for his negligence in due course, but it took the loss of a young German son to bring his failure to the attention of his commanders.187

When Private Dieter Unkle committed suicide because he could not pay his debts, Party leaders were determined to improve the “poor educational work” in the regiment by demanding that “all measures be taken.”188 As with the case of Gerhard Jaeger, this emphasis on “all means” included measures that would be appropriate today:

It is incumbent on all commanders, at whatever level, to know, as quickly and as specifically as possible, all aspects of the soldiers [in their units], particularly their family and personal issues. Toward this end, all means are to be exploited.189

Knowing their subordinates has always been a hallmark of good leadership. Changing the dysfunctional culture of the NVA, however, was much more difficult to achieve. It was easier for army and Party leaders to cleanse the socialist consciousness by assessing blame and assigning punishment. For example, the company commander, the company Stellvertreter and the platoon leader were all punished with reprimands for J. K. Heppenheimer’s suicide because of their “deficient educational work.”190 In other words, three officers suffered the consequences because they could not convince Heppenheimer to change his off-duty lifestyle or prevent his suicide. The

190 Tiedley, “Nachweisbuch über besondere Vorkommnisse 1956,” 18-19. „Ursache: unmoralische Lebenswandel, hat 3 uneheliche Kinder, das 4... unterwegs.“
lieutenants responsible for the watch when Günter Rademacher shot himself were also punished for not preventing it.191

About three weeks after Sergeant Lothar Janson deserted his unit in June 1956, his girlfriend discovered him dead by natural gas asphyxiation in her apartment. While professionally Janson had been a reliable soldier, he had personally incurred a significant debt in keeping up with child support payments after a divorce. The financial and familial stressors were obvious, but the Party’s focus was on the company commander and his Stellvertreter who could not account for Janson’s whereabouts or his financial situation. Inevitably, the Party blamed both officers for his suicide and fired the company commander from his post.192

In Bodo Sachs’ case, the chain of command also received extensive punishments for their failure to take professional responsibility. The captain in charge of the station was reprimanded and assigned a 24-hour duty watch. The Officer of the Day received three days of house arrest with additional work assignments. The political officer of the company received two days of house arrest and additional work assignments. The company commander received five days house arrest with additional assigned duties. All of these punishments were completely in line with their commander’s attitude about such problems—a suicide could only occur because of insufficient and ineffective work by the company commander and the political officer.193

The conclusion that the cause of suicide was because of ineffective political work was not unique. The regimental commander responsible for the investigations of Private Dieter Meier’s and Corporal Werner Feigenbaum’s suicides also concluded that more “personal work” by his officers was still necessary:


We must conclude that intensive [political] work in such cases must still be conducted in order to prevent the loss of valuable human lives in this way.  

There were a few commanders in the NVA who had a pragmatic view of these problems. The 1st Flak Division had already experienced a high number of actual and attempted suicides in the previous six-month period. The frequency was high enough to force the division commander, Lieutenant Colonel Rau, to hold extensive discussions with his commanders about the problem. Despite their efforts, though, on November 19, 1958 23-year old Corporal Werner Haber returned to his apartment after having a drink with his father and gassed himself. Officially, the air force attributed the cause of his suicide to his dysfunctional family relationships. His parents and stepparents confirmed that there had been many disputes in the family. Unfortunately, Haber was stereotyped as “weak-willed” and unable to deal with the familial disappointment and professional embarrassment of being passed over for promotion. When he learned that his wife was also unfaithful, he sought a solution through the Stellvertreter of his training company, but that effort was also for naught.

Suicide was a prohibited topic, but Lieutenant Colonel Rau insisted that his commanders and his officers discuss it. They did their best, but the lack of options within the discourse failed to provide them with anything useful as a solution. In the end, the loss of good German youth was never as important as the shame and embarrassment that suicide brought to the Party.

It should be noted in concrete terms that the ignominy of a suicide affects the social order and [therefore] calls for a conscientious education and better understanding by the officers of our soldiers and NCOs [author’s emphasis]. Rau was correct in his assessment; suicide was a societal problem and good leadership was an important element of any possible solution.

194 Sommerfeld, “Selbstmord des Gefr. [Feigenbaum], 1956,” 103. „Zum anderen muß die Schlußfolgerung gezogen werden, daß in derartigen Fällen noch intensiver mit den Menschen gearbeitet werden muß, um zu verhindern, daß wertvolle Menschenleben auf diese Art verloren gehen.”
196 Ibid., 4.
197 Ibid. „In dieser Information soll besonders auf die Schändlichkeit eines Selbstmörders in unserer Gesellschaftsordnung und konkret auf eine bewußte Erziehung und das bessere Kennenlernen unserer Soldaten und Unteroffiziere durch die Offiziere hingewiesen werden.”
That is why Rau’s focus on his commanders was a logical strategy. If suicide was caused by isolation and a loss of hope, then good leaders would have emboldened young men to live for one more day. Of course, in the absence of proven suicide prevention measures, any NVA commander would have relied on the required, but unproven, political educational measures. “Conscientious education” would have been appropriate if it was focused on suicide prevention, but such education was political in nature. Rather than offering specific tools to help the soldier, the message of these meetings was that suicide was an offense, an ignominy, to the East German people. Despite his best efforts, Rau was unable to prevent the number of suicide cases from climbing in his division.

The suicide of Cannonier Siegfried Schnur is another example of how some commanders could take a more practical stand about these problems. Between 4 A.M. and 6 A.M. on April 21, 1958, Schnur of the 22 Motorized Rifle Regiment (MSR-22) hanged himself in the watch tower while on guard duty. He was only a few months short of his 20th birthday and had been in the army less than a year.

Nothing about this case would lead one to believe that Schnur was suicidal. The investigating commission could find no private or official reasons for his tragic action. In fact, he was regarded as one of the best soldiers in the company. A letter the parents received from their son the day after his death shed no light because it indicated that Schnur was in good spirits and liked his work. Other factors were also discounted. His parents denied a familial history of suicide. Nor could investigators find fault with the conduct of the guard watch. Apparently, an outstanding soldier had killed himself for no obvious or politically acceptable reason.

In every military unit in the world, regardless of nationality or service, there were a few favorite sons and daughters who catch the eye of their sergeants and officers; Siegfried Schnur was such a soldier. His suicide, then, must have completely shocked the chain of command and

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199 Ibid., 6.
befuddled its investigators, so much so that the final report was signed by the commander of the 3rd Military District, Major General Kurt Wagner. It appears that Wagner had the intestinal fortitude to go against conventional wisdom in this case. He concluded, political-military discourse notwithstanding, that there was no obvious cause for this suicide. The report hit the Defense Ministry like a firestorm.

Nineteen days later, Lieutenant General Heinz Hoffmann responded for Defense Minister Willi Stoph with a shocking retort. Without benefit of medical or scientific information to support his position, Hoffmann declared what is common knowledge today, namely that every suicide has a cause:

It is impossible that a soldier commits suicide without a reason. Even if the appointed Commission could not determine any causes, it is impossible. Such a finding only proves that the [investigating] commission has not worked hard enough.200

Hoffmann then directed General Wagner to reconvene the investigating commission and submit a new report to the Defense Minister. Besides the victim, somebody had to be at fault, and the Minister wanted satisfaction.

General Wagner did not respond as expected. He stood by his original report and concluded that, "The only cause for this suicide lies in the psychological makeup of Schnur."201 Wagner had discerned a cause that was mere supposition on his part—the cause of this suicide was psychological! Perhaps Wagner and the responsible division commander, Hans Ernst (both Major Generals), brought enough bureaucratic and Party credibility to their findings to survive this frank reply. Both of them remained in command for a few more years.202

200 Ibid., 2. „Es ist unmöglich, dass ein Soldat ohne Grund sich das Leben nimmt. Das ist auch unmöglich, selbst wenn die eingesetzte Kommission keine Ursachen ermitteln konnte. Eine solche Feststellung beweist nur, dass die Kommission nicht gründlich genug gearbeitet hat.“

201 Ibid. „Die einzigste Ursache zum Selbstmord liegt in der Psyche des [Schnur].“


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Unfortunately, most NVA commanders could not stand against the Party for what they believed was right. The political-military discourse not only constrained discussion, it restrained the range of possible solutions available to the chain of command. Good socialist soldiers did not commit suicide; therefore, suicide prevention began with good political work. Those who failed, defined as any supervisor who supervised soldiers that committed suicide or any other besondere Vorkommnisse, also discovered they were secondary victims and punished for their lack of effort in political matters. Despite its single-minded focus on ideological solutions, the Party was unable to eliminate “the thousand trifles” that affected the daily lives of the common soldier. The resulting command climate evolved into a military culture in the 1980s that shocked Bundeswehr General Schönbohm—in the socialist state, the machine was more important than the man.

In the end, soldiers improve by observing and mimicking the examples set by mentors and supervisors. When their leadership is toxic, when the command climate is dysfunctional, and when the political and social objectives of the army are poorly articulated, men degenerate into poor soldiers and questionable citizens.

The rates of suicides committed in the NVA were just as high as in the civilian population. These rates reflected a deep bureaucratic and institutional causality that could have been repaired. It was the ideology that caused the political-military discourse. The political-military discourse perpetuated and nurtured a dysfunctional bureaucracy and a culture of leadership that was at best, irritating — at its worst, toxic.

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203 “Erfahrungen, MSR-2, 1960,” 22. „Eine Ursache für diesen Zustand besteht darin, dass die Kommandeure und Parteiorganisationen noch nicht voll begreifen, dass die Erhöhung der Anforderungen an die Soldaten zugleich eine grössere Sorge um den Menschen erfordert und die Beseitigung der tausend Kleinigkeiten, die das Leben der Armeeangehörigen unnötig erschweren, verlangt.“
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

The leading cadre at all levels does not appear in the barracks often enough. Nor are they committed to the principle of continuous political work with the troops. They still do not understand that higher expectations on the soldiers also require a greater concern for them. *Material for Active Party Members of the NVA, 1961.*

In the event of an aggressive imperialistic attempt against our country under the conditions of a rocket-delivered nuclear war...and at the risk of sacrificing their lives, army members in all areas of political and military training and education are to be prepared to crush every enemy with exceptional resilience and fortitude. *Assessment of Political-Moral Circumstances, 7PD, 1962*

Today, standing in the middle of Berlin’s famous *Pariser Platz*, visitors from around the world can view the historic Brandenburg Gate, the stately French and American embassies, and the famous Adlon Hotel. After a short 15-minute walk to the south, those same tourists can enjoy the bustling *Potsdamer Platz* adjacent to the fashionable Sony Center. Between the two plazas lie the newly constructed *Memorial to the Murdered Jews in Europe* (the German Holocaust Memorial) and brick markers commemorating the razed wall that separated East and West Berlin during the Cold War—a poignant reminder of its most recent struggles.

Both squares also provide popular attractions: hot-air balloon flights, restaurants, cafes, souvenir shops—all too happy to provide the visitor a taste of Berlin. Also providing entertainment are unique living memorials to the East German soldier. Young men, most born after the end of the Cold War, dress in formal or battle dress uniforms of the NVA and have their pictures taken while holding East German army flags. A few *ersatz Soldaten* earn money by stamping passports with entry visas to the former GDR. Others paint their skin and uniforms with silver tint and stand like

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1 “Material für das Parteiaktiv der Nationalen Volksarmee,” 142. „Die leitenden Kader (aller ebenen) treten nur ungenügend an der Basis politisch auf und verwirklichen noch nicht konsequent das Prinzip der ständigen politischen Arbeit mit den Menschen. Es wir noch nicht begriffen, dass die erhöhten Anforderungen an die Soldaten zugleich auch eine grössere Sorge um den Menschen erfordert.”

statues on soapboxes while expecting generous donations thrown at their feet. The images are so powerful that they have occasionally become backdrops for German and international TV broadcasts.³

Unfortunately, these young men hardly seem aware of the message they send when they are wearing NVA uniforms. Regardless of any political bias we might hold against the GDR, NVA soldiers swore an oath to serve their country. The frivolous behavior of today’s young men in NVA uniforms has turned the military service of hundreds of thousands of Germans into a cruel tasteless joke.

Of course, the East Germans won no grand military victories. Their only casualties came from training accidents and other besondere Vorkommnisse, most of which are forgotten or suppressed in their memories. Today, save for the iconic memorial of Volkspolizei soldier Conrad Schuman jumping over barbed wire into West Berlin, there are more memorials in Berlin to Soviet soldiers of World War II than to soldiers of the more recent East German Army.⁴ The tourists remember their pictures, but most army veterans have tried to forget their undistinguished but honorable service.⁵

The grand arc of Marxism in East Germany cannot be separated from the lives of the soldiers who served it on a daily basis. Nor can old memories ignore the roles the Party and its officers played in the army’s dysfunction. The few ex-NVA soldiers who have written memoirs or fictional accounts of their experiences rarely mention their officers in positive terms.⁶ Yet, whether


⁴ Examples of existing Soviet memorials include the massive Soviet War Memorials in Treptower Park, the Tiergarten, and in Schönholzer Heide. There is also a war memorial to the Soviet Army within the confines of the Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp north of Berlin.


by omission or commission, every commander and political officer played a significant role in the way their soldiers were treated. In many cases, these officers failed to care for their soldiers as their duty required. To paraphrase one historian’s pointed analysis of the East German state, the forces of destruction, albeit from within the Party’s own bureaucracy, won over the forces of production—and the common soldier suffered for it.7

Clearly, the tragic incidents involving individual soldiers described in Chapter 5 have not been described in isolation. Our understanding of their context enhances our understanding for how and why those tragedies occurred. When Frau Kahler shouted at the unsuspecting political officer standing at her front door, she already knew the single most important fact of her life—her son was in trouble. What she did not know was whether he had died or had deserted.8 In either case, she would never see him again. Like so many mothers whose sons had served their country, she feared that ominous knock on the door by an unknown notification officer. The stranger would not be a Party official in a tie or a Stasi agent in a trench coat, but an officer in NVA uniform with a long, dour face reporting the physical, or worse, the ideological demise of her son. Neither K.H. Kahler’s suicide, the beating of a sailor near Rostock, nor the unsanitary conditions in an air force dining hall can be truly understood apart from the context in which they occurred: a political-military discourse that caused extensive dysfunction, command incompetence, and the pervasive toxic leadership of its officers. The context, as described in Chapters 2-4, has broadened our perspective of every-day life in the NVA.

The Nationale Volksarmee represented everything the regime hoped to achieve in the GDR. The Socialist Party established a formal command structure with a politicized chain of command to monitor the professional performance of its commanders and to develop the socialist consciousness of its soldiers. The soldiers, in turn, were expected to return home with a new

political consciousness and newly honed political skills that would be used in the relentless development of the German socialist state. What had been learned in uniform would be carried back into civilian life.

Unfortunately for the SED, this was not a successful process. The Party’s descriptions of a utopian future under the socialist mantel were ephemeral and easily unmasked by cynical soldiers. Nor did the Party’s hollow rationalizations to improve military and personal performances provide the expected motivation for improved political action or military performance. The irony was that those responsible for inculcating this ideology into the minds of hundreds of thousands of young men had a singular difficulty describing a world that could never become reality. In this way, the soldier in the barracks and the veteran at home received daily reminders of the dissonance between the state’s propaganda and their own stark reality.

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There are many theories to explain why the GDR collapsed. Some focus on the Soviet Union’s failure to prop up the East German regime in 1988-1989. Others focus on social and economic causes. Notably, most theories have not focused on the organizational problems of the regime, probably because the centralized planning of resources was considered a hallmark of socialist state-building. However, those stale 5-year plans focused on national goals and objectives without providing appropriate and corresponding methods and resources to see the plan through to completion. Similar problems played out on a routine basis in the NVA as its officers tried to solve practical, sometimes personal, problems with impossibly ideological solutions. The undercurrents of this process closely approximate Michel Foucault’s organizational dynamics of state systems as a “system of systems.” Each particular system (education, labor, industry, or national security, for example) depended on the same ideological playbook for its success.

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9 For an excellent overview of the various theories that frame the East German debate, see: Ross, The East German Dictatorship.
The Party elite and its faithful were supposed to have a very clear understanding of how they were to implement socialism in the new German state. Within the army, the ideological content, homogenized and normalized, was communicated with textual memes, messages, and signification that mirrored the interplay of ideological, political, and social forces within East Germany. In turn, these memes and messages were repeated in every conversation, discussion, and official communiqué at every organizational level of the NVA. Eine reihe von Mängel was supposed to be solved by putting the Leading Role of the Party in the forefront of all individual efforts, by mandatory use of criticism/self-criticism as a management tool, and by ensuring that Einzelleitung interfered with the commander’s ability to solve problems. In that regard, the Party created in its national defense establishment a structure and environment that absolutely depended on the “homogenization and normalization” of ideological content to achieve its strategic goals.10

From an organizational perspective, the Party provided appropriate guidance on strategic, organizational, and operational matters. It also provided articulated boundaries and limits on the authority of its commanders and staffs. From this standpoint, the SED was particularly successful: the commanders and political officers within the NVA were compliant, self-critical, and watchful of comrades who did not conform to the Party line. The Party achieved its short-term goals—the state was never in danger of a military coup.

On the other hand, the Party never imagined that the army it built was functionally incapable of achieving its strategic objectives. For the most part, the army had the resources necessary to achieve its objectives, even though the equipment in many units was dated. The MfNV also funded an entire system of schools for officers who were trained using socialist principles in the proper application of military violence. Despite these efforts, though, the political-military discourse, the solution to all problems in the Defense Ministry, actually had measurable negative

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effects on the quality of its leadership, the efficiency of its training, the state of its discipline, and its organizational performance in general.

Inspection reports routinely condemned officers for not putting the Leading Role of the Party in the “foreground of their work.” While the policy of Einzelleitung insured a dual chain of command with a Party presence at every echelon, it also enhanced the prestige and the role of the Party at the expense of the traditional role of the commander. In effect, Einzelleitung contributed to the army’s dysfunctional behavior by creating unnecessary conflict between political masters of the state and the military chain of command. The policy of criticism/self-criticism exacerbated these tensions so badly that one wonders how anyone survived professionally.

These foundational policies found expression as textual patterns with unique memes and specific messages. NVA documents, particularly documents written by political officers and bureaucratic political organs, used a series of textual patterns—circumlocution, inductive reasoning, and the interrogative—to establish their position within the military hierarchy. These patterns shaped tautologies that certified the state as a superlative and all-subordinate sectors and organizations as having eine reihe von Mängel. Thus, the policies of the political-military discourse became repetitive memes—Leading Role of the Party, criticism/self-criticism, and Einzelleitung—used to validate the state and claim privilege over all other solutions to its problems.

The Leading Role of the Party formalized the de facto status of the Party as a “control regime” in the complete Foucauldian sense of the term. Party control became more hardened, more institutionalized, more formal, and more dogmatic. Its political organs developed an independent
system of control: inspections, analytical reports, hearings, and trials that reinforced the importance of ideology in assessing crime and punishment. The evidence is clear on this point. What is mystifying, however, is not that the discourse negatively affected these systems of control, but that the Party and the military leadership did not have the wherewithal to change in a positive way the thrust of its dysfunctional influence over NVA operations, training, and decision-making.

If the political-military discourse was the cause, what were the organizational effects? The remaining chapters traced the trajectory of that dysfunction across the organization of the NVA. On an organizational level, the discourse directly affected the ability of its officer training establishments to properly and efficiently train both line and political officers. What those officers learned from professional schools and their senior officers significantly affected their ability to create and maintain a positive work environment for the soldiers. Nor could poorly trained and poorly educated officers avoid having direct negative effects on their units’ ability to accomplish military tasks. The resulting command climate was not only dysfunctional, but also toxic. Large numbers of vehicle accidents, accompanied by accidental deaths, were common. The average soldier and his officer were frequently disciplined. The mix of military and Party disciplinary processes combined to keep a thumb on the least infraction. The number of disciplinary processes was a significant detractor to efficiently training a socialist army for combat.

Of course, an army that has leadership problems also has problems with its soldiers. The first indicator of such problems should have been the high suicide rates. Unfortunately, in the absence of accepted medical theory on suicide prevention in the 1950s and 1960s, the NVA was singularly incapable of reversing the trends. Among many factors to this problem was the callous attitude of NVA officers toward their soldiers—one of privilege instead of appropriate care.

After the fact, the Party’s failure to adjust successfully to its dysfunction was easy to see. More difficult to understand was the bureaucratic lethargy that prevented positive organizational change. The Minister of Defense and his generals clearly understood the scope of their problems
and attempted to correct them. They also had a finely honed feedback system that readily and efficiently identified problems. In most cases, its dual chain of command kept the political masters abreast of the army's readiness and its day-to-day problems. Without a doubt, the Party's awareness of its problems was a particular strength.

However, while the central planning organs of the East German state could articulate clear goals, its methodology was often counterproductive and sophomoric. Yes, the regime was quite good at identifying gaps in performance, but it could not coerce those responsible into adopting effective leadership methods and struggled to find effective military and political solutions to its own perceived deficiencies.\(^\text{11}\) The epitome of that struggle found fruit in the discourse by equating “ideological training” with successful training results. Good rifle marksmanship or drivers’ proficiency in technical schools was not the result of good training and practice, but of “good political work.”\(^\text{12}\) It is now obvious that the Party’s goals were clear; the military and political resources necessary to achieve their goals were plentiful, yet the Party was never able to resolve the organizational dysfunction it created for itself.

This emphasis on the political was incongruent with practical military training and unit proficiency. Infusing dialectic materialism into army life would embolden a renewed socialist consciousness, but training deficiencies still occurred, which forced military and political leaders to call for a renewed emphasis on the Party’s Leading Role and more self-criticism instead of practical training.\(^\text{13}\) The result of such logic was a destructive trend by officers to try to solve their practical problems by ideological means, with unforeseen harm to their soldiers.

The lack of strong leadership in the officer corps did play a large role in the dysfunctionality of the NVA. This was due, in part, to a less than middle-school education for the vast majority of officer candidates. Only 10% of NVA officers in the 1950s and 1960s had a university education.

\(^\text{12}\) "Chronik des PR-14 von 20.08.1956 bis 30.11.1962 (Geheime Verschlußsache),” 135, 144.
\(^\text{13}\) "Rolle der Partei in der NVA, 1958,” 39.
Starting from such a poor educational foundation, most line officers would have barely maintained their qualifications in their military specialties, much less maintained a functional understanding of Marxism-Leninism. However, the fact that most NVA officers were poorly trained and educated was peripheral to the bigger problem. The regime’s leadership doctrine, strongly influenced by the ideological mandates of the political-military discourse, caused an irrational focus on ideological, rather than practical principles of leadership.

How this translates into organizational productivity and efficiency was easy to see. **Politbüro** directives clearly mandated that, “the first duty of the leadership cadre of the NVA [was] ideological education, the political and military training of the troops...”  

Could there be any wonder, then, that some officers took this instruction to the extreme? Yet, the Office for Security Questions in the **Politbüro** was surprised to discover that many officers were deficient at their military tasks:

The desire to gain concrete operational-tactical knowledge does not yet exist in many officers. A large number of officers are of the opinion that their school course [note: formal training] was sufficient to qualify themselves militarily and do not recognize the necessity to learn...operational-tactical material.

Many of their top junior officers seemed to have incorporated this attitude. The rate of NVA officers sent home from their courses in Moscow for unprofessional conduct in 1956-1957 would have been embarrassing for any country, much less the leading socialist state in the Soviet camp.

Nevertheless, recognizing the problem did not bring about reforms within the military domain. Five years later, senior operational commanders, constrained by the political-military discourse, were still directing their units to focus on the ideological over the practical:

The most important task towards the elevation of combat training is the effective political-ideological-moral education of Army members, the strengthening of their will to win and their confidence in victory (author’s emphasis).

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Instructions like this would have sent mixed messages across the officer corps and resulted in very predictable attitudes by commanders and officers towards their soldiers. Commanders would have been first in the hierarchy to fix these problems, but many, even ten years after the founding of the KVP/NVA, were having difficulty functioning as required in their position:

...commanders have insufficient ideas about the purposeful training of their personnel, function with difficulties, and do not have a complete appreciation of their troop units and the formations of our division.\textsuperscript{18}

Subordinate officers would have quickly understood that their own commanders set the professional standard they were to achieve. Consequently, either they took unwarranted privileges or they demonstrated unacceptable professional qualities in their daily duties, including:

...irresponsibility, sloppiness, heartlessness, arbitrariness, deficient organization of duty, incorrect use of disciplinary instructions, and mistakes in the organization of material provisioning, especially in provisions and uniforms.\textsuperscript{19}

These complaints were not isolated to a few units, but symptomatic of wider leadership problems. Many officers did not conform to service regulations or understand what their duties were with respect to military training:

The fact is...commanders have insufficient ideas about the purposeful training of their personnel, function with difficulties, and do not have a complete appreciation of their troop units and the formations of our division.\textsuperscript{20}

Others had problems just meeting the basic requirements of officer leadership at levels where the soldiers lived and trained, so much so that by 1964 the MfNV was reporting that:

The care for the official and personal lives of army members was still not yet meeting the day-to-day basic principles of socialist troop leadership of all commanders and superiors.\textsuperscript{21}

Junior officers were clearly caught in the middle. Seeing the systemic problems, senior leaders came to distrust their juniors and lashed out at their inability to execute little understood responsibilities. The junior officers now learned supposed socialist military leadership by trial and

\textsuperscript{18} "Auswertung 7.PD, 1962," 64.
\textsuperscript{20} "Auswertung 7.PD, 1962," 64.
error rather than through good instruction and competent mentoring. Consequently, junior officers lost control of their sergeants and soldiers early in their first assignments and usually failed to regain it. When the command climate did not improve, the system directly blamed the junior officer. Most often, that blame surfaced as significantly high punishment rates. 21% of junior officers committed violations so egregious that they were placed on probationary status or completely removed from Party rolls.22 Other units experienced punishment rates as high as 40%.23 These same junior officers slowly disappeared into the bureaucratic woodwork by hiding behind uninformative or inadequate reports that justified their decisions while criticizing their subordinates, their peers, and even their superiors. This was not leadership framed by a program of aggressive professional development, but rather a program hindered by an incessant focus on leadership by ideology. The resulting lack of discipline directly affected combat readiness, jeopardized the security of the state, and interfered with the socialist experiment in significant ways.

The result was that soldiers lived and served in a repressive command climate led by ill trained and undereducated toxic leaders. Senior officers could have solved this problem with an aggressive mentoring program, but this was also an unfulfilled expectation. Middle-ranking officers and commanders, the echelon most responsible for supervising young officers, were either reluctant to provide guidance and leadership or were often absent from their duties.24 The evidence also points to an officer corps filled with careerists who took advantage of their positions despite the admonitions and pleas of Party leaders and senior officers. Those officers who did not focus on preventing military crimes or accidents were blamed for their “sloppy

work...noncompliance of regulations, and violations of supervisory responsibilities.”

Naturally, junior officers followed these examples and shirked their own responsibilities, thus often leaving their sergeants and soldiers to fend for themselves.

The resulting leadership vacuum contributed to every possible red flag in the NVA: high rates of accidents, desertions, disciplinary punishments, and suicides. The average headquarters district or Border Troops Brigade in the period 1959-1960 averaged a vehicular accident every two to three days. Indeed, a border guard involved in a vehicular accident during that period, either as a driver or as a passenger, had a 60% chance of being injured or killed.

The 5th Military District, with approximately 40% of the units in the NVA, experienced 463 motor vehicle accidents in the period 1957-1958, or one accident every two days.

Another flag pointing to organizational dysfunction was the frequency of disciplinary proceedings incurred by soldiers and their officers. In the period 1954 to 1957, the annual rate of “refusing to obey orders” by soldiers was almost 17,000/year. Another sign of the friction between NVA officers and their soldiers was the rate of assaults against their direct supervisors, sometimes exceeded 6,000 incidents per year. By 1965, the assaults were so alarming that the political officer of the 7.PD reported:

Disciplinary violations...have climbed alarmingly. Above all, this is a matter concerning assaults, insults, slurs, and ill-disciplined acts towards supervisors, deficient educational work, negligence of official duties, and violations against orders and instructions.

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The soldiers bore the direct brunt of these leadership failures. The training environment was oppressive and counterproductive. Outside of the military, the everyday life of the average citizen was reflected in the mantels of power, the titles of ownership and political power, the police regulations, and the working codes of industry necessary to establish control and discipline.\textsuperscript{31} The everyday life of the NVA soldier was similarly ordered, arranged, and manipulated by command authority, political supervision, pervasive regulations, and onerous everyday routines that resulted in suicides, high accident rates, large numbers of desertions, excessive drinking, and unacceptable assaults on superiors. Predictably, these incidents were most often attributed to ideological causes as was represented in one report of a fatal accident:

This [incident] had its causes in \textit{insufficient ideological educational work}. The significance of orders and their execution for the elevation of combat readiness and the improvement of military discipline are not yet completely clear [to all army members] [author’s emphasis].\textsuperscript{32} The soldier completely responded to this environment.

The story of the NVA soldier is also the story of the “other” in the political-military discourse. This group included all army members who were charged and punished, as well as any soldier who was not a Party member. The “other,” the discourse claimed, was the product of “political-ideological unclarities” which implied that the soldier, the army, and, by implication, society itself, was not focused on prescribed methods and objectives. If they had been focused properly, NVA soldiers would have understood the importance of their responsibilities and acted in Party-appropriate ways. The “other” was highlighted in forms and dimensions with which most of us are unfamiliar—the kangaroo courts of Party processes, the beatings by officers or sergeants, the depictions of soldiers’ resistance to the Party—these all represent the ironclad application of discipline through Party discourse. The manifestation of these methods was the startlingly high

\textsuperscript{31} Lüdtke, \textit{The History of Everyday Life: Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life}: 20.

rates of besondere Vorkommnisse and suicides in the NVA. The natural implication was that an NVA without disciplinary problems would have been unbeatable.

Nor could the Party and its political officers really hope to achieve the self-professed goal of developing the socialist consciousness of its soldiers. Most soldiers could not, or would not, meet the high standards of ideological purity expected of them. Other soldiers had the audacity to show their actual resistance by deserting or participating in other prohibited behaviors. Soldiers complained, disobeyed their instructions, caused accidents, or just generally performed below expected standards, but their most egregious failure was refusing to join the Party. The Party’s apologies for these delinquent soldiers were centered squarely in the political-military discourse. As the political office from the 7th Panzer Division repeated so often:

The ideological basis of ... deficiencies lay in the incorrect assessment of the military-political situation and a political carelessness toward the international situation. Problems, regardless of their context or scope, were always framed in ideological terms.

Of all the indicators of dysfunction, though, none was more poignant than the Party’s failure to reduce the suicide rate of its soldiers. The frequency of NVA suicides shows the dramatic effects of the discourse across the entire institution of the army. The records of individual investigations describe tragedy after tragedy of the soldier in the context of a dysfunctional political-military discourse. More important, the records also show the chronic lack of responsibility by officers for their soldiers. Instead of eliminating “the thousand trifles” in the daily lives of their charges, the Party inadvertently exacerbated its problems by undercutting the responsibility each officer should have had for his soldiers.

This is the context of the East German soldier. The poor leadership of the officer corps and the resulting bureaucratic dysfunction is exactly why the Alltagsgeschichte of the NVA is such a

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34 “Erfahrungen, MSR-2, 1960,” 22. „Eine Ursache für diesen Zustand besteht darin, dass die Kommandeure und Parteiorganisationen noch nicht voll begreifen, dass die Erhöhung der Anforderungen an die Soldaten zugleich eine grössere Sorge um den Menschen erfordert und die Beseitigung der tausend Kleinigkeiten, die das Leben der Armeeangehörigen unnötig erschweren, verlangt.“
powerful narrative in the historiography of the GDR. Every individual soldier involved in a 
besondere Vorkommnis had a company commander, a battalion commander, and a political officer 
who should have prevented that incident. Every policy within the army had the imprint of a 
specific senior general, colonel, or political officer attached to it. These political and military elites 
had the most influence over the lives of their soldiers. This was also the group that the soldiers 
trusted the least. Consequently, a climate of toxic leadership grew that political leaders and 
generals could neither correct nor contain:

...something is not right in the relationships between superiors and subordinates 
and in the relationships between the officers and noncommissioned officers to the 
soldiers. The blame, fault, and ultimate responsibility for the army’s dysfunction should be placed squarely 
on Party leaders, commanders, and officers.

Intuitively, Party leaders and generals understood they were having difficulties in 
establishing a “scientific connection between theory and practice.” However, the discourse, as 
they understood it, was the only authorized means to solve their problems. Despite measureable 
adverse effects on officer leadership, the command climate, and combat training and readiness, 
army leaders trudged on, hoping that their political-ideological efforts would eventually bear fruit 
in the practical-military realm. They failed, and the Party lost a unique opportunity to shape the 
attitudes and mores of the citizen-soldier and of the population as a whole.

The command climate that developed from the discourse in the 1950s evolved into a 
military culture in the 1980s that shocked Bundeswehr senior officers. The Party could never 
successfully explain why professional soldiers played with loaded weapons, why supposedly well-
trained soldiers had terrible accidents, why good socialists committed horrible crimes, or why the 
sons of respectable socialist parents committed suicide. In turn, the discourse perpetuated and 

36 Bleck, “Stellungnahme [Jaeger],” 8. ...,zu der Schlußfolgerung dass im Verhältnis Vorgesetzter und Untergebener, in 
den Beziehungen der Offiziere und Unteroffiziere zu den Soldaten einiges nicht in Ordnung ist.”
nurtured a dysfunctional bureaucracy and a culture of leadership that was irritating at best, toxic at its worst. Barracks were run down and kitchens were unsanitary, yet vehicle parks for combat vehicles were well maintained—the machine had truly become more important than the man.38 As the trajectory of this work has shown, the resulting sclerosis touched the lives of every NVA soldier.

COMPARISONS TO OTHER SOCIAL STRUCTURES

In his seminal work, The East German Dictatorship, Corey Ross questioned the efficacy of government plans to improve the economy: Was government reform ever a viable prospect? In the context of the socialist system, was it effectively impossible to achieve? He argued that government efforts were never about reforming the economic system, but rather about reframing it while maintaining its basic pillars.39 So also in the army, where the evidence presents a consistent picture of reticence by leaders to change the way it functioned.

This reticence was also consistent with the way other government agencies functioned in the GDR: leaders were singularly incapable of formulating new solutions because the political-civil discourse they religiously followed restricted their freedom of action. As it turns out, the discourse used to maintain its power in the civilian sector had the same textual memes, messages, and signification as the political-military discourse of the NVA. These similarities included efforts to form a socialist consciousness in every citizen, the existence of eine Reihe von Mängel, the importance of the Leading Role of the Party as a guiding principle, and the classification of all non-socialist efforts as threatening “acts of a Western enemy.” Civilian ministries were particularly hamstrung by the essential requirement to use political-ideological methods to solve practical problems.

As with the army, the political-civilian discourse was the means by which the state established its predominance in non-military sectors. All social transformation had to be conducted

38 Schönbohm, Two Armies: 59-61.
39 Ross, The East German Dictatorship: 90.
through political struggle. Not only was organizational change without political struggle a non sequitur, but action without political struggle could never be tolerated as a viable alternative for decision makers. Within the NVA, the political-military discourse framed the goals and methods that the military bureaucracy could use. Similar textual patterns formed a prolific political-civil discourse in the records of the GDR’s other ministries. Just a few examples will serve to illustrate the similarities of discourse and the resulting dysfunction.

In 1957, senior officials in the Ministry of National Education reflected on their continuing problems with the preparation of their teachers and educators:

...I would like to report how teachers and educators endeavor to conduct ideological work. Certainly, we are justified in stating that there are still weaknesses and deficiencies in educational and training processes at our public education establishments [author’s emphasis]. As with the MfNV, the Ministry of National Education used the same textual code, eine Reihe von Mängel, to illustrate the cause of its problems: “Falling short of ideological-political leadership is the cause for a number of deficiencies.” The educational system, as with the army, put party loyalty and ideological work ahead of work performance and efficiency.

There was also a well-established connection between national education and training and the development of a socialist consciousness in every citizen. At the 5th Party Conference in the summer of 1958, Walter Ulbricht reemphasized how critical this concept was to political-ideological work throughout the civilian sector:

Socialist education means: the well-rounded development of personality, education in solidarity and collective action, education for militant activities...development of all physical and mental capabilities, especially the development of the socialist consciousness for the benefit of the people and the Nation [author’s emphasis].

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41 Turner, Germany from Partition to Reunification: 203.

42 Yoreler, "Entwurf Ministerium für Volksbildung," ed. Ministerium für Volksbildung; Betriebsparteiorganisation (Berlin: Ministerium für Volksbildung; Betriebsparteiorganisation; SAPMO-BA, 1958), 8. „Sozialistische Erziehung heißt: Allseitige Entwicklung der Persönlichkeit, Erziehung zu Solidarität und kollektivem Handeln, Erziehung zu kämpferischer Aktivität,
Later that year, the Ministry of National Education again reviewed its unsatisfactory progress and directed the use of a familiar methodology to put the ministry back on track. The Ministry noted that success would never be achieved without essential preconditions, including the Party’s “unity and consolidation” and an increased emphasis on the Party’s Leading Role in all areas. Nothing was more important for the educational establishment than to operate in accordance with established principles of Marxism-Leninism, including an increased emphasis on a well-known bogeyman:

The intrusion of the enemy’s ideology, especially in the areas of culture and public education, is caused by those comrades [their own teachers and ministerial workers]...who are not particularly interested in the practice of socialist reconstruction. Teachers who were not focused on the socialistic reconstruction of East Germany (or who failed to “place socialist reconstruction in the forefront of their efforts”), not only failed in their educational tasks, but were also conduits for “enemy” ideology. Indeed, the teacher who did not study Marxism-Leninism was considered more ignorant than “an illiterate person.”

The Ministry of National Education also experienced problems similar to the leadership challenges of the NVA. As with many army commanders, administrators did not focus on supporting their teachers throughout the educational establishment:

Some [ministry officials, school administrators, and teachers] have become bureaucratic souls who behaved heartlessly and coldly with respect to the concerns

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Vermittlung einer hohen theoretischen...Allgemeinbildung, Entfaltung aller geistigen und körperlichen Fähigkeiten; das heißt, Bildung des sozialistischen Bewußtseins zum Wohle des Volkes und der Nation. (Walter Ulbricht auf dem V. Parteitag).”


44 Ibid., 3. „Der Kampf um den Sieg des sozialismus erfordert, die führende Rolle der Partei auf allen Gebieten unseres gesellschaftlichen Lebens durchzusetzen. Die wichtigste Voraussetzung ist die Einheit und Geschlossenheit der Partei. Sie zu festigen und zu stärken, muss das Hauptanliegen aller Genossen sein.”


46 “Reden zu Parteiorganisationen über sozialistische Erziehung, 1957,” 15. „Der Lehrer aber, der nicht den Marxismus-Leninismus studiert und sich nicht mit ihm in Theorie und Praxis vertraut macht, ist überdruck als ein Analphabet.”

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and cares of teachers and educators. Their criticism is often inconsiderate and insufficiently helpful.\textsuperscript{47}

The 7\textsuperscript{th} Panzer Division made those same arguments when it discovered that political training was lagging behind “less essential” military training. The “decisions and documents of our Party and government are not always...in the forefront [the priority] of required tasks by our units.”\textsuperscript{48}

Practical solutions were necessary, but only in the context of an ideological prologue or a signifier that rationalized and justified appropriate solutions.

These types of problems had not disappeared by 1959. The Ministry of National Education severely criticized “working circles” of teachers for their lack of attention to the Party’s doctrine and its mandated pedagogy. The Party accused some teacher groups of reading doctrine and pedagogical requirements “superficially or incompletely.” There was an expectation, rarely satisfied, that a cross-fertilization of “lessons learned” between educational “working-circles of excellence” would occur. Nor did Party membership protect teachers from criticism when they did not demonstrate an appropriate “excitement” in their “collective work” or complete their required accreditation requirements.\textsuperscript{49}

In the same vein, the Minister of Labor and Vocational Training Friedrich Macher once described problems in the civilian work environment in now familiar terms:

The issue of turnover [equivalent to AWOLs and desertions] is not just a question of wages, but also a question of working conditions and the treatment of the workers [the command climate]. In such [business] establishments where there is a good operating atmosphere and where the workers are cared for...the turnover is not nearly so high.\textsuperscript{50}

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 17. „Manche sind Bürokratenseelen geworden, die sich herzlos und kalt gegenüber den Belangen und Sorgen ihrer Lehrer und Erzieher verhalten. Ihre Kritik ist oftmals unüberlegt und nicht helpend genug."


\textsuperscript{50} Fritz Macher, “Protokoll über die 2. Beratung der für die Ausarbeitung der Direktive des 2. Fünfjahrplanes gebildeten Unterkommission für Fragen der Arbeitskräfte am 9.9.57 (Abschrift),” in SED Parteiversammlungen, ed. Ministerium für Volksbildung; Betriebsparteiorganisation (Berlin: Bundesarchiv Berlin; Zentrale Kommission für Staatliche Kontrolle (ZKSK), 1957), T. „Die Frage der Fluktuation ist nicht nur eine Frage des Lohnes, sondern auch eine Frage der Arbeitsbedingungen, der Behandlung der Menschen. In solchen Betrieben, wo es eine gute Betriebs atmosphere gibt und wo man sich um die Arbeiter kümmert, ohne daß man jede Forderung erfüllt, ist die Fluktuation bei weitem nicht so hoch. In den Betrieben also, wo eine gute politische Arbeit geleistet wird, habe wir eine weit geringere Fluktuation.”
Macher made a good point—take care of your workers, and they will be happy. Absenteeism will be lower. Production will rise. Like the political-military discourse, however, Macher could not avoid depending on familiar textual patterns to underscore the importance of the established political discourse: lower turnover existed only in places where “good political work was accomplished.”

Improving the work conditions and treating people correctly were essential management techniques, but even for Minister Macher they had to be rooted in good political work:

With a corresponding [political] struggle in the factories, it is quite possible to increase labor discipline by reinforcing political-ideological work, thus avoiding the loss of work hours [due to sickness or absenteeism]. [In this way], we are quite capable of fulfilling our plans with fewer workers.

A good worker with an established socialist consciousness, like his compatriot in uniform who did not have accidents or break the rules, did not get sick or refuse to come to work.

As was the case in the army, management failures at different bureaucratic levels confirmed that there were a “few deficiencies” among bureaucrats in the ministries. Such deficient bureaucrats were often accused of having egotistical, even selfish, tendencies. Other managers "did not feel responsible" for the essential task of accurately estimating the training necessary to develop an efficient labor force.

In the city of Cottbus, managers were singled out for lacking the “necessary sense of responsibility” and for needing “constant guidance and supervision.”

28 years later, pensioners in the GDR complained of “bosses who are not as good as they used to be; they lack practical experience and cannot put their ideas into practice.”

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51 Ibid.
52 Ibid., 10. „Es ist bei einem entsprechenden Kampf in den Betrieben, bei Verstärkung der politisch-ideologischen Arbeit durchaus möglich, die Arbeitsdisziplin zu erhöhen und durch Verbesserung der Organisation der Arbeit Ausfallstunden zu vermeiden. Wir sind durchaus in der Lage, die Pläne auch mit weniger Arbeitskräften zu erfüllen.”
54 Ibid., 5. „Die Leiter in diesen Ministerien fühlen sich zu wenig für die Berufsausbildung verantwortlich; das trifft auch für einen großen Teil der Betriebsleiter zu.“

28 years later, pensioners in the GDR complained of „bosses who are not as good as they used to be; they lack practical experience and cannot put their ideas into practice.” Niethammer, “Zeroing in on Change: In Search of Popular Experience in the Industrial Province in the German Democratic Republic,” 276.
civil sector, it seemed, finding fault with managers and bureaucrats was no different from finding fault with officers in the NVA.

FINAL THOUGHTS

On February 15, 1990, the political organs of the NVA were dissolved. The Main Political Office of the NVA (Politische Hauptverwaltung) was decommissioned, along with 64 political offices at the division level and 258 working groups in the regiments and battalions. The culling process was extensive. Every political officer, regardless of rank, was discharged from active service as well. By German Reunification Day on October 3, 1990, over 60% of the officers and most of the soldiers had been separated from the NVA and returned to the civilian sector.

Fortunately for East Germany, the Cold War never turned hot. An analysis of the NVA’s policies, discourse, officer development, combat training, and command climate suggests that the NVA would have been soundly defeated. The reason was not arms and men—both were plentiful—but the training, discipline, and operational capability necessary for victory on the plains of Central Europe were lacking as long as the Party’s political-military discourse hamstrung NVA commanders.

The argument for this premise is simple. The ideology of Marxism-Leninism notwithstanding, the objectives of victory and ideological purity, that cancerous double helix, were so intertwined that achieving either would have been impossible. From the Party’s perspective, the solution to their organizational problems was never through better military or technical training, but exclusively through political work made possible only by the Party. The elements of the political-military discourse actually prevented the Party and the chain of command from cooperating in ways that could have achieved both goals: defending against an attack while transforming the army through political education. In the end, the practical demands of modern

warfare would have overwhelmed an officer corps whose entire existence was defined by the political-military discourse.

It is in this context that the *Alltagsgeschichte* of the NVA should be understood. As Clifford Geertz has suggested, political authority has always required a cultural frame within which it can define itself.\(^{58}\) The soldier should be regarded no longer as a marginal figure, but rather as the core of a new narrative of military service in a socialist state that confirmed the relationship among discourse, bureaucratic dysfunction, toxic leadership, and the life of the private citizen.

On the other hand, the impact of state-sponsored ideology on the private and ordinary lives of East German men in uniform will be silently replayed for generations to come. Uniformed service was filled with boring barracks routine, tedious political classes, and toxic leaders. The soldiers’ reality never matched the idealistic visions of the future they were promised. Even the Party had viewed its practical party work as being "formal and distanced from reality."\(^{59}\) The great experiment failed. Despite the Party's best efforts, the grand idea of socialism never flourished. The mentalities of the Party elite have been exposed for their inability to understand and connect with its citizens. The picture of systemic dysfunction in the GDR is more clear—the burden of ideology to solve practical problems.\(^{60}\)

Historians of *Alltagsgeschichte* argue that “large-scale socioeconomic and political structures” cannot be separated from “the ‘little’ aspects of life world and everyday culture” of the citizen.\(^{61}\) This is true also for the soldier. The political-military discourse, together with large and inflexible military structures, complicated the *Alltagsgeschichte* of NVA soldiers. Without the ideology, there could be no socialist consciousness. Without the political-military discourse, there could be no bureaucratic dysfunction. Without the bureaucratic dysfunction and the toxic

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\(^{59}\) *Jahresbericht PV, 1957,* 27.

\(^{60}\) Kaschuba, "Popular Culture and Workers’ Culture as Symbolic Orders: Comments on the Debate About the History of Culture and Everyday Life.,” 171.

\(^{61}\) Ibid., 177.
leadership of the officer corps, the injuries, crimes, accidental deaths, and suicides of soldiers and young officers make no sense. In this regard, the academy's attempts to characterize the East German State as a “dictatorship,” as a “welfare dictatorship,” or as a “Stalinist state,” does not completely capture the one consistent theme that underlies all other descriptions—the utter and complete inability of dysfunctional state organs to accomplish their assigned tasks—simply stated, the East German state as DYSFUNCTION.62

Every former East German who served in the NVA knows and remembers the elements of the East German misadventure. Every NVA soldier experienced its dysfunction in one form or another. Since their experiences were never tempered by war, they never had to defend the state, but they also never became the catalysts for social change the Party desired. Most would rather forget their experiences. Unfortunately, while huge efforts have been made to preserve archives and illuminate the East German past, the fact is that still greater efforts must be made to help former East Germans come to terms with their unique and dysfunctional past.63

63 Vergangenheitsbewältigung, or “coming to terms with the past,” is an essential concept developed in the 1950s and 1960s as a means of addressing the sins of the Nazi regime. The term still applies to today. 16 million former East Germans and their descendants are still coming to terms with the realities of life under a communist regime.
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<td>Abt.</td>
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<td>Bataillon</td>
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<td>DDR</td>
<td>Deutsche Demokratische Republik</td>
<td>Armed Forces of the Federal Republic of Germany</td>
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<td>Deutsche Grenzpolizei</td>
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<td>DM</td>
<td>Deutsche Mark der Deutschen Notenbank (DM) 24 July 1948 to 31 July 1964</td>
<td>East German Border Guards</td>
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<td>DV</td>
<td>Dienstvorschrift</td>
<td>Service Regulations</td>
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<td>DVP</td>
<td>Deutsche Volkspolizei</td>
<td>East German National Police</td>
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<tr>
<td>FDGB</td>
<td>Freier Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund</td>
<td>Free Federation of German Trade Unions</td>
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<td>FDJ</td>
<td>Freie Deutsche Jugend</td>
<td>Free German Youth</td>
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<td>Geheime Verschlusssache</td>
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<td>Gruppe der Sowjetischen Streitkräfte in Deutschland</td>
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<td>HA</td>
<td>Hauptabteilung</td>
<td>Group of Soviet Forces in Germany (1949–88)</td>
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<td>K-Raum</td>
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<td>Operational Space?</td>
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<tr>
<td>KS-Boot</td>
<td>KS-L = Küstenschutz-Lehrfahrzeug</td>
<td>Coast Protection-Teaching Vessel</td>
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<td>KPdSU</td>
<td>Kommunistische Partei der Sowjetunion</td>
<td>Communist Party of the Soviet Union</td>
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<td>KVP</td>
<td>Kasernierte Volkspolizei</td>
<td>Barracked People’s Police</td>
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<td>LaSK</td>
<td>Landstreitkräfte</td>
<td>Land Forces</td>
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<td>LPG</td>
<td>Landwirtschaftliche Produktionsgenossenschaft (LPG) [DDR]</td>
<td>Agricultural Cooperative</td>
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<td>MB</td>
<td>Militärbezirk</td>
<td>Military District (Corp equivalent)</td>
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<td>MdI</td>
<td>Ministerium des Innern</td>
<td>Ministry of the Interior</td>
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<tr>
<td>MfNV</td>
<td>Ministerium für Nationale Verteidigung</td>
<td>Ministry for National Defense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mot.</td>
<td>motorisiert</td>
<td>motorized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSD</td>
<td>Motorisierte Schützen-division</td>
<td>Motorized Rifle Division</td>
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<tr>
<td>NVA</td>
<td>Nationale Volksarmee</td>
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<td>PD</td>
<td>Panzerdivision</td>
<td>Tank Division</td>
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<tr>
<td>PR</td>
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<td>PR-14</td>
<td>14.Panzerregiment</td>
<td>14th Tank Regiment</td>
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<td>Parteiorganisation</td>
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<td><strong>RAG</strong></td>
<td>Regiment</td>
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<td>Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR im Bundesarchiv</td>
<td>The Institute for the Archive of Party and Mass Organizations of the GDR in the German Federal Archives</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>SED</strong></td>
<td>Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands</td>
<td>Socialist Unity Party of Germany</td>
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<td><strong>SeeSK</strong></td>
<td>Seestreikräfte</td>
<td>Naval Forces</td>
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<td><strong>SMAD</strong></td>
<td>Sowjetische Militärangehörenden in Deutschland</td>
<td>Soviet Military Administration in Germany</td>
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<td><strong>SPW</strong></td>
<td>Schützenpanzerwagen</td>
<td>Armored personnel carrier</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>SSD</strong></td>
<td>Staatssicherheitsdienst</td>
<td>State Security Service</td>
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<td>Stellvertreter</td>
<td>Deputy Commander</td>
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<td>Stellvertreter des Kommandeurs für politische Arbeit</td>
<td>Deputy to the Commander for Political Work</td>
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<td>Territoriale Verteidigung Süd (TV 24)</td>
<td>Territorial Defense South (KVP)</td>
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<td>Unteroffiziere auf Zeit</td>
<td>Short Term Enlistment NCO</td>
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<td>Volkseigener Betrieb</td>
<td>people-owned enterprise [GDR]</td>
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<td><strong>VEG</strong></td>
<td>Volkseigenes Gut</td>
<td>People owned possession</td>
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<td><strong>VS-Vertr.</strong></td>
<td>Vertraulich Verschlusssache</td>
<td>Confidential Information</td>
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<td><strong>WBK</strong></td>
<td>Wehrbereichskommando</td>
<td>Military Area Command (Bundeswehr)</td>
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<td>Central Committee (of the Politbüro)</td>
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<td><strong>ZPKK</strong></td>
<td>Zentrale Partekontrollkommission</td>
<td>Central Party Inspection Committee</td>
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Primary Sources


"Befehl des Ministers für Nationale Verteidigung: Aufstellung einer Abteilung für die Militärische Ausbildung am Institute für Gesellschaftswissenschaften und an der Parteihochschule "Karl Marx" beim Zentralkomitee der Sozialistischen Einheitspartei Deutschlands (Vertrauliche Verschlußsache)." 1958.


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University of Cincinnati

Date: 10/29/2014

I, Daniel W Jordan III, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in History.

It is entitled:
Socialism Gone Awry: A Study in Bureaucratic Dysfunction in the Armed Forces of the German Democratic Republic

Student’s name: Daniel W Jordan III

This work and its defense approved by:

Committee chair: Martin Francis, Ph.D.

Committee member: Edward Ross Dickinson, Ph.D.

Committee member: Katherine Sorrels, Ph.D.