"Ulbricht's helpers": the role of Hitler's army generals in former East Germany

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Anti-fascism was always one of the myths of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Fascism had been wiped out root and branch in the GDR, according to the history textbooks there. It was something that was proclaimed at every opportunity by the party and government leadership in official statements, and which is repeated today, and not just by nostalgics.

This propaganda put down deep roots, but the reality was quite different. To understand the character of the GDR and its Stalinist state party the SED (Socialist Unity Party of Germany) it is important to investigate the actual relations of East Germany's ruling layer to sections of Hitler's officer corps in the *Wehrmacht*.

The book " *Ulbrichts Helfer—Wehrmachtoffiziere im Dienste der DDR*" (" *Ulbricht's helpers—Wehrmacht officers in the service of the GDR* ") by Peter Joachim Lapp is recommended reading. Published last year, it illuminates a part of these relationships in the early years of the GDR under the leadership of Walter Ulbricht.

The book provides much detail and numerous original documents, showing how former *Wehrmacht* generals and officers held key positions within the structure of East Germany's armed forces. It is not fundamentally reprehensible, and sometimes even inevitable, that the building of an army may rely on utilising military experts from the opposing side. Also, not every *Wehrmacht* officer, and certainly not all those in the lower ranks, was a convinced Nazi.

But the collaboration of the former GDR with high-ranking *Wehrmacht* officers was not restricted to technical military know-how. It laid the foundations for preserving and continuing the spirit of German and Prussian martial traditions, their "tried-and-tested" principles of military drills and even the external appearance and behaviour patterns of German militarism. This could be seen first in East Germany's " *Kasernierte Volkspolizei*" (KVP, Garrisoned Peoples Police)" and after 1956 in the " *Nationale Volksarmee*" (NVA, National People's Army).

The book's first paragraph undermines any belief in the "socialist character" of the East German army. For example, the SED always concealed the fact that:

* The first Chief of Staff of the KVP and the NVA was a former lieutenant general and army leader in the *Wehrmacht*.

* The first president of the GDR's highest court had served in the *Wehrmacht*'s Courts-Martial, and at the same time belonged to the NSDAP (Nazi Party).

* The first commander of the academy for KVP and NVA officers was a colonel and a holder of the *Ritterkreuz* (Knight's Cross, one of the Nazis' highest military honours, often awarded by Hitler personally).

* The first man in charge of motorisation (tanks) at the GDR's Ministry of Defence was an ex- *Wehrmacht* major general, who between 1939 and 1942 was an assessor (honorary judge) at the Nazi's *Volksgerichthof* (People's Court), responsible for handing down many death sentences for political crimes.

* A former first lieutenant in the elite Waffen-SS was appointed as a colonel and a division commander in the 1950s.

The author systematically depicts how the NVA and its structures developed, and the role of former *Wehrmacht* officers. He is not concerned with proving that the construction of the East German armed forces was more or less identical with the *Bundeswehr*, West Germany's Federal Armed Forces, where it is known that almost all its leading members came from the fascist *Wehrmacht*.

"The *Volkspolizei* and *Volksarmee* contained at most 5 percent former *Wehrmacht* officers, and mostly below this percentage. Thus quantitatively there is hardly any comparison between West and East Germany. However, qualitatively the small group of " *Ehemaligen*" (former *Wehrmacht* officers) played a far larger role in the KVP and NVA than was admitted during the existence of the GDR."

The foundation stone was laid in spring and summer of 1943. Following the defeat of the 6th Army under Field Marshal Friedrich Paulus at Stalingrad in the winter of 1942/43, and the failed 1943 summer offensive in Kursk, a number of *Wehrmacht* generals and officers began to turn away from Hitler because they suspected Hitler's defeat could involve the destruction of Germany.

The Stalinists used this turn. Walter Ulbricht, who was in exile in the Soviet Union, was one of the founders of the " *Nationalkomitee Freies Deutschland* " (NKFD, National Committee for Free Germany). The NKFD, and later the " *Bund Deutscher Offiziere*" (BDO, Federation of German Officers), tried to bring together imprisoned *Wehrmacht* officers and use them for the Stalinists' own ends. During the war this primarily consisted of utilising front organisations for propaganda and subversive purposes against the *Wehrmacht*. However, the members of these two associations would acquire special significance after the war and after their dissolution in 1945.

In 1945/46, a series of " *Ehemaligen*" remained in the "Soviet zone of occupation" (SBZ, the part of East Germany under Russian control) and were employed as "cadres" in the administration, factories, mass organisations, at universities and technical schools, in the press, as well as in the *Deutsche Volkspolizei* (DVP, German Peoples Police). This already speaks volumes about the character of the future ruling layer in the GDR. And especially when contrasted with the dissolution of the countless "anti-fascist committees" that had sprung up at the end of war spontaneously in the most important industrial regions of East Germany, in order to settle accounts with the Nazis and war criminals. The KPD (German Communist Party) leadership denounced the workers' anti-fascist committees as "ultra-left" and replaced them by an administrative apparatus in which former *Wehrmacht* officers could be found.

The deliberate construction of East German military institutions—actually forbidden under the Potsdam agreement of August 2, 1945 between the victorious allies, Britain, France, the USA and the USSR—was begun in mid 1948. On the one hand, this was a reaction to the Cold War and the associated tying of West Germany to the political and military structures of America and Western Europe. On the other hand, it

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reflected the fact that large sections of the Soviet army were gradually being withdrawn back to the USSR.

According to a Soviet government resolution of July 2, 1948, 10,000 East German men should be trained for military service, with half of this figure, as well as the entire leadership (100 officers and five generals) coming from German prisoners of war held in the Soviet Union.

In September of the same year, this leadership arrived in the SBZ, and by the beginning of October they had 4,774 troops. Under the auspices of the "German administration of the interior" (DVdI), the "Department of Border Police/Reserves" was created. Thus the foundation for the East German police troops was laid.

A central figure in this unit, and also in the following development of the NVA, was Vincenz Mueller, a former *Wehrmacht* lieutenant general, an army leader in the Second World War and holder of the *Ritterkreuz*. His biography, rising from a front line officer in the First World War via the *Reichswehrministerium* (Imperial War Ministry) as a close collaborator of general von Schleicher to become a staff officer and finally *Wehrmacht* general, embodied the German militarism of the first half of the twentieth century.

On October 1, 1948, as Chief of Staff of the *Volkspolizei*, and once again in the rank of a general, he became the second most important man in the construction of East Germany's military forces. Regional staff posts in the East German states of Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt and Thuringia were filled by three other former *Wehrmacht* major generals, while 100 of the first officers were distributed throughout the entire SBZ, occupying staff positions and training functions. This ensured that the forms of the new troops developed in the regions, especially by Mueller, were anchored centrally and subordinate to the “cadres” of former *Wehrmacht* officers.

The size of the *Volkspolizei* reserves grew rapidly, one year later achieving a strength of approximately 35,000 men, when the "Head office for training" (HVA) was established, which formed the basis for East Germany's future ground forces. In the seven-strong HVA governing body could again be found four “ *Ehemaligen*,” two ex *Wehrmacht* major generals and two majors from the general staff.

The management of this department, like most others, remained in the hands of old KPD/SED cadres, while the post of Chief of Staff, or Supply Chief, or VP Inspection, and thus responsibility for actual operative affairs in the practical construction of the armed forces, was handed over to the "generals".

The author summarises the nature of this by examining the role of Vincenz Mueller:

"In his first months of service on the KVP staff, Mueller endeavours to advance the military-organizational structure, to complete the technical training, to develop the internal structures of the KVP units as well as to generally ensure the material and personnel of the troop. He thereby falls back on his experiences in the *Wehrmacht*; in his opinion, this is what he was ‘bought' for."

Mueller's efforts can be seen even more concretely from the regular reports of his first deputy and constant shadow Bernhard Bechler, sent to the *Ministerium fuer Staatssicherheit* (Ministry for State Security, or Stasi). Bechler, also a former *Wehrmacht* major, who in the meantime had risen to become a major general in the KVP, expressed his agitation that his superior constantly ignores regulations, citing a Soviet general in the SBZ “who told him that he should introduce internal order appropriate to the German tradition." Moreover, he reports that Mueller tries to arrange everything, "to prepare new regulations, which rest on the line of fascist regulations."

In the construction of the navy the GDR based itself on the former “ *nationalsozialistischen Fuehrungsoffiziere*” (NSFO, “National Socialist Officer Leadership") of the Nazis' navy, under first lieutenant Heinz Neukirchen. In 1951, after his release as a Soviet prisoner of war, Neukirchen was appointed as staff chief of the naval police. By 1964 he had risen to become head of the *Volksmarine* (People's Navy), reaching the rank of Vice Admiral. On retirement, he continued his career in civilian life, taking over the post of general manager in the nationalised maritime and harbour industry.

The HVA, which increased in size to about 55,000 men by 1952, formed the core of the new units. On July 1, 1952 the first regular units of the East German armed forces came from the KVP and the HVA. Here also Vincenz Mueller, now a lieutenant general, played the first violin.

As the first deputy to the Interior Minister, and again Chief of Staff, he was now the military number one in the GDR and directly subordinated to Willi Stoph, the then Interior Minister. By the end of 1952, the total personnel of the KVP rose to over 90,000 men.

The first acid test the KVP faced came scarcely a year after the establishment of the force. This opportunity also showed against whom the KVP was directed. Alongside Soviet tanks, the KVP took part in the brutal suppression of the workers' rebellion of June 17, 1953, which ensured the continued rule of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the GDR.

While the SED leadership denounced the rebellion as a fascist counter-revolution, the influence of former *Wehrmacht* officers in the KVP was higher at the end of 1953 than ever before. As well as the Chief of Staff and one of his two deputies, they comprised four of seven reserve force staff chiefs, 40 percent of reserve leaders' deputies and 75 percent of all directors of military schools.

1953 also represented a turning point in the collaboration with the *Wehrmacht* officers. The intensification of the Cold War, and the associated closer linkage of the GDR to the Soviet Union, led to tensions. The main phase of the construction of the East German armed forces was complete, and the star of the “ *Ehemaligen*” began to sink.

The book contains a whole series of concrete details, revealing the influence of the *Wehrmacht* within the structures of the East German military. It is broadened by a rich selection of short biographies of former *Wehrmacht* members.

A review of the book would be incomplete without saying a few words about its author and his own analysis. Although he very clearly establishes the relationship of the SED to the *Wehrmacht*, his actual aim was the rehabilitation of its former generals and officers.

Peter Joachim Lapp spent four years in a GDR prison as a young man, and later in the West was a journalist for German national radio *Deutschlandfunk* for nearly 20 years. He reveals his quite unconcealed sympathies for the " *Kamaraden* " (military comrades). He tries to present the careers of the “ *Ehemaligen*” as a tragic fate, in which they were betrayed first by Hitler and were first utilised, and when their usefulness was worn out then thrown away by the Stalinists.

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