

The Military Imaginary

SOLDIERS, MYTHS, AND STATES

I WANT TO OPEN THIS BOOK with a bold proposition: the soldier is the state. The soldier is the personification, the sign, the representation of the state; its arm, its agent of violence, the tip of the spear, the means by which the state comes into being, is maintained, and continues to be. Soldiers represent the imagined community of the state in living, active form; they are homogenized into a single identity of the state, and represent this imagined ideal of homogenization. States write the mythology of soldiers, turning soldiers into mythic creatures. This kind of myth-work elevates soldiers above “mere” civilians, removing them from the quotidian and placing them into the unquestionable. According to the state, the soldier is the ideal citizen, the best kind of person the state can produce. Soldiers in uniform are living memorials to the state and its history, walking monuments to memory—they just are not made of stone, like other war memorials, though they may appear as cold, hard, lifeless, and unfeeling. Soldiers are monuments to previous wars and the preformed memories of as-yet unfought wars to come. The soldier represents the congealed historical memory of the violence of the state, and is the state in its most concrete, literal, purest human form. This image is, of course, drilled into the soldier.

And into civilians.

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At least, this is how states would like soldiers to be and be perceived. Because they would like this, states go to great lengths to insure that soldiers—and representations and imaginings of them—approach these ideals. States can be seen as vast experiments in social construction, and militarization plays a key role in this; states make soldiers both to “be” the state and to defend the state. But how are soldiers “made” into this ideal, and how are they “unmade” when the desired image changes? What happens when men, made into the soldierly ideal of one state,

find themselves absorbed into another state, a state with a very different idea of what it means to be a soldier? What does it mean to live as a sign of the state, and what happens when meanings and signification shift? What are the material ramifications of shifts in the symbolics of militarized identities? These were the sorts of issues involved in the experiences of former East German army officers in the context of German unification in 1990; the sorts of problems and processes they faced resulted from these issues.

In *Fallen Elites*, I examine the cultural politics of what it means to be a soldier in Germany by focusing on the lives of a group of East German Army and Border Guard officers, both before and after unification, and on the ways in which memories and representations of the World War II German military and soldiers—the Wehrmacht and SS—continue to shape ideas of what it means to be a good and proper soldier and man in post-unification Germany. By focusing on East German army officers who had power and then lost it, this book studies up, and then down again, providing an ethnographic perspective on elites and power in the modern state. I examine the idea of “soldiers” in political life, the construction of citizenship and national identity, and the legitimation of the state and military. I look at how states use soldiers—who counts, how, why, and when—in the political life of the state, and how the deployment of ideas about soldiers affects the symbolic and material lives of men identified—positively and negatively—as soldiers. This is an examination of German unification as seen through what I call the “military imaginary” of the state: the ways in which the necessity, implementation, and desired outcomes of (compulsory) military service and training are imagined and envisioned by the state, and the ways in which these tropes are linked to normative ideas of the “proper” soldier and man, legitimate violence, morality, and military tradition.

There are multiple military imaginaries in a state: those of the state, of the military, of soldiers themselves, and of civilians. The military imaginary of a state is linked to the past, to memories and representations of soldiers and their actions, their heroism, deeds, and defense of the state. In a sense, these imaginings of the proper soldier function along the lines of myth, achieving a mythic status, and occurring in a mythologized time.

They are also linked to the economic system of the state: soldiers are expected to fight and die for the state's political and economic viability.

Fallen Elites is about the Cold War contest between the capitalist West and the communist East, and the lingering effects of competing military and economic blocks. As Germany works through complications brought about by unification, ideas, prejudices, and mindsets formed and lived during the Cold War continue to effect it. Lingering on in corners of the state are contentious notions of what it means to be a good and proper "German soldier"; these competing ideas of what it means to be a soldier act as a metadepbate about the past forty years and the history and memory of German soldiers in World War II. East German officers (and their families) are products of their time and context, products—and producers—of a vast exercise in militarization, extensions of a history that shaped and continues to shape their lives and worlds. War and economics, history and memory coalesce in these men's lives and experiences, making them the living exemplars of militarization policies. Within the shaping of national histories, personal histories and narratives of militarization take shape. I trace the life histories of men who became elites in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in a context of military-political power, specifically, the Cold War context of the post-World War II rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. These men lost their status and power when the Cold War ended. Officers of the East German Nationale Volksarmee (National People's Army; NVA) held and wielded power, and symbolized and represented power and the state. After unification, they lost their power and status but continued to symbolize and represent militarism, oppression, and totalitarianism within a context in which they no longer are seen to fit and in which they no longer have power.

Examining German unification through the lives of NVA officers reveals the contentious and unfinished nature of unification, the cumbersome and contradictory attempts by the German government and military to come to terms with the military of a dictatorship, and the problematic and often disturbing use of Germany's military past in state discourse and narratives. This book explores what happens to fallen elites—in this case, military officers—when they lose both the state they were sworn to defend and the status that goes with this duty and "privilege." I follow the

lives of men who held power and lost it overnight, who went from being official heroes to being official villains. I also examine the practices and actions of West German elites as they consolidated their power over both the military itself and representations of the German military and soldiers. Through the use of Cold War tropes of “proper” militarized masculinity, as well as the deployment of specific memories of World War II, West German elites have created an internal “other” and rehabilitated certain forms of German military history, tradition, and identity as a means of shoring up legitimacy for the newly unified state and appeasing the German military. Conversely, some NVA and Border Guard officers have used West German military policies of exclusion as a way of “explaining away” human rights abuses and military authoritarianism in the GDR, making themselves, in their own eyes, the “victims” of unification. As such, I examine the rational world of elite victims: the ways in which they see and process their experiences in light of the contexts from which they came and in which they find themselves. From the outside, what they say and do might seem irrational and offensive; for officers, their responses and understanding of their situation make perfect sense to them, and are ways to make sense of their lives after unification. Only by trying to understand their “rationality”—even if we find their comments and remarks offensive and off the mark—can we come close to understanding how former elites construct themselves as victims, see themselves as victims, and create victimhood narratives as a way to make sense of their fall.

States rarely leave militarization policies or the creation of “soldiers” to chance. Drawing from the German experience, I theorize the ways in which states use the military as a means of creating “ideal” men—and ideal citizens—through the inculcation of military values, worldviews, and “hegemonic” masculinity. In *Fallen Elites*, I ask two main questions: Do the political uses and representations of militarized masculinity change when states or governments change? In what ways does military identity intersect with political economy, memory, political processes, gender, semiotics, and citizenship? Through a consideration of the lives and experiences of East German NVA and Border Guards officers, I examine the fact that men must be made into soldiers by the state. Soldiers do not come “ready-made”; if they did, states would not need to expend effort,

resources, or expense to make men into soldiers. Rather than relying on sociobiological or psychological models to explain why men become soldiers, we need to examine the role of states, governments, political economy, education policies, history, and the creation of gender roles as the formative factors in creating militarized masculinity and soldiers.

A VERY COLD FUSION

Despite official narratives of a relatively smooth transition, of the merging of “those things which belong together,” German unification and the formation of a new German state have been an uneven project filled with friction and animosity. While the West German government celebrated the “victory” of unification, and stated that all East Germans wanted unification, one group of East Germans did not look forward to the dissolution of the GDR and their absorption into the West German state: members of the East German military, the NVA. Disbanded immediately upon unification on October 3, 1990, the overwhelming majority of NVA officers were immediately unemployed, stripped of their status as officers and “defenders” of the state, portrayed by the West Germans as the perpetrators and “losers” of the Cold War. This was a group of people who, contrary to most East Germans, I would not characterize as happy about the demise of socialism. For these men, unification was not a joyous, desired event; rather, unification represented the “end” of their careers, security, status, identity, and the state they had pledged their lives to serve. The “fall” into democracy for these men was from the start fraught with uncertainty, disappointment, anomic, and a profound sense of loss. Unification in 1990 signaled a radical transformation in the political, economic, and symbolic lives of East Germans, despite the promises by the Kohl administration of a “blooming landscape” of economic prosperity. The collapse of the GDR and the merger of the two states meant instability, lost jobs, lost homes, and lost income for many East Germans, as well as the stress of adapting to capitalism and learning how to consume. With unification came widespread unemployment and disruptions in daily life and life courses; by 1991, out of a population of roughly 16 million, 4 million East Germans were out of work.¹ The experiences of NVA officers after unification are characteristic of East German experience in general, but they differ in a

number of important ways. These differences illustrate the role and use of the military in the state; how state elites operate and perceive the state, the military, and violence; and how the “banal practices” of state elites impact the lived experience of the state.

On October 3, 1990, all NVA soldiers and officers over the age of fifty-five were immediately released from the military, and all officers above the rank of lieutenant-colonel (*Oberstleutnant*) were relieved of duty.² The Einigungsvertrag—the treaty unifying East and West Germany—stipulated that the Bundeswehr (the Cold War West Germany military, and the name of the post-unification German military) was to be reduced to 370,000 soldiers by 1994; 25 percent of the Bundeswehr was to be filled by former NVA soldiers and officers. The Bundeswehr initially accepted twenty thousand NVA soldiers and officers into its ranks; these were primarily specialists to train Bundeswehr personnel in the use of Soviet weapons and weapons systems taken into the Bundeswehr. The overwhelming majority of these soldiers and officers were released from the Bundeswehr within two years. By 2002, only 5 percent of the Bundeswehr was made up of former NVA soldiers and officers;³ as of 2006, there were approximately eight hundred former NVA officers left on active duty in the Bundeswehr.⁴

German unification was not simply the joining of two halves of a long-separated whole; it was about fusing together two diametrically opposed systems, two distinctly different ways of seeing the world, the state, economics, fairness, human beings, the military, and conflict. In this context, memories of World War II and the actions of German soldiers loomed large, playing a key role in the shaping of the new German state. Perhaps most important, unification was the fusing of two radically different ways of imagining “Germany,” what it should be and represent. It included the supposed merger of two different systems of defense and what it meant to be a “defender” and soldier of the state. It was the unequal merger of two militaries sworn to defend diametrically opposed political-economic systems, and soldiers trained and indoctrinated to believe each was the one true system. The GDR was ultimately a militarized dictatorship (though the debate is open as to what degree), and the NVA and Border Guards were integral parts of the system: they helped develop

and maintain it, protect, and preserve it. In one of the great ironies of history, however, when it came time to actively save the GDR, the NVA and Border Guards decided that it was not worth saving in the state it was in, and did not fire a shot or intervene to keep it from collapsing. These are the soldiers who many see as the men who let socialism slip away. It is due to their actions (or inaction) that German unification was allowed to proceed peacefully—without a shot fired to stop it.

For Germans on both sides of the political divide, the Cold War was experienced as a cultural division, a splitting of the “family” of Germans that included an intense rivalry over legitimacy.⁵ Indeed, much of the political battle between the two Germanys revolved around representations of their respective armies, their actions, and their relation to the past. Just as the two Germanys constituted a “mirror” for the other, so too did the two German Cold War militaries.⁶

As Frykman and Lofgren have noted, identity formation often takes the form of a negative example; that is, by stating that another group acts in a certain manner, or has certain characteristics, the identity of one’s own group is defined in contrast, by what it is not.⁷ In regard to the former GDR and the NVA, I argue that such a process is occurring in the representation of former East German soldiers by West German state actors and by the new, formerly West German Bundeswehr. A former NVA general summed up the attitudes of many former NVA soldiers about portrayals of the NVA as an aggressive military, and the trials of former Border Guards and GDR government officials when he stated: “Hey Germany, look here: we’ve found someone who is guilty. Now we can be satisfied.”⁸ This feeling of being the victims of “victor’s justice” runs deep with former NVA officers, and frames the ways in which they view the post-unification German state and their experiences in the new state.

Representations of the officers and soldiers of the NVA as highly aggressive and concerned solely with preparations for the invasion of Western Europe or the suppression of internal dissent within the GDR elide the extremely complicated political, social, and economic dynamics within the NVA, and the role of the military in East German society. As Lesley Gill, Cynthia Enloe, and Ruth Seifert have noted, militaries serve to create hierarchies among men.⁹ I argue that a similar process is

at work in post-unification Germany: the former NVA and its officers are coded as the “bad” Germans who served an “illegal” regime and lost the Cold War, while the West German army and its officers are the “good” Germans who served the “legitimate” Germany and won the Cold War. This is not to excuse the human rights abuses of the Border Guards, the *Kadavergehörigkeit* (“corpse-like obedience”) of the NVA, or the brutality of overarching compulsory military service. Rather, it is to point out the inconsistencies, inequalities, and unevenness of the unification process and the ways in which history, memory, and gender came together in the German military after unification.

States emerging from periods of dictatorship must often come to terms with officials and soldiers who have committed war crimes or human rights abuses; Chile, Argentina, and post-World War II Germany come to mind.¹⁰ The German case is unusual, as the East German military never fought in a war, did not resist its own demise, and willingly participated in the dissolution of the state it was sworn to defend. Germany was also forced to come to terms with a dictatorship for the second time in the twentieth century, and confront the actions of soldiers in the service of an unjust regime. While Border Guard officers and soldiers could be brought to trial for easily identified human rights abuses committed on the Berlin Wall and intra-German border, NVA officers could not necessarily be held accountable for their actions during the existence of the GDR. Despite the harsh discipline and bellicose rhetoric of the NVA, it never actually did much that would have involved its officers in war crimes trials or other sorts of trials for crimes against humanity. Although the overwhelming majority of NVA officers could not be tried in court for clear-cut crimes or abuses, they could still be “punished” through extrajudicial means, such as cuts in pensions, symbolic marginalization, and their removal from the cult of German military honor. Given the Cold War rivalry between the Bundeswehr and the NVA, and the fact that no former GDR or NVA officials or officers were in power and in a position to contest such actions,¹¹ West German elites felt that they could do as they pleased with NVA officers. This followed a general trend in the early years of unification, when large numbers of GDR officials, bureaucrats, teachers, professors, and anyone whose loyalty to the new German state was seen as

questionable, lost their jobs, posts, and positions, and were replaced with West Germans, or East Germans who were considered politically reliable.

As McAdams writes, one of the forms of justice used by West German elites to punish East German elites was “disqualifying” justice; that is, even if they could not be held directly responsible for abuses or illegal actions in the GDR, they could still be disqualified from full rights and participation in the new state, based on their past affiliation(s) in the GDR.¹² They were punished not necessarily for what they did, but for who they were in the past, regardless of wrongdoing, and because they “should have known better” than to have served in what to West Germans was the “illegal” military of a “state without the rule of law” (*Unrechtsstaat*). In some instances, this may be true, but as a blanket condemnation of all NVA officers (and by extension, their families), it creates problems for the unification process. In the Bundeswehr, this was expressed more as retribution, and not justice, vis-à-vis the NVA. Bundeswehr officers saw NVA officers as both expendable (in terms of the reductions stipulated by the Unification treaty), and as threats to their careers.¹³ The NVA was seen as traitorous to the “German nation,” as a military that upheld the GDR state, and helped perpetuate the Cold War. Perhaps most important, the NVA was allied with the Soviet Union and the Red Army, Germany’s primary enemy in World War II. Given the carryover of fascist and anticommunist sentiment in the West German military from World War II (the Bundeswehr was founded and heavily influenced by former World War II Wehrmacht officers, who—unofficially—carried over the traditions and worldview of the World War II German military), this was seen as the most grievous sin of NVA officers.

By looking at the politics and practices of military representation and the seemingly banal questions of military honor, we can see how the state uses soldiers to link itself to an idealized version of the past that upholds legitimacy in the present. I examine who controls representations of Germany’s military past and its soldiers, who gains and who loses, who is valorized and who is marginalized by these representations and the subsequent material and symbolic ramifications they engender. As an examination of power relationships centered on the military, policy, and representation, I focus on ideas about “proper” soldiers and the “proper”

relationship between the military, men, and citizenship, and how these ideas shape, as Eric Wolf writes, who can “direct and initiate action to others” and how these “others who [have] to respond” do in fact respond.¹⁴

BERLIN AND THE ECHOES OF MILITARIZATION

My primary field site was Berlin. Berlin was in many ways the quintessential Cold War setting: heavily militarized, the trip-wire city of the folly of war and the possibility of suicidal war to come. Divided by the Wall, the site of countless intrigues, personal dramas, political dilemmas, and death, Berlin symbolized the division of Germany in concrete form. The Berlin Wall came to symbolize the Cold War and the division of Germany like no other structure, and the men who maintained the Wall and protected the GDR were seen in the West as servants of an unjust and inhumane regime—soldiers harkening back to the recent history of a criminal military. They were, in many ways, the personification of Cold War injustice. Snaking its way through the center of Berlin, and encircling West Berlin, the Wall was—and still is—*the* signifier of repression and militarization in post-1945 Germany.

Berlin was the logical site to study the cultural politics and memories of soldiering in post-unification Germany. Most importantly, a large number of former NVA and Border Guard officers still live in Berlin; the political contexts may have changed, but they and their families have remained. The headquarters of the German Army Veterans Association (Deutscher Bundeswehrverband), which handles the veterans groups of former NVA officers, is located in Berlin. I also know Berlin well, having lived there for a number of years; it was the site of my military experience and my initial experiences with the NVA, the Border Guards, and the Wall. For the most part, the Wall is gone, though sections have been preserved as a memorial to those killed, wounded, and imprisoned for attempting to cross into the West, and to serve as a reminder of the brutal nature of the East German regime (a reminder that is deeply offensive and misguided to many former NVA and Border Guard officers). While remnants remain, the Wall as an active military barrier, a barrier that gave structure to their lives, is gone. Literally and figuratively for them, only remnants remain, remnants of a former life of power, status, and stability.