

**Life in the Veterans' Group: East German Army Officers, The Military, and
Citizenship in the New German State**
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Introduction

"On October 2nd, 1990, a **German** army ceased to exist. The National People's Army of the German Democratic Republic was disbanded following the unification of Germany according to Article 23 of the Basic Law. There was no place in the Unification Treaty for the just treatment or the concerns for the future of the soldiers in this army, like those in the Association of Career Soldiers. These soldiers believed in the fairness of those who were in charge of their fate. They also believed in the promises of politicians and representatives of the Federal Ministry of Defense. And they could not believe that all rights would be denied them, that all internationally recognized rules and rights would not apply to them. For them it was unimaginable that rules concerning human rights as well as the treatment of prisoners would not apply to them as well. The soldiers of the NVA did not fire their weapons. The majority of NVA members were not willing to stop the movement for a better GDR with armed force in 1989/90. This was true for all ranks, from private to general. Like the rest of the population, they too had lost faith in the political and military leadership and more or less agreed with the demands of the citizens."

Herbert Becker, Deputy Chairman of the *Landesverband Ost*, in a 1999 open letter demanding the clarification of the "Status Problem" of former NVA officers.

"An educated East German can't trust anything in this democracy." Bernd, a former NVA missile officer

Drawing on two years of ethnographic and archival research in Berlin with former members of the *Nationale Volksarmee* (National People's Army - NVA) of the German Democratic Republic, this paper examines the relationship between the military, citizenship, and the state in post-unification Germany. I examine the lives of former NVA soldiers in East German army veterans' groups - *Kameradschaften* - and what these groups provide former officers and their families. Veterans groups give former East German army officers an official, military forum from which to tell their side of unification and German history. They are also "training grounds" in which to explore the transition from state socialism to market capitalism, come to terms with unification, and learn how to become citizens in a completely different state and social system, a state that before unification was seen as the "enemy." I argue that veterans groups are state-

sanctioned spaces – men’s clubs or lodges - which allow men to regain their identities as both East Germans and military officers, to become again what they once were, even if only for a limited time in a circumscribed space. The *Kameradschaften* function as a space from which to (re)create their identities as former NVA officers; in the process, they provide a space from which to critique that which they now believe was wrong with the past, critique the present, and negotiate their roles in the post-unification German state. However, through this process of identity recreation for NVA officers, veterans’ groups provide the German state and military a convenient “foil” for the creation of new forms of German state and military identity, and allow for the perpetuation of Cold War imagery and legitimation of (West) Germany as the “true” Germany.

The study of elites – even discredited or fallen elites – is instructive, though often fraught with misunderstanding. This article in no way intends to legitimize or relativize human rights violations committed by former NVA officers or East German Border Guards. Rather, the goal of this article is to examine the ways in which the military, masculinity, history, and memory come together in the lives of former East German officers and how these same elements, shattered in the unification process, come together in the creation of a new symbolic order of military masculinity, state legitimacy, and perceptions of citizenship after unification.

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, and an intense rivalry over legitimacy (see Borneman 1992, 1993). One Germany, and one German military – the West German *Bundeswehr* – claims to have “won” the Cold War rivalry, while the other Germany and German military - the East German NVA – is seen as having lost; this can

be seen as the only German military “victory” of the twentieth century. On October 2nd, 1990, after months of negotiations regarding the fate of the *Nationale Volksarmee*, it, along with the GDR, ceased to exist. Despite discussions and rumors of the possibility that the NVA would remain a “second” German army, these, ultimately, proved futile and false. Just as the two Germanys had constituted a “mirror” for the other (see Borneman 1992), so too did the two German militaries - the *Bundeswehr* and the NVA - constitute mirror images for one another, albeit conflicting mirror images of both the present and the past, as each claimed to be the legitimate German military after World War II. While West Germany considered itself as the legal heir of the Reich (Flockton, Kolinsky, and Pritchard 2000:1; Fullbrook 1995), and saw itself as part of the continuity of German history (including that of Nazi era) (Borneman 1993), East Germany considered itself the “new” Germany, initiating a break with the past and enshrining anti-fascism as the guiding principle of the state (Flockton, Kolinsky, and Pritchard 2000:2; Fullbrook 1995).

Unification in 1990 signaled a radical transformation in the lives of former East Germans, filled with the hope of political and economic freedom. However, with unification came wide-spread unemployment and disruptions in daily life and life courses; like that of many East German citizens (Berdahl 1999; Flockton, Kolinsky, and Pritchard 2000; Probst 1999), the employment futures of many NVA officers and career soldiers looked uncertain, bleak, and, in terms of continuing a military career, over. The *Bundeswehr* made it clear that the overwhelming majority of NVA officers and soldiers would not be accepted into the new German army. This was particularly true for officers above the rank of lieutenant-colonel (*Oberst-Leutnant*), who were deemed ideologically “impure” and too close to the former East German government and “state religion” of

communism. From an ideological standpoint, there was no place in the new German army for men who had served an “unjust” and “totalitarian” regime, men who had formed the “backbone” of communism in the East, and who, in terms of the periodization and historical narratives employed by (West) Germany, were a continuation of German totalitarianism (see Borneman 1993). In terms of the “tradition” of the *Bundeswehr* (where the *Bundeswehr* traces its predecessors and role models, and from which it derives its historical legitimacy), there was no place for communists or men who had served a communist regime. While “tradition” is a discourse, it is also a practice; through the practice of tradition in the *Bundeswehr*, a particular version of German history is valorized, and certain Germans are marginalized, becoming the living measure against which tradition and identity are measured (see Giordano 2000). As Germany and the new *Bundeswehr* began a concerted effort to reshape German state and military identity, it was (and is) these men who did not fit, and it is through their lives and experiences after unification that the shaping of state and military identity can be seen. The *Bundeswehr* sees itself as a mirror of German society (Kohr, Lippert, Meyer, Sauer 1993; Koop 1995), reflecting the conditions and current events of German society. Through the lens of the German military, an aspect of the unification process comes to light: the contentious and unresolved problem of East/West integration, and the role of history, memory, and militarized masculinity in the unification process.

The “State” is understood here as “a set of organizations invested with the authority to make binding decisions for people and organizations juridically located in a particular territory and to implement these decisions using, if necessary, force” (Rueschemeyer and Evans 1999:46-47). This often entails the state “simultaneously

expressing several contradictory tendencies” (Rueschemeyer and Evans 1999:47). As Corrigan and Sayer note, one of the main things that states do is *state*, make statements (Corrigan and Sayer 1985:3). While states do indeed make statements concerning history, memory, gender, and propriety, the various administrative units (and administrators) of the state are often at odds with one another concerning just what form these should take. States are not to be considered "homogenous" units; to do so is to reify the state and fail to examine the often contradictory actions of the various "organs" of the state (Abrams 1988; Calhoun 1997; Tilly 1999; Wolf 1982). Indeed, as Herzfeld writes, research on the state should focus on “what bearers of power actually do – how they direct institutional controls and classifications to the pursuit of particular ends” (Herzfeld 2001: 122). This is evident in post-unification Germany, where the official goal of the German state was (and is) complete and equal unification of East and West; this, at least in terms of the German military, is not the case. The post-unification Ministry of Defense and *Bundeswehr* have gone to great lengths to prevent the full integration of former East German officers into both the military and national identity in order to shore up their claims as the “legitimate” German military and inheritors of the “proper” German military tradition. As such, these two “organs” of the new German state have issued numerous statements concerning remembrance, military tradition, and the types of men it deems suitable for inclusion into the German “military imaginary,” the stated image of the military.

German Militaries in the Cold War

Former East German officers are to a large degree “frozen” in time by virtue of having served in the NVA and by the history of militarization policies in the GDR.

Unlike West Germany, military service was more pronounced and more prominent in daily life; the militarization of GDR society was a primary goal of the Socialist Unity Party (SED - the East German communist party). While this was never a completely smooth process - the SED never succeeded in fully convincing the majority of East Germans of the necessity of large-scale militarization and mandatory military service – the image and popular conception in the West of the GDR as a highly militarized state and society linger (Bickford 2002, 2003).

During the 40 year history of the GDR, over 2.5 million men passed through the NVA and took part in compulsory military, paramilitary, and civil defense training (Schroeder 1998:453). Mandatory military training and military service for men played a key role in transmitting both the ideological and political aims of the SED, as well as state-endorsed gender roles and identities deemed necessary by the SED for the maintenance of East German society. Active military service in the NVA consisted of 18 months of mandatory service; career officers faced a minimum 25 year enlistment (Backerra 1992; Diedrich, Ehlert, and Wenzke 1998; Fischer 1995; Karlson and Judersleben 1992).

The GDR (like all Warsaw Pact states) engaged in a concerted effort to turn men into “socialist military warriors;” as such, militarized masculinity was actively promoted by the state (Bickford 2002, 2003; Hafeneger and Budrus 1994; Müller 1997). While not as severe in its approach as the GDR, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) maintained (and continues to maintain) a conscript military. In terms of training and official doctrine, the *Bundeswehr* stressed its role as an almost non-ideological army in order to distance itself from the negative legacy of the Third Reich and the ideologically tainted German military of that era. Soldiers of the *Bundeswehr* were portrayed as “citizen-soldiers” who

did not blindly follow orders. Rather, they were instilled with “*Innere Führung*” (Inner Leadership) (Kleßmann 1997:146; Schmäling 1991), which was to prevent them from following illegal and inhumane orders; this was an obvious attempt to distance the West German military from that of ideological, authoritarian German militaries, i.e., the World War II German military and that of East Germany, the NVA. Rather than serving the “German Nation,” *Bundeswehr* soldiers were to follow “*Verfassungspatriotismus*” (Constitutional Patriotism), and wear plain, bland uniforms (in comparison to those of the past); this was to prevent the nationalistic fervor and blind discipline of the Nazi past. For the majority of West Germans, the NVA represented an authoritarian, ideologically motivated military serving Communism, and given its *Wehrmacht*-style uniforms and Prussian discipline, a continuation of the *Wehrmacht* and Prussian militarism. The *Bundeswehr*, on the other hand, was a non-ideological defensive army that served not the nation/state, but the constitution and democratic government. For East Germans, the *Bundeswehr* and West Germany were merely a continuation of the World War II fascist German state, while the NVA was the “new” German military serving an anti-fascist state which, by virtue of being anti-fascist, considered itself absolved of the past and all its crimes (see Herf 1997; Maier 1998; Weitz 1997). Both German states played on the past to create post-war militaries that fit into their conceptions of history and their roles in the respective military blocks which they served -- NATO and the Warsaw Pact. Discussions with both *Bundeswehr* and NVA soldiers and officers revealed that during the Cold War, both German armies viewed the other as the largest threat to peace and security. Both sides harbored a special animosity for the other, which has continued after the end of the Cold War and unification (Herspring 1998; Zilian 1999).

States, according to Weber, have a monopoly on legitimate violence. And as Tilly (1999) states, war makes states. This may be true, but of even more importance is the fact that war makes states and states make soldiers to make war. States not only have the monopoly on legitimate violence, but also a monopoly on the representations and images of the men (and increasingly, women) who commit this violence; that is, they have a monopoly on militarized gender identities and who is considered a legitimate man or soldier. This includes not only the present, but also the past, for it is more often from the past that role models and traditions are sought; the selection of role models, and the past as well, falls under this official monopoly of the state. The types of men made by states into soldiers impacts the view and perception of the state in the international arena. For this reason, the new German state finds it necessary to make men into specific types of soldiers and delegitimize certain types of men who had been certain types of soldiers. In present day Germany, it is a process of oppositions based on the past.

Political Economy and the Symbolics of Unification

A 1995 series of surveys and questionnaires distributed to over 10,000 former NVA officers reported that, along with many East Germans, a majority of former East German officers (87.8% of those surveyed) consider themselves second class citizens as a result of their service in the NVA. Additionally, over half of the former officers surveyed (53.4%) complained that they were denied jobs by virtue of having served in the military; as a result, their living standard has declined, placing increased pressure and instability upon themselves and their families (Fischer 1995). In former officers' households, wives have been forced to bear the brunt of the instability brought about by drastic cuts in pensions by finding well-paying jobs to support themselves and their husbands; this fits

the general trend in post-unification eastern Germany (Berdahl 1999; Dolling 1993; Howard 1995; Kolinsky 1993; Nickel 1993; Ostner 1993; Rosenberg 1991).

As with the majority of eastern Germans, un- or under-employment is a common problem among former NVA officers; few have been able to find work suitable to their qualifications for two reasons. First, a large number of military skills do not translate to civilian jobs. And second, after unification, East German degrees and credentials were invalidated, as they did not conform to (West) German standards, and in a number of cases, were considered to be ideologically tainted. Most former NVA officers found jobs as watchmen, security guards, or truck drivers, if they found a job at all. An outcome of this sort of economic marginalization is a swing to the political right by some former officers; they have embraced the xenophobic, anti-immigration, anti-assimilationist rhetoric of right and far-right parties, whom they feel best represent their frustrations and concerns. As of May 2000, the chairman of a local Brandenburg branch of the *Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (National Democratic Party of Germany), a far-right political party, was a former NVA colonel. Some far-right groups, I was told, dispensed with their anti-communist prejudices in order to attract disenchanted former officers; unlike the Federal German government, their public statements affirmed both the “Germanness” of East German officers as well as their service as soldiers to the German *Volk*. This, coupled with the perception that “foreigners” received more benefits and better treatment than they did, pushed many officers to embrace dangerous, and in terms of their backgrounds, antithetical beliefs, which served to marginalize them even further.

According to Herbert Becker (Deputy Chairman of the NVA veterans groups),

economic marginalization has not simply been left to market forces; NVA officers feel that they have been deliberately penalized through reductions in their pensions. While West German army officers are legally allowed to earn an additional 120% of their pensions after they retire, former East German officers and soldiers are only allowed to earn DM650 in addition to their pensions (as of 1999), which average between 30% and 65% of that of a West German officer. The official reason given for the discrepancy concerns the number of "points" one has accumulated. NVA officers, even though they paid into pension plans in the GDR, did not receive points in the former Federal Republic; service time in the NVA was declared invalid and not included in the calculation of pensions after unification. As such, they are only entitled to points gained after unification. This is a serious point of contention with former NVA officers; they publicly state that they have been taken advantage of and that the reason for this has nothing to do with bureaucracy, but is dictated by the political desire to inflict a "*Strafrente*" (punishment pension) on them for having served in the NVA.

Max, a former artillery officer, summed up the growing sense of frustration, marginalization, and disbelief concerning their status in an interview conducted in 1999. Although he was unable to find work, he claimed to be financially more secure than many other former officers; he receives a "mini pension," but more importantly, his wife has full-time employment and can support the family. Despite this, he still feels like a "second-class" citizen:

First of all I feel, well... I live well, but I feel like a second-class person (*Mensch zweiter Klasse*); I live well, better than before really, don't have as many burdens. I get sort of an ersatz pension, a mini-pension, but I can live from it, and since my wife is fully employed, we live very well actually, that's the truth. But what the Federal Government has done is a bad thing, the CDU/CSU, and in my opinion the FDP as well, that we're not to be recognized, that we can't say "lieutenant-

colonel or colonel, retired" (*Oberstleutnant* or *Oberst, ausser Dienst*). This is a question of status and it hasn't been solved. If I had been a Nazi officer, or even an SS officer, then I would be greeted as such, with my SS rank and my name, or as a colonel of the *Bundeswehr*. When I heard this I couldn't contain my surprise that this really happens, that this is the way it is done at meetings; these officers are recognized. In march, mid march, Poland and Hungary will join NATO; these officers, who were "communist enemies" of NATO, who are lieutenant-colonels and captains, both active and retired, they are still officers. It's only us who are no longer officers, and that isn't right. It's unequal treatment of the first degree, and I don't understand it.

While Max admits that in many ways, he is better off materially, it is the lack of status and recognition, and that former *Wehrmacht* and SS officers are treated with respect, that trouble him most. Former NVA officers are also disturbed by the fact that SS and *Wehrmacht* officers are entitled to burials at state expense, whereas they are not. The official reason given is that SS and *Wehrmacht* members who later served in the *Bundeswehr* can receive a state burial, while NVA officers who never served in the *Bundeswehr* are not (Dr. Gerhard Kümmel, Universität der *Bundeswehr*, PC:2003). The popular belief amongst former NVA officers is that since *Wehrmacht* and SS soldiers "fought for Germany," (the fascist Germany), they are allowed burials; NVA officers believe that as members of the fascist German military, they should not be honored by the state. Many also believe the *Bundeswehr*, as essentially a carry-over from the fascist German military (i.e. *Wehrmacht* and SS), is therefore allowed burials, whereas former NVA officers are denied this because they never "fought" for Germany and served the "anti-fascist" German state and military. While mourning is a private matter for the families of former NVA officers, it is a matter of state importance for *Wehrmacht* and SS soldiers (Hausen 1997). This is "proof" for many former officers that the Federal Republic of Germany is a continuation of the Third Reich, a "fascist state in democratic clothing," as one officer put it. NVA officers are also outraged that they are now

officially coded by the Ministry of Defense as “*Gediente in fremden Streitkräften*” (Veterans of Foreign Armed Forces) by virtue of their service in the East German military. This coding makes them, at the symbolic level, “non-German;” the symbolic meaning of this designation has not escaped the notice of former officers. One of their primary goals is to be recognized as “German Soldiers”; not only are they “non-German,” they are not considered “German Soldiers,” like *Bundeswehr*, *Wehrmacht*, or *SS* soldiers.

Life in the *Kameradschaften*

Former National People’s Army veterans groups are affiliated with the *Deutscher Bundeswehrverband* (German Army Association - DBwV), the official veterans organization of the formerly West German, now post unification German military. After unification, the *Bundeswehrverband* extended membership to those former NVA officers who were not active members of the *Staatssicherheitsdienst*, the State Secret Police, or *Stasi*. As of May 2000, there were 12,500 former NVA soldiers affiliated with the *Bundeswehrverband*. Veterans groups act as “sites” of memory by allowing former soldiers (in this case, NVA officers) to come together to remember the past and discuss the present and future; as such, they form what Winter and Sivan call “networks of complementarity,” where members remember and share complimentary memories and experiences face to face (Winter and Sivan 1999:32). NVA officers say they are grateful that the *Bundeswehrverband* welcomed them, and that they have an official platform from which to air their concerns. While many of them find it strange that the *Bundeswehr* has accepted them into its official interest group for soldiers, and seem to have a somewhat uneasy relationship with it, they are nonetheless happy to have an outlet from which to air their complaints and problems.

Founded in 1956 (shortly after the formation of the *Bundeswehr*), the *Bundeswehrverband* acts as an apolitical and financially independent representative for over 240,000 members, consisting of conscripts, career soldiers and officers, retired military members, family members, and widows/widowers of military members (DBwV Website). On its website, the *Bundeswehrverband* states that its opinions and policies are taken seriously by the government and parliament; as such, it is the political voice of German soldiers and their families. Comprised of four *Landesverbände* (state associations) representing the northern, southern, western, and eastern states of Germany, the *Bundeswehrverband* has veterans groups and offices throughout Germany; there are representatives and offices on all military installations. *Landesverband Ost* (State Association East) is the most recent of the state associations. Formed on April 5th 1991 with an initial 6,500 members in Magdeburg, *Landesverband Ost* represents the states of Freistaat Thüringen, Freistaat Sachsen, Berlin, Brandenburg, Sachsen-Anhalt, and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (DBwV Website). Currently, *Landesverband Ost* has 32,000 members; this includes former NVA soldiers and officers who joined after unification.

Former NVA officers are organized in local *Kameradschaften*, which hold monthly or bi-monthly meetings; *Kameradschaften* are generally located where NVA units were formerly located, and their members are usually members of that former unit. A map on the wall at the main office of the *Landesverband Ost* shows all of the various *Kameradschaften* in eastern Germany; this mirrors pre-unification maps of the locations of NVA units, making it appear that former NVA units are still there. In a sense, they are: in the mental maps of former officers, they still seem to view and understand the new eastern states as if it were still the former GDR in terms of where units were stationed, distances

between units, who was stationed where, and the quickest routes to and from former bases. A "military template" still overlays the east to former NVA officers. Small flags are used to designate their locations, just as they would be used on training and exercise maps during military maneuvers. In what I viewed as an ironic commentary on the state of relations between NVA veterans groups and those of the *Bundeswehr*, the "headquarters" of the NVA groups in Berlin was marked with a large red flag; that of the *Bundeswehrverband*, and thus, the "headquarters" of the group that represents primarily *Bundeswehr* groups, was marked in white. Revolution versus reaction: the old tropes of the Cold War marked out clearly in small flags on a map in an obscure office in Berlin.

After unification, many officers viewed the veterans groups as both a forum to express political discontent as well as a site of memory; here they were able to "return" to the NVA, to go back to what was familiar to them, to reactivate those social and hierarchical networks that were officially taken from them after unification. And perhaps most importantly for their sense of identity, the *Kameradschaften* allowed them to feel like soldiers again, something they believe the Federal government has gone to great pains to take away from them. But these meetings were more than just monthly occurrences; they seemed to have structured and in some instances shaped the life courses of former officers. *Kameradschaft* meetings were more than just a chance to get together to talk about the past; they were also a way to insure that the present made sense, had some sort of form. In a very real sense, it gave them something to live for, something to look forward to, something to fill their time in a meaningful way. There was always a sense of desperation present at the meetings, a sense of loss and a sense of people attempting to counter that loss, as who they were slipped away. As two former

officers put it to me, "the veterans groups provided us with a sense of purpose again, a sense of belonging. Before we joined, we were lost. Now we have something to give us direction."

One of the primary reasons for participation in the *Kameradschaften* is political representation. As the only officially sanctioned organization representing soldiers' rights, the *Bundeswehrverband* provides former NVA officers with a forum from which to air their grievances. It has also been an arena for "getting to know" the *Bundeswehr*, a process that has not been particularly easy for either side. After unification, the *Bundeswehrverband* was the only organization to offer former officers any form of official, government-sanctioned opportunities to speak out politically. According to a report written in 1995 concerning former NVA officers in the *Bundeswehrverband*, those officers who joined are somewhat unusual; the report, written by a former NVA colonel who heads the "Working Group for the History of the NVA," states that it is uncommon for the an army to open itself up to its former enemies (Fischer 1995:5). In this regard, few NVA officers joined the group, presumably because it is the official organization of the *Bundeswehr*, their former enemy. In comparison, "ISOR" (*Initiativgemeinschaft zum Schutz der sozialen Rechte ehemaliger Angehöriger bewaffneter Organe und der Zöllverwaltung der DDR* - Association for the Protection of the Social Rights of former members of the Armed Forces and Customs Agency of the German Democratic Republic), another organization representing the interests of former NVA officers, STASI members, and police and customs officials, has a membership of over 80,000, (H. Becker PC: 1999) but does not enjoy any sort of official, governmental recognition. While those former officers who joined the *Bundeswehrverband* can be viewed as "moderate"

(something which they themselves like to think), ISOR is considered by many former NVA officers and the public at large to be a "hard line" organization; members of ISOR, I was told, are those who have had the hardest time coming to terms with unification and integration into (west) German society. Additionally, ISOR members are deeply suspicious of the *Bundeswehrverband*, find it difficult to believe that this organization is concerned with the best interests of former NVA officers and other members of the GDR armed forces, and consider former NVA officers who have joined to be "traitors" to the past. As Fischer states in his report on NVA officers, "just as it is unbelievable that a western army would open up its professional interest group to members of its former enemy, so too it is unbelievable for many former NVA officers, who simply cannot accept it" (Fischer 1995:5).

As stated earlier, in comparison to the large number of career officers who served in the NVA, only a small percentage have joined the *Bundeswehrverband*. Their reasons are many and complicated. Over the course of my fieldwork and interviews with former officers, many stated that they joined the *Bundeswehrverband* as a way to stay active and to learn how to be "good citizens" in their new country. Primarily, most joined the *Bundeswehrverband* out of economic necessity and fear for the future. Herbert Becker, the deputy chairman of the *Landesverband Ost*, told me during many discussions that they always try to find money or other support for former officers and their families who are in extreme need or dire circumstances; he spoke of many families not being able to pay rent, funeral expenses, or medical care. The veterans groups also serve as informal business networks for former officers who have attempted to become small businessmen. The *Bundeswehrverband* provides former officers with a chance to have their concerns

heard by government officials, at least in theory. In practice, it seems that they are more often ignored, or their concerns diverted and put on hold.

During the course of my fieldwork, a serious crisis threatened the East German membership of the *Bundeswehrverband*: the war in Kosovo. Over 3000 former NVA officers withdrew from the association, citing as the reason their disapproval of the NATO "aggression" against Serbia and the participation of the *Bundeswehr* in the war. The general sentiment amongst officers was that they had no desire to be members of an organization that supported an army that attacked what they saw as an "innocent" country. This sparked an intense debate within the *Kameradschaften*: one could withdraw in protest, but if one did, that removed yet another voice from the strength of former NVA officers in the *Bundeswehrverband* to argue and fight for their rights. Withdrawal from the *Bundeswehrverband* also contributed to the general perception, many argued, that former NVA officers were "living in the past," and that their solidarity was simply misplaced and out of date Cold War loyalty. Herbert Becker, the deputy chairman of the *Landesverband Ost*, lobbying continuously for members to stay in the organization despite their opposition to the war, stated: "If they start leaving now, then we lose strength and power in the organization; they need to realize that the only power you have in a democracy is your voice. Many haven't learned that yet."

As Germans among Germans

In an address at the March 23, 2000 meeting of the *Kameradschaft Ehemalige Rostock*, the chairman of the veterans group made the following statements and demands. I quote at length from this address, for it sums up the feeling of disenchantment, anger, and frustration felt by East German members of the *Bundeswehrverband*. Reading from

an open letter that was to be sent to the colonel in charge of the *Bundeswehrverband*,
Herr Richter, the chairman of the veterans group stated:

We want to underline the fact that no one is above or outside the current laws, and German law applies to every German with equal power concerning content and applicability.

We demand the same for ourselves. We are concerned about equality and our equal treatment as German soldiers. We are concerned with the continued project of the internal unity of our German people.

There has to be a stop to the banning of parts of our biographies from the life of our people. No politician will be able to reach our heads or our hearts if, for purely political reasons, he does not recognize us as German soldiers with the same equality as soldiers of the current German army.

Political opportunism is damaging German unity, and we are no longer willing, 10 years after the unification of both German states and its people, to put up with discrimination, belittlement, insults, and the limiting of our legal rights.

We declare our intensive resistance to these actions. We want the unity of our people, but with legal equality as Germans among Germans (Richter, Public address, March 23, 2000).

Richter continued his speech with a call for equal recognition as "German"

soldiers:

We call for the state to recognize us as German soldiers. In our opinion, it makes no sense that our fathers and grandfathers, who, in the service of a German government that exploited their oath as soldiers, used them to overrun peoples and states, kill or injure people, and destroy property, may call themselves German soldiers, use their ranks and wear their medals and awards. And they are allowed to sit next to us in this organization as German soldiers, while we, as German soldiers as well, who never attacked other peoples or countries, are officially denied the right to call ourselves German soldiers.

It is incomprehensible to us that the German government and the *Bundeswehr* accept soldiers of the Polish, Czech, and Hungarian armies as equals, with their ranks, military diplomas and state awards, while we, who served and carried out military duties with these same soldiers for decades, went to the same military academies, and in some cases, received the same awards on the same day, are denied this respect as Germans from Germans. This goes against all logic.

We are Germans according to birth, ethnicity, and fatherland. It was not us, but rather, our fathers and grandfathers that led us into wars that were lost. In the end, it was they who gave the victors the possibility to divide our country, which allowed for the political developments in the two halves of Germany.

The East German state was either our place of birth or our new home. We could not choose another one, we belonged to it. 17 million Germans could not leave it. The other German state would not have been able to survive it, and

German land would have been given up.

We remained true to our homeland, served this separate German state and protected it.

We protected the path of our people. We served the will of our people and the laws of the last freely-elected government of the German Democratic Republic, up until the peacefully accomplished unification of the Germans. Without a military revolt.

We were German soldiers aware of our duty, and always acted in the interests of our people, never against it. We performed our military service honorably and with a sense of duty, and we were honored for our service, as is common in all armies on earth. That was our life as German soldiers.

Richter's address was greeted with loud applause and almost universal approval.

After his speech, I conducted an informal survey concerning the points raised; of the 25 former officers with whom I spoke, all agreed that he was speaking directly to their concerns and worries, and demanding those things that they themselves wished rectified.

Throughout Richter's speech - and throughout my fieldwork - former officers told me that they wanted to be treated as "Germans among Germans," as equal citizens, not "second class" citizens. This was a call for inclusion in the "*Volk*," the German Nation; they demanded full acceptance and treatment as German citizens. If there was to be true unification, then there could no longer be "two states, one German nation." Legally and politically, the two states are one, but former officers still feel that, by virtue of different laws, or the differing application of laws, they are not part of the German nation. They see themselves as Germans under Germans, second-class citizens.

Over and again, and in official statements released by the *Landesverband Ost*, the following problems and points of contention emerged: pension cuts, prohibition from using former rank, awards and medals, questions of honor, recognition as German and as German soldiers, recognition of diplomas and other educational degrees, lack of jobs, and a severe loss of identity. As a result of these sanctions, they believed that immigrants

coming to Germany enjoyed more privileges and advantages than they as "real" Germans do not. This is a dangerous trend among former officers, despite the fact that the majority claim to be staunchly on the political left. This feeling of being "under" Germans – as well as "under" non-Germans – sets the stage for political anomie, disengagement, disbelief in the democratic process, and a possible move towards the extreme right and xenophobia. As I write this, Germany is reeling from the recent gains by far-right parties in eastern Germany; fieldwork in the coming summer will focus on the voting patterns of former officers to ascertain if these feelings of disengagement have caused them to shift to the right.

While all of this may seem to affect only a small, perhaps marginal, segment of the former East German population, its symbolic impact is far greater. Through these men, the process of state building - the creation of legitimacy and the creation/invention of tradition - is played out. And in a sense, because they are a marginal group, the process remains hidden from view to the general public. The opinion of (West) German *Bundeswehr* officers and (West) Germans with whom I spoke is that these men were on the wrong side, and as such, deserve nothing. Not only were they "on the wrong side," but they chose to stay there, and served in a military that insured that there would indeed be a "side." These men, so it seems, are viewed as servants of an unjust regime. They not only stayed, but they actively believed, and are in a sense blamed for the division of Germany. In his memoir, "Two Armies, One Fatherland" (1995), Jörg Schönbohm, the *Bundeswehr* general sent to the "East" in the months prior to unification to disband and restructure the NVA comments that NVA generals reiterated the fact that as part of the Warsaw Pact, they had helped maintain peace and stability in Europe. "Yes, this may

have been true," he wrote, "but I had to keep reminding them that they were still Communists." As Herbert Becker wrote in an appraisal of the "status question,"

"Surely, the NVA was a different German army from the German armies before it. It was also a different army from the *Bundeswehr*. But that doesn't seem to be the problem. The problem is this: the NVA served a different social system. Therein lies the reasons for the belittling and discriminatory treatment of those who served in the NVA." (Becker: "*Sachstandsbericht Statusfragen*," 1999).

Conclusion

By taking part in veterans groups meetings, former officers attempt to re-insert themselves into German military history: they were soldiers, and now, as members of a veterans group for soldiers, they are soldiers once again, German soldiers. It is a somewhat contradictory process; the German government and military have attempted to strip them of their distinction as "German soldiers," yet, by virtue of taking part in these meetings, they are, at least unofficially, recognized as German soldiers. But, from their point of view, that is the problem: it is unofficial. They demand to be officially recognized as both Germans and soldiers, and as German soldiers who did not start or fight in a war. They want to be recognized as good men, in a sense unlike their fathers and grandfathers and other male relatives who fought for an illegal German government. And they want to be seen as good men vis-à-vis the *Bundeswehr*, which they view as a continuation of the military of their fathers and grandfathers. Veterans groups are not only sites of memory, but masculinity as well; they can show Germany that they are indeed good, proper men, worthy of being considered German, and, in their eyes, perhaps the best German men. However, in the eyes of the post unification German state, this does not seem to count for much, at least in the opinions of former officers. While it is true that they did not start or fight in a war, their arguments are seen as a continuation of

the official GDR stance that as an anti-fascist state, they were not complicit in the crimes committed by Germany in World War II (Herf 1997; Weitz 1997). Because of this, they are seen as merely parroting what they were taught to say and believe, and no matter what, they still served a dictatorship that did not "fight" for Germany.

Participation in veterans group meetings serves as a sort of "self help" group for these men by allowing them to come together to discuss their experiences of coming to terms with unification and learning how to live and act in a market economy and a democratic system of government. This is a group of people who, contrary to most East Germans, I would not characterize as having "wanted access to Western goods" (Gal and Kligman 2000). Rather, they resisted such things, although to varying degrees (this is not to say that no NVA officer ever wanted western goods; the point is that they did not desire them to anywhere near the same degree as those outside of the military in the GDR). For these men, although not necessarily their families, unification was not a joyous, desired event. Rather, for the majority of the men I interviewed, unification represented the "end" of their careers, their life choices, security, status, and the state they had sworn to defend. As such, the "fall" into democracy for these men was from the start fraught with uncertainty, disappointment, anomie, and a sense of profound loss.

In post unification Germany, state and military legitimization are connected to the past and present via soldiers, men who either "fought" for Germany, regardless of the fact that they fought for a criminal government, or did not fight for Germany, or rather, for the "right" Germany. While debates concerning *Wehrmacht* and SS soldiers and whether or not they committed war crimes continue (the recent controversies surrounding the *Wehrmachtausstellung* – the exhibit detailing the complicity of the regular German army

in the crimes of the Holocaust – speak to this (see Bartov, Grossmann, and Nolan 2002), there is no debate concerning the criminal nature of the NVA. In this instance, tradition is transmitted through the constructions, memories, and represented actions of certain types of men. Tradition is based on men who fought and killed in war, rather than men who did not fight or kill in a major war, even if they served a government considered illegitimate or ideologically criminal.

While the *Bundeswehrverband* has taken former East German officers as members, they are considered “second class members” in much the same way East Germans in general are considered second-class citizens. The veterans groups provide former officers with “sites” of memory -- places to come together and discuss the past, present, and future -- but their concerns fall on deaf ears. A letter from the deputy chairman of the former NVA veterans groups in the *Bundeswehrverband* stated that since my fieldwork ended in May 2000, little has changed, and none of their concerns have been addressed or rectified, despite constant assurances to the contrary (Herbert Becker, PC: January 2003). Although the *Bundeswehrverband* provides them a forum to air their concerns, I see it as something else: it allows them to come together in order to further marginalize them. Meetings of former NVA officers are exactly that -- meetings where former members of the NVA come together. As such, they are viewed as *still* the NVA: still unreformed Communists, still hardliners, still militarists to those on the outside looking in. While inclusion in the *Bundeswehrverband* paints a picture of unification, that they have been welcomed into the new, unified Germany (which strengthens the German government’s stated desire of full unification and integration), it is only that, an image, an illusion of integration that allows for the continued marginalization of former

NVA officers in order to shore up the image of the *Bundeswehr*. The more they attempt to redress or counter their "loss," the more they become the NVA of the (West) German imaginary, evidence that they are not fully integrated because *they* do not seek full integration but rather, a return to the past. According to this logic, their marginalization is their own fault, and they are victims by their own doing.

National and state identity come into conflict in the new cultural and political imaginary of Germany; East Germans were always considered part of the "German Nation" by West Germany during the Cold War, but now that Germany is unified, former NVA officers are the "bad Germans" because they served a different German state. In this instance, *Jus Sanguinis* is replaced by *Jus Soli* (Brubaker 1992); NVA officers are denied their "Germanness" because they lived in and served the "other" Germany and are thus no longer part of the German nation. The unified German state appears to find it necessary to dismiss certain Germans because of prior state allegiance in order to construct a new state identity; they are no longer German because they served a state that was counter to West Germany, whereas former *SS* and *Wehrmacht* soldiers served the German nation and a state that did not rival the pre-unification Federal Republic. The sense of disillusionment and anomie that former NVA officers feel is caused by this tension between national and state identity: they thought that they were serving Germany and were part of the German nation, regardless of political system. In the new Germany, the construction of a state and military identity seems to require the negation of a national identity and biographies of certain Germans based not only on their own pasts, but on Germany's contentious and tortured past of the twentieth century.

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