

**Clemens Heitmann.** *"Schützen und helfen"? Luftschutz und Zivilverteidigung in der DDR 1955 bis 1989/90.* Berlin: Christoph Links Verlag, 2006. 500 pp. EUR 29.90 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-86153-400-6.



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## The Social Militarization of the GDR

The first major scholarly work on civil defense in the GDR, Clemens Heitmann's study finds itself at the intersection of four major scholarly enterprises. First, Heitmann himself presents this as a study about the extent and limits of totalitarianism in the GDR, a theme most cogently formulated by J  rgen Kocka and Sigrid Meuschel (oddly not given her due here). Second, this work strives to elucidate the nature of a system that drew its citizens into participation in the building of a socialist modernity. Heitmann's work serves as a corrective to any urges to gloss over the oppressive aspects of this project. Third, this book ties into a much older theme of German history and historiography: social militarization. And fourth, this study illustrates and advances the goals and methods of "new military history." In line with the German conception of *Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, Heitmann promises at the onset of his study to employ the techniques and approaches of military, social, political, and gender history, along with a history of mentalities. Though rejecting a narrow social science approach, Heitmann nonetheless does not seriously engage in cultural

history, but combines structuralist (in the sense of social history) and institutional approaches. Indeed, this study is first and foremost an organizational history. It is a good example of this kind of inquiry, based as it is on archival research of admirable depth and breadth. By contrast, the author rejects the methods of oral history because they might not be representative. He is overly timid here, ignoring methods that historians have developed to deal with this issue, as well as with the problems of biased sources. (Isn't the latter in fact one of the classic methodological issues that historians have been dealing with for centuries?) Nor does this study make use of other sources that would allow a bottom-up approach to the subject. This decision leaves the book's theme half unexplored. Even so, this study would make a fine point of departure for a dissertation that would deal with the cultural side of social militarization in the GDR.

Paramilitary organizations permeated East German society; Heitmann argues that their main purpose was to promote loyalty to the system. Zivilverteidigung, the largest of these organization by far, counted nearly half a

million members in the waning years of the GDR. The author also emphasizes their military function. Along with militarized youth organizations and curricula, paramilitary organizations formed the foundations of a “militarized socialism” rooted in Soviet military doctrine.[1] Vladimir Ilyich Lenin’s conception of a “just war” (to be fought in defense of socialism) was challenged by Nikita Khrushchev, who believed that any war must turn nuclear, making war an unacceptable alternative. After Khrushchev, however, the possibility of waging a conventional war in Europe again made war thinkable. This state of affairs did not preclude an escalation into nuclear war, of course. The tactical use of nuclear weapons, so Soviet military planners believed, would have a fairly minimal impact on the Soviet Union. (By contrast, the GDR was part of a buffer zone where western aggression would be stopped; it would thus be totally devastated.) Recent research indicates that the East German leadership nonetheless never seriously questioned Soviet military thinking, which was based on four premises: the permanent military threat to the socialist world posed by the capitalist West; the centrality of the USSR to the preservation and defense of socialism; the coinciding interests of the Soviet Union and GDR with regard to the defense of socialism; and the necessity of subordinating civilian concerns to military needs. The GDR leadership’s acceptance of this view of the world and its subservient attitude towards the Soviet Union resulted at least in part from the “existential threat” posed by the 1953 East German uprising and the conviction that ultimately, only Soviet might could keep the SED in power.

Civil defense played an important role in Soviet-directed military planning in the GDR. East German civil defense organizations were modeled on Soviet mass organizations of the Second World War. In the earlier decades of the GDR, these were organizations for air defense (*Luftschutz*). Drawing on the experiences of World War II, they were charged with taking preventative steps that would limit the impact of air attacks on populations, towns, and industry, as well as dealing with the destruction caused by such attacks. A conceptual shift from air defense to civil defense (*Zivilverteidigung*) took place in 1967, in conformity with Soviet policies and accompanied by a broadening response to the growing dangers of war in the atomic age. Civil defense took on an explicitly military role, much in keeping with Lenin’s assertion that the preservation of the labor force was a top priority in wartime because it was needed to save and restore socialist society. The communist leadership in the Soviet Union and the GDR saw civil defense as a strategic factor to be

used to ensure the total mobilization of resources and the survival of the state in wartime. Heitmann’s interpretation of this doctrine is quite valid: “The preservation, not of human beings, but of an abstract force of production, was called for, not for humanitarian reasons, but driven by exclusively materialistic motives” (p. 67). This thesis could nonetheless have been strengthened by contrasting (on the basis of the secondary literature) this military doctrine with western military planning, and discussing (however briefly) the relationship between military, political, and humanitarian goals in western thinking on war.

The “hinterland”—a problematic concept when applied to the GDR—played a central role in Soviet-bloc military thinking. Based on the experiences of World War II, the Soviet Union continued to advocate a survival strategy—even in case of atomic war—involving industrial production in areas well away from the front. Applied to the GDR, this doctrine was nonsensical: “The consequences of a conventional war and, even more, of an unconventional war on East German territory would have spelled, not only the end of the GDR, but of any human existence on its soil” (p. 83). Nonetheless, from the 1950s to the 1970s, the GDR’s political and military leadership persisted in believing that an atomic war could be waged and won, downplaying both its short- and long-term effects. While defense minister Heinz Hoffmann, for example, argued that atomic war should be avoided if possible because it would kill so many, he clung to the thesis that any war waged by the Soviet bloc would be a “just war” that would lead to the triumph of socialism. An official report of 1962 assumed that in case of an atomic attack, the state and economy would continue to function, despite massive destruction and radioactive contamination.

This is where civil defense was supposed to come in. It was part of a broad attempt, beginning in 1952, to bring about a “total mobilization and militarization” of society (p. 100), necessitated in the eyes of the SED leadership by the central importance of the hinterland to survival in total war. North Vietnamese survival of American attacks during the war in Vietnam was invoked as evidence that the GDR could also hunker down and survive a western onslaught. The air defense and later the civil defense system were supposed to rally the resources of the entire population and help organize total war. The conception of the central importance of the hinterland to survival in total war led, so the author argues, to the subordination of society to the military, both in the GDR and the USSR.

At least as important as military goals were attempts

to mobilize support for the SED, asserts Heitmann. In the 1960s, Hoffmann made it his goal to “draw all segments of society and state in proper proportion into military protection and to spread the socialist defense idea throughout the entire population” (p. 189). Though no rock-solid evidence survives, there are many hints that the latter thought was uppermost in the minds of the SED leadership in their molding of the air defense/civil defense system. The origins of air defense go back to the period just after the 1953 uprising, a time at which the SED was trying to expand its support among the general population. Air defense was not originally connected with the military: army support was scant; officers of the armed forces were not placed in civil defense functions; leadership positions were given to apparatchiks, not civil defense experts; and no one in the army or subject to the draft was supposed to serve in civil defense. Air defense was organized as an umbrella organization that was under the authority of the Ministry of the Interior until 1976 and that coordinated the civil defense activities of a large array of state organizations. These organizations commandeered personnel to air defense. Employees were chosen for their political loyalty rather than their expertise—hardly a recipe for military efficiency. Emphasis was placed on the support and participation of the broader population. Most functions in the air defense/civil defense system were carried out by volunteers recruited from their places of employment or neighborhoods. Many were women. To garner support for air defense, the SED had to overcome painful associations between air defense and the terrors of aerial bombardment during World War II. In addition, in the late 1950s, the SED had to undo the impact of earlier SED propaganda, which had presented atomic war as so catastrophic in its impact that it essentially precluded civil defense.

The air defense/civil defense system was not, however, able to mobilize and indoctrinate volunteers as effectively as hoped. Despite widespread propaganda, East Germans saw civil defense as one of many bothersome tasks forced upon them by the SED. These organizations never found enough volunteers. Grumbling over required training was widespread. A typical reaction was, “In the atomic age, air defense is senseless” (p. 163). In addition, the organization of civil defense was dysfunctional, especially before 1976. Absurdly enough, security measures often made it impossible to communicate the necessary military information to civil defense volunteers. And the SED could not count on civil defense officers and volunteers to follow orders, as demonstrated by widespread refusal to participate in the invasion of

Czechoslovakia to end the Prague Spring in 1968. Even a lack of uniforms had a demoralizing impact. Training was militarized after the Defense Ministry was put in charge of civil defense in 1976. Paramilitary civil defense units participated in military maneuvers, during which they temporarily experienced military discipline. Training exercises not involving the military were a different matter, and incidents of drunkenness during these are a clear indication that not all of their participants took them seriously.

The air defense/civil defense system had been ineffectual in terms both of its military role and indoctrination, a state of affairs that changed with the Brezhnev-era creation of a revamped civil defense system under Soviet supervision. Civil defense took on more explicitly military functions related to territorial defense in case of invasion. This “shadow army” (p. 199) was a largely imperceptible force without barracks, yet ready for mobilization in case of war. In 1976, at the insistence of the Soviet Union, civil defense was moved from the Ministry of the Interior to the purview of the Defense Ministry, and its personnel came under military law. Military men were recruited into top administrative positions in civil defense. This militarization of civil defense gave the East German military establishment the ability to exert power and influence over wide swaths of GDR society. Civil defense was totally subordinated to military doctrine, in particular the defense of the hinterland and the sustainability of fighting ability after attack. Moreover, much greater emphasis was placed on indoctrination of civil defense volunteers and the general population regarding the dangers faced by the GDR and the need for civil defense. The civil defense system subordinated civilian government and the economy to the needs of the military in ways that were, according to the author, typical of the GDR. (Industry and local governments had to cover much of the expenses and the loss of working hours.) This attitude went along with a profound cultural militarization—promoted only in part by the civil defense system.

It is remarkable that this process of militarization reached its climax during the era of *d  tente*. Heitmann attributes this surprising development to a widespread attitude within the SED that the “unbridgeable divide between socialism and imperialism could not in any way be weakened or overcome though *d  tente* policies” (cited from an SED document on p. 201). Heitmann goes so far as to assert that the SED was forced by the Soviet Union to accept *d  tente*, which the SED saw as an existential threat, for which it tried to compensate with strong-armed tactics. This thesis contradicts much that has been

written about *d  tente*, but deserves to be fully examined.[2] However, here as elsewhere, Heitmann does not do enough to counteract the false impression that the SED was monolithic in its outlook.[3]

Some former citizens of the GDR have argued that the principal mission of civil defense organizations was to deal with non-military emergencies and catastrophes. However, as Heitmann demonstrates again and again, up until the 1980s, they did not have the resources and personnel to do this. In cases of emergency, units of many other different organizations poured into the affected area, with little more than token representation of *Luftschutz*, later *Zivilschutz*. Heitmann argues that they were “too unprofessional, materially too weak and intentionally too haphazardly recruited” (p. 147) to have been able to make any real contribution to emergency relief. From this he concludes that the recruitment of volunteers had more to do with “indoctrination and control” (p. 147) than with actual civil defense functions, and that disaster relief was not the main function of air defense and civil defense before 1984.

In 1984, civil defense was ostensibly redefined as primarily focusing on emergency relief, though the author is not quite sure what to make of this development. His analysis is presented in a convoluted and contradictory way. On the one hand, he places this shift in the context of Erich Honecker’s attempts in the mid-1980s to break free of absolute Soviet control over East German military policy. In 1986, Honecker publicly called Soviet middle-range rockets stationed on East German soil “hellish” (“*Teufelszeug*,” p. 243), and asked that they be removed. Several pages later, however, Heitmann argues that the SED probably wanted to preserve the roles of civil defense in military planning and indoctrination, and only decided to begin emphasizing emergency relief as a way of overcoming popular criticism, notably from the Protestant church. Indeed, civil defense volunteers and professionals breathed a sigh of relief as the unpopular militarization of the 1970s was cast aside and transparently useless advice on how to deal with the aftermath of an atomic attack was dropped. The author makes a case for the argument that Honecker’s attempts at *d  tente*, demilitarization, and distancing from the Soviet Union were sincere. But does this assertion not contradict the author’s argument that the demilitarization of civil defense was carried out primarily for propaganda purposes, as well as his earlier claim that *d  tente* had been forced upon the GDR by the Soviet Union? I was both intrigued and baffled by what Heitmann writes on this subject. What is clear is that more research is needed.

In all of this, Heitmann sees ample evidence that in the GDR, the state could never truly subjugate society. This thesis would have been stronger had the author dealt in greater depth with popular reactions. His sections on the cultural orientation of civil defense volunteers are intriguing, but lacking in depth. He asserts, for example, that the level of militarization in civil defense was lower than that in many other auxiliary organizations, but does not give much evidence to prove it, aside from the fact that civil defense volunteers did not carry arms. One would also like to know more about popular reactions to civil defense training, drills, and public awareness campaigns provided to the public by civil defense employees and volunteers. How did East Germans react to fallout shelters—some of which were World War II bunkers—and orders to keep canned foods in the cellar in case of attack? How did they feel about air raid drills, carried out in public places up into the 1980s? On other subjects, Heitmann is more forthcoming. A section on high school military training and civil defense training gives a sense of the growing resistance to militarization of society among parents and in the Protestant church. Heitmann also analyzes the relationship between the SED and the Red Cross with subtlety, demonstrating both how the SED attempted to put the Red Cross to work for its militaristic purposes and how Red Cross volunteers tried to avoid serving the SED through their work.

Heitmann’s relative lack of interest in popular culture goes hand in hand with a flawed overall conceptualization of the topic. A focus, not on indoctrination—a very narrow, instrumentalizing, top-down concept—but on the creation of a modern, East German socialist identity would have suggested other methods, questions, and possibly conclusions. What did it mean to be a soldier of socialism? Did fear of western aggression promote militarism and nationalism in the GDR, as it most certainly did in the Soviet Union? Did a social militarization of the GDR take place? What impact did paramilitary instruction in schools and volunteer work in civil defense have on images of socialist identity and East German identity? Did volunteering for civil defense make an impact on thinking about gender roles among the many female volunteers? These questions have not been adequately addressed here or in the literature. As we know from the work of Sheila Fitzpatrick and Robert Gellately, even the most repressive of dictatorships were created and maintained, not only from the top down, but also from the bottom up.[4] It is not enough to say, as Heitmann does, “It was the wish of the party to attain cultural hegemony and to form citizens into loyal subjects” (p. 300). To deter-

mine whether this actually happened, one needs to look beyond the policies and intentions of those in power.

In addition to his difficulties with conceptualization, the author has a somewhat perplexing way of presenting his material. After a very long introductory section on military doctrine, the reader expects an analysis of the military role of air defense/civil defense, but instead Heitmann embarks on a discussion of their role in rallying popular support for SED rule. Indeed, he often treats these two functions of these organizations—the military role and indoctrination—as essentially the same thing, ignoring tensions between the two. The militarization of 1976-84 brings into sharp relief the competition between military goals and the desire to win over popular support. Heitmann's treatment of a third aspect of civil defense—disaster relief—is handled well. But it is puzzling that he mentions but says next to nothing about a fourth dimension of civil defense activity: its possible use in cases of civil unrest.

The author makes admirable attempts to introduce the reader unversed in GDR history to different facets of his book's theme, background, sources and methods, but at times he belabors the obvious or, what is much worse, confuses the issue at hand. For example, it is not always clear whether the branches of the police, fire departments, and various state agencies discussed in the text were part of the air defense/civil defense system (for example, on pp. 145-147). The minutiae of organizational history presented in this study are at times mind-numbing, and it doesn't help that the list of abbreviations is incomplete (NVR, WBK, OSD, DRK, and WKK are missing). In addition, the index is woefully inadequate. This, of course, is presumably the fault of the press, not the author, and the book's style of indexing does not differ substantially from that of many other German monographs.

These difficulties notwithstanding, it is Heitmann's great achievement to have shown how war, or rather the ability to wage war, became an important component of

SED legitimacy, and, indeed, of socialist identity in the GDR. He points to social militarization as a strong line of continuity between the Prussian-German past and the GDR. His meticulous archival research has unearthed a wealth of new information that will be of great assistance to future researchers. Even so, the subject cries out for comparative perspectives (made possible, for example, by Nicholas Steneck's dissertation on civil defense in West Germany),[5] as well as an in-depth exploration of mass involvement and the impact on popular culture.

#### Notes

[1]. Heribert Seubert, *Zum Legitimitätsverfall des militarisierten Sozialismus in der DDR* (Münster: Lit, 1995), cited (without page number) in Heitmann on p. 3.

[2]. The GDR, of course, had much to gain from détente, notable the end of attempts to deny recognition of GDR sovereignty and beneficial economic ties with the West. See William Glenn Gray, *Germany's Cold War: The Global Campaign to Isolate East Germany, 1949-1969* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); and Timothy Garton Ash, *In Europe's Name: Germany and the Divided Continent* (New York: Random House, 1993).

[3]. For a discussion of factions within the SED, see Monika Kaiser, *Machtwechsel von Ulbricht zu Honecker* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1997).

[4]. See Robert Gellately, *Backing Hitler: Consent and Coercion in Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), and *The Gestapo and German Society: Enforcing Racial Policy 1933-1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990); Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); also Wendy Goldman, "Stalinist Terror and Democracy: The 1937 Union Campaign," *American Historical Review* 110 (2005): 1427-1453.

[5]. Nicholas J. Steneck, "Everybody Has a Chance: Civil Defense and the Creation of Cold War West German Identity, 1950-1968" (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 2005).

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