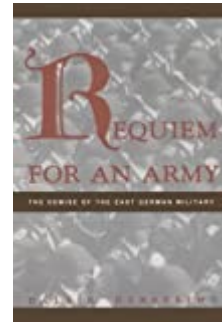


Dale Herspring. *Requiem for an Army: The Demise of the East German Military.* Lanham and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998. xviii + 249 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8476-8719-0.



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Another German Army in Search of a State

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The French statesman Mirabeau once wrote that while most states have armies, Prussia was an army in search of a state. Ironically, the same could almost be said of the East German National People's Army (NVA) after November 1989. The NVA had been the pillar of the East German regime. The NVA's professionalism and high combat readiness were symbolic of the German Democratic Republic's (GDR) commitment to the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact. In the chaos of 1989 and 1990, therefore, it should be no surprise that the NVA shared the pathetic fate of the GDR. As the German Democratic Republic disintegrated in the months surrounding the opening of the Berlin Wall, the NVA tried in vain to establish a new identity or at the very least find berths for its career soldiers in the *Bundeswehr*. On neither front could it succeed, which makes it all the more surprising and noteworthy that the NVA did not attempt a "Chinese solution" (à la Tiananmen) to the problems of the East German party-state. Such chaotic circumstances lead Dale Herspring to title his recent work on the NVA, *Requiem for an Army*.

Herspring, a political scientist with an interest in civil-military relations, uses the NVA example to explore two important questions: Why did the NVA (for the most part) support democratic reforms and thereby help to dig its own grave? And how did career soldiers of the NVA weather the dissolution of the NVA and the transition (for a very few of them) to the *Bundeswehr*? Of course, as a political scientist, Herspring hopes to be able to generalize his findings to understand the nature of the army and officer corps of a party-state and what factors determine whether a party-army will defend the state during an internal crisis.

In keeping with the title of the work, the story Herspring tells is appropriately somber. Everywhere one perceives a sense of disillusionment and collapsing morale. Herspring lays blame for the rapid collapse squarely at the feet of the senior GDR leadership. The failure of Honecker to entertain reformist proposals and the failure of Defense Minister Heinz Kessler to face reality until well into November doomed the East German communist system (and the NVA) to collapse. Crisis followed crisis (demonstrations in Leipzig, Dresden

and elsewhere; protests by elite units; strikes on military bases; desertion and absenteeism in the armed forces) but leaders lacked the ability to address any of the problems at their root. The essential problem is that no one knew what the GDR would look like or who would run it a few weeks or months in the future. The demoralization within East Germany was heightened by the fact that many decisions were being made elsewhere (in Bonn and Moscow) and not by the protagonists of Herspring's story.

The heroes of Herspring's book, if there are any, are tragic. Admiral Theodor Hoffmann, defense minister for the short Krenz interregnum, is credited with recognizing the realities of the situation and doing his best to stave off chaos. The refusal of Hoffmann and other NVA leaders to use force during the demonstrations of October and November 1989 certainly deserves praise. Herspring lauds Rainer Eppelmann, the pacifist clergyman made defense minister after the elections of March 1990, for his attention to the needs of NVA soldiers and their families. But these men and others operated in an environment that left them virtually no room for independent, meaningful action.

The pace of events also hampered leaders—Hoffmann described the process as “perestroika at supersonic speed” (p. 110). Reforms introduced in October and November 1989 to decouple the army from the party did little to restore its prestige (pp. 70, 87-89). In January, soldiers at Beelitz went on strike for better living conditions (p. 92). In March, even soldiers of the elite Friedrich Engels Guard Regiment in Berlin took to the streets to demonstrate for reforms (p. 102). Eppelmann's attentions could do little to improve conditions and his proposals for an independent role for the NVA in a democratic, unified Germany fell on deaf ears in Bonn and elsewhere. On October 2, 1990, the NVA disbanded.

Herspring's narrative is clear and provides sufficient political and diplomatic context for the reader to place the dissolution of the NVA alongside the collapse of the GDR as a whole. He usefully synthesizes the disparate articles, memoirs, and other sources to shed some light on the decision-making process in both the GDR and (to a lesser extent) the FRG. He describes very well the sense of bitterness and abandonment felt by the thousands of NVA soldiers for whom no place could be found in the *Bundeswehr*.

At key points, however, Herspring editorializes beyond what his evidence (mainly memoirs, interviews, and newspaper accounts) can support. For example, in

describing the prospects for the newly installed Krenz regime in October 1989, Herspring denies Krenz the “imagination, the intention, or the power needed to introduce the kind of fundamental changes that were required if the old system was to survive” (p. 60). One might ask what exactly the changes might have been that could have saved the GDR and, if they were so fundamental, by what standard could one say the “old regime” had survived? Similarly, Herspring calls the NVA, which never fired a shot in defense of its country, and which actively undermined the communist party in the latter stages of its existence, “one of the best and most professional party-armies” (p. 15). With armies like these...

It is puzzling that many authors (Herspring included) perpetuate the seeming blindness of their sources to the similarities between the situation of the NVA and that of the *Wehrmacht* after 1945. Neither he nor the military officials involved in the dissolution of the NVA seemed to have given much thought to the historical antecedents. Herspring provides tantalizing hints at continuities and parallels but insists that in absorbing the NVA, the *Bundeswehr* “faced a task unprecedented in the annals of recent European military history” (p. 145). His qualification that other examples (like the *Wehrmacht*) involved defeated armies or cases of internal strife is unconvincing. Herspring makes a passing reference to the committee set up to screen former *Wehrmacht* officers for acceptance into the *Bundeswehr* in the 1950s (p. 151), but refuses to explore the parallel further. Whether with equipment, personnel, facilities, or traditions, very similar decisions had to be made in 1950 and 1990. Neither Herspring nor any other author I have read on the subject has explored this connection in a satisfactory way.

To his two main questions, Herspring provides concise answers in his concluding chapter. The NVA did not intervene decisively in the chaos of October 1989 for two reasons: its leadership, principally General Streletz and Admiral Hoffmann, issued specific directives against the use of force against demonstrators. And its soldiers, no longer isolated from East German society and increasingly demoralized, had no interest in perpetuating the existence of a regime that treated those who served it so poorly. On the transition to democracy and to life in a new army, career NVA soldiers fared less well. Few survived in the *Bundeswehr* beyond the first year or two. By January 1991, only 9400 former NVA officers remained in the *Bundeswehr* (p. 176), and over the next several years that number dwindled even further (p. 182). Habits of strict obedience and politicization died hard in many officers and disqualified them from successful service in a

democratic military.

Herspring relies perhaps too heavily on memoirs and newspaper accounts to describe the situation prevailing in the NVA. His conclusions, no doubt, point us in the right direction, however, and will be largely supported, I suspect, once more documentary material becomes available. Clearly and insightfully, Herspring illuminates the critical military aspects of German unification.

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