

The mobilization system of the GDR. An insight into militarized socialism

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The militarization of the GDR has been widely discussed in recent decades. With reference to the country's numerous paramilitary and military forms of organization, military training and anti-Western propaganda, most writers have understood mass mobilization of the population as an element of securing power in the SED state, rather than a mobilization in the strict sense. However, here and in the statewide mobilization system of the GDR one finds a key to the qualitative and quantitative understanding of "militarized socialism."

The mobilization system of the GDR cannot be regarded separately from the Warsaw Pact's image of war and operational planning, not to mention the special geostrategic role of the GDR. In the eyes of the Communist party and its political leaders, the comprehensive preparations for war were only the logical consequence of the confrontation with a capitalist system that was aggressively striving to expand. In case of a NATO attack, which was assumed to be certain, Soviet military doctrine for Europe until 1987 envisaged the Warsaw Pact taking the offensive and then advancing to the Atlantic. The time permitted for such an operation to be successful was not months or years but just a few weeks.

The GDR – due to its location on the border between the military blocs simultaneously a combat, transit and replenishment area in the event of war – planned its mobilization system accordingly. The GDR military



lexicon of 1973 defined mobilization as a measure for converting to the requirements of war, “a profound social process” that includes not only national defense but also the economy, the state bureaucracy and the general public. The comprehensive national and societal dimensions of the mobilization system also become clear when considering its evolution. Focused from the late 1950s on military capacity expansion, from the 1970s more civilian areas became part of the planning, so that at the beginning of the 1980s there was a comprehensive national mobilization system that promised to place the GDR on a war footing within days.

That the military mobilization would inevitably have necessitated a transformation of civilian life becomes clear merely from the manpower difference between the armed forces’ peacetime and wartime strengths. According to mobilization specifications, the NVA would more than double its troop levels. At the beginning of the 1970s, the strength of the NVA including border troops in peacetime was 199,100 men. During a war, it was supposed to grow to 404,200 men and women. In the mid-1980s, the peacetime roster totaled 244,700 soldiers; 326,800 should be additionally mobilized in case of war. If one includes the paramilitary forces of the MfS (Stasi), various police formations, factory militias, civil defense, fire brigade and other support organizations, mobilization would mean that as many as two million people – a quarter of the GDR’s working population – would directly or indirectly serve the armed forces or their operational capacity.

In particular, safeguarding the operational capacity for all groups of forces operating on and from the territory of the GDR opens up a further category which should be included in the mobilization and its planning. “Operational growth,” i.e. the deployment of East German,



Polish and above all Soviet forces including supplies, was to be ensured by preparing the social and technical infrastructure in peace and maintaining its permanent availability in the event of war. This was planned under the responsibility of the NVA, but was largely diverted to the civilian sector, much to the latter's disadvantage. Making more than 20 percent of all vehicles in the GDR economy available to replenish the armed forces is a comparatively harmless statistic. Far more serious would have been the almost complete occupation of the GDR rail and road networks by military transports, or indeed the public health system, which was firmly embedded in the medical care of the armed forces. Civilian hospitals had to provide beds and staff in case of war. In 1970, of just under 160,000 available hospital beds, around 80,000 were reserved for the Eastern Bloc armed forces; by 1978, that figure had risen to 96,400 – whereas the number of available beds had fallen to 147,350. The civilian population would have had to switch to makeshift facilities, which at the same time would have permitted only limited care options, with an enormous increase in demand.

Such a system of personnel and material replenishment, the conversion of the administration and economy as well as the use of public services of general interest for military purposes would not have been possible without targeted planning and preparation in peacetime. Starting with the planning of reservists, material, equipment and vehicles for troops through the expansion of the transport system under military parameters and the creation of reserves of all kinds, to the selection and training of state and economic leadership cadres – nothing was left to chance. Accordingly, in 1970 in the exercise "FRÜHLING-70" involving the NVA, territorial and civil defenses, it was concluded that: "No decision should be taken in the economic sphere without consideration of the interests



of national defense.” And not only there. In the following years, the demand for “war-related thinking and action” was constantly repeated in peace. Attempting to understand the “transfer of military principles and structures, forms of organization as well as thinking and behavior on other areas of social life” as militarization alone, as suggested by Heribert Seubert in 1995, therefore falls short.

All in all, it can be said that the previous approaches to the study of GDR militarization have provided necessary but incomplete explanations. At the very least, they would need to be supplemented by an analysis of the comprehensive mobilization plans and preparations for war, because these link the different categories of militarization. Ultimately, dealing with the mobilization system of the GDR sheds light on the functionality and quality of this militarization in itself, while revealing the official and unofficial expenses of financial, material or even personal costs, by which militarization can be measured and quantified.

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