

‘Friedensarmee’?: East German Military Films

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After the destruction of World War Two, it seems absurd to associate an army with peace. Yet the National People’s Army (NVA) of East Germany (a.k.a. German Democratic Republic, or GDR), was routinely called a ‘Friedensarmee’: this means not just a ‘peacetime army’, but an ‘army of peace’. The NVA was established in 1956 as a professional volunteer army. Conscription was then introduced in 1962 for men over eighteen. Women could also volunteer from 1982. Soldiers served an eighteen-month military service, or ‘Wehrdienst’, but many chose to or were persuaded to enlist for longer, to guarantee privileges such as university places. NVA soldiers never fought in active combat, but everyday army life was far from peaceful. ‘Wehrdienst’ was almost impossible to avoid, and millions of conscripts and volunteers passed through the NVA’s notoriously punishing training. The resulting paradox was that the GDR’s ‘army of peace’ was second in strength only to the Soviet Red Army within the Eastern bloc.

Why the talk of ‘peace’, then? Remilitarisation was controversial in both Germanies after WW2. Postwar fatigue, international outrage over Nazi war crimes and the destruction from Allied bombings all combined to create a climate of anti-military and even pacifist sentiments. Conscription was commonly rejected, so to convince citizens of its necessity, the regime used propaganda. The word ‘Friede’ explicitly distanced the NVA from militarism and Nazism. Feature films, made by the Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft (DEFA), the state film studios, were one form of propaganda which reached the widest audiences but, despite the State’s carefully control, few military films were entirely uncritical.

I have divided the development of GDR military films into three phases. Films are in bold with their dates and directors. For a look (in German) at German military film more widely, a good

place to start is *Krieg und Militär im Film des 20. Jahrhunderts*, ed. by Bernhard Chiari, Matthias Rogg and Wolfgang Schmidt (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2003).

A New Military Tradition? 1949-1961

Germans' roles in World War Two were problematic for the state's propaganda legitimising the NVA, so the war had an uneasy place in military films of the 1950s. Throughout the GDR, war films were more controversial but often met with more critical acclaim (e.g. *Sterne* (Konrad Wolf, 1959) and *Jakob der Lügner* (Frank Beyer, 1975)).



In military films themselves, the war was used to show a break with Nazi traditions, as in *Im Sonderauftrag* (Heinz Thiel, 1959). Its protagonist is Naval Captain-Lieutenant Fischer, who intercepts a West German boat which has strayed into GDR waters. Fischer recognises the merchant vessel's captain, Arendt, as his superior from the war. Fischer narrates in flashback how he, and apparently Arendt, joined the resistance while stationed in Denmark.

Flashbacks to the war are dark and grainy, in stark contrast to the bright scenes in the 'present-day' GDR. Fischer realises that all was not as it seemed with Arendt, and an investigation reveals that he had been an SS officer. This coincides with the discovery of a diver on Arendt's boat who has been photographing GDR naval facilities, and he and Arendt are arrested as spies.

The figure of Arendt draws a connection between Nazi crimes and West Germany, whereas Fischer's character links East Germany to the antifascist resistance. However, the film exaggerates a rare phenomenon: almost all the German officers shown are involved in resistance. Moreover, it is ironic that Fischer, a German officer, is rowed away to safety in

Sweden by resistance fighters, when this was how the Danish resistance famously saved so many Jews. Above all, *Im Sonderauftrag* emphasises the peaceable and reactive role of the East German navy versus the Western aggressor.

The antifascist heritage and the break with Nazism became a staple of enlistment films like *Schritt für Schritt* (János Veiczi, 1960). The main character, Hanne, enlists to defend the achievements of socialism. The supposedly voluntary ('freiwillig') nature of 'Wehrdienst' became an important motif in military films, even after conscription was introduced. Hanne's father fought under Nazism and forbids his son's enlistment, but Hanne defies him, symbolically breaking with Nazi tradition. The generational split is resolved when Hanne finds out that his father was imprisoned for resistance in 1944, instead creating an antifascist inheritance from father to son. The film introduces the theme of everyday military life, but depicts it without any physical or psychological hardships. The film only shows military life as seen by Hanne's visiting younger brother, and the childlike perspective implies hardships which are hidden from the child and the film's (infantilised) viewer by censors and the director.

A Window for Critique Opens and Closes: 1961-1972

The Berlin Wall, built in 1961, removed the need for filmmakers to make a case for the GDR, as people could no longer easily move to the West. This initially allowed filmmakers freedom to scrutinise the GDR as a society. After its introduction in 1962, conscription was one of many aspects subjected to artistic critique, as in *Der Reserveheld* (Wolfgang Luderer, 1965).

Der Reserveheld is a comedy starring Rolf Herricht, a famous comedian, as an actor (subtly renamed Ralf Horricht) who is conscripted as a reserve while he is supposed to be playing a soldier in a military film-within-a-film. The humour derives in part from Horricht's slapstick, but is also directed at the NVA. Luderer creates comic comparisons between the barracks and a

film set, uniforms and costumes, soldiers and actors. Even the final military manoeuvre is being filmed (see right), with supervising officers joined by lights, cameras and a film crew. The film-within-a-film structure emphasises the role of films in the army's image. As it never engaged in combat, spectacle was important for the NVA's legitimacy, but also invited comedy: *Der Reserveheld* mocks the NVA as a show army with little real substance. This corresponds with Horricht's rather superficial character: he seems to exist only to make people laugh, and not even his wife takes him seriously.



In 1965, the GDR leadership cracked down on criticism, tightening censorship and banning a dozen films. Films became more traditional in this period, as with *Hart am Wind* (Heinz Thiel, 1969) and *Anflug Alpha 1* (János Veiczi, 1971). The latter shows the air force and the glamorous and fast-paced macho world of fighter pilots. Veiczi leaves individual characters underdeveloped, instead showing a harmonious collective, with soldiers even whistling as they peel a mountain of potatoes. As in films from the 1950s, token characters represent clear political messages: a Russian officer underlines the 'brotherhood-of-arms' with the USSR and the protagonist's wife embodies the expectation that women accept and make sacrifices for their husbands' military careers. The plot is also underdeveloped, and it often seems that the series of impressive, and clearly expensive, shots of planes in flight took precedence over plot.

The Military Individual: 1972-1990

In the late 1970s and 1980s, directors like **Claus Dobberke** began to focus on individuals and the military's less than peaceful treatment of them. *Ein Katzensprung* (1976) focuses on the problems for individual men within the often harsh and anti-individualist military collective. The protagonist of *Ein Katzensprung* is a young career officer who is shown in casual clothes more often than in uniform (see right), and the film's rock-'n'-roll-style soundtrack attempts to modernise the military and appeal to young people. Another character's violin playing marks him out as an individual. Ultimately,



though, the film shows men who are changed and even scarred by military service, often at the expense of individual identities. The scars left by military service were not just physical but psychological, and Dobberke's later film, *Drost* (1985), is a slow-paced and introspective look at the effect of military service on a retired officer. Drost, the protagonist, is shown having difficulties adjusting to civilian society. His family and friends have all left him, and he is haunted by flashbacks to the war and his thirty-five years in the army. The music and camerawork is slow and thoughtful, and the film's narrative is disorientating with recurring unexplained flashbacks to Drost's memories.

In early 1989, only months before the GDR's collapse, *Zum Teufel mit Harbolla* (**Bodo Fürneisen, 1989**) was released. Fürneisen's historical satire is set in 1956 and not only looks back to the year of the NVA's founding, but at forty years of military film. The film both satirises and undermines the military film genre. Incompetent officers, repetitive military language and drunk-and-disorderly soldiers meet with situations ignored by conventional military films: desertion, corruption, black-market traders, sex with local girls, and intimate physical contact between men dancing and even bathing together.

Conclusion

On the one hand, films made an important contribution to establishing a new GDR military tradition, giving visual form to the state's official position. They emphasised a break with Nazi tradition, drew a link with German resistance to Hitler, framed military service as voluntary even under a conscription system, and depicted strong, honourable, controlled military men as good socialist citizens. On the other hand, films opened this dogma up to counter-interpretations, often unintentionally, exposing ironies and paradoxes in the military's propaganda. Filmmakers also exposed the profound effects of military service on young men, which were rarely discussed elsewhere in GDR society. The trajectory of GDR military film ends in 1989 with a satire, and later films such as *Drei Stern Rot* (Olaf Kaiser, 2001) or *NVA* (Leander Haußmann, 2005) picked up this satirical thread from a post-reunification perspective, with greater scrutiny of the 'Friedensarmee' and its all but peaceful impact on young recruits. These two post-reunification satires are easily available on DVD and are a good place to start pursuing an interest in army films.