

**Herspring, Dale R.** *Requiem for an Army: The Demise of the East German Military*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998.

In *Requiem for an Army*, Dale R. Herspring offers a useful English summary of the events surrounding the collapse of the East German military (the NVA) in 1989 and its subsequent submergence into the West German Bundeswehr following reunification. While primarily a close empirical account of the NVA's collapse, the book is motivated by two larger concerns: why the NVA did not use force in 1989, and understanding the difficult process of integrating former NVA members into the Bundeswehr, including the nature of the typical NVA member. I will concentrate on the first question, though I will draw on the author's conclusions about the typical NVA officer since they are relevant for assessing his answer to that question.

The main puzzle - why the NVA did not use its coercive power to preserve the regime and its own interests - is an important question not just for the history of the GDR, but for transitions from authoritarian rule generally. (pp. 1, 2, 37) Unfortunately Herspring's attempts to answer this admittedly difficult question are ultimately theoretically and empirically disappointing. First, although Herspring criticizes "most models" (p. 1) and various "tendencies" among Western writers (pp. 97, 204, 215, n. 3), and explicitly claims a broader comparative and theoretical relevance for his case (pp. 4, 12, 197, 204), he makes no reference to the relevant theoretical literature on the subject, including those studies that focus directly on the collapse of the GDR, such as Daniel Friedheim, Rasma Karklins and Roger Peterson, and Susanne Lohman.<sup>1</sup> In addition to not placing these questions in any theoretical or comparative context, Herspring does not offer a logically consistent, generalizable alternative of his own. In chapter eight, the author offers "generalizations" from the empirical chronology in chapters one through five and argues that "a party leadership's ability to use its armed forces internally is dependent on," first, strong control over the military by the party; second, whether it sends clear and unambiguous messages to the armed forces; third political stability; fourth, the presence or absence of an external threat; and fifth, ideology. (pp. 197-98) Independent variables one and two are obviously necessary (but not necessarily sufficient) conditions; if the party cannot direct the military, a fortiori it cannot order it to repress demonstrators. The political stability variable is confusing since the entire question of the military's response to instability presupposes that instability in fact obtains, while the ideological variable is too vague and ad hoc to assess, "structures and writings can work against the party." (p. 198) When? Under what conditions?

Although the variable on external threats - specifically Moscow's role - is an important one, Herspring's own research demonstrates that the Soviets' importance lay not in the substance of perestroika and glasnost, but in their signals that they would not back up the NVA if it decided to use force. (pp. 46, 56, 64, 66, 194) Elsewhere, Herspring cites other factors to explain NVA inaction in 1989, including disciplinary and morale problems and the lack of training for domestic use. (pp. 193-95) Disciplinary and morale problems, the author argues, suggest that "probably . . . soldiers would not have carried out [their] orders" to repress (p. 193); yet this directly contradicts his claims about the extreme obedience of NVA members. (pp. 199-200) And while the lack of training may explain

hesitancy on the part of (some) senior officials and officers to use the army, it does not prevent it, as Tiananmen Square clearly demonstrates.

Although Herspring draws on a wide range of important German primary and secondary sources, the book also suffers from empirical shortcomings. The responses to the first two questions on the questionnaire that the author submitted to NVA officers, for example, are directly relevant to the NVA's puzzling quiescence in 1989, but are never discussed systematically by the author. As a result, more questions are begged than answered. For example, Herspring cites an officer's statement that "the NVA leadership was not prepared to solve problems with the force of arms" as one reason for the NVA's inaction. (p. 192) But not prepared in what sense? Morally? In terms of training, logistics, and equipment? Not prepared in the sense of a cost-benefit analysis given the likelihoods of Soviet help and ultimately success versus failure? Elsewhere the author hints that Generals Goldbach, Grämlitz, Süß, and Stechbarth (pp. 68, 192) may have played a key role in dissuading or even preventing Defense Minister Keiserling from deploying military units against demonstrators. Such "speculation" by the author is not pursued by the sort of field research that might answer to these intriguing questions. (p. 68)

In the end we know that all of the following factors played a role, without knowing which were the most important or decisive: the timing of Honecker's ill health (pp. 44-46, 48); the inability of the political leadership (especially, but not exclusively, senior members like Honecker) to grasp the gravity of the situation (pp. 41-42, 47, 49, 54-55, 61-65, 69); signals from the Soviets that the East Germans were on their own; no training for domestic repression; and low morale and demoralization. In the final analysis, Professor Herspring's contribution is to have identified the key actors as well as the questions we should ask them to determine why the NVA permitted a peaceful transition to democracy and reunification.

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## **Endnotes**

1. Daniel Friedheim, "Bringing Society Back into Democratic Transition Theory after 1989: Pact Making and Regime Collapse," *East European Politics and Societies* 7, no. 3 (Fall 1993), pp. 482-512; Daniel Friedheim, "Regime Collapse and the Peaceful East German Revolution: the Role of Middle-Level Officials," *German Politics* (April 1993), pp. 97-112; Rasma Karklins and Roger Peterson, "Decision Calculus of Protesters and Regimes: Eastern Europe 1989," *Journal of Politics* 55, no. 3 (August 1993), pp. 588-614; Susanne Lohman, "Dynamics of Informational Cascades: The Monday Demonstrations in Leipzig, East Germany, 1989-91," *World Politics* 47, no.1 (October 1994), pp. 42-101.