Proletarian Myth and Political Mobilization: The 'Kampfgruppen der Arbeiterklasse' (Working-Class Combat Groups) in the GDR 1953–1989/90*

Tilmann Siebeneichner
Georg-August-Universität Göttingen

ABSTRACT

Political myths played a crucial role in the legitimation process of the German Democratic Republic. The 'Kampfgruppen der Arbeiterklasse' – Combat Groups for short – created after the June-Uprising in 1953 were meant to materialise the myth of a united and pugnacious proletariat which would stand up to defend its 'socialist achievements' ('sozialistische Errungenschaften'). Ongoing social ties at the grass-roots level proved as relevant for the support of the Combat Groups as local traditions. This points to invidual 'spaces of experience' ('Erfahrungsräume') which were crucial for 'eigen-sinnige' or 'stubborn' interest adoptions of the message of the Proletarian Myth. An analysis of the Combat Groups in this perspective thus promises information on the communication of a specific view on the political reality in 'real existing Socialism', as well as it illustrates how people at the grass-roots level adopted structures of power for themselves.

I

'A ghost is haunting Europe', quotes Erwin Geschonnek, commander of the workforce Combat Groups ('Kampfgruppen der Arbeiterklasse') in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), from the Communist Manifesto in a scene in the DEFA film 'Stories of that Night', 1967, when describing the mission of the Combat Groups in the course of the erection of the Berlin Wall, and adds,

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'Right now, we are this ghost'[1]. This reference to the charismatic moments of a revolutionary movement by the fictitious commander indicates the crucial role which political myths played in the legitimisation of Communist rule in the first German 'Workers' and 'Peasants' State (Münkler 1997).

The 'Battle period of the KPD' (Angress 1973) had its undeniable place in the collective memory of the GDR, serving to legitimise the political leadership as well as to present a particular viewpoint about political reality. These perceptual patterns, which constructed and reconstructed not only history but the legitimisation itself (Sabrow 2000: 14), were characteristically manifested in the Workforce Combat Groups. In recourse to the proletarian myth – the vision of a united and pugnacious workforce – the revolutionary traditions of the German workforce movement were kept alive and furthered.

Tracing the history of this organisation makes questioning the effectiveness of central elements such as 'struggle', 'dedication' and 'sacrifice' in the political culture (Rohe 1987, 1990) *of 'real existing Socialism' possible since, although directly subordinate to the Socialist Unity Party, the Combat Groups recruited their members from both the SED as well as the non-organised workforce. The Combat Groups were meant to strengthen the class consciousness and the combat readiness of all 'working people' ('Werktätigen') in the GDR* (Dünow 1958: 92ff.).

The failure of the SED ('Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschland' = Socialist Unity Party) to form a class conscious and loyal party militia through the Combat Groups became obvious, at the latest, in the course of events in the fall of 1989 when, although formed after the June Uprising in 1953 (Ruhpieper 2003; Grasshoff 2003) in a test case they were not compactly deployed against the protestors because the political leadership had doubts about the loyality of its fighters[2]. This shows, on the one hand, the precarious potency of political myths which are based on a comprehensible reference to the present (Zimmering 2000: 30; Dörner 1995: 19–97), but on the other hand it focuses on the day-to-day life contexts in which the fighters found themselves.

The disillusionment which is mirrored in the collapse of the GDR represents the limitations of dictatorship (Bessel and Jessen 1996) in which the potentates failed in their attempt to bind

the population ideologically and politically to their state (Wierling 2000). Hence, to explain the relative stability of the dictatorship of forty years' duration by its 'Durchherrschung' (Kocka 1994; the term was brought up by Lüdtke 1994) seems rather inadequate. Although military historians of the GDR have stressed the 'hypertrophic bloat' (Diedrich, Ehlert and Wenzke 1998, IX; Ehlert and Rogg 2004) of the GDR repression system – to which the Combat Groups also belonged – 'thus underlining its repressive character, the "constitutive contradiction" of the GDR' (Pollack 1997) describes the complexity of a dictatorship which never fully achieved its claim for power under the SED (Jessen 1995) and which therefore must neither be read as a 'transfiguration history' ('Verklärungsgeschichte') nor as a 'condemnation history' ('Verdammungsgeschichte') but as a 'comprehension history' ('Verständnisgeschichte') (Sabrow 1999: 113f.; see also Kleßmann 1995) since attributes such as 'bureau dictatorship' ('kommode Diktatur' [Grass 1995]) and 'niche society' ('Nischengesellschaft' [Gauss 1983]) indicate a – surely restricted – freedom of action in the 'real existing Socialism' which can be seen in the area of conflict between ideologically guided and dictatorial construction of social reality on the one hand and on-going or newly evolving social structures on the other hand (Jessen 1995: 100).

In this sense the underlying concept of this project – 'domination as social practice' ('Herrschaft als soziale Praxis') – highlights the mutual dependence of both the governing and the governed and their interaction in implementing a certain order (Lüdtke 1991; especially concerning the GDR see Lindenberger 1999). It provides information about the 'balance of imbalance' (Hübner 1993) not only in the Combat Groups themselves but also in the continually increasing militarisation of the 'real existing Socialism' (Seubert 1995).

The following remarks present in a chronological and somewhat cursorical way the first results of a corresponding dissertation project by the author, the aim of which is to analyse the history of the Combat Groups in the GDR districts of Halle and Magdeburg. The remarks focus mainly on the period up to the erection of the Berlin Wall in 1961 for two reasons: First, because up to this event the Combat Groups had established their enduring profile and secondly because the historical sources produced in the aftermath of

this event became increasingly formal (Fulbrook 1996: 276). This paper is based predominantly but not exclusively on documents from local district archives. Although the Combat Groups belonged to the SED they were trained and instructed by the DVP, the German People's Police (Bessel 1996; Lindenberger 2003). Therefore the historical sources focusing on the Combat Groups have two tracks: first in the periodic records of the SED local district headquarters and secondly in the reports documenting the cooperation between the Combat Groups and the police[3].

II

Although some 'progressive' workshops – as they were called in typical SED-jargon – had begun to set up so called 'Workshop Combat Groups' ('Betriebskampfgruppen') in the immediate aftermath of the June Uprising (LHASA 1953) their general formation did not start before 1954 due to a decision first made by the secretary of the central comitee in December 1953 which presented the basic principle for a general formation (SAPMO-Barch. 1953). Combat Groups were not only to be formed in industrial workshops but in every collective farm (LPG), agricultural supply station (MTS) and state administrative office as well. They were meant to 'protect the workshop against attacks from the outside as well as guaranteeing the safety within the workshops' (LHAM 1954b), latter refering undoubtly to the experiences of the June Uprising. Membership in the Combat Groups was to be on a voluntarily basis and about ten to fifteen percent of the local workforce was to be recruited (LHAM 1954a). Although the SED intended to recruit some 300,000 workers within in the Combat Groups until the 1960s these numbers soon turned out to be illusionary – by this date[4] they had managed to recruit 'only' 193,030 fighters, organised in 2,132 about one hundred-man-strong contingents, 'Hundertschaften' as the units were called recalling the historical example of the 'Rote Frontkämpferbund' ('Red Frontfighters Association'= RFB [Schuster 1975; Finker 1981]).

Since by the spring of 1954 Combat Groups in some areas – for example in the district of Zerbst in the county of Magdeburg – existed only 'on paper' (LHAM 1954b) a broad public resistence to the formation of Combat Groups is apparent. Some workers were not only suspicious of the reason for the formation of the Combat

Groups – one worker in the Leuna-Werke near Merseburg who had been asked to join the combat groups told the party officials that he had 'studied Marx in depth and therefore held the opinion that the Combat Groups were directed against the workers' (LHASA 1957b) – but the SED also found itself confronted with a widespread 'no more war'-attitude (Kutz 1997; Koselleck 1992) which corresponded with the official 'Demilitarization policy' ('Entmilitarisierungspolitik') of the early 1950s (Stoecker 1997; Wenzke 1999: 1114).

In this sense workers articulated their reservations about the formation of Combat Groups with direct reference to the pacifist rhetoric of the SED: 'Until the 1950s the party has always declared no more wars and therefor he will not take up arms again'. Noted a report by the Bureau for Security ('Abteilung für Sicherheit') of the district administration in Magdeburg (LHAM 1957b; see also Ross 1999).

If there was support for the formation of Combat Groups it came mainly from the ranks of older workers: 'Those comrades who joined the Combat Groups are predominantly 50 to 60 years old', noted the local police headquarter in Wittenberg as a good example (SAPMO-Barch. 1955; LHASA 1955c). This report would suggest that the formation of Combat Groups attracted mainly those workers who had belonged to the organized working-class movement since the Weimar Republic and whose 'horizon of expectations' ('Erwartungshorizont') corresponded with the message of the Proletarian Myth because of their individual political-historical backgound ('Erfahrungsraum') reaching all the way back to the 'Kampfzeit' (on the relation of 'Erfahrungsraum' and 'Erwartungshorizont': Koselleck 1989).

The mythification of the 'Kampfzeit' initiated by the SED in order to popularise the Combat Groups enabled those worker veterans a late gratification[5] and awakened in them a 'meaningful vita' ('sinnhafte Vita') on the 'good side of history' ('auf der "guten" Seite der Geschichte') and by this promoted an 'amalgam of reciprocal instrumentalizing interests' ('ein Amalgam sich wechselseitig instrumentalisierender Interessen') as Klaus Mallmann has stated it in reference to the veterans of the Spanish Civil War (Mallmann 1994: 47).

This also became evident in the 'Generalappell' in March 1956 which marked the closure of the first schooling period of the Combat Groups. With its official dedication to the fallen figthers of the 'March action' of 1921 (Schumann 2001: 109–142) it is an example of the attempt to use local traditions and memories for the cause of the SED. Michel Focault has brought up the term of 'heterotopic spaces' ('heterotopische Räume') to signify real existing spaces in which 'both the mythical and the actual contest of the space in which we are living' comes to expression (Focault 1990). In this sense the population of places like Hettstedt and Leuna, which belonged to the hotspots of the 1921-uprising, expressed deep sympathies for the parade of the local Combat Groups (on the meaning of 'spaces' as 'reference points concerning collective memory' see Kühberger 2006: 179–184).

The exceptional reception of the 'Generalappell' – in the district of Halle alone some 22,000 combatants took part in the event – furthermore grounded in the broad public approval which was given to the fighters marching in the ranks of the Combat Groups. Everyone who felt himself as rather unimportant but especially those 'old fighters of the party' who had already fought in 1921 and now where named to the public while marching along the Combat Groups (LHASA 1956b) were thus enabled to find and feel himself as an important part of the 'great ensemble' ('Große Ganze') (Lüdtke 2006: 54ff.; Brockhaus 2006: 156).

Until the subordination of the Combat Groups to the DVP in spring 1955, which was from there on responsible for the Combat Group-training, the 'first units stood on their own and carried out their instruction at their own discretion', as a report of a local historian commission formulated it (Kommission zur Erforschung der Geschichte der örtlichen Arbeiterbewegung 1964: 32). While workers who had voluntarily subscribed themselves to the Combat Groups were enthused to 'get a gun in their hands as soon as possible' (LHASA 1955b) the training not seldom confined itself to taking the names of the volunteers (LHASA 1955e). Due to serious deficiencies in terms of equipment – in the summer of 1955 one hundred fighters had to share one single weapon in the district of Halle (LHASA 1955e) – the training focused mainly on small parades and exercises with small caliber rifles (Kommission zur Erforschung der Geschichte der örtlichen Arbeiterbewegung 1964: 20).

Surprisingly enough the Combat Groups did not possess their own weapons. In the beginning they received small caliber rifles from the hands of the 'Society for Sports and Technics' ('Gesellschaft für Sport und Technik' = GST [on the GST see Heider 1998]) and after the subordination to the DVP they had to pick up their weapons at the local police headquartes every time they held an exercise (LHASA 1955ff.). Although this regulation was officially explained by referring to the fact that the workshops could not guarantee safe storage of the weapons, it at the same time reflects the strong distrust the party showed towards its own followers and this inevitably led to a likewise strong frustration among the more dedicated fighters.

Practising only a basic education without weapons usually leads to a boycott by the fighters (LHASA 1955c). For example in the district of Hohenmölsen the officials noted that at first 'much work had to be done to convince the comrades to accept a basic training in "marching", "turning" and "saluting"' (LHASA 1955d). Although an order from the Secretary of Interior in January 1957 demanded that 'all duties had to be exercised on the basis of military command and strict discipline' (BStU 1957), numerous fighters insisted 'that the relationship between the Combat Groups should be the same as in the production process' (LHAM 1957a).

During its whole existence the social practice in the Combat Groups was marked by a widespread comradery ('Kumpelhaftigkeit') between the officers and the plain fighters (LHASA 1960c). This echoes traditional anti-militaristic ressentiments within the organised working-class movement but in the eyes of those in power it weakened the quality of the training: The 'good sides' of the Combat Groups were particularly 'weakened because in the exercise of duty no strict military discipline has as yet been implanted', moaned a report by the SED-district-leadership Hohenmölsen still in November 1960 (LHASA 1960c).

If these remarks on the one hand stress the disciplining intentions the SED had towards their own following in forming the Combat Groups, they on the other hand show their limits since the local officials had to admit that 'despite on-going efforts' these conditions were only 'slowly being overcome, particularly in the case of the older comrades' (LHASA 1960c). The 'common experience' ('Gemeinschaftserlebnis') had already been a major point

in the communist combat units in the Weimar Republic (Bers 1980). That concerning this point not much had changed is shown by the willingness the fighters expressed when at the end of the 1950s more and more units began to have weekend training sessions (LHASA 1956c) since in that way the training could be 'planned better, practised more intensely and arranged more interestingly' (LHASA 1956a) and also strenghtened the companionship of the fighters (LHASA 1960a). But the officials also had to admit that this form of training tempted some fighters to regard it solemly as a joyride including massive alcohol comsumption (LHASA 1960d).

Excessive alcohol consumption in the Combat Groups was – as in the whole of the GDR – a widespread and more or less tolerated problem which was not only anchored in the fact that in 'real existing Socialism' alcohol was relatively cheap and easy to get (Kaminsky 2001). Since 'alcohol and industrialization, booze and the working-class' had always marked a close relation in which alcohol functioned as a narcotic against everyday frustration (Hübner 1988: 7), the widespread consumption of alcohol in 'real existing Socialism' has been interpreted as a probate means against the diversity of propaganda and reality which helped in escaping the adversities and limits of socialist everyday life (Brieler 1992). But alcohol was more than a narcotic: it also functioned as a symbolic form of distinguishing oneself, encouraged contact to like-minded people and thus strengthened solidarity and communication (Hübner 1988: 217ff.)[6]. Reports on alcohol consumption within the Combat Groups mirror this 'stubborn' ('eigensinnig') melange (on the term 'Eigensinn' see Lüdtke 1993):

On the 25 and the 26 of May 1962 the 7th unit (Halle-Ost) held their training. During the training dissolutionary effects occurred among the comrades fighters of the VEB Kohlehandel. Fighters of other workshops were heavily insulted and pelted with food and stones during sleep. Thereby they were called: 'We are tough but righteous like the OAS!' A guard which tried to intervene was tried to attack physically. Those outgrowths evolved under the influence of alcohol since some fighters were given alcoholic drinks by the factory manager.

Held responsible for this 'outgrowth' were a former foreign legionnaire who had been previously convicted for sex crimes and

a former member of the standby police ('Bereitschaftspolizei') who had been removed as disreputable (LHASA 1961). While this incident indicates signs of everyday life frustration – as shown in the highly provocative slogan 'We are tough but rigtheous like the OAS!' – as well as references to a specific form of male-bonding which also includes acts of 'permitted excesses' ('erlaubte Übertretung') of civil standards (Theweleit 2002: 13; Kühne 2006: 126) – as the attacks against fighters of other workshops demonstrate – the SED only took notice of their burdened biographies to explain their 'moral' malpractice.

Since 'moral firmness' ('moralische Festigkeit') seemed inconsistent with the presence of 'class enemies' – former foreign legionnaires, members of the Army ('Wehrmacht') or members of other Nazi organisations were all regarded as 'class enemies' – within the ranks of the Combat Groups, the SED spent much effort in tracing down such 'class enemies' also because some fighters had constantly complained that in some units former 'rank officers of the fascist Wehrmacht served as commanders' (LHASA 1960c).

In fact, the Combat Groups had both former members of the Wehrmacht as well as of the NSDAP and even the SA in their ranks. As the evaluation of 413 so called cadre files ('Kaderakten') of Combat Group commanders in the district of Halle shows (LHASA 1963), 313 of these 413 men had served in the Wehrmacht (75.8 %)[7] – in view of the fact that some 18 million German men had served in the Wehrmacht during World War Two it is a hardly surprising result (Echternkamp 2001: 422). More surprising seems the fact that 17 fighters who had been members of the KPD or the KJVD ('Kommunistischer Jugendverband Deutschlands' = Communist Youth Organizaion) before 1933 (12.7 %) – 'veterans' who were characterized by their long-term membership in organizations of the working-class – faced 15 former NSDAP-members and even four SA-veterans (13.3 %).

This result indicates that the Combat Groups seemed attractive not only to long-term members of the organised working-class movement but also to former members of ideologically opposed organisations. Although former NSDAP-members faced the distrust of the SED they were usually kept in their positions if it could be confirmed that they had come to the 'right consequences' in the past, which was for the most part determined by their social-

political engagement ('gesellschaftspolitisches Engagement' [LHASA 1963; Danyel 1999; on the aquaintance with the Nazi-past especially concerning the 1960s in a comparing perspective see Siegfried 2000]).

First one has to take notice of sometimes strategic but also serious-minded intentions of rehabilitation ('Rehabilitierungsabsichten'). To engage oneself in the construction of socialism ('Aufbau des Sozialismus'), at least in paramilitary forms, points furthermore to another function of the Combat Groups: possibly they have to be regarded as part of a SED-specific 'past policy' ('Vergangenheitspolitik' [Frei 1996]) which tributed to a successful social re-integration of persons who were, in the eyes of the regime, compromised persons through the proposal of gender-specific 'manly military games' ('männlicher Militärspielerei'). Michael Geyer has stressed the meaning of 'honour' ('Ehre') and 'decency' ('Anständigkeit') that was tied to the individual memory of war: 'At stake was not the evaluation of the past (…) but the very sense of the individual self' (Geyer 2001: 384). By receiving appreciation for wartime experience and knowledge through the engagement in the Combat Groups – even under an ideologically diverse signature – this allowed the veterans of World War Two to face their traumatic experience which placed their individual biographies in a not only futile but also dishonest light.

At the same time – especially with regard to the former members of Nazi organisations – one has to take notice of generation-specific imprints (the 'canonical' text by Mannheim 1928/1962; an introduction is given by Daniel 2001: 330–345; Jaeger 1977; especially concerning the working-class movement: Tenfelde 2005). Political violence was an 'endemic' phenomenon (Rosenhaft 1995; Schumann 2001; Weisbrod 1992) in the Weimar Republic – the later SED-district Halle, then the Prussian province of Saxony, was one of the centres of politically motivated uprising-attempts and street battles (Leidigkeit and Herrmann 1979) – grounding in a widespread awareness of crisis and the failing legitimisation of the political system. The vast majority of the persons here analyzed – 371 (89.8 %) – belonged to the 'political generations' ('politischen Generationen' [on this term see Fogt 1982; critically: Herbert 2003])[8] of that time.

Thus regarding the Weimar Republic one usually speaks of a 'front fighters'-generation ('Frontkämpfer-Generation') and an 'after war'-generation ('Nachkriegsgeneration') – one can extend this scheme by referring furthermore to the so-called 'Hitler youth'-Generation ('HJ-Generation')[9].

Of 133 Combat Group commanders, 32.2 % were born before the end of World War One. One of them, born in 1898, belongs to the 'front fighters'-generation while the others belong to the 'after war'-generation. Historiography names one particularly imprinting event for both of the generations which is the mythical transfiguration of the war experience (Mosse 1999; Bessel 1991). While the ones who belonged to the 'front fighters'-generation actually fought in the war, the younger ones tried to adapt the ideal of the front fighter to politics by developing a categorical ('unbedingten') lifestyle that was characterized through frostiness, cruelty and dispassion[10] and the pursuit of 'pure' ('rein') and uncompromising, radical action (Herbert 1996: 44ff.; Wildt 2002: 854). The attempt of a 'sweeping revolutionary interpretation' (einer 'umfassenden revolutionären Sinndeutung') to face a reality that was experienced as a crisis situation was therefore what united these generations of a 'heroic modernity' ('heroische Moderne' [in this sense: Gründel 1932; on the term of 'heroic modernity' see: Kittsteiner 2005]).

While Communist and National Socialist violence are considered to be a result of different but complementing efforts to solve a crisis which was not grounded in the political circumstances of Weimar alone but also in a crisis of masculinity (Rosenhaft 1995: 270); the milieu-specific involvement and exercise of political violence furthrmore reflects the 'close enmity' ('nahe Gegnerschaft') of SA and RFB. There were numerous renegades to be found within those two combat units due to personal contacts and similar family backgrounds and the activists usually respected one another not because of their political convictions but because of their courage and individual readiness for action which once again reflects a shared 'generational style' ('generationellen Stil' [Reichardt 2002: 525–529; Swett 2004: 228, 256ff.]).

Three of the four former SA-members joined the Combat Groups immediately after its formation. One cannot exclude the possibility that their engagement was grounded in rehabilitating motivations. Their early engagement in a paramilitary organisation

like the Combat Groups refers to yet another point: It might also be possible that the mythical transfiguation of a pugnacious engagement in the Combat Groups and its 'aura of radicalism' ('Aura des Radikalismus') individually dominated their motivation to a greater extent than their support for the policy of the SED (on the 'aura of radicalism' concerning the SA see Balistier 1996; Reichardt 2002).

Since every fourth of the here analysed members of the 'after-war'-generation who engaged in the Combat Groups had belonged to an anti-democratic organisation before in the Weimar Republic – overall 36 persons (27 %) – this also indicates a widespread action-minded attitude ('Aktionsbereitschaft') that found its outlet in paramilitary activities still in the GDR. The mostly immediate entry of those who had previously been engaged in paramilitary activities indicates a specific attraction of the Combat Groups that is further stressed by the fact that 56 persons (13.6 %) joined the Combat Groups before joining the SED, 26 of them (46.6 %) already in the formation period 1953/54 of this organization[11].

The 'Invention of Tradition' (Hobsbawn and Ranger 1994) the SED persued in revitalising political practices of the 1920s reflects not only the political socialisation of the rulers. It at the same time appealed to every other longterm member of the organised working-class movement (Schirmer 1992) and even to those who were raised in National Socialism – the so called 'Hitler Youth'-generation (Wierling 1999) – and were now experiencing the construction of Socialism as a form of individual and collective conversion, purification and reparation (Gibas 1999: 320; on the 'stagining' of the 'people' in Nationalsocialism see Jegelka 1996).

This became evident in the first practical test of the Combat Groups in the fall of 1956. 'De-Stalinisation Crises' ('Entstalinisierungkrisen' [Foitzik 2001]) – the dispute over the totalitarian heritage of Stalinism – challenged the Soviet claim for hegemony everywhere in Eastern Europe – item Walter Ulbricht faced intense criticism for his attempt to trivialize the impulses of the XX party congress of the KpdSU (Ritter 1999; Grieder 1999: 108–159; Prokop 2006; on the XX party congress see Aksjutin 1996) – and escalated at first in Poland and finally in Hungary in civil war-like confrontations between reform-friendly and reform-hostile forces which in the GDR revitalized the memory of the June-Uprising of 1953.

Protest against the policy of the SED in 1956 not so much appeared within the working-class but rather at the universities. Parades and so called 'alarm-exercises' ('Alarm-Übungen') which sometimes were held even in the public were meant to demonstrate that the rulers would surpress every sign of opposition with all their might. The Combat Groups played a crucial role in this context: They were not only part of the repression-system but at the same time represented central values of the imaginated collective 'working-class' like 'solidarity', 'discipline' and 'pugnacity' (Solidarität, Disziplin und Kampfbereitschaft). The 'staging of the working-class' ('Inszenierung der Arbeiterklasse' [Hübner 1996]) as a pugnacious collective in this sense aimed not only at frightening potential enemies, it furthermore served as a self-assurance of the socialist order or rather established it at first in ritualised parades and rallies by offering 'positive' identification values which served to produce legitimation of and loyalty to the regime (Sauer 1999).

Confronting rebellious students, the Combat Groups proved to be a somewhat reliable force since latent generational conflicts and a deployment far away from their own milieu ensured somewhat clear-cut fronts (Kowalczuk 2000). But to present oneself as 'master in his own home' ('Herr im Hause') as the Combat Groups did at the university was rather impossible in their own social milieu since at the workshops the Combat Groups only represented a minority that faced suspicion and milieu-nonconformist behaviour here threatened individual status and social ties in everyday contextes. Although 'alarm-exercises' and parades which were held under the impressions of the violent confrontations in Poland and Hungary were somewhat popular among the fighters, their sometimes 'enthusiastic engagement' (das 'begeisterte Engagement') resulted first and foremost in the coincidence of individual and political interests – in many cases the 'alarm-execises' revealed a 'tendency towards playing war' ('Tendenz zur Kriegsspielerei') as the accompanying officers of the police noted (LHASA 1956e; LHASA 1956ff.) and the 'kick offer' (das 'Rauschangebot') of symbolic politics worked because it faced a willingness to feel overwhelmed by a 'terrific world beyond the prosiac experience of everyday-life' (einer 'Welt der Grandiosität jenseits des nüchternen

Alltags' [Brockhaus 2006: 162]) – and thus enabled a successful integration of the activist-minded following.

Conflicts which aroused over the wearing of the Combat Groups-uniform and an accompanying definite commitment for the 'workers-and-peasants-might' ('Arbeiter-und-Bauern-Macht') indicate that the embedding of the Combat Groups in daily-life-contexts counteracted definite loyalties. Those workers who at the same time were members of the Combat Groups faced ambivalent and contradictory loyalties – towards their comrades in the Combat Groups or above all the regime on the one hand and towards friends and colleagues on the other.

A lack of understanding and a sense of shame was shown by fighters in Sangerhausen – here the local party organisation of the VEB Engine Works Sangerhausen had noted in October that 'some comrades feel ashamed while wearing the uniform at the work-place' (LHASA 1956d) – show that the fighters were neitherapart of a 'total institution' (Goffman 1972), nor sheer (party-)soldiers but first and foremost workers, members of a caring and cooperative connoted 'work-society' ('Arbeitsgesellschaft' [Kohli 1994]) who normally were not willing to seperate themselves from their colleagues through the symbolic sign of the uniform (Frevert 2003; Diehl 2005). Thus the first practical test already proved the ambiguous character of the Combat Groups and revealed the contradiction between political and everyday-life reality in 'real anticipating Socialism' ('real antizipierenden Sozialismus').

The workshop-based organisation of the Combat Groups did in fact prove to be full of frictions. Although the V. Party Congress of the SED in July 1958 had declared the Combat Groups to be a 'definite part of social life' in the GDR (SAPMO-Barch. 1983) this full-bodied claim ignored the frictions that evolved not only in adapting them to the 'economic conditions of everyday life' ('ökonomischen Alltagsbedingungen') in 'real existing Socialism' but also in an on-going broad refusal to acknowledge every kind of 'master prestige' ('Herren-Prestige') to the members of the Combat Groups which normally occurs in the followers (der 'Gefolgschaft') by having proven their loyalty to the 'charismatic masters' ('charismatischen Herren' [Weber 1972: 146ff.]).

In this sense the DVP noticed, as shown particularly in the district of Hohenmölsen, that especially the managers and foremen

were supporting the Combat Groups only ‘badly’ (‘schlecht’). Beyond circumventing a participation of fighters in the training by reshuffeling their shifts there were other ways to belittle a fighter's motivation: ‘In the discussions it went so far that one expressed that activists of the Combat Groups were penalised concerning prizes and honours’. Here rather ‘such comrades’ were preferred who ‘did not bother about the Combat Groups and their development,’ as fighters moaned (LHASA 1960b).

Open indifference and a lack of support by the ‘economic functionaries’ (‘Wirtschaftsfunktionäre’) proved to be ‘greatly harmful’ (‘sehr schädlich’) to the ‘motivation to fight’ (‘Kampfmoral’) as one noted in the MTS Poppenrode in the district of Hettstedt and affected the ‘interest and consciousness of the fighters which consequently oftentimes decreased’ (LHASA 1958).

In the celluloid and paper factory Merseburg the ‘indifference of the economic functionaries’ was held responsible for the reduction of the local unit which fell from originally 34 to 7 fighters (LHASA 1957a; see also LHAM 1959a). Even worse behaviour was shown by the functionaries who at momentous occasions and festivities stood aside and ‘made fun of the demonstrating Combat Groups while pointing out “without me”’, as the district administration of the police in Magdeburg noted in May 1959 (LHAM 1959b). The SED thus tried to anchor the Combat Groups within the society through the means of symbolic practices: The Combat Groups became increasingly present in the public – in this regard one has to take particular notice of the traditional ‘Luxemburg-Liebknecht-Commemorations’ (Könczöl 2005; Sabrow 2001) in which Combat Groups had marked the virtual and symbolic highlight since 1957 and were meant to exemplify the unbowed militancy of the Communist struggle (Weitz 1994: 49) – received their own emblem at the end of 1957, their own newspaper called ‘The Fighter’ and were symbolically sworn in as the protectors of the ‘workers-and-peasants-might’ through a pledge which they had been taking since October 1959. At the same time the Combat Groups were entrusted with broadened duties and responsibilities. ‘Measures to surpress counterrevolutionary activities’ (‘Maßnahmen zur Unterdrückung der konterrevolutionären Aktionen’) already formulated in November 1956 (SAPMO-Barch. 1956; see also BStU 1956) assigned the Combat Groups a crucial role in the SED's own civil-unrest-prevention-programme.

Administrative and organisational reforms like the foundation of a 'Central School for the Combat Groups' ('Zentralschule für die Kampfgruppen' = ZSfK) in May 1957, which aimed at securing a professional schooling of the Combat Group officers, and the centralisation of several units into so-called 'Combat Group batallions' ('Kampfgruppen-Bataillone') which had been equipped with heavy armour since 1959, intended furthermore to strengthen the vigor of the organisation and to make it an integral part of Socialist territorial defence (SAPMO-Barch. 1959). Although an accompanying and more diversified training found the support of the fighters, many behaved with indifference to the schooling bargain. Lamentations over the widespread phenomen of the so-called 'Übungsideologie' ('training-ideology')[12] as well as over an ongoing 'old boys' ('kumpelhaft') relationship between Combat Groups officers and simple members rather refer to individual assertions of 'stubborn' practices at the grass-roots level and in a broader context, to the 'longue duree' of workers- and working-class-experiences which consisted in the pursuit of autonomy even in the 'workers-and-pesants-state' of the GDR (Kleßmann and Sywottek 1999: 900; Kaschuba 1989).

The deployment of the Combat Groups in the course of the erection of the Berlin Wall – at first a propagandistic effort which allowed the SED to present the erection of the 'antifascist protection wall' ('antifaschistisches Schutzwalles') as if the working-class itself had decided to take up arms – made evident that all adminstrative and organisational reforms had proven vastly ineffective. The National Defence Council (Nationale Verteidigungsrat) instead stated 'grave deficiencies' ('ernste Mängel und Schwächen') in the deployed units (SAPMO-Barch. 1961b) and the popular support adjured by the official propaganda proved to be napless: a premature withdrawal of most of the units had become necessary particularly because vociferous resentments had occurred in those workshops from which the fighters stemmed (SAPMO-Barch. 1961a).

The deployment in the course of the erection of the 'antifascist protection wall' was the first and only 'real' deployment of Combat Groups. A 'generational change' that took place in the 1960s due to age-related retirement of the first generation of fighters also affected the attachment to tradition. While the 'Kampfzeit' still

stayed present in an ever intensified fostering of tradition, it inevitably had to lose their fascination in a time that was less minted by 'tough struggles and privations' ('harte Kämpfen und Entbehrungen') but proving rather 'the normality of a safe and self-evident situation (...) although not invulnerably everyday-life' (Rothbauer, qouted in Lüdtke 2001: 295). 'Bumming around, deficiency and a lack of discipline' were increasingly stated concerning the training (LHASA 1966). 'The great contradiction' ('Der große Widerspruch'), as one commander in the district of Genthin stated, was not only evident in the growing lack of legitimation but to practices that mirrored the 'deficiency society' ('Mangelgesellschaft') of 'real existing Socialism':

One goes to the training and out of the 8 hours training some 30 or 40 % consist of deficiency and waiting time. Thus many comrades come and say, I sacrifice my spare-time for the training and here it is unorganized and lacks this and that (LHAM 1968; see also LHAM 1977).

Due to individual biographic experiences, engaging oneself in the Combat Groups until the 1960s might have been completely rooted in idealistic motives. In the 'safe world of the dictatorship' (Wolle 1999) the motives changed increasingly to pragmatic ones. As contemporary witnesses report, to join the Combat Groups ensured ones personal career and last but not least the SED awarded the militant engagement with a so-called 'Combat-Group-Pension' ('Kampfgruppen-Rente') beginning in the 1970s[13].

At the latest in the fall of 1989 it became obvious that the Combat Groups were by no means the loyal 'party army' the SED wanted it to be and as it was regarded by some contemporary observers (Dissmann 1978). The workshop-based organisation now proved that 'the distance between the SED-leadership and the Combat Groups was by far larger than the distance one fighter felt towards the protesting colleague or towards young people in general' (Herbst, Ranke and Winkler 1994: 468).

III

Although the Combat Groups found a toneless ending – 'so, and all this disappeared in the course of one night' as a contemporary witness remembered the dissolution of his unit[14] – the on-going recourse on the Proletarian Myth proved to have a lasting effect as petitions by Combat Group members showed in the fall of 1989

concerning the dissolution of their organisation. There countless, particularly older, fighters voted against a dissolution of the Combat Groups, not only because they meanwhile shared 'many personal points of reference in their life with the Combat Groups' but also because the Combat Groups owed their continuity to the 'legacy of the fallen fighters of revolution' and to 'all martyrs of the antifascist struggle' (SAPMO-Barch. 1989a, 1989b, 1989c; on the 'charismatic' implications of antifascism see Maser 2002).

The antifascist struggle linked those who actually fought this battle and those who wished they had. As a 'founding myth' ('Gründungsmythos' [Münkler 1998]) of a 'better Germany' it enabled the generational symbiosis of those veterans who had belonged to the Communist movement since the Weimar Republic and whose political socialization had been highly charged morally through the experience of persecution and emigration (Niethammer 1994: 107ff.) and the members of the 'Construction' ('Aufbau') – or 'FDJ' ('Free German Youth')-generation (Wierling 2003), which kept the Proletarian Myth alive but which in the course of the GDR lay 'like a lead plate' ('wie eine Bleiplatte' [Niethammer]) on the following generations and by this contributed decisively to the inner collapse of the political system (Meuschel 1992: 240; Niethammer 1997).

Although one can state an appeal of the Proletarian Myth in the time of the construction of Socialism with its crises and long-reaching individual and collective continuities at least for the activist-minded following, one has to take notice of its 'stubborn' adoptions by the historical actors. As the analysis of the social practices within the Combat Groups indicates, it was not so much anchored in a distinct 'class-consciousness' but rather in 'stubborn' enthusiasm for gender-specific 'military play' (männliche 'Militärspielerei') and its connected male-bonded 'common experience' (männerbündisches 'Gemeinschaftserlebnis'). Here the disciplinary intentions which the rulers pursued with their party militia met their limits, as did the SED-specific 'historic culture' ('Geschichtskultur' [Sabrow 2000]) which in the on-going recourse to the Proletarian Myth was shown to be misconceived in that 'by the end of the 1980s, the DDR population had grown intensely weary with a political language and political policies rooted in the 1920s and increasingly removed from the concerns and realities and desires of everyday existence' (Weitz 1997: 386).

NOTES

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[1] Erwin Geschonnek plays a commander of a Combat Group-unit in the forth episode 'The small and the tall Willi' ('Der kleine und der große Willi') of the DEFA-movie 'Geschichten jener Nacht' from 1967. All four episodes of that movie deal with Combat Groups-members and their engagement in the course of the erection of the Berlin Wall, highlighting different aspects of their commitment and stressing overall the revolutionary heritage of the GDR. The movie received broad reception but was no commercial success due to its obvious legitimatoric purpose (Kannapin 2005: 188–201).

[2] The term 'fighter' was used both in official and everyday-language to signify a member of the Combat Goups and thus is used in the following without quotation marks.

[3] Although paramilitaristic efforts were a common part of the political culture in the whole of Communist-ruled Eastern Europe, the Combat Groups represent a somewhat unique organisation. Militias existed in every former Warsaw Pact-Country but the mixture of traditionalist and disciplining elements within the Combat Groups seems to have been a GDR-specific phenomenon. A somewhat comparable organisation existed in Hungary, though, where after the experiences of 1956 a 'worker's militia' was formed. Although the reason for its formation is similar, the 'worker's militia' showed some important differences, recruiting its membership first of all almost entirely out of party-members (Gosztony 1977; especially concerning Hungary: Barany 1997). Contacts between the Combat Groups and the 'worker's militia' did exist, but seems to have happened on a more fomal level (SAPMO-Barch. 1962).

[4] The Combat Groups reached their peak in 1961 with about 201,000 members (Wagner 1998, 2001); the efforts of Wagner mark a first and useful approach on this topic.

[5] For example, in the course of the 'Generalappell' in March 1956 numerous veteran fighters who had already fought as part of 'revolutionary soldiers-councils', 'in the year 1920', in 'the march action of 1921' and 'against facism' were greeted publicly (LHASA 1956g).

[6] The everyday-life contact with members of the Red Army seems to have had a certain impact concerning this point as well; since the 1970s, Combat Group-units were encouraged to get in contact with units of the Red Army; meetings were held regularly but strictly ritualized contacts could seldom overcome nationalist stereotypes which gave these meetings always a controversial note (on this: Müller 2005; Satjukow 2003).

[7] Former non-commissioned officers (Unteroffiziere) resembled the largest group within the analyzed Kaderakten: 127 persons (30.8 %) – they are usually considered as 'tough' ('hart'), 'reliable' ('zuverlässig') and 'duteous' ('pflichtbewusst') and count, at the latest, since napoleonic times as the 'backbone' ('Rückgrat') of every army (on this: Dillkofer and Klein 1981: 119ff.).

[8] Herbert critically regards the term as 'expression of on-going political and cultural hegemony-changes' ('Ausdruck werdenden politischen und kulturellen Hegemoniewandels' [Herbert 2003: 114]); here the age-groups until 1930 are connected to these three generations.

[9] Peukert connects with the 'Frontkämpfergeneration' the age-group of 1896, with the 'Nachkriegsgeneration' the age-group of 1914 and with the 'HJ-Generation' the age-group of 1925 (Peukert 1986: 143).

[10] Helmut Lethen lists as keywords concerning the 'cult of realism' the 'ban of the ritual of lamentation, the disciplining of one's affects, the devices of manipulation, the fraud of assimilation, the modes of physiognomic judgements and the reflection in a parallelogramm of forces' ('Verbot des Rituals der Klage, die Disziplinierung der Affekte, die Kunstgriffe der Manipulation, die List der Anpassung, die Verfahren des physiognomischen Urteils und die Reflexion in einem Parallelogramm der Kräfte' [Lethen 1994: 57]).

[11] Since the exact date of entry is only documented in 262 of the overall 413 cases this figure might be even higher.

[12] The term 'Übungsideologie' refers to widespread practices constantly moaned by the instructors, which consisted in 'playing war all the time and neglecting the systematic training of each and every fighter' (LHAM 1978).

[13] In detail the pension-bonus awarded 'on a membership lasting a) at least 25 years or b) at least 20 years if the retirement results due to disablement or incapibility for medical reasons, an age-, disablement- and accident-pension granted with 100 Marks'. The Secretary of the ZK also enacted a 'widow-pension' granted with 60 Marks, an 'orphan-pension' granted with 40 Marks and a 'half-orphan-pension' granted with 30 Marks (see SAPMO-Barch. 1974).

[14] Interview with Bernard Weber (name changed by the author), a former member of the Combat Groups, 7/6/2006. Although an order given by the secretary of the Interior had instructed that the dissolution of the Combat Group units should take place in a 'dignified way' this was possibly only 'in exceptional cases' due to the 'tense mood among the population and the Combat Groups-members themselves', as the Chief of the DVP in the district of Halle noted (SAPMO-Barch. 1990).

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