Andrew Bickford. *Fallen Elites: The Military Other in Post-Unification Germany*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011. ISBN: 978-0-8047-7396-6.

Anthropologists have become increasingly concerned with ‘soldiering’ as an object of scholarly inquiry, providing us with valuable insights into what it means for those involved in the military to be soldiers, and what they mean to the states that make them. The latest work of Andrew Bickford, Assistant Professor of Anthropology at George Mason University, goes along the same lines. In *Fallen Elites: The Military Other in Post-Unification Germany*, Bickford examines the process of militarization in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), which led to the creation of its army, the National People’s Army, or the NVA, as well as the fate of NVA soldiers after German unification in 1990.

His study is guided by two main questions: ‘Do the political uses and representations of militarized masculinity change when states or government change? In what way does military identity intersect with political economy, memory, political processes, gender, semiotics, and citizenship?’ (p. 6) In order to answer these questions, Bickford searched through several archives in Berlin, attended numerous meetings of former NVA members, and conducted interviews with more than eighty officers of the West German and onetime East German army, including important figures like the then head of the Border Guards, General Klaus-Dieter Baumgarten.

Through this fieldwork, Bickford finds that the leaders of the GDR held a certain image of the ideal soldier, one of a socialist warrior who prizes ideology above nationality and thus would be willing to kill fellow Germans from the West if necessary. To turn men into this ideal, the East German government employed various means, among them the use of the media, songs, cartoons, youth groups, among other tactics. Not only did this policy of militarization target men, but also women, who were supposed to accept, love, and support soldiers and their role(s) in the state. Military publications like the *Armee Rundschau* portrayed the ideal woman as being passive, unsure of herself, apolitical, and interested solely in establishing a lasting relationship and becoming a mother. This idea contradicts the common belief
that socialist societies like the GDR embraced more progressive gender roles than other societies, as the East German government went to great lengths to foster women’s commitment to men in the military in order to establish families that are stable as well as loyal to the system, which were seen as the foundation of socialist society.

Militarization policy in East Germany, even though imperfect and never completely successful, worked rather well, as the majority of NVA soldiers had internalized the master narratives of the GDR to an extent that it would define and impact their lives even after unification. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the incorporation of the GDR into West Germany, most NVA officers were released from military service, despite the claims of unified Germany’s government to create an ‘army of unity.’ This left many of them prone to economic hardship, as they suffered from unemployment and insufficient pension. What angered and irritated former NVA officers even more than these material losses was the symbolic damage done to them, as the dissolution of the East German military stripped them off their reputation, their status, and ultimately their identity.

As West Germany dominated the process of unification, Western perceptions of the GDR and the NVA prevailed in unified Germany. Thus, the NVA has been seen as the prime example for an immoral army, one that served an unjust and totalitarian regime. Moreover, as West Germany did not recognize East Germany, the NVA has not being viewed as a German army, with its former members therefore not being entitled to any military honors in the unified German state. Former NVA officers find this especially troublesome because soldiers who served in the German military during World War II are entitled to such honors, even though they (also) served a clearly unjust and totalitarian regime. This marginalization of former NVA officers in unified Germany has resulted in their withdrawal from the state: Not only do many of them oppose the new German state, combined with a glorification and romanticizing of the GDR, but also many engage in absurd and dangerous conspiracy theories by viewing themselves as the martyrs of unification.

Bickford proves to be a keen observer of the German condition, as he, for example, recognizes that certain elements of fascism and the Third Reich not only have been living on in the Federal Republic of Germany, but also persisted in the supposedly antifascist GDR. More generally speaking, Bickford’s account of German history is a very credible one, as it stands a solid middle ground between Western triumphalism and approaches which glorify the GDR.

What makes *Fallen Elites* such a seminal work is that it not only addresses a facet of German unification which had been largely uncovered and therefore enriches our understanding of both the German past and present, but also and especially that it provides several valuable findings that can be generalized beyond the German case. For example, it shows us that penalizing professional soldiers of dissolving regimes both economically and
symbolically leads to their alienation, posing an obstacle to conciliation and unification processes; rather, such fallen elites should be addressed with integration strategies that attend to their sense of identity, self-worth, and status.

Moreover, Bickford’s study demonstrates that militarization is a political tool, something that is done by certain people to other people: State actors decide how soldiers and the military should be and what they should represent, and in order to bring these images into being, they define a positive military ideal by creating a negative point of reference, an image of an improper-inferior military. In post-unification Germany, the NVA served as this negative point of reference; it became the ‘military other.’ The German case also illustrates that such images of proper and improper militaries and soldiers are not timeless entities, but they can change over time. One last finding mentioned at this point is that essentialist claims about innate male aggression seem to be wrong; men are not born soldiers, but they get turned into them through militarization programs.

All these are important insights, which can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of soldiering and militarization. Thus, Bickford’s magnificent study should not only be read by those concerned with German unification and military history, but also by those interested in military anthropology, that is, the making and unmaking of military identities.

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