

The legacy of Soviet troops in Germany

BY REGINE WOSNITZA

In autumn 1994 when the American British, French, and Russian troops withdrew from unified Germany, the once again sovereign country faced a legacy of more than 10,000 abandoned military sites. The large majority were located in former eastern Germany, where some 500,000 Soviet troops had been stationed. Thus, Federal Minister of Finance Theo Waigel responded to the unexpected windfall with a bout of generosity: he offered the property, to the eastern Laender (states).

But like most bargains, there was a hitch. The barracks were badly neglected, the military training areas littered with live ammunition and strips of land riddled with underground airraid shelters. Repairs and conversion would cost millions of deutschmarks.

Unlike most states, Brandenburg accepted and is now the proud owner of 80 barracks complexes, 26 residential areas, 19 airfields, 60 military training grounds, 33 radar stations, and airraid shelters and other items. The big question what to do with the „Waigel gift.“ Should the barracks be destroyed or restored for civilian use? Should the training grounds be cleaned or turned into wildlife reserves? Could the underground shelters be filled in, or would the areas above have to remain empty ?

Two years later, many questions remain unanswered. This is also true of the Soviet headquarters in Wuensdorf - 30 kilometers south of Berlin. Here the state of Brandenburg founded a special company to tackle the conversion of the military base once home to 40.000 troops and civilians. Wuensdorf's history as a garrison goes back to the turn of the 20th century. Inhabitants saw the German imperial army arrive, witnessed its replacement by the Nazi Wehrmacht (armed forces), and watched as the Soviet forces overran the military compound in 1945. In 1953, the Supreme Command of the German Group of the Soviet Armed Forces set up headquarters in Wuensdorf.

For the next 40 years the world's largest military unit stationed abroad received orders from within a garrison surrounded by 10 miles of walls. And the policy of separation between military and civilians enacted by the Soviets was strictly enforced. Since the departure of the troops, the walls have opened to the public only once. Except for infrequent construction noises, the only sound is the hum from the nearby main road. Empty playgrounds among the 870 deserted buildings evoke the cheers of the officers' children. Their parents' role in East Germany is portrayed on huge billboards with glorified pictures of army tanks. Juergen Baumann, manager of the Development Corporation of Wuensdorf is convinced that by the year 2010, the empty town will once again teem with life. Then the new residents will decide whether to retain the name of "Waldstadt," which was proposed due to the green woods and parks interspersing the grounds. Baumann estimates that the corporation's investment of DM 360 million will, in the coming 10 years, trigger some DM 1.5 billion in private investment. Yet, while the housing projects have nearly been settled, and 1,000 civil servants will resume residence and jobs in the next two years, retail investment is still slack. Too many similar projects mushroom in Berlin's vicinity.

"We have to keep our goal in mind and ensure that we approach it daily, step by step," says Baumann, recently described as a "golden optimist" in a German magazine. The 2,800 inhabitants of civilian Wuensdorf just across the main road are, however, slowly becoming impatient. "For 50 years the presence of troops affected Wuensdorf more than any other place," says Mayor Hans Dieter Linke. "I think by now too many people are involved in planning and nothing really results from it." Citizens want the roads (bothered

by 50 years of Soviet Army vehicle traffic) repaired. Shop managers suffered considerable losses at the disappearance of their Soviet customers and badly need business to pick up again. Some 200 people from the area formerly employed at the garrison's tank repair shop are still in need of new jobs.

Nevertheless, despite all financial worries, the troops are not much missed. On the contrary, Wuensdorfers enjoy the quiet streets where children can safely play again. Like everywhere in East Germany the blue and brown uniforms of the "loyal comrades in arms of the glorious Soviet Army" were a common feature in Wuensdorf. And the mass of army vehicles, whose drivers constantly ignored all traffic rules, were considered a real danger. Shopping worked both ways and Germans sometimes found food unavailable elsewhere in the Russian "Magazines."

However, the exchange of items like watches, heating material, gas, tools, and sometimes weapons took place in secret. Paid nothing but a pittance, Soviet soldiers snatched anything they could lay their hands on in the barracks and found a ready market in the communist economy of short supply. In contrast to these clandestine transactions, the official meetings arranged by the "German Soviet Friendship" organization were dreary encounters. Though meant to promote friendship, anything but superficial small talk between Germans and Soviets was, ironically, not only discouraged but forbidden. The German population came to acknowledge the Soviet military's presence as an immutable evil. "The Friends," pronounced with delight or derision depending on the situation, were neither feared nor revered.

And even where contact would have been possible, Germans preferred to ignore them. The garrison of Karlshorst, for example, was located inside East Berlin itself and mainly manned with officers of the Soviet army and the secret service KGB. Although the fraternization ban applied, the officers and their families had more leeway than elsewhere, and German and Soviet families sometimes inhabited the same building. Vera Stutz-Bischitzky, today a translator and editor of Russian books, was among the few Germans who did not shy away from the Soviets. She had been born in Karlshorst in 1950, and these foreign people had always interested her. At the age of 13, she ventured into the military compound to try out her basic school Russian. Once on the base she would chat with soldiers tending the tanks or feeding the pigs, and she would buy cream at the all Russian shop as a special treat for her mother. Stutz-Bischitzky did not mind that her school friends, who, like the majority of East Germans learned Russian only grudgingly, considered her genuine interest as slightly weird. "I felt drawn to the company of the Soviet people and thought they were the greatest," Stutz-Bischitzky recalls today. "I never gave it a thought that I might get into difficulty, I as a girl among all the soldiers. And I never did. They were always very open, warmhearted, and friendly to me." Although she sharply criticizes Soviet and Russian politics, Stutz-Bischitzky regrets that Russian culture does not gain the interest it deserves.

But she has not been back to Karlshorst in a long time. Because of its alleged mixture of military, communists, and secret service residents, the district is still unpopular with most Berliners. The federal government, nonetheless, devotes special attention to Karlshorst. So far the German government has bought 177 apartments, the renovation allowance of which triples the amount spent on any other Allied property. Their facades freshly painted, these buildings are not only little jewels amongst the other gray dwellings, but bring back the architectural beauty of the area.

Helmut John at the Federal Property Office in Berlin suspects "political reasons" behind the government's choice. He maintains that the investment at this prominent garrison serves to prove that the Soviet legacy is not disdained. Still, the present activities are nothing but a cosmetic operation. The planned construction of 200 houses and 700 flats as well as the restoration of the residential and military buildings deteriorating by the day, are continuously postponed. Both town developers and government officials fear that any newly created living space will remain empty until the government actually moves to Berlin. In order to balance at least some of the millions of deutschmarks spent on guarding empty buildings and sites and to prevent decay, the property office now issues temporary leases.

Among all the derelict and rundown houses, one freshly renovated former KGB barrack stands out. It is currently used as a training college. Other tenants are more inconspicuous. Only small signs point to the charity that uses some barracks to house Bosnian refugees, or the Gauck Authority that stores files from the Stasi secret service in heavily guarded containers.

The "Museum Berlin Karlshorst on Russian German relations since 1917" is the only permanently converted object. After Soviet troops captured the building in April 1945, the final signing of capitulation took place on those premises and confirmed the end of World War II. Today not much remains of the building's past. It used to house a very different type of exhibition. From 1967 to 1994, the "Museum on the Unconditional Surrender of Fascist Germany in the Great Patriotic War 1941-1945 glorified the Soviet Union. This socialist show emphasized the role of the Red Army as liberator and the suffering of the Soviet people by the Nazi regime of horror. Soviet troops, undisputedly, had the most casualties during World War II, but official policies never referred to the wave of rape, pillaging, and cruelty, committed by Soviet soldiers, that accompanied Germany's liberation.

Neither did the exhibition refer to the real background of the events of June 17, 1953, named "fascist punch" in socialist terminology. That day, hundreds of thousands of East Germans took to the streets demanding the government's resignation and free elections. By evening, Soviet tanks had crushed the demonstration, arrested 20,000 people, and started executing alleged instigators. Due to the museum's remote location, it is mostly school classes or educational groups that visit the completely new and extensively documented exhibition nowadays. Several entries by individual Germans and Russians in the visitors' book speak of the sorrows inflicted on people in the name of both nations. Other entries complain that detailed information on the Soviet troops and their impact is missing.

It was to fill this gap that Dieter Kiesslich, an employee with the Development Corporation of Wuensdorf conceived the idea of a different kind of museum. Kiesslich admits that, like most of his East German compatriots, he knew little about the Soviet troops. Although he enjoyed the mentality of Russians he met on business trips, he had no particular liking for any kind of military. But when the amateur historian realized that the gutting of garrisons would demolish all traces of the past, he founded the Association of Military History in Wuensdorf "We must acknowledge that the Soviets were stationed here for 45 years, in which they were either celebrated as heroes or condemned as the devil," says Kiesslich. "I simply believe we owe this kind of museum to history, especially as we Germans are fond of dodging our past."

Kiesslich and some of his 20 collaborators are among the few people granted permanent entrance into the compound. Their collection, by now the largest in all of Germany, includes the telephone operating table from which the final closure of Wuensdorf was confirmed to Moscow. They saved furniture from dormitories and prisons, documents from offices, ammunition from uniform pockets, and weapons from training grounds. Among the many items they found on rubbish heaps were uniforms and pictures explaining every little detail of garrison life to the many non Russian speaking soldiers. Their first small, threeday exhibition last September drew an amazing crowd of 4,700 people. This response encouraged Kiesslich to specify plans for a permanent museum, a Russian restaurant, and a cultural center in one of the Wuensdorf villas. He hopes to raise enough money to open in eight years' time.

Such interest, as well as the 60,000 people who watched the farewell parades in Karlshorst in 1994 and gave cakes and flowers to the departing soldiers, flabbergasted military expert Volker Koop. "Many people, unless they had been directly victimized, started to glorify the troops," he says. "This change took place when the troops were certain to leave and when GDR citizens turned into citizens of the Federal Republic of Germany. I cannot understand how they can suddenly ignore the 20,000 crimes Soviet soldiers committed each year."

This information was, however, never readily available, and Koop himself only discovered it by accident. Working as a press officer with the western Ministry of Defense in 1991, he came across an abundant supply

of files compiled by the GDR Military Prosecutor and listing the crimes of Soviet soldiers. Koop's recently published book „Between Law and Despotism. The Red Army in Germany“ gives impressive examples of the 20,000 crimes that 500,000 soldiers committed against 16 million East Germans. Between January 1980 and June 1981, for example, Soviet drivers caused 1,790 of the 2,135 accidents they were involved in, injuring 666 people and killing 69 East Germans and 36 Soviets. Each year, members of the military committed 1,500 burglaries in houses, factories, shops, and apartments. Each week, at least one woman or girl became a victim of rape. And the list includes also incidents of murder, arson, or theft of munitions. The figures remain well below the crime statistics of any larger city. Koop says he is not so much concerned with the number of incidents but with the fact that military authorities behaved as occupiers until the very end. They prevented crimes from being investigated, ignored daily letters of complaints by German prosecutors, and intimidated, blackmailed, and ridiculed victims.

In order to avoid public outrage, German authorities often paid compensation to victims. The Politburo of the SED (East Germany's Socialist Unity Party) as well as the East German Ministry of National Defense were well aware of the Soviets' status. Koop found a bit of formerly secret classified information dating from 1988 explicitly stating that under international law, Soviet troops were still an occupying force, but, for the time being, did not function as such. The general population, though, remained ignorant of this fact. They had learned the lessons of occupation well, and once the events of 1945 and 1953 faded into history, the occupiers' threatening image stopped bothering them.

According to Richard Weissshuhn, member of the dissident movement in East Berlin, even the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961 and the sealing off of the border did not totally alter daily life. People learned to adapt to the new situation. „We were not interested in the Soviet troops and we did not take them seriously," Weissshuhn says of the opposition movement of the 1980s. "If we had done that we would have been totally paralyzed. Our problem was the Stasi secret service, and that was quite enough to cope with." The "house of cards" of Soviet imperialism rapidly collapsed, once Gorbachev started rattling at it. But when the Cold War Era came to an end, the legacy of problems was just beginning.