

Free German Forces

As Pact troops advanced into Germany a number of Germans declared for the Pact and volunteered to join the Pact armies. Initially these were quietly ignored by the Pact command. As the situation worsened, these volunteers were assembled in Danzig for training. Initially under Russian officers (who were selected from those who had served in Group of Soviet Forces Germany and spoke fluent German) these were given a short training period. Most were professional veterans of the East German Army and needed little training to bring them back up to speed (many of these “Ossies” had been made redundant after amalgamation or had received a reduction in rank, fuelling resentment). In addition, as the troops were mainly committed communists (often the reason they had been dismissed from the Bundesheer), commissar strength within the unit was low and the Soviet officers were gradually phased out (although a small cadre remained throughout the unit’s history). The percentage of ex-officers volunteering was high at 14% of the total force and as a result ironically many had to accept demotions from their former ranks. The unit was originally to be sent to the Chinese Front when training was completed but petitioning from the unit (and in particular the commander Hans Gutterbach) reversed this decision as it was felt that a unit that was familiar with Germany would be more usefully deployed there and would make an excellent propaganda tool (indeed whilst in training it featured in a number of Soviet films).



Illustration 1: Photo believed to be Maria Schmidt

Women were also recruited into the unit from the start (none had been kept on into the unified army. It is unknown when the decision to allow them a combat role was made but it was clearly in place by the fighting for Warsaw where the sniper Maria Schmidt was awarded the Hero of the Soviet Union.

The newly formed Free German Legion was dressed and equipped as a standard Soviet unit but with former East German ranks and a German roundel on the side cap (ironically identical to the German Army!). Other changes to parade wear were announced but it is



Illustration 3: Example of the grey field cap

unlikely that these were ever implemented. An alternative head dress was however introduced, namely a grey field cap with the roundel worn on the front. This was more popular than the side cap and more common than it in late war photos. At least one captured soldier has been photographed in the East German army helmet not the standard Soviet one (it has



Illustration 2: Free German Legion troops in Poland sometime in late 1998. The centre figure has a non-issue blue scarf. The proximity of the vehicles probably explains the lack of equipment. Note the high boots.

been suggested that this was a personal souvenir from his pre-Unification service and not issued). In addition a number of photographs released by Pravda in March 1998 appear to show the rain pattern camouflage uniform issued before Unification. It is entirely possible that these photos are in fact pre-Unification photos used for deception purposes as no documented cases of the uniform being worn in anything other than odd items has ever been identified. Boots were officially standard Soviet issue but many appear to have work boots similar in style to the East German marching (or jack) boot (these are often the first clue in photographs that one is looking at a member of the Free German Legion).

Tank crews wore the same uniform as their Soviet counterparts. Some pinned a metallic version of the roundel to the front of their padded helmets.

Equipment was mixed, about 1/3 of the armour was T72 (believed to be the A model with a stiffening of B models plus command K models), the remainder being T55 (troops were assigned based on what vehicles they had previously trained on). At least some of the T55s featured horseshoe armour and/or were the M model. K models of both were also seen and it is



Illustration 4: Detail from a painting of the 2nd Division. Note the pin on the helmet of one of the dismounted crewmen. The machine gunner has an unusual brown helmet, possibly of local manufacture.



Illustration 6: From the same series of paintings, 2nd Division BTR70 clearly showing the East German marking. Unusually the vehicle has two sets of numbers. The reason for this is unknown.

equipped differently. Photographs show both at varying times and one alternative suggestion is that the 7.62S weapons were used in training and these photos released later. The RPG 7 and 16 were widely issued as were at least some RPG18s). The missile teams were issued AT4 (which was also fitted to most of the BMPs). The artillery was under strength and consisted of towed D30 howitzers using a mix of

believed that the engineer battalion included a number of OT55 flame throwing tanks. APCs were mainly BTR60s and 70s with at least one battalion in BMP1 (although some units may have had BMP2s according to some reports – it is possible these were recovered or replacement vehicles). Small arms were standard Pact issue. Reports vary as to if the calibre used was 5.45 or 7.62S – it is possible that the sub-units were



Illustration 5: 2022 Aberdeen Proving Ground, general John White examines a T72 captured from the 2nd Division

prime movers (and perhaps a BM21 battalion but reports are contradictory on this). Recce units used the BRDM2. Intriguingly the divisional helicopters appear to be captured German UH1 Hueys repainted in a tan and green pattern with a large identification red star (one photo shows what appears to be a smaller East German flag painted below the star on the door but the view is blocked by a figure). On photos it appears the door guns were replaced by Soviet PK machine guns.

Once training was completed the unit was redesignated the 2nd German Motor Rifle (Motorisierte-Schützen) Division “Willi Bredel” (it is believed that no 1st Division ever existed and the name was a deception plan). The Division then was committed to breaking the siege of Warsaw and performed well against the US 8th Infantry Division. Casualties were heavy (including many from at least one nuclear strike that hit the division) and after the breaking of the siege the unit was withdrawn for refitting. During this time officers toured German POWs trying to recruit with mixed success (many who recruited did so simply to escape the POW camp conditions and did not prove to be efficient soldiers). There is at least one confirmed report of the hanging of deserters and commissar strength was increased at this time. In early 2000 it was found fighting 1 Royal Green Jackets of the 3rd (UK) Mechanised Division in the area of Frankfurt. The next time the unit was positively identified was in fighting the 2nd US Marine Division along the Vistula River in the Summer Offensive of 2000. Here the unit took part in a large number of small scale engagements with raiding marines in the marshes. It is believed that the unit was thrown in despite being under equipped as the marshes were better suited to a unit with limited armour.

Currently the unit is believed to have withdrawn northwards towards the Baltic coast and may be trying to move towards the German border to return home (although their reception will no doubt worry them). It is speculated that they are looking for any damaged (but repairable) ships to leapfrog along the coastline. In September 2000 there was a confused radio intercept from elements of the missing US 8th Infantry Division that confirmed an engagement with German troops believed to be the 2nd Division. Current strength is around 1500 with 2 T55 tanks and a small number of APCs).

There was a further German division in the process of formation. This is shown on western intelligence reports as the 4th German Motor Rifle (Motorisierte-Schützen) Division. Recently declassified DIA reports of the time further indicate that it was to be called the “Karl Marx” but no other source shows this. This was only at cadre strength (using personnel from the 2nd Division) when Danzig was hit by a nuclear weapon. The division was destroyed by this and the few surviving cadre members were reassigned to the 2nd Division as the equipment stockpiles had been destroyed.



Illustration 7: Soviet propaganda photograph claimed to be of the 4th Division but probably pre-Unification as the helmets carried are incorrect for the Twilight War.

In addition there was a separate Fallschirmjager Battalion 73 "Hans Beimler" formed at the same time. This unit is still shrouded in secrecy, however it is shown on paper as a standard light infantry battalion (parachute capable) but it is believed that it better resembles a special forces unit. It is thought that the unit was used in deception operations using captured German Army equipment (it is believed that they were involved in the attack on the 2nd German Army HQ in March 1998). In January 2000, it appeared that a member was captured by the 2nd Marine Division whilst attacking a marine outpost after crossing the Vistula when it froze. Speaking fluent English he convinced them that he was a member of the unit on a raid. Remaining with the unit he reached Bremahaven as part of Operation Omega (where he was used as a translator as the unit crossed Germany). He was evacuated to the USA, taking American citizenship before embarking on TF34. Here he told his story years later to journalist Reece Davids. In this he finally admitted that he was a marauder who had deserted the 1st Panzer Division and he had used the story to try and save his life believing (correctly) that the chance of survival was much higher for a special forces trooper that military intelligence wanted to know about than a marauder. The current location of this unit is unknown and strength is believed to be no more than 100. The current commander is Major Simon Grubber, a veteran with experience serving in Angola with the Volksarmee as an advisor.

A fragmentary Soviet document listing an order of battle in the Reformed Library of Congress shows a Fallschirmjager Battalion 400 in the process of being recruited. There is no date on the document but by analysis of other units referred to, it appears that it dates from around January 1997. No further trace of this unit appears in any other source. Peters in his analysis of the Pact order of battle (comparing location and strength) has suggested that this may well be the 73rd Battalion which was later renumber after training.

The air force too recruited ex-East German pilots. Here the need for loyalty was much higher as it was felt that pilots would have an easier time escaping to the west. As such there was no recruiting of ex-POWs. Units of ex-East German pilots were part of the Central Front. Operating a mix of Mig29s and SU25s they formed separate battalions within Soviet Regiments. The highest scoring pilot Major Paul Krusse scored 23 kills before being shot down and killed by a Danish F16 over Jutland in January 1998. Ground crew wore standard Russian Air Force insignia with East German rank badges and roundel on the side cap. Aircrew wore standard Russian flying equipment with (almost always) no German distinctions. Crews were briefed that if shot down they should claim to be from the German regions of Poland. In many cases there is documentary evidence of false backgrounds being provided. It is worth noting that film footage and photos of the Free German People's Air Force is rarer due to the secrecy surrounding identities of the pilots.

Naval units are something of an enigma. No records have ever been found indicating that any navy was formed. However a badly damaged Osa II washed up off Peenemunde in May 1999. The crew wore standard Russian naval equipment with little or no identifying marks (although this was common by this date) but all of the surviving logs (most of which were ruined by seawater or shell fragments) were written in German and personal effects indicated a German origin for many of the crew. The Osa has been identified as previously belonging to the Polish Navy. Interestingly four of the bodies show evidence of being equipped with equipment

intended for Naval SPeznaz use such as underwater firearms. It is commonly believed that this vessel was in use by former East German sailors and was being used for a secret operation. One western source (Peter Fleming in *Operation Grantham – The secret raids*, Cambridge University Press, 2009) has however claimed that it was actually a NATO operation, pointing to much of the damage appearing to be caused by Soviet weapons. No further information has come to light on this intriguing incident.