

The Soviet Military Administration in Thuringia (SMATh) 1945-1949

The American occupation regime that lasted barely 100 days ceased to exist without having any profound impact on the post-war development of this region, with the withdrawal of the American Armed Forces from Thuringia. Only when the rearguard of the American military administration left the Thuringian capital on July 2, 1945 and in the subsequent days all town- and land-districts were occupied by the Soviet 8th Guards Army that was commanded by Lieutenant General Vasily Ivanovich Chuikov, a development took place that created between 1945 and 1949 according to the stalinist ideal of the USSR, the basis for the later political, social and economic regime of the DDR (German Democratic Republic).

Simultaneously to the advance of the Soviet combat units, officers of the 7th department of the political main administration of the Red Army were deployed. They had the task to liaise with German self-administrations that had been appointed by the Americans in order to find out how the land lies politically and to set the stage for the establishment of a Soviet military administration in Thuringia.

The substructure for the establishment of a regional Soviet military administration constituted the SMAD-decree No. 5, which Marshal Zhukov, who had the highest military rank of the Soviet Union and was the highest commander of the Soviet Military Administration in Germany, enacted on July 9, 1945 in Berlin-Karlshorst. The decree arranged for the immediate "organisation of a normal life within the provinces" and appointed Lieutenant General V.I. Chuikov (from July 27, 1946 Lieutenant General Boldin) as governor of the military administration in Thuringia and made Major General I.S. Kolesnitchenko his deputy in charge of civil matters.

At first, the administrative staff of the SMATh was accommodated in the building of the Higher Regional Court in Jena, then however its domicile was moved to the the capital of Weimar on July 11. In the following days and weeks, the Soviet officers begun to build an improvised military-administrational apparatus. At this, they were substantially geared to the example of the superior SMAD-authority (Soviet Military Administration of Germany) in Berlin-Karlshorst. In addition to the governor and his deputy for civil questions, another deputy belonged to the SMATh, who was concerned with economic questions and to whom the departments for industry, agriculture, finances, labour force, trade and provisioning were subordinated to. In the course of the summer 1945, the military administration was supplemented by the departments for 'people's education' and health care. From the outset, the political directorate took up a key position within the realisation of the "socialist occupation policies" and the remodelling and governance of the political life in Thuringia.

The so-called 'propaganda-department' emanated from it in October 1945 (from 1947, 'information-department'). It was responsible for all questions of ideology and propaganda, for the press, for broadcasting and censorship, for cultural policies, for all matters concerning the church, youth or the trade unions as well as for the close collaboration with the local German administrations. The propaganda department, which was headed by colonel M.M. Varakin, concentrated its attention especially on the development and manipulation of the Thuringian parties from the very first. The parties had been licenced on the basis of the SMAD-decree No. 2 by the SMATH in the first weeks of July in 1945.

The SMATH and the Party System in Thuringia

Similar to the other 'Länder' within the Soviet occupation zone, also in Thuringia the building of political parties was carried out under the conditions of the Soviet occupation regime in the months of late summer of 1945. Already in the initial stage, it became apparent that the authorization of KPD (Communist Party), SPD (Social Democratic Party), CDU (Christian Democratic Party) and LDP (Liberal Democratic Party) depended on numerous conditions, which kept them within dependency on the Soviet leadership.

The leading members of the parties had to be registered by the local military commanders and had to agree to work henceforth under the control and according to the directives of the Soviet occupation power. They had to align themselves with terms such as 'anti-fascist' and 'democratic', of which the occupation power certainly interpreted according to its own ideology: Marxism-Leninism. From the word go, the latitude of the parties was heavily constricted. The exception was the KPD, which was called "Russenpartei" by the population and unconditionally supported the policies of the 'socialist occupation regime'. It received extensive political and financial support from the SMATH. This became particularly obvious during the events of late autumn 1945, which evolved around the forced unification of KPD and SPD. After December 1945, when the SMATH replaced the 'opponent of unity' and Thuringian chairman of the SPD, Dr. Hermann Brill with Heinrich Hoffmann, who was willing to cooperate with the occupation regime, Major General I.S. Kolesnitchenko initiated an offensive aimed at the uniting of both worker's parties. Accompanied by intense pressures on the social democratic local- and district associations on January 23, 1946 the deputy responsible for civil matters of the SMATH intimated clearly to a SPD-delegation led by its new chairman Heinrich Hoffmann that Thuringia was to play a vanguard role for the unification and that the procedure had to be completed by May 1, 1946.

In the light of such a futile situation, in which the persecution and Soviet reprisals against so-called 'unification-opponents' from the SPD-camp dominated the political daily life, long-

lasting resistance against the from SMATh and KPD pushed “unity of the working class” was no longer possible.

On April 7, 1946, three weeks before the deadline Kolesnitchenko had set, the Thuringian SED (Socialist Unity Party of Germany) was constituted at the unification party convention in Gotha. In the first months of the occupation regime, the SMATh also canvassed the ‘bourgeois’ parties. CDU and LDP however, were suspiciously observed by colonel Varakin’s propaganda department. The slightest provocation or discrepancy from the political views of the occupation regime could result in drastic political constraints and restrictions. This became exceptionally notable in autumn 1946, during the preparations for the communal-, district- and regional elections in Thuringia.

At this occasion, especially the christian- and liberal democrats felt the effects of the partial siding by the occupation regime directly after the opening of the election campaign. For instance, in contrast to the SED the registration of the local groups of the CDU and the LDP by the commanders of the SMATh was dealt with in an extremely restrictive manner. Moreover, the occupation administration delayed the approval of “bourgeois” party journals and clearly favoured the SED by the distribution of paper contingents necessary for the printing of election posters and pamphlets. In addition, the censorship offices of the Thuringian occupation organs interfered intensively in the coverage of the liberal- and christian democratic parties and made therefore the circulation of their programmatic objectives next to impossible.

Under these circumstances, it was not surprising that the SED with massive support of the SMATh won the local- and regional elections by 50.5% and 51.5% respectively of all votes. Also in the regional parliament (Landtag) it constituted the majority faction with 49.3% of the votes and occupied the key positions in the newly formed Thuringian government. On the basis of its election victory, the SED attempted increasingly to manifest its claim for leadership in Thuringia. Although, CDU and LDP had undertaken some efforts to defy the process of the communist seizure of power, any influence of the “bourgeois” parties in opposition to the SED was systematically repressed by the SMATh.

The occupation power did not even shrink away from interfering in the affairs of the party-leadership bodies of CDU and LDP. The daily “debates” and the coverage of leading party functionaries to the staff of the SMATh, the prior approval of all events and conventions, even for private functions like a member- or functionaries diet constrained the work of these parties. Political assemblies were frequently forced to adopt resolutions that were drafted by

the propaganda department of the SMATh beforehand. Any earnest resistance was impossible considering the degree of political manipulation, for any open disagreement the assemblies were ended immediately and the participants imprisoned by the present Soviet control officers. The SMATh even interfered in the appointment of party executives. In many cases it confounded on pain of penalties the election of candidates, who were deemed non-compliant and disliked by the SMATh. Repeatedly, the military administration exercised its right to appoint or dismiss party functionaries at its discretion and assisted the top-ranking politicians that were considered in line, in extending their power-political influence.

Through the consolidation of the parties, forming the 'United Front of the Anti-fascist-Democratic Parties' (Einheitsfront der antifaschistisch-demokratischen Parteien) the SMATh created an important instrument for the control of the Thuringian party politics. To the committee belonged five leading representatives of KPD, SPD (later SED), CDU and LDP respectively that had to engage to co-operation. De facto, the parties were founded on the basis of the participation in the United Front, because without willingness to cooperate the occupation power would not have allowed their existence. The United Front could only come to a decision unanimously/in unison, therefore it was unattainable to form a "bourgeois" coalition against the interests of the KPD/SED. The political objectives of the communists coincided to a large extent with the aims of the Soviet military administration and they were able to use their veto, without direct intervention of the SMATh to stop politically unwanted initiatives of CDU and LDP in due time.

In spring 1948, the Soviet military administration conducted the founding of two pro-communist parties. The political influence of the "bourgeois" parties was the more constricted with the birth of the Democratic Agrarian Party of Germany (DBD) and the National Democratic Party of Germany (NDPD) in Thuringia. However, also within those district- and communal parliaments, where the "bourgeois" parties held the majority, the dominant position of the SED was cemented. Soon it became obvious, which role the DBD and the NDPD had to play according to the occupation power. On the outside, they appeared as independent parties. The underlying policy was of course predetermined by the SMATh and the SED. While the DBD was to canvass predominantly the rural electorate, it was task of the NDPD to appeal to those in the population, who were nationalist-conservative minded in order to subduct them from the influence of CDU and LDP.

The SMATh and the Administrative- and Governance System in Thuringia

Similar to the party- and bloc system, the KPD/SED was soon to dominate in all state institutions through Soviet support. In Thuringia, the initial foundations for that were laid by the SMATh in mid-July 1945. Although, the Soviets confirmed the at the beginning of July by the Americans appointed, government president Hermann Brill (SPD) as provost of the regional administration (Landesverwaltung), they dismissed him from all offices by mid-July. His party-political activities, as co-author of the so-called 'Buchenwald manifesto', his well-articulated objectives concerning the co-operation between the two worker's parties to further the building of a socialist Germany and the idea to implement this through the founding of a 'Coalition of Democratic Socialists' (Bund demokratischer Sozialisten) did not suit the political concept of the Soviet occupation power.

Therefore, the SMATh appointed a new regional administration under the leadership of the – for the time being - neutral advocate and former major of the town of Gera, Rudolf Paul on July 16, 1945 and secured simultaneously key departments such as internal affairs (Ernst Busse), education (Walter Wolf) as well as employment and social policies (Walter Albrecht) for the communists. From the beginning, the occupation power emphasized the very close linkage between the agencies of the SMATh and the German self-administration bodies. Furthermore, those had to follow strictly the instructions and orders of the military administration that represented the legal foundation.

The execution of an order was not taken lightly by the Soviet officers, as the in October 1947 by the Soviets confirmed Premier, Werner Eggerath remembers, "Already, one or two days later everything was controlled. They asked me, where the planning-concept for the implementation was, and they were under no circumstances satisfied with general information or excuses. This plan had to be determined, signed by the head of the district authority, it had to be clearly stated who was responsible for what, until when which task had to be completed, at what time the control had to be conducted by, when the reports were to be evaluated - in short the plan regarding the implementation played a significant role."

Any offences against the orders of the occupation power, for example in an economic/financial matter could inflict long lasting terms of imprisonment or in extreme cases even the death penalty on the basis of the SMAD-decree No.160 of December 8, 1945 ('On the Responsibility for Sabotage and Acts of Diversion').

The military administration secured its access to the political development of the Thuringian administrative apparatus with the help of regular deliberations between the divisions of the SMATh and the appropriate German administrative agencies.

The president of the regional administration (Landesverwaltung) was obliged on the basis of the SMAD decree No. 108 of April 6, 1946, to propound monthly written reports on the situation to the military administration.

After the regional elections (Landtagswahl) in October 1946, the SMATh extended its controlling measures to the newly formed government of Thuringia. The government was not allowed to take independent decisions without the explicit consent of the SMATh.

It was forced to show any laws and directives still in the drafting stage to the responsible legal officers of the SMATh. Furthermore, the budgeting was determined without formal participation of the parliament between the finance department and the Thuringian military administration. After the closing audit by the finance department of the SMAD in Berlin-Karlshorst, the budgeting was only forwarded to the parliament for a legal declarative statement.

Likewise to all other political areas, a close co-operation between the occupation power and the SED existed also on the level of the regional parliaments (Landesparlamente). For instance, in contrast to the CDU and the LDP, the SED was not obligated to present its proposals and drafts for parliament to the responsible officer of the Soviet military administration. On the opposite, the "bourgeois" parties were even forced to present the wording of smaller parliamentary questions, which were normally only shown to the president of the parliament (Landtag) at the beginning of a session according to the bylaws, to the Soviet control officer. Most of the proposals of the "bourgeois" parties were declined and as result not reproduced as parliamentary printing matter. In many cases, the SED adopted – if in different wording - the proposals of those parties and forwarded it directly to the president.

In the course of 1948/49, the function of the Thuringian parliament was more and more reduced to a mere voting institution. The so-called "Große Anfragen" (extensive enquiry/proposal) that usually demanded a statement by the government with subsequent debate were suppressed by the SMATh or – in case it had issued a permission - by the SED. The 'smaller' enquiries became increasingly unsubstantial and were not allowed to contain criticism directed at the administration. Enquiries deriving from the SED were solely brought up in order to underline and emphasize the work of the administration or to deliver the

evidence for the outward impression, how people-friendly the same actually conducted its policies.

On June 4, 1947, the Soviet occupation power founded with the decree/order No. 158 the German Economic Commission (Deutsche Wirtschaftskommission/DWK), which was responsible for the coordination between the regional- and central administrations as well as for the economic planning within the Soviet occupation zone. When the SMAD granted the Economic Commission legal powers from February 1948, it became apparent that with the increasing transfer of the regional competencies to the central administration a renunciation from the federal administrative structures that were prevailing beforehand within the Soviet occupation zone, had begun. Simultaneously, the Soviets created the institutional preconditions for the preparation of a separate German state and a puppet government on the territory of the Soviet occupation zone.

Only a few weeks after the founding of the DDR, the Soviet military administration had been dissolved in Thuringia. However, this did on no account indicate the end of the Soviet occupation politics in this region. Major General Kolesnitchenko had formally assigned the powers of the SMATh to the invited representatives of the Thuringian government and parliament in a ceremony on November 12, 1949 at the Weimar military headquarters.

Nonetheless, after the establishment of a Soviet control commission, which consolidated in reduced form the key departments of the former SMATh, he and his successor Panjuchkin still had a significant voice regarding the political, social and economic developments in Thuringia until the dissolution of the 'Land' on Juli 25, 1952.

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