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Officer Selection in the federal Armed Forces of Germany

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1. Review of the German Selection System

After the end of World War II, Germany did not have any armed forces of its own for a period of ten years. Military officer selection, for the most part, still takes place according to principles that were introduced 1955, which had the objective of preventing as much as possible, any misuse of the armed forces. Only the careers of specialist officers, which were introduced much later, are governed by other rules.

The first applicants for commissioned service to be tested for aptitude during the establishment of the Federal Armed Forces (FAF) were former officers of the Wehrmacht, whose ability to lead military units was usually beyond any doubt because they had already sufficiently proven their ability during the war. Aptitude tests did not, therefore, initially focus on abilities the candidates needed in order to meet certain performance requirements, but on personality traits, attitudes and motives that had been declared selection criteria for political and moral reasons. By filling in questionnaires and talking to examiners in interviews, applicants had to prove that they were prepared, without any reservations, to uphold the values of the new democratic Constitution and to treat their subordinates as „citizens in uniform“. The guidelines for officer selection applicable at that time, incidentally, were reminiscent of the classical educational ideal of „mens sana in corpore sano“. It seemed that there was no demand for much more than a sound mind in a healthy body because elites of all kinds had fallen into disrepute due to the Nazi ideology.

After the first teams of instructors had been accepted for service, more and more young men without prior military service applied; they had to be tested not only for a democratic attitude, but also for the basic ability to learn and discharge leadership tasks. The aptitude test methods were supplemented accordingly, and repeatedly adapted to the changing requirements during the following years. Nevertheless, the following principles have largely remained unchanged.

A. Centralized Selection Procedure

The selection procedure for applicants for commissioned service is handled by a single central agency for all armed services and functional areas.

Exception:

Every armed service has its own procedure for the admission of qualified noncommissioned officers to the career of „officer specialist“ (with captain being the highest rank).

B. Uniform Selection Criteria

General aptitude for commissioned service is a requirement for both the acceptance of civilian applicants and the admission of military personnel to the career of line officer or of medical officer. In addition, applicants for flying service, whose general aptitude has already been recognized, must pass an additional specific fitness test at the Air Force Institute of Aviation Medicine in Fürstfeldbruck. This requirement applies to pilot applicants in all three armed services.

C. Holism

A summary assessment is given for all of the applicant's relevant aptitude requirements.

There is no standard algorithm for determining the weights for combining different sources of aptitude data.

D. Commission Principle

The applicant's aptitude, or lack of it, is established in a unanimous vote by three persons with different educational and experiential backgrounds. This is supposed to prevent the risk of placing too much weight

on any specific aspect of aptitude, which can happen due to the large amount of discretion permitted by the principle of holism.

Of the current 333,000 FAF service members, 37,000 are commissioned officers. To maintain the level, approximately, 2,700 officers need to be replaced every year. In 1998, the distribution of young people accepted for commissioned service were as follows:

	Line officers	Medical officers/ military music officers	Officer specialists
Persons without prior military service and service members (conscripts or temporary career volunteers)	1.763	233	-
Noncommissioned officers	15	-	374
Reserve officers and other reinstated personnel	227	-	-
Personnel with special civilian qualifications (e.g. lawyers, doctors)	17	38	-
Total	2.022	271	374
Actual strength of commissioned officers	24.200	2.800	10.000

The following deals with officer candidates, who are referred to in the first line of the above table, i.e. those who start their officer career at the lowest rank. Two thirds of them are recruited from civilians attending school, shortly before they qualify for entrance to university or technical college. The rest of the candidates are recruited from soldiers who are either serving a ten-month period as conscripts or who have volunteered for two years or more of service. Some candidates are NCOs or reserve officer candidates. For those willing to enlist for at least twelve years, the Federal Armed Forces will subsidize a university degree at one of the FAF Universities at Hamburg or Munich; medical studies can be subsidized at other universities. The supply/demand ratio (total; $12.500/2.500 = 5.7:1$) varies significantly between the different armed services and functional areas. The number of applicants per training slot is most favourable in the medical service (11.6:1), but this is because of the high proportion of female applicants (65 %). For line officers, the Air Force and the Navy (with ratios of 6.7:1) have problems finding line officers in only a few

functional areas. The Army (with a ratio of 4.3:1) must, in some branches, accept applicants with the lowest acceptable level of aptitude, and can still not satisfy all of its demands. The centralized, uniform selection system applicable to all armed services has the advantage that it is easier for applicants to change between the armed services and functional areas. In 1998, during the selection process about 30 % of all officer candidates changed their mind at least once about their original assignment preferences specified in the application forms. The selection procedure is handled by the Centre for Testing Applicants for Commissioned Service (Offizierbewerberprüfzentrale or OPZ), which is a part of the FAF Personnel Office (Personalamt der Bundeswehr), located in Cologne. The OPZ has a maximum testing capacity of 7,500 applicants per year. If there are more applicants, their number is decreased to the maximum capacity by a pre-selection based on school reports and on test scores from local recruiting centres. The OPZ assesses two groups of 85 applicants each per week. Usually, every Sunday and Tuesday afternoon two officers give a lecture on the most

important aspects of the military professions and training and about courses of study at an FAF university. For successful applicants, tests last about two days and the programme usually ends on Wednesday or Friday, with the planning of the details of their enlistment.

1. Officer Profile

Article 37 of the Legal Status of Military Personnel Act provides the legal basis for the selection of officer candidates. It outlines the mission to establish the fitness of „character, mind and body“, i. e. to assess the general aptitude for an officer career in any of the services. Apart from special requirements for certain branches, there are general requirements that every candidate should meet. The Ministry of Defence has never defined this vague concept of „general aptitude“ or given precise instructions for the selection of candidates, but has listed the following eleven aptitude factors which are to be assessed and rated on a seven point scale:

- conscientiousness
- leadership potential
- social competence
- style of expression and communication
- judgement, decisiveness
- learning and achievement motivation
- stress resistance
- reasoning
- professional and career orientation
- physical fitness

These aspects of suitability are not listed according to priority, and there are no instructions on how to weight them or evaluate different profiles; scores are simply summed up. More important than the score is the „qualification degree“ or „degree of aptitude“ for successfully completing officer training and performing successfully at the lowest officer rank.

- most suited
- well suited
- suited
- unsuited

Applicants are mainly selected with regard to their „general aptitude“ for an officer career. All officers are selected to be leaders, and despite their different assignments they have to meet some common requirements. With respect to the checklist of 11 aptitude factors, every applicant must meet a minimum standard. Although it is not exactly defined, it is assessed with a fairly high inter-rater reliability.

There is little doubt that the concept of „general aptitude“ is very useful for the purpose of negative selection, i. e. for the identification of applicants who are „not suited“ for officer training. There is a question of whether it is also a useful concept for the purpose of positive selection. Traditionally, the German officer is not a specialist, but a generalist. After being trained for certain rank level, he is expected to cope with any assignment at this level in his branch. Officers who want to reach the rank of general must be willing and able to take on a great variety of military assignments in a short period of time. What is needed for success is a high degree of adaptability and flexibility. In the German system of personnel selection and development, someone who is a „jack-of-all-trades“ has a better chance of success than someone who is highly, but narrowly, gifted.

2. The Selection Tools

The examiners use the following sources of information:

- The applicant's personnel files, which includes a curriculum vitae, school reports, efficiency reports and personal data. Additional questionnaires give information about the applicant's background, hobbies, and self-image.
- Information about intelligence and other relevant capabilities (e.g. concentration, mathematical knowledge) is gained by psychological tests.
- A short essay.

- An interview enables the panel members to identify and assess important personality traits which relate to the requirements of the officer profession.
- A short lecture, in which the applicant has to prepare and present a subject before other applicants and the panel. This shows the applicant's range of ideas, linguistic skill, and ability to speak freely.
- A round table discussion, in which three to four applicants develop ideas in an open discussion. This test permits the assessment of mental and personality factors.
- A group task in which the applicants jointly carry out a given task, e. g. prepare a planning document or an action plan.
- The applicant's physical fitness is established by a medical examination and a physical fitness test.

3. The Decision-making Process

The criterion of „general aptitude for commissionees service“ is, on the one hand, dichotomous in principle, i. e. an applicant is either „suited“ or „unsuited“ (go/no go). On the other hand an additional distinction is drawn between the degree of aptitude, using the rating „mostly suited“, „well suited“ or „suited“.

The assessment of the general aptitude of applicants is delegated to ten commissions (selection panels) which are responsible for eight to nine applicants per run. Every commission consists of an officer in charge (usually a former battalion commander), a captain (usually a former company commander) and a certified psychologist. Each member has one vote.

In an advisory talk, the applicant is counseled about training, particularly university studies, and future assignment. The general aptitude for commissioning training and the

ability to study are different areas of assessment. In the case of applicants with a university or technical college qualification, the test report will also contain a statement on the recommended course of study. In principle, every applicant who enlists for a minimum of 12 years and whose training also includes university studies can choose their area of study from the courses offered. However, because of the limited number of places in some courses of study, applicants are required to give at least two alternative choices. Changes can also be made during the officer training courses at the Officer Schools.

If there are more applicants for certain services, branches or subjects of study than are required, a top-down „selection of the best“ will be made. On the basis of the aptitude test results, an order of suitability will be established. Applicants who have been assessed as „well suited“ or even „most suited“ are normally enlisted with specifications about to time, place and unit given the day after the test. Applicants with a lower degree of suitability have to wait until all the other applicants who want to be enlisted at the same time for the same service have been tested.

Applicants wishing to enter the aviation service undergo additional tests at the Air Force Institute of Aviation Medicine. This includes assessment of their psychological fitness for flying and medical fitness for military flying duties. After this, OPZ decides on their enlistment.