

Army of Hope, Army of Alienation: Culture and Contradiction in the American Army Communities of Cold War Germany

John P. Hawkins

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This ethnography describes the intense contradictions that exist between the cultural values of American life and the cultural values needed to survive in combat, as represented through the experiences of forward-deployed U.S. Army units in Germany during the height of the Cold War. Living in constant military readiness, yet participating in peacetime community and family processes, Army personnel had to tolerate the contradictions and live by both sets of principles. In soldier perception, family life and community activities ought to have been guided by American rather than military values. Yet the military ran the community, and military activities penetrated and disrupted family life.

In Germany the penetration and disruption was much exacerbated by isolation, for these Americans did not generally have the language or cultural skills to escape from the military community. Rather, they were marooned in an intensely judgmental fish bowl community where there was no private life. The resulting scrutiny and the measures people took to avoid it and sustain autonomy corrupted the community, its families, and the units themselves. The scrutiny, with its attendant risks, and the intense contradiction in values led to feelings of profound alienation.



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