

Volkssturm

Introduction



"Nun Volk stood up,
nun Sturm broke loose"

This is not a complete history of the German Volkssturm. Several good books have been written by highly esteemed historians. This is my contribution to Chakoten at the request of Per Finsted.

When talking about the German Volkssturm, the expression "Das letzte Aufgebot" is often heard, where the word "Aufgebot" in particular means according to the dictionary:

Aufgebot *n* tender *n* (a. an D|af); **mit dem ~ der letzten Kräfte** at the request of all forces.

Setup

As early as November 1943, the OKW had begun planning for a total mobilization of all armed men in Germany. However, this planning was put on hold when it became clear to the OKW that Hitler would use the party apparatus to raise and equip such a force.

By the late summer of 1944 it had also become clear to Hitler and the people around him that drastic measures were needed to reverse the fortunes of war. The Western Allies stood on the German borders, and in the east the Russian army had begun its offensive to the west.

Therefore, the party under Bormann, as head of the Party Chancellery, began to prevent the downfall of the Third Reich by mobilizing the last armed men and forces. By commander's order of 25.9.1944, the decision on the formation of the "Deutsche Volkssturm" was announced. This order included all armed men aged 16 to 60, i.e. the years 1895 to 1925.

The structure and organization of this party militia was characterized by the normal disputes over competence between the competing rulers of the National Socialist state:

- a. Responsible for setting up and conducting the Volkssturm was the Gauleiter and his part of the party apparatus.
- b. Responsible for training, armament and equipment was the Reichsführer SS.
- c. Originally responsible for combat operations was the Reichsführer SS. However, this provision was changed in November 1944 so that the Volkssturm came under full command of the Wehrmacht during deployment. However, several of the Gau- and Kreisleiters ignored this addition, which did not exactly reduce the confusion. When the Volkssturm was not deployed with Wehrmacht units capable of leading the Volkssturm, the Volkssturm had to fight under the leadership of the Gau- or Kreisleitern 1).

The Volkssturm was to be set up on the basis of 4 tenders.

The first tender included everyone who was fit for combat from the years 1884 to 1924 (ie 20- to 60-year-olds) and who did not fulfill an indispensable function in the civil service. For the first tender, deployment outside the home area was not foreseen, but the persons covered were accommodated in joint accommodation (barracks) after the call-up.

The second tender again included all those who were fit for combat duty from the years 1884 to 1924, but who were employed in factories important to the war, in the news and transport service or in other indispensable functions in the home area.

Who was included in the first and second tenders could be interpreted and the discussions were given in advance. Of course, all the men included tried to enter under other tenders, as this would allow them to stay at home. They were supported in these efforts by their employers who want to keep their workers.

In order to curb the discussions, in the best bureaucratic tradition, on 23/2/1945, detailed regulations were drawn up about who belonged to the first tender and who belonged to the second tender. Thus, a machinist in the volunteer fire service was included in the second call, while an ordinary volunteer firefighter was included in the first call.

The third tender included young people from the years 1928 to 1925 (16 to 19-year-olds), insofar as they had not already been called up to the Wehrmacht, Reichsarbeitsdienst or served as Luftwaffenhelfer. When cohort 1927 from July 1944 and large parts of cohort 1928 at the end of 1944 were called up for conscription, the third call for the majority of the 16-year-old Hitler Youth passed. In March 1945, part of the class of 1929 was also called up as flak soldiers, so that there were relatively few men left for the Volkssturm.

The fourth and final tender included all those who were not fit for combat duty, but who could be used for guarding and security duties. When assessing the individual, the strictest competence criteria were applied. In the fourth tender, only those men who were unable "to complete the shortest foot march" entered. All others landed in the second or first bid. Thus, it did not take long before it was said that "Volkssturmsmen between 50 and 60 can only be exempted from service if they can prove that their father is at the front".

For the placement in the tenders, it was decisive whether one could be dispensed with, an assessment with a medical examination did not take place. Thus, in the first and second tenders there were men with serious illnesses such as heart defects, tuberculosis or invalids.

In total, in connection with the formation of the Volkssturm, approx. 6 million men, where the first division into tenders was as follows:

First bid: 1.2 million

Second tender: 2.8 million

Third tender: 0.6 million

Fourth bid: 1.4 million

For the men included in the second tender, there was a deluge of applications from the companies with declarations of indispensability for production. Armaments Minister Speer supported the companies, as he was interested in keeping companies with war-important production going.

It is not possible to determine how many men the Volkssturm really included or how many were deployed. The search services [2](#)) had registered up to 175,000 wanted Volkssturmsmen after the capitulation in 1945. Likewise, it is not possible to say how many Volkssturm units were set up.

Legal position

The Volkssturm found itself in a legal gray area. This was a conscious choice made by the party's top leadership.

The implementing regulations of 27.9.1944 stated that "The members of the Volkssturm are to be regarded as combatants in accordance with the Land War Convention from The Hague".

The approval of the militia (Volkssturm) by the warring parties was sabotaged by Himmler, although the Foreign Office repeatedly drew his attention to the necessity of this approval.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs therefore independently informed the warring parties through Switzerland and Sweden about the formation of the Volkssturm.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs drew attention to several extremely worrisome aspects of international law:

- The decree on the Volkssturm states that the Volkssturm defends the homeland not only with weapons, but with all available means. This wording contradicted the Hague Land War Convention, which specifically allowed combat only with weapons.
- The leadership of the Volkssturm lay with the regional and district leaders from the party, although it was normal international law practice that such militias were only led by the Wehrmacht. Himmler's argument that the Volkssturm was to be perceived as "levée en masse" according to the Land War Convention was of course not correct. With "levée en masse" it is about a spontaneous uprising against an unlawful enemy occupation and not about a formation of a militia ordered from above.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs could not get through with their legitimate concerns. Because of the position under international law, the Russians refused to recognize members of the Volkssturm as combatants.

The Western Allies, after receiving the information from the Foreign Office, declared that the units of the Volkssturm fighting on the Western Front would be treated as combatants if they were clearly marked, carried their weapons openly and obeyed martial law. This declaration was made without the Western Allies recognizing a legal claim.

Armament and equipment

According to the decree, the Reichsführer SS was responsible for arming and equipping the Volkssturm. This wording was later used by the organizations normally responsible for armaments and equipment (OKW, Speer, etc.) to refuse to surrender weapons and equipment from their stocks and production to the Volkssturm. Thus, the weapons handed over were either spoils of war or weapons that were already in the possession of the NSDAP. In this connection, it must be remembered that the Wehrmacht had a monthly need of 300,000 rifles, but only 200,000 rifles were produced per year. month.

Even the specially developed Volkssturmväben were never produced in significant numbers. Of the carbine/rifle type, only 55,000 were produced between January and March 1945, as raw units, how many were actually completed and delivered is not known. In addition, these weapons had a quality that could be described as scrappy at best. Worn spare barrels from older machine guns were often used for the barrels on the rifles, e.g. MG 15, 17 and 81 that could no longer be used by the Luftwaffe. The spread of fire with these weapons was beyond any tolerance, the pistons split at the slightest load and it was not possible to shoot rifle grenades with these weapons.

How hopeless the armament situation was for the Volkssturm can be illustrated with the following examples:

- In December 1944 and January 1945, the SS attempted to procure weapons on the Italian black market for use in the Volkssturm.
- The fourth order, to be used for the immediate defense of the home area, was to be armed with hunting weapons of private origin.

- At a battalion near Cologne in 1945 the following armament was ascertained: First
 - company: 8 Italian guns for 80 men.
 - Second Company: Belgian rifles without ammunition, revolvers and pistols from the late 19th century.
 - Third company: Danish rifles with 6 to 9 shots per arms.
 - Fourth Company: French carbines model 1886 and Italian rifles without ammunition.

One of the really well-equipped units was the one that had to defend Rominter Hede, which was Göring's private hunting ground. Here Göring himself had arranged for the armament, having obtained weapons from the Luftwaffe's stocks.



The members of the Volkssturm had to provide their own clothing and personal equipment. Thereby all imaginable uniforms were used in whole or in part and in all imaginable combinations. After 5 years of war and the general lack of everything, it was of course not possible for the ordinary Volkssturmsman, even with the best will, to put together a useful equipment. Above all, it was not possible to get suitable winter clothing or good shoes/boots. Instead of field bottles, thermos jugs were used. At the beginning of 1945, only every 10th of the inducted Volkssturmsmen had a coat, short boots were used instead of boots. As a result of the inadequate clothing, there was a sharp increase in colds, especially in the older cohorts.

Steel helmets were impossible to recover, even identity badges could rarely be issued, as it was not possible to get the zinc tin from which the badges were made - even in the army, after October 1944, these badges were issued very sporadically.

The exception to this pity was the 20 battalions Volkssturm zBV 3). who were stationed at the Oder Front, and who were therefore in full command of the Wehrmacht, and the Volkssturm units in Breslau also taken over by the Wehrmacht, were well equipped and, with the exception of the heavy companies, completely armed and equipped, without being trained in weapons.

It was important to the Gauleiters that "their Volkssturmsenheder", which they perceived as their private army, should also look like soldiers. Therefore, the lack of uniform clothing was a thorn in their side. The Gauleiter tried everything to obtain uniforms or uniform fabric. They seized fabric from the textile companies without permission and legal authority, issued falsified loss notices or looted

Wehrmacht's warehouses without worrying in the least about the objections that came. Only when the Reichsführer SS, Himmler, intervened was an end put to the most daring seizures. The Gauleiter of the Warthegau 4) ordered 130,000 m of uniform fabric on the Italian black market. He was still waiting for the delivery when the Warthegau was overrun by the Russian units.

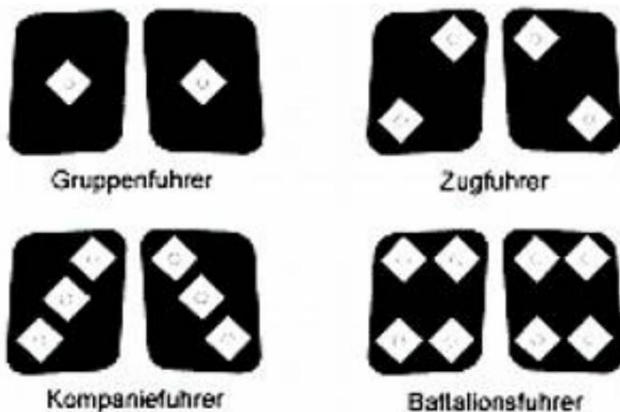
Organization

Responsible for the Volkssturm was the Gauleiter. Since the borders of the party areas did not coincide with the defense areas, a defense leader had to negotiate with more Gauleiter to coordinate the efforts of the Volkssturm. Bormann, as head of the Party Chancellery, blocked the simple solution of making one Gauleiter the leading contact person for the Wehrmacht in these cases. As the Volkssturm was of importance to the entire party, this would thus mean that one Gauleiter was perceived as better than his colleague, and this, according to Bormann, could not be discussed at all. Thus, defense area XVII in Vienna had to negotiate with no less than 7 Gauleiters: Niederdonau, Oberdonau, Vienna, Salzburg, Styria, Tirol-Vorarlberg and Carinthia.

The Volkssturm battalion was the basic unit, whereby the number of battalions that had to be set up depended on the size of the party circle.

The battalion was basically set up as follows:

- Battalion staff including a signal and liaison platoon of 16 men. 3 companies
- with 3 or 4 platoons, for each platoon 3 to 4 groups.
- A heavy company with lighter infantry guns (these were almost never fielded due to lack of weapons).



If possible, a pioneer platoon was to be set up, which was primarily responsible for roadblocks.

Special units, such as motorized transport battalions with 3 companies and pioneer and repair units were to be set up in each region, but due to a lack of equipment and professionally trained personnel were almost never set up.

The units of the Volkssturm were designated by digits, where

- the first digit was the number of the Gau. the
- second digit was the battalion number within the Gau. the
- third digit was the company number within the battalion.

7/108/1 thus meant 1 company of 108 battalion in Gau 7 (Franken). Often, instead of this cumbersome number, the name of the staging city was used. Thus the above-mentioned battalion came to be called "Volkssturmbatalion Ansbach" and the first company of this battalion became "Volkssturmkompanie Rothenburg".



The name "Volkssturm" was required for all units. Under no circumstances could this be replaced by anything else. When the Gauleiter from Tirol-Vorarlberg wanted the units in his party circle to bear the traditional designation of "Standeschützen", he was strongly lectured by Bormann. However, this teaching did not prevent the Gauleiter from internally referring to his Volkssturm as "Standeschützen" and even ensuring that they were given a sleeve badge with the Tyrolean eagle and the inscription "Standeschützen Battalion" supplemented by the town name.

The Gauleiter from Westphalia-Süd, Albert Hoffmann, who wanted to take over the name from an existing SA Sturmbann unit called "Freikorps Sauerland" also had to listen to Bormann. Despite this, the "Freikorps Sauerland" stuck to its designation within the Volkssturm and never wore the official armband.

This obstinacy of the Gauleiter clearly shows that even Bormann in these small matters was not always able to assert his will.

In the last days of the war, probably additional fanciful names for Volkssturm units arose. However, these names were never used publicly. Thus, at the battles for Berlin there was a "Freikorps Mohnke" and a "Freikorps Adolf Hitler". The name "Freikorps Adolf Hitler" was also used by a unit in Munich-Upper Bavaria under the leadership of Hans Zöberlein.

Application and effort

Fortification work

The Volkssturmen's first effort was in October 1944 fortification work in East Prussia, in the construction of the rearward positions in the Warthegau (B-1 Line) and at the western border of the Reich to improve the West Wall, which was never erected. There were rightly doubts in the Volkssturm, and in the Wehrmacht, about the value of these defenses, which were built on the model of the First World War. Especially in the west, the population found these provisional fortifications, and especially the armored barricades in the local areas, to be pointless, and considered them to be a danger. Where these fortifications were built under pressure from the party, the inhabitants did everything to keep them open to the advance of the Allies. The prevailing opinion was that if the Atlantic Wall could not hold, how could the earth walls and trenches hold.

Evacuations and relocations

On the eastern front, individual Volkssturmsmen, but also units up to company size, were used to accompany refugee trains. In some cases, the Volkssturm was used to help move industrial companies to quieter areas.

Guard

Although the Volkssturm was not trained for guarding, at the beginning of 1945 this became one of the main tasks, as the Stadt- and Landwacheinheiten had been transferred to the Volkssturm at the end of 1944. Among the objects that were guarded were bridges, transport companies and energy supply, as well as industrial companies.

The guarding of POW warehouses and prisoners of war, which were used to build fortifications, was carried out by the Volkssturm. The Volkssturm was also used to guard inmates from concentration camps

during their transport to the center of Germany.

In the final weeks of the war, Volkssturmenheden were frequently used to protect towns and villages from roving foreign slave laborers, and to secure food and supply stores from looting by the German population. Armaments Minister Speer believed in 1945 that it was the main task of the Volkssturm to ensure peace and order in the country.

Security crew

During the fighting on the East Prussian border in the autumn of 1944, it had appeared that the army was not in a position of strength to occupy the rear-facing positions, thereby securing artillery and PAK units against attacks from enemy units through the back door. This task was originally assigned to the fortress base battalions, but as the positions were expanded by the Volkssturm, they were also subsequently used to man these positions.

As early as October 1944, the Volkssturm was deployed in the rear-facing areas of the Western Wall. A similar application in the east did not come into place until mid-December 1944. The local Gauleiters, above all Koch in Ostprussia and Greiser in the Warthegau, had strongly opposed the command of "their"

The Volkssturm was handed over to the Wehrmacht.

In some cases security crews were set up by the Wehrmacht as frame units. That is to say, infantry, pioneer and artillery units were lined up with a cadre of Wehrmacht soldiers, then filled up with personnel from the Volkssturm. Only in a few cases did it succeed in setting up these units, as the personnel from the Volkssturm, who were assigned especially to the pioneer and artillery units, lacked the necessary training.

Both the forces and weapons of the Volkssturm were only sufficient to occupy the most important parts of the security facilities. Large parts of the security installations had to remain unmanned. Thus, e.g. in the Warthegau positions, in the rear-facing areas of Army Group A between Posen and the Weichsel river, were only secured sporadically, and held out only for a very short time for the Russian offensive in January 1945.

Combat effort

An effort outside Germany's borders in 1944 was categorically rejected by Hitler. Even in connection with the critical situation in Hungary, he refused to give permission to transfer 30 Volkssturm battalions from Ost Österreich to Pressburg-Varastin, in order to carry out security tasks and entrenchment works there.

The first battalions were already deployed on the eastern front shortly after the first invitation, but only with security tasks and entrenchment work. This changed quickly as the Russians advanced in the area. In November 1944, 8 Volkssturm battalions were deployed in the 170th Infantry Division alone, although they were not part of the Wehrmacht. The experience gained finally led to the rule that the battalions from the Volkssturm were subordinated to the Wehrmacht upon deployment.

When the Russians began their offensive across the Weichsel River to the west on 13 January 1945, it could be determined that the Volkssturm in the Warthegau was not useful in the field due to lack of equipment and insufficient training and that the planned tasks as security crews could not be fulfilled.

The craze for the Warthegau's Volkssturm led to 20 battalions being raised for special use.

These battalions were taken from the first and second tenders drawn from the not immediately threatened party areas (Gau's) in the middle of Germany. These units were mainly equipped with German weapons. After formation and training, these battalions were deployed on the Eastern Front. However, they did not reach the area around Frankfurt an der Oder until mid-January 1945, where the Red Army stood at the Oder.

Some of these battalions drove with their trains directly into the arms of the Red Army, as no one knew where the front went exactly.

These 20 battalions were pretty much the only Volkssturm units that were fairly decently equipped, uniformed and trained. However, most lacked heavier weapons.

In Berlin, the Volkssturm made up more than half of the German troops in March 1945. Out of 41,000 men, 24,000 were from the Volkssturm, although mostly poorly equipped and trained. Between the alternating battle commanders of the Wehrmacht and Goebbels, as Gauleiter for Berlin, there were frequent clashes over the use of the Volkssturm.

In the west, the Volkssturm was deployed in greater numbers at the 19th Army on the Rhine, so that the private soldier referred to the 19th Army as "19th Volkssturmsarmee". Along with police battalions, 20 Volkssturm battalions from Baden and 6 from Württemberg-Hohenzollern were deployed on the western edge of the Black Forest.

References

Yelton, David Keith: The last reserves - political-military aspects of the structure, function and composition of the German Volkssturm, 1944 - 1945. Michigan 1990 (UMI Ann Arbor Publ.)

Wright, Burton: Army of despair. The German Volkssturm 1944-1945. Dissertation - Florida State University 1982. Michigan 1989 (UMI Ann Arbor Publ.)

Websites

<http://www.lexikon-der-wehrmacht.de/Soldat/Volkssturm-R.htm>

<http://www.100thww2.org/overview/m.html>

<http://www.lonesentry.com/articles/volkssturm>

<http://www.erasmus-gymnasium.de/faecher/geschichte-baden-wuertt.html>

Personal observations

When the Volkssturm was created, the bottom was literally scrapped for usable personnel, regardless of whether the individual was physically able to carry out the service. The only thing that counted was the number of heads. Equipment and armaments could not be raised and the party apparatus had stuck itself in the wheel by keeping the Wehrmacht out from the beginning. Hence the humorous passages about the purchases on the Italian black market.

Were they worth anything? As a supplement to the infantry, who had to fight on the front, and where a good physique and a long education were a prerequisite, the answer can only be a resounding no.



On the other hand, the Volkssturm was a good supplement when it came to urban combat with short distances and plenty of opportunities for concealment, obfuscation and cover. In Berlin, the Russians had to change tank advance tactics, providing each tank with infantry protection to avoid members of the Volkssturm with Panzerfaust destroying the tanks from a distance of less than 50 meters. This slowed down the advance considerably because it took time to find and take down members of the Volkssturm every time a tank was fired upon.

On the Western Front, the US 100th Infantry Division made the same costly experience around Heilbronn, where it took them 8 days of fighting to gain control of the town. Heilbronn had less than 80,000 inhabitants at the time and had been heavily damaged by bombing raids by the Royal Air Force shortly before.

Henrik Tuxen

Notes:

- 1) It is an open question whether these party leaders possessed the necessary military tactical skills.
- 2) E.g. Red Cross.
- 3) Zu besondere Verwendung "for special use" in this context simply means that these units would be deployed outside the home area.
- 4) The Warthegau lay between Warsaw and Posen on the western side of the Weichsel river.