The Steel Helmet of the
East German Army - Part 3
by Richard Church

In parts 1 and 2 of this article the discussion was focused around the evolution and variants of the steel helmet worn by the armed organizations of East Germany.

In the last installment of the article the author will discuss the various plastic versions of the M56 helmet, which were introduced in June 1957 for wear by honor formations of the NVA, the MfS and the DDR’s various police agencies. The author will conclude the article with some further comments about the steel helmet.

Throughout the Cold War the armed organizations of the East German state had honor formations, the most visible and well known of which were stationed in East Berlin. The NVA had two East Berlin based honor units who wore cuff titles on their tunics and greatcoats. The NVA-Wachregiment received their name and cuff title in 1962 and the Wachregiment Friedrich Engels received their name and cuff title in the mid 1970s. As for the MfS, it also had East Berlin based honor units taken from the ranks of the Wachregiment Feliks Dzierzynsky, who received their cuff title in 1967.

Examples of some of the known functions performed by the honor formations were pall bearers, attendants at funeral services, wreath-laying at memorial ceremonies, standing guard at monuments to war dead and victims of Fascism, honor guard assemblies and processions for visiting dignitaries and providing music during parades and state or military ceremonies.

The honor formations and ceremonies in East Berlin were very highly visible to the East German public and to visitors and journalists from the West as well as to dignitaries from other Warsaw Pact nations, thus the wearing of the plastic helmet is most commonly associated with the East Berlin Wachregimenter. However, other, less well known “regular” units of the NVA, Grenztruppen der DDR, and the various police agencies had their own honor formations and musicians. The MfS also had decentralized units based throughout the DDR, such as the Wach-und Sicherungseinheiten or WSE (“guard and security units”) who did not wear cuff titles. All of these units could wear the plastic helmet.

The Plastic Helmet

The shells were made from a single, molded piece of plastic and painted stone gray with the paint sometimes factory-applied and sometimes applied by hand. There are several distinct variations that were used over the years. The period of service for each type of variation is generally not known with precision as the plastic shells were not marked with any kind of date. However, helmets used by the NVA and the MfS had the tri-color decal applied until about 1960/61 (refer to part 1 of this article).

Type 1 Plastic Helmet,
1957 – early 1960s

The overall appearance of the shell is similar to the M56 but the front surface projects down at a somewhat shallower angle than that of the Stahlhelm, resulting in an asymmetric profile. The visor
is also slightly upturned. The base of the shell is circumscribed by a flange. The only marking on the shell is the distinct head size (e.g., 55, 56, 57, etc.), which is molded into the interior surface at the rear. The liner is attached with three WWII style split tail rivets whose heads are much larger than those used on the Stahlhelm. The leather itself is of the same configuration used in the M56 liner, but it is stitched onto a pressed fiber liner band rather than being riveted to a galvanized steel liner band as in the Stahlhelm. The Y-straps are also similar to those used in the Stahlhelm except there is no flat leather piece covering the D-ring where the individual pieces of the “Y” meet (This style of Y-strap can also sometimes be found in early production Stahlhelme). Cushioning is provided by four foam rubber pads that are riveted to the liner band in the same locations as on the standard M56 liner.
AUKTIONSHAUS ANDREAS THIES EK

Steingastra. 18 • D-73230 Kirchheim unter Teck • GERMANY • Tel. +49 171/266 2781 • Fax +49 7021/48 40 52
E-Mail: aftlies@t-online.de • www.andreas-thies.de

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A41 – 525 / $ 84 000

A41 – 537 / $ 21 000

A41 – 529 / $ 112 000

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A44 – 259 / $ 220 000

A43 – sold for $ 259 000

A44 – 31 / $ 504 000

A44 – 504 / $ 40 000

A41 – 202 / $ 40 000

A2 – 475 / $ 61 440

A44 – 44 / $ 43 400
Type 2 Plastic Helmet, early 1960s – mid 1980s

The shell contours of the 2nd pattern plastic helmet more accurately follow the contours of the M56 Stahlhelm shell. If this helmet was indeed introduced as early as 1960 then it is possible that tri-color decals were applied for a short period of time.

There are no shell markings of any kind. The use of split tail rivets was abandoned in favor of three non-detachable rivets, and thus the liners were permanently installed. The leather liner was again stitched onto a pressed fiber liner band and the leather was typically stamped with a distinct head size. The use of four cushioning pads riveted to the liner band was continued but the composition of the pads changed over the years. In fact, three distinct variations of the 2nd pattern plastic helmet have been identified and are summarized below. It is believed that the Type 2B and the Type 2C were used concurrently although this has not been established conclusively.

Type 2A,
early 1960s – mid/late 1960s:
no flange around base of shell, ventilated liner tongues, foam rubber cushioning pads.

Type 2B,
mid/late 1960s – mid 1980s:
no flange around base of shell, non-ventilated liner tongues, most frequently found with urethane foam cushioning pads; however, occasionally found with foam rubber pads (presumably these are earlier production examples).
Type 2C, mid/late 1960s – mid 1980s:
narrow flange around base of the apron, non-ventilated liner tongues, most frequently found with urethane foam cushioning pads; however, occasionally found with foam rubber pads (presumably these are earlier production examples).
Type 3 Plastic Helmet, mid 1980s – 1990

The shell again accurately reflects the contours of the M56 Stahlhelm except there is no flange around the base. Six externally visible rivet heads immediately distinguish the 3rd pattern plastic helmet. There are no shell markings. The standard M78 adjustable liner system was used, thus the need for the six rivets. The rivets were non-removable, resulting in a permanently mounted liner.

Further Comments on the Steel Helmet

- As is to be expected during changes to uniform regulations, earlier helmets were modified to bring them into conformance. Specifically, as the application of decals was eliminated circa 1961-1964, decaled helmets still in use were brought into conformance at the unit level by either painting over the shell or removing the decal by sanding or scraping. This practice is very reminiscent of what was done to eliminate the national colors decal from the M35 helmet circa 1940. The vast majority of decaled M56 shells appear to have been factory re-worked at some point as examples with decal remnants, either on the surface or evident under the paint, are very rare – about as rare, in fact, as decaled helmets themselves.

- During the transition between liner systems existing materials were sometimes used in the new liners. For instance, the author has an example in which the leather with ventilated tongues used in the M56 liner was cut into two sections and attached to a M66 liner band. It is also reasonable to presume that M66 suspensions with the bowl-shaped bumper can be found with post-1978 dated leather, although the author has not personally observed such an example.

- As was mentioned in Part 1 of the article, Stahlhelm shells were manufactured in three sizes designated as “I”, “II” and “III”. Size II shells are by far the most common. This has led to questions among some collectors whether size I and size III shells continued to be made after the transition to the M56/66 shell and M66 adjustable liner. The author has observed that M56 shells in size III were re-issued with the M66 and/or M78 liner and that M56/66 shells in size III were manu-
factured at least into the mid-1970s. Presumably the same is true for size I shells although the author has not personally observed a post-1966, size I shell.

- As was mentioned in Part 2 of the article, a distinguishing feature of the M66 liner suspension is a series of pins that attach the bowl-shaped bumper to the upper face of the central liner ring. These pins were white colored in the earlier production M66 liners. The author has observed that semi-opaque, colorless pins began to be used beginning in the early to mid-1970s. These later pins more closely matched the appearance of the polyethylene used for the Spider. The use of adhesive in lieu of pins to attach the bumper has also been observed in some liners dated from the mid-1970s through the first half of 1978. The central ring in such liners has empty holes where the pins would normally be inserted.

- The later, “yellow” urethane foam apparently began to be phased in starting in the mid-1970s, as the author has observed some mid-1970s dated liners with such foam. By the time the M56/78 shell and M78 liner were introduced, the use of the earlier, “white” foam had been virtually discontinued.

- Photographic evidence shows that, for special occasions, the Stahlhelm was given a highly smooth and shiny finish. Photographs known to date show such helmets being worn by honor formations at political assemblies, apparently in an auditorium at the front of a stage or podium. It is not known why the Stahlhelm rather than the plastic helmet was worn for these occasions. Perhaps the Stahlhelm was able to give a glossier surface.

**Aftermath of Re-Unification**

The newly reunified Germany saw little use for the great majority of the equipment, uniforms, and personnel of the former East German military and police organizations. The German government contracted surplus exporters to essentially go into the East and clean out the warehouses. Thus the early 1990s saw great quantities of surplus equipment and uniforms of all kinds flooding into the surplus market or exported to other governments. Quite a few East German steel helmets ended up in other countries such as Turkey and the Balkans. A limited number of helmets did see use in post-unification Germany into the 1990s with the police of the state of Brandenburg.

The flood of the early 1990s has largely abated and, as knowledge of East German helmet evolution spreads, collectors are seeking out the more scarce variants with ever-increasing vigor, especially pre-1961 specimens with decals. The M54 has become quite desirable and routinely fetches prices comparable to some Wehrmacht helmets. It should be noted that the M54 and the very early M56 were not part of the surplus flood but rather have been emerging in limited numbers from estates, former depots and, occasionally, museums. Given the extensive reworking and the relatively small size of the East German armed forces compared to the Wehrmacht, especially in the 1950s and early 1960s, the early helmets will never be available in quantities comparable to their 3rd Reich counterparts.

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