



Review of the publication: Wolfgang Klietz, *Ostseefähren im Kalten Krieg*, Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag 2012, ISBN 9783861536734

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From 1982 to 1986, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) carried out its largest project in the transport sector near Sassnitz on the Rügen Island. Several thousand workers erected a ferry port with a track system including the Soviet broad gauge (1520mm) as well as the European gauge (1435mm). Upon completion, five huge double-deck ferries took over a large share of freight traffic between the GDR and the Soviet Union, its largest trading partner and most important ally. Consequently, the costly and time-consuming transit through the Polish People's Republic could be reduced significantly. Additionally, the Mukran ferry port was of military significance.

Based on archival research, secondary literature, as well as interviews with contemporary witnesses, journalist and historian Wolfgang Klietz sheds light on such diverse topics as the genesis of the ferry port, its precursors, construction work and construction workers, the ferries, strategic planning and military significance, the partner port in Soviet Klaipeda, as well as the role of the Mukran port during the withdrawal of Soviet troops in the beginning of the 1990s. One chapter is even dedicated to archaeological discoveries during construction work. Three additional chapters are based on conversations that the author conducted with three contemporary witnesses: the head of the construction project, a "Bausoldat" [1], as well as a ferry captain.

When the Mukran ferry port was put into service in July 1986, around 3,500 construction workers had worked for four years to construct moles, piers, re-gauging halls, a track system of 120 kilometers, and 1,200 flats in nearby towns for the employees of the port (p. 13 ff.). The two small villages Mukran and Borchtitz were erased to make space for this large-scale facility. 5.3 million tons were planned to be processed in the ferry port on an annual basis. Three million tons were commercial GDR imports from the Soviet Union. This was around one third of the overall trade volume between the two countries in that period. In the final stage, six ferries constructed at the Mathias-Thesen shipyards in Wismar were meant to circulate between Mukran and Klaipeda. According to the plans, they should have made the 506 kilometers in 24 hours, which would have meant that every four hours one ferry would have arrived at the port (p. 14).

Naturally, such a large-scale project had to overcome considerable obstacles to efficiently construct and run the ferry port. The author mentions challenging ground conditions (p. 36), the reload of cargo (p. 124), or nonfunctional fork lifters (p. 124). Additionally, the capacity of the Rügendamm Bridge connecting the island with the mainland had to be extended by a second railway track (p. 37). At the same time, Wolfgang Klietz pays more attention to the innovative technical solutions that had to be invented first in order to realize the project. In contrast to a similar ferry connection between Soviet Ilyichyovsk near Odessa and Bulgarian Varna, where ferries were loaded with the help of huge elevators, East German constructors chose a double-deck model with a large access ramp to load the ferries (p. 46). The two ports of Mukran and Klaipeda were connected with a direct telephone connection and equipped with a special computer system. The hardware had been supplied by Robotron from Dresden, the software designed by the Research Institute for Traffic in Leipzig (p. 136).

From a Polish point of view, the most interesting aspect of the topic are the very reasons why the Mukran port came into being in the 1980s [2]. As the most important transit country, Poland played a crucial role for the traffic between the GDR and the Soviet Union, which is why the political and economic turmoil following the establishment of the independent self-governing labor union Solidarność in 1980 turned out to be decisive for the port's construction. Persistent struggles about transit fees, however, were probably even more important – at least from an economic point of view. These struggles started already in the 1950s and reached their temporary climax in the first half of the 1960s, when Poland threatened to increase transit fees by 170 percent (p. 19). Back then, the Soviet Union and the GDR secretly negotiated about "project 3700" – a large ferry port on Rügen. Seeing that the conflict about transit fees among member countries of the Council of Mutual Economic Aid (CMEA) was temporarily resolved in 1965, the Soviet Union pulled back (ibid.).

However, the conflict was revived in the late 1970s and, consequently, plans for a ferry port reemerged. In 1981, the GDR paid around 1 billion Mark for its transit through Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary (p. 20). For 1983, payments were expected to rise to over 1.4 billion Mark. According to planners, the ferry port was designed to reduce the share of transit traffic passing through Poland in the transport of trade goods between the GDR and the USSR from 50 percent in 1980 to only 19 percent in 1990. Planned investment costs of 1.4 billion Mark for the entire facility were compensated in the long-term by transit fee savings of 880 million Mark between 1986 and 1990 alone (p. 22). These numbers suggest that the economic incentives to construct the ferry port were at least as important as the political reasons. The relatively sparse information on this issue cited by the author highlights that further research on the question of Polish transit fees is necessary.

Instead of economic reasoning, the author pays close attention to the military aspects of the project. According to initial plans, 30 percent of the overall capacity of the ferry port was allotted for transport needs of the Red Army (p. 14). In the late 1980s, the West Group of the Red Army in the GDR included 4,116 tanks, 7,948 armored and 94,000 ordinary vehicles, 615 helicopters, 623 planes, and 2.6 million tons of material (p. 146). Additionally, around 550,000 Soviet soldiers and their families had to be supplied. Consequently, the military administration of the Red Army in the GDR demanded a strong presence at the ferry port. Fearing to lose full control over the facility, the GDR government successfully blocked these demands. Instead of 180 representatives, the Red Army only deployed 42 servicemen (p. 43). At the same time, the National People's Army of the GDR used the ferry connection only occasionally to participate in joint maneuvers of Warsaw Pact countries in the Soviet Union.

Naturally, the establishment of such an important military hub attracted the attention of NATO countries. The author devotes several chapters to military planning and surveillance strategies of West Germany as well as the Military Liaison Mission of the Western allies, which was allowed to move freely on GDR territory. In order to hide troop transports, the custom-built ferries were equipped with a third underdeck, where up to 300 soldiers could spend the 20 hour boat trip unnoticed. Additionally, the ferries had a double hull to resist torpedo attacks (p. 14).

One of the most interesting chapters regarding military transport is the one focusing on the retreat of the Red Army due to the Two plus Four Agreement between 1990 and 1994. Once again, the ferry port became the most important transport hub. 43 percent of all Red Army shipments to the Soviet Union were conducted via Mukran (p. 147). Germany supported the withdrawal with 15 billion German Mark, partially used to construct new barracks for the returning soldiers in Russia.

Today, the ferry port still advertises its feature as the "westernmost point of the Trans-Siberian Railway" due to its broad gauge rails (p. 14). Since the last ferry connection to Klaipeda was put out of operation several years ago, however, other connections, e.g. to Scandinavia, are now more important for the port. Although a large number of installations and buildings are in decay, an industry park is now occupying parts of the vast area, including logistics companies, a fish processing plant, a pipe processing plant for the Nord Stream pipeline, as well as a technical base for nearby off-shore wind parks (p. 165).

"Ostseefahren im Kalten Krieg" is the first monograph dedicated to the history of the Mukran ferry port. The highly readable book contributes to historical fields of research such as Cold War studies and the history of technology or transport. Economic historians, however, will find only little information about the economic motives for the construction of the Mukran project. Thanks to a pellucid language and rich in illustrations, the work can be interesting not only for historians, but also for a broader audience. A great advantage of Kliez's book is that it does not only focus on the macro level of geopolitics and military aspects, but, by including the memory of three contemporary witnesses, the work also draws on individual experiences.

[1] In the GDR, "Bausoldaten" were conscripts who had rejected military service but were allowed to do non-military work, especially construction labor. They were regularly subjected to discrimination.

[2] The author mentions three precursory projects: the Prussian "Rügenhafen" in the mid-nineteenth century, a naval base at Jasmund Bodden in the late 1930s, as well as the "Sondervorhaben Glowe" in the early 1950s (p. 26 ff).

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