

MUSEUM GUIDE (english)



Gedenkstätte Bautzner Straße **STASI - HAFT DRESDEN**



Site of the former Dresden District Administration of the East German Ministry of State Security (MfS)

To the north and south, the site of the MfS Dresden District Administration was bounded by walls. The wall to the north, next to the Bautzner Straße, had been demolished. The big intramural steel gate was permanently manned by two guards. The wall to the south, which marks the boundary of the site towards the River Elbe, still remains unchanged. Right next to the wall within the site, an off-leash dog zone had been established to enhance the security level. Today, the boundaries to the east and west no longer appear in their old form.

History of the site

Before the Second World War, the site was privately owned. Of the buildings still existing today, only the mansion, today used as a medical centre, and the "Heidehof", a part of the big building right next to the Bautzner Straße, had existed at that time. The mansion was used as a residential building. The "Heidehof" was a cardboard box factory and from the 1930s onwards, it was then converted into a residential building.

In May 1945, after the Soviet occupation of Dresden, the Soviet Military Administration in Saxony gained possession of the site. The owners of the site were dispossessed afterwards. The former "Heidehof" was now used as the Soviet garrison headquarters. At the same time, the Soviet secret service also moved into the building. Later on, a Soviet military tribunal met on the premises on the upper floor as well. All the other buildings on the site were only built at the beginning of the 1950s.

Receiving room

During the internment process, all important personal details of the arrested were recorded. In addition to the name, the time and date of the internment, any other relevant information such as special characteristics, possible suicidal tendencies, the mental and physical condition as well as specialised education of the arrested were recorded on the inmate index.

An initial pre-examination was also part of the internment process and was carried out in this room. For that reason, the remand prisoners had to completely undress. Typical physical features and possible tattoos were noted and recorded on the relevant form sheet. Also, all the prisoners were internally searched to find possibly hidden money, notes or other things. This was a degrading measure to show the prisoner his total exposure to the Stasi apparatus.

The prisoners' clothes and personal belongings were confiscated and kept in the property room until the prisoners were released. All pieces of clothing, belongings, documents and valuables were recorded and the arrested confirmed the completeness of the record with his signature. After that, they were handed over the typical prisoner's garb which, since the mid -1970s, consisted of grey underwear, felt slippers and a dark-coloured sweat suit of the NVA (National People's Army in the GDR).

Photo room

Immediately after the reception in the remand prison, a mug shot of the prisoners was taken. For this, the prisoners kept their private clothes on and were not allowed to change their beards and hairstyles. Three photographs, measuring 6 x 13 cm, were taken of the prisoners - frontal, profile and half-profile. The prisoners had to sit on this chair and were moved into the respective positions using a lever. Additionally, prints of all fingers of the new prisoners were taken. The print sheet was signed by the prisoners and then forwarded to department 32 where the print sheets were kept. On another blank sheet, all physical characteristics of the prisoners were recorded.

Remand prisoners of the Ministry of State Security (MfS)

Between 1952 and 1954, the detention building was built to keep the remand prisoners of the MfS Dresden District Administration in one central place. From 1954 onwards, all MfS remand prisoners with their main residence in the Dresden district were sent to the newly erected detention building on the Bautzner Straße. People of higher public importance were an exception and, after being arrested by the Stasi, were mostly sent to the central MfS remand prison in Berlin–Hohenschönhausen. People who were captured by the MfS in the administrative catchment area of the Dresden district or people who were seized during an escape attempt in Czechoslovakia were brought to the Dresden remand prison as well. The latter were kept here only for a short time and were moved to the appropriate district administration after a few days. Conversely, GDR citizens who had been captured in a socialist foreign country further away - such as Hungary, Romania or Bulgaria – were first brought to Berlin – Hohenschönhausen and were then moved to the appropriate district, e. g. to the remand prison in Dresden.

Detention building

The detention building was built after the GDR was founded and was therefore among the most modern MfS remand prisons. It contains 44 detention cells for remand prisoners. Normally, the prison provided space for up to 88 prisoners. In states of unrest, however, it was able to house up to 432 prisoners and internees. Generally, remand prisoners stayed here for three to four months; periods of more than one year were an exception. The remand prisoners were kept in cells for one, two or three people, whereby from the mid-1970s on, solitary confinement was used as a form of punishment or to mentally break down prisoners for interrogation. The detention building's occupancy rate was nearly constant over the years, so it can be assumed that there were about 12,000 to 15,000 prisoners detained over the whole period from 1954 until 1989.

Guards

For the supervision of the prisoners in the cell block and in the corridors in the building, guards from department XIV were in charge. From the moment that the prisoners were taken to their cells, the guards only called them by their new "name" – the cell number combined with the position inside the cell, e.g. "prisoner 58-1". Neither did the guards know the prisoners' real names nor the reasons why they were arrested. Also, according to prison regulations, the guards were absolutely not allowed to have any private contact with the prisoners. They were to treat them correctly but without any sympathy; private talks were prohibited. As a result, the prisoners were kept isolated and also, these regulations aimed at maintaining the guards' image of the prisoners as public enemies who do not deserve any sympathy.

Two-person cells

From the middle of the 1970s, the majority of prisoners were accommodated in two-person cells. The facilities in all cells were identical and were not changed after the late 1970s. The cells had the required number of beds with mattresses and bedding, a small wall cabinet for plastic crockery and items for dental hygiene, a sink with a water supply, a stool and a folding table attached to the wall which was used for eating, reading and sometimes playing games. A positive aspect for the first prisoners was that the cells were equipped with a working heating system and a toilet. In the early years of the GDR, this was not part of the general standards of prisons. However, the heating could not be adjusted from inside the cell. This was the same with flushing the toilet until the middle of the 1970s - it could only be operated by the guards.

Most of the former prisoners found the windows which were replaced by glass blocks to be particularly depressing. These blocks were assembled in two rows creating a ventilation shaft between them. Gaps from the top of the outer "window" and the bottom of the inner "window" allowed air to circulate. There was no other possibility for ventilation so the air in the cells could become very stuffy. However, an even bigger disadvantage was the lack of a view to the outside and very little daylight entered the cell. Therefore, artificial light was switched on throughout the whole day.

Daily routine

A day in the remand prison started at 6am. At 7am, breakfast was served through the door hatch. The prisoners received hot meals at midday and cold meals in the evening. The food was prepared in the kitchen which was situated beside the cell block on the ground floor and was distributed using a lift to the floors. One of the biggest problems which remand prisoners were exposed to were the limited opportunities for activities. Additionally, it was forbidden for the prisoners to work in the prison. Also, they had no writing materials in their cells in order to bring their thoughts to paper or write letters. On request, books were issued which could be selected from a list, but occasionally they were distributed without considering the wishes of the prisoners. Also, the prisoners could receive a newspaper on a daily basis, but the only choices were "Neues Deutschland" and the "Sächsische Zeitung". Later, games such as Ludo could be borrowed. However, these "privileges" were dependent on getting the permission from the interrogation officer.

This was the same with writing and receiving letters as well as visits from close relatives. In later years, the prison regulations stipulated that remand prisoners were only allowed to write and receive four letters a month and could be visited by family members once a month. Here, the prisoners were also dependent on favours from the interrogation officer. The prison regulations did not provide further opportunities for activities. Therefore, many of the inmates considered being out in the fresh air every day a welcome change. For many prisoners, it was a small relief that smoking was permitted in the cells. Cigarettes, like other luxury items, could be ordered once a week from a list upon payment by family members.

The day at the remand prison ended at 9pm. At this time, the light was turned off in the cells.

Surveillance

Being an MfS remand prisoner meant that you were under constant supervision. The prisoners had no privacy; life was always played out before the eyes of other people. The other prisoners were unwanted witnesses to each moment in the everyday life of the prison, from washing and going to the toilet, to the emotional and physical health right through to going to sleep at night. In addition, there were regular prisoner checks conducted by the guards. Throughout the day, the responsible guards checked each cell approximately every five minutes using the small mirrored glass peepholes in the cell door or the small inspection hatch in order to better see into the blind spots. This was to ensure, amongst other things, that the prisoners had not attempted to commit suicide and that the prison rules were being upheld, e.g. that the prisoners were not lying on the bed during the day, that they did not have any oral contact with other prisoners outside of their cell or any forbidden pastimes such as playing card games. The checks were also carried out approximately every fifteen minutes during the night. In doing this, the guards could check if the inmates were upholding sleep regulations. These stipulated that the face had to be visible and that hands had to be over the cover. For this purpose, the light was briefly turned on and, if required, the prisoners were woken up noisily. However, just turning on the lights of the cells was enough to massively disturb the prisoners' sleep.

Writing cell

Writing was absolutely prohibited in the prisoner's cell. However, once a week, prisoners were allowed to write a letter to close relatives. Therefore, the prisoners were taken into this writing cell and could write a letter under supervision. Every letter was censored before it was sent out. All incoming letters were also inspected before they were handed over to the prisoners. Writing about personal matters was allowed, but if letters were found to be containing things about the detainment or related issues, they were not forwarded.

Communication amongst prisoners

An important aim of the various regulations and control was to keep prisoners isolated. When out of their cells, they were not allowed to encounter other prisoners in the building or in the exercise yard and could not come into contact with each other. Prisoners were always taken through the building alone and did not even encounter any other prisoners in the exercise yard. Often, during the entire time in the remand prison, they would not come face to face with another prisoner apart from their cell mate. For the same reason, speaking loudly or singing was forbidden in the building. The prisoners should not have been able to be recognised by other prisoners known to them or possibly arrested family members. Despite these regulations and the continuous surveillance, the prisoners succeeded in contacting each other. Most frequently, they used the so-called "prison code". They communicated with each other by knocking signals. For each letter, the prisoners had to knock a certain amount of times corresponding to its position in the alphabet, e.g. knock once for the letter "A" and 26 times for the letter "Z". If the "interlocutor" already understood the sentence before the end, this was also signalled by knocking. This way, a lot of information could be learned about the prison and the prisoners. Even if "knocking" was prohibited and could be punished after issuing a warning, it was used daily by almost all prisoners.

Static noise generator

Toilet downpipes connecting the cells were also used by the prisoners as a means of communication. Water was removed from the air trap of the toilet bowl so that a conversation could be had using the piping. To prevent this, a static noise generator was developed which was fitted to every downpipe and generated a quiet buzzing noise when the electricity was turned on. This made direct conversation between the cells impossible.

Exercise yard

Once a day, the prisoners were taken to the exercise yard. According to the regulations, prisoners had to have at least 30 minutes but a maximum of 60 minutes of exercise in the fresh air every day. But according to reports, the time in the exercise yard was mostly too short. Even here, they did not meet other prisoners, as individual cells in the yard were locked by doors. It was forbidden to talk loudly, to sing or to attract attention in any other similar ways. Prisoners merely had the opportunity to run a bit and do some gymnastics exercises.

The exercise yard in its current form was built in the 1970s. Before, the individual exercise cells had been equally sized and structured like pieces of pie. In the reconstruction process, a roof was built which protected the prisoners from the rain but stopped them looking out into the outside world. Each of the armed guard post on the platforms on the right and left was supposed to prevent escape attempts.

Medical rooms

Each new inmate had to undergo a simple “health check” within 24 hours after being arrested. However, this was only carried out by a doctor for foreigners, young people and people that were injured. Within three days, a medical examination was carried out. For women, a gynaecological examination was carried out. Prisoners were also examined in this room when they were ill. In this case, the prisoners had to report this to the guards as early as possible. In severe cases, the prisoners were taken to the prison hospital in Berlin-Hohenschönhausen or Leipzig-Meusdorf. In emergencies, the local hospitals were used – each under high and elaborate security measures.

Shower room

Once a week, the remand prisoners were brought individually to the shower room where they were allocated 10 minutes for their personal hygiene. For the rest, the prisoners washed in the cells. The male prisoners could periodically use razors which were issued to them for this purpose. Only at this time would the power be switched on in the cell, which could be controlled by an installed lamp outside the cell that was then lit up.

According to regulations, female prisoners were also to be cared for by female guards. However, the proportion of women within the guards was small so that male guards were often responsible for female prisoners. Due to this, the stress for women was, besides the lack of privacy, additionally increased.

Solitary confinement

Solitary confinement was located on the first and fourth floor. It was used to punish prisoners with complete isolation. Solitary confinement could be imposed as a disciplinary punishment for up to 14 days. These cells were likely to be used to break resistance if a prisoner proved to be “uncooperative” during interrogation. The room was bare apart from a radiator and a screwed-on stool. The light in the windowless room remained switched off and was only briefly switched on to check on the prisoners. There was also no toilet so the prisoners were dependent on the “kindness” of the guard for relieving themselves. They received a blanket for sleeping and had to lie on the floor. Food was silently passed through the hatch. The prisoners should become compliant by removing all sensory stimuli.

Foreigner's cell

In addition to GDR citizens, foreign remand prisoners were also taken to this detention centre. For example, this was the case if a person stood accused of espionage or belonged to a human-trafficking group that assisted GDR citizens to escape to the “West”. There were individual cells for these prisoners, which were the same size as the three-person cells for the GDR prisoners. In contrast with the usual cells, these had a barred window made out of transparent glass so that sufficient daylight could get in. In addition, these cells were fitted with a metal bed, which, in contrast to the wooden beds, were bigger and somewhat sprung.

Corridor

The prisoners were often, sometimes every day, taken to be interrogated. The interrogation rooms were located on the 4th floor of the prison building which could only be reached by this staircase outside of the cell block. The prisoners were taken to be interrogated by guards whereby they were taken firstly to the third floor by the stairs within the cell block and from there, led across a corridor to this staircase. For safety, a signal wire was installed here with support of an alarm which could be set off in case of a possible danger situation. The guard pulled the wire so that the plug connection would break and therefore produce an alarm signal. The prisoners had to keep one and a half steps in front of the guard while in the corridor. They were always led individually, thereby avoiding any kind of encounter between remand prisoners from different cells. For this reason, red-green signal lamps were installed on each floor of the cell block as well as in the staircase, which were set to red before a prisoner was taken from the cell. This signalled to other guards that a prisoner was already being taken through the block. However, if an encounter occurred, the prisoner had to immediately turn to face the wall. The signal lamp was then set to green as soon as the prisoners reached their destination. This procedure was maintained in every corridor throughout the prison regardless of whether the prisoners were being taken for interrogation, outside, to shower or to the visitors room.

Signal light

The red light was a signal for the guards indicating that a prisoner was being taken through the building. During this time, all other prisoners had to be kept in their cells. When the prisoner was no longer in the corridors, the green light was turned on.

Interrogation room

On average, prisoners remained on remand for three months. There were also cases in which trials stretched over several months. The aim of the detention was to prove the prisoners' "crime" and to build a case against them. At the end of the remand period, a final report was made which had to be signed by the remand prisoner. This report served as a basis for the case so that entire passages from this were frequently adopted in the indictment. Until the final report was produced, the respective prisoner was interrogated frequently, sometimes on a daily basis. In the 1970s and 1980s, this happened mostly during the day although interrogations could also be done at night.

Interrogation methods

Frequently, attempts were made to make remand prisoners cooperative by persuading them right at the start of the interrogation. In these cases, the interrogation officers treated the prisoners in a friendly way to begin with and explained to them that cooperating during the interrogation process would only be advantageous for them during their time on remand and would also affect their later sentence in a positive way. If this strategy was unsuccessful, various options were open to the interrogation officer to put pressure on them.

Psychological pressure

From the middle of the 1960s, physical violence was no longer be used to force a confession. This was because, amongst other things, from 1963, Western Germany could pay a ransom for the release of political prisoners. In order to maintain the appearance of constitutionality, no information about physical abuse should reach abroad. Pressure on the prisoners was created in other ways. Alongside endless, partly nocturnal interrogations, sleep deprivation and the feeling of impotence against the institutions of the state security, a great deal of psychological pressure also meant that “insubordinate behaviour” during interrogation was prevented. The prisoners were defenceless when they were told that their family or their children could be harmed. There was also the threat that their spouses may be taken into custody, and in such a case, their children put into a home. A rarely, but demonstrably used method was the removal of their children from their custody who could consequently be adopted by other families. The threat alone forced the prisoners to be “cooperative”.

Cell informants

In order to acquire useful information for an interrogation, the interrogation officer used statements from so-called cell informants about their fellow prisoners. The cell informants were mostly remand prisoners which were pressured or bribed into cooperating with the state security, for example, they were offered privileges whilst on remand as a reward for useful information. In Dresden, approx. 14% of all remand prisoners were cell informants which was over the average of 6-10% throughout the GDR. Occasionally, conversations between prisoners were listened in on by the guards and important information was passed on to the relative interrogation officer.

NKVD-cellar

The main building of the Dresden District Administration of the East German Ministry of State Security (MfS) was reached by a connecting corridor constructed between 1952 and 1954. From May 1945 up until the beginning of the 1950s, there was a Soviet commandant's office here. The Soviet secret service NKVD/MVD used the cellar of the building as a remand prison until 1953. Alongside the people accused of war crimes or cooperation in high positions of the Nazi apparatus, people were increasingly taken into custody who were classified as being against the Soviet occupation forces. They were mostly sentenced to long-term imprisonment of between 10 and 25 years or to death by the Soviet Military Tribunal, which met in the upper levels of the former "Heidehof". Those sentenced were brought to Soviet special camps in the Soviet occupied zone and later to prisons in the GDR. However, in many cases, they were also taken to labour camps within the Soviet Union, the Gulags, where they had to carry out hard labour under extreme climatic conditions. In many cases, relatives never found out about the whereabouts or the death of the prisoners.

Room for sewing and ironing

In this room, women from the convict work detail were appointed to sew and iron bedclothes, prison garbs, etc. These women were already convicted and were kept completely separate from the remand prisoners.

Male convicts were predominantly appointed to do constructional, electrical and paint work that arose in and on the buildings.

Convicts also worked in the in-house kitchen and in the garden located towards the River Elbe. Remand prisoners, however, were not allowed to work.