

## Understanding the SED dictatorship and its impacts on the victims

### 4.5 Victims of forced labour in prisons

In the discussions that the Federal Parliamentary Commissioner for the Victims of the SED Dictatorship has held with former political prisoners, the forced labour performed during their imprisonment has been an important issue. The victims report that, even today, the work they carried out in prison tends not to be seen as part of the injustice perpetrated against them, and instead is often portrayed as a welcome diversion of sorts in the otherwise dull prison routine. Political prisoners are also told, time and again, that inmates work in today's prisons as well, and that "forced labour" is not an appropriate term for what they experienced in East German prisons.

It is important to the Commissioner to learn more about the background of the work carried out by political prisoners in those prisons. Requiring inmates imprisoned on political or religious grounds to carry out forced or compulsory labour constitutes forced labour under the 1957 Convention adopted by the International Labour Organization (ILO).<sup>54</sup>

Alongside the prisoners' accounts, archive records also paint a clear picture of the repressive and unsafe nature of the forced labour carried out in prisons. One example of this is a report produced by the GDR's Interior Ministry in 1976 about conditions at the prison in Cottbus. It describes "compliance with hygiene standards as inadequate" and mentions "non-compliance with occupational safety requirements, such as wearing hearing protection and glasses".<sup>55</sup>

The Federal Parliamentary Commissioner for the Victims of the SED Dictatorship is grateful to the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media for having taken up an initiative by the Union of Victims' Associations of Communist Tyranny (UOKG) and funded a preliminary study which looks at several examples in order to provide a picture of the working conditions and the resulting damage to prisoners' health, and to trace the supply chains for the goods that were produced. The preliminary study was carried out by researchers at Humboldt-Universität in Berlin, and the results were published in March 2024. Using four examples, it shows, firstly, that supply chains for some products that political prisoners were involved in manufacturing can be traced from the production sites in East Germany, through several intermediary entities, to final customers or retailers in West Germany. Secondly, with regard to the health impacts of the forced labour, the study sets out probable links between the specific working conditions in four examples of organisations where political prisoners were forced to work, and the long-term health problems reported by the victims. At the same time, it provides evidence that the prisoners – unlike normal workers – had no way to withdraw from the work they were ordered to carry out. Any refusal inevitably led to disciplinary measures, which could range from privileges being taken away – such as the ability to receive visitors and packages – to three weeks in solitary confinement

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<sup>54</sup> See International Labour Organization (1957).

<sup>55</sup> Brandenburg Main State Archive (2023): 10.

with minimal food. The study also shows that many West German companies profited from forced labour in East Germany.<sup>56</sup>

In the Commissioner's view, the results of the preliminary study prove the need for systematic research into forced labour in prisons and its impacts on the victims. A more comprehensive follow-up study could provide more in-depth findings both about the physical harm caused by the work that was performed and about the intra-German economic links associated with forced labour in prisons while Germany was divided. This would close a current gap in the research, and the results could, in particular, contribute to better medical care for the victims.

In addition to examining the personal impacts of forced labour in prisons, the Commissioner has also focused in this reporting period on the question of how the state and the companies involved are addressing the topic of forced prison labour.

The companies involved have had a very broad spectrum of reactions.

At one end of the spectrum, there are companies such as IKEA. The fact that IKEA sought a direct dialogue with victims and commissioned comprehensive research after the first indications came to light that the company had sold goods produced by forced labour in prisons is, in the Commissioner's view, exemplary and reflects a responsible approach to the company's own history. IKEA is currently engaging in talks with the UOKG and the Commissioner with the aim of getting involved in providing support to former political prisoners. The planned nationwide hardship fund for SED victims, which is to be managed by the Foundation for Former Political Prisoners, may be the right platform for this, as the foundation's statutory mandate specifically includes the possibility of accepting donations from third parties.

Then there are companies such as ALDI Nord, which expressed its regret after becoming aware of the preliminary study and the business links it outlined with VEB Strumpfkombinat Esda Thalheim, whose production sites included Hoheneck women's prison. With this expression of respect for the victims, ALDI Nord has laid the foundation for further research to be carried out and for a dialogue with the former political prisoners. In the Commissioner's view, this kind of engagement on equal terms represents the starting point in seeking a joint path to recognition.

On the other end of the spectrum is the Otto Group, the successor of the Otto-Versand mail-order business. Although the Otto Group has been aware for some time that the company sold reflex cameras manufactured by VEB Pentacon, which maintained a site for the production of camera bodies at the prison in Cottbus, it has so far refused to meet with representatives of the victims. Likewise, to the best of the Commissioner's knowledge, the Otto Group has to date not commissioned any independent scientific research. Instead,

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<sup>56</sup> See Kunze, Samuel; Mirschel, Markus; with the involvement of the Union of Victims' Associations of Communist Tyranny (UOKG) (2024).

when the preliminary study was published by Humboldt-Universität, the Otto Group publicly stated that the study was “scientifically questionable” because of the involvement of victims’ associations and thus victims themselves.

The Commissioner finds these statements by the Otto Group perplexing because the preliminary study was carried out by researchers at Humboldt-Universität, and the victims’ associations were only involved as the driving force behind the commissioning of the study. Moreover, the involvement of victims’ associations in research is now common practice. For example, in its call for proposals for its comprehensive research programme into the history of the GDR, the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) specifically referred to the victims’ associations as a stakeholder group which “can be involved as a research partner and as a transfer and education partner”.<sup>57</sup>

More recent findings, in particular, such as the fact that tights produced at Hoheneck prison were sold by the company Neckermann, whose brand rights were acquired by the Otto Group in 2012, should, in the Commissioner’s view, be grounds for the Otto Group to re-examine its approach to date.

The former Otto-Versand and the companies Quelle and Neckermann, whose brand names have been acquired by the Otto Group, sold products manufactured by East German businesses which engaged in the large-scale production of goods by political prisoners. Even if, from a legal perspective, the Otto Group is not the legal successor of companies such as Quelle or Neckermann whose brand rights it has purchased, the Otto Group has associated itself with these companies by purchasing their brand names. The popularity that the Quelle and Neckermann brands have gained over the decades, which the Otto Group is using by acquiring the brand rights, is not the only facet of these brands; in the Commissioner’s view, they also include dark chapters in these companies’ history, such as involvement in forced labour in prisons.

Moreover, the Commissioner finds it inappropriate that, with regard to the sale of VEB Pentacon cameras by what was then Otto-Versand, as outlined above, the Otto Group is publicly arguing that, because other production sites existed outside the prison in Cottbus, there is a high probability that the components of the reflex cameras it sold did not come from the prison. To date, despite extensive research in the archives, the Commissioner has seen no evidence to suggest there was any separation between the production of parts at the prison and at other sites. Instead, the sketches of the production facilities at the main factory, where the cameras were assembled on a production line, show that there were no separate storage facilities for the camera bodies produced at the prison and those manufactured at other sites, and that the camera bodies from both sources were used in parallel with no consideration given to their origin.

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<sup>57</sup> Federal Ministry of Education and Research (2017).

Particularly against this background, the Commissioner continues to believe that the Otto Group, too, should face up to this part of its corporate history and research it fully. She remains ready to support and assist with such an approach.