Bonn Profiles - Press Reports

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BQ 665 - No. 47/2020

Cottbus Declaration on GDR Forced Labor of September 13, 2020: "Serious injustice has been done to these people"

(Bonn, 16.10.2020) The Union of Victims' Associations of Communist Tyranny e.V. (UOKG), the Human Rights Center Cottbus (MRZ), the International Society for Human Rights (IGFM) and the Memorial Foundation Victims of Communism (VIC) organized a tribunal on "Forced Labor in Political Prison in the GDR". The top-class international jury listened to expert lectures for two days and interviewed 14 witnesses. In the end the jury wrote the "Cottbus Declaration on GDR Forced Labor".

Thomas Schirrmacher, President of the International Council of the International Society for Human Rights, summarized his experience to the press: "Almost all applications for

recognition of post-traumatic disorders resulting from forced labor have been and are still being rejected. and many former political prisoners of the GDR are in despair. The slowness. even lameness, with which the authorities handle these applications is frightening, even contemptuous of humanity. The most important passage in this statement is therefore, in my opinion, the demand for a reversal of the burden of proof in the case of illnesses resulting from forced labor and typical of prison."



Dieter Dombrowski. Federal Chairman of the Union of Victims' Associations of Communist Tyranny (UOKG), welcomed the Cottbus' Declaration with the words: "It is important that in the 30th year of German Unity the exploitation of political prisoners through forced labor is not forgotten. Many of the former forced laborers have retained severe physical

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and psychological damage. The jury was unanimous in its advice and its demands. These people have suffered grave injustice and they need help and support."

Dr. Susanne Kill, since 1999 head of the "Corporate History / Historical Collection" at DB AG (the German railway) and author of the book "Die Reichsbahn und der Strafvollzug in der DDR" spoke about "Prisoner

Forced Labor for the German During a plenary session © BQ/Martin Warnecke Reichsbahn of the GDR - His-



torical Research and Remembrance Policy". Further lectures on "Forced Labor of Political Prisoners in the SED Dictatorship" were given by Dr. Jan Philipp Wölbern, University of Postdam and specialist for the prisoner release between GDR and FRG, and Dr. Christian Sachse. Further contributions were made by Maria Nooke, Brandenburg's representative for coming to terms with the consequences of the communist dictatorship, and Birgit Neumann-Becker, Saxony-Anhalt's representative for coming to terms with the SED dictatorship. Birgit Neumann-Becker also presented the touring exhibition of the state of Saxony-Anhalt, which had been set up in Cottbus and can be ordered.

The jury was made up of:

- Dr. Matthias Bath, former public prosecutor in Berlin 1988–2017, former political prisoner
- Peter Heidt, MdB, Chairman of the FDP parliamentary group in the Committee for Human Rights and Humanitarian Aid in the German Federal Parliament
- Prof. Dr. Huige Li, Deputy Director of the Institute for Pharmacology at the University Medical Center Mainz, born in China
- Bada Nam, Secretary General of the human rights organization PSCORE, South Korea
- · Vladimir Novitsky, attorney from Moscow, Chairman of the International Society for Human Rights (IGFM), Russia Section
- Carla Ottmann, deputy federal chairwoman of the UOKG, former political prisoners in Hoheneck, honorary judge at the Social Court of Berlin
- Dr. Klára Pinerová, historian, Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes of the Czech Republic, in Prague

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- Prof. Dr. Dr. Thomas Schirrmacher, President of the International Council of the International Society for Human Rights, expert on human trafficking
- Marion Smith, CEO of Victims of Communism, Memorial Foundation, US Congress
- Arnold Vaatz, MdB, since 2002 Deputy Chairman of the CDU/CSU parliamentary group in the German Federal Parliament, former GDR civil rights activist, lead the re-establishment of the Free State of Saxony

Cottbus Declaration on GDR Forced Labor From September 13, 2020 (preliminary translation)

From September 11th to 13th, 2020, a tribunal on the subject of "Forced Labor in Political Custody in the GDR" took place in the Cottbus Human Rights Center, the former East German penal institution Cottbus, at the invitation of the Union of Victims' Associations of Communist Tyranny (UOKG).

An international jury was faced with the task of determining "whether characteristics of forbidden forced labor and exploitation according to internationally recognized definitions" were fulfilled in relation to political prisoners of the SED dictatorship.

The jury heard several specialist lectures on the definition of forced labor, its prohibition under international law and the basics of forced labor of political pris-



Part of the jury, in the middle Carla Ottmann © BQ/Martin Warnecke

oners in the GDR in various branches of industry. The jury also interviewed 14 former political prisoners (4 women and 10 men) who during their imprisonment in different industrial areas and at different times were used for forced work for industrial companies in the GDR.

After the lectures they had heard and the questioning of contemporary witnesses, the jury came to the conclusion that the GDR penal system was one of the largest employers within the GDR's state-planned economy. For this purpose, the GDR penal system and its facilities maintained a nationwide network of labor deployment companies in which the most varied of GDR companies had production for their purposes, taking advantage of the generally existing work obligations of prisoners in the GDR. Many of the products created in this way were intended for exports to the non-socialist economic area. The

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individual conviction of forced labor required by international law by the court did not take place.

The prisoners could not choose their occupation, nor was their professional qualifications taken into account. Instead, they were called upon to work solely according to the specifications of the national economic plan and the possibilities of the respective institution. In many cases, the statutory provisions on health and safety at



At the microphone Sylvia Wähling, Director of the Cottbus Penitentiary Memorial © BQ/Martin Warnecke

work that were otherwise applicable in the GDR were not complied with in the institutions. The inmates had to work longer than was the case in normal factories. As a rule, the penal institutions also worked around the clock in three shifts. In addition, physically difficult and health-hazardous jobs were often carried out in prison establishments. There was a lack of work clothes and protective measures to prevent accidents at work. The accident rate was also much higher than in normal industrial companies. In addition, medical care after occupational accidents was often inadequate.

In cases of doubt, the prisoners' duty to work was enforced with severe sanctions, arrest sentences and even physical violence in the event of under-compliance or refusal to work. The witnesses reported, among other things, a writing ban, beatings, threats with

consequences for the children and being taken to standing cells. The characteristics of forced labor are thus fulfilled. In addition, this forced labor was generally inadequately paid.

The GDR has thus violated all international agreements of the United Nations and the International Labor Organization to suppress and outlaw forced labor and did not even grant its prisoners the minimum principles of the United Nations for the treatment of prisoners, even though it had acceded to this latter agreement.



Thomas Schirrmacher in conversation with Birgit Neumann-Becker, representative of the state of Saxony-Anhalt © BQ/Martin Warnecke

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Even if the Federal Republic of Germany cannot be regarded across the board as the legal successor of the GDR, the values of the Basic Law and Article 17 of the Unification Treaty of August 31, 1990 result in a legal obligation to permanently come to terms with the SED injustice and to create appropriate compensation regulations for the victims of the SED dictatorship.

The overwhelming majority of the former political prisoners of the GDR have been compensated for the imprisonment they suffered through criminal rehabilitation.

In stark contrast to this is the often inappropriate treatment of claims for compensation and the duration of the corresponding proceedings.

However, these compensation regulations do not cover the forced labor suffered in addition to the mere deprivation of liberty and the resulting psychological and physical health damage, so that there is a need for further regulation.

In order to facilitate the recognition of consequential damage from GDR imprisonment and the forced labor suffered there, a standard presumption in favor of the victims of the SED dictatorship should be introduced or



(from left to right): Karl Hafen, Thomas Schirrmacher and Dr. Sorin Muresan in front of the poster of the tribunal and the outside wall of the former Cottbus penitentiary © BQ/Martin Warnecke

the burden of proof should be reversed in the sense of the regulation of the Federal Compensation Act (BEG).

In addition, an independent fund should be created for compensation or reparation payments for the benefit of former prisoner forced laborers. The beneficiaries of political forced labor in the GDR and their legal successors were to make payments for this fund. In the interests of the victims, the political mandate and decision-makers are called upon to promote this process.

We welcome IKEA's willingness to participate in this fund. We urge companies and policymakers to follow suit.

The Foundation for Political Prisoners or the East German Forced Labor Foundation would be responsible for the administration of this fund to be created. V. into consideration.

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In view of the advanced age of those affected, it is urgent to act as soon as possible.

Dr. Matthias Bath
Peter Heidt, MdB
Prof. Dr. Huige Li
Bada Nam
Carla Ottmann
Dr. Klára Pinerová
Prof. Dr. Dr. Thomas Schirrmacher
Marion Smith
Arnold Vaatz, MdB

Downloads and Links:

- Cottbus Declaration on GDR Forced Labor from September 13, 2020 (pdf)
- Cottbus Declaration on GDR Forced Labor from September 13, 2020 with the original signatures of the Jury in German (pdf)
- Brochure of the event with introduction of the jury members in German (pdf)
- The logo of the event (png)
- Photo 1 and photo 2: During a plenary session © BQ/Martin Warnecke
- Photo 3: The chairman of the jury Staatsanwalt a.D. Matthias Bath © BQ/Martin Warnecke
- Photo 4: Part of the jury, in the middle Carla Ottmann © BQ/Martin Warnecke
- Photo 5: At the microphone Sylvia Wähling, Director of the Cottbus Penitentiary Memorial © BQ/Martin Warnecke
- Photo 6: Thomas Schirrmacher asks a question on behalf of the jury in Cottbus
 © BQ/Martin Warnecke
- Photo 7: Thomas Schirrmacher in conversation with Birgit Neumann-Becker, representative of the state of Saxony-Anhalt © BQ/Martin Warnecke
- Photo 8 (from left to right): Karl Hafen, Thomas Schirrmacher and Dr. Sorin Muresan in front of the poster of the tribunal and the outside wall of the former Cottbus penitentiary © BQ/Martin Warnecke
- Photo 9: Thomas Schirrmacher in front of the poster of the tribunal on the outside wall of the former Cottbus penitentiary © BQ/Martin Warnecke
- Opening speeches of the event: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aeDZiIAEU1w
- Press release of the UOKG in German: http://www.uokg.de/2020/09/cottbusser-erklaerung-zur-ddr-zwangsarbeit/

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- Invitation of the UOKG to the Tribunal in German: http://www.uokg.de/2020/09/tribunal-zwangsarbeit-in-politscher-ddr-haft/
- Press release of the ISHR: https://ishr.org/these-people-have-experienced-greatest-injustice/
- Website of the commissioners of the state of Brandenburg for the Reappraisal of the consequences of the communist dictatorship (in German): https://aufarbeitung.brandenburg.de
- Wikipedia entry on Maria Nooke (in German): https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maria Nooke
- Website of the State Commissioner for the Reappraisal of the SED Dictatorship (in German): http://www.thla-thueringen.de
- Message from the Federal Agency for Civic Education (in German): https://www.bpb.de/geschichte/deutsche-geschichte/stasi/234183/zwangsarbeit
- BQ 463: Europe and the USA should combine their Expertise in the Battle against Human Trafficking: https://www.bucer.de/ressource/details/bonner-querschnitte-022017-ausgabe-463-eng.html
- BQ 556: New German book on human trafficking: https://www.bucer.de/ressource/details/bonner-querschnitte-392018-ausgabe-556-eng.html
- BQ 627: Guest lecture by Thomas Schirrmacher on human trafficking at the University of Cologne:

https://www.bucer.de/ressource/details/bonner-querschnitte-092020-ausgabe-627-eng.html



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