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At Home with the Stasi: Gedenkstätte Hohenschönhausen as Historic House

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16.1 Introduction

A survey conducted in 2007 by the SED-State Research Group (Forschungsverbund SED-Staat) among young people from across Germany revealed a worrying level of ignorance regarding the political history of both east and west. Students from both sides of the former divide were unable to give the year of the building of the Berlin Wall or place Erich Honecker and Konrad Adenauer as, respectively, past leaders of the GDR and the Federal Republic. This lack of factual knowledge was coupled, particularly in the case of east German students, with what the authors of the survey viewed as an overly positive impression of the GDR education, health and welfare systems and too little awareness of the repressive nature of the state. This image of the GDR was attributed to the picture painted by parents and relatives, who had experienced the GDR firsthand and who overemphasize the social aspects of the state and make no reference to its dictatorial character (Deutz-Schroeder and Schroeder, 2009, pp. 17–31, 199–204). The authors of the survey considered this to be not only a distortion of history, but also a threat to democracy and therefore to the political stability of the Federal Republic (Deutz-Schroeder and Schroeder, 2009, pp. 199–204). Communicative or family memory was, in this respect, felt to be an inadequate method of passing on a ‘correct’ image of the GDR that might strengthen democracy and legitimize the Federal Republic as the superior form of society. This chapter seeks to analyse the role that institutionalized cultural memories of the GDR, specifically the memorial at the former Ministry for State Security (or Stasi) prison in Hohenschönhausen (Gedenkstätte Hohenschönhausen), might play in efforts to counteract what is felt to be the ‘false’ image of the GDR portrayed in family and social memory. What are the aims
of this site of cultural memory in the context of the contests between
different groups and individuals struggling to assert their memory of
the East German state? What is the particular ‘voice’ of the memorial in
these debates and what methods are used to make it heard?

16.2 Commemoration or education?

The most recent edition of the Federal Memorial Concept
(Gedenkstättenkonzeption des Bundes), published in June 2008, makes
clear the view of the East German dictatorship that memorials and
other sites of memory are supposed to portray and their role in the for-
mation of national identity. A clear link is drawn between lessons learnt
from the experience of National Socialism by the founding generation
of the Federal Republic, identified as a respect for freedom, human
rights and the principles of the Basic Law (Grundgesetz), and the need to
remember the victims of both Nazi and SED dictatorships as part of this
‘anti-totalitarian consensus’. It is, the authors argue, the responsibility
of everyone to keep the memory of the human suffering experienced in
these chapters of German history alive and to work through the causes
and impact of the National Socialist and SED dictatorships in order to
strengthen this anti-totalitarian consensus and raise awareness of the
value of liberal democracy and human rights (Deutscher Bundestag,
2008, pp. 1–2). The Concept thereby places the emphasis on the memo-
ries of those persecuted or victimized by these regimes, rather than on
the everyday experiences of those living under dictatorship. In this
regard, the memory that state-funded memorials are intended to project
stands in contrast to what is perceived as the dominant communicative
or family memory of the state. Given the tension between this state-
supported process of remembering the GDR past and apparent nostalgia
for the East, it is unsurprising that the memorial at Hohenschönhausen,
which is included as a key site in the Federal Memorial Concept, con-
tinues to be controversial. Viewed by many as an attempt to impose
a particular version of the GDR, the memorial has been criticized for,
among other things, an overemphasis on the brutality of the 1950s,
conflating Nazi and Soviet oppression, or engaging in political propa-
ganda directed against the Left, particularly against the post-communist
Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), now renamed as DIE LINKE (e.g.,
Hofmann, 1997; Kappeler and Schaub, 2008).

What, however, are the stated aims of the memorial itself? What func-
tion can and should it play in the memory of the GDR and, specifically,