

Summary on the Final Report for the Preliminary Study

“Forced Labor of Political Prisoners in Penal Institutions of the GDR”

Source Information:

Final Report for the Preliminary Study “Forced Labor of Political Prisoners in Penal Institutions of the GDR”

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The complete study can be downloaded here:

<https://www.uokg.de/projekte/zwangsarbeit-fuer-aldi/>

1. Working conditions of political imprisonment in the GDR

Numerous eyewitness reports show that political prisoners in the GDR had to perform forced labor and often had to work under unhealthy, sometimes life-threatening conditions.

It is well known and scientifically proven that the guidelines for occupational health and safety in the GDR were rarely adhered to. However, the fact that they were knowingly disregarded in the country's prisons and that the forced laborers were at the mercy of this situation is the result of in-depth research. The preliminary study "Forced labor of political prisoners in prisons of the GDR" confirms this finding once again.

Of course, occupational safety problems in the GDR did not only exist with regard to the use of prisoners, but it was the prisoners who were often used for particularly dangerous tasks and who - unlike their civilian colleagues - could hardly refuse to work. The list of punitive measures ranged from the prevention of family contact, such as the ban on writing or receiving a letter once a week and the removal of the once-a-month visit of close relatives, to solitary confinement with additional aggravating measures.

The direct consequences of the often completely inadequate occupational health and safety were regular accidents at work and often long-term health and psychological problems after imprisonment. In a survey of 361 former forced laborers conducted in 2023, 44 percent of the interviewed stated that they were still suffering from physical impairments. 32 percent complained of psychological complaints and just over half reported both types of impairment.

This is nothing new - the problem, however, is that the reported consequential damage caused by prison work is often not recognized and compensated accordingly by the responsible authorities and courts. The main argument here is that after so many years, no causal link can be established between the work as a forced laborer and the health problems today. The results of the preliminary study create a scientifically sound basis for the recognition of the damage to health caused by forced prison labor. (final report preliminary study, p. 29f)

2. Health effects of political imprisonment

In trauma research, it is undisputed that imprisonment for political reasons has a negative impact on the health of those affected. For example, a large-scale study conducted by the Charité in Berlin as part of the "Landscapes of Persecution" research network shows that those affected suffer more frequently from psychological complaints such as post-traumatic stress disorder and are also exposed to a higher risk of metabolic and autoimmune diseases.

The preliminary study builds on these findings and goes even further in its approach. The following explanations are based on the assumption that the consequential

health conditions of former political prisoners were not caused solely by the traumatic stress caused by the prison situation, but also by the specific conditions under which those affected had to perform forced labor during their imprisonment. As part of the preliminary study, the question of how production facilities functioned and what tasks political prisoners had to take on in the production process was therefore also investigated. To this end, the production processes and manufacturing procedures were reconstructed as closely as possible. The working conditions were reconstructed in order to determine the condition of the production facilities and the extent to which necessary health and safety measures were observed or not. In the course of this, the existing research literature and archive materials made available were evaluated and contemporary witnesses were interviewed. In the final step, the immediate and long-term effects that these conditions had or could have had on the health of the forced laborers were collated, i.e. how high the risk was that the prisoners suffered health problems from their work. In addition to interviews with contemporary witnesses, literature and archive research, a systematic search was conducted for publications by the Federal Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, the German Social Accident Insurance and individual industrial sectors. Quantitative and qualitative studies dealing with the long-term effects of hazardous situations in the workplace were also analyzed in order to examine the present problem of the health consequences of forced labor of political prisoners. (final report preliminary study, p. 31f)

3. Long-term health consequences resulting from the working conditions of forced prison labor

A particularly vivid example of the health-threatening conditions of forced prison labor in the GDR is the use of prisoners in the chlorine plants of the Bitterfeld Chemical Combine. They had been working there on a small scale since the end of the 1960s. As part of a cooperation agreement between the company and the Bitterfeld Prison, their numbers were greatly increased in 1974. Up to 111 prisoners had to work in chlorine plants I and III. In Plant I, their deployment lasted until 4 December 1989; in Plant III, it ended significantly after its modernization in 1986. A considerable number of the people deployed were political prisoners. In the chlorine plants, they came into contact with chlorine, alkaline lye, hydrogen and mercury during the work process - all undeniably harmful substances with serious consequences for body and mind.

The production facilities in chlorine plants I and III had been built around 1936 and, according to an MfS report (MfS = Ministry of state security of the GDR), had remained in operation since then without any significant new investments. According to the same report, the responsible managers had repeatedly demanded the termination of production due to wear and tear. However, a central decision was

made to continue production “until 1990 and beyond”. Over time, the production facilities became extremely dilapidated, so that breakdowns were the order of the day. Small explosions occurred time and again, releasing toxic chlorine vapors and spraying caustic sodium hydroxide solution. The danger to the prisoners from such accidents was exacerbated by the fact that there was no functioning ventilation system. Until 1981, the doors were also bricked up and passive air circulation was further impaired by screens.

The greatest danger to the prisoners came from the mercury that was released at several points in the production process. Due to the high temperatures, mercury vapor was formed and concentrated in the room air. In addition, the mercury escaped from damaged pipes, evaporated and collected in gaseous form on the floor, as mercury vapor is heavier than air. There, the vapor condensed back into liquid mercury and collected in the cracks of the dilapidated floor, sometimes forming veritable puddles. In all situations, the prisoners' bodies and clothing were contaminated with mercury.

Instead of eliminating the obvious damage to the production plant and protecting the prisoners in this way, the management put together a special convoy of prisoners to collect the mercury and return it to circulation. To do this, the prisoners had to either use dustpans and hand brushes or first rinse away the mercury lying around with water hoses and then pour it into buckets or metal bottles. The prisoners were exposed to high doses of the released mercury. The prisoners were not sufficiently informed about the dangers of mercury, nor were they provided with protective clothing. In addition, the usual strict separation of work clothes and uniforms was not observed. The prisoners were transported directly back to the prison at the end of their shift and their clothing was only changed there. This not only led to the contamination of the prisoners' accommodation with mercury, but also of the buses used to transport the prisoners.

The drastic effects of this exposure became apparent in 1980 and 1981, when two prisoners working in the chlorine plants died. Although the MfS subsequently discovered extensive deficiencies and violations of occupational health and safety guidelines, the economic benefits of the plant were considered too important for production to be stopped.

(final report preliminary study, p. 35-38)

4. Effects of mercury on the health of prisoners

Inhaled mercury vapors are absorbed by the lungs and almost 80 percent of them enter the bloodstream, spreading rapidly throughout the body. The absorbed mercury not only accumulates in the kidneys and liver, but can also cross the blood-brain barrier and directly affect the central nervous system. Mercury acts as a powerful cellular and protoplasmic toxin that damages the human body in many places at the

same time. Acute mercury poisoning caused by inhaling large quantities can lead to shortness of breath, nausea and vomiting or even kidney dysfunction. Long-term exposure to mercury can lead to a chronic form of poisoning. In addition to initially occurring general symptoms such as fatigue, headaches and aching limbs, this is accompanied by severe psychological, motor and cognitive abnormalities. Examples of the numerous symptoms include anxiety disorders, irritability, the development of tremor and concentration problems.

A number of scientific studies have investigated the causal relationship between high mercury exposure and chronic health problems and have found that although many of the mercury-related symptoms diminish over time, they can still be measured years after the end of exposure.

It should therefore be noted that a causal link between forced labor and the health impairments described by those affected today is extremely likely. (final report preliminary study, p. 38f) It is therefore necessary to provide appropriate assistance and compensation in the event of positive findings.

5. The reconstruction of supply chains for forced labor products

In order to also hold companies accountable that profited from forced prison labor, proof of supply chains is necessary. The supply chains provide complete proof of economic relations between the GDR and the Federal Republic of Germany or the NSW (non-socialist economic area) and they serve to prove the integration of forced prison labor in the GDR penal system into the production of goods for export to the Federal Republic or the NSW and they show a picture of market economy structures in the GDR planned economy. Above all, however, they show the extent to which the companies involved were aware of forced prison labor, profited from it and thus shared responsibility for it. This connection was documented by analyzing secondary literature, interviewing contemporary witnesses and researching archives, and then by showing the path of the product from the production facility in prison to the German or Western supermarket shelves. (final report preliminary study, p. 13f)

6. Proof of a supply chain using the example of the Aldi Group

The result shows that partial productions formed an important component of the GDR export economy. The GDR foreign trade company TextilCommerz was responsible for the VEB Strumpfkombinat Esda Thalheim. Federal German representative companies placed orders, production requests and quota requirements directly with TextilCommerz. The latter forwarded everything to the responsible combine and the executing VEB (= state owned company), in this case the VEB Esda Thalheim. In the so-called Esda complex, representative companies

formed the link between the foreign trade company TextilCommerz and the companies in the GDR and the end sellers or bulk buyers, such as the company Nolte - ALDI Süd - or Albrecht Einkauf OHG - ALDI Nord - in the Federal Republic. The annual export quotas for women's tights to the Federal Republic amounted to around 30 to 45 million pairs, including the share from prison labor.

Of importance for this study is the use of female prisoners from the Hoheneck Prison for VEB Esda Thalheim, which can be documented on the basis of records. Reports from contemporary witnesses complete the picture.

Looking at the 1970s and 1980s, historian Tobias Wunschik calculated that forced laborers produced around 9 million pairs of tights per year, which accounted for around 10 percent of total production and was equivalent to around 8 million Valutamark per year. Using the example of Sayonara tights, the preliminary study was able to document the coordination of export quotas, the receipt of individual and collective orders and the call-off of products by TextilCommerz directly from the VEB Feinstrumpfhosenwerk Esda Thalheim. This was possible, for example, on the basis of the invoice and individual order numbers issued by the VEB, to which the corresponding product - in this case the Sayonara tights - and the quantity called off could be assigned. On some of the forms for calculating the individual price, for example 0.68 GDR marks for the tights produced in prison, the date, the intermediate dealer, the end customer, the exporting foreign trade company, the producing VEB, the quantity called off and the margins in the delivery schedule, the scope of delivery of 2000 pallets weighing almost 400 tons, the exporting delivery company (Deutrans), the border checkpoint to be used and the commission for the intermediate dealer can be seen.

It can also be seen that the production from the VEB Esda Thalheim factories was combined with that of the penal system to form a complete export delivery. The goods were prepared for the end customer in a manner typical of the market, priced, packaged and made ready for dispatch. The dispatch of the goods was reported by the VEB to the foreign trade company with instructions for invoicing.

The supply chain is already closed with the knowledge of these papers by the German customers, but certainly with the knowledge of the present testimony of a civilian employee in the Hoheneck women's prison, who had to drive delivery vans bearing the labels of the companies Aldi, Karstadt and Quelle to the prison yard to load them with (among other things) tights and then hand them back to the West German driver in front of the prison.

(final report preliminary study, p. 13-17)

7. The quintessence of the preliminary study

It was established that a causal link between forced prison labor and consequential health damage or impairments in those affected by forced prison labor is extremely

likely. In addition, it was possible to work out from the supply chains that companies that benefited from forced prison labor had or could have had knowledge of the circumstances of production. Many files have been analysed for the first time as part of this study, but by no means all of them have been fully evaluated. This is to be done in greater depth in a planned main study.

The results of the preliminary study have created an initial basis for reorganizing a state support and compensation services for those affected and finally putting into practice the announcements made by the current federal government in the coalition agreement.