

Press release

Memorial Sites
Secret Sites
Hohenschönhausen – the remand prison of the GDR

Groups of people move along a prison corridor: young people with mobile camera-phones, adult visitors and groups made up of members of the German armed forces. They peep through doors into the prison cells the windows of which are filled with opaque glass blocks.

Berlin Hohenschönhausen. Once run by the MfS (Ministry for State Security, or Stasi for short) the prison once used for those awaiting trial is today a museum open to visitors. As a prohibited zone it was until 1990 one of the most secret and sinister locations in the GDR. It was not marked on city maps.

Former prisoners on one side – and a former interrogator of the MfS on the other side are witnessing the different periods of this site: from a soviet internment camp for Nazi activists to an “efficient” imprisonment on remand. The former prisoners report about the ways they were treated and the reasons of their detention. The former officer of the MfS gives us a rare insight in the Ministry and in the task of an interrogator: They had to make the mostly illegal collected evidence (which others had gained by spying and bugging homes) utilisable for trial by – not seldom forced - guilty pleas of the detainees.

The prison in Hohenschönhausen was always a gauge of the political situation within the GDR. During the Cold War the front line between the two economic systems passed through the two German states. Up until its dissolution the development of the other state on German soil did not follow a linear pattern and was not only influenced by factors in home affairs, but also by events occurring beyond its borders – sometimes as a reaction to developments in the West, sometimes to events in fellow socialist states. The state’s reaction to the population’s demands and its expression of will varied therefore from one period to the next. But the aim was always to “*eliminate oppositional forces within the GDR.*”