

Leipzig's Museum of Contemporary History

Dr Sebastian Fink works in the museum as well as in journalism. He's offered to take HHR members who visit Leipzig in October 2019 on a guided tour of the museum. The tour will take around 90 minutes but he says you could easily spend 4 hours there absorbing all there is to see and read. By November 2018 the Museum's displays will have been fully refurbished. What follows is an edited account of Sebastian's article about historical events that feature in Museum displays.

The exhibition starts at the end of the war, in May 1945, with pictures of the 90% destruction of Cologne, Berlin and Dresden, followed by information about the Potsdam conference between Churchill, Truman and Stalin. They made decisions about the future of Germany's economy in agriculture and non-military industries. Former Nazi institutions controlling the economy would be decentralized, and all of Germany would be treated as a single economic unit. War criminals would be brought to trial and so forth.

The next room shows a 1946 propaganda film about the foundation of a new political party – the SED. The new party brought two left-wing parties - SPD (Social Democrats) and KPD (Communist Party) - together. Footage shows members walking peacefully together past ruined buildings while the party song plays in the background - *Die Partei hat immer Recht - The Party is always right*. The Soviet Union forced this amalgamation and put the SED in charge of the government of the Soviet Occupied Zone (SBZ). Stalin wanted this new and unencumbered party - a fiction of democracy – to have complete power over the whole of Germany.

Meanwhile people in East Germany were put to work deconstructing their former factories under the supervision of the Soviet Red Army. By 1947 East Germany had lost 40% of its economic capacity.

By 1948 a unified Germany was out of the question. In May 1949 the U.S., Great Britain and France founded the Federal Republic of Germany with Bonn as its capital and West-Berlin as an island in the middle of the socialistic neighbour. The East German Democratic Republic (GDR) was founded on the 7th of October 1949. It was called 'democratic' but as the election ballot paper from 1949 shows in the exhibition, it was a dictatorship. The ballot paper listed several parties and candidates, but one couldn't choose between them. All a voter could do was support or reject the list of parties on the

ballot. The parliament was already in place before the election. To vote yes, electors simply put the folded ballot in the election box. To vote no they had to cross out every name on the list. Published results always showed 98%+ approval for the list. Election commissions faked results to secure a satisfying result for SED leaders.

The first Secretary of State was Wilhelm Pieck, followed by Walter Ulbricht in 1955. Ulbricht built the wall around West Berlin in August 1961 after the one and only huge revolt in the GDR on 17 June 1953. Workers went on strike and people demonstrated on the streets for democratic rights and free elections. Huge pictures and a map of the GDR made in West Germany at the time show that the whole country was on its feet that day. An original Soviet flak-gun shows how the revolt ended. About 90 people were killed, hundreds injured, and thousands arrested.

It was a decisive turning point for the young country. Tens of thousands left the GDR every year. People entered Berlin mostly by train and moved to Marienfelde in the south of the city before flying out to the West. The exhibition shows how refugees were accommodated during their five week wait, and displays advertisements that warned them they would be homeless in the West. Around 30% came back to the East, mostly because of homesickness or to help their families. The guitar of singer/songwriter Wolf Biermann who was de-cutinized in 1976 is on display. Dozens of famous artists of the GDR followed him to West Germany in protest against this action.

In total the GDR lost close to three million citizens up to 1961. The economy was under threat of breaking down through lack of workers. When President John Kennedy came to Berlin in 1961 he declared West Berlin was under US protection as a free city. Khrushchev allowed Ulbricht to start construction of the wall on August, 13, 1961 in the early hours of the morning. They planned to close to border on a hot summer Sunday when many people were out of town at the lakes. Most of them returned in the evening when the damage was done. The army was ordered to shoot anyone who tried to cross the border illegally. After three days the first victim - a young man - bled to death next to the fence. More than 1700 victims died until the wall fell in 1989.

The wall in Berlin was not finished until 1981, when it had become a 125 km strip of two walls leading through the city and around the western part. People pulled back to their private lives, trying to live as comfortably as possible. Nevertheless there were threats to parts of the population. The exhibition has vision of exploded churches such as St. Paul's cathedral in Leipzig in 1968 - an example of restrictions imposed on religious people who often were not allowed to attend university. Culture

was a difficult issue in the GDR. Almost no outside movies, books, comics or magazines were to be shown or sold. Local productions didn't make it to the cinema either if they were critical of the government. The Ministry of State Security (Ministerium für Staatssicherheit - Stasi) held the whole country under its control. They had one spy for every 68 citizens of the GDR - the tightest net of all government agencies in the world. The exhibition shows how the Stasi worked – e.g. modern technology like the tiniest of cameras; fabrics left on the seats of chairs at a hearing were conserved in airtight containers to help police dogs to find suspects again; information was forced from prisoners by keeping them awake in their cells. Leipzig also has a large Stasi museum in the former Stasi headquarters.

Despite all the fear and the work of the Stasi, in the 1980s the political world changed and the citizens in the GDR grew more confident. With Mikhail Gorbachev a more liberal politician gained power in the Soviet Union and Reagan and Bush in the US prompted the GDR to become more open to the world. By now the economy was seriously damaged, the environment was polluted and East Germany had to borrow 2 billion marks from West Germany to keep afloat.

In May 1989 there were elections again, but this time citizens were involved in counting the ballots. Compared to published numbers there were large gaps which proved what people knew anyway. In anger about this, people started to leave the country again - this time over the Hungarian border, which was opened that summer. Many also crossed the border to Austria on foot. Others went to the West German embassy in Prague, climbed over the fence and camped in the garden of the Palais, and on September 30th they were allowed to go to West Germany. Meanwhile almost 100,000 citizens had left the GDR. Five weeks later, the wall was opened.

The Museum has an original piece of the wall lying on the floor with a Trabant, the most common car in the GDR, running over it. That the wall came down was possible because of courageous demonstrations in the whole country. The movement started with the Monday demonstrations in Leipzig. On the 9th of October 100 000 people walked around the city centre - not attacked by the state forces which was sensational. They shouted "We are the people" and "No violence". One month later - after Erich Honecker had resigned – the speaker of the government, Günther Schabowski, told the world press on the evening of November 9th that the borders would be opened immediately. It was actually planned for the following year. This was Schabowski's mistake. People in East Berlin went to the border demanding to pass. The army officers at Bornholm Street had no

orders to let them through but people refused to go home so soldiers opened the gate. After weeks of peaceful demonstrations soldiers were no longer willing to shoot at their own people.

Only eleven months later, the country was reunited by Chancellor Helmut Kohl, who was supported by Mikhail Gorbachev, Bush and Mitterrand who even talked Margaret Thatcher into it. On 3rd October 1990 the treaties were signed. This date has been a national holiday since then.

A time of huge change in the East began, accompanied by big numbers of unemployed, millions of people leaving the Eastern territory for better job chances in the West, and a big struggle to rebuild the country, a struggle that continues today.