

The political role of the system of residential care of children in former East Germany

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Financial compensation for institutionalized children in West and East Germany before 1989

Since 2010, Germany has seen a debate on abuse in former residential homes for children in West Germany from 1949 to the late 1970s. Most of the mentioned institutions in this debate had been either former catholic or protestant ones. A strong impression was brought to light that the care system in such homes for children had been generally open to abuse. Many victims reported incidents of violence and repressions, inhumane methods and loveless child care workers (mostly nuns). In its final report, the Residential Care Committee (= Runder Tisch Heimerziehung), founded in 2012, reports systematic maltreatment. Members of both churches, the government, charities, foundations as well as concerned former institutionalized children discussed the opportunity for a compensation for those victims. An impulse was started to start a fund for financial help e.g. in the field of therapy or to compensate missed pension claims for the period of working in residential homes. The fund included 120 Million € and was founded as a “compensation for consequential disadvantages suffered by former residents in their later lives.” (Henning; Sokoll, 2010)

On the other side, only few accounts to the fates of former children in residential homes in East Germany were published since the fall of the Berlin Wall. The published accounts and claims, however, seemed to be single, individual stories of abuse and repressive education – as opposed to the accounts of systematic maltreatment in the West. But with the discussion of the residential care system in West Germany, a growing number of people from the former East also started to tell their stories and claimed their right for compensation. Could it be that children in both German states had made similar negative experiences of systematic maltreatment and abuse in residential homes?

This debate marked the beginning of the present academic approaches on the past of residential care in both parts of Germany from 1949 to 1989. In West Germany, the period from 1945 to 1975 was called the period of “dark education”. Research suggests that the equivalent “dark period” in East Germany continued until the end of the socialist system. In spite of the different political systems in both parts of Germany, aspects of the ideology of the Nazi era were still widely influential, and not only in the education sector.

In 2011, the German government decided to set up two funds for financial compensation for former children in residential homes: Residential care of children West Germany (1949-1975) and East Germany (1949-1989). The reason for the different periods of time covered by the funds was that in the 1970s, as a result of the student revolts in West Germany, a reform of the educational system in the field of residential care started. With the shorter period of time allocated for West Germany, the founders of the funds suggested that with the reforms in West Germany the conditions in residential homes began to change for the better.

As of today, 27,000 ex-institutionalized children of the former GDR have made demands for reimbursements from the fund (Fonds Heimerziehung, 31.1.15). Information centers for the funds allocated to former East Germany exist in five federal states of Germany. These centers assist those affected in helping victims to apply for financial support and in giving pieces of advice regarding other forms of help, such as therapies or contact with self-help groups.

Studies show that there was a total of about 495,000 children and youth in “normal” residential homes in East Germany from 1949 to 1989, and around 135,000 children and youth in “special” re-education homes in the East during the same period of time (Laudien, Sachse 2012: 255). The overwhelming majority of those 27,000 victims who contacted one of the five information centers and reported their experiences had been placed in the so-called “special” re-education homes. This is the reason why those “special” institutions are the focus of the following text.

Centralization after the Second World War

The main task of the children welfare system from 1945 to 1949 in East Germany was to find a shelter for the millions of orphans who lost their parents in the war. The government of the Soviet Occupation Zone (SOZ) took over former villas, castles, barracks and mansions and used them as orphanages. The homes were run by protestant or catholic institutions such as the German “Diakonie” (deaconry) or Caritas, by private individuals or societies and by the Russian Administration.

With the founding of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in 1949, education became one main task of the state. The aim of all education should be the formation of a “socialist personality”. Therefore, all private and religious institutions in the field of residential care were replaced by officially sanctioned institutions. The public child protective services received instructions to stop admitting children and youth to any residential homes that were not run by the state. Most of the non-government affiliated homes were closed because of a lack of children or were transformed into homes run by the GDR Ministry of Health (e.g. homes for the elderly or homes for people with disabilities).

By the end of the 1950s, the full system of child welfare was centrally run by the state. Only a few church institutions were left. They existed up to the end of the GDR, but with marginal numbers of children admitted. As with many minority groups in the GDR, they were tolerated, but not welcome or supported.

The formal, substantial power in the realm of residential care was held by the political authorities. They decided the official aim and direction of every education institution, methods of education, and the training of children and youth workers. As a result, the mentality of education from former eras was preserved and could not be overcome. Necessary reforms were stopped and new knowledge in the field of children and adolescents psychiatry ignored. Old structures and ideas were occupied by socialistic ideology and used to widen the power of the SED (= Socialist Unity Party of Germany).

The system of residential care

Residential homes for infants aged 0 to 3 and homes for mentally or physically handicapped children were within the responsibility of the Ministry of Health. Similar to other countries of Eastern Europe, all other residential institutions for children and youth were run by the Ministry of Education.

The system of residential care was separated into “normal” and “special” institutions (“Normalheime” and “Spezialheime”). The criterion of separation was *the expected effort the public had to invest in the education of the child or young person*. This criterion was not a socio-pedagogical one. The specific problems children and youth were facing, as well as the underlying reasons for their behavioral problems, were very often not taken into consideration when choosing the type of institution for each child. The relevant question was not how the child or young person in question could be best supported, but how much the socialist society would have to “invest” in order to re-educate or “correct” the person in question in order to form a “socialist personality”.

In the “normal” institutions of the Ministry of Education, children were staying between the ages of 3 and 18. They were divided into:

Normal children homes (“Normalkinderheime”):

- homes for children of pre-school age (3-6 years)
- homes for children at primary school level (divided into homes for pupils in regular schools and schools for children with special needs) (6-12 years)

- homes for students at secondary school level (divided into homes for pupils at regular schools ("Polytechnische Oberschule - POS") and school for children with special needs ("Hilfsschule") (13-18 years)

and normal juvenile homes ("Jugendwohnheim") (14-18 years)

- homes for young people in vocational training (near their company training centers).

Most of the children and youth were orphans or "social orphans", which means that they were taken from their parents' homes because of neglect or abuse. Children could be placed in state homes for short-term or long-term periods. If a return to the original family was not planned, they could be sent to foster families or put up for adoption. The return to their original families was depending on special conditions. These conditions were set by a committee of the parents' municipality, called "Jugendhilfekommission" ("Commission for the Support of the Youth"). The conditions of return were – in opposite to the special institutions for re-education, connected to the situation at home. If the family could provide a stable situation - the parents would have regular work or had a new partner, and the danger of neglect or abuse ended, sometimes the children could return to their homes. But in most of the cases the children stayed in residential care up to the end of their school education or vocational training.

Around 400 "normal" homes for children and juveniles with a total capacity of around 22,000 people existed from 1949 to 1989 throughout the territory of East Germany. (Laudien, Sachse 2012: 182). The number did not change through the five decades, despite the fact that socialist ideology had proclaimed that, with the "development of a truly socialist society", the underlying reasons for the existence of "social orphans" would disappear. But families deemed as "problematic" existed even under socialism. The socialist answer to this social question basically suggested that all social problems had to be "leftovers of the system of capitalism". Social problems within socialism could only be caused by the former capitalist structures, where the ideas of socialism had not been "successfully implemented". In a soon dawning future, the children welfare system could be done away with entirely as all parental education would be replaced by public education in boarding schools. (Dreier, Laudien 2013: 73)

From the beginning, "special" institutions existed parallel to the "normal" institutions. Special institutions should re-educate children and youth. Children welfare was understood as follows:

'Child and Youth Welfare Services include both a timely corrective influence on signs of social aberration and the prevention and elimination of neglect of children and adolescents, as well as the prevention and crackdown on juvenile delinquency, the re-education of maladjusted and

delinquent minors, as well as the care for orphaned children and young people and those disassociated from their families.' (Regulation of Children Welfare 1966: §1 par.1).

Child and Youth Welfare Services were understood under a triple mandate: *prevention, social care and correction*. "Special" institutions for criminal juveniles and those with behavioral problems were part of many state systems for the organization of residential homes in Western, Central and Eastern Europe in the late 20th Century. (The correctional institutions in the former GDR were not an exception.) Specific characteristics of the "special homes" of East Germany were:

The special homes were divided into special correctional facilities for children ("Spezialkinderheim") and special correctional facilities for juveniles ("Jugendwerkhof"). A total of about 135,000 minors were admitted to such correctional facilities from 1949 to 1989.

Similar to the number of "normal" children homes, the number of special children facilities did not change during those 40 years but stagnated at a figure of around 35 to 40 homes with an average of 2,500 children at all. The number of special facilities for juveniles also remained constant at around 30 homes with about 2,500 juvenile each.

The process of institutionalization in residential homes

From 1945 to 1952, based on the Children Welfare Act of 1923/1943, which had been used by the ideology of National Socialism, criminal courts could send juveniles into special correctional facilities. In 1952, the juvenile law was passed. From then on and until 1968, the juvenile court could order children's admission to special correctional facilities instead of juvenile prisons. In 1966, the Regulation of Children Welfare took effect. According to this new regulation, only a committee of the children welfare system at the level each municipality in question ("Jugendhilfeausschuss") could order children and juveniles to be admitted into residential care. Usually, these committees had three to five members who worked as volunteers. They did not have to be professionals in the field of children welfare but somewhat pedagogically versed. In practice, they were usually pre-school teachers and child care workers, but even driving instructors and hair dressers were admitted to the committees. The person in charge was the director of the department of child welfare from the municipality in question. One member of this department prepared a case analysis of the minors.

This analysis could include the first contact with the family, reports from the parents' workplaces, reports from the children's kindergarten or school and reports by the voluntary youth welfare worker of the neighborhood ("Jugendhelfer"). These voluntary youth welfare

workers - a literal translation into English would be “youth helpers” – were at the same time members of yet another committee (“Jugendhilfekommissionen”). It was their task to provide information and send reports to the relevant department at municipal level and act as right-hand men of the professional workers (Jugendfürsorger”) in the child welfare system. In 1989, throughout the GDR around 1,300 professionals worked at municipality level in the field of child welfare, while the number of voluntary “helpers” amounted to 26,500 people in 4,000 committees (Laudien, Sachse 2012: 165). The empowerment of voluntary workers was part of the socialist idea. In the field of children welfare this effort was labeled “facilitation of societal influence”.

Today, researchers and activists in the field of social work debate the idea of “networking in the local community”. Could this networking in the local community, the present contribution asks, be similar to the GDR “facilitation of societal influence”? The main difference, however, between “networking” and “facilitation” was marked by questions of privacy. The GDR’s voluntary “helpers” had the right to enter private homes, obtain information from schools, kindergartens, neighbors and colleagues of the parents. Their reports had vital influence on the decisions regarding allocated educational measures and additional steps. It is obvious that the Ministry of State Security of the GDR (“Stasi”) used the work and influence of “helpers” in children welfare for their own interest. The so-called “Confidential Informants” (“IMs”) that were hired from the ranks of the youth “helpers” received special training courses instructing them in the child welfare system in order to help create what became a legend of a “helper” who could then, armed with the ID card of a “voluntary helper”, ensure access to family homes and their personal surroundings. This system of around 26,500 voluntary helpers was open to political abuse. Research has unearthed cases of families who were put under enormous pressure by State Security. In 1986, “confidential informants” were instructed to reveal credible, useful reasons to prescribe the institutionalization of children whose parents were members in an opposition group in Berlin and had resisted cooperation with State Security (Dreier-Horning, Laudien 2015: 59).

In one district of Berlin, the director of the municipal department of children welfare and person in charge of the committee which decided about the institutionalization of infants (“Jugendhilfeausschuss”) was a “Confidential Informant” of the Ministry of State Security. It is immediately evident that there was a risk of exploiting and misuse of knowledge and intelligence gathered in the decision-making processes, as both the parents and the minors concerned did not have to be invited to committee meetings. Today, many of the former children who were sent to residential homes after committee meetings claim that until this day they were unaware of the reasons for their institutionalization, because nobody informed them at the time.

In sum, key criticisms leveled at the official processes of children's institutionalization in the GDR are the following:

1. From 1966 up to 1989, decisions about the admission of minors into "normal" or "special" residential homes were made by committees consisting of three to five members with voluntary and unprofessional workers. They decided on basis of a written and oral report of a worker of the department of child welfare of the municipality within 15 to 30 minutes.
2. The parents and minors could be asked to attend, even other people from the concerned parties' school or place of work, but they did not have to be invited.
3. The decision was not made by a neutral court, but by a committee from the children welfare system itself.
4. The minors had no advocate or spokesman, and were very often left out of the decision-making process.
5. The preparation of the case analysis was made by voluntary "helpers" in the children welfare system. Their reports were frequently more orientated towards ideologically influenced and moral standards than towards subject-specific, skilled social-pedagogical criteria.
6. The underlying motives of the person contacting the child welfare workers initially were often not legitimate or justifiable. The process allowed teachers or headmasters to expel "problematic" children and youth from schools without analyzing the underlying reasons for their behavior.
7. State Security and other political and official authorities wielded direct influence on the work of the child welfare system. It was possible to compel parents into cooperation with State Security by threatening them with the child welfare office. The child welfare system could easily be abused as an extended "arm" of the political system.

Transit facilities

Around 20 transit facilities ("Durchgangsheime") existed in the former GDR to accommodate children and juveniles for a short period of time. Every year 10,000 to 12,000 minors passed through these homes. They were either located on shared and combined premises with other residential homes or stood by themselves. They hosted mainly children and juveniles who had been picked up or arrested by the authorities. Most inmates had previously run away from other residential homes or their parents. Other inmates were merely minors waiting for a place in a "normal" or "special" facility available.

All transit facilities were closed homes surrounded by walls and secured with barred windows. Some of them had been previously used as jails. The children detained in these facilities had to work on indoor or outdoor production sites up until the age of 14. In the transit facility in Berlin they were picked up in the morning for transport to a company with lipsticks-manufacture. In the Baltic town Rostock juveniles had to cut the heads of fishes for a fish company. The younger children should get school lessons. The period of stay was supposed to end latest within 18 days. In some transit facilities this deadline was exceeded in more than 50 % of the cases.

Problematical is the fact that even pre-school and school kids were sent in transit facilities – together with criminal juveniles, who waited for their trial. Because transit facilities acted in case of emergency as a first accommodation and were used as a kind of custody for youth suspected of criminal activities. The background of these small children was in most cases neglect or abuse in their original homes. Because of that they were put out of their homes or ran away. But instead of giving the necessary therapeutic guidance they were accommodated in closed rooms with strange and sometimes dangerous minors and waited for next transport to another residential home.

The “socialist personality”

The vision of the socialistic system was to create the “new human being”. Education was seen as the central step in this process. What exactly a “socialistic personality” should be was, however, not defined in academic circles. It was an open term, which could be defined depending on the official authorities.

The “socialistic personality” was more a summary of ethical values than anthropology image. Some ethical values were formulated in the 10 commandments of the “Junge Pioniere” – the children section of the youth organization: e.g. be honest, be helpful, love your parents and your country.

To identify with the GDR and the values of the socialism was the first and important expectation. Young groups of people like Punks, Gothic and Rock groups with different ideas were criminalized and persecuted. The children welfare system with the possibility of closed facilities became part of a repressive system. The political authorities used the established structure of the children welfare system for their own interests.

Truancy, combined with a bad motivation and failure in school, was the main reason for re-education. Sometimes it went together with criminal activities, which were not enough for a trial. Truancy was considered similar than refusal to work. Adults could be kept in prison due to

§249 (asocial behavior) of the GDR criminal code. Juveniles who were hanging around in parks could be sent in special homes because of a criminal act called “membership of a youth group” and “disturbance of public order”. It is not surprising that the main content of the re-education program was the work-education.

But besides from young people who refused to go to school or to vocational training, even unsuitable dresses, homosexuality, early sexual contacts etc. could be reasons for re-education in special homes. All these “incorrect behavior” was seen as an “leftover from the capitalism system” or was entitled as “western-influenced”.

Special correctional facilities for children and youth

People from youth groups came together with criminal juveniles, with underachievers and children with serious behavioral deficits, who would have been a case for psychic therapy. This structure gave a bad influence to every education process and provoked violence and abuse – not only by educator but also by other children and juveniles.

The corrective training with the aim of re-education can be reduced to:

- To learn order and discipline
- To respect authorities and to subordinate in society
- To learn how to work and appreciate the worth of work
- To respect the “worth” of the socialist society

The conditions to leave special homes were connected to the educational success of the correctional.

The special facilities for children (“Spezialkinderheime”) were closed institutions for the age of 8 to 16 years. They received lessons in different subjects and should be prepared to the exam of class 8. Youth who finished the 8th grade went into special homes for juveniles to participate in vocational training. It was impossible for those children to come into contact with other people then the people inside, because the school was part of the facility.

Isolation rooms

Every special facility had a closed isolation room. The conditions for these rooms were defined within a special regulation in 1967. In practice, the isolation rooms existed since the beginning of the GDR, but now the method of isolation became a legal and regular method in every special facility. The isolation rooms had a bed, which was mostly fixed at the wall and dropped down for the night, a stool fixed at the wall, a wall table and a bin for toilet. The window was barred and

the door closed, the size of the room had to have a minimum of 6 m². Before 1967, it was even legally allowed to jail children under the age of 12. Due to the regulation of 1967, the isolated person had to be at least 12 years old. As the maximum period, the director of the facilities was allowed to imprison somebody for 12 days. There are, however, documented cases of special facilities where the director did not follow these rules.

Special homes for juveniles ("Jugendwerkhöfe") were mainly located near industry areas or were part of a company as a kind of boarding section, but in closed facilities. If the juveniles "behaved well", they could join events in the towns nearby during the weekend. Only during the holidays it was possible to go home to the parents for a short term. But this allowance was connected to the educational success in the correctional facility.

Anton Semjonowitsch Makarenko

In the 1950s the special facilities were organized like a vocational training company. They offered trainings in jobs of trade or farming. The concept was partly borrowed by the Soviet educationist Anton Semjonowitsch Makarenko. In the full period from 1949 up to 1989 only his pedagogical ideas were used in the former GDR. The person in the Ministry of Education responsible for residential care was Eberhard Mannschatz. He graduated to the pedagogical ideas of Makarenko and mainly influenced the direction of the residential care system. The academic publications in that field and the training content of the later educators were characterized by Mannschatz's adoption of Makarenko. Makarenko became the exclusive pedagogic theory in pedagogic general and residential care specially.

In the area of the Ukraine in 1920, Makarenko set up a facility for criminal orphans with the idea of re-education. The difference to the existing facilities was the educational aspect. He believed in the re-socialization of children and juveniles who became prostitutes or criminals because of neglect as a result of the Russian War in the beginning of the 20th century. His ideas were part of a general European progressive educational movement. In Germany a long period of reforms in the field of education came into life with the principle "Age of the child".

The anthropology of Makarenko has the character of this progressive period: They believed that no one is born as a bad person, the environment and our experiences forms us to what we are. Hence, adults should not punish children and juveniles, but give them a chance for correcting. But at the same time, Makarenko's correctional program is a pool of repressive methods.

There are to characteristics of his pedagogical ideas:

1. His focus lay on the work training: Education to work and by work. The work itself should help to stabilize the character of the minors combined with discipline and order.
2. The group should educate itself. This self-education should not be managed by the educator or another authority. This progressive approach with basic-democratically elements caused violence and authoritarian structures among the group.

The belief in these two methods of re-education was the pivot of the correctional facilities in the former GDR from 1949-1989. In practice the work became a self purpose without asking what it was supposed to achieve and the self-education developed to punishments of the group without responsibility of the educators. The critical reports about the conditions in the special correctional facilities existed in every decade of the GDR because of the so called "Worker-and-Farmer-Inspections". In an open and flexible political system there would have been changes in the academic circles. In the former GDR, however, the pedagogical ideology stayed with the one-sided reception of Makarenko as the single relevant theory for re-education.

The "Closed Juvenile Correctional Facility Torgau"

If a person in a special juvenile facility refused to work, broke the rules of the facility, ran away more than five times, or became violent or criminal, he or she was taken to the "Closed Juvenile Correctional Facility Torgau". It was a special facility for juveniles who could not be taken under control in other special correctional facilities. In the view of the authorities they tried to "refuse the re-education process". The facility in Torgau had the task to prepare the juvenile for correction by force: Up to 12 days they could be isolated in dark cells. They got a number instead of their names, they were forced to sport exercises up to the physically burn-out. They were not allowed to speak with each other. Every activity was organized in a group – even using the toilets had to be done in group to extra times during the daily timetable. The toilets were not separated. The young people should be completely at mercy. More than 4,000 young people between 14-18 years from 1964 to 1989 were arrested in Torgau.

Today, the facility is a memorial which shows one part of children welfare in former GDR which we have to call "repressive system". The Court of Appeal in Berlin decided in 2004, that every arresting in Torgau can be rehabilitated due to of serious human rights abuse.

Summary of the main characteristics of the correctional facilities:

- They were under the roof of the Ministry of Education, not under the responsibility of the Ministry of Justice, although their character was similar to imprisonment.
- Besides of arresting criminal persons they were used as correctional institutions for political oppositional youth and alternative groups.

- Children and juveniles could be sent to facilities by a 3-5 member non-professional committee of the municipality ("Jugendhilfeausschuss") without a court decision and without the right for objection by the parents.
- In most of the cases, the special institutions boosted violence and abuse by other residents or by the workers.
- Juveniles who were placed in special homes without school but with working facilities ("Jugendwerkhöfe"), were forced to break up school without graduation.
- Children in most of the special homes did not receive the opportunity to graduate higher than class eight, although the GDR had a regular school system of ten classes since 1959.
- The graduation of the vocational training in special homes was not officially accepted in the GDR. As a result, the leavers were untrained and had a lot of disadvantages in their further lives.
- More important than regular vocational training were the education of working and the employment of cheap workers in case of lack of manpower - in some cases forced labor.
- The stay in the "Closed Juvenile Correctional Facility Torgau" is the single case in the German jurisdiction of residential child care where a person can be rehabilitated without special proof of abuse, because the Court in Berlin came to the conclusion that imprisonment in Torgau always involved human rights abuse.

Actual situation

With establishing the fund-system for compensation, the first researching projects started. Most of the posed knowledge about the residential care in former East Germany is therefore not older than three years. Today, step by step, long-term structures are established, e.g. the setup of memorial places. The most important place is the "Closed Juvenile Correctional Facility" in Torgau (www.jugendwerkhof-torgau.de). But even in other former facilities memorial places open up.

With the German Institute of Residential Care Research, Cooperative Institute of the Protestant University of Applied Science Berlin, the first long-term structure in academic institutions was established in 2013. The institute searches in the field of residential care and related topics (e.g. foster families, juvenile delinquents, adoption). Among others we had the aim to integrate the topic of residential-care-history in academic structures and to promote the academic research in that field- in the conviction that the knowledge about past should guide us in the coming challenges of social work.

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