



HOHENSCHÖNHAUSEN: A TANGIBLE REFLECTION OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF OPERATIVE PSYCHOLOGY IN THE GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

Researcher: Zoe Werth, Advisor: Dr. Charles Vannette, Department of Languages, Literature, and Cultures
University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH, 03824

INTRODUCTION

The division of Germany post-World War II led to the emergence of two distinct states with diverging political ideologies and systems of governance. In the East, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) sought to establish a socialist society under the influence of the Soviet Union. Conversely, in the West, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), emerged under the aegis of the Western powers — the United States, the United Kingdom, and France.

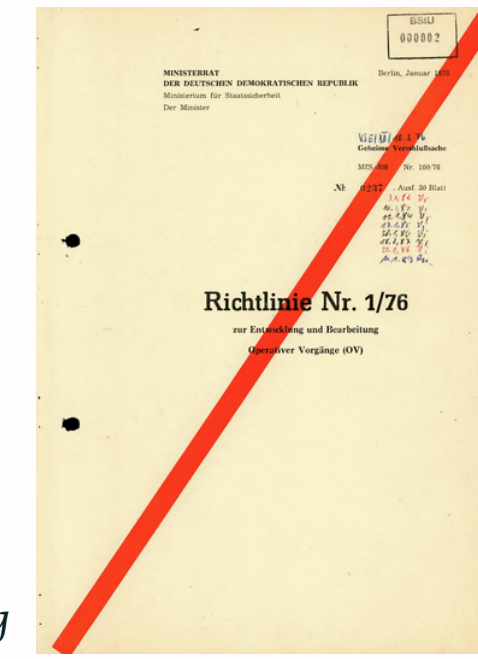
This division created not only a physical barrier but also an ideological chasm between the two Germanys. This divide between the two German states would become one of the largest symbols of the Cold War, which in turn would help influence the development of Operative Psychology within the GDR.

The shift towards Operative Psychology is analyzed within the political, economic, and historical influences of the Cold War; highlighting how the GDR's limited resources, ideological warfare, and international pressures resulted in a move away from physical coercion to more subtle psychological techniques in response to the increased international focus on human rights and the potential for internal dissent.

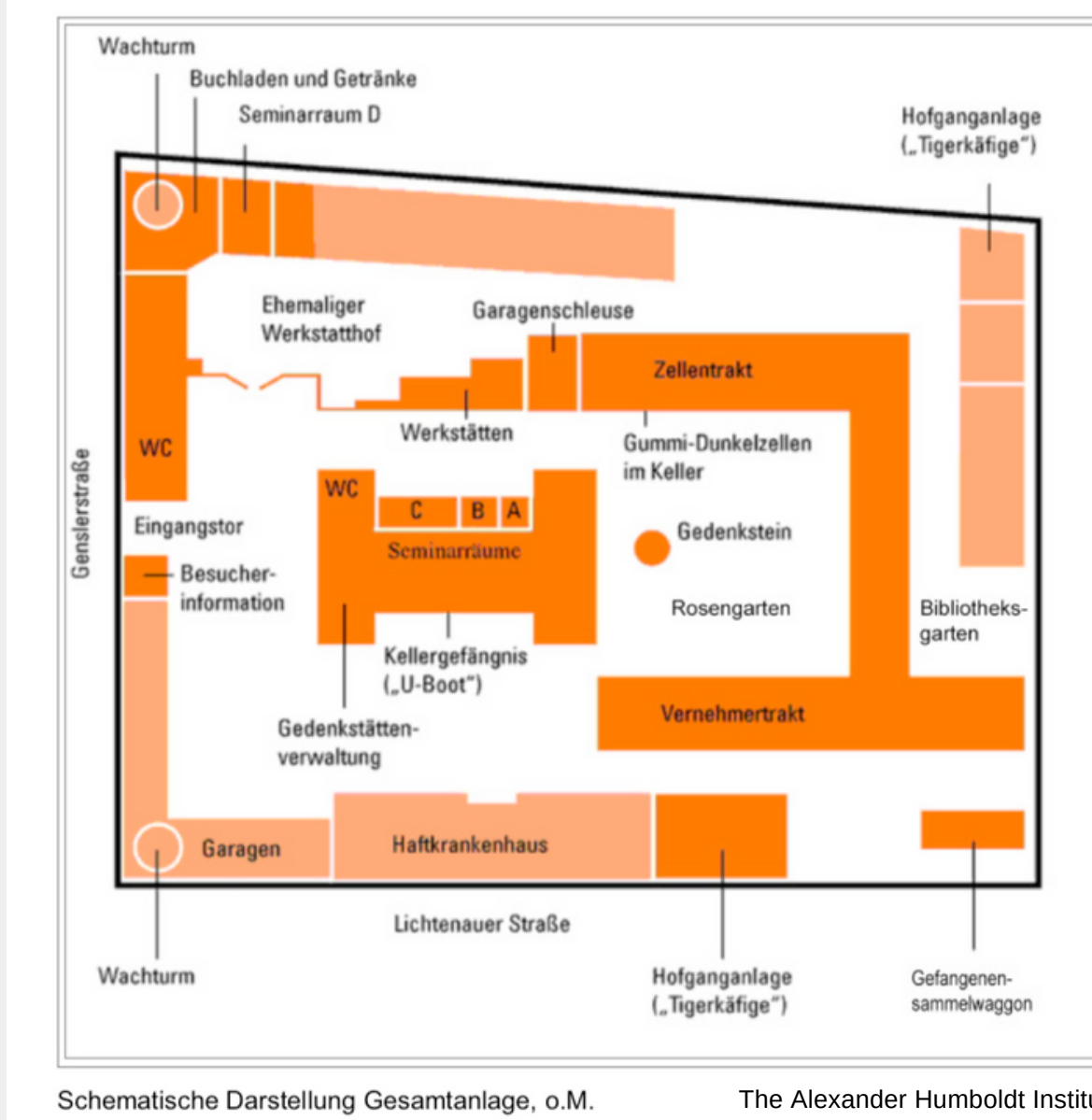
Through an architectural and historical analysis of the prison, alongside a review of prisoner testimonies, this research aims to understand how the environment of Hohenschönhausen was methodically designed to disorient and manipulate detainees within the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in order to support the use of Operative Psychology. The interplay between environment, psychology, and state power are also analyzed— thus critically assessing the legacy of Operative Psychology and its implications for human rights and the psychological practice.

OPERATIVE PSYCHOLOGY

Operative Psychology (OP) can be described as a form of applied, institutional psychology that serves secret police or militaristic purposes, including interrogation techniques, or other operational procedures such as recruiting, or supervising suitable “informal collaborators”. The use of OP is also characterized by its “invisible nature”, which allowed for deniability. The use of psychological techniques in the GDR, that would later be known as “Operative Psychology”, date back to as early as the 1950's, but were escalated in the 1970's. Six months after the Helsinki Accords were signed, *Directive 1/76*, which outlined the uses of *Zersetzung* [Decomposition], was published by the Ministry of State Security (MfS) as the official guidelines for the standardization, the development, and implementation of “operative procedures”. Especially notable about this document is the lack of physical violence mentioned, as well as the emphasis on anonymity of official MfS employees. The team that developed these “operative procedures” were only identified after the reunification of Germany, and were comprised of trained psychologists who aimed to increase the effectiveness of psychological manipulation and torture in order to support a totalitarian governance.



“Directive No. 1/76”, © Bundesarchiv



Schematische Darstellung Gesamtanlage, o.M. The Alexander Humboldt Institute

Map of the Complex at Hohenschönhausen

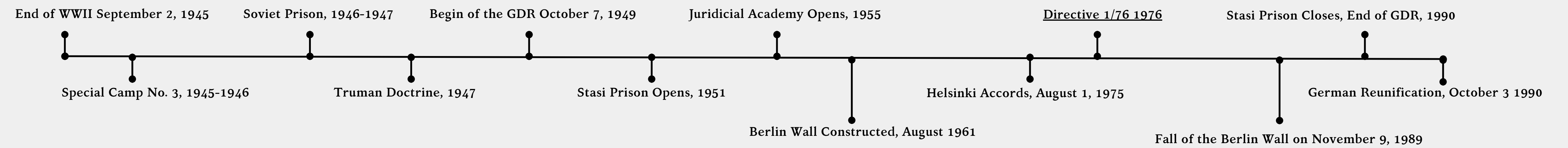
REFLECTION

The use of Operative Psychology at Hohenschönhausen is a dark chapter in the history of psychological practices, where knowledge of the human mind was weaponized for control and repression—a direct betrayal of the Hippocratic Oath. Psychologists who developed the procedures and techniques regarding “Operative Psychology” at the Juridical Academy in Postdam did not aim to make interrogation and imprisonment more humane by fighting against physical violence, rather their research on interrogation techniques were conducted in order to make them more effective.

The treatment of prisoners under the use of OP was denoted by such cruelty that left deep psychological scars, affecting individuals' mental health long after their release. Former political dissident of the GDR and psychologists Jürgen Fuchs, who was imprisoned at Hohenschönhausen, described the conditions as “an assault on the human soul”.

This institutionalized application of techniques of psychological torture was not isolated to East Germany. The pressures of the Cold War that led to an increased need for more effective interrogation techniques also had a great effect in the West— specifically in the United States. The CIA was created in 1947 in order to obtain information about threats to national security. The CIA, similarly to the Stasi, was officially forbidden to use physical violence to meet their objectives, however it is retrospectively clear that this principle was flagrantly violated by the CIA, especially in regards to the physical and psychological treatment of prisoner's at Guantanamo Bay, which is still in operation to this day.

While OP was smaller in scale compared to the United States interrogative program, which employed top-level researchers from the 1950s onwards, had greater financial support, and showed a heavier impact on international psychology, the effects of OP still serve as an important lesson about state power, human rights, and the boundaries of psychological practice.



SPECIAL CAMP NO. 3 (1945-1946)

- This site served as a prison camp run by the Moscow People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD). From Special Camp No. 3, over 20,000 prisoners were either transported or forced to march to other Soviet camps including, the former concentration camp at Sachsenhausen.
- Conditions at the prison camp were horrific. The rations and resources for food and medicine were inadequate, and the hygienic conditions were abhorrent. The coldness in the winter was so intense in the unheated cells that many imprisoned there became severely ill. About 1,000-3,000 people died under these conditions.



Wooden fence of the Soviet special camp, photo taken in the mid-fifties © Bundesarchiv

SOVIET PRISON (1946-1947)

- In winter 1946/47, the Soviet authorities converted the former Special Camp No. 3 into the main Soviet Secret Police prison for detention and interrogation of political prisoners. Prison laborers carried out the conversion of the former canteen, as well as the construction of the new underground cell section that prisoners dubbed the “U-Boot” (“the submarine”) due to the general dampness, and the use of water torture in the cells.
- The individual cells were small, damp and cold, with only a wooden bed and bucket as a toilet for furnishings. The light in the cells was kept on all hours of the day. Generally, interrogations would take place at night and would often involve threats and physical violence. Former prisoners have reported that confessions had been extracted after sleep deprivation, standing for hours on end, being kept under close arrest, or being confined in “water cells”. Some cells were reported to be 3 m x 2 m by 2 m in size.
- Group cells could contain roughly 10-20 prisoners at a time, with one wooden bed and one bucket for the group to share. During most hours of the day, prisoners were not allowed to sit, and they were especially not allowed to sleep. At night, patients were required to maintain a certain form while sleeping.



Isolation Cell in the “U-Boot” © Max Wahrhaftig

STASI PRISON (1951-1990)

The architectural modifications made under Stasi control were instrumental in the shift towards Operative Psychology, making the prison in and of itself a tool of psychological warfare. The environment was methodically designed to destabilize, disorient, and manipulate detainees, while also appearing quite tolerable from an outside perspective, marking a significant evolution from physical to psychological methods of repression.

- In the late 1950s, inmates from the adjacent labor camp “X,” situated at the rear of the complex, were labored to construct a new detention facility equipped with over 200 cells and interrogation spaces. This above ground, U-shaped structure became the primary remand prison for the Ministry of State Security (MfS) up until the end of the GDR in 1990.
- The prison's primary purpose was the detention, interrogation, and psychological manipulation of individuals deemed a threat to the state's socialist ideology and authority. This facility was shrouded in secrecy, omitted from city maps, and its existence was unknown to the public.
- In the new building, isolation cells were introduced, designed to maximize psychological pressure by preventing communication between prisoners, and creating a sense of complete isolation from the outside world. Light systems were installed in the hallways, which allowed the guards to coordinate when to move prisoners from their cells to the interrogation rooms, ensuring that no prisoner ever saw anyone else imprisoned at Hohenschönhausen.
- One of the primary strategies employed was the isolation of prisoners, to weaken their mental resilience and foster a dependency on their interrogators. This was coupled with efforts to disorient detainees: the prison's layout was intentionally confusing, and prisoners were kept unaware of their location within the facility. They were transported while blindfolded and held in cells that were soundproofed, eliminating any cues that could help them orient themselves in time and space. Sensory manipulation played a crucial role in this psychological arsenal. Techniques included both deprivation and overload, such as being kept in total darkness or under constant, harsh lighting, and exposure to repetitive loud noises or enforced silence. These methods aimed to create a profound sense of dislocation and vulnerability. Additionally, methods like enforced stress positions and sleep deprivation were employed, not as forms of direct physical violence, but to physically and mentally wear down individuals, rendering them more amenable to interrogation.



Cell with Bed, Table, Chair and Prison Clothes © Thomas Weber - webrock-foto.de



Cell Corridor with Food Slot © Thomas Weber - webrock-foto.de