

IGFM annual general meeting – 4/5 September 2021

Remembering the Communist Dictatorships: Warning against Forgetting



Markus Meckel, Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Federal Foundation for the Reappraisal of the SED Dictatorship and Foreign Minister of the GDR from April to August 1990, described the remembrance of the past as a "national task" and "service to society" at the IGFM conference. He described the founding of the Russian organization "Memorial" by dissidents during "glasnost" and "perestroika," which the former Secretary General of the USSR, Mikhail Gorbachev, founded as principles of

his policy. The founders were not only concerned with democratization, participation, and justice. "The past, marked by terror and degradation, was also to be snatched from oblivion and repression."

In the GDR, the process of coming to terms with the past began with the peaceful revolution of 1989. The Central Round Table was established on December 7, 1989. There, representatives of all parties and groups discussed the reorganization of society and the holding of free, democratic, and secret elections.

Meckel, a co-founder of the Social Democratic Party of the GDR in October 1989, recalled the joint declaration of all parliamentary groups of the 10th GDR People's Chamber, adopted at its 2nd session on April 12, 1990. This declaration carried the confessions both of co-responsibility for the period of National Socialism and of complicity in the suppression of the "Prague Spring" in 1968 by military intervention in violation of international law. The parliamentarians also branded the inner-German border as inhumane.

Meckel said, "we were convinced that at the beginning of the work of this democratically elected parliament of the GDR there should be a declaration in history." After the SED had stolen its responsibility for the burdens of German history and shifted them to the Federal Republic, Meckel said, with the beginning of the establishment of democratic structures, the deputies faced up to the responsibility that accrued to the Germans from the burdened history. The reappraisal was initiated by the GDR's representatives and not by Western politicians.

Between 1992 and 1998, two commissions of inquiry of the German Bundestag dealt with the history of the SED dictatorship and its consequences. On the recommendation of the second commission, the German Bundestag passed the law establishing the "Foundation for the Reappraisal of the SED Dictatorship," which began its work in the fall of 1998. The decision was reached across party lines.

Meckel sees a major challenge on the fact that there is no consensus in Germany and Europe on the assessment of communism - unlike with regard to National Socialism. "That the crimes of communism are trivialized is something I experience in Germany and the rest of Europe to this day." He said it was not just a matter of coming to terms with the injustices committed in the SED state,

but also of establishing a connection to crimes committed in the name of this ideology beyond Germany's borders. According to Meckel, working for human rights and coming to terms with history are closely related - both tasks concern human dignity.

Birgit Schlicke, a former political prisoner of the SED state, made it clear how important it is to come to terms with injustices committed by the state. Her family applied to leave the GDR in 1985. As a result, all family members came under pressure. The then 16-year-old refused to break away from her family. Finally, she was expelled from school: It was no longer "economical" to continue her education. She was also denied an apprenticeship. When the situation for the family worsened in 1987, the father finally wrote a letter to the IGFM in Frankfurt, which the daughter Birgit typed out and which they had smuggled out of the GDR.

"One day after my 19th birthday, my father disappeared," Birgit Schlicke recalled. Four days later, on March 3, 1988, she too was arrested. For months, the Stasi tried in vain to pressure her into confessing. "They told me almost every day that the IGFM was an enemy organization that wanted to destroy the GDR," Schlicke continued. For getting involved with them, father and daughter were severely punished. "I resisted being put on the same level as murderers and concentration camp guards."

Their trial was a farce. The verdict was already determined. She was sentenced to two and a half years in Hoheneck women's prison, with military drill and hard labor. The course of history came to her rescue. On November 10, 1989, the prisoners were allowed to watch the news on television and learned of the fall of the Wall the day before. Fairly soon after her release, Birgit Schlicke made the decision to write about her fate in a book. "It soon became clear to me that I had a certain obligation as a contemporary witness," she explained. Schlicke recalled the first Injustice Rectification Act of 1992, which aimed to rehabilitate and compensate victims of political justice. This was followed two years later by the Vocational Rehabilitation Act and the Administrative Rehabilitation Act. "Normally, there should also be criminal prosecution of the perpetrators," Schlicke said. He said it was dramatic that this was not implemented in Germany. "The perpetrators are among us," Schlicke criticized.

He added that coming to terms with the past also involves scientific research, teaching at universities and schools, and media work. The knowledge of the younger generations, who no longer experienced the GDR, is shockingly incomplete. As a contemporary witness, she meets with lively interest in school classes. To sensitize young people, the establishment and maintenance of memorials at the sites of state crimes plays a key role. Former prisoners were just able to prevent the Hoheneck women's prison from being converted into a gastronomic experience.