

## Jehovah's Witnesses in Germany: Prisoners during the Communist Era\*

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Both dictatorships in Germany mobilised the police and the criminal justice system to persecute Jehovah's Witnesses when they showed religiously motivated non-compliance and when they continued to evangelise publicly. According to Gerhard Finn, in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) Jehovah's Witnesses were 'the first "enemies" against whom the political panels of judges acted'. He says that in 1958 'The members of this religious community were kept separate from other prisoners. Because of their uncompromising attitude despite harassment from guards and because of their solidarity, they became examples for the other political prisoners' (Finn, 1960, p. 90). Finn rightly emphasises distinctive characteristics of this group, such as isolation, non-conformity and solidarity. His observation is noteworthy because the East German regime particularly deprived its 'enemies' of liberty in order to 'secure a process of education by the penal system' (GDR quotation, according to Finn and Fricke, 1981, p. 12).

This essay focuses on specific conditions of imprisonment as they were experienced by individuals and the group as a whole, and describes these conditions from the perspective of the prisoners. The daily reality of prison life can be reconstructed mainly by oral-history statements of the victims who were affected. I have analysed reports by formerly imprisoned Jehovah's Witnesses whom I interviewed in autumn 2000, as well as other oral-history sources.<sup>1</sup> Typical experiences of imprisoned Jehovah's Witnesses, such as strict bans on reading or possessing a Bible, as well as conflicts resulting from their refusal to eat blood sausage (known as black pudding in England), are confirmed by non-Witness prisoners (see Bechler, 1984, pp. 334–39).

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This essay divides history into chronological sections as introduced by Klaus-Dieter Müller (1998, p. 31), who uses this system to describe the conditions of imprisonment of political prisoners in the SOZ (Soviet Occupation Zone) or early communist Germany. My sections cover the years 1950–55 (phase I), 1956–76 (phase II) and 1977–89 (phase III).

## **Background**

For more than 100 years the Bible-oriented religious organisation of ‘Jehovah’s Witnesses’ (name introduced in 1931), previously known as ‘International Bible Student Association’, has been involved in missionary activities among the German people (Wrobel, 2001, pp. 96, 108–13). The Witnesses teach the first-century Christian belief that an entirely new, righteous world order will soon be established by means of God’s heavenly kingdom. Even before this change to a new world order (‘End of the World’, Matthew 24:3) takes place, the adherents of this organisation practise brotherly love on a worldwide scale, which explains their strict political neutrality, their refusal to commit acts of violence, their rejection of military service, and their non-participation in political elections (refusing to give a government the authority to decide between peace and war) (Wrobel, 1994; Schmidt, 2000). In accordance with Romans 13:1, Jehovah’s Witnesses respect every state as a ‘higher power’ and, as recently stated by the Federal Constitutional Court in Germany, as a ‘transitional government permitted by God’. If, however, there were to be a clear conflict between the law of God (‘dictates of their faith’, *Glaubensgebot*) and the law by the state, they would consider God’s law as superior (Federal, 2000, pp. 82, 98). When this teaching of ‘relative submission’ results in the fatal misconception that Jehovah’s Witnesses have an alleged animosity against the state or against democracy, the totalitarian state responds by marginalising them, presenting them as criminals, and punishing them. Such punishment is often connected with accusations of political or social ‘dangerousness’ (Besier and Besier, 2003). A recent publication states: ‘Jehovah’s Witnesses probably represent the largest coherent victim group under the SED [East German Communist Party] dictatorship’, and ‘their persecution in the GDR . . . almost immediately [followed] the persecution by the National Socialists’ (Maser, 2000, pp. 378–79).

Jehovah’s Witnesses already experienced local restrictions, house searches, confiscations, arrests and interrogations in the SOZ (before the founding of the GDR in October 1949). Some arrested people were soon released. Others remained ‘missing’. But in 1946–47, two Witnesses lost their lives – Erna Steinicke in the special camp of Bautzen and the blind Karl Straube during his imprisonment in Brandenburg-Görden (see also Dirksen, 2003, pp. 108–09).

In August 1950, at the time that the GDR ban was introduced, this religious organisation had approximately 23,000 members (Yearbook, 1951, p. 165). The ban initiated a period of extreme persecution for Jehovah’s Witnesses in the GDR.<sup>2</sup> During the combined periods of the Soviet Zone and the GDR a total of 6000 Jehovah’s Witnesses were arrested. This includes about 1000 people who were kept in custody on remand but were not convicted. This number also includes all Jehovah’s Witnesses who from 1962 were convicted because of their refusal to perform military service.

The three phases of imprisonment in the GDR present the following overview:

- (i) From 1950 to 1955: 1850 prisoners (37 per cent).
- (ii) From 1956 to 1976: 2050 prisoners (41 per cent; approximately 620 names are missing; from 1962 onward, practically all were conscientious objectors).

(iii) From 1977 to 1989: 1100 prisoners (22 per cent; approximately 340 names are missing).

Total number: 5000 prisoners in the GDR prison system (convicts).

A different time frame gives the following figures:

- (i) From 1950 to 1961: more than 2300 prisoners (46 per cent).
- (ii) From 1962 to 1989: more than 2700 prisoners (54 per cent).<sup>3</sup>

At the following places, a total of about 100 or more Jehovah's Witnesses, who are identified by name, were detained (in custody on remand or in prisons for people awaiting trial, other penal institutions, prison hospitals, prison labour camps, prison details, etc.): Dresden (598), Chemnitz/Karl-Marx-Stadt (578), Waldheim (512), Halle/Saale (476), Zwickau (443), Cottbus and 'Schwarze Pumpe' (Black Pump) (305), East Berlin (304), Bützow/Bützow-Dreibergen (279), Bautzen (268), Leipzig and Klein-Meusdorf (256), Brandenburg (221), Torgau (220), Magdeburg (192), Stollberg Hoheneck (189), Potsdam (137), Erfurt (130), Gera (128), Rostock (113), Greifswald (107), Schwerin (99), Görlitz (95) and Luckau (93).

During the periods of the Soviet Zone and the GDR a total of 62 Jehovah's Witnesses died in custody on remand or during imprisonment in other prisons (or as a result of their imprisonment, including cases of death of unknown causes, and the deaths of three women who were driven to suicide in 1950–51). The deceased individuals included 16 women (26 per cent) and 46 men (74 per cent). From among these, 29 people (45 per cent) were persecuted in both dictatorships (four women and 25 men).

### **Under the Penal System 1950–55**

Immediately after the enforcement of the ban in 1950 Jehovah's Witnesses in the GDR appeared as a distinct group within the penal system. Certain characteristics of the group, such as their conduct and their treatment by the prison staff, prevailed until phase III (from 1977), the last historical section. During the first phase of imprisonment all the 1850 convicted Jehovah's Witnesses had to endure the same inhumane treatment to which political prisoners of the GDR were exposed. These involved agonisingly cramped conditions, inadequate food rations, disease, exposure to cold and heat, unsanitary conditions, social isolation and harassment, which caused the death of some 37 inmates (including those who died in custody on remand). Among the causes of death were, for example, pleurisy resulting from treatment during detention (Richard Leubner, 1952), insufficient medical attention (Martha Knie, 1953), 'vertigo' (Erich Wenge, 1954) and heart attack (Paul Grossmann, 1955) (WTA, O-Zentralkartei).

As a female Witness of that time remembers, 'Jehovah's Witnesses were the most dangerous, as we were accused of spying for the United States according to article 6 [of the GDR Constitution]' (1-124). How did a relatively large number of adherents come to be in GDR prisons with the most severe forms of punishment? According to statements of the Ministry for State Security (MfS), during the 'police action on GDR territory of 30 August 1950' a total of 373 adherents were arrested up until 6 September. They were accused of offences such as 'espionage and acts of treason', 'connections with government offices in America and other hostile countries', 'war propaganda' and 'election offences' (BStU, 1950b). On 20 September 1950 chief public

prosecutor Ernst Melsheimer instructed the criminal division to use ‘for the formulation of the charges’ the ‘comprehensive explanation for the ban of the sect’ as found in the East German newspaper *Neues Deutschland* (BStU, 1950a). Under the heading ‘Enemies of the people arrested’ the East German newspaper *Tägliche Rundschau* of 3 October 1950 reported that ‘the judiciary...acted promptly and ruthlessly’ (Bästlein, 1996, p. 62). In Mecklenburg 37 Jehovah’s Witnesses were imprisoned, with sentences totalling 274 years. In this regard, the public prosecutor stated: ‘In general, “group overseers” were sentenced to 10 years in a penitentiary. “Publishers” and others received 8 years’ (BStU, 1950c, p. 8). By 6 December 1950 a total of 1200 Jehovah’s Witnesses had been arrested nationwide; 115 of these were ‘sentenced to many years of imprisonment; ten received life sentences’ (WTA, O-Dok, 1950). Only from 1956 onwards did sentences no longer exceed ten years in prison. From then on, imprisonment usually lasted between three and four years (see also Dirksen, 2003, pp. 924–25).

Until 1950 the legal and prison systems were under Soviet authority. After 1950 the Ministry of the Interior, as well as the People’s Police (*Volkspolizei*), took over. For Jehovah’s Witnesses, this transition meant more than a change of uniform by their wardens. (As a result of this development, for example, in April 1953 the 80 Witnesses in Waldheim were transferred from the old cell complex to join their 120 fellow-believers in the big cell house). The transfer of authority from the judiciary to the police resulted in the ‘correctional function’ of punishment being substituted with a ‘function of oppression’ for some time. The members of the People’s Police, who were trained to hate the ‘class enemy’ and who were less qualified than and frequently intellectually inferior to the political prisoners, often compensated for their perceived inadequacies with outright cruelty. However, compared to the time under Soviet authority, fewer political prisoners were mistreated and died. Punishment and severe detention nevertheless remained life-threatening. Only a few Jehovah’s Witnesses experienced physical mistreatment, ‘such as beatings’, during their period of imprisonment (as opposed to their time in custody awaiting trial); but they still had to suffer ‘harassment, humiliation, degradation, intimidation and hunger’ (O-ZZ Männel; 1-030; Finn, 1960, pp. 77–80, 109–13; Finn and Fricke, 1981, pp. 19–20, 26–28, 55, 106–07, 108; Müller, 1998, pp. 47, 51).

In the beginning, all prisoners suffered from hunger. In fact up until the autumn of 1951 severe malnutrition was prevalent. Prisoners were allowed to receive food parcels from their families (during the period from 1950 to 1955 only), but Jehovah’s Witnesses were denied those privileges when religious literature was discovered in the parcels (‘the process of searching through our parcels was more thorough’, a Witness recalls (1-123)), or in their cells. From 1950 political prisoners were allowed to send notes, of no more than 15 lines, to the same recipient once a month. Later, this was increased to 20 lines per letter. Jehovah’s Witnesses, however, ‘were not allowed to use [God’s name] Jehovah in their letters’ (1-121; see also 1-086; 1-111). ‘Wrong’ conduct could make a prisoner more liable for severe punishment. Conversations about the Bible were prohibited. Disregarding these rules resulted in solitary confinement (Müller, 1998, p. 44; Finn and Fricke, 1981, pp. 89–90, 98).

Because of their religious beliefs, Jehovah’s Witnesses refused to eat blood sausage. At first, the prison administration misinterpreted this as ‘*Wirtschaftssabotage*’ (1-007), an ‘act of sabotage’ of food supplies, and regarded it as an offence against prison regulations. As a result, Jehovah’s Witnesses were sanctioned and received collective punishment. Part of this collective punishment at the prison for women in Waldheim was the cancellation of the privilege of writing monthly 15-line letters. They were also

not allowed to receive any parcels. Only after an outstanding letter campaign 'by all family members to the prison administration' (1-005) was this restriction lifted. At the penal institution in Torgau, blood sausage was 'even violently forced into the mouth' of some Jehovah's Witnesses. Interestingly, though, 'a sudden change took place from blood sausage to other sausages, and blood sausages were never served again' (1-108; see also 1-008; 1-018). In Bautzen, the governor of the prison at first threatened to interpret the refusal as mutiny. However, he then decided to have other prisoners eat the food in question (Leubner, 2000, pp. 304, 312). (In National Socialist concentration camps a refusal to accept blood sausage at food distributions similarly resulted in confrontations between the prisoners and the camp administrations. See Garbe, 1999, pp. 435–36.)

'Laughing and singing was generally prohibited' at the penal institutions in Waldheim and Halle (1-049). A female Witness imprisoned from 1951 to 1954 recalls: 'Jehovah's Witnesses were always penalised by denial of food, solitary confinement, restrictions on letter writing, no exercise (walking) for weeks. Not so the others. Jehovah's Witnesses were punished for singing their religious melodies (Kingdom songs) and other trivialities. In their opinion, we were lunatics' (1-119). Another woman remembers: 'During cases of sickness, we were not even allowed to see a doctor. Even medications were denied us' (1-004).

The exemplary conduct Jehovah's Witnesses displayed in the GDR prisons was characteristic for this group of prisoners. They were noted for their 'positive and calm disposition and their decent decorum toward their wardens' (1-123). They 'did not join in the collective screams of hunger from the windows nor did they participate in drumming against doors as a means of protest' (1-118). (The demonstrations against hunger which took place in 1950, 1953 and 1965 were supported by all or most of the political prisoners.) 'To this end', a former prisoner stated, 'we tried to comply with the prison regulations. We had no part in acts of violence or fits of rage. We did not participate in revolts led by prisoners' (1-145). The female Jehovah's Witnesses 'displayed unity among themselves whereas disputes within other groups were common' (1-010). There were 'no cases of homosexuality', a problem 'about which a prison warden complained in other cells' (1-103; see also Finn and Fricke, 1981, pp. 102–3, 105–6).

In Zwickau and Waldheim, more than 100 Jehovah's Witnesses were kept in separate sections of the prisons. In 1953 they were repeatedly transferred to other sections since with every move 'they scrubbed the filth from neglected cells' (1-020) and cleaned them thoroughly 'with water and brushes' (1-014). In Bautzen, they were at one point even allowed to 'whitewash their cell' (Leubner, 2000, p. 311). Jehovah's Witnesses, including female prisoners, were praised for their 'good example of cleanliness' (1-019). Nevertheless, the prison authorities always emphasised that 'Jehovah's Witnesses had committed an offence against the existing state order' (1-009; see also 1-032).

During the National Socialist period the concentration camp administrations were repeatedly confronted with the question of whether Jehovah's Witnesses should be isolated as a separate group or whether they could be dispersed among the other prisoners (see Garbe, 1999, pp. 411–13, 449–50). The GDR prison wardens had to deal with a similar 'problem'. In the spring of 1953 a police officer in Waldheim commented to the female Jehovah's Witnesses: 'If we leave you together, you will encourage one another. If we place you with other prisoners, you could corrupt them. We should put all of you in solitary confinement. But, then, we will again be drowned in baskets of letters!' (1-005). During the day the women 'were strictly isolated'; at

night they had ‘to sleep on straw mats on the floor of the attic’ (1-012). According to one Witness, they were ‘kept in cells mixed together with other prisoners’ until October 1952; ‘however, when they noticed that we preached to the others, they transferred all 92 of us sisters to another section, called the “*Belegschaft 17*”’ (1-005). In prison in Waldheim Jehovah’s Witnesses were ‘strictly kept separate from others because of their missionary zeal’ (1-027). Similar reports were made from the Osterstein (Zwickau) penitentiary. There, Jehovah’s Witnesses were initially kept in solitary confinement (in early 1952). Later, they were ‘distributed among the cells of political prisoners, prisoners who had committed economic crimes, and criminals’; finally, when ‘instead of only one portion of blood sausage, several portions were returned’ the authorities ‘once again isolated them as a separate group’. Reports show that ‘such changes were frequently instituted’ (1-016). At the Magdeburg Sudenburg prison Jehovah’s Witnesses were ‘isolated during the period between 1950 and 1953’ (1-021). Usually the Witnesses used this ‘isolation’ and the punishment of inactivity as an opportunity to strengthen one another in faith. At the Waldheim prison and at other penal institutions organised efforts were even made to copy portions of the Bible, the ‘daily text’ (a quotation from the Bible with a commentary) and *Watchtower* articles for personal and group Bible studies (O-ZZ Dumat; Leubner, 2000, p. 316).

Up until 1952 production work was a privilege mainly reserved for criminal prisoners and denied to political prisoners. However, from 1952 economic planning in the GDR involved an assessment and exploitation of the potential of human labour in prisons. In the Torgau penal institution in 1952, for example, ‘the whole section’ of Jehovah’s Witnesses were at first not allowed to work, whereas the other prisoners from the section below ‘were forced to work’ (O-ZZ Männel; see also Finn and Fricke, 1981, pp. 20–21, 65, 67, 80–81). The isolated Witnesses, who were ranked among the ‘serious cases’ in the Waldheim prison, considered it a special kind of discrimination ‘that they were not allowed to work until the beginning of January 1954’ (1-015). When the majority of Witnesses were allowed to work, they were initially isolated in two work details: From January to March 1954 in the ‘*Webelitzen* detail’ (*Webelitzen* were wire ropes with a loop in the centre through which the thread was guided on the loom) and from April to September 1954 in the ‘fur-cutting detail’ (cutting of rabbit fur) (1-027). The working Witnesses now had ‘the opportunity to make special purchases’ and ‘shared [these] with those who were not allowed to work’ (1-015). A report from the Zwickau prison says that ‘at the end of 1954 and the beginning of 1955 Jehovah’s Witnesses were also suddenly allowed to work’. In the cellar of the cell block a bottle-cleaning section had been established in which only Jehovah’s Witnesses were allowed to work. The prison authorities relied on the fact that they would ‘not use glass shards to inflict injuries’ on themselves or others. From the middle of 1950 workplaces were established, and working became mandatory for all prisoners (1-015; 1-027; see also O-ZZ Dumat; O-ZZ Gerstenberger).

The *Volksaufstand* (national uprising) on 17 June 1953, in which ‘Jehovah’s Witnesses remained calm and disciplined’ (1-130), brought about a general tempering of abuse. Temporarily, it resulted in improvements in prison conditions, including those for Jehovah’s Witnesses. (Until November 1955, because of its failures before and during the uprising, the MfS was ‘downgraded’ to become the State Secretary’s Office of State Security, SfS (Möbius, 1999, pp. 16–17, 29, 34–45; see also Müller, 1998, p. 47)). At the Bützow women’s prison, where the Witnesses had been ‘isolated for two years’, ‘the events of 17 June’ resulted in them being distributed ‘among all criminal and political prisoners’ (1-017). The same took place at the Luckau prison. Until that time, all male ‘Jehovah’s Witnesses – with the exception of a few skilled

workers – had been isolated on the upper floor of the cell block’, and they were also ‘not allowed to watch films’ (1-112). The relaxation of ‘the more severe detention in Bautzen, Torgau and Waldheim’ (1-170) was attributed to the national uprising. ‘Some of the promised alleviations of our prison conditions were never realised, others [only] to a certain extent’, writes a Witness (O-ZZ List). Another Witness stated that in Zwickau ‘the prison conditions improved’ (1-020) after 17 June 1953, up until his release in December 1954. However, the 120 Jehovah’s Witnesses remained isolated in a separate prison section. One female Jehovah’s Witness was released several months before the end of her sentence. The prison guards dismissed her with the words ‘Your release is proof of our strength!’ (O-ZZ Bucher).

After the death of Stalin in March 1953 the Soviet Union began to moderate its despotic practices in the context of destalinisation. (This development reached its climax at the Twentieth Party Conference of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956 and the introduction of a new party leadership. In 1965 thousands of Jehovah’s Witnesses who had been deported to Siberia were allowed to move to a place of their choice (see Kalin, 1999, pp. 20–25).) On 11 June 1953 a ministerial decree on a ‘new policy’ in the GDR led to a first, relatively important, wave of prisoner releases. Among such releases were at least 40 Jehovah’s Witnesses. Major changes in the system did not take place, however, and it was not until 1956 that there was a noticeable decline in the numbers of prisoners, which resulted in the closing of some prisons. Thousands of sentences on political prisoners were now suspended, or pardons or amnesties issued. By now, acts of violence on the part of prison wardens were rather exceptional (Finn and Fricke, 1981, pp. 18, 108–09, 113; Möbius, 1999, p. 45). From May 1956 to January 1957 a total of 375 Jehovah’s Witnesses (29 per cent of all imprisoned believers) were released from custody, whereas 938 remained in detention (*Potsdamer Tageszeitung*, April 1957, according to Finn, 1960, p. 226).

### *Prohibitions on Bible Reading*

According to some observers, ‘Jehovah’s Witnesses were generally denied the possession of a Bible’ (Finn and Fricke, 1981, pp. 71, 101). Many contemporary witnesses confirmed these facts: ‘All prisoners, with the exception of Jehovah’s Witnesses, received a Bible’ (1-008). (In June 1935 the National Socialist justice administration had ordered that Jehovah’s Witnesses should be refused books such as the Bible, ‘from which they could receive constant nourishment and encouragement in order to support the inner conviction for their forbidden sect and its subversive ideology’ (Liesche, 1937, p. 140; see also Wachturm, 1936).) In 1951 the prison personnel in Bützow-Dreibergen rejected requests to obtain a Bible from the prison library with the words ‘A Bible in the hands of one of Jehovah’s Witnesses is worse than a torch in the hands of an arsonist!’ (O-ZZ Dumat). In Waldheim (1952 or 1953) it was said that ‘Jehovah’s Witnesses know the Bible by heart!’ (1-014). Jehovah’s Witnesses serving life sentences in Bautzen, on the other hand, were allowed to have a Bible in 1951 (Leubner, 2000, p. 310).

Usually through other prisoners, Jehovah’s Witnesses obtained Bibles, which they then hid in their cells. At one time, during his free hour, a 50-year-old superintendent searched the cells of some Jehovah’s Witnesses and found two Bibles; he danced ecstatically, ‘always on just one foot, down the 100m-long hallway with the Bibles under his arms’. The Witnesses obtained another Bible. This time they ‘took it apart, and distributed the small books among their various cells’ (O-ZZ Groffig). The various Bible portions, which were ‘circulated in the cells of the brothers’, were used

‘for thorough Bible study’ (O-ZZ Dumat). Some of the prisoners ‘learned several Bible texts by heart’. Fritz G. was able ‘to read the complete Bible for the first time during his imprisonment in the penitentiary’ (O-ZZ Glöckner).

The persistence of imprisoned Jehovah’s Witnesses in trying to obtain a Bible was one of their characteristics the GDR prison authorities had to deal with. As a result, in the early 1950s the cells of the prisons of Waldheim and Bautzen ‘were regularly thoroughly searched during the night’ (1-006). Such searches, which were ‘more frequently’ performed on Jehovah’s Witnesses ‘than on the political prisoners and the criminals’, were described for Bautzen in 1953 as follows: ‘We had to take off all our clothes, had to stand naked on the platform, and received new clothes. The straw mattresses were thrown from the bed frames, and the straw was spread over the cell floor’ (1-026). In Waldheim in 1954 ‘the possession of Bible portions and other religious material meant three weeks of intensified detention, withdrawal of privileges, such as being able to work and to shop in the HO shops [shops owned by the *Handelsorganisation*], or having to return the usual monthly parcels from relatives’ (1-027). Other prisoners confirmed ‘how severely Jehovah’s Witnesses were punished for possessing such items’ and what happened if they were found with a Bible: Jehovah’s Witnesses ‘were generally punished with a four-week prohibition on receiving parcels [from relatives], which they accepted with the usual composure’ (Bechler, 1984, p. 339).

### *Markings for Prisoners*

Isolated Jehovah’s Witnesses who were classified as ‘extremely dangerous’ (1-016) had to wear patches representing the most severe form of punishment – strips of red bandages on their thighs and upper arms. These patches were to identify prisoners serving a life sentence, escaped convicts and those in solitary confinement. (Additionally, from 1952 onward there existed the ‘green’ category for labour details inside the penal institution and the ‘yellow’ or ‘white’ category for labour details outside the penal institution.) Red arm and leg bands for Jehovah’s Witnesses were used, among other prisons, in Torgau, Luckau and Brandenburg-Görden (1-055; 1-101; 1-112; 1-256; O-ZZ Grottko). ‘The “red ones” were the “serious cases”’, confirms a former prisoner (who was not a Jehovah’s Witness), ‘who were excluded from any form of work’ in Brandenburg-Görden (Finn and Fricke, 1981, p. 65; see also Finn, 1960, p. 135). At the Bützow women’s prison the female Jehovah’s Witnesses were marked ‘with a red armband’ (1-017), as were the men in Bützow-Dreibergen, in order to ‘demonstrate their particular dangerousness’ (1-086; O-ZZ Dumat). They were ‘isolated’ or ‘separately accommodated on a floor’ (1-248) which was marked ‘green’ (this information relates to 1954) (1-248; see also 1-256).

In the 1950s a ‘red dot’ (1-256) or a ‘red disc’ (1-041) was put on the outer cell doors in Brandenburg-Gören and Waldheim in order to identify the ‘isolated’ prisoners (Jehovah’s Witnesses and political prisoners); in the Luckau prison, the identifying mark was a ‘red square’ (1-147). From the Waldheim prison, chalk marks were also reported: ‘A “B” (for *Bibelforscher* [Bible Students]) was put on the outer side of the cell door’ (1-145). When the Witnesses in the Magdeburg penal institution were ‘put in cells with other prisoners’, ‘for every prisoner, a little stick was put into a socket’ on the outside of the door. For Jehovah’s Witnesses, ‘the little stick had a white crossbeam, so that the warden knew that there was a Jehovah’s Witness in the cell’ (1-104; see also 1-034). A purple ‘Z’ (first letter of German *Zeuge*, Witness) about the size of a finger attached to the door served the same purpose. This was noticed by a



female Witness who was imprisoned for three weeks in an underground cell in Halle, Kirchtor 20, following her conviction in January 1956. She writes: 'We were not put in a cell with the other prisoners but were held separately. At our cell door there [was] a purple "Z"' (1-103). This brought back memories of the purple triangles with which the SS stigmatised the imprisoned Jehovah's Witnesses in the National Socialist concentration camps (author's telephone interview with Hedwig Köhler, 23 March 2001; see also Garbe, 1999, p. 405). However, the GDR penal institutions did not use specific identification marks for Jehovah's Witnesses as a prisoner group.

### **Under the Penal System 1956–76**

Between 1956 and 1962 only about 400 convicted Jehovah's Witnesses served prison sentences in the GDR penal institutions. The closing of the border between the two German states and the building of the Berlin Wall on 13 August 1961 meant that East German couriers could no longer make risky trips to West Berlin to pick up Watchtower publications, and hence there were no more arrests and convictions of East German couriers. The Jehovah's Witnesses who were imprisoned from 1962 were almost exclusively conscientious objectors (WTA, Liste, 2001). During the mid-1950s the GDR leadership was mainly concerned about international recognition, and therefore tried to avoid attracting publicity over violations of human rights. One official stated: 'We do not want you to publish any unfavourable reports about your people in your *Watchtower*' (1-270). Up until shortly before a delegation of the British Labour Party visited the Brandenburg prison in 1956 'the prisoners in all penal complexes had to keep a distance of two metres from one another during their walks in the prison yards. They were not allowed to talk' (1-242), but the Witnesses had to 'keep more distance than the other prisoners' – apparently three metres (1-123). However, no further distinctions were made between Jehovah's Witnesses and other prisoners. One Witness noticed that the difference in treatment was reflected 'especially in spiteful remarks and the tone of voice used toward us' (1-123). Some older prison wardens, who knew Jehovah's Witnesses from the National Socialist concentration camps, displayed 'a tolerant and generous attitude' (1-122). Others, however, behaved in quite the opposite way (1-101; 1-233; see also Finn and Fricke, 1981, p. 97).

Between 1956 and 1976, 22 East German Jehovah's Witnesses died in prison, among them people suffering from cancer and elderly people who were not allowed to receive medical treatment in time (Martha Dierke, 1956; Wilhelm Engel, 1964) or who died from a heart attack (Carsten Möller, 1962). In 1973 the GDR became a member of the United Nations and its organisations. In 1975 it signed the CSCE Helsinki Final Act. The exposure of the GDR to potential international criticism resulted in changes regarding the persecution of people on political grounds and brought about a certain alleviation of punishments. The number of deaths resulting from unknown causes declined (WTA, O-Zentralkartei; see also Müller, 1998, pp. 60, 70).

By early 1956, as a result of the release of almost all prisoners who had been convicted by the Soviet military tribunals, the composition of the prison population had changed considerably. Prisoners now underwent 'systematic education through work'. This had certain advantages (overcoming monotony, additional financial resources for food purchases); but it also had disadvantages (forced labour, extremely difficult working conditions, poor payment and labour requiring the fulfilment of quotas). Privileges such as letter writing, allowing family members to visit the prisoners on a regular basis every couple of months (so-called *Sprecher* ('speakers'),

relatives who had received permission to speak to the prisoner), and permission to receive parcels, purchase food and participate in cultural events depended on the 'fulfilment of quotas' (*Normerfüllung*). Political censorship was strict. Sanitary conditions, health care and social conditions (overcrowding) continued to be inadequate, even though improvements had gradually taken place. All in all, however, the physical ill-treatment of prisoners continued to decrease (Finn, 1960, pp. 146–47; Finn and Fricke, 1981, pp. 20, 22, 91; Müller, 1998, pp. 48, 50–53, 57, 60). Only two of the seven Jehovah's Witnesses who were questioned by the Hannah Arendt Institute for Research on Totalitarianism in Dresden stated that they had been mistreated by the prison wardens during their imprisonment during the 1970s in Bautzen I, Dresden (Bautzener Strasse) and Rassnitz. One of them was 'kicked twice by an *Unterleutnant* [second lieutenant] who hated Jehovah's Witnesses' (HAI-01). The other was subjected to four days of strict solitary confinement for trivial offences. He was accused of having petted the guard dog. As a result, the MfS doctor gave him a vaccination because he had 'supposedly contracted rabies' (HAI-04).

'In Cottbus and Bautzen, the officials avoided drawing attention to Jehovah's Witnesses', and if questioned about the reasons for their imprisonment (in the period 1959 to 1962) Jehovah's Witnesses were not allowed to answer 'For religious reasons' (1-233). The Witnesses continued to cooperate closely with one another during their period of imprisonment. They supported each other even if somebody was struggling to conform. 'Parcels and [food] purchases were shared in a brotherly way' (1-329; for similar group cohesiveness in the National Socialist concentration camps, see Garbe, 1999, pp. 437–38). This was especially beneficial for those who were ill, or for those who had come out of solitary confinement and consequently had no money for additional purchases of food during their first month of work.

In 1964 the judiciary issued a decree which specified imprisonment by categories I, II and III. The categories affected the deployment of labour, political-cultural 'education' and permission to receive visitors ('speakers') and other privileges. Punishment in the penal system was carried out according to military practices with a great deal of harassment and restriction. Disregarding these measures resulted in detention and withdrawal of privileges (Finn and Fricke, 1981, pp. 22–25, 81–82, 99). Category I (imprisonment of three years and more) prisoners suffered the most severe conditions. In 1966 a group of 14 leading Jehovah's Witnesses were sentenced to periods of imprisonment of 4–12 years (Wrobel, 2000, p. 27; O-ZZ Rink, p. 54). From 1960 onwards most convicted Jehovah's Witnesses received prison sentences (Dirksen, 2003, p. 926) that put them in prison category II (up to three years' imprisonment). However, 'political prisoners' were often placed in the most serious category. Thus the Jehovah's Witnesses imprisoned in the Waldheim penitentiary were 'put in category I, which meant the withdrawal of privileges (letter writing, and permission to receive parcels and to be visited)' (1-254). Here they were exposed to the harassment of the *Kommandoleiter* (commanding officer): 'He prevented us from having urgently required doctor's visits and prohibited all magazines and newspapers. Also the 20 East German marks which each prisoner received at Christmas from a particular blocked account were not given to Jehovah's Witnesses, because we don't celebrate Christmas' (1-169).<sup>4</sup>

In general, Jehovah's Witnesses were still 'not allowed to possess a Bible' (1-302). From the mid-1960s, however, exceptions were made. In 1967–68, at the Hoheneck prison, seven Jehovah's Witnesses (domestic workers) 'received the privilege, on an individual basis, to read the Bible for one hour once a week' (1-302). At the Thale camp in 1972 Witnesses received 'from the library two Bibles for daily Bible reading'

(1-322). At the Rackwitz (Leipzig) prison the request for a Bible was also granted, and the group was allowed 'to conduct a form of Bible study once a week. On one occasion, even the prison warden of this prison joined the Bible study' (1-318). At this prison, it was even accepted that Jehovah's Witnesses refused to eat blood sausage, and they were given other sausages instead. When at a political event they remained seated during the playing of the national anthem, they were at first publicly reprimanded. Later, however, they were privately 'commended for their good work' (1-318).

Since Jehovah's Witnesses consider personal Bible study for religious reasons absolutely necessary, they smuggled Bibles and biblical literature into prison (Wrobel, 1994, pp. 2, 11); these were then 'passed on from one group of Witnesses to the next' (1-321). In September 1971 publications of this kind, concealed in tins, made their way from Plauen into the new prison in Chemnitz. One former prisoner at the new Chemnitz prison reported that in the early 1970s, 'during the first weeks... our cells were frequently searched for Bibles, individual Bible texts, etc.' 'Three months after portions of the Bible' had been found in his cell, he was 'transferred to another cell' (1-353). In the mid-1970s at the Stralsund prison the Bibles were removed from the library. However, the imprisoned Jehovah's Witnesses were still able 'to obtain and use' Bibles and 'the *Watchtower* journals which at that time were available in the GDR' (1-352). At the Riesa prison, Jehovah's Witnesses 'often [had] extensive discussions' about their faith with other prisoners. They were therefore 'given repeated warnings and were threatened with punishment with solitary confinement' (1-343). Their beds and closets were also 'searched with particular care' (1-347). Jehovah's Witnesses consider 'witnessing' or evangelising as part of their 'worship of God'. However, the prison administrations generally did not allow any religious 'propaganda' (Finn and Fricke, 1981, p. 100).

Even as late as the mid-1970s the religion-based refusal to eat blood sausage resulted in serious conflicts with prison wardens. However, in most cases the officials were willing to make concessions. At the prison hospital in Waldheim (in 1962) and the prison in Chemnitz, Kassberg (in 1973), the Jehovah's Witnesses ate only dry bread for a time since on certain days they received nothing but bread with blood sausage, 'in the morning, at noon and in the evening' (1-353; see also 1-238). From about 1975 blood sausage was no longer given to Jehovah's Witnesses there. In subsequent years such consideration on the part of the prison administration was also given to Jehovah's Witnesses elsewhere; in Zwickau in 1976, for example (2-012; 2-035). In Bautzen I from 1975 to 1976 Jehovah's Witnesses 'received something else when the others were served blood sausages' (2-008). One prisoner in the Naumburg prison stated that during this period the kitchen personnel received orders to give 'Jehovah's Witnesses something other than blood sausage and meals without blood' (1-354). He also stated that he was informed about this arrangement when he arrived.

In the course of time, prisoners were discharged, released on parole or 'pardoned' (*Gnadenakte*, granted amnesty), or had their periods of imprisonment reduced. Quite a number of Jehovah's Witnesses also benefited from these provisions. At the same time, like the released political prisoners, they were banned from practising their profession or trade for certain periods of time. They were also prohibited from travelling or leaving their place of residence (Finn and Fricke, 1981, pp. 114–18, 125–28; Raschka, 1988, pp. 81–86; Wrobel, 2000, pp. 24–29). They might suffer other injustices. For instance, one of the released Jehovah's Witnesses 'was given the dirtiest work at the gas works' (1-340). In 1973, even though one of the released Jehovah's Witness was allowed to work in his 'former profession', he was not permitted to work 'at his former company' (HAI-01). After his release in 1973 another

former prisoner who had injured his spine as a result of hard physical work was ‘permanently excluded from being considered’ for promotion. In his ‘personal file, his period of imprisonment was particularly underlined in red’ (HAI-03). (In 1984, by contrast, during the third phase of imprisonment of Witnesses (1977–89, see below), a former employer ‘was happy to re-employ (holiday season)’ a Jehovah’s Witness after his release, and he soon received a ‘rise in pay’ (HAI-07).

### *Educational Measures*

After the blatant physical oppression of the 1950s the GDR prison authorities concentrated more in this second period on the ‘educational aspect’ of punishment. Now each prisoner received political education by various means including films. At the Rüdersdorf prison near Berlin ‘certain television programmes were... especially intended for Jehovah’s Witnesses, as, for instance, films with military subject matter’ (1-305). The *Politoffizier* (an officer who was responsible for giving the prisoners political instruction and propaganda) at the Berndshof camp, near Ueckermünde, used the publications of the Watchtower Society of Jehovah’s Witnesses in his efforts at re-education ‘on work-free days’ (1-265). However, ‘because of his lack of success, he himself was sent on special training courses’ (1-270; see also 1-271; 1-272). Specific ‘re-education’ was later also given to the believers in Bautzen II who were completely isolated until July 1966. However, ultimately this re-education was ‘replaced by discussions held every three months before a board of people at the prison warden’s office’ (1-265). Generally, Jehovah’s Witnesses were viewed as ‘non-conforming’. However, in time they received privileges at this prison as well, such as being allowed to ‘walk on the sunny side of the prison yard or performing outside sports activities (volleyball)’ (1-265). From May 1971 at the prisons in Plauen und Chemnitz they were forced to read literature with political content. Because they showed a ‘lack of contrition for the reasons for their imprisonment’, they were ‘prohibited from watching television’ (1-321). They were also no longer allowed to read general educational literature (see also Finn and Fricke, 1981, pp. 70–73). The political-cultural ‘education’ that was provided at the penal institutions (films and lectures, education courses and television) was less strictly enforced at the prison labour camps. However, these were ‘privileges’ from which Jehovah’s Witnesses and politically oriented prisoners who were not expected to respond favourably to re-education were generally excluded (Finn and Fricke, 1981, pp. 73, 78–79).

From March 1952 onward, even though Dieter Pape had abandoned the teachings of Jehovah’s Witnesses and instead embraced communism, he was imprisoned (an eight-year sentence) because of his former religious activities (O-ZZ Seifert; Seifert, 1999). In July 1956 he wrote a memorandum in which he indicated that he would be willing to cooperate ‘after his release with the prison authorities’ in order to convert Jehovah’s Witnesses by means of ‘educational methods’ (BStU, 1956c, pp. 188–90). On 25 July 1956 at the Luckau prison he signed a secret declaration stating that he would subsequently ‘act subversively among them’. He assured the authorities that he would carry out this ‘commission loyally and sincerely for the good of our government’ (BStU, 1956a). On 27 July 1956 the MfS district administration of Halle advised the main department in Berlin ‘to release Pape from the penitentiary by the end of August 1956’. They also submitted a copy of his report in which he described ‘how such educational methods in the prisons, which could be extended to all penal institutions, could be carried out’ (BStU, 1956b, pp. 192–93). In the memorandum, Pape suggested that they ‘split up the Witnesses as much as possible’

and systematically indoctrinate them by means of counter-literature and explanatory conversations (*Aufklärungsgespräche*). The Halle MfS was pleased with the ideas of this 'secret informer' (*Geheimer Informator*, GI) (BStU, 1956d).

The brother of Dieter Pape, Günther Pape (1961), who lived in West Germany, had written the book *Ich war Zeuge Jehovas*. He had converted to Catholicism and supervised propaganda against the Jehovah's Witnesses in West Germany. Dieter Pape 'edited and prepared' his brother's book for publication, and it was published in the GDR with government subsidies in 1961 (see also Hirsch, 2000). Public agencies in the GDR also distributed the book outside penal institutions. (In August 1961 in East Berlin the undersecretary of state for church affairs confidentially sent out a large number of copies requesting church councils to make sure that Jehovah's Witnesses and people who sympathised with them received it (StA Chemnitz, 1961).) All imprisoned Jehovah's Witnesses were ordered to read the book and were also given one day to write down their opinions on it (1-347; 1-233; 1-343; 1-242). From 1970 a book by the former Jehovah's Witness Manfred Gebhard was used in individual questioning (political education), but 'the political background or direct link to State Security was too evident' (Kirchner, 1995, p. 984; see also Garbe, 1999, p. 20; Yonan, 1999, pp. 97–99). Imprisoned Frank Klammer, who refused to read or comment on the renegade publications, was put in a cell as 'incorrigible'. On 24 June 1975, after being released from nine months' imprisonment, he died at the age of 26 due to an inexplicable degeneration of his spinal column. According to his wife, he must have contracted a disease during his imprisonment in Bitterfeld or Untermassfeld (where the 'serious' form of imprisonment was executed). One guard apparently said that her husband 'was worse than a murderer, for a murderer would at least regret his offence' (O-ZZ Klammer).

Neither the methods of Pape nor the use of other apostate literature produced any satisfactory results. Unintentionally, Pape had mentioned in his memorandum the paradigm that was responsible for the failure of 'educational measures': the deep conviction of the believers, despite 'isolation and concentration [either to isolate them or to put them together]'. In this context, he referred to Elisabeth W., a Jehovah's Witness who had been imprisoned in Hoheneck: 'It seems that her imprisonment has deepened her conviction' (BStU, 1956c). Those who were released from prison usually continued their religious activities. In January 1963 a report by the MfS in Berlin complained about the fact that 'former prisoners who are once again in positions of responsibility prepare and conduct training courses for the event of repeated arrests' (BStU, 1963, p. 69). On 21 April 1970 the MfS released a paper indicating revised thinking: 'The organisation of Jehovah's Witnesses cannot be suppressed with compulsory measures. This can only be achieved through criticism within their ranks and of the actions of their leadership' (BStU, 1970, p. 157). With determination, the MfS pursued their strategy of demoralisation (*Zersetzung*) from inside the organisation.

### 'Declarations'

In the late 1950s the GDR penal system apparently offered Jehovah's Witnesses the possibility of an early release, provided they were willing to compromise. According to a Witness who was imprisoned in Dresden, Bautzen and 'Schwarze Pumpe' from 1957 to 1969, 'as a Jehovah's Witness I was able at any time to obtain my release only by signing the declaration of abstention (*Unterlassungserklärung*)' (1-179). From more recent years, a declaration of commitment (*Verpflichtungserklärung*) used to recruit

Jehovah's Witnesses as spies or *IM* (*Inoffizieller Mitarbeiter*, Unofficial Collaborator) begins with the words *Ich habe erkannt, dass...* (I acknowledge that ...) (1-179; Worst, 1991, p. 199; see also Finn, 1960, p. 118). During the National Socialist regime arrested Jehovah's Witnesses were periodically presented with a 'declaration of commitment' asking them to renounce their faith for the purpose of gaining release from prison or concentration camp, and it is interesting that these statements likewise began with the words 'I acknowledge that ...' (Hesse and Harder, 2001, pp. 66–73, 96–97, 181–82, 419–20). One Jehovah's Witness who was imprisoned in Zwickau, Plauen and Chemnitz from 1969 to 1970 reports that 'the interviews with the "educator" had the objective of re-educating or persuading us to change our attitude. It was always emphasised that we would be immediately released if we would acknowledge our wrong conduct' (1-314). Another Witness imprisoned in Zwickau and Plauen from 1972 to 1973 reports that he was offered 'a release on the following day' if he would 'sign a paper stating that he would at least perform military service' (1-335).

### *Refusal to Work*

In the National Socialist period, spectacular refusals to perform any work related to the military are well known from the concentration camp prisoners who wore the 'purple triangle' (Garbe, 1999, pp. 431–34). In a similar manner, Jehovah's Witnesses in the GDR penal system refused to participate, for instance, in the construction of military airfields in 1953; and in the Luckau prison in 1957 they refused to produce uniforms for soldiers (1-130; Leubner, 2000, pp. 313–14). After the introduction of compulsory military service in the GDR mass arrests of Jehovah's Witnesses took place almost every year between 1962 and 1982 (see 2-099). Up until 1987 a total of 2750 persons were put in prison. Thus more people were imprisoned during this period than during the period between 1950 and 1962 (see also Dirksen, 2003, pp. 784–85, 923).<sup>5</sup> Often during their imprisonment those conscientious objectors 'were exposed to criminals serving long-term sentences or recidivists' (Brauckmann, 1993, p. 225). The refusal to participate in military exercises in the penal camp Berndsdorf resulted in interrogations and punishments such as 'standing in the yard in the cold for long periods of time with insufficient clothing' (1-266). Since the Witnesses refused to work as *Bausoldaten* (soldiers working on construction sites), they had to perform hard labour constructing railway tracks near Ueckermünde. When this matter became known to the general public in September 1965 the 130 men were transferred to Bautzen 'during the night'; there they were completely isolated. The chief warden of this prison stated that they had committed 'an offence which by far exceeded that of a murderer' (1-272; see also Yearbook, 1974, p. 230). In time, though, they earned the respect of the guards because they 'did not fight over positions, did not steal, or get involved in fights', but rather 'were exemplary in keeping their cells, the prison and their places of work in order' (1-270) and were used to saying 'please' and 'thank you' (1-260). In 1976 the group of Witnesses in the prison in Chemnitz refused to produce 'paperweights depicting the head of Karl Marx' (a gift item). As a result, they were not allowed to write letters for three months (normally they were allowed to 'write every two weeks'), and they also could not receive any visitors or parcels (2-026).

As early as 1975 Jehovah's Witnesses at the penal institutions of Athensleben (Magdeburg), Rassnitz and Chemnitz were placed into the category of 'less severe' imprisonment. In Rassnitz this signified permission to write and receive letters every two weeks and to receive visitors once a month for up to one hour. However, one

former prisoner stated that 'the MfS disregarded this regulation (visiting regulations allowed for one hour per person every three months under supervision of a guard)' (2-019). Jehovah's Witnesses who worked in the building trades were eventually 'left almost without supervision' (2-006). In Chemnitz Jehovah's Witnesses were the only ones who were allowed 'to work outside the prison under the supervision of a guard' (2-001), sometimes even without a guard. As a result they were able to bring their Bible 'literature into the prison' secretly (2-002). Some labour details consisted only of Jehovah's Witnesses because there was 'no danger that they would escape'; however, they were 'frequently subjected to searches' of their cells. The criminals were permitted to watch television several times a week. Jehovah's Witnesses, on the other hand, were allowed to do so only 'once a week at the most' (2-011). Even though the prisoners at the Athensleben labour camp had to work 'many hours of overtime (receiving pay of about 40 East German marks)', they 'did not have to wear prisoner's clothing (yellow stripes), and the conditions during meetings with relatives also improved'. Upon request, Bible reading was even allowed behind closed doors. However, the 'prison bars at the windows' remained. The prisoners also 'did not receive any milk or coffee'. 'But inside the penal institutions' they had 'the freedom of visiting other prison cells' (2-017). Generally, prisoners were given 'the prospect of an early release' if 'they had been involved in social or political activities within the penal institution' (2-019). However, Jehovah's Witnesses were excluded from such possibilities.

### **Under the Penal System 1977–89**

In May 1977 a new penal law (*Strafvollzugsgesetz*, StVG) became effective. This brought about improvements for all, including Jehovah's Witnesses who were imprisoned for refusing military service for religious reasons. Privileges (such as letter writing and visits from 'speakers') depended on the prison, the prison wardens, or the category of punishment. In many places Jehovah's Witnesses were transferred from 'general' imprisonment (*allgemeiner Vollzug*) to 'moderate' imprisonment (*erleichterter Vollzug*). 'Severe punishment in the dungeon' (*strenger Arrest*) was discontinued. The daily routine within the prison walls did not change much, however. There was a general lack of nutritious food and inadequate sanitary provision and many work-related accidents occurred (because of outdated machinery, insufficient protective measures in the workplace, or excessive requirements with regard to fulfilling quotas). Other deficiencies included preferential treatment of criminals and overcrowding of prison cells. One Jehovah's Witness (imprisoned in Rüdersdorf from 1981 to 1983) described the medical care as 'inadequate'. He also stated that toothache was usually 'treated' by pulling the tooth out (HAI-06). There are no reports that Witnesses were attacked by criminals or prison wardens. During the 1980s ill-treatment was rather the exception (see also Finn and Fricke, 1981, pp. 62–63; 109; 133–49; Müller, 1998, p. 72).

From 1977 in the correctional institution for youths in Halle Jehovah's Witnesses were allowed monthly meetings with their relatives outside the institution, provided they fulfilled the requirements ('good cooperation') (2-025). We hear that the visiting hours here were 'no longer supervised as strictly' and

were not restricted to the regulated time. The relatives were also allowed to bring food and toilet articles. From May onward, also coffee was allowed, which had previously been prohibited. We were even allowed to write and

receive letters more frequently. The daily routine did not change as far as work and leisure time were concerned. The authorities also rejected the request of the group to be granted a Bible. Until the end of the imprisonment, censorship of outgoing and incoming mail continued. (2-031)

In addition to meetings with relatives outside the prison, the penal institution of Regis-Breitingen gave Jehovah's Witnesses permission to write 'a fifth letter per month, as a privilege, or to wear civil clothing inside the penal institution. Even food supplies and shopping opportunities improved' (2-036).

In Chemnitz (Kassbergstrasse), where Jehovah's Witnesses were supposedly in the 'moderate' imprisonment category as early as 1975–76, the prison wardens did not accept the new penal law. Improvements did not take place until the spring of 1979, when Jehovah's Witnesses accidentally found torn pieces of the penal code, pieced the StVG together, and sent a petition to the prison administration. As a result, the 'periods between visits' from relatives were decreased 'from 8 to 6 weeks and then to 4 weeks', and 'in place of the obligatory blood sausage [they] received liver sausage or *Mettwurst*' (2-045). During this period of imprisonment, there were no serious conflicts between personnel or fellow prisoners over the Witnesses' refusal to eat blood sausage. Reports from the 1980s describe how 'meetings with relatives' there 'were monitored by means of cameras and tape recordings' (2-077). Sometimes parcels were delivered only after 'the food (for instance, gammon) had gone mouldy' (2-078). 'The brothers were refused most of the privileges', stated a former prisoner (in Chemnitz from 1980 to 1982). 'Political prisoners were in a similar situation. The criminals were treated more leniently' (2-079).

'The new law allowed every prisoner to read the Bible', recalls a Witness who was imprisoned in Dresden (Bautzener Strasse) (see also StVG § 34, 8, according to Finn and Fricke, 1981, p. 141), but the imprisoned Jehovah's Witnesses were told that this 'does not apply to them' (2-030). They were sentenced to 'moderate' imprisonment but 'were not treated accordingly. With the exception of Jehovah's Witnesses, every prisoner could get a Bible from the library' (2-050; see also 2-033; Finn and Fricke, 1981, p. 101). Consequently the Witnesses in Bautzen I (1975–76) kept a Bible hidden (2-004). From 1977 the 14 Jehovah's Witnesses at the correctional institution for young men in Halle were granted several privileges regarding visitation rights, holidays and letter writing. However, they were not allowed to have a Bible, even though 'as a group' (2-031) they repeatedly submitted requests. Jehovah's Witnesses at the Plauen penal institution were also prohibited from 'possessing or reading the Bible' (2-061). This ban also included other 'religious literature' (2-074). ('Whenever he had the opportunity' the prison warden there 'harassed, insulted and punished [them]' (2-061).) On the other hand, upon special request, some Witnesses (but not all of them) at the Athensleben labour camp were allowed 'to read the Bible for one hour in a separate room' (2-017). At the beginning of 1979, as a result of their above-mentioned petition, the Witnesses in Chemnitz (Kassbergstrasse) were 'officially [allowed] to read' (2-045) a Bible that had been specially provided. For several months in 1978 the Witnesses in Chemnitz (Reichenhainer Strasse) had 'official permission' to read the Bible 'as a group without supervision' (2-046). However, later this was rescinded.

Their 'unity and solidarity' (2-045) continued to distinguish the group of Jehovah's Witnesses, who were 'not put at a disadvantage but were also not given any preference' (2-108). They 'received sufficient food and proper treatment', and in Chemnitz Kassberg (from 1985 to 1986) they were allowed to have '80 to 100 East



German marks for personal purchases' (2-108). They shared in a brotherly way various goods with other Witnesses, such as 'food and writing materials' (2-047). 'In contrast to deployments with criminals, the guards supervising labour details of Jehovah's Witnesses outside the prison were unarmed' (2-047). Some of the Witnesses 'worked almost the entire day without a guard outside the prison' in garden areas and 'in the evenings' they 'returned to the prison on their own' (2-088). Only Jehovah's Witnesses 'were chosen to clean the street in front of the prison' (2-045) or 'to feed the dogs outside the prison' (2-088). During the 1970s Jehovah's Witnesses 'who worked in outside details without guards' or with only a few guards had to wear 'shirts and jackets with yellow horizontal stripes' (1-347). This made one Jehovah's Witness – who 'struggled with being separated from his family and the brothers' – feel 'a bit proud' (1-326).

Among Jehovah's Witnesses there were never any police spies or 'informers in the prison cells' (*Zelleninformatoren*) who cooperated with the system that tried to control the attitudes and private conduct of the prisoners (2-027; see also Brauckmann, 1993, pp. 228–30; Finn, 1960, pp. 117–18; Finn and Fricke, 1981, pp. 73–75). Since Jehovah's Witnesses 'did not participate in the political activities in prison' (2-022), they were not considered for an early release as were other prisoners. However, the amnesties which were handled in 1979 and issued in 1987 also included Jehovah's Witnesses (2-022; O-Zentralkartei; see also Finn and Fricke, 1981, p. 118; Dirksen, 2003, p. 783). There are two cases of death that have not yet been resolved. On 2 January 1983 the prisoner Thilo Löffler died as a result of an untreated case of diabetes in the hospital in Saalfeld. (In Unterwellenborn a prison warden mockingly told the young man, who fell into a coma shortly before he died, 'The Lord will take care of you!'.) In 1974 26-year-old Werner L. (born in 1950), who suffered from a heart condition, was imprisoned in Plauen. He had been sentenced to 20 months' imprisonment in Chemnitz and died almost one year after his release (O-ZZ Lange; O-ZZ 'L.').

## **Conclusion**

Because of their religious activities, teachings and contacts with their Governing Body located at the world headquarters in the USA, Jehovah's Witnesses were regarded by the communist government of East Germany as political enemies. Consequently the Witnesses were subjected to severe punishment. Basically, this disastrous misconception did not change until the GDR came to its end, although the intensity of persecution and the conditions of imprisonment under the military-style prison system were subject to irregular changes.

The violent measures used by the state's politically oriented representatives of justice, as well as the imposition of punishments, were out of proportion to the so-called crimes of these respectable citizens, who refused to submit to Marxist-Leninist ideology but did not use violence. According to Roland Brauckmann (1993, p. 225), himself a victim of the criminal justice in the GDR but not a Jehovah's Witness, 'In Torgau and other places these deeply religious, innocent middle-class citizens were exposed to the gross stupidity of the 'educators' of the prison system. With deliberate measures and methods, these educators simply had one goal: breaking the integrity of the prisoners.' However, the process of 'education by means of punishment' failed. In the merciless prison environment the personal conviction of Jehovah's Witnesses usually remained intact, and, ironically, in many instances even strengthened. By adapting to prison conditions, it was frequently possible for them to maintain their

religious routine (fellowship, communication about faith and belief). In 1976 a warden in the prison in Zwickau ‘locked them all up in one cell’ so that they would be able to commemorate the Lord’s evening meal (2-012).

Neither by brutality nor by ‘subversion’ (*Zersetzung*) were the East German authorities able to destroy this religious group. Similarly, the majority of the political prisoners kept ‘their conviction and stuck to their political ideologies’ (Finn and Fricke, 1981, p. 104). Thus in the most recent resistance historiography of the GDR Jehovah’s Witnesses, along with the political prisoners, are granted the recognition they rightly deserve (see Maser, 2000, pp. 283, 379).

## Notes

- 1 I consulted material in the Watchtower History Archive of Jehovah’s Witnesses (WTA), Wachturm Gesellschaft, 65617 Selters/Taunus, Germany. The documents classified there under ‘O-ST-H’ are replies to a questionnaire I devised and sent out on 12 October 2000 to hundreds of Witness survivors of prisons in the GDR. (This was done in preparation for the talk ‘Zeugen Jehovas im Strafvollzug der DDR’ which I delivered during a conference at Heidelberg University, 3–5 November 2000, about the persecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses under both dictatorships in Germany. See <http://www.tu-dresden.de/hait/zf21.htm>.) I received most of the replies by the end of October, but some were returned later; thus some are dated October 2000, some November 2000. The collection is now part of the WTA. The documents have the general number ‘O-ST-H’ and are divided into ‘H1’ (period of imprisonment 1948–1976) and ‘H2’ (period of imprisonment 1977–89). In the questionnaire I asked the former prisoner (1) to describe his or her experiences regarding the treatment of Jehovah’s Witnesses in GDR prisons and whether (and if yes, how) other prisoner groups were treated differently and (2) how the imprisoned Witnesses behaved in prison and whether and how their behaviour differentiated them from other prisoner groups. The ‘H1’ group are numbered 1-001 to 361 and the ‘H2’ group 2-001 to 121, a total of 482 questionnaires. I also consulted oral-history reports and letters (O-ZZ). In addition, I analysed seven completed questionnaires that were sent back anonymously, these being referred to as HAI-01 to HAI-07. These forms were put at my disposal by Dr Johannes Raschka of the Hannah Arendt Institute for Research on Totalitarianism in Dresden, via Gerald Hacke, in March 2000. See also Raschka, 1988, p. 8; Hacke, 2000.
- 2 By 2 April 2001, the WTA of the Watchtower Society in Germany had registered the names of 5011 Jehovah’s Witnesses from the Soviet Zone of former East Germany and the GDR who had been victims of repressions or persecution. Of these, a total of 3835 were male (77 per cent) and 1149 female (23 per cent); of the total number of victims 4469 persons (89 per cent) were detained (i.e. held in police custody for at least three days); a further 334, or 7 per cent, were interrogated for one or two days and released without charge; and a further 208 (4 per cent) experienced house searches or suffered financial disadvantage (job loss, *Ordnungsstrafverfügungen* or fines). Of the total number of about 5000 persecution victims registered by name, 505 Jehovah’s Witnesses (10 per cent) also suffered some form of discrimination or persecution under the National Socialist regime; of these 325 persons (6.5 per cent) experienced detention under both dictatorships.
- 3 List of convicted persons (WTA, Liste, 2001) supplemented by Dirksen, 2003, pp. 785, 923. According to Dirksen, between 1950 and 1961 there were 3297 arrests and 2253 sentences were handed down.
- 4 From 1968 the penal code differentiated between the categories of ‘moderate’ (*erleichtert*), ‘general’ (*allgemein*) and ‘serious’ (*streng*) imprisonment; in 1974 the so-called ‘more severe’ form of imprisonment (*verschärfter Vollzug*) was added. From 1977 there were only ‘general’ and ‘moderate’ forms of imprisonment (Raschka, 1988, pp. 69–70; Finn and Fricke, 1981, p. 24).

5 The WTA (O-Zentralkartei) in Selters/Taunus has registered the names of only 1800 such persons; the number of 2750 conscientious objectors is based on Dirksen, 2003, pp. 784, 928–29.

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