



# Centre for Human Rights Cottbus - Memorial Prison of Cottbus

## Who we are and what we want

The Centre for Human Rights Cottbus (HRC), which is recognized as a non-profit organisation, was founded on October 31, 2007, after a meeting of hundreds of former political prisoners of the former GDR. The organisation has the following aims:

“To contribute to the reconciliation within the scope of processing and clarification of the history of the two former prisons in Cottbus. Moreover, we want to make our visitors aware of the fact that there are people in other countries who are persecuted for political, racial or religious reasons and we want to motivate them to help those people by means of processing the history of injustice of this place”.  
(Excerpt of the statute).



Members of the organisation as well as former prisoners want to ensure that the injustices committed during the communist dictatorship in Germany will not be forgotten and that we will learn from history how precious democracy and rule of law are for our world.

## The Memorial Site

On April 1, 2011 – that is 151 years after the inauguration of the “Royal Central Prison” – the German Federal Secretary for Media and Culture approved the application for financial support of the Human Rights Centre so that a memorial site, a meeting and an educational centre could be created at the former “Cottbus prison”. On May 2, 2011 the prison was bought with the support of the Ministry of Science, Research and Culture of the State of Brandenburg and with the support of private donors. However, due to the lack of sufficient funds it was possible to renovate only the main building and a small part of the entrance building. The other buildings and factory halls will be renovated later.

This memorial site shall serve as a place where the history of the prison during the two German dictatorships, that of the Nazis as well as that of the communist regime in the GDR, shall be presented. In December 2013, a permanent exhibition, called “Checked clouds: Political imprisonment in the Cottbus prison 1933 – 1989,” was inaugurated. With reference to the prison of Cottbus, this exhibition is based on testimonies of former political prisoners during the two dictatorships. It is mainly a human rights exhibition and not the history of the prison.

## Our Supporters

The “Memorial Prison of Cottbus” is supported by the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, the Minister for Culture of the State of Brandenburg, the mayor of Cottbus, and by the whole city council regardless of political affiliation. The HRC has close relationship to human rights organisations and other “Memorial sites” with similar goals. In Cottbus, there is excellent cooperation between the Department of Architecture of Cottbus University as well as with the prison of Cottbus-Dissenchen. Both institutions support the aims of the memorial site.

## About the History of the Prison

The “Royal Central Prison” was opened in 1860. Between 1930 and 1936, it served as a youth custody facility. From 1937 until the end of the Second World War, it served as a women’s prison. During the two German dictatorships, more and more political prisoners were imprisoned here. It was the largest prison for political prisoners in the GDR. It was built for 600 prisoners but up to 1,200 people were detained here. Most of the prison complex was destroyed during the bombardment of Cottbus that took place on February 15, 1945. Between 1949 and 1951, the prison was renovated and re-constructed.

From 1971 to 1989, prison inmates were forced to produce goods for the state-owned companies Sprela and Pentacon. Since these companies did not care about the prisoners, labour conditions were disastrous. Prisoners who did not manage to fulfil the production quotas on the antiquated machines, were punished either by means of a ban on buying things or, worse, by being put in isolated confinement in the so-called “Tiger Cells.”



In 1963, the Federal Republic of Germany

began to pay for the release of political prisoners. By 1989, the Federal Republic of Germany had paid for the release of 33,755 persons who came from all over the GDR. In other words, political prisoners were being bought free as if they were slaves. A great number of these people, who were sentenced mostly for trying to flee from the GDR or for “subversive agitation,” served their sentence in the prison in Cottbus. The communist regime earned about 3.5 Billion German Marks with this human trafficking.

After the reunification of the two German states, changes were made to the prison to conform with the regulations governing federal imprisonment. Until 2002, the prison served as a prison for criminals of the Federal State of Brandenburg. In 2002, a modern prison was opened up in the district of Dissenchen, Cottbus so that the old one was closed down. In December 2007, the former prison was put up for auction and sold to a private investor. In the meantime it had fallen victim to vandalism. In 2011, the Centre for Human Rights Cottbus bought the prison and put an end to its dilapidated condition.