

Call for Papers

8. Hermann-Weber-Konferenz zur Historischen Kommunismusforschung (2026): “Punitive education. On the relationship between violence, ideology and care in ‘total institutions’ under communist rule”

Organizers: Prof. Dr. Thomas Lindenberger (Hannah Arendt Institute for Totalitarianism Studies at TU Dresden /HAIT/), Dr. Klára Pinerová (Institute of Contemporary History of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague /ÜSD/, HAIT) and PD Dr. Udo Grashoff (HAIT) in cooperation with the “Jahrbuch für Historische Kommunismusforschung”, funded by the “Gerda-und-Hermann-Weber-Stiftung in der Bundesstiftung Aufarbeitung”.

Location: Gedenkstätte Bautzner Straße, Dresden

Date: April 15-17, 2026

Deadline for abstracts: June 15, 2025

The communist regimes of the 20th century are often referred to as ‘educational dictatorships’ as they saw the (re-)education of each individual as the basis for building a socialist society. According to the communist understanding of the historical necessity of transition from capitalism to a communist society, it was not only the power structures and production relations that were to be overturned. At the same time, a ‘new man’ was to emerge who would leave behind the individualistic and egoistic attitudes of the exploitative society and, thanks to his intellectual and moral abilities, would harmonise with the collectivist principles of Marxism-Leninism out of his own ‘insight into necessity’. Only then, according to the communist dogma, would the antagonism of individual and society, as well as the division of society into classes, be finally overcome.

This ‘historical necessity’ had to be achieved through control and, if necessary, coercion. The ‘new man’ – later on in the context of the GDR: the ‘fully developed socialist personality’ - was to be created through targeted intervention in all areas of society with the help of surveillance and punishment. This applied to the party itself, it applied to the centre of society

in large companies, mass organisations, education and leisure. This communist educational compulsion was also implemented and experienced in a particularly striking way at the margins of society where individuals branded as ‘parasites’, ‘asocials’ or ‘insane’ did not behave in accordance with social norms or deliberately violated them.

The conference will focus on those institutions and social places where people were particularly exposed to repressive re-education. We are talking about labour colonies, camps, youth work centres, special children's homes, but also regular prisons, in which the idea of re-education through labour and within a collective, often in reference to the Soviet pedagogue Makarenko, was the official guiding principle. For the study of these institutions it is important to pay close attention to the relationship between ideals and norms and practice. According to theory, the logic of revenge and retribution did not inform such re-education. The explicit aim was to reintegrate everyone into socialist society. However, the practices of punitive education in numerous ‘total institutions’ of real socialism thwarted these self-declared goals and turned them into their opposite. They caused or favoured the development of group dynamics that were characterised by a high degree of violence, humiliation and contempt for humanity, and this systematically and permanently. In consequence, communist rule created and reproduced its own ‘asocial’ or ‘negative’ milieu.

This ambivalence of re-education practices in communist dictatorships stands at the center of the conference. Its aim is to develop a differentiated understanding of the Janus-faced nature of the relationship between care, education and repression in communist regimes. Based on the treatment of non-conformists and delinquents in different contexts and regions, communist practices and concepts combining education and repression will be explored. Focusing on generic institutions will also allow comparisons with the rival systems in the West and with precursors of these typically ‘modern’ institutions. The conference is based on the conviction that the treatment of people in state-enforced custody and care - be it prisoners in prisons and camps, patients in psychiatric wards, children and young people in residential care, or similar - is one indicator of the humanity or inhumanity of the ruling system.

We are looking for contributions addressing topics of one of the following panels. In particular panels I and III:

- I. COMMUNIST CONTEXTS: IDEOLOGY, THE PARTY, AND THE MILITARY
 - The education of the ‘new man’ / the ‘developed socialist personality’, the party culture including criticism and self-criticism and penal education, the militaristic

society, the reception of Makarenko's pedagogy in different countries of the East and the West.

II. PENAL INSTITUTIONS

- Prisons, camps, penal colonies, banishments, gulag, including re-education experiments in prisons

III. SOCIAL ENGINEERING, CONTROL, AND DISCIPLINE

- Children's homes, youth work centres, medical and care institutions, discipline and punishment through the exclusion of marginal groups such as 'parasites', 'asocials', 'rowdies', members of ethnic minorities and sub/counter-cultures.

Proposals

Proposals of 300–500 words, accompanied by a short biographical note, should be sent by **June 15, 2025** to the following address: punitiveeducation.conference@tu-dresden.de.

Decisions will be announced no later than **June 30, 2025**.

The 8th “Hermann Weber Conference on Historical Research on Communism” will take place from April 15-17, 2026, at the Gedenkstätte Bautzner Straße, Dresden. Travel and accommodation costs will be covered by the organizers after consultation. The conference language is English. It is expected that the draft papers will be submitted by **March 16, 2026**. They will be presented and discussed at the conference. The conference is sponsored by the “Gerda-und-Hermann-Weber-Stiftung in der Bundesstiftung zur Aufarbeitung der SED-Diktatur”. A revised version of selected conference papers will be published in German in the “Jahrbuch für Historische Kommunismusforschung” 2027 (translation resources are available; the papers will be proofread). The application requires the willingness to submit a contribution for review for this publication.

Organised by:

Hannah Arendt Institute for Totalitarianism Studies at TU Dresden (HAIT)

Institute of Contemporary History of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague (ÚSD)