Bayernturm, the observation tower that has lost its function

I have written about the former GDR many times on this blog; I will include the relevant links below the post.

After the Second World War, the eastern half of Germany, which had been divided into two and came under Soviet influence, became a socialist state with a system similar to that of Hungary. However, the paranoia that was fundamentally encoded into the system reached its peak here, as the neighbouring country, the FRG, was the former western half of the country and – what a surprising consequence – fared much better economically and politically after the division than the more destitute *'Soviet'* GDR. Clearly, the Easterners also wanted to prove that they were just as good as West Germany, but the socialist planned economy was never suited to competing with the free market, so they built their imagined superiority on lies, intimidation and a brutal network of informers.



Bayernturm, the disused watchtower

The Wall, with a capital 'W', was erected by the GDR in 1961, partly to signify the separation of the two countries, and partly to prevent the GDR *from "being depopulated"*, as its citizens – or, to use the terminology of the time, 'comrades' (*'Genossen'* in German), were beginning to flee en masse to the West to escape the planned economy (I've written more about the Wall here: Across the Wall).

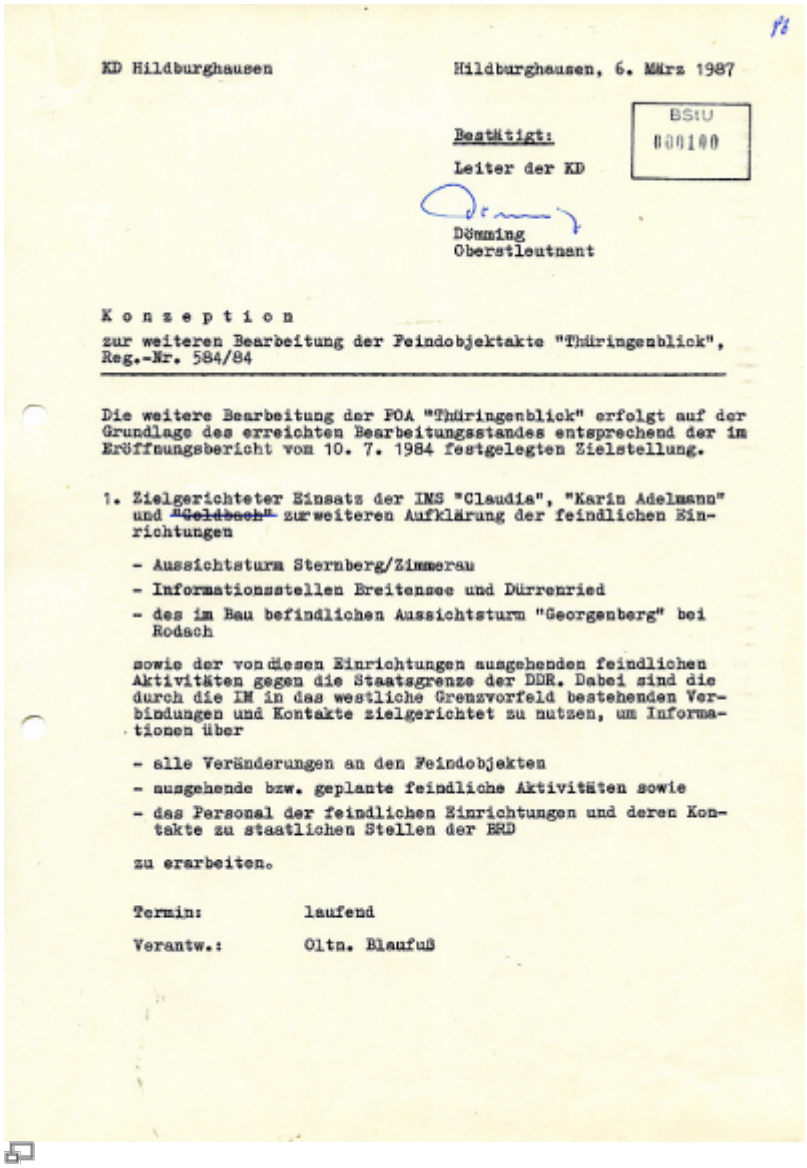
The Wall, of course, immediately became a tourist attraction in West Germany; today we refer to this phenomenon as 'disaster tourism', where curious people try, in dense, packed queues, to get close to the disaster-stricken area, in this case the border with the GDR, so that they could see for themselves the existence of the paranoid regime. Clearly, the free market recognised the phenomenon, and the supporting infrastructure began to be built up immediately to meet the huge demand. What's more, the state – the West German government – even contributed funding to the developments; their desire for reunification was never a secret.


Bayernturm, the observation tower as it appears today

One such development designed to attract tourists was the **Bavarian Tower** , which opened in 1966 on what was known in Western parlance as the 'internal border'. The rather unimpressive, 38-metre-high, octagonal tower, built right next to the border fence, offered a superb view of the countryside; and a special model of the GDR side had even been incorporated into it, where one could use lights to locate the neighbouring GDR barracks, Soviet bases and settlements. From there, the Soviet military radar system on the Stadtberg near Hildburghausen was clearly visible and could be observed through binoculars.

Even whilst it was still under construction, the tower on the eastern side caused concern, as it was initially believed that a missile launch pad was being built. The building, alongside a restaurant and a hotel, immediately attracted huge interest, *"business was booming"*, with visitors arriving from all over the world to catch a glimpse of the border installations and the 'death strip'.

The *'death strip'* was not a sensationalist term coined for the sake of tourists; indeed, the GDR border was defended against 'intruders' with automatic weapons, minefields, armed guards and concrete blocks that were impenetrable to vehicles – that is, *'escapees'*— that is, fleeing GDR citizens. Similar to this, but largely of a more modest design, were the so-called **information points** were set up during that period along the western side of the border, from the Baltic Sea to Bavaria, where local retired librarians and teachers told visitors about the border and the former, borderless, free life.



KD Hildburghausen

Hildburghausen, 6. März 1987

BStU
000100

Bestätigt:
Leiter der KD

Dömming
Oberstleutnant

K o n z e p t i o n
zur weiteren Bearbeitung der Feindobjektakte "Thüringenblick",
Reg.-Nr. 584/84

Die weitere Bearbeitung der FOA "Thüringenblick" erfolgt auf der Grundlage des erreichten Bearbeitungsstandes entsprechend der im Eröffnungsbericht vom 10. 7. 1984 festgelegten Zielstellung.

1. Zielgerichteter Einsatz der INS "Claudia", "Karin Adelmann" und ~~"Goldbach"~~ zur weiteren Aufklärung der feindlichen Einrichtungen

   - Aussichtsturm Sternberg/Zimmerau
   - Informationsstellen Breitensee und Dürrenried
   - des im Bau befindlichen Aussichtsturm "Georgenberg" bei Rodach

   sowie der von diesen Einrichtungen ausgehenden feindlichen Aktivitäten gegen die Staatsgrenze der DDR. Dabei sind die durch die IM in das westliche Grenzvorfeld bestehenden Verbindungen und Kontakte zielgerichtet zu nutzen, um Informationen über

   - alle Veränderungen an den Feindobjekten
   - ausgehende bzw. geplante feindliche Aktivitäten sowie
   - das Personal der feindlichen Einrichtungen und deren Kontakte zu staatlichen Stellen der BRD

   zu erarbeiten.

   Termin: laufend

   Verantw.: Oltn. Blaufuß

The first page of the STASI's 'Thüringenblick' file

The STASI, the GDR's secret police, naturally watched these developments with concern; in their eyes, these facilities symbolised the FRG's efforts towards reunification, which thus called into question the integrity of the GDR state. They began gathering information on almost all of them immediately, monitoring and (ostentatiously) photographing visitors. The Bavarian Tower offered a glimpse into everyday life in the then GDR province of Thuringia from West German Bavaria, and so the *STASI HA-I* unit's Thuringian spectacle, namely **'Thüringenblick'** to summarise the tasks, informants' reports and the documents collected.

Despite all its efforts, the secret police failed over a period of roughly 25 years to recruit informants from information points along the border, hotels, restaurants, observation towers and educational institutions, so the only material they were able to include in the file came from retired East Germans wandering about, such as handwritten travelogues, brochures and admission tickets. They too must have regarded this result as rather meagre, so in February 1989 the file was closed and sent to the archives.

On the night of 2 October 1990, as the date changed to 3 October, the federal flag was hoisted on the Reichstag in Berlin; the STASI was then dissolved in 1991.

With the abolition of the inner border, the tower also lost its status as a tourist attraction; today it

stands abandoned on the outskirts of Büchelberg, awaiting renovation.

Sic transit gloria mundi.

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Sources

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Naturpark-Hassberge: "Bayernturm" observation tower

wikipedia: Bayernturm

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