

## **Katy Bennett – Berlin, May 2018**

I travelled to Berlin in May 2018 with my Themes and Sources class – we are studying ‘The Politics of Memory in Germany after 1945’ and for that reason, the trip centred on visiting memorial sites and places of historical relevance to this period.

Our first stop was the Holocaust Memorial in the centre of Berlin, followed by the Berlin-Hohenschönhausen Memorial. Both were highly thought-provoking experiences. The former is striking because of how much it blends into the city and this prompted me to think about why it has been memorialised in this way. The Memorial appears vague from the outside, with little reference to the perpetrators, something which has been criticised. The Memorial has also been criticised for only commemorating Jewish Holocaust victims as well as by intellectuals such as Günter Grass and Martin Walser, whose controversial speech we studied in class. Visiting the Memorial in person helped me understand these debates and their origins, which will help me when it comes to writing my essay.

Visiting Hohenschönhausen was thought-provoking in a very different way. We were given a tour of the ex-Stasi prison, which meant that it was a learning experience for me as well as a reflective one. The tour guides at Hohenschönhausen often have some connection to the prison – the father of the tour guide leading us had been a prisoner there – giving the memorial a highly personal element. It was interesting to hear what has been destroyed, rebuilt or preserved over time, and why – much of the destruction was done by the GDR to obscure the extent of what was done there, while prison cells have been carefully refurbished for the memorial. The Hohenschönhausen Memorial is very much designed to educate rather than simply be a place for contemplation.

The next day, we visited the Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp Memorial. This is a profound memorial and I found this visit particularly thought-provoking. Most of the inside of the camp was destroyed in the process of making the memorial, against the wishes of many of the actual victims of the camp, who wanted it preserved to testify to what they had experienced. This is a striking testament to the fact that the process of memorialisation is often complex and does not always serve those most affected. The Sachsenhausen Memorial was also used as a propaganda tool by the GDR, to present itself as having overcome its Nazi past when West Germany had not – there is even a stage for giving speeches located in the camp. At the same time, the camp is hugely informative and reflective on the crimes committed there. In this way, it invites consideration of who and what memorialisation serves, and the multiple layers to this – even a memorial created largely to be propaganda for the GDR arguably still serves a powerful purpose.

Overall, this trip prompted me to think more deeply about the politics of memory and has been of huge help to my study of History at Cambridge. I am very grateful to Pembroke College and the Travel Award for enabling me to do this.