

Are German prison industries really so much better than ours?

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This was the question which I and Ursula Smartt (a senior lecturer and prison researcher at Thames Valley University) set out to answer in an expedition to Germany this February. It arose from previous visits (by HMCIP Judge Tumim and others) to a number of German prisons, from which it appeared that German prisoners worked harder, did better quality work, and were better paid than ours and that as a result German prison industries made substantial profits. Contrasts were therefore drawn between the allegedly lethargic and apathetic atmosphere of the typical workshop in an English prison, and the busy and purposeful atmosphere in German prison workshops. This suggested that German 'industrial prisons', where regimes were built around a full and purposeful working week with the incentive of realistic wages, could be a model from which we could learn. If the Germans were succeeding in making a reality of the industrial prison concept, why were we apparently less successful at places like Coldingley where a similar concept had been tried in England?

In a nutshell...

Our conclusions put the comparison into a rather different perspective. The German prison industries which we saw were certainly good, and sometimes excellent. But they are not on average that much better and in some respects their performance falls short of ours. They do regularly achieve a 35 hour net working week, against our average of 21 or 22 hours. This has helped them to build successful long term partnerships with private employers. They do pay their prisoners better (an average of £30 a week, with £10 taken in compulsory savings), but not at the same rate as outside workers. Nevertheless, productivity and

output are not particularly impressive: on the basis both of output and productivity figures and of subjective impressions going round workshops, it is apparent that, while German prisoners work longer hours, they do not generally work any harder or more efficiently. The kind of work done is very similar to that in our prisons, and we saw the same range of prisoner responses, from the apathetic to the involved and hard-working that one sees over here. The apparent profitability of their industries arises from their different conventions as to the way the accounts are prepared and in which costs are included in or excluded from the accounts.

These conclusions were based on a short but intensive visit to four German prisons in three different German states or Länder. And therein lies the first important lesson about the German prison system. There is no national Prison Service. Each of the 16 Länder (10 in the former West Germany, and six in the former DDR) has its own prison system, controlled by an autonomous Ministry of Justice. The ethos and culture vary markedly from Land to Land, with a particularly pronounced North/South divide. Attitudes tend to be more liberal in the North, more conservative in the South. (The so-called Neuer Länder of the former DDR adds another quite different dimension to the picture, but that is another story outside the scope of this article). These differences in social attitudes are reflected in the way prisons are run and prisoners are treated in different parts of Germany.

This fragmentation makes the setting up of a visit like mine and Mrs Smartt's more complicated, in that instead of contacting just one national headquarters, separate arrangements had to be made with the authorities of the three different Länder which we visited – Baden-Württemberg in the South West, Bavaria in the South East and Lower Saxony in the North. Fortunately Mrs Smartt had existing contacts in

the various Justice Ministries and, as a native German speaker, was able to conduct the necessary negotiations quickly and effectively.

First impressions

The four prisons we visited were: Bruchsal (Baden-Württemberg), a medium sized – about 400 inmates – closed prison, roughly equivalent to a Category B training prison, but also holding maximum security prisoners, and taking prisoners sentenced to four years or over; München-Stadelheim (Bavaria), a very large (around 1,600 prisoners) prison, rather reminiscent of a big local like Liverpool with a broad mix of types of prisoners, including young offenders and a high proportion of remands; Straubing (Bavaria), a large – 860 prisoners – training prison, catering for long-term Category B to maximum security prisoners, and also with a special therapeutic wing holding about 35 prisoners; and Celle (Lower Saxony), a smallish prison of about 230 places, catering for long-stay (eight year minimum sentence) prisoners up to maximum security level.

As might be expected, there was a good deal of variation in the atmosphere and ethos of the four prisons. Both Bruchsal and Straubing had been built on the Pentonville model (the former in the 1840s, the latter in the 1890s) – an interesting reminder of the influence which 19th-century penal practices developed in America and Britain had in Germany at that time. Unlike the real Pentonville however, both Bruchsal and Straubing have managed to avoid the accretion of a clutter of infill buildings to mask the star-shaped layout of the original wings. München-Stadelheim also dated from the 19th century, but with considerable later development, whilst Celle was even older, dating from the early 18th century, when it had been established as a House of Correction and Madhouse. (Apparently when the principality of Celle was combined with Hannover, the inhabitants of Celle were offered the choice of a university or house of correction to compensate for the loss of their independence. They chose the latter because of fears of what effects an influx of students would have on the good burghers' daughters. A prison seemed a safer option).

A striking common theme was the scrupulous attention to cleanliness and hygiene. Litter was simply not tolerated, and even a large prison like München-Stadelheim, operating under what was probably quite considerable operational pressure, seemed able to maintain a standard of cleanliness and decorative order which few of our prisons could match. The prison at Bruchsal could almost be described as a model prison in this respect, with the tone being set from the moment a visitor arrives in the smart gatehouse, decorated in a well-

chosen colour scheme to convey a calm and professional impression (also reflected in the way the uniformed staff member on duty greeted us). Nowhere in the prison could we find any dirt, grime, scuff marks on doors or walls, scruffy hand-made notices or jumbled notice-boards. The staff clearly took a pride in their own appearance, and that of the prison.

Kitchens too were very impressive. Again hygiene and cleanliness were paramount. We went into the kitchens at München just after lunch to find that the work was done for the day, and everything already cleaned up. The kitchen workers come on even earlier than the ordinary workers (more about this later), around 5.00 am, to prepare breakfast, lunch and a cold evening meal which is dispatched to living units at lunchtime. By 1.00 pm the enormous kitchen is deserted, with only the caterer left on duty, and all the equipment looking as if it had never been used.

Some kitchens did their own butchery, with this being taught to the inmates as a trade. The quantities of meat being served were prodigious – particularly in Bavaria, where vegetarians would have a bleak time indeed! Each prison also had an in-house bakery, producing a variety of loaves and rolls, and in some cases a pâtisserie section producing cakes for sale to staff and local people – again with trade training for the inmates employed. The overwhelming smells were of baking and sides of bacon, so you usually left feeling hungrier than when you went in – the reverse of the experience in the usual English prison kitchen.

Regimes

Regimes in German prisons basically mean work and vocational training. Unlike us they do not have debates about the 'balance of regime activities', the value and purpose of work, or what sort of work prisoners should do. It is simply taken as read that ideally all – but failing that as many as possible – prisoners should be actively employed in productive work for a full working week. The parts played by education, physical education and other activities are correspondingly much smaller than in our system.

Our hosts probably found our curiosity about 'industrial prisons' rather puzzling, since a regime focused on industrial work would not be regarded by them as anything special or remarkable – it is just the normal expectation. Even a prison like München-Stadelheim, which is much closer to our concept of a local than a training prison, had 570 prisoners out of 1,578 at work when we visited. (For the remaining prisoners, however, life would have been fairly bleak with little or no alternative activity available, and long periods of lock up).

Bruchsal achieved 93 per cent employment, Straubing 60 per cent and Celle 62 per cent.

Working hours are about 35 hours a week, with no difference between the big, busy local-type prison like Munchen-Stadelheim and the other prisons catering for longer stay inmates. Again, the 35 hour working week was not a matter of debate or thought to represent the achievement of some demanding target. It was simply a fact of life around which prison routines were, as a matter of course, designed.

The working day (both inside and outside prison) starts early in Germany. The prisoners would typically be at work by 7.00 am, and work through to about 3.00 pm with a short (1/2 hour to one hour) lunch break. Interruptions were unknown.

Type and Quality of Work

There is no doubt that our German colleagues out-perform us in relation to getting the prisoners to work and keeping them there for a respectable working week. What of the work that they do? Here we are on much more familiar ground. With only one or two exceptions the types of work provided in German prisons match very closely those encountered in this country. (Indeed, as an aside, my experience of seeing prison industries in the USA and Germany and exchanges of information with counterparts in Canada, Sweden and Holland, convince me that the pattern is very similar throughout the leading prison systems of the world, with few real innovations anywhere. We have as much to pass on to others from the innovations being developed within prison enterprises here as we have to learn from others experience).

Contract Services work played an important part, as it does here, providing pick up and put down work for prisoners whose aptitudes or length of stay precluded other activities. We saw prisoners trimming rubber gaskets, packing vacuum cleaner bags, assembling electrical fittings and filing off aluminium castings for car engines and escalator treads. The atmosphere in these workshops was very similar to that in similar shops here, except that there was no music system blasting out pop music to entertain the workers. None of the workshops we saw in Germany had music and the idea was frowned on by our hosts.

Engineering and woodwork figured prominently in the German industries diet, as they do here. The main discernable difference was that production was organised more on jobbing than mass production lines. Whilst this was in some ways more satisfying both for staff and prisoners, it was probably one of the reasons why the German output and productivity figures were (as

will be demonstrated later in this article) not particularly impressive. In these workshops, great emphasis was placed on training, indeed some workshops were more akin to our vocational training than to our production workshops. Germany still retains almost intact the historical system of trade training through apprenticeship to journeyman and master craftsman. This provides excellent training for prisoners who are there long enough (at least two and a half years) to benefit, but the British NVQ system better serves that majority of prisoners whose stay is shorter and who can pick up units leading to an NVQ in a relatively short time.

An important feature of German prison enterprises is the high proportion of external work and of involvement with the local economies of the prisons' surrounding areas. In England and Wales prison enterprises are still dominated by production for use within the Prison Service – less than five per cent of our output is sold externally. In Germany external sales account for at least half of the output, shared between major contracts and partnerships with private companies, and direct sales to the public. Examples of the latter were the picture framing and upholstery restoration services offered to the local community at Bruchsal. It was clear that this prison must have been a significant player in the local economy, but apparently there was no significant opposition from local traders. Equally, industrial managers in German prisons are very assertive in their efforts to win external contracts for work. The industrial manager at Straubing told us that he had a legal duty to source work for prisoners, and that he would use any necessary means to achieve this, including advertising and features on the local radio stations. Again, there seemed to be little or no opposition to this activity from local businessmen.

In several workshops, work was provided directly by a private sector company, which might also provide machinery and on-site supervisors. At Straubing, enterprises of this type included saddle-making and – the most impressive shop we saw in Germany – the manufacture of precision-engineered aircraft engine parts for a firm called MTU. MTU's staff supervised this highly-skilled work and a member of their staff quality controlled each item produced.

An important aspect of these workshops was the very long term relationships with the firms concerned – as long as 17 or 20 years in some cases.

Pay and Productivity

Average pay in German prison industries is around £30 per week, with the possibility of earnings up to around £50 in the most skilled kind

of work, like the MTU precision engineering. In accordance with Federal law, one third of the pay is deducted and held in a savings account to be paid to the prisoner as so called 'bridging money' on release.

Despite the higher pay levels the productivity of German prisoners is no greater than ours, and in some senses considerably lower. An academic study reporting in 1994 indicated that productivity rates averaged between 15 per cent and 20 per cent. This is well below the average in England and Wales. Average productivity in our engineering workshops is around 30 per cent, in woodwork around 40 per cent. Our lowest productivity industries (tailoring and textiles) achieve 24 per cent and 20 per cent respectively. These findings were supported by our own observations of workshop activity and comparisons of sales output. The idea that German prison workshops are hives of activity, compared with apathetic ones in this country does not stand up to examination.

What about profits? - Not without honour save in their own country

A key question for us was whether German prison industries were profitable. If they were, we would clearly be interested to find out how they did it.

Unfortunately direct comparison of profit and loss accounts is not possible. Different accounting systems and conventions are used, and the differences exist not only between here and Germany, but also between different German states. A particularly problematic area is the inclusion or exclusion of important costs, such as supervision (staff), depreciation, workshop rent charges and interest. Some points could be resolved through detective work and questioning: for example it emerged that in Bavaria only 20 per cent of staff costs are attributed to the industries accounts. Other points remained intractable.

We did not however see anything which would lead us to think that, if calculated on like for like basis, German prison enterprise **costs** would be significantly lower than ours. Even the absence in Germany of any equivalent of a relatively large

central organisation like Prison Enterprise Services would be (probably more than) offset by greater local costs. For example the prison at Celle employed 32 book-keepers for the industries alone.

On the **income** side of the account, one would expect German prison industries to generate greater income per prisoner employed, if only because of the longer working week, and that indeed seems to be the case. Compared with an income of £4,824 per prisoner employed in England and Wales (1992/3 accounts), Baden Wurtemberg generated £7,338, Bavaria £5,440 and Lower Saxony £4,914 (all 1993 figures). With the difference in the length of the working week one would, other things being equal, expect the German figures to be rather higher than this (around £8,000 on average), but there is probably some under-estimate of their sales per inmate employed because their employment figures (but not their sales figures) include domestic and kitchen work.

For individual prisons, Bruchsal achieved £6,785, Munchen-Stadelheim £3,700, Straubing £8,260 and Celle £8,803. Comparison with some of our major industrial prisons is revealing: Featherstone £9,215, Kirkham £9,540, and (much criticised) Coldingley £11,272. So perhaps we are not really doing so badly after all.

Conclusion

German prison industries have many positive and interesting features from which we can learn. But there is no reason to think that they do better on the whole than we do. Both countries have competently managed prison industries and the similarities are more significant than the differences. I certainly felt that in each German workshop I entered, I was on familiar ground, meeting staff who were tackling similar problems to our own, with a similar degree of commitment and professionalism. It is a particularly British habit to denigrate our own performance in comparison with that of other countries. Such denigration has no justification in relation to the management of prison industries ■

VERBALS

"In prison people get used to the routine and not having to cope for themselves," says Chris, aged 51 recently released after serving a 10 year prison sentence for fraud. "Back in the real world you can feel like an alien coming to terms with the changes that have occurred since you've been away. £20 used to buy you enough food to overflow a supermarket trolley - now it won't even fill a basket. Your old friends tend to be wary and embarrassed of you. You're suspicious of everyone. You don't know what to expect in different situations. You walk into a pub. Is everybody looking at you? It feels like it."

[An ex-prisoner quoted in the Annual Report 1994/95 of NACRO]