

About the work of the research group

Scientists of the research network Forschungsverbund SED-Staat at Freie Universität Berlin have found that more people were victims of the GDR border regime than previously thought. Since August 2012 the Forschungsverbund SED-Staat at Freie Universität Berlin has been investigating the fate of victims of the GDR border regime. The researchers involved in the new project are gathering information about the lives of the men, women, and children who died on the inner-German border between 1949 and 1989. The work is planned to be continued through the end of 2015. The researchers aim to compile a list of all the victims complete with short biographies. The research is being funded by the German Federal Government's Commissioner for Culture and the Media and the German states of Hesse, Lower Saxony, and Saxony-Anhalt. The researchers at Freie Universität currently have information regarding 1,129 suspected victims of the GDR border regime. The information is mainly personalized data, but to a small extent there are references to persons whose names are not known. So far in the archival research in-depth biographical information was found for a total of 408 people who were killed in connection with the GDR border regime. Exemplary cases are published on the Internet on the website of the research network.

The vast number of verified deaths were of East German refugees who were under 25 years of age and were skilled or unskilled laborers. According to the documents in the archives, the youngest victim was a six-month-old baby who suffocated in the trunk of a car being used to flee the border in July 1977. The oldest fatality at the inner-German border was an 80-year-old farmer from Lüchow-Dannenberg in Lower Saxony who in June 1967 mistakenly fell into a minefield. Landmines tore off both his legs. His agony lasted more than three hours. He bled to death under the eye of a GDR regimental surgeon who was not willing to venture onto the mined border strip.

In addition to the GDR citizens who lost their lives while trying to escape and the civilians from the West who were killed, there is another thus far neglected group of victims. The SED propaganda officially honored selected border guards who had lost their lives while on duty by naming monuments, roads, and schools after them. On the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the border troops on November 28, 1986, Erich Honecker paid tribute by name to 25 of these East German border guards. In every case the guards being thus honored were those who had lost their lives in exchange of fire with members of the Western Allied Forces, the West German border guards, or Western civilians or who were shot by deserter comrades. More than ten times higher is in fact the number of soldiers, officers, and civilian employees of the border troops who died while in service because of accidents with mines or firearms or who committed suicide because of pressures to which they were exposed, fell in East Germany under the strictest code of silence. As part of the new research project, the names and biographical data of these largely unknown victims of the GDR border regimes are to be uncovered, and they are to be taken into account in the final overall presentation of the research results.

The number of soldiers and officers among the border guards who were relegated from duty by the East German Ministry for State Security is astonishingly high. In 1986 a total of 1,506 members of the border troops were withdrawn or placed outside of units that secured the border because the State Security Service had determined there were grounds for possible intentions to desert. Emigration applications from relatives or friends or even positive remarks made about Western vehicles and Western fashions could lead to such removal from border duty. So far the researchers at Freie Universität have evaluated several thousand individual files in the archives of the German Federal Commissioner for the Records of the East German

Ministry for State Security and the German Federal Archives in Berlin-Lichterfelde and Koblenz in which information is contained on escape attempts and other incidents on the inner-German border. Biographical research on Soviet soldiers who were shot after desertion near the German border or who took their own lives proved to be particularly difficult. In these cases the researchers were able to ascertain the names and service locations of some of the victims, but no further biographical data were available.