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The Victims at the Berlin Wall, 1961-1989

Findings of a Research Project by the Centre for Research on Contemporary History Potsdam and the Berlin Wall Memorial Site and Documentation Centre

Objectives

When the project began in 2005 - 44 years after the Berlin Wall was built and 15 years after the East German archives were opened -, there were still no reliable data on the number of people killed at the Wall.¹ Depending on the sources, purpose and date of the studies, the figures varied between 78 (Central Registry of State Judicial Administrations in Salzgitter), 86 (Berlin Public Prosecution Service), 92 (Berlin Police President), 122 (Central Investigation Office for Government and Unification Criminality) and more than 200 deaths (Working Group 13 August). The names of many of the victims, their biographies and the circumstances in which they died were widely unknown.²

The dual objective of our project therefore was to establish the number and identities of the individuals who died at the Berlin Wall between 1961 and 1989 and to document their lives and deaths through historical and biographical research.

Definition

In order to provide reliable figures, the project had to begin by developing clear criteria and a definition of which individuals are to be understood as victims at the Berlin Wall. We regard the “provable causal and spatial connection of a death with an attempted escape or a direct or indirect cause or lack of action by the ‘border organs’ in the border territory” as the decisive factor. In simpler terms: the criteria are either an attempted escape or a temporal and spatial link between the death and the border regime.

This applies regardless of whether the death was caused by the use of firearms or an accident in the border facilities, and independently of whether it took place directly on the death strip, in the no man’s land, or after transportation to a hospital – hours, days, weeks, months or, as in the case of Herbert Mende, even years later.

1] See: Hans-Hermann Hertle/Maria Nooke (eds.), *The Victims at the Berlin Wall, 1961–1989. A Biographical Handbook*, published by Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung Potsdam and Stiftung Berliner Mauer, Berlin 2011. All sources not otherwise stated are contained in this publication. The biographical portraits can also be read on the website www.chronik-der-mauer.de. – The following individuals worked on the project, the book and the findings presented below: Udo Baron, Christine Brecht, Martin Ahrends and Lydia Dollmann.

2] These observations also apply to those killed on the inner-German border, on the borders to third countries and in the Baltic. See: Hans-Hermann Hertle/Gerhard Sälter, “Die Todesopfer an Mauer und Grenze. Probleme einer Bilanz des DDR-Grenzregimes”, in *Deutschland Archiv* 4/2006, 667-676. This article also includes numerous references to primary sources and secondary literature.

Our definition thus also includes deaths not covered by the criminal prosecutions of acts of violence on the border, as these concentrated solely on cases in which another individual was directly involved.

Sources

The project registered and researched a total of 575 deaths and suspected cases. The project team checked these cases and wrote the biographies on the basis of broad archive and material research.

- For the first time, this project was able to evaluate the case files of the Berlin and Neuruppin public prosecution services, prepared in the course of investigations on acts of violence at the Wall: a total of more than 150 investigation files and over 70 pre-investigation files.
- In response to an application to the archive of the Federal Commissioner for the Records of the Ministry of State Security in the former German Democratic Republic (BStU), we were provided with records on more than 100 deaths and suspected cases.
- In the Federal Archives Military Archive, the project team was able to research some 300 cases in the files of the GDR National Defence Ministry, the GDR border troops and the military public prosecution service.
- Wide-ranging research, material viewing and evaluation also took place in the Police History Collection of the Berlin Police President, the Federal Archive in Berlin and Koblenz, the Berlin Archive, the Brandenburg Central Archive, the Political Archive of the Foreign Office, the Archive of the Central Registry of State Judicial Administrations in Salzgitter and in various press, radio and photo archives.

In order to gain insights into the victims' motivations and living conditions independently of official documents from East and West Germany, the project team sought contact to their families and friends, succeeding in more than 70 cases. This meant that personal memories and family contexts could be included in numerous biographies.

Findings

The case reviews led to the following findings:

- At least 136 people were shot dead, suffered fatal accidents or committed suicide after a failed escape attempt across the Berlin Wall.
- In a further 16 cases, the archive material was not sufficient to prove whether or not the individual was a victim of the Berlin Wall or not. These cases concern drownings in which the identity of the body is unknown and there is no clear proof of attempt escapes or links to the border regime. As such criteria cannot be ruled out, however, these and a further eight cases on which no archive material could be found – thus a total of 24 cases – could not be identified as victims.
- 164 suspected cases were ruled out as victims *at* the Berlin Wall, as there was neither an indication of an escape attempt nor a spatial link with the border regime, or as there were no deaths. These cases include, for example, escapees who survived shootings with severe injuries, or individuals alleged by West Berlin sources to have been involved in escape attempts, which can however be proved not to have taken place. Dual counts due to imprecise information were excluded from the figures, as were suicides in Berlin waterways that could be proved to have no relation to escape attempts.³

3| For a detailed look at these cases, see: Hertle/Nooke, *The Victims at the Berlin Wall, 1961–1989*, 464 f.

- At least 251 mainly elderly travellers from East and West Germany died before, during or after passing through a Berlin checkpoint, predominantly as a result of heart attacks. There were at least 227 deaths of this type at the Friedrichstraße Station border crossing. These included 164 GDR citizens, 40 West Berliners, 20 West Germans, one Czechoslovakian and two GDR citizens intending to pass through the checkpoint with permission to emigrate to West Germany. As a general rule, however, the sources provide neither precise places nor circumstances of these deaths. In other words, it remains unclear whether the individuals in question died before, during or after passing through the checkpoint or even during an interrogation. Not every death is therefore necessarily linked to the border regime. At the same time, however, the many deaths of travellers at GDR crossing points cannot be seen independently of the Berlin Wall and the East German border regime. Further research is certainly necessary on this subject.

At Least 136 Victims at the Berlin Wall

The 136 victims at the Berlin Wall on whom we have written biographical texts include:

- 98 escapees shot dead, suffering fatal accidents or committing suicide during an attempt to cross the border;
- 30 individuals from East and West Germany who were shot or had a fatal accident with no intent to escape;
- Eight GDR border soldiers killed in service by military deserters, fellow soldiers, an escapee, an escape agent or a West Berlin police officer.

Two thirds of the deaths occurred on the sector border inside the city; 46 people died at the Wall between Berlin and Brandenburg, referred to as the outer ring (including 34 escapees, eight individuals from East and West Germany with no escape intentions and four border guards).

Approximately half of the 136 deaths took place in the first five years of the Wall's existence (including 1966, this figure is just under 60 percent). The year 1967 formed an initial turning point, with the number of victims falling significantly from this point on. The main reason for this development is the technical modernisation of the border begun in 1966 (construction of the "modern border").

A second turning point can be made out from 1976 on: In the first 15 years after the Wall was built, from 1961 to 1975, a total of 118 people died in connection with the GDR border regime (i.e. 86.8 percent of all victims); the almost equally long period from 1976 to 1989 occasioned 18 victims (13.2 percent).

This clear reduction is primarily due to the continued technical enhancements to the border facilities (electronic alarms = "border signal fence 74"; border wall 75) and to intensified guarding of the area before the Wall itself. A further reason was the Helsinki Accords signed in August 1975. Escape attempts across the border facilities fell as a result, with less dangerous emigration applications rising in contrast.

VICTIMS AT THE BERLIN WALL 1961 to 1989

| Year | Total | <u>Of whom:</u> Escapes | <u>Of whom:</u> Individuals with no intent to escape <i>East German</i> | <u>Of whom:</u> Individuals with no intent to escape <i>West German</i> | <u>Of whom:</u> Border guards |
|--------------|--------------|----------------------------|--|--|---|
| 1961 | 12 | 11 | | 1 | - |
| 1962 | 22 | 15 | 1 | 2 | 4 |
| 1963 | 10 | 8 | 1 | | 1 |
| 1964 | 10 | 8 | | 1 | 1 |
| 1965 | 12 | 8 | 1 | 3 | |
| 1966 | 12 | 9 | | 3 | |
| 1967 | 2 | 2 | | | |
| 1968 | 7 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| 1969 | 3 | 3 | | | |
| 1970 | 8 | 4 | 2 | 2 | |
| 1971 | 4 | 1 | | 3 | |
| 1972 | 4 | 3 | | 1 | |
| 1973 | 5 | 4 | | 1 | |
| 1974 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 1 | |
| 1975 | 4 | 2 | 1 | 1 | |
| 1976 | - | - | | | |
| 1977 | 2 | 2 | | | |
| 1978 | - | - | | | |
| 1979 | - | - | | | |
| 1980 | 2 | 1 | | | 1 |
| 1981 | 3 | 2 | | 1 | |
| 1982 | 1 | - | | 1 | |
| 1983 | 1 | 1 | | | |
| 1984 | 1 | 1 | | | |
| 1985 | - | - | | | |
| 1986 | 4 | 4 | | | |
| 1987 | 1 | 1 | | | |
| 1988 | - | - | | | |
| 1989 | 3 | 3 | | | |
| Total | 136 | 98 | 8 | 22 | 8 |

Places of escape/death

| Place of escape/death | Total | <u>Of which:</u> Escapees | <u>Of which:</u> Individuals with no intent to escape <i>East German</i> | <u>Of which:</u> Individuals with no intent to escape <i>West German</i> | <u>Of which:</u> Border guards |
|---|------------|------------------------------|---|---|--|
| Inner city sector border/ East Berlin boroughs | | | | | |
| Pankow | 10 | 9 | | 1 | |
| Prenzlauer Berg | 7 | 6 | | 1 | |
| Berlin-Mitte | 35 | 26 | | 6 | 3 |
| Friedrichshain | 15 | 8 | | 7 | |
| Treptow | 23 | 15 | 3 | 4 | 1 |
| <i>Sector border</i> | 90 | 64 | 3 | 19 | 4 |
| Outer ring/ GDR towns and villages | | | | | |
| Schönefeld | 2 | 2 | | | |
| Großziethen | 2 | 2 | | | |
| Mahlow | 2 | 2 | | | |
| Teltow | 4 | 3 | | | 1 |
| Kleinmachnow | 4 | 4 | | | |
| Potsdam | 13 | 8 | 2 | 1 | 2 |
| Sacrow | 3 | 2 | 1 | | |
| Groß Glienicke | 1 | 1 | | | |
| Staaken | 2 | 1 | | 1 | |
| Falkensee/Falkenhöh/ Falkenhagen | 3 | 1 | 1 | 1 | |
| Schönwalde | 2 | 1 | | | 1 |
| Niederneuendorf | 1 | 1 | | | |
| Hennigsdorf | 1 | 1 | | | |
| Hohen Neuendorf | 2 | 2 | | | |
| Bergfelde | 2 | 2 | | | |
| Glienicke/Nordbahn | 2 | 1 | 1 | | |
| <i>Outer ring</i> | 46 | 34 | 5 | 3 | 4 |
| TOTAL | 136 | 98 | 8 | 22 | 8 |

98 Escapees Killed or Suffering Fatal Accidents

67 of the 98 escapees were shot dead. Aside from Franciszek Piesik, all escapees were GDR citizens, including ten military deserters. Franciszek Piesik was a Polish citizen, one of the 28 individuals who suffered fatal accidents during escape attempts at the Wall. This figure also includes escapees (for example Ida Siekmann, Rudolf Urban, Olga Segler and Bernd Lünser) who fell to their deaths in Bernauer Straße or drowned in the waterways on the Berlin border (such as Udo Düllick, Lothar Lehmann, Ingo Krüger, Georg Feldhahn, Philipp Held, Erna Kelm, Horst Plischke and Günter Wiedenhöft in 1961 and 1962 alone). Three of the escapees – Christel and Eckhard Wehage and Willi Born – committed suicide after their escape attempts failed.

The 98 escapees include eight women, four of whom made their escape attempts together with their husbands or friends:

- Ida Siekmann jumped out of a third-floor window in her apartment on Bernauer Straße 48 on 22 August 1961 – one day before her 59th birthday – and died. The Berlin Wall had cut her off from her sister, who lived in the Western sector of the city only a few blocks away.
- 80-year-old Olga Segler died of stress-induced heart failure on 26 September 1961, one day after her jump from her second-floor apartment on Bernauer Straße 34. Her daughter lived not far away in West Berlin.
- 20-year-old Dorit Schmiel made an escape attempt with her fiancé and three friends on 19 February 1962. None of them were willing to put up with the political conditions in the SED state any longer. Dorit Schmiel was shot in the stomach and “grabbed by the arms and legs and carried away like a piece of meat,” as one of her group remembers. All her fellow escapees were arrested and sentenced to imprisonment.
- 53-year-old Erna Kelm from Sacrow near Potsdam drowned north of Glienicke Bridge on 11 June 1962. The reasons for her escape attempt are unknown to this day.
- 37-year-old Hildegard Trabant made an attempt to escape on 18 August 1964, presumably motivated by marital problems. She was discovered trying to withdraw from the border territory and killed by a targeted shot in the back.
- 22-year-old Elke Weckeiser wanted to flee to West Berlin with her husband Dieter Weckeiser in Mitte, diagonally opposite the Reichstag building on 18 February 1968. Without aid or equipment, an escape at this particularly well-guarded spot was practically impossible. At the first barbed-wire barrier, 17 shots were fired at the couple, killing them both. The border guards later admitted that the use of firearms to prevent their escape had not been objectively necessary.
- The young couple Christel and Eckhard Wehage had been unable to find work in the same town or a marital apartment for many years. Having given up hope, they decided to hijack a plane from Schönefeld Airport in East Berlin to Hanover on 10 March 1970. The pilots, however, barricaded the cockpit and landed the plane in Schönefeld again. The Wehages committed suicide while still on board. “All we want is to live our own life the way we’d like to. [...] Should our plan fail, Christel and I will take our lives. [...] In that case, death is the best solution,” wrote Eckhard Wehage in his suicide note.
- 18-year-old Marienetta Jirkowsky, who made an escape attempt on 22 November 1980 along with her fiancé and a friend from Hohen Neuendorf in the north of Berlin, was shot down from a ladder at the last border obstacle and died as a result of a shot through the stomach. She and

her friends wanted “just to live in peace (...), without stress and without everything being banned,” as one of her friends described her motivation in hindsight.

The detailed biographical texts on these women and the large majority of male escapee victims reveal typical experiences of everyday life and repression in the GDR, also providing an insight into the circumstances of people living in the divided Germany. The overwhelming majority of the escapees came from East Berlin and the surrounding area. Those who attempted escape shortly after the Berlin Wall was built were mainly from the war and post-war generation. They had experienced the open border as children and young people and had witnessed the differences between East and West Berlin at first hand. Many of them had relatives in the West or commuted there for work. Even before the border was closed, the division had been a significant factor in their lives.

The later escapees, in contrast, were part of a generation socialised mainly in the GDR, and had not consciously experienced the open border. Their lives were marked by dissatisfaction with the economical and political conditions, a lack of perspectives and a longing for freedom. Their escape attempts were often prompted not only generally by family ties severed by the Wall, but by specific events. These included work-related and/or political conflicts in the workplace, the looming draft to the National People’s Army or harassment during national or police service, repressions due to critical comments, refusal of training and career improvement opportunities, petty treatment by the authorities or denial of an emigration application.

Around a quarter of the escapees had conflicts with the state authorities. Most of these had spent time in prison for political reasons, frequently on grounds of repeated attempts to escape. Seven escapees had previous convictions for alleged theft or fraud, in one case for a violent crime. Some attempted escape to evade imprisonment, further criminal prosecution or other repression such as referral to residential youth institutions.

It is often difficult to judge how intensely the individuals must have felt that they saw no other way out than an escape attempt at the risk of their lives.

30 Individuals from East and West Germany Killed or Suffering Fatal Accidents with No Intent to Escape

In the second group, which consists of individuals with no intent to escape, 22 of the 30 victims were inhabitants of and visitors to West Berlin. 15 of them were shot, including the escape helpers Dieter Wohlfahrt, Heinz Jercha, Siegfried Noffke, Heinz Schöneberger and Adolf Philipp, Hermann Döbler, Paul Stretz, Heinz Schmidt, Siegfried Krug, Heinz Müller, Gerald Thiem, Werner Kühl, Dieter Beilig, Dr. Johannes Muschol and Lothar Fritz Freie.

Seven had fatal accidents. These include five children: Andreas Senk, Cengaver Katranci, Siegfried Kroboth, Giuseppe Savoca and Cetin Mert, who fell into the border canal on Gröbenufer in Kreuzberg, West Berlin, and could not be rescued; also Ulrich Krzemien and Wolfgang Hoffmann.

This group also includes eight GDR citizens shot in the border territory although they had no intent to escape (Wolfgang Glöde, Dieter Berger, Peter Hauptmann, Herbert Mende, Friedhelm Ehrlich, Herbert Kliem, Johannes Sprenger, Lothar Hennig).

Eight Killed Border Guards

A third group consists of eight border soldiers killed in service. As guards, they were part of the system to secure the border and prevent escapes – and at the same time exposed to the dangers associated with it. Three border guards – Jörgen Schmidtchen, Rolf Henniger (who was considering escape himself) and Ulrich Steinhauer – were killed by armed military deserters, two of whom were also shot dead.

Günter Seling, the head of a patrol group, was hit by fatal shots when a fellow soldier mistook him for an escapee in thick fog. Siegfried Widera was hit to the ground by escapees and died of his injuries. Reinhold Huhn, Egon Schultz and Peter Göring were shot deliberately or accidentally by an escape helper, a fellow soldier and a stray bullet from a West Berlin police officer's gun, respectively, in conjunction with escapes.

With the exception of Günter Seling, they were made GDR propaganda heroes – taking them away from their families a second time, as Ulrich Steinhauer's sister put it. Public opinion in the West was divided over whether escapees had the right to defend themselves against border guards, or the life of a border guard took priority in the conflict between freedom and life, as the Berlin local court found (in the case of Ulrich Steinhauer).

Dealing with the Dead and their Families

Some of the most moving findings of our study concern the way the GDR dealt with the dead and their families. Had the killing been witnessed from West Berlin or become known, the East German propaganda tended to refer to the victims as "criminals" and "lumpen elements" who had "violated the state border" and attempted to evade "the punishment they deserved" – as was the case with Günter Litfin, Roland Hoff, Peter Fechter and others.

The SED party leadership knowingly accepted the killings. Yet it was also aware from the very outset that acts of violence were registered by the West Berlin police and dealt with by West Berlin's public prosecution service, and that the Central Registry of State Judicial Administrations in Salzgitter documented and investigated all cases it became aware of, for the purpose of criminal prosecution. Shots at the Wall also brought the GDR into greater disrepute in both parts of Germany, created an echo beyond the country through the protests of the US, British and French municipal commanders in Berlin, and damaged the international reputation of East Germany and the Soviet Union behind it.

These circumstances are referred to in a Stasi report in conjunction with the killing of the escapee Michael Bittner at the Berlin Wall in November 1986 as follows: "The political sensitivity of the state border to Berlin (West) made it necessary to conceal the incident. Rumours about the incident had to be prevented from circulating, with information passing to West Berlin or [the] FRG."⁴ In order to keep shots and of course killings at the Wall as secret as possible, the "processing of 'corpse cases', should they involve incidents on the state border to West Berlin"⁵ was placed in the hands of the Ministry of State Security (MfS), where it was regulated by "ordinances", "instructions" and "observations". The border troops did not automatically transfer injured escapees from the death strip to the nearest clinic, but had to deliver them to certain hospitals – preferably the People's Police Hospital in Berlin-Mitte and the Drewitz Army Hospital near Potsdam. Killed escapees were taken to the Forensic Medical Institute at the Humboldt University (Charité) or the Bad Saarow Central Army Hospital for autopsies. Even the severely injured were not generally transported by ambulance, but on the loading bed of army trucks or military Trabants, with no medical care whatsoever. According to later assessments, faster medical aid and more humane treatment could have saved several lives (for example in the cases of Klaus Garten, Hans-Jürgen Starrost, Silvio Proksch, Michael Schmidt).

Upon arrival at hospital or the coroner, the Stasi took command. The investigation departments ("Line IX") of the two local MfS administrations in Berlin and Potsdam were responsible for these escapees,

4] Final report of MfS/KD Pankow on OPK "Morgentau", 25.7.1988, in: BStU, Ast. Berlin, AOPK No. 5895/88, fol. 118.

5] Here and below, see: Ordnung [des MfS] für die Bearbeitung von Leichenvorgängen, no place or year stated, in: BStU, MfS, HA IX No. 5134, f. 10-16. There were similar instructions for the inner-German border.

and in particularly important cases Central Department IX at MfS headquarters. Injured escapees were isolated in separate rooms at the People's Police Hospital, kept under guard and transferred as soon as possible to the MfS prison hospital or the Stasi remand prisons in Berlin or Potsdam. The Stasi had sole power of disposal over the dead: it took over their possessions, effects and exhibits; in the case of Christian Buttkus it even confiscated and archived the fatal bullet removed during the autopsy. And it was the Stasi alone that determined what happened to the body: starting with the autopsy and followed by the issuing of the death certificate, the application to set up a "corpse case" with Department I A (political crimes) of the East Berlin public prosecution service, running the public prosecution file, receiving the autopsy report, issuing the death certificate at Berlin-Mitte registry office, receiving the funeral certificate, to the transfer and cremation of the corpse, which generally took place at Baumschulenweg Crematorium. In dealing with all these institutions – and after that with the family members – the responsible Stasi operative had to assume a false identity "as a police officer acting on behalf of the Berlin general state prosecution service".⁶

The border troops wrote reports on every attempted escape incident. In the case of deaths, these usually went to Erich Honecker, the Politburo member responsible for security matters and later secretary general of the SED. Their further investigations concentrated on analysis and, where appropriate, removal of weak points in the border security system, which had possibly favoured the escape attempt.

The actual investigation of the crime scene, collection of evidence and questioning and interrogation of witnesses, including the border guards involved, was again mainly the task of the Stasi Departments IX in Berlin and Potsdam, in particular their "special commissions", which cooperated closely with a further Stasi line, Central Department I.⁷ However, concealing the incident and the crime scene always took priority over crime scene investigation for these "investigation organs", if this could prevent events from being observed and registered on the West Berlin side. Members of Department IX in Berlin and Potsdam carried out regular clandestine investigations into the victims and their families as well as possible motives and third parties aware of the escape attempts. At the same time, they had the task of informing the victims' next of kin and where appropriate placing family, relatives, friends, colleagues and neighbours under observation.

It was "not advisable to come straight out with the news," according to the Stasi's "ordinance for processing corpse cases". Beginning with a general conversation with the as yet uninformed widow, father or mother "may produce many a valuable piece of information on the border violator".⁸ The extent of the information subsequently revealed on the death also called for "great tact". The following formulations were stated to have proved useful:

- a) ... lost his life through a border provocation of his own causing,
- b) ... had a fatal accident of his own causing,
- c) ... drowned in a border waterway."⁹

6] Ibid.

7] MfS-Hauptabteilung I operated within the NVA and the border troops under the title "Administration 2000" or "Area 2000" and was responsible for "military defence". This included above all preventative measures against desertion through the recruitment of informers and widespread spying on army personnel, along with detection and investigation of escape attempts. See: Stephan Wolf, *Hauptabteilung I: NVA und Grenztruppen, MfS-Handbuch*, Part III/13, published by the Federal Commissioner for the Records of the Ministry of State Security of the Former GDR (BStU), 2nd edition, Berlin 2005.

8] See: Ordnung [des MfS] für die Bearbeitung von Leichenvorgängen, no place or date stated, in: BStU, MfS, HA IX No. 5134, fol. 13.

9] Ibid.

As version b) “had a fatal accident of his own causing” apparently prompted many additional questions on where the incident took place, operatives were instructed to make use of version a), “as it is thus easier to explain why no information can be provided on the precise location of the incident.”¹⁰

The operatives were to refuse to “show the corpse” to the next of kin and had to attain their agreement to a cremation and request their signature for a declaration for this purpose. The Stasi paid the costs of the funeral up to the presentation of the urn, in a number of cases using money taken from the pockets of the victims themselves. Some relatives, for instance the family of Karl-Heinz Kube, received the urn by post.

According to an “observation” by the Potsdam Stasi administration, the relatives were to be informed that “a memorial ceremony will not take place on principle”.¹¹ Only when the urn was buried was it to be allowed for “a memorial ceremony [to] take place in the smallest company, for which a priest may also be selected.” By attending almost all burials, Stasi operatives robbed even the family’s farewell from the victims of its privacy; they monitored the sermons and shadowed the mourners. In conversation with the family, operatives were to assure that “no information on the incident becomes public, whereby suitable elements from the investigation results may be used tactically to achieve this objective (morally degenerate person, criminal tendencies, etc.)” The precise details given to the family members about the cause of death depended on the results of the investigation – and above all on what had already become known about the “incident” via “Western organs and propaganda, injured and arrested parties, other GDR citizens.”

In many cases, the public and the family found out about deaths for various reasons – and the Stasi was unable to conceal the details. In more than 30 cases, however, family members were informed about the death – usually with no information on the exact circumstances – but obliged to remain silent or lie on the matter to third parties, or they were simply told lies about the cause of death.

- The mothers of Hans Räwel and Walter Hayn were informed that their sons had drowned. In actual fact they had both been shot while attempting to escape: Hans Räwel on 1 January 1963, Walter Hayn on 27 February 1964. Because the latter’s family refused to believe the version they were told, they were threatened “they would be liable to prosecution if they spread rumours about the matter.”
- The parents of Joachim Mehr, who was shot dead during an escape attempt on 3 December 1964, were obliged to present their son’s death to third parties as a “traffic accident” – as were the widow of Klaus Garten, the relatives of Elke and Dieter Weckeiser, Klaus-Jürgen Kluge, Christian Peter Friese and many others, even up to the widow and parents of Lutz Schmidt.

In a number of cases, false circumstances of death were even constructed and evidence such as reports on finding the corpse and death certificates was forged.

- 10-year-old Jörg Hartmann and 13-year-old Lothar Schleusener were shot dead during a joint escape attempt in Treptow on 14 March 1966. Jörg Hartmann’s grandmother was told her grandson had drowned and had been found in Köpenick with injuries caused by a ship’s propeller. Lothar Schleusener’s mother was informed that her son had died of an electric shock in Espenhain near Leipzig. A forged death certificate from the Leipzig registry office was produced as proof.

10| Ibid., fol. 14.

11| Weisung des Leiters der BVfS Potsdam zur Regelung der Zuständigkeit und des Zusammenwirkens von Dienstseinheiten der Bezirksverwaltung bei der Bearbeitung von verletzten oder getöteten Grenzverletzern und durch Folgeerscheinungen verletzten oder getöteten Personen an der Staatsgrenze der DDR zu Westberlin im Bezirk Potsdam, Potsdam, 20.5.1970, in: BStU, Ast. Potsdam, BdL doc no. 400576, fol. 3-11, quote fol. 10. The subsequent quotes are also taken from this source.

- In the guise of police officers, Stasi operatives informed family members that Johannes Sprenger had been found strangled in a wood near to Buch Clinic on 20 May 1974: a “clear-cut suicide”, as they said.

In actual fact, Johannes Sprenger had been shot dead on the sector border between Treptow and Neukölln ten days previously.

- Herbert Halli’s relatives were informed that he had fallen into a construction ditch near the Czechoslovakian embassy after heavy drinking, where he was found dead without his identity papers on 4 April 1975. The investigations were said to have proved that he had died with no third-party involvement.

In fact, he had been shot dead the previous day during an attempted escape near Wilhelmstraße in Berlin-Mitte.

In at least 11 cases, the death was neither confirmed nor denied even in response to enquiries, and the names of victims were kept secret – although the Stasi was aware of them (Roland Hoff, Erich Kühn, Paul Stretz, Siegfried Krug, Heinz Müller, Gerald Thiem, Dieter Beilig, Manfred Gertzki, Dr. Johannes Muschol, Silvio Proksch, Michael Bittner).

Employees of the forensic medicine institutes, hospitals, public prosecution department, People’s Police, registry offices, funeral institutes, Baumschulenweg Crematorium and the graveyard administrations cooperated with the Stasi or served as its instruments and took part in the manipulation of evidence and falsification of official documents such as death certificates at the Stasi’s request or instructions.

After 1990, a number of the doctors, public prosecutors, police officers, registrars, crematorium and graveyard staff involved formed a kind of cartel of silence along with the Stasi operatives responsible. This is the reason why the disappearance of the bodies of Dr. Johannes Muschol, Roland Hoff, Siegfried Noffke, Dieter Beilig, Silvio Proksch and Michael Bittner cannot be explained.

This treatment by the GDR state organs and authorities had a dramatic effect on the families already traumatised by the loss of their loved ones, as Peter Fechter’s sister described during the court case against the border guards who killed him. A sense of powerlessness against the public defamation and the enforced obligation not to talk about the matter, she said, determined the family’s lives: “This experience of exclusion and the life with images of an enemy as an everyday occurrence that was not what we wanted, but was forced upon us by others, became a fundamental experience for the Fechter family.” To our knowledge, this applies for many if not all of the families. The mental wounds caused by this treatment never heal.

Final Remarks

Many families did not find out the truth about how their loved ones died until the 1990s, when the GDR archives were opened and the crimes on the border were prosecuted. The focus in the court cases against border guards and their chain of command during the 1990s was on the perpetrators, logically enough.

Our biographical handbook looks at the stories of the victims’ lives and the circumstances of their deaths. Presenting their fates is an attempt to give a face and a story to the victims at the Berlin Wall and to rescue them from the GDR regime’s proscribed oblivion – and in the case of the border soldiers killed, from the regime’s attempts to co-opt them posthumously. We hope to play a role in preserving their memory after decades of exclusion, enforced silence, instrumentalisation, and also looking the other way in the East and the West. Each of the biographies also documents everyday life in a dictatorship incapable of existence without the Wall, which perished when that wall fell.