

Traumatic consequences long after fall of the Berlin Wall

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Previously, there had been a lack of reliable data in Germany on the long-term psychological consequences of political imprisonment in the GDR. Professor Andreas Maercker, Head of the Department of Psychopathology and Clinical Intervention at the University of Zurich, and private lecturer Dr. Matthias Schützwohl, Group Leader at the Clinic and Polyclinic of Psychiatry and Psychotherapy at Dresden University of Technology, interviewed 146 former political prisoners in the mid-1990s. 15 years later, they studied the majority of those concerned (78 men and 15 women) again.

"To our surprise, post-traumatic stress disorder is still present in a third of the people studied," says Professor Maercker, summing up the results. "While some have recovered compared to 15 years ago, in others the stress disorder has only manifested itself in recent years." In all, such a delayed or recurrent post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was apparent in 15 percent. We know from studies from other countries – mostly on prisoners of war or other [victims of violence](#) – that delayed or recurrent PTSD exists, albeit to a lesser extent. Maercker and Schützwohl's study is the first to demonstrate this for former political prisoners. It appears in the journal *Nervenarzt* and additional analyses are to be published in the English-language journal *Torture*.

Decline in dependency on addictive substances

Other psychological disorders that former GDR prisoners suffered from

decreased during the 15 years. [Specific phobias](#) such as claustrophobia were less common, for instance. The number of people addicted to alcohol and medication also fell. However, the number with acute depression quadrupled to 41 percent of those studied last year. At both time points, a more or less equal number suffered from [anxiety disorders](#) such as panic disorder (24 percent last year).

"We made another key discovery: Those affected tend to rate their own psychological condition after their release too poorly in retrospect but their current state more realistically," says PD Schützwohl. From this, the authors conclude that there is no distortion of memory for the purposes of a current desire for compensation, for instance, but rather that psychological factors play a role in the tendency towards a negative life evaluation.

More information: *Nervenarzt*. [Doi:10.1007/s00115-012-3646-y](https://doi.org/10.1007/s00115-012-3646-y)

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