

Study reveals scope of Western drug testing in East Germany

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Major Western drug companies conducted hundreds of clinical tests on citizens of communist East Germany during the Cold War, a report released Tuesday said, but dismissed charges of widespread ethical abuses.

The long-awaited report on a scheme designed to provide hard currency to the cash-strapped regime confirmed some allegations levelled in a 2013 article by news magazine Der Spiegel, albeit on a much smaller scale than first thought.

But the Western companies "benefited from totalitarianism," and chronic drug shortages in the East, it said.

Berlin's Charite university hospital said it found that 320 [clinical trials](#) were carried out in the 1980s on people in the so-called German Democratic Republic.

The research team led by medical historian Volker Hess found evidence of up to 900 studies by Western firms using East Germans between 1961 and 1990, the year Germany reunified.

But Hess told reporters that the studies appeared to have been in line with the standards and laws of the time, noting that practises in the West were also more lax in those decades.

"What appears dubious to us today was not specific to the GDR, even

though some of it appears ethically dubious now," he said.

"We have seen no indication of a systematic violation of existing rules on consent."

The tests were carried out for 75 companies from 16 countries, mainly from West Germany but also Switzerland, France, the United States and Britain. Some of the biggest names in the industry were involved including Bayer, Pfizer and Roche.

The study's authors dismissed speculation that the Western companies looked beyond the Iron Curtain for subjects because the trials would be cheaper there.

Rather, they saw the heavily centralised GDR as a more efficient testing ground, allowing quick completion of studies without the peering eyes of a critical public.

"The companies benefited from totalitarianism," Hess said.

Furthermore, the Western firms exploited chronic medication shortages in the East to offer experimental drugs.

The Stasi secret police was particularly interested in the studies and kept close tabs on them, and a bureau under its auspices negotiated the contracts with Western companies.

The first comprehensive study of its kind was financed by the German government and medical industry associations.

The researchers combed through Stasi and patient files as well as reports from the companies themselves and interviewed former test subjects.

The Spiegel report had alleged that major Western drug companies used more than 50,000 people in the communist East as "human guinea pigs" for some 600 clinical trials, including for blood pressure and depression drugs, in the 1980s.

It said many had been unwitting participants and some even died as a consequence of the tests—charges disputed in the findings presented Tuesday.

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