

Psychiatric Times

The Legacy of Political Persecution



©BortN66/AdobeStock

- By [Greg Eghigian, PhD](#)

February 11, 2020

- [History of Psychiatry](#), [Film And Book Reviews](#), [Trauma And Violence](#)

HISTORY OF PSYCHIATRY

The DSM has recognized trauma- and stress-related disorders since its third edition in 1980. Historians of psychiatry have shown that the contemporary concept of a traumatic stress disorder first began to take shape in the wake of World War II, when the debilitating effects of Nazi persecution and murder on its victims began to be looked at as health problems for those affected.¹⁻³ Since then, a wide range of ex-political prisoners—including those from Chile, Iran, Myanmar, Palestine, South Africa, and Vietnam, to name just a few—have been examined and discussed by mental health specialists.

Among the most studied have been former political prisoners of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) or more commonly known as East Germany. The communist state there, founded in 1949, proved to be uncompromising with any citizen who appeared to be out of step with its directives, establishing a relentless state police apparatus (the Stasi) and a system of prisons and youth work camps.⁴

Though the regime came to an end in 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall, it is estimated that at its height in the 1980s, the GDR held around 200,000 political prisoners. A 2013 follow-up [study](#) of 93 such inmates found that “results indicate a trauma-related long-term morbidity,” albeit one that is “less stable than previously assumed.”⁵

A recent documentary by filmmakers [Jürgen Haase](#) and [Angela Henkel](#) now provides us with an intimate look at the toll imprisonment has had on some of these former

captives. *Splinters in the Head (Splitter im Kopf)* offers four ex-political prisoners a chance to discuss their experiences frankly and in their own words. In June of this year, I was invited to attend a screening of the film in Berlin, followed by a question and answer session with director Jürgen Haase and two of the film's featured subjects.

Karl-Heinz Bomberg was a physician and singer-songwriter, when he was charged with "anti-state agitation" and placed in a Stasi-run jail. Writer and human rights activist Siegmur Faust was also arrested for "anti-state agitation" and sentenced to three and a half years detention. Katrin Büchel is now a photographer, but after running away from home in her youth, she was placed in reeducation work camps over four years, deemed to be a girl with "authority issues" and "personality abnormalities." Thomas Hannemann, a mechanic, was given a sentence of four and a half year for attempting to escape the country. Together, they provide a compellingly stark glimpse into the experiences of political detainees there.

The first part of the film chronicles their initial encounters with arrest, interrogation, and detention. Siegmur Faust, for instance, recalls thinking at the time that everything was like out of a movie one sees about the Nazis. "I didn't do anything. This can't be happening," he remembers saying to himself. Most of them also describe an overwhelming sense of helplessness and loneliness, as they were badgered by interrogators, put in dark cells, and isolated from their families and other inmates.

For those having gone through it, the time spent in solitary confinement proved to be the most torturous. Karl-Heinz Bomberg recalls being beset by sweats and panic attacks. Thomas Hannemann found the absence of anyone to talk to and anything to do especially crippling. The experience was arguably even more vexing for Katrin Büchel, who was still a minor at the time of her confinement. She was sent to the high security youth camp at Torgau at one point, for exhibiting what records show was a dizzying array of red flag indicators, including "deviant behavior," anxiety, sedition, petulance, bedwetting, thumb sucking, bullying, and feeling insulted. Placed in solitary confinement, wet, cold, afraid, and anxious, she tried to kill herself. While she didn't succeed, others did.

The lack of personal freedom was not the only brutalizing feature of imprisonment. Büchel and other youth work camp detainees were forced to take part in reeducation drills, including presenting talks in which they had to recite communist party dogma. Thomas Hannemann's daughter was given up for adoption following his arrest. And Karl-Heinz Bomberg speaks of coming to the "catastrophic" realization that any number of his fellow inmates were actually operating as informants to the police.

Release from internment brought immediate relief to all of the subjects of the film—but the solace proved short-lived. Each describes how, even now, unforeseen effects of their detention have haunted them. Siegmur Faust recounts how small, mundane things and encounters would prompt him to burst into tears and how he constantly had to remind himself that ordinary conversations were not interrogations. The singer and clinician [Karl-Heinz Bomberg](#) notes that he still finds himself swept up in a perpetual vigilance, a compulsion to always be on the look-out. Büchel continues to have trouble sleeping and trusting others. Thomas Hannemann likewise has difficulties with sleep, but he is also plagued by a variety of aches and pains and is easily rattled when hears a heavy door closing. "Everything is still very present," he laments.

The discussion following the film provided the director Jürgen Haase along with Büchel and Bomberg to discuss the making of the film (which was seven years in development) and address comments and questions from the audience. As is frequently the case when life in East Germany is discussed in public forums in Germany, the conversation at times turned into a referendum on the former regime and its legacy. Was the GDR totalitarian? To what extent do former East German citizens deliberately avoid hearing about these kinds of abuses? Why is it that it falls to the victims to raise these matters and demand recognition? Exchanges were sometimes quite heated. And maybe that is to be expected. As historians and mental health professionals both know, in the words of the writer William Faulkner, “the past is never dead. It’s not even past.”

Perhaps the most poignant moment of the evening, however, came when Katrin Büchel was asked if she ever talked to her parents about this chapter in her life. “No,” she said. She paused. But her daughter at age 21 asked her if her experiences left her ashamed of East Germany. “Unfortunately, I had to say, I am ashamed,” Büchel admitted with resignation.

Editor's note: There is no link to the film at this time. Some information can be found [here](#). -Ed

Disclosures:

Dr Eghigian is Professor of History, Penn State University, State College, PA. He is the History of Psychiatry Editor for Psychiatric Times.

References:

1. Goltermann S. *The War in Their Minds: German Soldiers and Their Violent Pasts in West Germany*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press; 2017.
2. Brunner J. [Die Politik des Traumas: Gewalterfahrungen und psychisches Leid in den USA, in Deutschland und im Israel/Palästina-Konflikt](#). Berlin: Suhrkamp; 2014.
3. Zajde N. Die Schoah als Paradigma des psychischen Traumas. *Tel Aviver Jahrb Dtsch Gesch.* 2011;39:17-39.
4. Gieseke J. *The History of the Stasi: East Germany's Secret Police, 1945-1990*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn; 2014.
5. Maercker A, Gäbler I, Schützwohl M. Verläufe von traumafolgen bei ehemaligen politisch inhaftierten der DDR: Ein 15-Jahres-follow-up [[Course of trauma sequelae in ex-political prisoners in the GDR: A 15-year follow-up study](#)]. *Der Nervenarzt.* 2013;84:72–78.