

Berliners and the GDR: Knowledge, attitudes, places.

Results of a representative population survey

Status report on the reappraisal of the SED dictatorship in Berlin

Part 3

Executive Summary

About the study

On behalf of the Berlin Commissioner for the Reappraisal of the SED Dictatorship, forsa conducted a representative survey of the Berlin population. The aim of the study was to gain in-depth insights into the perception, evaluation and awareness of existing offerings and measures for reappraising the SED dictatorship, as well as to gauge attitudes towards the culture of remembrance in Berlin. The survey was aimed at Berliners aged 16 and over. It was based on a random sample from the population register. A total of 1,643 completed questionnaires were included in the evaluation. The fieldwork period ran from 15 August to 28 September 2025.

The most important results in brief

The GDR past is present in the minds and conversations of Berliners. Even 36 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the GDR past is still present in Berlin. Only 11 percent of those surveyed say they have never dealt with the topic of the GDR. Just under half of those surveyed say they have dealt with the topic of the GDR intensively or very intensively.

Those Berliners who have dealt with the GDR past (very) intensively were asked openly how they had done so. Just under half stated that they had done so primarily through conversations with family, friends or contemporary witnesses. The data shows that, overall, respondents deal with the GDR more often in a private and personal context than through public offerings. For 30 percent of Berliners, the first reason for engaging with the GDR was also based on family traditions and stories. In contrast, only 16 percent stated that school lessons were the first reason for engaging with the SED dictatorship. For 14 percent of respondents, their first point of contact with the GDR was based on their own experiences.

Around a third of Berliners talk (a lot) about the GDR in their personal lives. When asked to name the first historical event associated with the GDR, around a third of respondents mentioned the fall of the Berlin Wall or the opening of the border, while 20 percent mentioned the construction of the Wall. Only 5 percent mentioned the (popular) uprising on 17 June 1953.

Dealing with the reappraisal of GDR injustices

Just under a third of respondents say they have followed or noticed the reappraisal of GDR injustices over the past 35 years (very) closely. In relation to the total population of Berlin, this is significantly more common among respondents over the age of 70.

More than half of the Berliners surveyed say they have heard of the SED injustice rectification laws.

The GDR as a "dictatorship"?! – How Berliners characterise the GDR

Respondents were asked to name up to three keywords to characterise the GDR. Just under half describe the GDR as dictatorial, authoritarian or repressive. Terms such as "lack of freedom" or "lack of democracy and freedom of expression" are mentioned with similar frequency. The GDR is also characterised as a surveillance state or by the activities of the State Security Service (Stasi). The GDR is characterised much less frequently as people-oriented or caring, socialist or social, or socially just.

High awareness of Berlin memorials and places of remembrance

More than half of Berlin's population is familiar with seven Berlin memorials, museums and places of remembrance. While symbolic and tourist-oriented sites such as Checkpoint Charlie and the East Side Gallery are known to almost everyone, other sites are less well known.

The three places most frequently mentioned in the survey are directly related to the Berlin Wall: Checkpoint Charlie (88%), the East Side Gallery (78%) and the Berlin Wall Memorial on Bernauer Strasse (74%). Somewhat less well known are the Tränenpalast (63%), the Berlin Wall Trail (60%), the DDR Museum (56%) and the Hohenschönhausen Memorial (54%).

Significantly fewer people are familiar with the Campus for Democracy (22%) or the Marienfelde Refugee Center Museum (21%). Only 6 percent know about the Keibelstraße learning centre.

Memorials, museums and places of remembrance visited by Berliners

Only 3 percent of respondents say they have never visited a memorial, museum or place of remembrance. Checkpoint Charlie, the East Side Gallery and the Berlin Wall Memorial, on the other hand, have been visited by a majority of respondents. Three-quarters of respondents said the visit had an emotional impact on them. A similar number of respondents said they had learned new facts about the GDR during their visit.

Anniversaries that remain in the memory

When asked about occasions on which a commemorative event on the GDR has remained in their memory, two-thirds cited German Unity Day above all, followed by the anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall (46%).

What Berliners want: preferred communication formats

When asked which communication formats would most motivate them to engage more deeply with the topic of the GDR, just under half of those surveyed cited feature films and series related to the GDR. Many respondents see conversations with contemporary witnesses as an appealing approach, followed by short narrative videos on social media and informational videos with facts and background information.

"But now it's time to move on, isn't it?!" – Attitudes towards memories of the SED dictatorship

Only 14 percent of Berliners see no reason to engage with the GDR today.

A very large majority are in favour of visits to memorial sites being firmly anchored in school curricula. A large majority also agree with the statement that lessons for the future can be learned from the history of the SED dictatorship. 80 percent of those surveyed believe it is important to keep the memory of political persecution in the GDR alive, and more than two-thirds of participants think that more attention should be paid to opposition and resistance.

However, statements on the social practice of remembrance are assessed somewhat differently: 38 percent feel that social remembrance of GDR injustice in Germany often consists of rituals that are out of step with the times. 35 percent believe that enough is already being done.

Berlin, 6 November 2025