

An excerpt from a paperback written by three East German fans and translated by Thomas Recktenwald.



A short outline of the history of GDR fandom

Berichte aus der Parallelwelt

(Reports from the Parallel World)

Die Geschichte des Science-Fiction-Fandoms in der DDR

(The History of the Science Fiction Fandoms in the GDR)

Wolfgang Both, Hans-Peter Neumann und Klaus Scheffler

According to available knowledge the history of an organized fandom in the GDR started in the mid 1960's. Earlier an active scene of collectors had developed with contacts to the West and especially to the Science Fiction Club Deutschland (SFGD). In the following we will consider mainly organized fandom and examine the collector scene only in passing¹. Because in the GDR there existed no law for the formation of clubs, organized forms of group activities could only emerge under the umbrella of the official mass organizations. These so-called maintainers offered - within the framework of their political task - interested persons material and organizational support for leisure activities. Literature was one of these fields where ideological confrontation with the West German class enemy took place. Accordingly you had to fit the culture-political guidelines of the SED², aiming at the development of an own national culture and the fight against Western influences and values. According to that, presentation and evaluation of socialist aims or values in form of futuristic, utopian or scientific- fantastic literature and other artistic forms of expression had to take place in strict demarcation to Western Science Fiction. On the other hand, however, real life relativated these idealistic demands.

The first SFGD membership list from 1955 already contained, with number 43, a representative from the "Eastern Zone". During the following years singular fans from the East were enclosed. In September 1957 the first SFGD con was held in Bad Homburg with attendance of fans from the GDR. In Karl-Marx-Stadt a first SF club was founded in 1958 with close relations to West German fandom. But already in 1959 members of this Stellaris group SATURN were sentenced, one of them to imprisonment of five months, because of distributing trash and filth literature. The same happened to the first East German SFGD member Kurt Hertwig of Berlin: Because of, among other things, ownership of forbidden literature he was sentenced to imprisonment of four months. Fans got cautious, only trustworthy contacts were continued. Thus in 1961 Herbert Haeusler wrote to an American pen pal that in the GDR, contrary to West Germany, no organized fandom existed. Although since the start of the first Sputniks interest in space program and utopic themes were increasing in literature there were no clubs. The same estimation was still given in 1967 and 1970.

The political division of Europe as a result of WWII caused different social development in East and West. Whereas in the GDR the 1950s were shaped by overcoming the consequences of war, existential poverty and hardship and East- West controversy (here food rations cards - there the Wirtschaftswunder), the building of the Wall in 1961 casted the German separation into concrete. After parties, organizations and media had been forced into line and the first socialist economy plans

had been initiated by the SED in the 1950s, a separate social development started for nearly 30 years³.

In the beginning, within fandom still grown East-West contacts existed in form of connections by letters and reports in fanzines, but they increasingly faded away.

Until the mid-1960s in the GDR a social climate developed where also the utopian literature got its chance. On one hand the SED leadership oriented itself on the "Bitterfeld way of literature" i.e. literature by the working class for the working class, on the other hand the building of the Wall with its isolation to the outside (until the 11th SED plenary meeting) caused inside a short-time ideological easing of tension⁴. Thus not only the number of SF editions by GDR publishers increased, but the literary sciences also recognized utopian literature⁵. Whereas the journal "Jugend und Technik" (Youth and Technics) had already published some utopian short stories in the 1950s and, in 1962, together with other journals of socialist fellow countries called for a SF short story contest, from 1963 on a new journal for the youth, "technikus" presented itself as a literary platform for SF stories. Additionally several SF movie projects started⁶.

Via classified ads and autograph wishes first contacts by letters were established within the collectors' scene and to authors. Writer Carlos Rasch was the first who realized the chance to win readers here when he was asked for an autograph in 1961. He cultivated the contacts to his pen pals, and when the scene had reached a certain extension he heavily supported the formation of an organized fandom in the GDR. Reflections started for a fanzine. In 1966/67 Berlin fan Wolfgang Siegmund developed the letterzine "Phantopia" - a first platform for a regular exchange. To this and other fanzines Rasch contributed articles and stimulations. The first issues were type-written with 8-10 carbon copies, reaching only a small circle of friends. New possibilities seemed to show up in 1967 as a result of an intensified East-West contact: During the SFCD InselCon a visit of East Berlin and a meeting with GDR fans took place. At this they arranged with Hans-Joachim Alpers the Western edition of an Eastern fanzine. Two issues of "Cassiopeia" (ed. Guenzel/Siegmund) appeared. Another impulse was given by the poll in "Jugend und Technik" about the favorite utopian books. After the result had been presented, Carlos Rasch got hold of the addresses of the more than 600 participants - mostly pupils and apprentices - via his fellow journalists. When this became known the editor got a hard ticking-off, but Carlos, at one go, had numerous addresses. He wrote them and encouraged them to look for comrades-in-arms and to organize themselves in Utopia Clubs. Some fans he was already in contact with for a long time received whole lists with 20-30 names. Among them were Ralf Riediger from Halle or Ralf P. Kraemer from Dresden. So in 1967 there were - nearly ten years after the SFIG in Karl-Marx-Stadt - in many GDR cities first attempts to found an SF club. In Prenzlau, Leipzig, Magdeburg or in the Erzgebirge (Ore Mountains) platforms were formed. In a broadcast interview at the end of 1967 Carlos Rasch reported of about 15 Utopia Clubs, in a newspaper item they spoke of even 20 clubs. But most of them didn't surpass three or four meetings, the pupils and apprentices lacked organizational experience, perseverance and, above all, a maintainer for such groups. Stable club formations then existed from 1968 on after a longer preparation time in Hoyerswerda, Halle and Dresden. Until 1973 Falkensee, Calbe, Ilmenau and Salzwedel joined in. Whereas some clubs were the direct result of the address list of the poll mentioned above, Ilmenau presented itself as a branch of Halle, and the clubs in Hoyerswerda and Falkensee originated from initiatives of authors Horst Mueller and Carlos Rasch respectively.

The interest in technics already evident from the readers' background, especially in astronomy and space program, was also mirrored by the club activities. Besides talks about books, movies and authors there were discussions about space program, discoveries and inventions in nature and technics. Partly the members came also from astronomy and rocket clubs of the GDR. In the course of club development, however, interest in literature gained the upper hand. They increasingly established contact to further writers and then, since 1972, to the Arbeitskreis (= study group) Utopische Literatur (AKUL) within the writers' association of the GDR. Work inside the clubs widened out as regards content, individual libraries were built up, public relations were amplified

and own literary attempts started. Via the fanzine "Nova Phantopia" which partly appeared in mimeographed form they exchanged thoughts. Little by little contacts were developed in fandom by means of personal visits. In Halle the INFO-sheet regularly appeared, in Berlin Wolfgang Siegmund edited "Futura", and the Dresden fans worked on translations and own stories (fan editions). In November 1972 and August 1973 meetings of club leaders from Halle, Dresden, Magdeburg, Calbe, Falkensee, and Ilmenau took place. They arranged further exchange of material and made planned translations consistent with each other. A first highlight was PHANTREFF'73 (Treff = meeting) in Halle, the first big national fan meeting.

But at that point of time a campaign against Dresden's Stanislaw-Lem-Klub (SLK) had already launched, leading finally to the extinction of GDR fandom. In a politically motivated crusade students were expelled from their courses of study, others were reprimanded, and the enthusiasm of fans was slowed down to despondency⁷. The argument reached even into the Central Committee of the SED. Fandom was drained for a decade, only the islands Hoyerswerda and Ilmenau survived. And at the end of the 1970's an independent Sonderhaus Circle around Ronald Bartsch was formed, arising from the collectors' scene of the GDR. Meetings were held privately, declared as weddings if need be, or they took place in Carlos Rasch's garden.

The broader material and cultural range of the early Honecker era lead to an increased consuming⁸, but after the expatriation of Biermann in 1976 a "niche" society developed. A first anthology with newcomers appeared, and the increasing thematic broadness in mainstream and SF literature together with the enlarged offer of foreign authors stimulated demand and appetite for reading, but not organized reflection on that. On the other hand singular attempts were turned down by official institutions, and punctual contacts to authors were not continued.

A scandal shook fandom in 1975 and amused the republic: Fans between Schneeberg and Falkensee were roped for an advertising campaign for Rasch's novel "Magma am Himmel" (Magma in the Sky) and sent many identically worded LoCs to journals and radio stations like "Wochenpost" and "Volksarmee". The satirical journal "Eulenspiegel" gleefully picked up this event in the beginning of 1976. It must be stated for defence that not all signed and mailed the pre-fabricated letters.

A new generation of readers started in 1985 (again nearly 10 years after Prenzlau or Magdeburg) a second wave of club foundings. Following Berlin and Leipzig new SF clubs emerged in, among others, Erfurt, Elsterwerda, Halle. At this the nucleus of the Berlin club was again an astronomy workshop. The Kulturbund had digested the SLK affair to a large extend and was again at their disposal as maintainer. By means of events and fanzines connections were developed between them. Especially the Berlin series of events, "Tage der phantastischen Kunst" (Days of Fantastic Art) contributed to that. As a consequence of the third Days e.g. the clubs in Halle and Hoyerswerda arised anew. Contacts to a new generation of writers were established. The results of the 1967 and 1989 reader polls proved the change of generations: Only ((author)) G. Krupkat could make a showing among the top ten again. Editor/fan Erik Simon concatenated the two generations. Little by little East- West contacts were established again - Eurocon 1988 at Budapest offered a first possibility for becoming acquainted (also within GDR fandom). Supply with books was better, club libraries to reduce the appearances of shortages weren't built up anymore. With the "Traumfabrikant" (Dream Producer) an award was endowed, given 1988 and 1990. Two national meetings of club leaders took place in 1989 where getting in contact with Eastern European clubs was one of the subjects. Furthermore they arranged a national information sheet, INFO was revived. Thanks to computer technics, in the meantime available, several fanzines were born, and, starting with 1990, even an own publisher in Berlin. The closing point was formed by the first GDR Con in October 1990, a few days after the reunification.

All in all the following club foundings and attempts can be proved:

1959 Karl-Marx-Stadt

1967 Prenzlau (Kulturbund = KB⁹)
 Glauchau (library)
 Leipzig
 Frankfurt/Oder
 Magdeburg (KB)
 Berlin
1968 Hoyerswerda (library)
1969 Halle (KB)
 Dresden (KB)
1971 Falkensee (library)
1972 Calbe (library)
 Ilmenau (FDJ)
1973 Salzwedel (KB)
1976 Freiberg
1985 Berlin (KB)
 Leipzig (KB)
1986 Erfurt (KB)
 Dresden
1987 Elsterwerda
 Weisswasser (school)
1989 Halle
 Neuruppin
 Hoyerswerda
1990 Magdeburg

With this we can identify chronological and geographical accumulation points of fandom activities: There was a first attempt at the end of the 1950's. From 1965 on fandom started to organize itself. Club foundings reached a first climax 1968-71. This coincided with an increasing range of SF editions. There was a second wave 1985-89, during a period of social stagnation in the GDR and the opening of the Sowjet Union¹⁰. The economical system of the GDR had reached its limitation, further increasements were no more possible (also detectable from stagnating book editions). To the contrary, the pendulum was threatening to swing into the opposite direction because besides heavy debts and neglect of investments the over-exploitation of resources became a burden. National contacts and meetings took place 1971-73 and from 1988 on, within the collectors' scene since 1979. In the clubs essentially the sane group- dynamic processes proceeded: foundation by enthusiasts, steep upswing of activities and membership figures, instable phase with changing of the founding members by club organizers¹¹, formation of stable structures and responsibilities, settling down of the activities to an average level. The majority of the members is male, 20-40 years old with academical or technical education.

Lifetime of the first clubs was about four years - exceptions (Hoyerswerda, Ilmenau) prove the rule. Generation change could lead to a dying down of activities in the absence of new blood, because getting into grown structures can be difficult. Some clubs, however, broke down under political-ideological pressure.

Regional accumulations existed in middle Germany ([see map](#)). The industrial nucleus of the pre-war time offered an intellectual-cultural breeding-ground for such activities. Whereas regions traditionally shaped by agriculture remained white spots also in regard of fandom, between

Magdeburg and Dresden stable clubs developed during both waves. Berlin was in 1966 and 1985 a first center. The SED concept of a "proportional development of the national economy" neither showed the desired economical effect nor can there be detected cultural consequences. Clubs outside industrial clusters remained singular appearances and depended on the engagement of single persons. A North-South gradient must also be stated in this context.

Traditions shape stronger than ideological paroles. All in all short-winded political and culture-political up and down has less effect on fandom than long-term social processes or the work of singular personalities. As we will show in the following articles the year 1973 represented for the GDR fandom a break as heavy as the year 1989.

Footnotes:

1. Whereas the collectors, mainly loners, concentrate on collecting books, pulps and other documents, trade search lists, are regular customers of antiquarian bookshops and meet at book markets, the other ones regularly meet in groups to talk about read, hear and seen matters, to discuss with authors, to write themselves or to spread their views in own journals - fanzines; that is they use to have an organized form of group activity.
2. SED = Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands = Socialist Unity Party of Germany
3. For the literary reflection of these phases in the SF literature of the GDR see /6-9/.
4. Thus the youth radio station DT64 beat music movement came to life, youth clubs were established by means of government money. clubs were established by means of government money.
5. E.g. at the Potsdam College of Education or the Magdeburg College of Technics diploma and PhD theses were written about this genre.
6. In 1966/67 four movie projects and a TV film were planned; in 1970 "Signale - ein Weltraumabenteuer" (Signals - a Space Adventure) was produced from Rasch's "Asteroidenjaeger" (Asteroid Hunter), film scrips were made from Ziergiebel's "Die andere Welt" (The Other World) and Yefremov's "Das Maedchen aus dem All" (The Girl from Outer Space) (both not filmed); in 1972 "Eolomea" was produced from Wagenstein's script, and in 1968 the TV production "Stunde des Scorpions" (Hour of the Scorpion) from Krupkat's "Die Unsichtbaren" (The Invisibles) was broadcasted.
7. These conducts are identical to those of the state security against authors.
8. At its VIII. party convention in 1971 the SED decided to lift the material and cultural standard of living of the population.
9. KB = Kulturbund = Culture Organization - an umbrella organization with local branches to support and, of course, watch professional and amateur activities in the fields of literature, film, art etc.
10. In 1985 Gorbatchev announced his way of glasnost and perestroika.
11. In "futura" 1/72 there's an "obituary" by Carlos Rasch on the club founders and their merits, evoking heavy protests in "futura" 2/72; club founders were accused of god-like solo runs.

[Fan History](#)

[Homepage](#)

[Site Map](#)

[Site Search](#)