

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Showcasing Germany in space: the lives and afterlives of Cold War rocket stars Sigmund Jähn and Ulf Merbold

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Abstract

East German Sigmund Jähn and West German Ulf Merbold were Germany's first spacefarers. While their rivalry mirrored the superpowers' space race in many ways, it differed in a significant aspect: Jähn and Merbold shared a common cultural and historical background. Going where no German had gone before, therefore, was as much a competition of democracy versus dictatorship, and/or capitalism versus communism, as it was about which state represented the 'better' Germany. Moreover, this rivalry did not end with the Cold War but reappeared with renewed vigour in the country's eventual reunification process after 1990. Drawing on national archival and printed sources from all around the world, this article analyses collective projections and competing performances in the making of Germany's most famous rocket stars, both before and beyond 1990. Discussing individual characteristics, cultural traditions and techno-scientific ambitions, it argues that descent rather than socio-technical prospect proved crucial in designating the progenitor of German space flight.

'The first German in space – a citizen of the GDR', the Socialist Unity Party (SED)'s daily *Das Neue Deutschland* rejoiced in August 1978, much to the surprise of an excited population. For almost two years this 'space first' had been planned in utmost secrecy. Careful preparations, however, included a team of East German journalists also present in Zvyozdnyi Gorodok near Moscow who documented the future German cosmonauts' training and produced both visual and written material celebrating the socialist space first, well in advance and meticulously scripted.¹ Hardly surprisingly, the making of what would ultimately become the German Democratic Republic's 'greatest hero' matched that of the progenitor of all cosmonauts, Yuri Alekseyevich Gagarin, in many respects. Sigmund Werner Paul Jähn (1937–2019) was a worker's son from the East German periphery who displayed a strong commitment to the communist cause from early on and had joined the country's armed forces to become one of its first fighter pilots.² What complicated the matter in Jähn's case, however, was that

¹ 'Der erste Deutsche im All: Ein Bürger der DDR', *Neues Deutschland*, 27 August 1978, p. 1. See also the personal account of GDR journalist Gerhard Kowalski, 'Kosmo-Siggi', *Der Spiegel*, 23 August 2018, at www.spiegel.de/geschichte/erster-deutscher-im-all-sigmund-jaehns-weltraumflug-von-1978-a-1224152.html. All Internet sources were last accessed on 9 January 2025.

² On the making and meaning of socialist heroes in general see Rainer Gries and Silke Satjukow, 'Zur Konstruktion des sozialistischen Helden: Geschichte und Bedeutung', in Gries and Satjukow (eds.), *Sozialistische Helden: Eine Kulturgeschichte von Propagandafiguren in Osteuropa und der DDR*, Berlin: C.H. Links Verlag, 2002, pp. 15–34. For Jähn in particular see Horst Hoffmann, *Sigmund Jähn, der fliegende Vogtländer: Autorisierte Biographie*, Berlin:

he belonged to a nation that had unleashed the most devastating war in history and which had been sundered into two states in the aftermath.

Well into the 1970s, both the GDR and the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) still had yet to come to terms with recent national history. Although both were considered model countries within their respective camps and boasted comparably high living standards and thriving economies, it was only in 1973 that they had become fully fledged members of the international community by being accepted into the United Nations. Simultaneously, interstate tensions had eased as well, yet the very existence of ‘another’ Germany posed a continuous challenge to each regime’s legitimacy.³ Thus the timing of Jähn’s first foray into space could not have been better for East Germany: only months ahead lay the thirtieth anniversary of the German Democratic Republic, and only a year earlier the rival West German government had announced that it was looking for the first German to fly into space. ‘Astronaut Dr Ulf Merbold from Stuttgart ... participates in the race for space’, was how the *Neue Ruhr Zeitung* introduced Merbold (b. 1941), who would become the counterpart to both Jähn and the heroic image he represented. A scientist by profession, Merbold had no prior connection to the military or the aerospace industry. Nevertheless, his space debut was eagerly awaited by West German media: ‘For more than six years he is destined to become the FRG’s living showpiece in space’, the *Süddeutsche* announced in August 1983, and another magazine, *Quick*, added, ‘Having been leapfrogged by an East German did not diminish Merbold’s enthusiasm. He knew that the experiments he was about to conduct had never been undertaken by anyone else. This sufficed.’⁴

To (space) historiography, astronauts and cosmonauts have become iconic figures, not only of the Space Age but of the twentieth century as a whole.⁵ Exemplifying new ways of being in and out of this world and establishing trustworthiness, reliability and predictability on social interaction in times of fundamental change, spacefarers represented a specific type of persona: collectively constructed and celebrated, their image and actions served to give meaning to humanity’s outreach into space.⁶ Due to the confrontational character of the Space Age and its close connection with the Cold War, astronauts and cosmonauts were specifically turned into shining examples of the competing blocs’ best values and proved instrumental in assuring their respective political, moral and techno-scientific superiority.⁷ In the case of the divided German nation, however, these processes were complicated

Edition Ost, 1999; and Axel Wölk, *Zwei unwahrscheinliche Freunde: Die Geschichte der ersten beiden deutschen Astronauten Sigmund Jähn und Ulf Merbold*, Westarp: BooksonDemand, 2021.

³ See Frank Bösch (ed.), *Geteilte Geschichte: Ost- und Westdeutschland 1970–2000*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015; Udo Wengst and Hermann Wentker (eds.), *Das doppelte Deutschland: 40 Jahre Systemkonkurrenz*, Berlin: C.H. Links Verlag, 2008.

⁴ ‘Die Deutschen greifen nach den Sternen’, *Neue Ruhr Zeitung*, 2 June 1983, p. 5; ‘Noch 211 Tage bis zur Stunde Null’, *Quick*, 3 March 1983, pp. 100–3; ‘Weltraumkandidat im Wartestand’, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 2 August 1983, p. 4. Both German spacefarers have published autobiographical accounts; see Sigmund Jähn, *Erlebnis Weltraum*, Berlin: Militärverlag der DDR, 1983; and Ulf Merbold, *Flug ins All: Von Spacelab zur D1-Mission. Der persönliche Bericht des ersten Astronauten der Bundesrepublik*, Bergisch-Gladbach: Lübbe, 1986. Notably, no biography exists for Merbold; see, however, Wölk, op. cit. (2).

⁵ See Michael J. Neufeld (ed.), *Spacefarers: Images of Astronauts and Cosmonauts in the Heroic Era of Spaceflight*, Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press, 2013.

⁶ As outlined in Alexander C.T. Geppert, ‘Rocket stars, space personas and the global space age’, *BJHS*, this issue, the concept of ‘persona’ applied here draws from a variety of accounts. Most importantly, persona is considered a ‘public self’, i.e. a product that oscillates between the private and the public and is never given but constantly (re)modelled. See P. David Marshall, Christopher L. Moore and Kim Barbour, *Persona Studies: An Introduction*, Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2019, pp. 238, 1, 10. Conceived as a ‘public self’, the concept puts the processes of social, political and historical ‘celebrification’ at the centre of its attention and analysis. See Jessica Evans and David Hesmondhalgh (eds.), *Understanding Media: Inside Celebrity*, Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2005, pp. 12, 23–6.

⁷ See Matthew H. Hersch, *Inventing the American Astronaut*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012; Andrew L. Jenks, *The Cosmonaut Who Couldn’t Stop Smiling: The Life and Legend of Yuri Gagarin*, DeKalb: Northern Illinois University

by the fact that both states drew on a common historical and cultural background in creating 'their' space flight hero. Having the bloc confrontation played out symbolically in a single country placed a divided Germany in the spotlight for both international and domestic audiences. But although until reunification the German bid for space echoed common features of the superpowers' space race, it was never only about democracy versus dictatorship or capitalism versus communism. Domestic debates about who represented the progenitor of German spacefarers and what qualified him for this calling did not end with the Cold War. Instead, they would reappear with renewed vigour in the process of political and cultural reunification after 1990, suggesting that, to domestic audiences, the German space race was also and predominantly about competing models of citizenship and what constituted national belonging.⁸

Investigating 'persona' as a product of both collective projections and individual performance and discussing archival sources and popular representations such as stamps and paintings, as well as autobiographical documents and interviews, this article investigates the public life and afterlives of twentieth-century Germany's most famous spacefarers. Who participated in their making? What kind of historical traditions and cultural values were called upon in the processes of their celebrification? How did they resonate with public audiences both within Cold War borders and beyond? Discussing the making, appeal and legacy of Germany's first spacefarers promises to unravel the inner workings of the fascination that space evoked and continues to evoke. Yet, in the case of the divided Germany, it also sheds light on how space allowed for a remaking of past, present and future orientations of the nation.

The 'first German in space': place and belonging

The town sign reads Morgenröthe-Rautenkranz. The place is well known to many tourists and winter sportsmen. Situated roughly 700 meters above sea level. Splashing streams flow around slate-covered houses. A small town in the Vogtland. Coming to this place as a city slicker one is easily convinced that the local people have a longer life span. Forests and meadows breathe a cozy peace.

These are the sentences introducing Sigmund Jähn, the 'first German cosmonaut', in the most widely distributed publication issued in August 1978, a joint special issue by the *Armeerundschau*, the journal of the National People's Army (NVA), and the *Jugend + Technik*, a journal for young people interested in science and technology.⁹

Significantly, the article was as much a portrait of the people of the Vogtland as of Jähn, who was born in Morgenröthe-Rautenkranz in February 1937. Together with his fellow fighter pilot Eberhard Köllner, Jähn was chosen to represent the GDR in the Soviet Interkosmos program and began training from November 1976 onwards. In stark contrast

Press, 2012; Slava Gerovitch, *Soviet Space Mythologies: Public Images, Private Memories, and the Making of a Cultural Identity*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015; Colin Burgess, *Selecting the Mercury Seven: The Search for America's First Astronauts*, New York: Springer, 2011; Burgess, *The First Soviet Cosmonaut Team: Their Lives, Legacies and Historical Impact*, Berlin: Springer, 2009; Roger D. Launius, 'Heroes in a vacuum: the Apollo astronaut as cultural icon', *Florida Historical Quarterly* (2008) 87, pp. 174–209; Tom Wolfe, *The Right Stuff*, New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1979.

⁸ See Jan Palmowski and Geoff Eley (eds.), *Citizenship and National Identity in Twentieth-Century Germany*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008. On the original space race see Roger D. Launius, *Reaching for the Moon: A Short History of the Space Race*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019; and Asif A. Siddiqi, *The Soviet Space Race with Apollo*, Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2003.

⁹ 'Das Herz am rechten Fleck', *Interkosmos'78: Sonderheft der Armeerundschau und der Jugend + Technik*, August 1978, pp. 7–12, 7. This special issue had a circulation of 560,000 copies.

to the earlier space flights of Soviet cosmonauts, Interkosmos missions were widely publicized and promoted.¹⁰ Since December 1977, the Central Committee's agitprop department had been preparing Jähn's public presentation. At first glance and quite unsurprisingly, it completely matched the heroic image of first-generation spacefarers. This is particularly evident in the so-called 'Cosmonauts' Grove' (Hain der Kosmonauten) which was established as early as September 1978 and featured a bust of Jähn flanked by those of Yuri Gagarin and Jähn's fellow space traveller, Valery Fyodorovich Bykovsky. Reflecting the 'technological utopianism' prevalent in Soviet astroculture and the saint-like status ascribed to its protagonists, its location is worth noting.¹¹ Established on the grounds of the Berlin Archenhold-Sternwarte, known as one of the first and most popular German public observatories, the Cosmonauts' Grove dominated a site associated with the oldest traditions of German astroculture. Indeed, Jähn's trip was meant to honour a very special occasion: 'Sigmund Jähn – in the year that marks the thirtieth anniversary of the existence of our German Democratic Republic, his feat is vital proof of the righteousness of our way, of the victoriousness of socialist ideas', the GDR's Secretary of Defence, General Heinz Hoffmann, would claim.¹²

Hoffmann's claim was backed by various international representations, notably stamps, considered by historians 'cultural business cards' that are useful and important in conveying central ideas and orientations of value-based communities such as a nation.¹³ In the early 1980s, various states, most notably Vietnam and Mongolia, began to issue stamps dedicated to Jähn, acknowledging not only his spectacular feat but the very existence of the GDR as a respected member of the international community. This was echoed in a painting by Russian artist Yuri Korolev: the tall and blonde Jähn stands out in his *Space Brothers* (1981), yet he is presented as one among equals in the all-encompassing community of socialist spacefarers, vowing that 'Soviet politics, based on the principles of freedom, friendship and understanding, have enabled our people to finally put our resources, our vast knowledge and skills, at the service of human progress.'¹⁴

International representations that showed Jähn both in his Sokol spacesuit and among 'space brothers' of all races offered two messages: first, that only through the alliance with the Soviet Union (and cooperation with other socialist states) would Germany be able to put its intellectual and physical resources at the service of humanity. Second, that those aligning themselves with the Soviet Union and its 'space brothers' could be no Nazis, however tall and blonde they were. True, among those who had fought Nazism in the 1930s and 1940s there had also been a significant number of German communists who later proved instrumental in establishing the GDR. Important here was the effort by the SED to revitalize its revolutionary traditions by assembling all those who had fought Nazism under the banner of an 'antifascist state'.¹⁵

With the advent of its thirtieth anniversary in October 1979, the GDR had increased its ambitions to establish a distinct 'socialist' identity. In 1974, an amendment to the Constitution elided all references to the 'German nation' and 'German unity' and designated East Germany 'a socialist nation state of workers and peasants' and 'an inseparable

¹⁰ Colin Burgess and Bert Vis, *Interkosmos: The Eastern Bloc's Early Space Program*, New York: Springer, 2015.

¹¹ Howard P. Segal, *Technological Utopianism in American Culture*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985.

¹² Heinz Hoffmann, 'Zum Geleit', in Günther Bersch et al. (eds.), *Gemeinsam auf der Erde und im All*, Berlin: Militärverlag der DDR, 1979, pp. 5–7, 7.

¹³ See Umberto Cavallaro, *The Race to the Moon Chronicled in Stamps, Postcards, and Postmarks: A Story of Puffery vs. the Pragmatic*, Chichester: Praxis Publishing, 2018.

¹⁴ Jähn, op. cit. (4), p. 5. See Gloria Maritza Gómez Revuelta, 'Black in space: Arnaldo Tamayo and the Cuban cosmic revolution', *BJHS*, this issue.

¹⁵ Gareth Pritchard, *The Making of the GDR: From Antifascism to Stalinism*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004.

constituent part of the socialist community of states'.¹⁶ While these decisions indicated the SED's temporary desire to detach itself from German national history (seeing itself as an 'inseparable' part of the socialist community), Jähn's success prompted the party to present the GDR as its very essence: 'The GDR is the first German state to have taken the decisive step of our historical epoch, the step from capitalism to socialism. After having entered a new sphere of social development, it also participated in the advancement into a new spatial sphere', the *Neues Deutschland* claimed exactly one year after Jähn's space debut.¹⁷

Andrew Jenks has noted that at the height of Gagarin's popularity, 'a reader of history textbooks from that era would be convinced that ethnic Russians had made practically every meaningful discovery in human history'.¹⁸ The same holds true for Jähn if one substitutes 'ethnic Russians' with 'socialist Germans' and 'human history' with German 'national history'. From being an absolute nobody before his trip into space, the making of the 'first German in space' propelled the former printer and pilot into the company of the nation's most renowned scientists, such as Alexander von Humboldt, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz or Carl Friedrich Gauß, claiming 'that the ideas and ideals of these great Germans of the past have become reality' in the GDR.¹⁹

By the 1970s, discussions about the party's *Erbe und Tradition* (heritage and tradition) had gained momentum. Faced with an unrelenting exodus of its citizens, the SED sought to create a sense of belonging among its population that, contrary to its own self-understanding as a revolutionary movement, opened up to more traditional strands of history that had hitherto been reviled as 'national' and 'bourgeois'. Rather than ignoring such strands, they now were adapted in order to foster a sense of belonging and pride closely connected to what the party called 'socialist achievements'.²⁰ Establishing the Cosmonauts' Grove on the grounds of the oldest German observatory is but one example that illustrates the extent to which so-called socialist achievements were no longer presented as antagonistic to national traditions but as their very fulfilment.

To this end, the SED considered heritage – often articulated in idyllic terms such as the previously cited description of the Vogtland – an important means of mediating between traditional cultural values and more recent ideological demands.²¹ Referring to his profession as a fighter pilot, the joint special issue by the *Armeerundschau* and the *Jugend + Technik* introduced Jähn as a 'hunter' and stressed his enthusiasm for the 'age-old noble art of hunting', expressing a deep connection with nature in general and his local woods in particular that is highly valued in traditional German culture.²²

Postcards from Morgenröthe-Rautenkranz would promote the town as the birthplace of the 'GDR's first cosmonaut' (Figure 1). In turn the 'flying Vogtlandian' – as Jähn was soon

¹⁶ Frank Rainer Dietze, *Die Verfassung der DDR: Zur verfassungsgeschichtlichen Entwicklung der DDR*, Hamburg: Dr. Kovacz, 2018, pp. 361–3.

¹⁷ 'Ein Jahr nach unserem Start in den Weltraum', *Neues Deutschland*, 25 August 1979, p. 2.

¹⁸ Andrew Jenks, 'The fiftieth jubilee: Yuri Gagarin in the Soviet and post-Soviet imagination', in Neufeld, op. cit. (5), pp. 81–106, 84.

¹⁹ 'Sigmund Jähn: Der erste DDR-Bürger im Kosmos', in Autorenkollektiv (ed.), *Der Sozialismus: Deine Welt*, Berlin: Verlag Neues Leben, 1982, pp. 242–4, 244; Jähn, op. cit. (4), p. 110.

²⁰ Marcus Colla, *Prussia in the Historical Culture of the German Democratic Republic: Communists and Kings*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. For the SED's efforts to create a sense of belonging see Jan Palmowski, *Inventing a Socialist Nation: Heimat and the Politics of Everyday Life in the GDR, 1945–1990*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

²¹ Jan Palmowski, 'Citizenship, identity and community in the German Democratic Republic', in Palmowski and Eley, op. cit. (8), pp. 73–94.

²² 'Das Herz am rechten Fleck', op. cit. (9), p. 10. See also Celia Applegate, *A Nation of Provincials: The German Idea of Heimat*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990; Elizabeth Boa and Rachel Palfreyman, *Heimat – A German Dream: Regional Loyalties and National Identity in German Culture, 1890–1990*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.



Figure 1. A postcard from Morgenröthe-Rautenkranz, issued in 1978 and both depicting the idyllic setting of Jähn's home town and recalling 'the space flight of the GDR's first cosmonaut, a son of our community'. The picture at top left shows the monument erected in honour of Jähn, and that at bottom left shows the railway station that housed the space flight exhibition in its early days. The author's collection.

to be called both dismissively (in the West) and affectionately (in the East) – would regularly return and bring friends and fellow space travellers such as Bykovsky from the Soviet Union or Amaldo Tamayo Méndez from Cuba.²³ The 'complicated relationship between the periphery and the center' has been identified as a crucial feature in the making of socialist space heroes. According to Jenks this was a symbolic exchange that would eliminate the difference between past and present and ultimately revive the nation.²⁴ In order to establish a 'socialist' sense of belonging and pride the SED actively encouraged the establishment of museums of local history and subsequently only a year after his return from space a 'permanent exhibition dedicated to the first joint USSR–GDR space flight' was established in Morgenröthe-Rautenkranz. More than 650,000 GDR citizens would come to visit the exhibition by 1989, many of them in school classes and field trips.²⁵

The SED considered space flight an attractive means to address especially those younger generations whose loyalty to the GDR had troubled its leadership since the 1960s. Following Gagarin's success, several cosmonaut centres had been established throughout the country where children could test themselves on their space-related abilities and participate in simulated space flights. However, the educational task of these centres went beyond preparing

²³ See Hoffmann, op. cit. (2). For Amaldo Tamayo Méndez see Gomèz Revuelta, op. cit. (14).

²⁴ Jenks, op. cit. (18), p. 82.

²⁵ Deutsche Raumfahrtausstellung Morgenröthe-Rautenkranz e.V. (ed.), *Begleitheft zur Deutschen Raumfahrtausstellung Morgenröthe-Rautenkranz*, Muldenhammer, 2019, p. 1. *Astronomie und Raumfahrt* claimed that 50 per cent of its visitors were adolescents; see 'Ständige Ausstellung erster gemeinsamer Kosmosflug UdSSR-DDR', *Astronomie und Raumfahrt* (1983) 21(4), pp. 124–5.

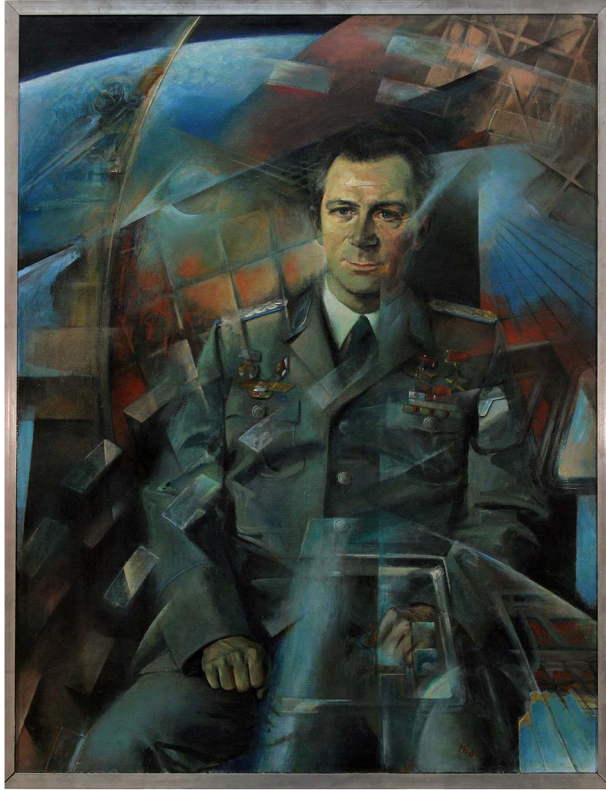


Figure 2. An official portrait of the GDR's first and only 'pilot cosmonaut'. Notably, whereas international images usually presented him in his Sokol spacesuit, domestic representations regularly opted for a more militaristic version, showing Jähn in his NVA uniform. Paul Michaelis, *Deutscher Kosmonaut Sigmund Jähn*, n.l. (GDR): s.n., 1980. Courtesy of Militärhistorisches Museum der Bundesrepublik Dresden.

future cosmonauts.²⁶ Tests that focused on individual fitness, Morse code and mechanical ingenuity (such as assembling a working flashlight in under a minute) indicate the extent to which they were connected to the SED's wider ambition to militarize its population. In times 'like these when the US is pressing ahead its nuclear build-up, the Pentagon is establishing a high command for military operations in space and its space flights serve increasingly military purposes', Jähn wrote in his biography, education had to include military preparations.²⁷ Hence domestic representations of Jähn regularly depicted him in his air force uniform (Figure 2).

With its evident references to bourgeois avant-garde art, most notably Italian Futurism, a portrait of Jähn by East German painter and 1971 *Nationalpreis* winner Paul Michaelis (1914–2005) did not at first seem to fit the canon of state socialist art. Yet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's (1876–1944) proto-fascist praise of the 'beauty of velocity' suited Michaelis, who vividly supported the artistic tenets of the Party but deliberately chose classic avant-garde

²⁶ Colleen Anderson, 'Youth space education and the future of the GDR', *Central European History* (2020) 53, pp. 146–67, 156.

²⁷ Jähn, op. cit. (4), p. 7.

style to convey socialist techno-scientific success.²⁸ Moreover, Futurism's aggressive aesthetics matched contemporary science fiction in the GDR, which by the 1970s was obsessed with 'direct confrontations with the class enemy' and 'mandatory acts of sabotage within the socialist camp'. These, however, were not merely fantasies.

Beginning in the early 1970s, the Soviets had armed some of their space stations, determined to fend off any potential attacks by rival powers. Significantly, a series of cosmonauts serving on these space stations were awarded the medal for Distinction in Guarding the State Border of the Soviet Union – the space frontier, these accolades highlighted, was no longer considered a distinct realm of utopian promises but an integral part of the socialist empire that had to be defended just like its earthly borders.²⁹ Symbolically, this was echoed by the erection of Jähn's 'personal' fighter jet, a Mikoyan–Gurevich MiG-21F-13, in front of the museum in Morgenröthe-Rautenkranz in 1980. A year later, the GDR would be presented with the space capsule Jähn had used to fly into space. The Soyuz 29 was not added to the space flight exhibition, however. Showcasing it in the GDR's museum of military history in Dresden instead (where it remains to this day – the museum became the Bundeswehr's museum of military history in 2011) perfectly demonstrated contemporary socialist perceptions of outer space as yet another battlefield in the unrelenting fight against the class enemy.

Both the MiG and Michaelis's painting echoed Jähn's celebrification as the GDR's one (and only) 'pilot cosmonaut', leaving no doubt where the 'better Germany' belonged historically as well as ideologically. In March 1978, the SED had endowed an award titled 'pilot cosmonaut of the GDR' clearly imitating the Soviet model which had been awarded in the years following Gagarin's ultimate 'space first' in 1961. Jähn would be the award's only recipient, which was meant to underscore not only the enormity of the occasion but also his status as progenitor of the German 'new man'. This 'new man' was fond of his *Heimat* or homeland, but he was also convinced that it would only blossom through the alliance with and adoption of the Soviet model. Indeed, by many accounts Jähn was preferred to his backup pilot, Eberhard Köllner, as a representative of the GDR precisely because Jähn excelled in Russian.

Jähn also maintained that he would have never been picked to fly into space if he had been born in the FRG.³⁰ Thus, while the pilot cosmonaut mediated questions of historical place and ideological belonging to international and domestic audiences, his persona also conveyed where the individual's place was in the larger society of this 'better Germany'. Every class-conscious citizen should put his faith in the hands of the Party, whose 'diligence, knowledge and skill created such technological wonders and rendered possible great scientific achievements', Jähn wrote in *Der Sozialismus: Deine Welt* (Socialism: Your World), a book that was handed out to everyone attending the popular secular *Jugendweihe* coming-of-age ceremony.³¹

The case of the Jugendarbeitsgruppe Kosmos, founded in 1970, demonstrates the limits to these ambitions and allows for a rare insight into existing 'hidden transcripts' which

²⁸ See Sigrid Hofer, 'Kosmonaut Ikarus: Weltall, Erde, Mensch – Die planbare Zukunft als bildnerische Projektion', in Karl-Siegbert Rehberg, Wolfgang Holler and Paul Kaiser (eds.), *Abschied von Ikarus: Bildwelten der DDR – Neu gesehen*, Cologne: Böhlau 2013, pp. 205–16, 214.

²⁹ Jörg-Uwe Fischer, 'Feinde im Orbit: Die Welt des 21. Jahrhunderts im Science Fiction-Film der DDR', in Silke Satjukow and Rainer Gries (eds.), *Unsere Feinde: Konstruktionen des Anderen im Sozialismus*, Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2004, pp. 277–95, 293–4; Cathleen Lewis, 'Space spies in the open: military space stations and heroic cosmonauts in the post-Apollo period, 1971–1977', in Alexander C.T. Geppert, Daniel Brandau and Tilmann Siebeneichner (eds.), *Militarizing Outer Space: Astroculture, Dystopia and the Cold War*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, pp. 313–41.

³⁰ 'Einmal war er ganz oben', *Die Zeit*, 23 August 2018, pp. 10–11, 11.

³¹ 'Sigmund Jähn: der erste DDR-Bürger im Kosmos', op. cit. (19), p. 243.

had more in common with Jähn's international persona than with his militarized domestic image.³² Evidence suggests that his success did enhance pride and partisanship within the GDR population: workers at the Braunsbreda train station praised the GDR for 'belonging to those five states capable of sending a man into space'; West German newspaper *Der Spiegel* noted that Jähn was widely considered 'one of us' rather than a privileged member of the Party's nomenclature. Other observers maintain that Jähn's feat was considered the fulfilment of a dream of mankind within the general population.³³ Along these lines, the members of the Jugendgruppe reached out to like-minded people both in the East and in the West and cultivated regular contacts regardless of political affiliations, thereby subverting ideological requirements with regard to a clear-cut bogeyman. The alarmed State Secret Police (MfS) soon intervened and dissolved the group even though the GDR's military intelligence had hoped to profit from its Western contacts.³⁴

The history of the Jugendarbeitsgruppe demonstrates that contrary to a militarized public transcript, 'hidden transcripts' existed that were strongly devoted to the utopian aspects of space flight. In hindsight, it seems quite ironic that, in order to bring its population into line, the SED opted for a much more militant persona in comparison to the one Jähn represented internationally, whereas its citizens seemed far more invested in seeing his feat as a contribution to the unity of mankind in a way that went beyond the celebrated community of socialist 'space brothers'. As Thomas Nahrendorf, who was five years old in 1978, recalls,

The Vogtlandians are proud of both of their space travellers. Sigmund Jähn and Ulf Merbold. One is from Morgenröthe and the other is from Greiz, which is only 45 kilometers away. Because Merbold went into space as a citizen of the FRG we were not allowed to celebrate him. We were, however, allowed to celebrate Sigmund.³⁵

This comment articulated a strong sense of local belonging, yet it differed from the one the SED had hoped to create. Rather than cementing geographic and ideological borders, *Heimat* and – ultimately – outer space as well served as spheres in which these borders lost their significance.

'Our man in space': science and technology

Remarkably – and for reasons about which one can only speculate – Ulf Merbold's origins were rarely mentioned in Western media. This is all the more surprising as his biography perfectly suited any given narrative about the alleged superior attractiveness of West German order and society. Merbold had been born in Thuringia and aspired to study physics after leaving school. To this end he was required to join the Free German Youth (FDJ), which prompted Merbold to flee the GDR in 1960, eventually settling in Stuttgart, where he became an astrophysicist at the local university.

In many ways, Merbold's persona was crafted as the very opposite to Jähn's. The latter would always maintain that he had never had the intention of going into space but merely

³² For the concept of 'hidden transcripts' see the seminal work by James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 1990.

³³ 'Einer von uns', *Der Spiegel*, 3 September 1978, pp. 101–3; Roland Hirte, 'Ein später Held: Sigmund Jähns Flug ins All Hirte', in Gries and Satjukow, *Sozialistische Helden*, op. cit. (2), pp. 158–72, 169; diary by Brigade IV, Train Station Braunsbreda [1978], in Justinian Jampol (ed.), *The East German Handbook: Arts and Artifacts of the GDR*, Cologne: Taschen, 2019, p. 562.

³⁴ See Reinhard Buthmann, *Konfliktfall 'Kosmos': Die politische Geschichte einer Jugendarbeitsgruppe in der DDR*, Cologne: Böhlau, 2012.

³⁵ Thomas Nahrendorf, at www.forum.kosmonauta.net/index.php?topic=3293.0.

obeyed a Party order.³⁶ Central to the story of Merbold's persona is personal initiative and an enterprising spirit: in early 1977 he had spotted an advertisement in a German newspaper that offered work for 'scientists in the [then still under construction] Spacelab', to which he responded 'out of sheer curiosity'.³⁷ Moreover, Jähn was a soldier whose public image was very much crafted along the lines of the first-generation 'heroic' cosmonauts. Merbold, on the other hand, was a trained scientist being introduced as the 'first of a new breed of space travelers' who 'unlike previous space travelers' would be 'completely devoted to science in space'.³⁸ Thus it did come as a surprise when, in the summer of 1983, shortly before Merbold's flight was scheduled, Jähn received his doctorate at the Zentralinstitut für Physik der Erde in Potsdam. The dissertation, which he had co-authored with professional physicist Karl Heinz Marek and which was based on experiments conducted during his space flight, was kept under lock and key, however, because Jähn and Marek had used sensitive material, the authorities maintained.³⁹ According to Jähn's biographer, Horst Hoffmann, being able to present the GDR's cosmonaut not only as the first German in space but also as the first scientist with a PhD was a propaganda campaign to pre-empt ongoing West German efforts. 'Honestly, Marek contributed the most', Jähn himself would later admit.⁴⁰ The 'flying Vogtlandian' was a worker and a soldier who also mastered science, his late dissertation signalled. Merbold, however, was presented internationally as the 'genuine article': 'Slender and serious, with sensitive hands and an intense brown gaze', a British television listing magazine introduced him as 'a scientist by nature as well as by profession'.⁴¹ Highlighting his physical features, Merbold personified the very opposite of both the 'blonde beast' and the proletarian 'new man'; his inquisitiveness and his seriousness evoked a tradition of Germans as 'poets and philosophers' instead, whereas his pragmatism and personal initiative displayed a strong transatlantic orientation. 'When Dr. Merbold accidentally kicked an instrument cabinet, disrupting some experiments, he proved himself fluent in an Anglo-Saxon expletive', the *New York Times* reported.⁴²

European participation in post-Apollo space activities was largely the result of (West) German initiative and influence.⁴³ To the FRG's government, investment in science and engineering both provided a 'soft' and unsuspecting way of reclaiming lost status and international leadership and at the same time demonstrated its commitment to the American way of Cold War life. Emphasizing (space) science allowed the FRG to rewrite recent German (space) history, with controversial space pioneers such as Hermann Oberth or Eugen Sänger who had provided the Nazis with its terror weapons now becoming the intellectual masterminds of the US post-Apollo programme. Most importantly, the latter's promotion as a programme, deeply embedded in 'the values of the middle class and the dignity of ordinary

³⁶ Jähn, op. cit. (4), p. 9.

³⁷ 'European spaceman', *TV Times* magazine, 28 November 1981, pp. 94, 96.

³⁸ 'A new breed of space traveler', *New Scientist*, 23 August 1984, pp. 8–11, 8.

³⁹ Hoffmann, op. cit. (2), pp. 256–61; 'Als DDR-Bürger gestartet und als Deutscher gelandet: Ko(s)mische Randnotizen zum 35. Jahrestag des Fluges von Sigmund Jähn', *DLR-Blog*, 26 August 2013, at www.dlr.de/blogs/home/space/als-ddr-buerger-gestartet-und-als-deutscher-gelandet-ko-s-mische-randnotizen-zum-35-jahrestag-des-fluges-von-sigmund-jaehn.aspx/searchtagid-11467.

⁴⁰ 'Der bodenständige Raumfahrer', *Tagesspiegel*, 23 September 2019, p. 24; see also Wölk, op. cit. (2), pp. 35, 42.

⁴¹ 'European spaceman', op. cit. (37), p. 94.

⁴² 'Spacelab, still in orbit, already deemed a success', *New York Times*, 6 December 1983, p. 1.

⁴³ John Krige, Arturo Russo and Lorenza Sebesta, *A History of the European Space Agency, 1958–1987*, 2 vols., Noordwijk: ESA, 2000; John Krige, Angelina Callahan and Ashok Maharaj, *NASA in the World: Fifty Years of International Collaboration in Space*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013; Helmuth Trischler, 'Contesting Europe in Space', in Helmuth Trischler and Martin Kohlrausch, *Building Europe on Expertise: Innovators, Organizers, Networkers*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp. 243–75.

work', perfectly matched and perpetuated popular narratives of the German 'economic miracle' which had provided the war-torn country with prosperity and stability after 1945.⁴⁴

Whereas Jähn's mission had been memorialized from the moment he was back on Earth, by erecting monuments and establishing museums dedicated to his space flight, none of this would happen to Merbold. Jähn was the first and last GDR citizen to travel into space. Merbold, on the other hand, was only the first of several more West German astronauts, his mission being tied to an ambitious programme that aimed to establish Western Europe as a major space power. Since 1972, the ESA had been building the Spacelab, a reusable and versatile laboratory which served as an integral part of the space shuttle.⁴⁵ Since the FRG accounted for most, but not all, of its cost, Merbold was chosen to present not merely 'Germany' but 'Europe' in space, as the British *TV Times* stressed. But this was only the beginning. As early as December 1982, well in advance of Merbold's space debut, the ESA had introduced two more German future astronauts who had been chosen for the FRG's D-1 mission. While Merbold would accompany Spacelab on its maiden flight, it was the D-1 (the 'D' standing for 'Deutschland'), launched in October 1985, that would represent the pinnacle of the West German space effort.

Merbold, nevertheless, was 'our man in space' (Figure 3), living proof of the fact that the FRG had finally made it into space and was destined to stay. Prime-time news presented Merbold at work in Spacelab and also featured a live conversation with US president Ronald Reagan and German chancellor Helmut Kohl. Whereas the East German government had used Jähn's successful space first to present itself as the culmination of German history, its Western rival thought more globally. Referring to 'the time when the first Germans came to the United States', both Reagan and Kohl suggested that, just like the German immigrants who had contributed to the foundations of the 'free world's' leading nation some three hundred years ago, they now contributed to the conquest of outer space for the 'free world'.⁴⁶ As the 'first of a new breed of space traveler', and very much in line with the public presentation of the Space Transportation System, Merbold's persona was meant to demonstrate that access to and living in space were about to become a common feature of contemporary life, both adventurous and pleasant, as a German cartoon demonstrated. This was a truly fantastic prospect. 'Forget Flash Gordon, forget Dan Dare, now it's Ulf Merbold': the *TV Times* invoked classic British science fiction heroes to highlight the enormity of the undertaking, whereas 'our man in space', the title of the aforementioned comic strip, was an obvious reference to arguably the most popular German fictional astro-hero, Perry Rhodan.

As with science fiction in general, the heroics of Perry Rhodan were closely connected to the use of superior technologies.⁴⁷ The making of Sigmund Jähn's image highlighted an almost symbiotic relation to his native soil, reflecting the SED's bid for political legitimacy as a 'true' German regime, where technology was of lesser importance. Jähn had flown on a Russian rocket and stayed in a Russian space station, and the most emblematic object associated with his persona came to be the MiG-21. Merbold's persona, on the other hand,

⁴⁴ For an example of rewriting German space history in the post-Apollo context see Werner Büdeler and Stratis Karamanolis, *Spacelab: Europas Labor im Weltraum*, Munich: Goldmann, 1976; for promotion of the post-Apollo programme see Valerie Neal, *Spaceflight in the Shuttle Era and Beyond: Redefining Humanity's Purpose in Space*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017, p. 45.

⁴⁵ Tilmann Siebeneichner, 'Spacelab: peace, progress and European politics in outer space, 1973–85', in Alexander C.T. Geppert (ed.), *Limiting Outer Space: Astoculture after Apollo*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, pp. 259–82.

⁴⁶ 'Remarks during a conference call with Chancellor Helmut Kohl of the Federal Republic of Germany and crewmembers of the space shuttle Columbia, December 5, 1983', at www.reaganlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/archives/speeches/1983/120583a.html.

⁴⁷ Klaus Bollhöfener, Klaus Farin and Dierk Spreen (eds.), *Spurensuche im All: Perry Rhodan Studies*, Berlin: Archiv der Jugendkulturen, 2003.

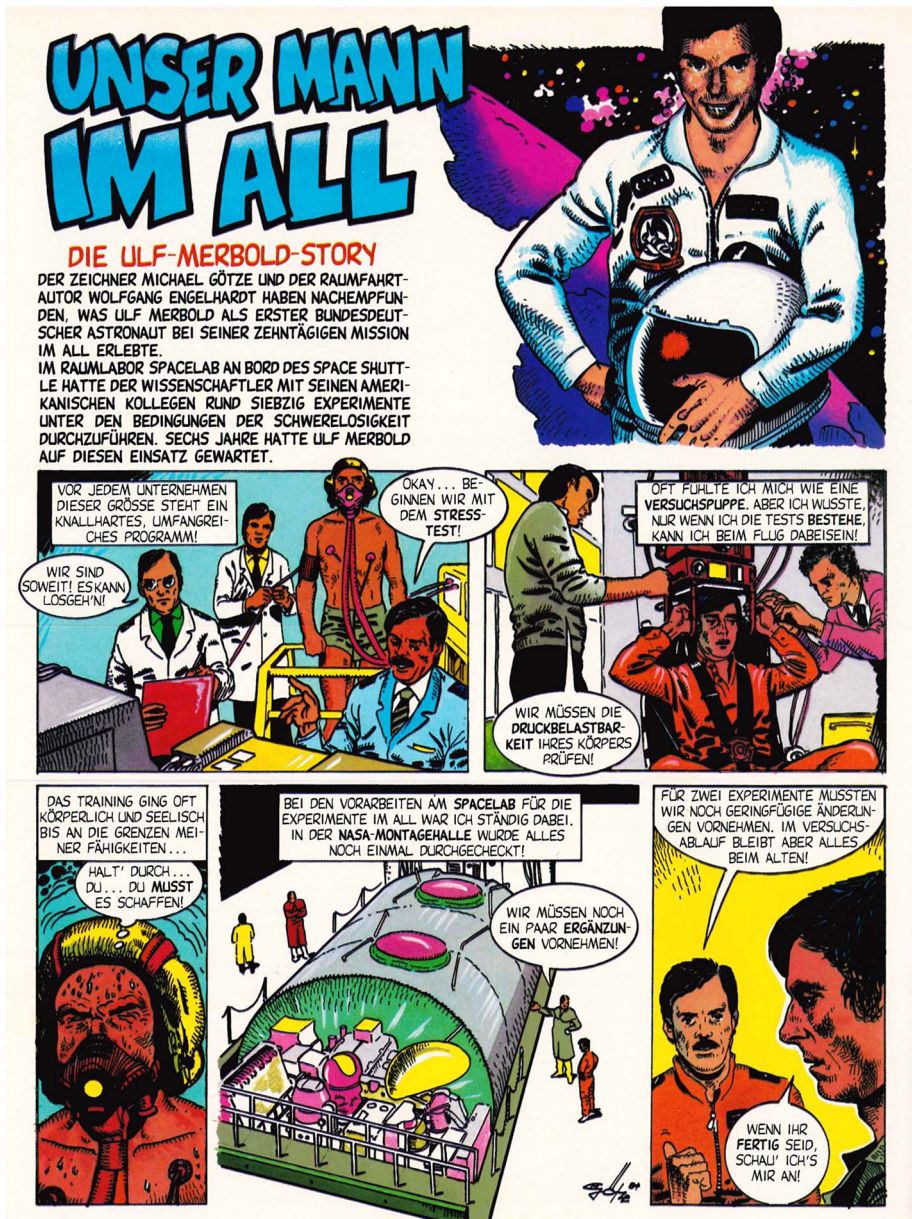


Figure 3. 'Unser Mann im Weltraum: Die Ulf Merbold-Story', Wolfgang Engelhardt/Michael Goetze, 1984. Courtesy of the artist, Michael Goetze.

would be incomplete without the Spacelab that was presented as 'Europe's masterpiece' and often portrayed as proof of German techno-scientific excellence.⁴⁸ Moreover, in NASA's terms Merbold was not an astronaut but a 'payload specialist': 'Generally payload specialists aren't wedded to a career as astronauts for NASA', a popular-science magazine explained,

⁴⁸ Hermann-Michael Hahn (ed.), *D1: Unser Weg ins All*, Brunswick: Westermann, 1985, p. 42; 'Editorial', *Bild der Wissenschaft*, November 1985, p. 3.



Figure 4. A Guinean stamp, issued in 1985, depicting 'German physicist Ulf Merbold' and the Spacelab/Space Transportation System. The author's collection.

'but rather are professional scientists, engineers and researchers who regard laboratories or class-rooms, either in an industrial or academic setting, as their true homes'.⁴⁹

The close connection of Spacelab and its first payload specialist is perfectly evident in various stamps issued by African states (Figure 4). Having states such as Guinea issuing stamps that were dedicated to space technology and its protagonists clearly echoes the symbolic dimension of Cold War space exploration. Notably, West German relations with the former French colony had come to a halt between 1970 and 1975 when the socialist-leaning Ahmed Sékou Touré fostered the country's relations with the rival GDR. However, only one week after Touré's death in March 1984, Colonel Lansana Conté seized power in a bloodless coup and installed a Military Committee of National Restoration (CMRN) that distanced itself from socialism and sought closer ties to the West.⁵⁰

Numerous letters to the Federal Ministry of Research and Technology illustrate the extent to which the celebrification of Merbold resonated with people of all ages and sexes in the FRG both before and after his space flight. Contrary to the GDR's space first, however, West German entry into manned space flight also faced strong domestic criticism. Influential German newspapers mocked Spacelab as 'useless and expensive' and the Green Party accused the government of fostering the militarization of outer space, echoing a growing discomfort with what was commonly presented as a 'key technology' for the

⁴⁹ 'A new breed of space traveler', op. cit. (38), p. 8.

⁵⁰ See William Glenn Gray, *Germany's Cold War: The Global Campaign to Isolate East Germany, 1949–1969*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003, pp. 107–15.

future.⁵¹ The Green Party had only been founded in 1980, and it had grown out of the anti-nuclear energy, environmental and peace movements that strongly opposed NATO's dual-track decision of 1979, fearing a nuclear confrontation on Central European soil. When Reagan had announced his Strategic Defense Initiative in March 1983 these fears gained new momentum. Notably, whereas the GDR had more or less ignored Merbold's space debut in November 1983, *Astronomie und Raumfahrt* published a lengthy article about the 'increased militarization of outer space' by Western powers on the occasion (paired with an article about the GDR's contribution to space science), claiming that current US space activities were 'part and parcel of the new American strategy to wage a limited and winnable nuclear war'.⁵²

Along these lines, various memoranda authored by respected West German scientists and public intellectuals accused the government of 'delusions of grandeur' and criticized its strategic intentions in space.⁵³ Merbold's persona is completely oblivious of these debates and the contemporary militarization of space deeply intertwined with the post-Apollo programme. Popular publications about Spacelab and its passenger, including Merbold's memoir, make no mention of the Strategic Defense Initiative. Instead, 'our man in space' and others are striking examples of the extent to which the astronauts aboard the Space Transportation System embodied what Ann Larabee has termed the 'populist presence in space': 'entirely informed workers living happily within the machine, untainted by global politics and environmental concerns'.⁵⁴

Albeit only as backup, Merbold was also part of the aforementioned D-1 mission, the first mission in space history that was partially directed from outside either a US or a Soviet mission control centre.⁵⁵ D-1 meant that the FRG became 'the undisputed number three in space flight', excelling in a realm that reached far beyond the provincial rivalries of a German space race. However, the D-1 mission flew on what was to be the last successful launch of the *Challenger* space shuttle. Its explosion in January 1986 'ruined the self-deception that space flight was no longer a risk but merely routine', German weekly *Der Spiegel* commented in the wake of the catastrophe. Pioneering spacefarers such as John Glenn were swift in stressing that space flight should be reserved for career astronauts only, effectively questioning all that Merbold's persona represented.⁵⁶

In comparison to Jähn, Merbold's persona was much more closely associated with a specific techno-scientific achievement, Spacelab. This not only stressed his scientific credibility but also demonstrated the FRG's orientation as a leading industrial power. Rather than duelling with the rival GDR, 'our man in space' was meant to demonstrate techno-scientific excellence on an international level that echoed pre-war reputation and status. After the D-1 mission, West German media would praise Spacelab as 'Europe made in Germany', claiming that national 'research and development capabilities have again

⁵¹ 'Nutzlos und teuer', *Die Zeit*, 20 January 1984, p. 48; 'Deutsche Raumfahrt: Milliardengrab für Steuerzahler', press release by the Green Party, 25 June 1987, Bundesarchiv Koblenz (Koblenz Federal Archives, hereafter BAK), B196/179969.

⁵² 'Auf Konfrontationskurs im Weltraum', *Astronomie und Raumfahrt* (1983) 21(4), pp. 99–103, 99; 'Der Anteil der DDR an der Weltraumforschung', *Astronomie und Raumfahrt* (1983) 21(4), p. 98.

⁵³ See 'Wider den weltraumpolitischen Größenwahn' (October 1986); and 'Kritik der Bonner Weltraumpolitik' (September 1987), BAK, B196/179969.

⁵⁴ Ann Larabee, "'Nothing ends here": managing the Challenger disaster', in Steven Biel (ed.), *American Disasters*, New York: New York University Press, 2001, pp. 197–220, 207.

⁵⁵ 'Europeans show mission control capabilities with Spacelab D1', *Aviation Week & Space Technology*, 4 November 1985, p. 19.

⁵⁶ 'Wie ein Leichentuch am Himmel', *Der Spiegel*, 2 February 1986, pp. 116–25.

established connection to the top of the world or even driven out competitors from the top spot'.⁵⁷

'The father and grandfather of German spacefarers': Ostalgia and techno-scepticism

With the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall, Germans in East and West rejoiced. Unification followed swiftly, but in the process it soon became evident that issues about which state was considered the 'better Germany' and what constituted this 'better Germany' had all but vanished. Given the highly symbolic nature of space flight during the Cold War, the German space race had always served to demonstrate the two states' commitment to their respective blocs; now that these blocs no longer existed, German peculiarities moved to the fore. Initially, matching the euphoria of unification, Jähn and Merbold came to be the nations' two 'flying Vogtlandians'.⁵⁸ In fact, both had befriended each other in 1984 when they met at a symposium dedicated to Hermann Oberth and had actually witnessed the fall of the Berlin Wall together while attending a congress of the Association of Space Explorers (ASE) in Riyadh in November 1989. 'Both of us can say without the slightest hint of deceit that individually we succeeded in overcoming the separation years before the Wall came down', Jähn and Merbold univocally explained in a public dialogue published by the Deutsches Museum in 1993. In stark contrast to the Cold War when space flight served as proof of a certain country or ideology being superior to others, it now was presented as an experience that in fact unmasked such perceptions as narrow-minded and obsolete. The real lesson learned from having been to space, both insisted in 1993, was that the national borders which dominate our maps only work in our heads; 'in reality, they do not exist'.⁵⁹

In unison, both praised the end of the Cold War, but only Merbold's career would continue unabated. In January 1992, he was chosen to represent the reunified Germany in space as part of another Spacelab mission. His second space flight effectively saw him becoming a movie star, as much of the material produced during that mission was used for the 1994 IMAX documentary *Destiny in Space*. Showcasing the daily lives of astronauts in space and addressing the future of human space exploration, Merbold was introduced by name and filmed conducting an experiment aboard Spacelab.⁶⁰ The film thus cemented his association with the space laboratory, while he was simultaneously preparing himself for yet another trip into space.

Since 1992 the ESA had sought closer cooperation with Russia to gain experience in long-duration space flights which were not possible with NASA at that time. This cooperation culminated in two Euromir missions that saw Merbold becoming the first ESA astronaut to visit the Russian Mir space station in October 1994. Another German, former Bundeswehr pilot Thomas Reiter, would follow suit in September 1995. Merbold stayed for a total of thirty-two days (which was the longest period a European had been in space at that time) and received the Russian Order of Friendship and the Kazakh Order of Parasat on his return.⁶¹ Moreover, the Kazakh government also issued a stamp dedicated to the mission

⁵⁷ 'Editorial', op. cit. (48), p. 3.

⁵⁸ See Hoffmann, op. cit. (2), pp. 271–4.

⁵⁹ Deutsches Museum Bonn (ed.), *Technikdialog 2: Ulf Merbold und Sigmund Jähn sprechen über die Entwicklung der Raumfahrt in beiden Teilen Deutschlands während des Kalten Krieges und nach der Vereinigung*, Bonn: Deutsches Museum, 1993, p. 12.

⁶⁰ *Destiny in Space*, dir. Ben Burt, USA/CAN 1994 (IMAX Corporation); the film can be seen on Youtube at <https://youtu.be/8Miepz-mQ3E>.

⁶¹ Ben Evans, *Partnership in Space: The Mid to Late Nineties*, New York: Springer, 2013, p. 207; David J. Shayler and Colin Burgess, *NASA's Science-Astronauts*, New York: Springer, 2007, pp. 393–4.

that showed Merbold and his fellow spacefarers, Russian Yuri Ivanovich Malenchenko and Kazakh Talgat Amangeldyuly Musabayev.

In the early 1990s, several African states commemorated the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Apollo lunar landings but honoured other spacefarers as well. Ghana issued two stamps in 1994, portraying Jähn and Merbold. These stamps featured the respective names, whereas Gambia, also in 1994, opted for one stamp that showed Merbold only, with the additional comment 'First German in space'. Numerous stamps had been dedicated to Jähn prior to 1989, both in the GDR and in other socialist countries. Given that by 1995 even former Soviet republics like Kazakhstan honoured Merbold, one could easily get the impression that in the early years after unification Merbold was the progenitor (as suggested by the Gambian stamp) and the face of German, if not European, space flight. Consequently, Merbold was chosen to head the European Astronauts Corps, effectively serving as Europe's 'chief astronaut' until 1999, whereas Jähn would later admit that he had felt he was 'being avoided' in those early years of German reunification.⁶² Having lost his job as a professional soldier in 1990, he was hired by the ESA to serve as a consultant in the Euromir programme. Here, however, the first German cosmonaut worked mainly behind the scenes while West German astronauts like Merbold and Reiter took centre stage.

The history of the aforementioned 'permanent exhibition dedicated to the first joint cosmos flight', renamed the Deutsche Raumfahrt Ausstellung after 1990, serves as a case in point. As with many things 'made in GDR', in the wake of unification many people did not seem to be interested in Jähn's heroics any longer; visitor numbers dwindled and the exhibition was about to be shut down. The nation's new centre did not seem to care any more for the periphery's old and outdated heroics. According to a poll conducted in 2005, only 5 per cent of the West German population knew of Sigmund Jähn.⁶³ Mainly thanks to the enthusiasm of outsiders, 'personalities of German and international space flight' in particular, as the supporting association founded in 1992 testifies, the exhibition was redesigned and revived. It was housed in the former Morgenröthe-Rautenkranz train station at first, and financial support from the European Union and regional institutions allowed for the erection of a far bigger building in 2005.⁶⁴ By then, visitor numbers had grown exponentially: 500,000 visitors had come to the German Spaceflight Exhibition by 2005; between 2005 and 2010 the figure rose to 275,000, almost doubling the regular visitor numbers.⁶⁵ What had happened?

In the early 2000s, Jähn had received an offer to star as himself in a movie about the late GDR. True to his down-to-earth image, he declined the offer. The movie nevertheless became a runaway success.⁶⁶ *Goodbye Lenin* tells the fictional story of a family whose mother is dedicated to the socialist cause but falls into a coma shortly before the November revolution. In order to protect her from a fatal shock, her son Alex conceals the collapse of communism when she awakens eight months later by creating fake news broadcasts from old East German news. Struggling in telling the unfolding historic events along socialist lines, Alex eventually turns to Sigmund Jähn (played by Swiss actor Stefan Walz) and introduces him as the new GDR head of state who finally delivers on the socialist promises.⁶⁷

⁶² 'Sigmund Jähn und der kubanische Kosmonaut Arnaldo Tamayo auf der Fiesta de Solidaridad', 18 July 2018, at www.netzwerk-cuba.org/2018/07/sigmund-jaehn-und-der-kubanischer-kosmonaut-arnaldo-tamayo-auf-der-fiesta-de-solidaridad.

⁶³ Some 65 per cent of the East German population knew of him 'right away', the article also commented. See 'Sigmund Jähn wird 70', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 17 May 2010.

⁶⁴ Deutsche Raumfahrt Ausstellung Morgenröthe-Rautenkranz e.V., op. cit. (25).

⁶⁵ Informationsblatt des Vereins 'Deutsche Raumfahrt Ausstellung e.V.', 1.

⁶⁶ 'Ich eigne mich nicht für laute Reden', *Der Tagespiegel*, 4 August 2018.

⁶⁷ Anthony Enns, *The Politics of Ostalgia: Post-socialist Nostalgia in Recent German Film*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Goodbye Lenin was released in 2003, at the height of the so-called *Ostalgie*. Some ten years after unification, the federal government seemed to be failing in delivering on its promises. Subsequently, many former GDR citizens constructed a retrospective image of their state as a stable and caring environment, resulting in a broad nostalgia for aspects of regular daily life and culture in the former GDR, which had disappeared after unification. *Ostalgie* was a profitable business opportunity in the first place, with festivities, magazines, music and the like that is also echoed in the rising visitor numbers of the German Spaceflight Exhibition in Morgenröthe-Rautenkranz. True, Jähn's persona would become one of *Ostalgie*'s most prominent figureheads. *Goodbye Lenin* introduced him as emblematic of what Svetlana Boym has called 'future nostalgia', 'a longing for the fantasies and desires that once were possible in the past'.⁶⁸ The GDR that Alex (re-)created for his mother 'increasingly became the GDR I would have possibly wished for myself', he admits in the movie, and with Sigmund Jähn as its head of state he seemed to have found the perfect symbolic fit. In the early 1990s, Jähn had indeed been invited to join the board of the Partei des deutschen Sozialismus (PDS), formed out of the ashes of the SED in December 1989. Although he declined the offer, he would always maintain his sympathies for the socialist experiment in the GDR. However, his legendary status stayed intact – or even grew – but not because of his representing a lost and allegedly 'better' Germany. Rather, *Ostalgie* downplayed ideological commitment as a standard of GDR culture and contributed to separating Jähn's success from socialist ideology, thereby making his popularity compatible for West Germans as well.

By the time of the fortieth anniversary of his space trip, the former pilot cosmonaut was celebrated throughout Germany. 'Our Gagarin is Jähn', the Deutsches Zentrum für Luft- und Raumfahrt (DLR), the German equivalent to NASA, claimed, with second-generation German astronauts calling him the 'father and grandfather of all German spacefarers'.⁶⁹ Appreciation of the latter seems to find proof in the publicly celebrated friendship between Jähn and second-generation German astronaut Alexander Gerst (b. 1976), a geophysicist from Künzelsau who has worked on board the ISS twice, accumulating a total of 362 days in orbit and thus holding the national record for the longest period in space. Calling Jähn his 'super-hero', who encouraged him to become an astronaut himself, Gerst broadcast from the ISS in August 2018 to celebrate the anniversary of Jähn's space flight.⁷⁰ Notably, Gerst had already paid tribute to the respective West German milestone a month earlier. But when he switched in from outer space in July, he joined the German electronic music pioneers Kraftwerk in performing their song 'Spacelab', featured on their critically acclaimed 1978 album *Die Mensch-Maschine*. Whereas the celebration of the East German space first clearly focused on its protagonist, here the techno-scientific object that had paved the way for the FRG's space debut was at the centre of attention.

Indeed, since his retirement in 1999, Merbold had been consulted primarily to discuss US space technology. A 2013 article, celebrating both Spacelab's maiden flight in 1983 and Merbold's seventieth birthday in 2011, introduced the first West German in space as 'wistful'. Merbold deeply regretted that the US had retired all space shuttles from service two years prior and commented on the various shortcomings of Russian space technology. Once considered the pinnacle of high tech, the orbiter was widely regarded as high-risk after a second shuttle, the *Columbia*, had crashed in 2003, something Merbold felt hard-pressed to accept. Criticizing the 'political class' for their lack of vision, he advocated the construction

⁶⁸ Asif A. Siddiqi, 'From cosmic enthusiasm to nostalgia for the future: a tale of Soviet space culture', in Eva Maurer, Julia Richers, Monica Rüthers and Carmen Scheide (eds.), *Soviet Space Culture: Cosmic Enthusiasm in Socialist Societies*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, pp. 283–306, 296–7.

⁶⁹ 'Unser Gagarin heißt Jähn', *DLR-Magazin* (April 2018) 157, pp. 52–3; Reinold Ewald, quoted in *Raumfahrer News*, 10 September 2018, at <http://m.raumfahrer.net/news/10092018154012.shtml>.

⁷⁰ 'Der fliegende Vogtländer', *Die Welt*, 27 August 2018, p. 24.

of a 'European spaceship', giving the same reasons that had legitimated German participation post-Apollo: 'Besides, such a programme is high-technology. A nation such as Germany could only profit from this because we do not sell resources but diligence and intelligence.'⁷¹ Holding on to the visions of Western 1970s space flight did not seem to capture the popular imagination any longer in 2013. Notably, public debates about the alleged deep-seated German hostility towards techno-scientific progress that had abounded after the *Challenger* disaster in 1986 seemed to resurface after 2010.⁷²

When Sigmund Jähn died in September 2019, Morgenröthe-Rautenkranz again took centre stage. Except for Alexander Gerst (who was on a training mission in New Zealand), all eight living German astronauts attended the local funeral service. Remarkably, the memorial speakers focused primarily on Jähn's international reputation. German president Frank-Walter Steinmeier praised his 'accomplishments as a scientist and as an ambassador of space flight'; to the DLR 'the world-renowned cosmonaut, scientist and engineer' had been a 'bridge builder between East and West, dedicated to the peaceful exploration of space'.⁷³ This is all the more surprising as the festivities of 2018 had shown that, contrary to Merbold, who rose to some fame in the former Soviet republics after 1990, Jähn had failed to make an impression in the West. The ESA's general director, Jan Wörner, was the only Western representative present in Morgenröthe-Rautenkranz.

Until his death, Jähn was an outspoken advocate of Russian-German friendship, even signing a controversially received plea for a different policy towards Russia after the country had illegally annexed the Crimean peninsula in 2014. 'Especially if you have friends in Russia – like many East Germans do – you start asking yourself: Where is this NATO-Europe heading to?' Jähn asked when teaming up with Tamayo in July 2017 to celebrate the attack on the Moncada Barracks that had sparked the Cuban revolution in 1953.⁷⁴ Tamayo and Jähn had become firm friends in the course of the Interkosmos programme. However, celebrating socialist heroics and returning to rhetoric that echoed the Manichean order of the Cold War with clear sympathies towards authoritarian regimes saw Jähn maintaining a disputed persona, particularly among former East Germans.

In 2021, local authorities in Halle decided that – unlike the old planetarium, named after Jähn in 1978 – the city's new institution should not bear his name, due to his former association with both the NVA and the infamous MfS.⁷⁵ Germany's armed forces took a similar stance. In 2018, they decided that Jähn should not be regarded as a hero, due to his NVA service. Gerhard Kowalski, who had accompanied Jähn during his preparations in Zvyozdnyi Gorodok on behalf of GDR media, found this decision hard to accept. 'Couldn't one make an exception for Jähn whose accomplishments as a spacefarer are undisputed? Or is this plain impossible due to the extent to which he was part of the system?'⁷⁶ Historian Sascha-Ilko

⁷¹ 'Machen wir uns unabhängig von Russland und den USA', *focus-online*, 13 November 2013, at www.focus.de/wissen/weltraum/raumfahrt/machen-wir-uns-unabhaengig-von-russland-und-den-usa-ulf-merbold_id_2179077.html.

⁷² Andie Rothenhäusler, 'Die Debatte um die Technikfeindlichkeit in der BRD in den 1980er Jahren', *Technikgeschichte* (2013) 80(4), pp. 273–94, 293.

⁷³ 'Der bodenständige Raumfahrer', *Tagesspiegel*, 23 September 2019, p. 24; 'Weltraumpionier Sigmund Jähn verstorben', *Deutsches Zentrum für Luft- und Raumfahrt*, 22 September 2019, at www.dlr.de/content/de/artikel/news/2019/03/20190922_weltraumpionier-sigmund-jaehn-verstorben.html.

⁷⁴ 'Wieder Krieg in Europa? Nicht in unserem Namen', *Zeit online*, 5 December 2014, at www.zeit.de/politik/2014-12/auf-ruf-russland-dialog; 'Die Gefahren für die Erde vom All aus gesehen: Zwei Kosmonauten warnen', *sputniknews*, 29 July 2018, at www.forum.kosmonauta.net/index.php?topic=3293.0.

⁷⁵ See 'Bitteres Ende im Namensstreit', *Tag24*, 26 February 2021, at www.tag24.de/nachrichten/regionales/sachsen-anhalt/halle-saale-planetarium-sigmund-jaehn-sed-stasi-stadtrat-beschluss-namensaenderung-1855374.

⁷⁶ Tradition decree of Germany's armed forces, 28 March 2018, at www.bmvg.de/de/aktuelles/der-neue-traditionserlass-23232.

Kowalczyk, on the other hand, reminded readers of Jähn's former image as a 'figurehead of the GDR', advising them not to forget that he had joined the military at the age of eighteen 'not because he was a naive gun nut nor an unscrupulous militarist but because he was a committed communist dedicated to defending the SED regime at all costs'.⁷⁷

These debates clearly indicate that, thirty years after the collapse of the SED regime, Germans, especially those with a biographical background in the GDR, are still very much divided over what can be adapted from the 'other' Germany and what is to be considered dangerous, illiberal and hence not worthy of tradition. If, however, Jähn's newly won post-2000 popularity is no proof of a successful cultural reunification process, how can it be explained? Appreciative media remarks do give some clue:

An ordinary guy, firmly rooted in Morgenröthe, who neither embellishes nor condemns the GDR and who is idolized for this. This might come across as droll in the West but here in Rautenkranz, far away from everything, the visitor will understand all too well. Obviously there isn't much left that is suited for a reunited German inventory,

the conservative weekly *Welt* wrote in 2018, highlighting a staple of Jähn's persona, his 'down-to-earthness'.⁷⁸

Significantly, some thirty years after unification – and similar to his image throughout the GDR – Jähn's later life again became as important as the fact that he had been to space. Looking at articles dedicated to his persona in the twenty-first century one can easily get the impression that the older Jähn grew the less he talked about space, reflecting instead on individual rootedness, the planting of trees (which was described as his favourite hobby) and humanity's responsibility for planet Earth: 'When I read about plans for the colonization of Mars I ask myself: why? Are we only about ruthlessly destroying our planet and then leaving for another one? Imagining the future of humanity on a different planet – it defeats me.'⁷⁹ Such statements implied a critique of predatory capitalism and echoed feelings of hostility towards techno-scientific progress at the same time, making his persona compatible with East Germans who held on to nostalgic views about the GDR, as well as with West Germans who felt inclined to a critical attitude towards technologically induced progress. Public-opinion research conducted throughout the 1990s had indeed revealed significant public scepticism about the wonders of technology, especially among younger Germans. Research had also revealed, however, that this scepticism was mostly fuelled by emotional takes on technology rather than by historical facts.⁸⁰

Again, the Deutsche Raumfahrtausstellung serves as a case in point. The German Spaceflight Exhibition is not the only space flight exhibition in Germany. It is, however, the only one closely associated with a certain individual and it prides itself upon documenting 'the past, the present and the future of space flight through unique models and originals'.⁸¹ Much of the success of the Deutsche Raumfahrtausstellung in becoming a 'true visitor magnet' is attributed to Jähn, who, until shortly before his death, would regularly guide visitors through 'his' exhibition. When reputed East German author Jana Hensel told him that as a

⁷⁷ 'Tod von DDR-Kosmonaut: Sigmund Jähn verkörperte das DDR-System', *Tagesspiegel*, 24 September 2019, p. 17.

⁷⁸ 'Der fliegende Vogtländer', op. cit. (70).

⁷⁹ 'Zu Besuch bei Sigmund Jähn', *Raumfahrt Concret* (2018) 102(2), pp. 6–9, 9; see also 'Eigentlich bin ich ein Waldmensch', *Tagesspiegel*, 5 August 2018, p. 1.

⁸⁰ Burkhard Strümpel and Joachim Scholz-Ligma, 'Technikskepsis als Weltbild und Lebensstil', in Ernst Kistler and Dieter Jaufmann (eds.), *Mensch: Gesellschaft Technik*, Wiesbaden: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 1990, pp. 215–26, 216.

⁸¹ See the webpage of the Deutsche Raumfahrtausstellung Morgenröthe-Rautenkranz at www.deutsche-raumfahrtausstellung.de.

child she had hiked to the Spaceflight Exhibition on numerous occasions, he started singing a Vogtlandian hiking song to her. 'I did not understand the text ... but the melody reminded me of the past. A somewhat distant and blurry past. One you cannot really see any longer but only feel.'⁸² Notably, and very much in line with Jähn's outspoken closeness to nature, the final exhibit is a bench in a woodland setting. This was his favourite spot, visitors learn, and are invited to take a deep breath before leaving the exhibition.

'You fill technology with life', a Bundestag representative praised Jähn in 2018, simultaneously expressing a widespread cultural fascination with authenticity prevalent in twenty-first-century German society.⁸³ Ongoing discussions on the Internet debating whether or not Jähn's 'personal' MiG-21, which to this day serves as the exhibition's figurehead, was actually flown by him and the popular demand to incorporate the Soyuz 29 into the local exhibition illustrate the extent to which people are obsessed with historical artefacts and their 'authenticity' in the early twenty-first century, especially with regard to the German Spaceflight Exhibition in Morgenröthe-Rautenkranz. 'We collect everything we can get our hands on: moon dust, spacesuits, research devices', a former mayor of the town announced on the Internet and promised possible future visitors that his 'space flight village' had an 'astronomic spectacle for young and old' on offer.⁸⁴

Germans in space: old and new divisions

Looking at the life and afterlife of the German space race through the lens of its celebrated protagonists, one is confronted with rather puzzling results. Modelled on the superpowers' space race in many ways, both Cold War German spacefarers were presented and perceived as figureheads of their respective states. What complicated this process, however, was that, contrary to the US and the USSR, the GDR and the FRG shared a common language, history and culture, torn apart by the rifts of the Second World War. Thus, while the German space race was as much about capitalism versus communism and democracy versus dictatorship as the superpowers' space race was, it ultimately posed the question of which spacefarer represented the 'better' Germany.

This is very much evident in the celebrification of Sigmund Jähn, meticulously orchestrated by the ruling SED in order to present its regime as the pinnacle of German history and its first pilot cosmonaut as the progenitor of a new German man. Due to its own traditions, the SED would face a sustained lack of legitimation for being merely a 'puppet regime' on Moscow's behalf, something the regime tried to overcome by fostering a sense of socialist *Heimat*. Morgenröthe-Rautenkranz as an integral part of Jähn's persona – who in fact had been residing in Strausberg, near Berlin, since 1978 – illustrates to what extent the 'first German in space' was meant to convey a new (yet paradoxically ancient) sense of belonging, one that instilled pride and partisanship.

But it is also evident in West German efforts to ridicule the 'other' Germany's space first or to simply ignore it. Remarkably, Ulf Merbold's origins were of no real importance to his image. Although coming only in second place, the West German space effort had been much more ambitious from the start. It built on Spacelab and thus associated Merbold much more closely with a certain technological feat than in Jähn's case. Rather than catching

⁸² 'Einmal war er ganz oben', *Die Zeit*, 23 August 2018, pp. 10–11, 10; see also the tribute by Morgenröthe-Rautenkranz's former mayor Konrad Stahl in Hoffmann, op. cit. (2), pp. 409–12.

⁸³ 'Unser Gagarin heißt Jähn', op. it. (69), p. 53; 'Von Sigmund Jähn zur Ariane 6', *Raumfahrt Concret* (2018) 102(2), p. 12.

⁸⁴ For the discussions about Jähn's 'personal' fighter jet see www.flugzeugforum.de/threads/mig-21-f13-von-sigmund-jaehn.81522; for Morgenröthe-Rautenkranz's former mayor see www.sachsen-tourismus.de/jetzt-nach-sachsen/land-leute/urlaub-in-sachsens-doerfern/morgenroethe-rautenkranz.

up with the national rival, therefore, the West German space flight debut was to showcase techno-scientific excellence and to reinstall its former status as a leading industrial power in (Western) Europe and beyond. However, place rather than technology remained the defining feature of Germany's *Über-Astronaut* after 1990. In the early 1990s, this allowed it to be conveyed that now something had been restored that should have belonged together all the time: German descent prevailed over Cold War rivalries.

In the course of German cultural reunification processes Merbold remained associated with a technocratic system that was increasingly considered one 'of the chosen: academics, civil servants, and corporate managers' after its decommissioning in the early 2000s.⁸⁵ In Jähn's case the meaning of place both grew and changed significantly, turning him into a prominent figurehead of *Ostalgie*. Dispute and disappointment on behalf of the East German population might be a reason for the fact that although it was clearly established by then that both German spacefarers shared a common Vogtlandian descent, their personas again kept being presented as antithetical. By all accounts, Merbold is characterized as rather 'cool' and 'distant'. Jähn, on the other hand, was known to personally respond to every letter he received, up to his death.⁸⁶ And whereas Merbold kept dreaming of a 'European spaceship', Jähn would criticize space expansionism and confess that, 'in reality, I am a woodsman'. Having presented himself as 'Dr. rer. nat. Sigmund Jähn, research cosmonaut' from the late 1990s onwards, his image saw a fundamental makeover after German unification.⁸⁷ Yet it was Jähn who came to be celebrated for his 'authenticity'.

What constitutes 'authenticity' and how it is properly assessed is still a matter of scholarly debate.⁸⁸ Public discourse and popular interest leave no doubt, however, that it has become a ubiquitous catchphrase and a popular cultural phenomenon that reflects a distinct type of historical appropriation dominated by emotion and personal experiences, very much evident in what Jana Hensel described when listening to Jähn's Vogtlandian hiking songs. Evidence discussed in the third section above suggests that thirty years after unification the debate about who are the 'true' father and grandfather of German space flight and what (de)legitimizes this status is still in full swing. Remodelling questions of place and belonging that already troubled the SED leadership in the 1970s and returning to local imagery and motifs after the year 2000, Jähn and 'his' German Spaceflight Exhibition were successful in creating an image that resonates well both with peripheral demands for *Ostalgie* and with broader cultural ones for 'authentic' (cosmic) experience.

The privilege of being among the first nations to have sent one of their own into space owed much to the symbolic value of space flight during the Cold War. Negotiating questions of historical guilt and political orientation in the German case, space flight served to highlight the two Germany's post-war status as model students of their respective camps. After the end of the Cold War, the reunited country had to find its own distinct outlook on space (history). The late appreciation of Jähn by the DLR and other official representatives can be interpreted as a way of emancipating itself from former Cold War paradigms. This turn, however, devalued techno-scientific expertise and focused increasingly on individual characteristics of Germany's pioneering spacefarers. The extent to which Jähn's persona is devoid of concrete historical or techno-scientific context suggests that contemporary

⁸⁵ Larabee, op. cit. (54), p. 215.

⁸⁶ Various letters are cited in Hoffmann, op. cit. (2), pp. 237–9, 251–2; according to Hoffmann, Jähn received some 50,000 letters in the late 1970s alone. Unfortunately, these letters remain in the possession of Jähn's relatives and are not accessible to scholarly research. For Merbold see Wölk, op. cit. (2), p. 83.

⁸⁷ Wölk, op. cit. (2), p. 47; 'Eigentlich bin ich ein Waldmensch', op. cit. (79); Sigmund Jähn, 'Foreword', in Heinz Hoffmann, *Die Deutschen im Weltraum: Zur Geschichte der Kosmosforschung in der DDR*, Berlin: Edition Ost, 1998, pp. 9–11.

⁸⁸ See Martin Sabrow and Achim Saupe (eds.), *Handbuch Historische Authentizität*, Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2020.

debates about the roots of German space flight and what it takes to qualify for hero status are less concerned with the country's current or future role in space than with the question of what constitutes a 'true' united Germany and who is worthy of belonging. Similarly to what Andrew Jenks has observed in Gagarin's home region, Jähn's provincialism served to make his persona 'more' German in comparison to the rather 'cool' and cosmopolitan 'European spaceman' Merbold. The degree to which Jähn is hailed for his 'down-to-earthness' in the early twenty-first century then allows for a paradoxical conclusion. Second-generation German astronauts Alexander Gerst and Matthias Maurer demonstrate that the country is still very active in human space flight. In fact, the ESA's European Astronaut Center, the home of the European Astronaut Corps, is based in Cologne, demonstrating the country's ongoing leading role in that field throughout Europe. Yet the fascination with Jähn's persona reveals a nostalgic, romanticized, at times even sceptical attitude towards techno-scientific progress and its merits that seems strangely at odds with the nation's ongoing activities in space.

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