Beyond the Wall:
Typography from the German Democratic Republic

Authors:

Grant Carruthers
(grant@fieldworkagency.com)
Fieldwork Agency Ltd
Newcastle upon Tyne
United Kingdom

Joyce S R Yee
(joyce.yee@northumbria.ac.uk)
Centre for Design Research
School of Design
Northumbria University
United Kingdom

Introduction

1989: The German Democratic Republic (GDR) still existed and the Berlin Wall was still standing. Communism was alive in Europe. Hard to believe now, yet only fifteen years ago, a reality. By 1990 the GDR was gone, but it lingers on in the memory of many people now as a dull, repressive, unimaginative place full of cheap plastic, grey concrete, goosestepping soldiers, sports stars with mullets, the dreaded Stasi secret police and of course, the Wall.

These memories illustrate common Western stereotypes of the GDR. But in the real, existing East Germany, the reaction of designers to the Communist system was not as downbeat or sterile as you might expect. The graphical and typographical culture of the GDR is a fascinating glimpse into how graphics and typography might have developed and functioned in an integrated system not based solely on the economics of supply and demand.

The "workers and peasants state" was founded in 1949 on the premise of supporting humanism, anti-fascism, peace and security. East Germany occupied a unique position within Eastern Europe; not only did it define an outer edge of the Soviet bloc, it faced the difficulty of being umbilically connected to 'the other (Western) Germany'. Questions of identity dogged it to the end, and stereotypical perceptions about Communism and Capitalism heightened the tensions between the split personality of east and west.

The history of East German typography is essentially, from a Western perspective, one of those "in spite of" stories. Inevitably constrained by inconsistent political ideologies in the arts, a lack of raw materials and outdated typesetting and printing equipment, GDR graphics and typography eventually flourished in a way which only occurs when designers are forced to come up with solutions in the face of seemingly impossible obstacles. Designers found innovative, critical and individual ways of coping with political and material shortcomings.

A Short History of GDR Typography

Following WW2, type foundries in the Eastern (Soviet) Zone of Occupation, like all other major private enterprises, were taken over by the authorities and nationalised. In 1951 the East German government consolidated the long established foundries of Schelter & Giesecke AG Leipzig, Schriftguß AG Dresden, and Ludwig Wagner AG into one main state-run type foundry: VEB Typoart Dresden[1]. This foundry was to continue producing fonts until the end of the GDR in 1990, whereupon it became Typoart GmbH. It still operates today in the printing industry but no longer produces typefaces. Many of the influential names in GDR typography worked there.

Leipzig and Dresden have a long tradition of fine printing and book arts which stretches back almost five hundred years. This tradition continued during the GDR, where the designers and typographers of what became known as the "Leipzig-Dresden School" worked to sustain the main printing and publication centres for the GDR. Leipzig in particular hosted many book design festivals (and still continues to do so today) such as "The Most Beautiful Books in the Whole World" and the "International Book Exhibition", both of which showcased the best of Eastern European and international work.

VEB Typoart Dresden was led from 1951 by the typographer Herbert Thannhaueser until his death in 1963. Thannhaueser (an art director in the former Schelter & Giesecke foundry) oversaw the company in its formative years, when raw materials were scarce; many fonts from the former foundries were used and many display faces were developed, along with new versions of typefaces designed for Linotype and Monotype compatible typesetting machines. Later, Typoart focussed more on book faces and helped to develop many Cyrillic versions of faces for Eastern bloc countries.

Thannhaueser's own typographical contributions include versions of Garamond (1955) and Didot (1958), along with his own typefaces Erler Versalien (1953), Liberta (1956-1960) and Magna (1968). Typoart Garamond is currently still available as EF Garamond No. 5 from the Elsner and Flake foundry.

The typographer, calligrapher, teacher and book designer Albert Kapr took over at Typoart in 1964. Kapr (1918 - 1995) was a devout Communist who believed in the need for fine typography and book printing in the GDR. He wrote many books on typographic and printing history, and was particularly keen on the history and preservation of the German blackletter form[2].

Kapr was the founding father of the Hochschule für Grafik & Buchkunst (HGB) in Leipzig, which proved to be very influential in the development of graphic design and typography in the GDR. Many of Germany's contemporary typographers and designers are alumni from the school.

Kapr developed Cyrillic versions of Thannhaueser's Garamond in the early 1980's and also designed Faust (1959), Leipziger-Antiqua (1970), Prillwitz-Antiqua (1971), and Magna Kyrillisch (1975).

Trends in GDR typography

What do GDR typefaces reflect in terms of influencing factors? Typography in the GDR was not driven by advertising or commercial pressures to the same extent as it was in Western countries. The developmental context of GDR typography lay essentially in the continuation of the 19th century and prewar traditions in book printing, letterpress and classical typography. This was the path which the Communists determined the new democratic Germany was destined to take, rather than the commercial development route favoured in West Germany.

Creative debates in the GDR , particularly in the Stalinist era of the early 1950's, appear to have been dominated by an ideological strictness which was compounded by a tendency towards a pragmatic and often inconsistent application of Communist prejudices towards the arts. Politicians took a great interest in what artists and designers got up to. Formalism, experimentation and abstraction were condemned as "bourgeois decadence" at odds with the notion of collective equality, yet functional Modernism and the teachings of the Bauhaus fell out of favour until the 1960's when new impulses invigorated the graphics scene and the reputation of the Bauhaus was reinstated. It is difficult to ascertain the real effect of these early policies, but it may go some way to explaining the conservatism of early GDR typography.

A more likely factor perhaps was the relative poverty East Germany faced in comparison to the American-backed recovery in West Germany. The need to design new versions of established typefaces had as much to do with economical and political expediency as a desire towards typographical tradition. Access to many of the fonts commonly used previously (such as Bauer Futura) were cut off to the Eastern sectors after the war, and the GDR had no money to pay for licences. So they developed their own versions, or found alternatives: Times Roman became Timeless (Typoart 1982), Helvetica became Maxima (Gert Wunderlich, 1965-84) Arno Drescher's 1930's Drescher Grotesk became the most widely used lead-type sans-serif Futura substitute in the GDR.

Applications of typography
Serving the State

The use of typography in East German graphics is as fascinating as the development of the typefaces themselves. Political propaganda was important to the Communists and political designs were zealously monitored by the Party at the highest levels. Posters were usually designed around dependable formulas using simple and clear images to communicate to a mass audience. Commercially there was little by way of advertising within the GDR itself (it was eventually stopped in 1971) but a larger export advertising market existed for East German products sold abroad for desperately needed hard currency. A look at marketing for GDR product and packaging design throws up some interesting examples of logotypes and typeface choices.

This is where the many stereotypes about GDR graphics begin. To experienced and cynical Western eyes some of this work may seem laughable and distinctly odd. The 'educational' (rather than seductive) nature of the labels may appear stunningly inept in conception and execution. Typography tends towards functional Modernist sans-serif faces in formulaic or clumsy layouts. Compelling design "accidents" and the built-in retro effects lend designs a certain charming chic today.

It is important to understand however that East German graphic design was not uniformly inferior. Even within the clearly undeveloped advertising sector, there are for example beautiful examples of techno-script logotypes. These are products of a unique context, an economic system which differed fundamentally from that of the West where it was largely discredited.

Mothers of Invention

To overcome technical & material shortages, designers looked to their own hand and craft skills to use typography in their work. Typesetting equipment and good quality photographic paper was hard to get hold of, and these problems forced them to experiment with other forms of typography. This is one reason why drawing, calligraphy and painting (practised intensely in GDR art schools) became more prevalent and well developed in Eastern bloc countries while West German designers, with a full range of photographical and typesetting materials at their disposal, did not use these techniques to the same extent. Necessity is the mother of invention and the East German experience certainly proves this.

Erhard Grüttner (1976)

Gert Wunderlich (1983)

By far the biggest source of work for designers other than political propaganda was the state-sponsored cultural sector, which provided graphic designers with the creative typographical opportunities and scope which were lacking in other sectors.

Designers could work as freelances, independent of the state run design agencies like DEWAG, VfAA and Interwerbung[3]. Designers like Helmut Brade, Volker Pfüller, Erhard Grüttner, Lutz Dammbeck, Feliks Büttner, Jurgen Haufe and Manfred Butzmann created exhibition, theatre, film and social commentary posters in a remarkable variety of styles, characters and wit which visually and politically challenged Marxist ideals. Such strongly individual statements were able to subvert the status quo using a highly sophisticated anti-Soviet visual vocabulary which included typography.

Volker Pfüller and Helmut Brade have very expressive and calligraphic approaches to typography in their theatre and exhibition posters. Hand drawn typography and image become linked into a coherent artistic statement. Idiosyncracy and the unique character of personal handwriting stand in opposition to the homogenous collective. Brade found that alternatives to letterpress type, like Letraset, were simply too expensive.


Volker Pfüller (1981)   **Helmut Brade (1985)**

Manfred Butzmann circumvented censorship rules by producing limited runs (under 100) of self initiated posters. He often produced black and white posters which used images in a grid structure to highlight emerging patterns of environmental effects caused by human neglect. In his "Heimatkunde" series (Heimatkunde is a sense of belonging to the local environment and history), he displayed neglected public spaces and environmental features in a critique of empty political rhetoric. In one particular example from 1984 he contrasts two examples of school handwriting exercises, one a beautifully drawn copperplate script from 1884 saying "it is better to suffer injustice wrongly than to be unjust to others" and the other a standard exercise from 1979. The 1979 version asks the pupil to repeat ad nauseam the phrase "Seid Bereit! " ("Be prepared"), the slogan of the Communist party youth organisation, the Thälmann Pioniere. The sense of loss in terms of traditions, human pride and beauty is poignant.
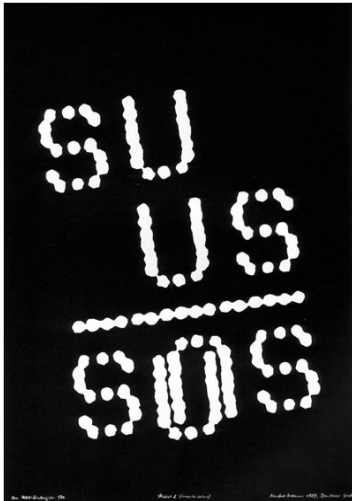
Manfred Butzmann (1984)   **Manfred Butzmann (1986)**

In other examples he takes graffiti as a starting point. "Nicht Hinauslehen!" (1986) meaning "Do not lean out!" takes several defaced examples of a warning sign to create a subversive word-play. "Saxa Loqvvntvr/ Steine Reden" (1985) (Latin/German for 'the stones talk') takes graffiti from the schoolyard of a school in Potsdam. Local history is made up of the actions of individuals, each with their own dreams for the future.

There was often a price to pay for his boldness. "I wanted to get involved in the GDR, in politics and society, with my own poster commissions. I achieved this. Some of my work had a direct effect (e.g. censorship), others were distinguished in poster competitions...because of the attention I got, both positive and negative, I enjoyed working in the GDR. My work was considered - and needed - by the citizens."[4]

The Wall is dead. Long live the Wall!

There is a current trend in Germany called 'ostalgie'. 'Ostalgie' is a mixture of the German words for East ('Ost) and nostalgia ('nostalgie'). It is particularly visible in Berlin near places like Checkpoint Charlie, or in fleamarkets, where street traders sell all sorts of tacky GDR memorabilia.

It is from these sources that a new, younger generation of German designers are drawing their inspirations. Interest in the design output of the GDR and its typographical achievements has never been greater, post Wall. Older Germans (particularly West Germans) with direct experience and memories of the GDR are more reluctant to embrace these trends. In fact, interest and knowledge of GDR graphics appears to be quite limited amongst designers in the West, including those of the former West Germany.

New interpretations of traditional fonts common in the GDR have been developed by contemporary designers. Drescher Grotesk, the GDR Futura-substitute, was revived in 1999 as FF Super Grotesk by Sven Smital of eBoy (Berlin) and Herbert Thannhaueser's Erler Versalien was redrawn by Andreas Seidal and renamed Missale Incana (2004). Ingo Preuß has revised Heinz Schumann's 1964 Stentor as Rosalia (2004).

Sektor typeface by Syvia Janssen - derived from East German banknotes

Heinz Schumann's (1964) Stentor

FF City Street Type (2000)
Ole Schäfer & Verena Gerlach

Other designs have come from more unusual sources. The humble East German banknote inspired Sylvia Janssen to design Sektor as part of a series of banknote-style fonts relating to themes of consumption. FF City Street Type (2000) by Ole Schäfer and Verena Gerlach is a family of fonts based upon the distinctive (and now almost forgotten) street signage systems of West and East Berlin. Schäfer and Gerlach had a huge respect for the typographic standards of the Eastern designers and were inspired by signs bought in a fleamarket.

In a great example of "form follows function", the original typeface for the Eastern streetsigns was never actually designed, and had to be reconstructed digitally. All kinds of material in the GDR were very rare and expensive, including metals, so street-signs were made of two weather-resistant coloured plastics (black and white). The letters were then machine carved out to create a technical style font quite different from the 1930's style sans-serif used in the Western sector of the city. And because many streets in East Berlin were named after Communist idols with double-barrelled names (e.g. Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz), they naturally had to be condensed.

Conclusion

It is important that the legacy of the Leipzig-Dresden School of typography is not forgotten and destroyed like many of the few remaining symbols of the GDR have been in the last decade and a half. At least some contemporary designers recognise the weight of skill, experience and knowledge the old typographers retained, and some believe that the typographic standards were much higher in the East than the West as a result.

Typographical influences in political, commercial and cultural work show a hugely varied and creative approach which takes influences not only from developments in Eastern Europe but also from an international perspective; particularly from the 1960's onwards, abstraction, Pop, Modernist and Expressionist impulses in both typography and graphics invigorated what had become dull Soviet-style realist propaganda.

Commercial work was underdeveloped and clumsy, and official political posters were the least political and least subversive in terms of content and typography, but the cultural sphere offered type a chance to be more individual and expressive in much more sophisticated ways. The socialist economic system itself played no small part in the development of a prominent cultural design space. Without generous State subsidies for designers and an emphasis on artistic achievement rather than commercial success, it is much more unlikely that designers would have had the chance to preserve old techniques or explore new forms of typographic expression. Admittedly, creativity was acceptable only as long as it was compliant with Marxist thought, particularly in politically themed work, but it is clear that designers were able to offer criticism of the State and sometimes (but not always) get away with it.

Equally, not every designer had something deeply subversive to say about politics and a lot of work is as much artistic as pretentious in nature. Many designers enjoyed working in the GDR and a celebration of the creative potential of typography and graphics is more likely to have been the primary intention of these designers before politics got involved.

When we both started looking into East German graphics and typography, we had an idea in our minds eye of what we might uncover: clichéd and cheesy graphics, dull, non-expressive and bland. However, looking at the work found in cultural posters and book design, we now know that they are innovative, brave, expressive and individualistic. Typography was of a high quality perhaps because it inherited such a rich tradition from Leipzig and Dresden. The Communists cared more about socialist progress than tradition, but key designers like Herbert Thannhaueser and Albert Kapr had the foresight and passion to see how important it was to preserve and develop typography. Ironically, Communism gave them that chance. Of course innovation continued in the forms of expression and inventive usage of type, in spite of technological, material, political or even traditional constraints.

With the continued presence of a healthy and lively typographic scene in Leipzig today, it is little wonder that the HGB Leipzig is still a highly regarded school despite, or perhaps even because of, the legacy of Communism. But the real heroes are the old East German typographers and designers. It's now time for them to be allowed back in from the cold and more widely recognised for their achievements.

Resources

Das Politische Plakat der DDR (1945-1970) [CD-ROM]. (1999). Muchen, K.G. Saur.

Plakate der SBZ/DDR: Sammlung des Deutschen Historischen Museums [CD-ROM]. (1999). Berlin, Deutschen Historischen Museums.

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Butzmann, Manfred (1999) Heimatkunde 1979-1989-1999: Plakate von Manfred Butzmann. Exhibition catalogue from the Brandenburgische Kunstsammlungen Cottbus Museum für zeitgenössische Kunst, Fotografie und Plakat.

Die 100 Besten Plakates des jahres 1981, Verband Bildender Kunstler der DDR, Ministerium für Kultur.

Die 100 Besten Plakates des jahres 1985, Verband Bildender Kunstler der DDR, Ministerium für Kultur.

Die 100 Besten Plakates des jahres 1987, Verband Bildender Kunstler der DDR, Ministerium für Kultur.

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Plakate von 1945 bis zur Gegenwart (1989). Berlin, Verband Bildender Kunstler der DDR. P40.

Bertsch, G. C., E. Hedler, et al. (1994). Stunning Eastern Design. Cologne, Tashen.

Kapr, Albert (1983) The art of lettering; The history, anatomy, and aesthetics of the roman letterforms . München, K.G. Saur.

Kraft, K. S. (1970). Die Schutzmarke. Berlin, Verlag Die Wirtschaft.

Links to fonts:

Drescher Super Grotesk

http://www.myfonts.com/fonts/bitstream/drescher-grotesk-bt/

http://www.bitstream.com

EF Garamond No.5

http://www.myfonts.com/fonts/linotype/garamond-no5-ef/

Magna

http://www.myfonts.com/fonts/ef/magna/

Maxima

http://www.myfonts.com/fonts/ef/maxima/

Missale Incana (a revival of Erler Versalier)

http://www.myfonts.com/fonts/astype/missale-incana/

http://www.astype.de

Timeless

http://www.myfonts.com/fonts/linotype/timeless/

Notes

[1] VEB is an abbreviation for a particular type of state owned business operated in East Germany, a 'Volkseigener Betrieb'.

[2] After WW2, the blackletter in the West was tainted by its associations with the Nazis and part of the Allied 'denazification' process included the discouraging of blackletter forms. The Soviet authorities however disliked Modernist approaches in art and design and were apparently disinterested in condemning the blackletter face as a particularly Nazi form.

[3] DEWAG: Deutsche Werbe- und Anzeigengesellschaft (. The official design agency of the East German Communist Party.
  VfAA: Verlag für Agitation und Anschauungsmittel, the State propaganda publishing house.
  Interwerbung: State design agency which dealt mainly with export advetising.

[4] Manfred Butzmann, correspondence with the authors May 2004.