

They Divided the Sky

Der geteilte Himmel

Presented by: Katie Unwin

***Der geteilte Himmel* is as a political novel that engages with the fundamental tensions between individual consciousness and state ideology in East Germany during 1959-1961. Set against the construction of the Berlin Wall, the novel follows Rita Seidel, a village teacher-in-training, and her relationship with Manfred Herrfurth, a chemist who ultimately flees to West Berlin while she chooses to stay behind in the East.**

"At least they can't divide the sky," Manfred said in a mocking tone. The sky? This enormous vault of hope and yearning, love and sorrow? "Yes, they can," she said. "The sky is what divides first of all." (191).

Written during the period between the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and the Prague Spring of 1968, the novel emerged from socialist literary development. Wolf belonged to the generation of East German writers who came of age after the Second World War who experienced socialism as participants rather than converts. This generational perspective distinguished her work from that of established socialist realist authors like Anna Seghers, who had developed their aesthetic during the anti-fascist struggle.

The novel's political significance comes from its literary strategies rather than explicit ideological content. Wolf structures the narrative through Rita's fragmented memories during recovery in a sanatorium following her collapse between two moving train carriages. This narrative structure creates a framework that prioritises individual agency over collective political doctrine. The narrative of Rita's memory is how the reader learns about life in a dividing Germany, not via official or collective sources.

Wolf employs what she termed "subjective authenticity," validating individual experience even and especially when it conflicts with official narratives. This technique represents a departure from socialist realist conventions established by Georg Lukács and codified in the 1934 Soviet Writers' Congress, which typically privileged collective progress over personal psychology. The fragmented temporal structure, which moves between Rita's recovery, her factory work and her relationship with Manfred, mirrors the psychological fragmentation that political pressure creates in individual consciousness. Wolf would develop this concept further in *Nachdenken über Christa T.* (1968).

Rita's industrial experience at the train carriage factory introduces the novel's central political tensions through her relationship with Rolf Meternagel, a demoted foreman whose pursuit of increased production quotas stems from genuine ideological commitment. This portrayal emerges from Wolf's own factory experience during the 1950s, when intellectuals were expected to engage directly with industrial labour as part of the "Bitterfeld Path", a cultural policy linking writers with working-class experience. Meternagel's trajectory, from supervisor to brigade member following

subordinates' corruption, then to breakdown from overwork, speak to the personal costs and moral complexities of socialist labour during the period of accelerated industrialisation that characterised East German development under Walter Ulbricht.

The novel's climactic political moment occurs during Rita's dangerous journey to West Berlin, where Manfred attempts to convince her to stay. This journey takes place during the summer of 1961, when emigration from East to West Germany reached crisis levels (over 200,000 people fled in 1961 alone, prompting the Wall's construction). His remark, "at least they can't divide the sky" prompts Rita's response: "Yes, they can. The sky is what divides first of all." This exchange demonstrates how political commitment fundamentally alters perception of the world, reality, horizons, "hope and yearning, love and sorrow" (191). Metaphysical divisions such as these are also explored in Cold War literature from Graham Greene's *The Third Man* to John le Carré's *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*.

Rita's decision to return to East Germany operates on multiple political levels, reflecting the faceted motivations of those who chose to remain in the GDR despite opportunities to leave. Her refusal to follow Manfred is a narrative rejection of a classical romantic plot. Rita does not define herself through romantic attachment, asserting instead her right to participate in shaping society's future. This feminist consciousness operates within socialist frameworks, challenging traditional gender roles and maintaining political commitment, a position that distinguished East German women's writing from both Western feminist literature and orthodox socialist treatments of gender. Her choice also embodies the novel's central argument that political systems require individual consent to function effectively, echoing debates about legitimacy that would resurface during the peaceful revolution of 1989.

The inclusion towards the end of the novel of Yuri Gagarin's space flight provides political allegory within the personal narrative, situating individual and personal crisis within the broader context of Cold War competition. Gagarin's achievement on 12 April 1961 represented a significant propaganda victory for the Soviet Union, demonstrating technological superiority and highlighting the contrast between cosmic achievement and earthbound division. News of this achievement reaches Rita during her factory test run. While the spacecraft is "tearing by up there cutting across all the meridians like a scalpel", Rita wonders about the global and personal effects this move will have, "This painful tugging on the ties that have held the world in place so far ... Will you be able to withstand the sudden liberation from this-is-all-there-is? Do we have enough human warmth to contend with the cosmic cold?" (146) This event creates a temporal parallel between collective technological triumph, tactics of separation and human emotion.

This technique of embedding historical events within personal narrative reflects Wolf's literary strategy of exposing how public history shapes private consciousness. Her treatment of political commitment avoids uncritical celebration and complete rejection, positioning her work between the official optimism of socialist realism and the pessimism of Western Cold War literature.

LANGUAGE: German / Deutsch

PUBLISHER: University of Ottawa Press

This title was not censored before publishing