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Chapter 15

A Brief History of the German Rocket Society¹

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The fostering of space research and its development in Germany, as well as the entire world, was the principal and proclaimed objective at the first gathering of 11 former members of the Peenemünde team, including A. F. Staats and H. Langkraet, on 21 September 1952 in Bremen. This resulted in establishing the German national rocket society, initially named “Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Raketentechnik” (working team for rocket technology). Soon after, a formal German rocket society was organized under the name “Deutsche Raketen-Gesellschaft (DRG) e.V.” (German Rocket Society).

The newly established society was an immediate success and gained many new members, most of them distinguished German scientists and former Peenemünde rocket researchers. After some time, many foreign scientists expressed their desire to join the society. Thus, because of its more and more international character, the society decided to change its name to “Hermann-Oberth-Gesellschaft e.V.” (HOG), in honor of one of the greatest astronomical pioneers living in Germany. This change took place in Hamburg on 19 September 1963, after the admittance of new members from France, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Austria, Portugal, Sweden and the U.S.A. The United States was represented by distinguished researchers like Wernher von Braun, Kurt Debus, Walter Dornberger, Ernest Stuhlinger and many others, who joined the society.

The HOG is governed by the “Präsidium,” which is a body consisting of the president, 4 vice-presidents, 9 lands group leaders and 32 board trustees (an advisory group “Kuratorium” of prominent member from the federal government, universities and industry).

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Figure 1 A reunion of some of the founding members of the International Study Group Hermann Oberth. Shown, left to right, are Hermann Oberth, A. F. Staats, and Wernher von Braun.³

As early as 1964, the board of trustees, together with the president of the society, submitted a major report to the federal government and the parliament (Bundestag), reviewing the actual state of space research in the Federal Republic and suggesting greater participation of Germany in international space activities. The Oberth Society assumed the responsibility of recording the existing resources in the Federal Republic that could be used in international space research efforts.

³ It is assumed that this photograph was taken in 1969.

The society holds several space symposia every year and one annual congress at major cities of the republic. Up to now, 39 congresses have taken place in various cities, such as Bremen, Hamburg, Hannover, Darmstadt, Koblenz, Nuremberg and many others. These congresses were often attended by prominent space personalities in the world, such as Hermann Oberth, Wernher von Braun, Leonid Sedov, and others.

Special respect is given to Hermann Oberth, now residing in Feucht near Nuremberg. The Oberth Society organizes a symposium in his honor every year on 25 June, his birthday, in Feucht. Also his 75th birthday (1969), 80th (1974), 85th (1979) and 90th (1984) were celebrated with special splendor during the HOG congress in Salzburg, Austria.

In 1961 the Oberth Society organized a first German solid propellant meteorological rocket project "Cumulus" and "Cirrus."

After the Oberth Society became a member of the International Astronautical Federation (IAF) in 1956, it was possible to establish scientific contacts with many other astronautical societies of the world.

In 1960, during the IAF congress in Stockholm, Dr. A. F. Staats, President of HOG, was elected Vice-President of IAF.

Today, the Oberth Society is on the list of the largest and most active national astronautical societies, all members of IAF. The society maintains active membership groups in several European countries and is joined by members from over 15 other nations.

It is important also to speak about the role played by August Friedrich Staats, who was the co-founder of the original German Rocket Society in 1952 and also its first president. Since then, and until the present, he has been constantly and by acclaim re-elected to the presidency. A very dynamic and resourceful personality, an outstanding speaker, and a former member of the Peenemünde team, Dr. Staats has provided a powerful and talented leadership.

Among the many accomplishments of the Oberth Society under the presidency of Dr. Staats, the following must be mentioned: The Oberth Society, after initially breaking the post-war syndrome of passiveness in Germany, contributed significantly to the revival of interest and support for space research. This was accomplished by:

1. Creating a permanent and successful space information center at the Oberth Society, which is at the disposal of members of the society, the general public and the government,
2. Establishing a space education center for university students and other qualified young people, which influenced many young space enthusiasts in their decision to join the national space research,
3. Running a space liaison center to maintain contact with worldwide space organizations and industries (Internationaler Förderkreis Wernher von Braun/Hermann Oberth),
4. Organizing an international space philatelic center for the promotion of space research,
5. Publishing an outstanding professional periodical, the *Astronautik* (for the past 25 years),

6. Establishing the Hermann Oberth Space Museum in Feucht near Nuremberg,
7. Erecting the Wernher von Braun monument on the East-Frisien island Spickeroog.

For his historical role as president of HOG for almost 40 years, Dr. Staats has received national and worldwide recognition. In addition to the numerous awards from the government and private organizations, Dr. Staats was especially honored at his 75th birthday celebration last October in Hannover by congratulations from the President and the Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, the Minister President of Bavaria and many other outstanding space research leaders in Germany and abroad.

In his historical contribution to the revival and development of space research in post-war West Germany as president of the leading astronautical society in Germany, Staats has been assisted by many members of the society. It is important to mention here the name of the vice-president of the Oberth Society, Ernst Sellner. Serving as a vice-president for many years, and responsible for all interactions and interrelations between the Oberth Society and IAF or other worldwide space organizations, Sellner contributed greatly to the international respect which the Oberth Society enjoys today. His selfless and dedicated work for the Oberth Society is appreciated nationally and internationally.



Figure 2 Dr. August Friedrich Staats, co-founder of the original German Rocket Society in 1952.