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Donna Harsch: Revenge of the Domestic

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INTRODUCTION

THE SHATTERED STATE of their country in 1945 sobered German Communists but did not debilitate them. Communists, a small but determined minority, planned to use class struggle, production, and Marxist ideology to drive Germany toward the socialist future. Contemplating the labor before them, they barely registered the grave concerns of compatriots: divided families, destroyed homes, scarcity of food. As people, Communists loved their families and had to eat and sleep. As Communists, they rated private concerns as diversions, even obstacles, to the realization of socialism. For them, family, household, and consumption formed the backdrop to the drama of class, politics, and production. While Communists studied the wide road ahead, German women stared gloomily at the rut in front of them. Women, a substantial but diffuse majority, looked at their devastated world through the Communist lens inverted: they were sick of struggle; uninterested in production; suspicious of ideology, but ready to sacrifice for family; anxious for a home of their own; and desperate for food, clothing, and any nice thing. Many women worked for wages and participated in political life as it emerged in occupied Germany. Yet most women predicated employment on their family situation and spoke in public about domestic issues.

This book reconstructs the encounter between Communists and ordinary women in eastern Germany, from the era of occupation through the first two decades of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). The narrative addresses the problem of continuity and change in the relationship between women and the family, on one side, and the Socialist Unity Party (SED) and the state it constructed, on the other. The gap between a production-oriented party-state and family-oriented women citizens, the book contends, never disappeared. The SED clung to its Marxist-Leninist ideology and propagated the primacy of socialized production. Women remained deeply interested in their domestic situation and notably family-oriented in career choice, opting for occupations that would allow them to harmonize family and employment.¹ The gulf narrowed, however, and from both directions: women and the SED adapted to one another's position and worldview. At first glance, ordinary women appear to have made all the adjustments. The GDR, as did most state-socialist lands, drew women of every marital and maternal status into wage labor and, hence,

¹ Thaa et al., 154–55, 157, 161, 167–68; Diemer, “‘neue Frau,’ ” 119, 122.

“socialized” them. East German women came to rate employment as integral to their sense of self.² The party-state appeared stationary relative to the women it moved but, in fact, it shifted its productivist stance. State adaptation occurred incrementally, by tweaking “woman policy” in an “affirmative-action” direction; recognizing the family as a determinant of the “socialist personality”; spending much money on services; channeling funds toward consumption and housing; and financing a generous welfare package. Many measures emerged as permanent policies and major leaps in expenditures only after 1971, but they originated in the 1950s and 1960s. Between 1945 and 1970, the book concludes, there unfolded a confrontation between unorganized women, with their domestic concerns, and the dictatorial party-state, with its productivist agenda, that vitally shaped the lives and self-perception of East German women and the policies and discourse of the SED—and contributed significantly to the fall of Communism in the GDR.

The pattern of continuity and change emerged out of a dynamic interaction between structures and agents, on the one hand, and a manipulative party-state and maneuvering women, on the other. The GDR was a dictatorship, and the SED set the terms of the encounter. Women reacted to state actions within structures created, supported, or condoned by the SED. I define “structure” as economic, political *and* domestic arrangements, as well as ideological convictions *and* cultural attachments. The fundamental tension between the SED state and women, the book posits, arose from the party-state’s contradictory relationship to these structures. Tension was generated, above all, by subordination of all things domestic to a production-based understanding of political economy and social transformation. The “classical socialist system” had an “ambivalent” relationship to the family, notes János Kornai.³ This ambivalence arose from Stalinist ideology’s indifference to domestic needs and desires, combined with the Stalinist economy’s dependence on the material and emotional labors performed by the nuclear family.⁴ Orthodox Stalinists, including the SED, squeezed consumption and exploited unpaid domestic labor to accumulate capital for investment in production.⁵ The SED aimed also to mobilize the wage labor of mothers of young children, while promoting high fertility and trying to keep access to birth control from women.

The domestic structure that the Communist state exploited was, basically, the family it inherited in 1945, a family forged by cultural tradi-

² Thaa et al., 173–74.

³ Kornai, 106–7. Also see Thaa et al., 25–27, 49.

⁴ Thaa et al.; Heitlinger, *Sex Inequality*, 194.

⁵ Capitalist societies exploit the unpaid domestic labor of women; market theorists, too, denigrate its economic significance. See Boydston; Hauser, e.g., 24.

tions, capitalism, the Third Reich, and war. The SED did not attempt to transform domestic arrangements, whether understood as family labor (the totality of work and care performed in the family) or gender relations (the division of domestic labors). The neglect of the domestic was not just pragmatic, but also philosophical, resting on the assumption that the family was of secondary social significance. Communists recognized, certainly, that women's oppression was grounded in the patriarchal family. They supported civic and social equality for women and, in power, eliminated the legal privileges of husbands and fathers. They believed, however, that female emancipation and familial change depended fundamentally on woman's participation in wage labor. Herbert Warnke, the head of the East German trade union federation (FDGB), summarized this viewpoint in 1952: "The equality of women is rooted in her place in production. In those places that woman is kept away from production or where she seeks to realize an ideal that keeps her out of production, there she remains dependent on man, her so-called provider."⁶ As wage workers, women would gain autonomy, cast off their parochial concerns, and become class-conscious. Communists, in sum, approached the "woman question" from a progressive standpoint. They were, however, antifeminist, for feminism attributed women's oppression to men, not to class society.⁷

Early Marxists recognized that woman could not realize her productive potential unless she was freed from domestic drudgery. A socialized economy, exclaimed Friedrich Engels, August Bebel, and V.I. Lenin, would liberate her by transferring most consumption, child care, and housework out of the home and into the socialized sector.⁸ Three points require emphasis here. First, Communists denied social meaning to domestic work. Housework contained no emancipatory potential because it was unwaged, private, individualized, unproductive, and, by their definition, unskilled; it did not function as real *labor*. Nor did they attribute much significance to the emotional work of the family in developing character.⁹ Second, they premised the socialization of housework and consumption on the prior transformation of the relations of production. Socialized wage labor, production, and workers would, over time, mechanically and independently transcend private unwaged labor, consumption, and housewives. Third, they did not see a redistribution of

⁶ SAPMO-BArch, DY34/21507, IG Bergbau, Konferenz zur Verbesserung der Gewerkschaftsarbeit unter den Frauen . . . 2.11.52, Protokoll, 7.

⁷ See Buehler, 14–16, 30; Diemer, " 'neue Frau' "; Hauser, 24, 142–43; Nickel, "Mitgestalterinnen," 234–35.

⁸ Heitlinger, "Marxism," 10–11.

⁹ Dölling, "Bewusstsein," 26; Heitlinger, "Marxism," 11, 15.

labor within the family as an interim, much less a long-term, solution, for reapportionment would not decrease the total claim of the household on members' time, effort, and attention.¹⁰ Redistribution would, instead, constitute a step backward, burdening men with the repetitive everydayness of the home's routines and the petty, even frivolous, concerns of consumption. After the Russian Revolution, several Soviet Communists had envisioned communalization of the household or socialization of the family, not just displacement of its work to socialized services.¹¹ By the 1940s, however, influential German Communists, like their Russian and Eastern European comrades, had abandoned this revolutionary impulse.¹² The SED never officially questioned the nuclear family as the form of domestic life under socialism.

The ideological justification for ignoring family structures was linked to political interest. A program of private transformation might have alienated male proletarians, the social base of Communism. The German Communist party (KPD) consistently advocated women's rights in the 1920s. Yet the KPD remained a predominantly male organization that celebrated the ideal Communist worker as brawny, tough, and devoted to "masculine" organized activities such as soccer, strikes, and street-fighting.¹³ The KPD's commitment to political struggle, self-abnegation, and disciplined cooperation was more than an abstract worldview. German Communists had battled the rise of National Socialism, resisted the Third Reich, fought alongside the Spanish Loyalists, suffered in Nazi concentration camps, and contributed to the Soviet cause in World War II.¹⁴ They *lived* their politics and believed that everyone else—rescued from capitalism and correctly educated—would live Communist politics as well.

The neglect of the family rested, finally, on the psychological bedrock of self-serving bias.¹⁵ Virtually every leading Communist in the GDR and elsewhere was a man, and most were husbands and fathers. As they set out to build socialism after the turmoil of fascism and war, they benefited from the conventional, gendered division of domestic labor and were personally invested in the status quo, although they were oblivious to this conflict of interest. Steeped in the rationalistic assumptions of Marxism,

¹⁰ For a late statement of this position by a GDR academic who was critical of its failings on the "woman question," see Dölling, *Individuum*, 147–48.

¹¹ Goldman, *Women*, 43–57; Heitlinger, *Sex Inequality*, 80–84.

¹² Madison, 46–47; Heitlinger, *Sex Inequality*, 136; Haney, 62.

¹³ Weitz; Epstein, 32.

¹⁴ See short biographies in Epstein; Weitz; Grieder, *Leadership*; Leonhard; Landsman, *Demand*, e.g., 24–25, 49, 121.

¹⁵ Babcock and Loewenstein.

Communists profoundly underestimated the power of private desires—including their own—to resist “reform.”

However grounded, the effect of Communist denial of the independent significance of domestic relations was the same: the SED proceeded to socialize production and upend class relations, while leaving the organization of individual consumption and private gender relations basically as it was.¹⁶ The contradiction between brave new world and familiar home, and between dynamic production and stagnant consumption, generated ironic effects. The Plan’s initial starvation of consumption, and its later inability to satisfy consumer wishes, enhanced the material and affective importance of the family for its members. East Germans depended on a family unit that worked hard to compensate for scarce provisions, crummy clothing, crumbling housing, low wages and pensions, inadequate services, and the paucity of public welfare.¹⁷ The state’s exploitation of family labor and private networks of support impinged on women more directly and in more ways than on men: women organized consumption, a task that demanded much time, exertion, and ingenuity; women did the bulk of labor in a household that required much work; women bore and nurtured children; and women performed much of the care for infirm and aged relatives. A second set of ironic consequences was, thus, the continual reproduction of woman’s domestic role, the reinforcement of her orientation toward consumption, the home, children, and marriage, and the fortification of men’s assumption of the naturalness of women’s orientation. Men and women were, obviously, both immersed in the family and its survival. Both contested state policies that restricted consumption and their ability to raise their children. Male workers’ sense of themselves as breadwinners who should earn a “family wage” fueled their opposition to wage cuts and antagonism to the integration of women workers into better-paid occupations. Many husbands told wives how to run the household and rear the children. Men had much invested in the family. Nevertheless, they, women, and the SED treated consumption, reproduction, and the home as women’s affairs.

The interaction between private domesticity and socialized production produced a third ironic effect: the family generated needs and desires that the socialist economy could not satisfy. In contrast, the “social market” economies of West Germany and other Western countries could meet consumer desires, a capacity that surprised Communists, who had, after all, cut their political teeth on depression-era, pre-Keynesian assumptions about capitalism.¹⁸ In sum, the intermeshing of public upheaval and pri-

¹⁶ On the “ideological neglect” of consumption, see Landsman, *Demand*, esp. 86.

¹⁷ Kornai, 106–8; Thaa et al., 97–98.

¹⁸ Landsman, *Demand*, 9–10.

vate continuity paradoxically strengthened popular interest in the nuclear family, in individual consumption, in conventional gendered personas, and in things “over there.”

The Stalinist economy, of course, did modify private lives. The family and public gender norms changed as married mothers entered the labor force in large numbers and became less willing to perform hard labor at home. The structures of wage labor altered the family but, mediated through women’s decisions, mainly in ways the SED did not like, such as a rising divorce rate, declining fertility, and growing demands for time-saving household technologies. Party and state officials began to fret about such unexpected tendencies in the late 1950s, as the GDR was plagued by a vexing scarcity of labor, owing to the inefficiencies of every command economy and the hemorrhaging of workers to the West that affected only the GDR. Like every Stalinist economy, the GDR depended on the mobilization of new sources of labor to maintain rapid growth.¹⁹ The SED became eager to improve the productivity of *current* workers by raising skill levels. Looking ahead, the party leadership saw the need for more and better-educated children who would become the *next generation* of workers. The insatiable appetite of state-socialist structures for more and higher-quality labor, now and in the future, concentrated attention on women: housewives constituted the only remaining pool of non-employed labor; women workers composed by far the larger pool of unskilled labor; women bore all the babies; mothers did the lion’s share of child rearing; and wives performed most housework. The party became more alert to the significance of domestic matters as the weight they loaded onto women began to drag against its production and reproduction goals.²⁰

The operation of structures, even Communist structures, is always attenuated by the behavior of human agents. The SED, of course, might be seen as a single-minded agent and the GDR as its monolithic extension. As First Secretary of the Politburo, the ultra-Stalinist Walter Ulbricht held the Politburo in a tight grip; the Politburo, in turn, controlled the SED, the state, and the economy. Ulbricht’s extraordinary power notwithstanding, the party-state did not act as a unified ego. Cleavages ran between the Plan and its implementation. Inside “the” state, each ministry pursued its particular priorities and pressed for more resources.²¹ Inside “the”

¹⁹ Kornai, 204, 211, 214–15.

²⁰ For a similar point, see Hockerts, “Grundlinien,” 519; Helwig, “Einleitung,” 15; Laatz, 182.

²¹ Landsman, *Demand*; Stitzel, *Fashioning*. Also see Hoffmann, *Aufbau*, esp. 545; Hockerts, “Grundlinien,” 521. For this argument applied to state-socialism in general, see Kornai, 419–20.

party, leading members did not always agree about which line to toe in any one political or economic crisis.²² Officials in the “mass organizations,” such as trade unions and the women’s league, did not smoothly transmit the program to members. At the lower rungs of the state, SED, and mass organizations, officials had considerable contact with ordinary citizens. Functionaries relayed up to higher authorities what they heard, acting not only as spies, but as intermediaries. They were susceptible to pressure because they lived in East German society and shared many of its cultural norms. Officials also instrumentalized the opinions of “workers,” “the people,” or “women” in order to gain resources for their particular projects. Last but not least, individual East Germans navigated and, indeed, negotiated among institutional interests, trying to play this state bureaucrat against that political functionary, that economic manager against this trade union official.²³

Ordinary women struggled as earnestly as men to locate small levers of influence. Female workers opposed production and wage policies, although they did so less adroitly than men, for women were less experienced on the shop floor, had few patrons in shop floor organizations, and were, therefore, more easily intimidated by pressure from above. In matters of reproduction, consumption, and the family, in contrast, women looked back on eons of experience and knew how to cull information and garner support from private networks. When it came to everyday life, they knew what had to be done and did not shy from speaking out or acting on this conviction. East German women articulated, in the main, “female consciousness,” a perspective arising from women’s shared sense of a special obligation to sustain life and from their acceptance of gendered responsibilities. Such consciousness, the historian Temma Kaplan has suggested, draws upon women’s determination to do right by their families, but it can motivate participation in riots, protests, and industrial unrest.²⁴

Without the right to challenge the SED in public, much less to organize, East German women resisted its plans through daily and individual behaviors. Between 1945 and 1948, when the political situation was fluid, women protested postwar dearth at every meeting they attended. In the 1950s, mothers complained about teachers, schools, and infant health care. Women, especially farmers’ wives, attended church and supported church-affiliated women’s groups. Wives resisted pressures to enter wage labor. Employed mothers missed work, changed jobs, and lamented insufficient and poor-quality institutional child care. Mothers protested

²² See Epstein; Grieder, *Leadership*, esp. 211–12.

²³ For similar interpretations of state-society relations, see cites in footnote 41.

²⁴ Kaplan, “Female Consciousness.”

the quantity and quality of housing, food, and children's clothing. Housewives clamored for household appliances. Young women snubbed GDR-made fabrics and fashions. Older wives contested the liberalization of divorce law. Unmarried women questioned their exclusion from a paid monthly housework day for women workers. Women workers laid down their tools to protest wage cuts. In the 1960s, as the majority of married mothers entered employment, new strategies emerged: full-time employed wife-mothers retreated into part-time work and refused to train for skilled work. Working women complained about gender inequality in the workplace. They demanded that managers and the SED address the household burdens that held women back. Women reduced their fertility rate. Pregnant women wrote letters demanding an abortion and protesting their lack of reproductive rights. Wives led a rise in the divorce rate. Throwing SED rhetoric about women's emancipation back at the state, women charged that they could not realize their productive potential. Whether they pulled against change or pushed to speed it up, women contested the official disdain for private matters. Although they almost always acted as individuals, the barrage of atomized words and deeds effectively demonstrated that domestic situations, family worries, consumer needs, and individual desires mattered and, indeed, deeply affected women's ability to hold a full-time job, willingness to qualify for skilled work, and readiness to bear another child.

Female functionaries in the SED, trade unions, women's league, and state bureaucracy arbitrated between ordinary women and the party-state. Women Communists typically toed the line but, especially in the late 1940s and again in the 1960s, they sometimes represented women's point of view with brio. They identified with women, intimately understood their structural disadvantages vis-à-vis men, and were appalled by the blatant misogyny they witnessed in the countryside, on the shop floor, and among male SED functionaries. They also used women's issues and complaints to gain some leverage within the patriarchal hierarchies of factories, unions, and party. Ordinary women found another sometime ally, sometime adversary in ordinary men. As workers, consumers, husbands, and fathers, men frequently supported women's complaints about consumption and reproductive policies. Simultaneously, though, men protested the state's efforts to introduce women into "male" occupations. Husbands often opposed their wives taking a job or pressured them to work part-time. The typical husband did not alter private habits to accommodate an employed wife. Workplace tensions eased as men grew accustomed to women's presence in industry and as they realized that women would rarely rise to high positions in the workplace. Private gender tensions did not relax over time, although, to paraphrase Tolstoy, the unhappy family became unhappy in a different way.

From early on, the contradictions within state policies and the popular maneuvering around those policies combined to force incremental adjustments to production goals. In 1948 the SED opened a state-run department store that sold more, better, and higher-priced goods as an enticement to higher productivity. State policy pitched in a consumerist direction after the workers' uprising of June 1953, although investment soon veered back toward production. In the later 1950s and the 1960s, the compromises became bigger, though they remained fragmentary and subject to retraction. The state adjusted hours of employment and modified training programs so women could qualify for skilled labor. It increased production of household appliances to rationalize the private home. Consumer industries tried to produce clothes and household goods that women would buy. Issues that had been utterly marginal, indeed, alien to the class-struggle worldview of the German, or any, Communist party swam into the consciousness of the party elite: consumer desires, marital conflict, domestic violence, the household division of labor, sexual satisfaction, birth control, the difficulties of large families, child development, adolescent angst, all the allegedly petty problems of everyday life that Communists had believed would evaporate after production was socialized. Social scientists and medical experts began to deliberate about reproductive issues, the family's psychological and physical health, and social reform.²⁵ The party tolerated a normalization and even humanization of public discourse and symbolism. Films, novels, and party slogans began fitfully to downplay political narratives and revolutionary struggle in favor of personal dramas and daily conflicts. Discourse deemphasized the heroic future relative to a comfortable here-and-now. In sum, policy and rhetoric were incrementally and unintentionally, but demonstrably, domesticated.²⁶

None of these adjustments righted the wrongs of Stalinist productionism: inability to satisfy consumers' needs and desires; economic inefficiencies; and labor shortages. There never occurred a rethinking of gender relations or their subordinate place in the real and ideal hierarchy of social relations in the GDR. In 1971, nonetheless, a combination of faltering productivity, falling fertility, and flack over consumption prompted a change of leadership and a change of course. Erich Honecker replaced Ulbricht as First Secretary of the Politburo. Under Honecker, the Politburo greatly accelerated the redistribution of resources toward consumption and welfare. Ulbricht had lunged in that direction in the 1960s, only to retreat back into productivist orthodoxy. Honecker made the turn and did not look back. His new course reordered Stalinist priorities without

²⁵ Winkler, "Forschung."

²⁶ Feinstein, 6–8, 135, 175, 217.

acknowledging the significance of the reversal; rather than insist that a better standard of living would follow from increased productivity, the media now argued that an improved style of life would generate higher production and reproduction. In typically grandiose language, Honecker dubbed this program the “unity of social and economic policy.”²⁷ The slogan was not just empty rhetoric. The “social” emerged as a key category of state policy in the form of much higher levels of state expenditure on consumer goods, housing, pensions, marriage credits, universal child care, and benefits for employed mothers. In addition, women gained reproductive rights, despite the state’s desperate desire for higher fertility.

The climb in consumption and welfare expenditures did not produce the wished-for ascent in production. Rather, productive investment declined relatively and, eventually, absolutely. The “unity of social and economic policy” could be held together only with ever bigger loans from the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), sending the GDR into heavy debt. The original productivist worldview was as eviscerated as the coffers of the state. “*Soziale Sicherheit und Geborgenheit*” (social welfare and security), the main legitimating claim of the Honecker era, was a homey justification of socialism that the First Secretary incessantly invoked, even after he fell from power.²⁸ The message contrasted sharply with the class-struggle vision and revolutionary language of the KPD and the young SED.²⁹

Women’s domestic orientation also seeped into the perspective of ordinary men. By the 1980s, for men as well as women, “private reproductive interests stood at the middle of the [popular] organization of life.” In surveys, women *and* men ranked “a harmonious family life” as their primary life goal, rated the satisfaction of private consumer desires as a central concern of daily life, and demonstrated a “notable home-centeredness in defining their lives.”³⁰ The SED’s contradictory policies and structures simultaneously reinforced and thwarted people’s consumer desires and domestic orientation. Initially, compromise helped stabilize relations between state and society. Over time, however, economic and ideological bankruptcy from above, and private dissatisfactions from below, eroded the foundations of Communism and contributed mightily to its collapse.

The domestic had taken its revenge. This reckoning did not signify a victory for egalitarian gender relations. It did demonstrate, however, that domestic structures—the family’s material and emotional labors, gender relations, consumption needs, and private desires—shape society and eco-

²⁷ Steiner, “Frustration 25; Bouvier, 68, 70–71; Stitzel, “Fashioning,” 509; Thaa et al., 53–55.

²⁸ Bouvier, 295–96.

²⁹ Thaa et al., 64; Maier, 28–29, 57.

³⁰ Thaa et al., 154–55, 167–69.

conomic relations as fundamentally as vice versa. The power of the domestic was communicated to the SED state gradually but persistently, and to overwhelming cumulative effect, by the everyday actions, family decisions, consumer choices, arguments, complaints, and occasional open protest of, above all, East German women.

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Since the fall of Communism, scholars of the GDR have debated how to characterize the SED state. Among proposed terms, prominent candidates (and their sponsors) include: modern dictatorship (Jürgen Kocka), educational state (Dorothea Wierling), commodious dictatorship (Günter Grass), tutelary state (Rolf Henrich), provisioning dictatorship (Beatrix Bouvier), and welfare dictatorship (Konrad Jarausch).³¹ Each pair says something true about the GDR of the Honecker era, although “welfare dictatorship” best encapsulates, I would argue, its social content and authoritarian form. Every characterization, however, is inadequate, for the GDR was an elaborate institutional entity that existed for four decades. The noun in each pair describes the GDR’s state-form, which did not alter between 1949 and 1989, whereas the qualifying adjective refers to state policy, which did change. The GDR was always a dictatorship, but it *became* a welfare dictatorship.³² No term indicates when or why that occurred. No single modifying adjective can convey, either, the complexity of state policy or its special features at any one time. No description, with the possible exception of Bouvier’s, communicates the catering to individual consumption that accompanied welfare measures. None notes the heavily maternalist content of the welfare package.

I offer no alternative terminology. I hope, rather, to illuminate the process by which a superideological, production-obsessed, future-oriented, male-dominated Communist dictatorship came to implement a welfare policy with a maternalist core and notable consumerist features, framed in a “secularized” and domesticated language of “real-existing socialism.”³³ My argument emphasizes the domestic causes of this transition in a triple sense: it privileges internal GDR structures and processes, private gender relations, and home-based labor and consumption. These interrelated factors, it posits, are necessary components of any convincing interpretation of the history of the GDR. They are not sufficient causes, but they justify a study that concentrates on them. The analysis proceeds from

³¹ Pollack, “Modernization,” 56; Jarausch, “Welfare Dictatorship,” 60; Bouvier, 329, 335.

³² Andrew Port makes a similar point. See Port, “Conflict,” 614. Also see Thaa et al., 5.

³³ Thaa et al., 54.

several additional assumptions. The mechanism of change was a dynamic, if unequal, relationship between state and society. The basic framework of this relationship emerged between 1945 and 1970 and was decisively shaped by the interaction between socialized production and family-based reproduction. Women carried much of the burden of this interaction from the side of society. Hence, women's relationship to the state is the focus of the book.

The book rests on evidence I gathered in GDR archives, but it also synthesizes the insights, methods, and evidence of social science and historical literature on the GDR, on post-1945 Communism, and on gender relations in industrial societies and welfare states. Within the scholarship on the GDR, a small but substantial subfield is feminist work on the "woman question." The feminist literature characterizes the GDR as a patriarchal state marked by a wide gap between emancipatory rhetoric and discriminatory practice. Feminist scholars have pointed out the contradictions within an ideology that advocated women's equality through employment, while leaving her to perform the bulk of unpaid labor in the home.³⁴ Communist policies, most studies acknowledge, did improve women's educational, financial, and professional situation relative to 1945.³⁵ Written largely by political scientists, sociologists, and demographers, feminist research has focused on state decisions and their impact on trends in marriage, divorce, and fertility, on the one hand, and on educational patterns, workforce participation, and SED membership, on the other.³⁶ I hope to enrich this literature with a history of gender relations between 1945 and 1970 that touches on every major aspect of state policy vis-à-vis adult women as well as on the main facets of their lives, and relates these categories to each other. The book corrects several biases in the feminist literature: a schematic periodization of woman's policy; segregation of woman's policy from general policy; assignment of causal power almost exclusively to structures and the SED; and neglect of the lived experience of women at home, on the job, and in stores.

Most work on the "woman question" puts forward a two-stage model of woman's policy that hinges neatly at the changing of the guard from Ulbricht to Honecker. Ulbricht followed, the scholarship argues, a "woman's production policy," whereas Honecker deemphasized women's integration into production in favor of maternalist measures intended to

³⁴ See, e.g., Dölling, "Bewusstsein."

³⁵ A positive assessment can be found in Rosenberg, 136–38, 148–49.

³⁶ See, e.g., Külke, "Berufstätigkeit"; Gast, *Rolle der Frau*; Helwig, *Familie und Beruf*; Obertreis; Roesler, "Industry,"; Helwig and Nickel; Bütow and Stecker; Trappe; Gerhard; Zachmann, *Mobilisierung*.

make it easier for women to combine employment and family.³⁷ Feminist analyses, then, see 1971 as the watershed year. They focus not on the origins, but on the consequences of Honecker's maternalist turn. Although broadly convincing, this periodization collapses the contradictory and evolving policies of the Ulbricht years into an intentional and linear trajectory from which Honecker suddenly diverged. This dichotomous chronology ignores the pronounced (negative) pronatalism of the 1950s that tempered Ulbricht's production policy. Authors overlook the origins of the transition to positive natalism and reproductive rights in the 1960s. This perspective tends to downplay the significance of rising state interest in the family under Ulbricht. The literature is also state fixated, assuming that the impetus for change came from above and was structurally motivated. It tends to treat women as passive victims or recipients of state policy, rather than as (constrained) agents.

The feminist literature tends to isolate the "woman question," rather than explore the dynamic interaction between gender relations and social and economic development. It fails to tie changes in "woman's policy" to the question of consumption. Honecker's maternalism appears unrelated even to his broader social policy. These objections do not apply to all authors. In a book published two decades ago and based on printed sources, Gesine Obertreis astutely analyzed the emergence of family policy in the 1960s. The policy historian Horst Laatz attributes the revival of state interest in social science research to concern about women and the family.³⁸ Above all, social historians of women have begun to redress the structural bias in the literature on gender relations.³⁹ Social histories have focused largely on women as wage workers. In her superb comparative history of the "housework day" in East and West Germany, however, Carola Sachse tightly links employment and domesticity, showing that women workers struggled around wages and benefits but related them to their domestic role.⁴⁰

Social historians of women have joined a strong current of state-society studies that has invigorated the historiography of the GDR since the opening of its archives in 1990. Social historians reject the classic version of the totalitarian thesis and assume that society was differentiated, active, and even effective, despite being atomized, repressed, and oppressed.⁴¹

³⁷ See, e.g., Buehler, 28; Bouvier, 250–52; Schulz, 126; Koch and Knoebel, 94–95. For a "softer" version of this thesis, see Hampele, 287.

³⁸ Obertreis; Laatz. Also see Helwig, *Familie und Beruf*; Trappe, 63; Schmidt, "Grundzüge," 274, 277, 284.

³⁹ See, e.g., essays in Budde, ed., *Frauen arbeiten*; Ansorg, "Leitungskader"; Ansorg, "Strukturwandel"; Schüle, "Spinne"; Budde, *Intelligenz*.

⁴⁰ Sachse, *Hausarbeitstag*. Also see Heineman, *Difference*.

⁴¹ For an overview of recent debates about totalitarianism and *Alltagsgeschichte* in the GDR, see Faulenbach, esp. 19, 21–23. For works that incorporate social history, see Bessel

Using Alf Lüdtke's concept of *Eigensinn* (self-constructed meaning), they define popular resistance and human agency more broadly than have political historians of the GDR. East Germans, social histories have shown, contested state policy in numerous ways: passive resistance, letters of complaint, flight to the FRG, individual sabotage, work stoppages, small protests, and a massive strike wave. These resistances, they argue, made a difference, causing the state to modify its policies at the point of production, attend to consumption, and revise the Plan. They point, above all, to the workers' rebellion of June 1953, which forced policy changes at the time and haunted the SED hierarchy ever after. Thus, they challenge a periodization of the history of the GDR that overemphasizes the Ulbricht-Honecker divide.⁴²

This book, too, recognizes the effects on state policy of the massive popular unrest in 1953. It places, however, as much emphasis on the corrosive effect of everyday evasions and resistances, including decisions about consumption, marriage, reproduction, the care of children, job training, and hours of work.⁴³ It sets these choices in gendered context. Apart from the historians of women among them, social historians generally analyze society from one angle: social class. They do not consider how class interest interacted with gender roles.⁴⁴ They presume, as did the SED, the primacy of employment and production over domestic structures and consumption as motivations of popular behavior. When the SED socialized productive relations, they argue, it "remodeled" society and "radically reshaped the social structure." The failure to transform the private sphere goes unmentioned. The family barely registers in social histories.⁴⁵ Social historians of the GDR rarely ask how private gender relations or the organization of the family may have influenced workers' demands and actions. In sum, social historians incorporate agency into a model of change over time but define identity in class terms, see agents as workers (not consumers, spouses, parents, or women), treat

and Jessen; Fulbrook; Hübner, *Konsens*; Humm; Jarausch, *Dictatorship*; Kaelble, Kocka, and Zwahr; Lindenberger, *Herrschaft*; Major and Osmond; Naimark; Niethammer, von Plato, and Wierling; Port, "Conflict"; Ross; Weitz.

⁴² Kopstein, 11; Ross, 57–59; Hübner, *Konsens*; Merl, 182; Schmidt, "Grundzüge," 284.

⁴³ For a similar perspective, see Budde, *Intelligenz*, 15.

⁴⁴ This neglect continues despite Kathleen Canning's powerful plea for the significance of gender in German labor history. See Canning, "Gender." A minority of general social histories of the SBZ or the GDR do incorporate women and gender: Fulbrook; Naimark; Niethammer, von Plato, and Wierling; Port, "Conflict"; Weitz.

⁴⁵ See, e.g., Jarausch, "Gegengesellschaft," 15; Martin Sabrow, "Konsensdiktatur," 89–90. Quotes are from Pollack, "Modernization," 33, 37. Pollack mentions "the power of persistence and the inherent dynamism of individual social sub-systems" (39) but does not identify the "sub-systems."

industrial relations as the stimulus of resistance, and privilege the shop floor as its site.

Recent consumer studies have pioneered a multidimensional approach to the history of social and policy change in the GDR. Scholars in this new field of research assume an interactive model of state-society relations, treat consumption as a basic constituent of culture and economy, and offer a gendered analysis of consumption and SED discourse about consumption. Recognizing that women were the main shoppers and shapers of taste, historians of consumption argue that women contributed centrally to the partial “consumerization” of the state-socialist economy.⁴⁶ I integrate this perspective into the story told here.

Historians tend to see the place and time we study as unique. East Germany, political historians point out, was an atypical industrial country because it was a Communist dictatorship. It was exceptional among Communist lands, they add, because it was a “half-country” and had an especially abject relationship with the Soviet Union. Social and economic historians also resort readily to explanations of SED policies that highlight its slavish imitation of the USSR, its anxious monitoring of events in fellow satellite countries, and its doomed competition with the Federal Republic of Germany.⁴⁷ Rather than investigate the structural similarities that may have motivated comparable policies, historians often assume that the SED always willfully copied the policies of some other, more autonomous, state. Comparative studies of East and West Germany have begun to correct this bias. In the case of gender relations, the German-German comparison has produced illuminating studies of marital motivations, consumer culture, youth culture, and the housework day.⁴⁸ Seldom, though, have historians (as opposed to social scientists) considered the GDR in comparative Communist context or, alternatively, as one among other industrialized societies.⁴⁹

This book is not a comparative study, but its argument has been inspired by both theoretical and empirical analyses of postwar Stalinism. The interpretive argument that has most influenced mine is Kornai's. The

⁴⁶ Kaminsky, *Kaufrausch*; Merkel, *Utopie*; Pence, “You”; Stitzel, *Fashioning*; Crew, “Introduction.” Literary critics and historians of culture, too, incorporate a gendered analysis into a dynamic interpretation of state/society relations. See, e.g., Feinstein; Hosek. Authors of several economic histories recognize the significance of consumption to the changing policies of the party elite but do not discuss gender or the family. See Kopstein; Landsman, *Demand*; Steiner, *Plan*.

⁴⁷ Steiner, “Frustration,” 25; Merl, 183; Wettig, 383–4; Bouvier, 79; Kaiser, “Einfluss,” 133.

⁴⁸ Heinemann, *Difference*; Pence, “Rations”; Poigert; Wierling, “Generations”; Sachse, *Hausarbeitstag*.

⁴⁹ Comparative “parallel” studies have begun to appear. See Brenner and Heumos.

interaction between the private family and socialized production contributed significantly, he contends, to the gradual deviation from classic Stalinism in every Eastern European land. A partial socialization of the family occurred over time, but its effects, he suggests, differed less in kind than in degree from the commercialization of consumption, housework, and child rearing that has transpired in advanced market economies since the 1950s.⁵⁰ Empirical studies of gender policies and domestic relations in postwar Eastern Europe and the USSR reveal similar contradictions as those in the GDR. The same studies, conducted mainly by feminist scholars, trace comparable consumerist dilutions of hard-line productivist policies after 1960. Every state-socialist land also implemented social and family policies with a maternalist core in the 1970s.⁵¹ Moscow did not always set the pace in these changes.⁵² In some policies, East Berlin led the way and, certainly, Honecker put together a more generous welfare package than did Brezhnev or Gorbachev.

Many scholars would attribute the size of the welfare package in the GDR to rivalry with the FRG, a developed welfare state by 1970. The GDR's evolution toward welfare policies paralleled, in fact, similar trends in most European states, though the timing and form of its welfare policy reflected state-socialist structures and Stalinist ideology. To make sense of these comparable tendencies across the Iron Curtain, I have turned to feminist interpretations of the Western welfare state. Mainstream explanations attribute the rise of welfare states to a political imperative within democratic countries to temper the class inequalities of classical capitalism. As does the typical state-society study of the GDR, this interpretation of the welfare state treats "class" as the "only relevant social division and only possible basis for a politics of 'interest.'" ⁵³ Susan Pedersen and others have challenged this assumption, contending that, as the traditional provider of welfare, nurture, and unpaid labor, the family "warrants consideration as an independent variable." Changes inside the family, suggests Jane Lewis, influenced state policy, not only vice versa. The wife-mother, she adds, typically initiated familial change. Hence, women's private decisions indirectly produced political consequences.⁵⁴ Feminist studies of the modern welfare state extend the insights of a rich historical scholarship

⁵⁰ Kornai, 106–8. I have been influenced, as well, by Katherine Verdery's argument that struggles around consumption profoundly affected the evolution of state-socialism. See Verdery.

⁵¹ Heitlinger, *Sex Inequality*; Lapidus; Haney; Ingham, Domański, and Ingham.

⁵² See, e.g., Reid, "Cold War."

⁵³ Pedersen, 5–7, 12, 20; Lewis, 160, 167. Also Gordon; Koven and Michel.

⁵⁴ Quote is from Lewis, 161–62. Also see Pedersen, 12.

that explores the intricate push-pulls among the family economy, domestic work, consumption, industrialization, and state decisions from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries in Europe and North America.⁵⁵ The theories and findings of this sophisticated body of feminist research have shaped my conceptualization of the dynamic evolution of everyday lives, women's labors, and state policy in the GDR.

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The book's organization is chronological as a whole and thematic within each period. A chapter on 1945–49 and a chapter on 1961–71 bracket five chapters that cover 1949–61, the period from the formation of the GDR in October 1949 to the construction of the Berlin Wall in August 1961. The first chapter discusses the many-sided confrontation between Communists and women under the relatively free, if also chaotic, conditions of the postwar era. Each chapter on the 1950s treats a major area of policy that affected women. These areas are presented in order of state priority: politics, production, reproduction, consumption, and family. The book's focus on the "long" 1950s is motivated, first, by that decade's character. Between 1949 and 1961, the SED created the basic structures and set the fundamental lines of development of the GDR's economy and society. These transformations provoked considerable resistance. The quality of the documentary record is the second reason for the focus on the 1950s. In abundant reports, (predominantly female) party, state, and union officials wrote about women's views and actions, the activities of SED women, male behavior, and tensions within state-party policy. The documentation is specific, descriptive, and revealing. Like other students of East German history, I was struck by the "honesty" and "richness" of reports from the 1950s, in contrast to their formulaic and "ritualistic" tenor in the 1960s.⁵⁶ However revealing, most documents were generated by officials and must be used critically. Surprisingly, their partiality does not always lean toward the "rose-colored" picture. Memoranda and reports by women functionaries often emphasize misogyny, negative incidents, failures of SED or trade union policy, and women's disgust with conditions. Whatever the bias, I try to balance conclusions by drawing on other sources, such as statistics, citizens' letters of complaint, and interviews.

⁵⁵ Representative of a vast literature on Germany, France, and Great Britain: Quataert; Canning, "Gender"; Sachße, "Mothers"; Coffin; Finn.

⁵⁶ Allinson, 9; Ross, 184.

The final chapter focuses on what changed from the 1950s to the 1960s. Its weight tips more toward state policy than popular behavior. This shift reflects the decline in the quality of local reports. More positively, state policy gains attention because it became less heavy-handed, ideological, and single-minded, and more motivated by real social problems and even characterized by lively discussion among “experts” and experimental implementations of their recommendations.