

The Union of Consumer Cooperatives and the SED's Embryonic Educational and Ideological Systems in the Soviet Occupied Zone of Germany, 1945-1949

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Abstract: *In 1945/46, when there were still open and free elections in the Soviet Occupation Zone (Sowjetische Besatzungszone, SBZ), the KPD/SED made extensive efforts to encourage women to participate actively in politics. Eastern Germany's newly re-established consumer cooperatives (Konsumgenossenschaften) were among the mechanisms available to the régime to organize women. Accordingly, on 13th November 1946, Helmut Lehmann, a member of the SED-Politburo, gave the following instructions to the Konsum or the Union of Consumer Cooperatives of the GDR (a Mass-Organization with various political and economic mandates):*

The cooperative movement has been given a decisive role to fill with women, particularly housewives... These newly formed cooperatives have to ensure that women participate in public life. As such, we have to ensure that our ideology spreads to women, so that they are not confined to the narrow realms of their families, but that they also offer their services to the wider community.¹

Assessing the role of the Konsum in the political and ideological indoctrination of women, this paper is based on evidence from the Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR, but also synthesises various research methods and secondary literature. On the basis of this research, this paper will consider the following questions: What types of propaganda did the Konsum direct at women? Was the Konsum a success as a state Mass-Organisation (its official status in the state structure of the DDR)? What can we discern from the programme of study to which women were subjected in the cooperative schools?

This paper has two streams of argument and examination. First, it considers how the Union of Consumer Cooperatives (*Verband Deutscher Konsumgenossenschaften, Konsum*) functioned as an embryonic educational network in the Soviet Occupied



Zone of Germany (*Sowjetische Besatzungszone*, **SBZ**). Within the cooperative organisation's educational classes there was an evident transmission of cooperative ideology, Cold War politics, and the propaganda of the SED. Second, this paper considers the ways in which the *Konsum* functioned as an ideological tool of the ruling power in Soviet occupied Germany – the Socialist Unity Party (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, **SED**).² In effect, the *Konsum* became a relatively effective – to use Lenin's term – 'transmission-belt' of Soviet ideology, particularly to societal groups that were beyond the direct reach of the party. The state used cooperatives as a tool to further politicise everyday life – particularly in the realms of consumerism, female employment, female participation in politics, and consumer culture – in certain totalitarian ways. Nevertheless, in spite of the repressive, totalitarian nature of the state, it produced modernising tendencies with women, including education, joining the workforce and political participation. That is, the interesting and important thing about state involvement in the *Konsum* was the way it blended totalitarian indoctrination (presumably negative) with the beginnings of what could be interpreted as partial gender equality in East Germany (presumably positive).

Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski classify a totalitarian regime through six interrelated features: a single mass party typically led by a dictator, a totalising and revolutionary ideology, a system of terror directed at specific 'enemies of the regime', complete control of the propaganda apparatus, a weapons monopoly, and a centrally controlled economy.³ Friedrich and Brzezinski define totalitarianism as the state's successful control and planning of all areas of life on the basis of a binding ideology

through modern technical and organisational means. The authors describe totalitarianism as a theory:

that centers on the regime's efforts to remould and transform the human beings under its control in the image of its ideology... The theory holds that the 'essence' of totalitarianism is to be seen in such a regime's total control of the everyday life of its citizens, of its control, more particularly, of their thoughts and attitudes as well as their activities.⁴

However, claims of total control are – even in the most repressive of regimes – never fully realised. Still, the term totalitarian is useful for a historical study of the GDR, for it denotes the politicisation of everyday life and the idea that the state attempted to infuse ideology into every aspect of citizens' experiences, including education, work, and consumption. The word 'attempts' is important: the SED's style and system of rule indeed carried totalitarian overtones, especially in the state's infancy. Clearly, totalitarianism cannot explain every facet of life in the GDR. However, by using this terminology I hope to emphasise that the SED effectively politicised – or to use Soviet terminology, 'democratically centralised' – every component of the Union of the Consumer Cooperatives.

This paper rests on evidence gathered in Berlin's Archive of Political Parties and Mass- Organisations of East Germany (*Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR*). More specifically, I draw heavily from archival sources from various departments of the SED regime during its infancy, namely the

files of the Department of Trade and Provision (*Abteilung Handel und Versorgung*) and the SED's economic secretariat Paul Merker (*Sekretariat Paul Merker*). This evidence paints a vivid picture of the regime's use of the *Konsum* as a political tool for the purposes of garnering support for the emerging socialist political and economic institutions (i.e. indoctrination) from 1945 to 1949 in the SBZ. However, because of the one-sidedness of these sources, I can only speculate as to how the population reacted to this indoctrination.

The aim of this paper is to make a direct contribution to the understanding of the German cooperative movement during the Soviet occupation. There are limited numbers of secondary sources directly pertaining to the *Konsum*, particularly published sources in English. Andreas Ludwig at the Dokumentationszentrum Alltagskultur der GDR in Eisenhüttenstadt and Ina Merkel at the Philipps-Universität in Marburg have published multiple works pertaining to East German consumption that directly and indirectly deal with consumer cooperatives.⁵ However, Thomas Adam and Stefan Jaunich assert that 'in spite of their size and scale, an overview of the East German cooperative movement is not readily available, and the development of the cooperative system in the GDR remains largely terra incognita.'⁶ Jan Bösche echoed this observation by suggesting that 'there are many potential research possibilities through an examination of the role of the consumer cooperatives in the former GDR.'⁷ While these studies are helpful, and connect to important historical debates about the nature of East German society, the degree of 'totalitarian' control, and so on, it is surprising – given the *Konsum's* size and political importance – that very little academic study of the consumer cooperatives has yet been done in English.⁸ Moreover, the consumer cooperatives, which were founded

at the beginnings of the Soviet occupation, became ingrained in the economic, social, cultural, political, and gendered history of the GDR. It is my hope, therefore, that this paper will make an original contribution to these areas of East German historiography, as well as in the long and rich history of the German cooperative movement.

German cooperatives have traditional ties to education and the modernisation of Germany's town and cities. During the 1840s and 1850s, government officials presumed that this education might be subversive. Gradually, however, officials in Berlin came to the realisation that cooperatives offered opportunities to educate farmers, modernise agricultural endeavours, and strengthen rural communities. At the 1899 party conference of the SPD in Hanover, the party passed a resolution recognising the contribution of the consumer cooperatives as an educational tool of the working-class. Through cooperatives, the SPD hoped to educate the working-class in governance and administration.⁹ Prior to the First World War, there were already modernising tendencies within the German cooperatives, as middle-class reformers recognised the potential for cooperatives to improve the lives of women. Traditionally, women were involved in cooperatives as members, customers, employees, or supporters and facilitators of men's involvement. Through these various roles, women were implicitly able to influence the economic and political policies of these cooperatives, but it was difficult for them to participate in cooperative governance. In fact, in the conservative Raiffeisen cooperatives, women were either discouraged or simply not permitted membership. On the other hand, the more liberal Schulze-Delitzsch cooperatives permitted female membership, although women were not allowed a seat in meetings. In the urban consumer cooperatives,

active female participation was promoted and some women rose to prominence within them. Fairbairn describes this inclusion of women as 'innovative, progressive, and modern.'¹⁰ As I hope to make evident in this paper, these progressive tendencies and modernising traditions of the German cooperative movement remained intact in the SBZ and may have actually increased on account of the SED's attempted totalitarian rule.

During the Weimar period (1918-1933), there were considerable changes in social relations, particularly with women, which were reflected in the cooperatives at this time. Customarily, cooperatives functioned within the gendered social context of the time, in which working-class families divided labour – that is, women were responsible for consumption and for managing the family budget. Cooperatives guaranteed fair prices, unadulterated food, serviceable household items, and a patronage refund. For that reason, women have an understandably long history of being drawn to cooperatives as shoppers, and cooperators sought to ensure their loyalty as consumers and members. Furthermore, cooperation's socialist, egalitarian heritage enabled women to participate in their power structures and governance, as well as influence cooperative policies.¹¹ While women were the traditional customers of consumer cooperatives, the ranks of senior management were almost exclusively dominated by men. But by the late 1920s, there was a growing sense among cooperative leaders that the movement was beginning to stagnate, and changing gender roles in society led many of them to believe that the increased inclusion of women might eliminate this stagnation. From 1923 to 1931, an increasing number of women's groups at the local and regional level provided a platform for the increased participation of women. Owing to these groups and educational opportunities,

women attained a greater presence in leadership positions at local cooperatives. In fact, between 1923 and 1926 the number of women in upper management in local cooperative boards quadrupled. Additionally, the cooperative movement also began to sponsor educational programmes for women and activities for mothers with children. In the context of these times, these were progressive steps.¹²

While the 1920s had been a promising period for consumer cooperatives, the emergence of Nazism in the following decade created a state that was ideologically opposed to them. On the basis of this ideological opposition, as well as the Nazi organisational *Führerprinzip* (appointment of leadership from above), the Nazis gradually appropriated consumer cooperative property under the authority of the German Labour Front. Throughout this process, the underground SPD used the consumer cooperatives as centers for quiet resistance to Nazi encroachment. However, by 1935, the remaining consumer cooperatives were dissolved and converted into state-run or private distribution centers. During the final stages of the destructive war brought by Nazism, the process of rebuilding the consumer cooperatives began in the bombed-out cities of Germany.¹³

During the reconstruction of this organisation, it appears that the party gave women some access to power. That is to say, with the onset of the Soviet Occupation in May 1945, the German Communists immediately began to seize control of political, economic, and cultural institutions, including the once independent consumer cooperatives. To assist in the party's effort to indoctrinate women, Helmut Lehmann, a member of the SED-Politburo, gave the following instructions to the *Konsum* on 13th November 1946:

The cooperative movement has been given a decisive role to fill with women, particularly housewives. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to implement the formation of housewife-committees in every sales-outlet. From these committees, propagandists for the cooperative movement have to emerge from the female ranks. With the aim of spreading party and cooperative ideology, the posts of the sub-party-organisations as well as the committees of the cooperative system should be primarily filled with women. In order for the party and the cooperatives to become successful, they have to ensure that women participate in public life. As such, we have to ensure that our ideology spreads to women, so that they are not confined to the narrow realms of their families, but that they also offer their services to the wider community.¹⁴

This quotation is evidence of the modernising tendencies of the SED and its Soviet ideology. It shows a willingness on the part of the regime to give women access to real power within this organisation, as well as breaking down the gender stereotype of women as the caretakers of the family.

In Soviet bloc states, Mass-Organisations were intended to act as 'transmission belts' through which the party could control, survey, indoctrinate, influence, and organise the population. On 10th June 1945, the SMAD issued its Second Decree or Order Number Two, permitting the establishment of Mass-Organisations in the SBZ, which were critical to spreading ideology and propaganda to members.¹⁵ With a rapidly expanding membership reaching 1,139,492 by August 1946, the party clearly

recognised the potential of the *Konsum* as a Mass-Organisation through which to spread its influence and ideology.¹⁶ For instance, as indicated in the SMAD Order 176, cooperatives were to integrate women into the emerging socialist order in the Soviet Zone through various means of propaganda. This marked a clear shift in the role of cooperatives from their traditional roles in the economic sphere to the ideological. This shift is particularly evident in official party documents, which indicate that as of 30th September 1947 in the SBZ, there were 230 consumer cooperatives, with 1,700,000 members, 7,017 sales outlets, and 414 owner-operated enterprises.¹⁷ Officially, according to the Guidelines of the SED for the re-establishment of the consumer cooperatives dated 24th August

1946:

The consumer cooperatives are a democratic organisation and must support the struggle of the anti-Fascist parties against Nazism, militarism and imperialism, as well as contribute to the overcoming of Nazi ideology and spreading of socialist ideas, especially to women.¹⁸

In a similar report from 22nd August 1946, the SED instructed the cooperatives to direct their attention to women. The report indicated that 'women must be compelled to make a contribution to the organs of the cooperatives. The women's committees will be expected to devote themselves to the deepening of the cooperative ideology amongst women.'¹⁹

The SED rapidly spread its influence and control throughout the *Konsum* by reorganising it in accordance with 'Democratic Centralist' (i.e. Leninist) organisational structures and principles. During this process of reorganisation and

ideological realignment, the SED inserted loyal cadres into leadership positions. As a result, former members and the influence of the Social Democratic Party (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*, **SPD**) were purged from the *Konsum*. Ultimately, this once independent mass workers' movement actually began to reflect the structures of the SED party/state. Moreover, the consumer cooperatives were not only subject to external pressure, but they also faced subjugation from within. For instance, after the formation of the SED through a merger of the SPD and KPD in April 1946, purges quickly followed that were intended to remove all suspect (i.e. Social Democratic) individuals from the *Konsum*. SED party bosses removed cooperators whom they deemed as too Social-Democratic or for having close connections with the West German cooperative organisations. With the transformation of the SED into a 'Party of the new Type' (i.e. Stalinist) in the summer of 1948, a number of SPD/SED functionaries of the cooperative leadership found themselves caught between the millstones of party proceedings. Ultimately, the SED succeeded in inserting its functionaries in to all cooperative leadership positions.²⁰ During the Great Leipzig show trial of 1949, many cooperative leaders with Social-Democratic ties were simply removed or imprisoned.²¹ In Leipzig, there was a complete expulsion of an entire generation of cooperative leaders on account of their affiliation with the SPD. Altogether, five board members, eight members of the Supervisory Board, five departmental leaders, two sales-outlet inspectors, as well as numerous employees were forcibly removed from their work while many others fled to the West. From 1948 to 1949, the SED removed any Social Democratic influence within the Leipzig consumer cooperative.²² The SED's takeover of the cooperatives was, among other aims, part of the party's effort to take over Mass-Organisations that once held Social Democratic influence, histories, and functions.

In order to ensure the realisation of 'democracy', 'progress', and 'peace', the cooperative advisory council determined that the establishment of a propaganda department was necessary in every cooperative. According to archival documents from 1947, the primary undertaking of the propaganda department was to bring about the development of democratic, cooperative, and political life.²³ The directors of the propaganda departments in the consumer cooperatives were responsible for implementing numerous SED political initiatives, including the construction of members departments according to their sex and professional grouping, such as workers, white-collar workers, the self-employed, farmers, independent tradesmen and businessmen, pensioners and senior citizens, and housewives. This also meant the employment of a full-time female secretary who was responsible for planning the formation of women's groups. Additionally, the *Konsum* directed its propaganda and recruitment efforts at women through meetings, press, radio, cinema, and amateur plays.²⁴

When shopping in cooperative stores, women were exposed to window-displays and posters promoting cooperative-political perspectives, as well as SED political slogans, which illustrated the party's intended totalitarian societal transformations and represented the objectives of the socialist planned economy.²⁵ The initial consumption experience in the consumer cooperatives was further politicised during the Cold War and the division of Germany. In fact, these displays often included a mix of political slogans in combination with desirable consumer products.²⁶ The message was clear: the Soviet system emerging in the SBZ was the more viable alternative. This message also reflected the widening fissure between the SBZ and

the Western Zones in the political, economic, and cultural realms. According to historian Katherine Pence, the display windows in the consumer cooperatives became the places in which the newly emerging East and West German societies competed.²⁷ State and *Konsum* functionaries were actively committed to the improvement of shop windows, for they believed that the political message of the SBZ was closely tied to them. Public officials from the government's economic departments, such as the Ministry for Trade and Provision and the party's economic departments supervised the development of these displays.²⁸ The SED together with the *Konsum* were moralising and politicising daily acts of consumption. As Donna Harsch, an American historian of East Germany, puts it, 'the act of shopping became ideologically charged.'²⁹

East Germans' dependence on the *Konsum* stores meant that its propaganda was continually present whenever consumers (mostly women) shopped in cooperative sales outlets. Female consumers often did not have a choice between the *Konsum*, the state-run *Handelsorganization* (HO), or private retailers. For the majority of Germans living in the SBZ, the *Konsum* was the only retail option available to them, particularly in smaller centers and the countryside. While the HO was established in November 1948, its high prices meant that it was impossible for the majority of Germans to purchase the goods available in these stores.³⁰ Nevertheless, there were advantages of being a *Konsum* member versus shopping in the HO or a private retailer. For instance, the *Konsum* offered its members services and rebates and reduced prices in other partner-establishments, such as local hotels, museums, theatres, and travel agencies.³¹ Upon joining the cooperative organisation, the new members (usually women) were eligible to receive a rebate of as much as two to

three percent of the *Konsum* turnover. At the end of the year, the cooperatives' earnings were counted and the refunds were distributed. Many families used this extra income to help subsidise their Christmas celebrations.³² The yearly patronage refund was also a welcome supplement to the family income and was used for the purchase of coal and potatoes over the winter.³³

Not only were women a target group (*Zielgruppe*) of the *Konsum*, but they were also expected to promulgate cooperative ideology. On 9th November 1946, Paul Merker, member of the Central Committee and Politburo of the SED, reported to Max Fechner, member of the Central Committee and city counsellor of Berlin, 'that women were a primary concern for the cooperatives and were being actively recruited into the organisation.' Merker continued to stress that:

Women should exclusively occupy the sales positions in the outlet stores and spread the ideology of the cooperative movement to the general public. Moreover, women were the so-called 'Finance Ministers of the Family' and all the household income flows through their purses. In these respects, women are essential for the functioning of the cooperative movement.³⁴

This quotation demonstrates the ways in which the state intended to use women as carriers of the party's ideology. While this was not evidence of complete emancipation, this inclusion of women in the political process of the SBZ was perhaps an example of emerging modernity.

Internal party documents demonstrate the party's willingness to apply pressure in

order to include women in the state's modernisation and totalitarian project. For instance, a *Konsum* report from 25th June 1948 indicated that Helmut Lehmann, Politburo member, was supportive of political pressure and initiatives coercing women to join the cooperatives in Thuringia.³⁵ Helmut Lehmann's willingness to use coercive methods was indicative of female opposition to the pressure to attain membership and participate in this organisation. While it is acknowledged that the evidence available is primarily drawn from the vantage point of the state. Nevertheless, a logical reconstruction is still possible, because these archival documents clearly suggest that this political pressure was meant to contribute to the establishment of a unified, totalitarian society under the ideological and political hegemony of the SED. While the state's use of the *Konsum* helped women achieve partial equality (seemingly positive), it also clearly operated as tool for the party to penetrate deeply into the lives of women (presumably negative).

In order to bring about this desired homogeneity and to support the stability of the system, the *Konsum* operated as a communication system, which reached wide areas of the population. For example, the *Konsum's* growing power and influence was evident in its increasing membership, which reached 1,700,000 as mentioned previously. The establishment to 230 stores and 7,017 sales outlets was also impressive and increased the reach of this organisation to wide segments of the German population in the SBZ that were otherwise beyond the party's reach, especially women.³⁶ As the evidence suggests, the party attempted to increase the 'socialist consciousness' of women through their contact with the *Konsum*.³⁷ In fact, according to the cooperative newspaper *KONSUM: Genossenschaftliches Mitteilungsblatt* from June 1948:

It is a pleasant fact that female participation in the workforce (*Frauenarbeit*) has made solid progress. We take the following slogan very seriously: 'Women have to be bearers of the cooperative movement.'³⁸

The administration of the *Konsum* was given the direct task of politically mobilising its membership in support of the SED and its policies. This was especially apparent in the selling committees where female members were particularly active. At a meeting of the Central Committee in the middle of 1947, a member clearly stated that the 'consumer cooperatives are a tool for the political mobilisation of the female membership.'³⁹ Politically, according to a report by a *Genossen* (comrade) Mummert, in the postwar conditions the consumer cooperatives and its membership were to go beyond the role they played in the pre-war years – that is, they were freighted with extra political obligations that went beyond traditional cooperative ideology. It was, for instance, necessary for the members to not only oppose the private capitalist interests and assure the availability of first class goods at affordable prices, but they must also be prepared to aid in the democratic development of a 'socialist' state. That is to say, they must help overcome Nazi ideology through further political mobilisation.⁴⁰ In order to accomplish this, every member was also politically obliged to attend cooperative meetings, as well make a contribution to the movement. The members also had to comply with the resolutions of the cooperative congresses and to take into consideration changes in cooperative statutes that were established during the general assemblies.⁴¹ It seems that members had to be able to (re)verbalise some of these slogans and propaganda at cooperative meetings in order to maintain their standing within this organisation.

With a membership reaching into the millions and with thousands of employees and customers, cooperatives were well-positioned to aid the ruling SED in transforming East Germans – and particularly women – into *subjects* reflecting the ideology of the SED. The consumer cooperatives experienced some degree of success in making contact with and gaining access to certain segments of the population (i.e. women and the family) that were outside the reach of the party's traditional political focal points. Thus far, the evidence presented depicts the *Konsum's* concerted efforts to infuse SED ideology and propaganda into the daily lives of its citizen, but again the impact of this propaganda is difficult to ascertain. It is, however, logical to conclude that cooperative loyalty was likely based on the consumption opportunities the *Konsum* provided, rather than its political incentives. However, as I argue, this consumption was always politicised and ideological.

Cooperative Education: the Integration of East German Women into the Socialist Order

The SED – under the tutelage of Marxist-Leninist ideology – was compelled to include women in the 'Building of Socialism'. Not to do so, the SED ideologues believed, would imply that the victory of socialism was not possible. For that reason, the party sought to mobilise women for political tasks. First, however, women needed to achieve an adequate level of ideological awareness before they could participate in the political struggles of the party.⁴² Following the founding of the SED in April 1946, the party came to the conclusion that women were lacking political knowledge, especially in the area of political theory. For that reason, the SED became particularly interested in the intensive education of women, particularly in the fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism.⁴³ In 1949, the *Konsum* received a new master statute: 'the consumer cooperatives were to recruit and educate their

membership in accordance with “progressive”, “democratic” principles’ (i.e. SED ideology).⁴⁴ This recruitment and education took place on many levels. For example, a cooperative school system was developed in which economics was secondary to politics. Accordingly, in his article ‘Zwischen Resistenz und Einvernahme,’ Wilhelm Kaltenborn asks rhetorically, ‘what can we discern from the programme of study to which women were subjected in the cooperative schools?’⁴⁵ The following section addresses this as yet unanswered question.

In the SBZ, the primary tasks of the cooperative schools included the specialist education and training of the functionaries, personnel, and the membership of the consumer cooperatives. The SED and the administration of the *Konsum* believed that during the Nazi dictatorship, cooperative functionaries lost their practical experience and the cooperative movement had become foreign to the younger generation. As a result, there were scarcely any educated and trained cooperative functionaries and staff. To remedy this situation, the SED and the *Konsum* established and developed a systematic educational system. In the immediate postwar years, the *Konsum*’s advisory council established a three-tiered educational structure, as well as guidelines and a curriculum for each tier in the system.⁴⁶

In the lowest tier, the *Grundschulen* (cooperative basic schools) were responsible for the training of the personnel in the cooperative stores, consisting primarily of women. Perceived by the SED to be the connecting link between the administration and the members, these schools were to pay particular attention to the education and training of the *Konsum* personnel. The instructors, as ministerial documents show, needed to have an influence on the students and trainees, thereby ensuring that they supported the ‘democratic centralisation’⁴⁷ of the cooperative system. Additionally,

the trainees were required to attain a professional education, which would enable them to successfully complete their duties in the cooperative trade.⁴⁸

By examining the curriculum from the *Grundschulen* in some detail, the propaganda and ideological component of the cooperative education becomes apparent. For instance, the *Grundschulen* implemented course work on the development of a *menschlich* (civilised/humane) society – including the various societal formations and the driving forces of societal development. Since the emerging society in the SBZ was becoming effectively sovietised (i.e. adopting the political and economic institutions of the Soviet Union), this study of *menschlich* society was almost certainly based on the model of the Soviet Union. Other political components included sections on Fascism and the overcoming of Nazi ideology. As the fifth module of the course, the creation and development of the consumer cooperatives may be construed to have been considered less important than the political facets of the training. It was followed by a section entitled: the status of women in the past, present, and future and their significance and importance in fulfilling the duties of the consumer cooperatives.⁴⁹

The primary task of the *Mittelschulen* (cooperative middle schools) was the training and education of qualified functionaries and workers, female specialists, as well as the administration of the cooperative stores, propaganda leaders, and inspectors. According to the document *Guidelines for the Cooperative Schools*, the *Mittelschulen* trained the majority of the leading cooperative functionaries. In addition to their cooperative and specialist education, these functionaries undertook a thorough political component during their training. For example, the students were required to

understand the most important aspects of the current political situation, as well as grasp the materialist (i.e. Marxist) worldview and be capable of formulating political judgments in any given situation.⁵⁰ At the middle schools, the courses were held in lecture form, but when possible there were also seminars, discussions, private study, written work, and group work.⁵¹ Specifically, the curriculum in the *Mittelschulen* was comprised of five political components based on Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy. It was also permeated with elements of de-Nazification. The remaining three components dealt directly with cooperatives, and they placed cooperatives into this worldview.⁵²

The cooperative *Hochschulen* (university or college of higher education) were responsible for training the instructors in the *Mittelschulen*, as well as highly-qualified cooperative functionaries, especially young professionals. Within these schools, the objective was to help these functionaries develop a Communist worldview. The training of the middle school instructors took place over a period of six months. The course structure itself was similar to that of the middle schools, but it had additional and more advanced components in the history of the German workers' movement, and German history in general, particularly with the Reformation, the Thirty Year's War, and the Revolution of 1848, and the First World War. For the cooperative *Hochschulen*, only highly qualified candidates with the necessary qualifications were selected.⁵³ A document from the Central Committee of the SED also indicated that in the regional, district, and party schools, seminars about the consumer cooperatives were incorporated into the course work. To directly quote this source: 'because the *Konsum* has become an important Mass-Organisation, it is, therefore, necessary that all party functionaries come to understand the importance of this Mass-Organisation through these courses.'⁵⁴ In my view, this quotation is significant

because it alludes to the emergence of the leading role of the SED in the *Konsum*. It also signifies the subordination of this once independent German workers' movement to the compliant role of a Soviet-style Mass-Organisation.

The network of cooperative schools continued to expand during the Soviet occupation. As of 13th August 1947, there were functioning cooperative schools in Gelenau/Erzgebirge, Allstadt in Saxony-Anhalt, Saackrow, Wilhelmshorst, Schwerin, and Oberhof. In Gelenau, courses were offered in the fields of accounting, auditing, and bookkeeping. In Allstadt, there were six courses, which dealt with propaganda, auditing, transport, accounting, women, and secretaries.⁵⁵ By 1949, there were additional *Konsum* schools in Kühlungsborn, Spremberg, Wilhelmshorst, Letzlingen, Weimar, a technical college for domestic trade in Blankenburg, an educational center for leading cadres in Cotta, and an international cooperative school in Dresden.⁵⁶ In Weimar, the Dorotheenhof served as an educational center for the *Konsum* for over forty years. There, the first course opened on 8th August 1949 and was attended by young saleswomen. On top of the practical education, there was also a great emphasis placed on political-ideological training. Weimar also served as a center for training special cadres in the field of socialist economics, as well as quality control inspectors, price inspectors, ledgers, and members of the board (*Vorstandsmitglieder*).⁵⁷

It may seem surprising that there was not a cooperative school in Berlin at this time.⁵⁸ This was perhaps the result of the damage suffered by the city during the war. Another possibility for the lack of a cooperative school in the city may have been that the SED (to be precise the Communist Party until April 1946) was

funnelling its resources for the reopening of Humboldt University in January 1946. What seems most likely, however, is that the cooperative schools were purposefully established in rural areas or in smaller centers to facilitate the isolation of students, who were cut off from the outside world by high fences and walls, thereby making it difficult for them to leave the building. In these schools, students were pressured to reshape their worldview in accordance with Marxist-Leninist ideology. If a student chose not to conform, the individual was quickly labelled a 'bourgeois' and publically humiliated in rituals of 'criticism and self-criticism.'⁵⁹ These tactics were generally quite effective and created a system in which an increasing number of disciplined and better educated Communist functionaries were able to replace veteran co-operators from the pre-Nazi era.⁶⁰

The SED's attempted totalitarian educational policies were inclusive to women – that is, they created a situation in which women were able to take the necessary training courses in order to assure that they were qualified for participation in the *Konsum's* internal governance and party politics. Throughout the 1940s, the continual rise of the number of women enrolled in these courses is perhaps indicative of increasing gender equality in the totalitarian SED regime.⁶¹ For example, Anne Wolter was appointed to the position of lecturer (*Referentin*) in the cooperative school in Gelenau (located in the Erzgebirge in Saxony) on 14th July 1947. The courses that she taught lasted three weeks. To translate her words, 'of the 24 registered participants, nine were women. In addition to their work in the cooperatives, these women were also first-rate functionaries of the party.'⁶² Given the historical context of the late 1940s, I believe that this was indicative of the state's and this organisation's attempt to establish gender equality and modernity. However, it is

important to note that the SED's vision of equality and modernity was the inclusion of women in waged labour, rather than breaking down traditional gender stereotypes or providing access to real power.

Conclusions

I argue that the *Konsum*'s inclusion of women in the education process at the onset of the Soviet occupation was a modern and progressive step given the period under consideration: 1945 to 1949. This initial inclusion of women in these cooperative schools was a first step towards multiple educational opportunities in technological fields at various polytechnic high schools.⁶³ In fact, during the 1950s and 1960s, women were, according to Jeannette Madarász, able to fulfill their search for self-realisation through social advancement and further education.⁶⁴ However, generally speaking, workers expressed their disinclination to pay attention to the regime's 'education' by switching off political broadcasts at the workplace and coughing during political presentations.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, the attitudinal and behavioural effect of the regime's ideological politics on the East German population should not be underestimated, as different segments of society reacted differently and experienced these policies in different ways. For example, given their educational opportunities, women were, according to Madarász, more loyal to the regime than other segments of the population.⁶⁶

With its propaganda departments, I suggest that the *Konsum* was an effective Mass-Organisation for the simple reason that it had direct and unremitting contact with women. Clearly – as the internal party documents suggest – the SED understood the potential of this organisation as a political tool on account of its propinquity with

women in the SBZ. When there is a continual presence of propaganda and slogans, the acceptable terms and the language of socialism become at least partially internalised. This internalisation of ideology was a requisite for maintaining membership within the *Konsum* and, more broadly, for functioning in the ideologically-charged daily interactions in the SBZ. Stephen Kotkin has described this process as 'learning to speak socialism.'⁶⁷ To put it another way, the *Konsum* facilitated the state in its effort to produce a specific kind of knowledge and integrate it into larger political frameworks in the SBZ. Furthermore, the *Konsum's* propaganda provided instruction in obedience, deference, the virtues and the political discourse of socialism, as well as how to give and obey the orders of the ruling SED. As a propaganda network, the *Konsum* inculcated self-discipline and encouraged the *Konsum's* members, consumers, workers and employees (mostly women) to establish, promote, and maintain Communist rule in Soviet occupied Germany.

¹ SAMPO-BA, DY30 IV 2/2022/111, Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker November 13, 1946, Konsumgenossenschaftliche Richtlinien der SED, written by Helmut Lehmann, p. 22-23.

² The Communist Party of Germany became the Socialist Unity Party of German following its forced amalgamation with the Socialist Democratic Party of German in April 1946.

³ Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*, 2nd / ed., Praeger University Series, Praeger, New York, 1965, p. 22.

⁴ Friedrich and Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*, p. 16.

⁵ See Andreas Ludwig, 'Die Anfänge nach 1945,' in ed. Andreas Ludwig *Konsum, Konsumgenossenschaften in der DDR*, Böhlau, Weimar 2006. Andreas Ludwig, 'Vom Dorfkonsum zum "Komplexen System der Landversorgung"', in ed. Andreas Ludwig *Konsum, Konsumgenossenschaften in der DDR*, Böhlau, Weimar 2006.

For some of Ina Merkel's important works on consumption and socialist consumerism see Ina Merkel, 'The GDR – A Normal Country in the Centre of Europe,' *Power and Society in GDR, 1961-1979: The 'Normalisation of Rule'?*, ed. Mary Fulbrook, Berghahn Books, New York, 2009; Ina Merkel, "Wer nie vorm Konsum Schlange stand..." in ed. Andreas Ludwig *Konsum, Konsumgenossenschaften in der DDR*, Böhlau, Weimar 2006; Ina Merkel, *Utopie und Bedürfnis: Die Geschichte der Konsumkultur in der DDR* Böhlau Verlag, Weimer, 1999.

⁶ Adam Thomas and Stefan Jaunich, 'Die Leipziger Bau- und Konsumgenossenschaften. Ein sozialdemokratisches Traditionsmilieu in der NS-Zeit und der Frühen DDR', *Internationale wissenschaftliche Korrespondenz zur Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung*, 36, 2000, pp. 201-202.

⁷ Jan Bösche, *Die Konsumgenossenschaften in der Wende von 1989/90: Von der Plan- zur Marktwirtschaft am Beispiel der Genossenschaft Sachsen-Nord/Eilenburg*, Heinrich-Kaufmann-Stiftung des Zentralverbandes deutscher Konsumgenossenschaften e.V., Hamburg, 2007, p. 64.

⁸ For English sources on the co-operative movement see Brett Fairbairn, 'Co-operative Values and the Cold War: The Rebuilding and Undermining of the German Consumer Movement, 1945-1955', *Annals of Public and Co-operative Economics* 71, no. 4, 2000, pp.637-663; Brett Fairbairn, 'Community Values, Democratic Cultures? Reflections on Saxony's Place in the German Co-operative Movement, 1849-1933', in *Saxony in German History: Culture, Society, and Politics, 1830-1933*, James Retallack (ed.), University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2000, pp. 180-195; Brett Fairbairn, 'The Rise and Fall of Consumer Co-operation in Germany', in Ellen Furlough and Carl Strikwerda (eds.), *Consumers against Capitalism? Consumer Co-operation in Europe, North America, and Japan, 1840-1990*, Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, 1999, pp. 267-302. On the earlier history of German consumer co-operatives see Brett Fairbairn, 'Self-Help and Philanthropy: the Emergence of Co-operatives in Britain, Germany, the United States, and Canada from the Mid-Nineteenth to Mid-Twentieth Century', in *Philanthropy, Patronage, and Civil Society: Experiences from Germany, Great Britain, and North America*, Thomas Adam (ed.), Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana, 2004 pp. 55-78; Brett Fairbairn, 'Membership, Organization, and Wilhelmine Modernism: Construction of Economic Democracy through Co-operation', in *Wilhelminism and its Legacies: German Modernities, Imperialism, and the Meaning of Reform, 1890-1930*, Geoff Eley and James Retallack (eds.), Berghahn Books, New York, 2003, pp. 34-50. For some general publications on the on the East German co-operative movement see Brett Fairbairn, 'Wiederaufbau und Untergang der Konsumgenossenschaften in der DDR und in der Bundesrepublik 1945 bis 1990', *Internationale Wissenschaftliche Korrespondenz zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung*, 34, 2, June 1998, pp. 171-198. Manfred Kirsch, *Die Marken Bitte!: Konsumgeschichten*, Eulenspiegel Verlag, Berlin, 2004.

⁹ Brett Fairbairn, 'The Rise and Fall of Consumer Cooperation in Germany', 284.

¹⁰ Fairbairn, 'Membership, Organization, and Wilhelmine Modernism: Constructing Economic Democracy through Cooperation' in H. Pogge von Strandmann, Geoff Eley, and James N. Retallack (eds.), *Wilhelminism and Its Legacies: German Modernities, Imperialism, and the Meanings of Reform, 1890-1930: Essays for Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann*, Berghahn Books, New York, 2003, pp. 46-48.

¹¹ Ellen Furlough and Carl Strikwerda, 'Economics, Consumer Culture, and Gender: An Introduction to the Politics of Consumer Cooperation' in Ellen Furlough and Carl Strikwerda (eds.), *Consumers against Capitalism?: Consumer Cooperation in Europe, North America, and Japan, 1840-1990*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Lanham, Md, 1999, p. 43.

¹² Brett Fairbairn, 'The Rise and Fall of Consumer Cooperation in Germany', p. 292.

¹³ Brett Fairbairn, 'The Rise and Fall of Consumer Cooperation in Germany', p. 294.

¹⁴ 'SAMPO-BA, DY30 IV 2/2022/111, Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker. November 13, 1946, Konsumgenossenschaftliche Richtlinien der SED written by Helmut Lehmann,' pp. 22-23.

¹⁵ David Pike, *The Politics of Culture in Soviet-Occupied Germany, 1945-1949*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, Calif. 1992, p. 4.

¹⁶ 'SAMPO-BA, DY30 IV 2/2.022/111, Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker. August 29, 1946, Konsumgenossenschaftliche Richtlinien der SED,' p. 19.

¹⁷ 'SAMPO-BA, DY30 IV 2/2022/111, Die Konsumgenossenschaftsbewegung in Deutschland, Berlin, 4. Februar 1948,' p. 101.

¹⁸ 'SAMPO-BA, DY30 IV 2/2022/111, Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker. August 24, 1946 Guidelines given to the Newly Formed Cooperatives by Ulbricht and Fechner entitled Richtlinien der SPD und KPD Für die Neugründung der Konsum-Genossenschaften.,' p. 1.

¹⁹ 'SAMPO-BA, DY30 IV 2/2022/111, Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker. August 22, 1946, Konsumgenossenschaftliche Richtlinien der SED,' p. 7.

²⁰ Upper-level infiltration was a typical Soviet practice. For example, following World War II, the 40,000 strong Ukrainian Insurgent Army resisted the Soviet re-conquest of Ukraine through violent activities, which included assassination attempts and the destruction of railroad and bridges. Rather than confront this large organisation directly, the Soviets infiltrated it and brought it down from within by 1951. According to the writing of one slain Ukrainian rebel, 'the Bolsheviks tried to take us from within...you can never know exactly in whose hands you will find yourself. From such a network of spies, the work of whole teams is often penetrated...' quoted in Gary Bruce, *Resistance with the People: Repression and Resistance in Eastern Germany, 1945-1955*, Rowman & Littlefield, New York, 2003, p. 256.

²¹ Brett Fairbairn, 'Co-operative Values and the Cold War', p. 12.

- ²² Thomas and Jaunich, 'Die Leipziger Bau- und Konsumgenossenschaften', p. 209.
- ²³ SAMPO-BA, Bestand: Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker, DY30 IV 2/2.022/112, Diskussionsgrundlage Zu Punkt 2 der Tagesordnung Für die Beiratssitzung des Konsum – Hauptssekretariats am 11. Und 12. September 1947 in Kühlungsborn: Berlin, den 15, September 1947, p. 26.
- ²⁴ SAMPO-BA, DY30 IV 2/2.022/112, pp. 28-29.
- ²⁵ SAMPO-BA, DY30 IV 2/2.022/112, pp. 28-29.
- ²⁶ Donna Harsch, *Revenge of the Domestic: Women, the Family, and Communism in the German Democratic Republic*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2007, p. 156.
- ²⁷ Katherine Pence, 'Schaufenster des sozialistischen Konsums: Texte der ostdeutschen "consumer culture"', in Peter Becker and Alf Lüdtke (eds.), *Akten. Eingaben. Schaufenster. Die DDR und ihre Texte: Erkundungen Zu Herrschaft und Alltag*, Akademie Verlag, Berlin: 1997, p.92.
- ²⁸ Katherine Pence, 'Schaufenster des sozialistischen Konsums', p. 97-98.
- ²⁹ Donna Harsch, *Revenge of the Domestic*, p. 179.
- ³⁰ The state trade organization Handelsorganization (HO) was established in November 1948 on Berlin's Frankfurter Allee (later to be renamed Stalinallee). In this store, East Germans had the opportunity to buy (un)rationed goods, albeit at very high prices. These stores served two purposes: they soaked up additional cash that was circulating in the GDR through piecework and higher wages; and they served as a key advertisement for the regime by displaying concrete proof of the improvements in everyday life and showing off the promise of consumer plenty. Pamela E. Swett, S. Jonathan Wiesen, and Jonathan R. Zatlín, *Selling Modernity: Advertising in Twentieth-Century Germany*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2007, p. 285.
- ³¹ Manfred Kirsch, *Die Marken Bitte!*, pp. 26-29.
- ³² Ina Merkel, *Utopie und Bedürfnis*, p. 150.
- ³³ Manfred Kirsch, *Die Marken Bitte!*, p. 26.
- ³⁴ SAMPO-BA, DY30 IV 2/2022/111, p. 20.
- ³⁵ SAMPO-BA, DY30 IV 2/2022/111, Landesvorstand Thüringen, Weimar, 25.6.1948, Gegenagitation der Gen. Emma Sachse Gegen die Konsumgenossenschaften, pp. 112-13.
- ³⁶ SAMPO-BA, DY30 IV 2/2022/111, p. 101.
- ³⁷ Hans-Joachim Herzog, *Genossenschaftliche Organisationsformen in der DDR, vol. Band 12, Schriften zur Kooperationsforschung*, J.C.B. Mohr Paul Siebeck, Tübingen, 1982, p. 179.
- ³⁸ SAMPO-BA, DY30 IV 2/2022/111, Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker. KONSUM: Genossenschaftliches Mitteilungsblatt Juli 1948, Juli 1948/Nr.1,' p. 115.
- ³⁹ Andreas Ludwig, 'Die Anfänge nach 1945', p. 23.
- ⁴⁰ SAMPO-BA, DY30 IV 2/2022/111, Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker. Berlin, February 4, 1947, Entwurf Für die Grundzüge der Aufgabengestaltung der Konsum-Union GmbH. unter Berücksichtigung der Erfahrungen der vergangenen 18 Monate, p. 73.
- ⁴¹ SAMPO-BA, DY30 IV 2/2022/111, Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker. 30. December, 1946, Für Gen. Lehmann Frage einer Zentralstelle Für die Konsumgenossenschaften, p. 37.
- ⁴² Gabriele Gast, *Die politische Rolle der Frau in der DDR*, Bertelsmann Universitätsverlag, Dusseldorf 1973, pp. 19-20.
- ⁴³ Gabriele Gast, *Die politische Rolle der Frau in der DDR*, p. 69.
- ⁴⁴ Wilhelm Kaltenborn, *Zwischen Resistenz und Einvernahme*, Versuch einer Bestandsaufnahme, Berlin, 2002, p. 18.
- ⁴⁵ Wilhelm Kaltenborn, *Zwischen Resistenz und Einvernahme*, p. 62.
- ⁴⁶ SAMPO-BA, Bestand: Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker DY30 IV 2/2.022/112, Richtlinien Für die Genossenschaftliche Schulungsarbeit in den Konsumgenossenschaften, Beschlossen auf der Beiratssitzung am 11.-12.9.1947, p. 21.
- ⁴⁷ The East German state was governed through a system of 'Democratic Centralism' in which political structures were – like most associations – organised on the basis of hierarchy with power concentrated at the top. However, 'Democratic Centralism' (a term adopted by Lenin and common currency throughout the Communist era) meant that open discussion was only possible until a higher party organ reached a decision. At this point, the decision was binding and all lower party organs and society were forced to implement it without question.

- ⁴⁸ SAMPO-BA, Bestand: Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker DY30 IV 2/2.022/112, Richtlinien Für die Genossenschaftliche Schulungsarbeit in den Konsumgenossenschaften, Beschlossen auf der Beiratssitzung am 11.-12.9.1947, p. 22.
- ⁴⁹ SAMPO-BA, DY30 IV 2/2.022/112, p. 23.
- ⁵⁰ SAMPO-BA, DY30 IV 2/2.022/112, p. 23.
- ⁵¹ SAMPO-BA, DY30 IV 2/2.022/112, p. 23.
- ⁵² SAMPO-BA, DY30 IV 2/2.022/112, p. 25.
- ⁵³ SAMPO-BA, DY30 IV 2/2.022/112, p. 25.
- ⁵⁴ SAMPO-BA, Bestand: Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker DY30 IV 2/2.022/114, Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, Zentralsekretariat, Abteilung: Genossenschaftswesen, Bericht von Karl Draeger, 15.Juni.1948, p. 27.
- ⁵⁵ SAMPO-BA, DY30 IV 2/2022/111, Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker. Bericht Über die zurzeit vorhandenen Genossenschaftsschulen, Berlin, 13.August 1947, p. 141.
- ⁵⁶ Manfred Kirsch, Die Marken Bitte! , p. 138.
- ⁵⁷ Manfred Kirsch, Die Marken Bitte! , p. 138.
- ⁵⁸ SAMPO-BA, DY30 IV 2/2022/111, Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker. Bericht Über die zurzeit vorhandenen Genossenschaftsschulen, Berlin, 13.August 1947, p. 141.
- ⁵⁹ Gareth Pritchard, *The Making of the GDR, 1945-53: From Antifascism to Stalinism Manchester*, University Press, Manchester, 2000, p. 154.
- ⁶⁰ Gareth Pritchard, *The Making of the GDR*, p. 154
- ⁶¹ 'Die immer stärkere Einbeziehung der Frauen in den Arbeitsprozess erforderte Qualifikation. Bildung war eine wichtige Produktionspotenz... Gegen Ende der DDR waren die Frauen bis etwa zum 45. Lebensjahr im Durchschnitt genauso hoch gebildet wie gleichaltrige Männer'. Barbara Bertram, "'Nicht Zurück an den Kochtopf"-- Aus- und Weiterbildung in Ostdeutschland' in Gisela Helwig and Hildegard Maria Nickel (eds.), *Frauen in Deutschland 1945-1992*, Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, Bonn 1993, p. 196.
- ⁶² SAMPO-BA, DY30 IV 2/2022/111, Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands Zentralkomitee: Sekretariat Paul Merker. Bericht von Anne Wolter, 24.7.47, pp. 139-140.
- ⁶³ Dolores L. Augustine, *Red Prometheus: Engineering and Dictatorship in East Germany, 1945-1990*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2007, p. 98.
- ⁶⁴ Jeannette Z. Madarász, *Working in East Germany: Normality in a Socialist Dictatorship, 1961-79* Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, Hampshire, 2006, p. 6.
- ⁶⁵ Corey Ross, *Constructing Socialism at the Grass-Roots: The Transformation of East Germany, 1945-65*, Palgrave, New York, 2000, p. 100.
- ⁶⁶ Jeannette Z. Madarász, *Conflict and Compromise in East Germany, 1971-1989: A Precarious Stability*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2003, p. 92.
- ⁶⁷ Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1995.



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