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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?

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.