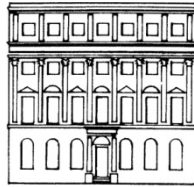


German Historical Institute London



BULLETIN

ISSN 0269-8552

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The Consumer on the Home Front: Second World War Civilian Consumption in Comparative Perspective

Conference Report

German Historical Institute London Bulletin, Vol 36, No. 1
(May 2014), pp164-169

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The Consumer on the Home Front: Second World War Civilian Consumption in Comparative Perspective. Conference organized jointly by the German Historical Institutes London, Moscow, and Washington and held at the GHIL, 5–7 December 2013. Conveners: Hartmut Berghoff (GHIW), Andreas Gestrich (GHIL), Nikolaus Katzer (GHIM), Jan Logemann (GHIW), Felix Römer (GHIL), Sergey Kudryashov (GHIM).

The home front of the Second World War is increasingly being recognized by historians not only as a vital part of military strategies during a war with an unparalleled degree of civilian mobilization, but also as a catalyst for broader social developments, for example, in gender and race relations. Collaboratively organized by three German Historical Institutes, this conference looked at the relationship of war and mass consumption and the role of the consumer in the war efforts of Germany, Japan, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States. While mass consumption has long been associated primarily with liberal democracies, research on Nazi Germany as well as Communist countries has demonstrated the degree to which these regimes also engaged the growing importance of mass consumption, even if in the Soviet case the structures of a mass consumer society did not fully develop until after the war. In the context of the war, however, the state rather than the market often played a central role in organizing consumption across all regimes. Next to comparative questions of how wartime consumption was organized and experienced, many papers also highlighted transnational exchanges and learning processes.

Hartmut Berghoff introduced the conference topic by highlighting the significance that all major powers attributed to civilian consumption during the Second World War, building on the lessons from the preceding war. The ‘modern’ home front under conditions of total war was seen as paramount for maintaining civilian morale, which meant that a shift to military consumption was inherently limited. Minimum standards of provisioning and a sense of distributive justice had to be ensured, and consumers were mobilized to participate in production, conservation, and distribution efforts. Consumption in fashion and entertainment also served as a form of

The full conference programme can be found under Events and Conferences on the GHIL’s website <www.ghil.ac.uk>.

distraction, while planners and marketing professionals in many countries fostered forms of 'virtual consumption', the promise of a consumerist post-war future which created a lasting legacy. Sheldon Garon, in the first keynote address, emphasized the global and transnational nature of home front planning, which runs counter to prevailing myths and narratives of national distinctiveness in collective memories of wartime experience. Taking Japan as his vantage point, Garon highlighted shared challenges in maintaining production and morale, in food security, and rationing. Far from unique, the Japanese, like other powers, paid close attention to the lessons of the First World War with its blockades, shortages, and ultimate home front collapses. They drew on a growing international body of knowledge in nutritional science to prepare for the coming war and mounted an (ultimately unsuccessful) attempt to maintain food self-sufficiency during the war. As clothing became increasingly uniform and much of the nascent consumer goods industry was converted to wartime production, food consumption became ever more central to the Japanese war experience by the end of the conflict.

Securing civilian nutrition was generally a central element in wartime efforts to maintain the home front, as explored in the first two panels of the conference. Rationing and price controls were part of the war experience in all societies under consideration here, albeit to significantly different degrees. Food provisioning was the central challenge in the Soviet Union, as Wendy Goldman showed, and deprivation was the predominant experience of most Russian civilians. Rationing was almost entirely handled through institutional canteens, while the retail sector was virtually non-existent. Still, the intricate rationing system was riddled with inequalities and corruption, often failing to provide factory workers with the bare minimum needed for survival. The consumer as an individual receded into the background in the Japanese case as well. Erich Pauer discussed the role of neighbourhood organizations in organizing rice rationing and the increasingly centralized distribution system that had supplanted private retailers and markets by the end of the war. In Germany, by contrast, consumer choice remained more viable and certain indulgences were seen as essential to morale. Nicole Petrick-Felber showed that while coffee consumption shifted entirely to surrogate products because of a collapse in imports, tobacco remained 'vital' to the war effort. Cigarette production continued, but after 1944 the

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state increasingly lost control over the rationing process as black markets emerged. For the Western Allies, the situation was entirely different, as Ines Prodöhl's paper demonstrated. She analysed the Combined Food Board, an international body set up in 1942 to organize the distribution of US agricultural surpluses to allied nations. While shortages in areas such as fats and oils riddled Western Allies as well, American abundance and global access to goods ensured that starvation was of little concern in the West.

Differences in available supply and the distribution of foodstuffs made for very different experiences in home front consumption by civilian consumers. In the United Kingdom, as Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska explained, scarcity, not starvation, was the primary experience. While a 'flat rate' rationing system promised a sense of equitable sacrifice, black markets, self-supplied consumers in the countryside, and the possibility of circumventing rationing in restaurants posed challenges to the 'fair share' principle and its promise to mitigate class distinctions. Still, many post-war Britons would go on to memorialize a mythical 'wartime community'. Many Germans, too, Felix Römer argued, viewed the home front situation in a relatively positive light. Based on US surveys among German POWs, his paper analysed the views of *Wehrmacht* soldiers regarding the food situation on the home front and cross-referenced them with research about the German rationing system. In the soldiers' perception, he concluded, maintaining sufficient caloric intake outweighed the negative experience of deteriorating food quality, which was due not least to the vivid memory of conditions during the First World War. Donald Filtzer analysed Soviet home front experiences by looking at infant mortality rates. Poor hygiene and pervasive illness as well as shortages of milk and fuel presented conditions rife for mass mortality, which indeed spiked early in the war. Yet overall, the war saw an eventual decline in mortality which could, in part, be attributed to state programmes but also speaks for the already high levels of mortality before the war and the continuity in experiences of deprivation and scarcity that, for many Russian consumers, spanned the inter-war and the post-war period.

The subsequent panel on wartime advertising provided a stark contrast to the realities of malnutrition in some countries, and furthermore provided surprising parallels between liberal democracies such as the UK and the USA and the organized economy of Nazi

Germany. David Clampin presented the British case, where advertisers were keen to contribute to the war effort, but also careful to maintain brand-awareness and encourage future consumption. Post-war visions of consumerism took the form either of forward-looking visions of modernity or a nostalgic promise of return to the 'good old days'. The anticipation they stoked, however, proved to be a political liability as rationing continued after the war. Many American advertisers, Cynthia Lee Henthorn argued, also blurred the line between government propaganda and commercial advertising. The overriding concern of US industry, however, was to ensure a return to an unfettered market economy in the post-war years. The consumerist world of tomorrow was to be a world of free enterprise. German advertisers, as Pamela Swett showed, also pursued their own commercial interests. While advertisements for consumer goods linked consumption and national expansionism, industry struggled to retain a degree of distance from the regime, especially towards the end of the war. Maintaining brand awareness during rationing was central for German advertising men, too, and Swett's examples suggested a surprising degree of continuity from the pre- to the post-war period.

Wartime nations thus frequently relied on 'virtual consumption', the deferral of immediate consumer satisfaction in anticipation of later rewards. In addition to advertising, the commercial entertainment industry was utilized to boost morale and influence consumer desires. Mila Ganeva discussed the prominence of fashion in wartime German media, from magazines to movies. While managing scarcity was an acknowledged reality, the imaginary consumption of luxury high fashion retained a prominent place in the media landscape. Even in the Soviet Union, as Sergei Zhuravlev showed, new fashion magazines appeared during the war. While textiles were extremely difficult to obtain, wartime photographs attest to a continuing concern with appearing fashionable among many Russian civilians. Despite a widespread struggle for survival, Russian workers in provincial factories also often had their first encounters with theatre and ballet, as cultural institutions were displaced from the major population centres. Erina Megowan argued that the Soviet policy of bringing 'high culture' and brigades of performers to the hinterland during the war was well received and had a lasting impact on cultural consumption across the country. In Germany, by contrast, as

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Neil Gregor suggested, the continued practice of regularly attending symphony concerts attested to a continuation of 'banal social habits' and a sense of everyday normalcy amidst total war. At least in certain areas, 'normal life' persisted and a shortage of material goods meant that surplus income during the war could be spent on entertainment. This panel certainly raised questions about the paradoxes of wartime consumption and the at times jarring juxtaposition of cultural consumption and entertainment with pervasive mass death.

The final part of the conference focused on the legacies of wartime consumption. Frank Trentmann opened this section with the second keynote address. He challenged the audience to consider the implications of the war for the long-term development of mass consumption, especially in the Western world. On the one hand, 1945 was not the dramatic break that is often assumed and consumer desires were deeply rooted and well developed prior to a war which did not fundamentally challenge them. On the other hand, the war left its mark on post-war mass consumption. It widened the transatlantic gap in consumption levels; it shifted tastes through wartime migration and exchanges; and it impacted on generational patterns of consumption. Finally, the war heightened belief in the possibility of statecraft and planning for consumption, leading to a secular rise in taxation and public forms of consumption across Western nations.

The papers in the final panel then looked at various legacies of the war, primarily through its impact on expert communities. Jan Lambertz discussed wartime and post-war studies by US and British nutrition experts which yielded new analytical techniques for measuring human 'need' and 'deficiencies', and which would find later application in defining civilian health standards. Looking at Canada, Bettina Liverant showed the impact of the war on economists and policy experts. Canada's experiences with strategic austerity, rationing, price freezes, and consumer surveys, which pre-dated those of its US neighbour, informed post-war efforts to control consumer spending and inflation within the framework of a Keynesian economic policy. Jan Logemann similarly argued that the wartime expansion of state-sponsored market research in the United States acted as a catalyst for post-war transformations in marketing research. Focusing on three prominent émigré consumer researchers, the paper traced both transnational transfers in consumer psychology and the entanglement of commercial, academic, and government

research that connected the warfare state to the post-war consumer's republic. In the Soviet Union, Oleg Khlevnyuk showed, basic structures of provision remained in place from the 1930s to the 1950s, but victory in the war promoted a growing gap between consumer expectations and the continued reality of shortages. Especially as Russian soldiers came into contact with consumption levels in other parts of Europe, pressures for reform mounted, leading to a 'new course' after Stalin's death. The impact of war preparations on innovations in the food industry, finally, was at the centre of Uwe Spiekermann's paper, which traced the effects of efforts by German nutrition experts to improve military food. Iconic consumer goods of the post-war economic miracle, such as instant potato dumplings, he showed, were literally field tested during the war. His paper also provided an important reminder of how closely consumption on the military front and on the civilian home front were intertwined.

The concluding discussion, led by Hartmut Berghoff and Andreas Gestrich, emphasized the surprising degree to which continuities could be traced in various areas of consumption from the pre-war to the post-war eras. Especially for the more developed consumer economies, the Second World War was not as decisive a break in the long-term development of mass consumption. It did, however, provide a point for broader implicit and explicit societal debates about the role of consumption between market and state, individual and community. Despite structural similarities in the challenges posed by wartime consumption and parallel developments across regimes, the comparative look made clear that the experience for consumers varied tremendously among the countries surveyed, with the United States and the Soviet Union representing opposite ends of a spectrum between curtailed affluence and mass deprivation. Everyday wartime experience, for example, in the various constellations of black or grey market activity, was finally noted as an important field for future research, especially as the memories of wartime sacrifices helped to shape cultures of mass consumption in subsequent decades.

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