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## **Revenge of the Domestic: Women, the Family, and Communism in the German Democratic Republic**

Donna Harsch

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In this book, Donna Harsch analyzes the dynamic encounter between the party-state of East Germany in the Ulbricht era (1949–71) and its women citizens. Rather than writing a history of East German women per se, Harsch puts policies that affected the family on center stage. She then shows that the family was popularly considered to be women's special province and that women in fact claimed the family as their special responsibility through their actions. She emphasizes interaction between state and society that changed over time: while ordinary East German women obviously lived under a dictatorship, they put pressure on the state in the policy areas of the workforce, reproduction, consumption, and leisure, and they did obtain some kind of response. While the state remained committed to productivism and the attendant drive to mobilize women into the paid labor force, it was compelled to alter policies to reduce resistance from women—much less elicit active cooperation. Harsch points out that women changed too, eventually expecting a state role in various private and family concerns and, by 1970, exhibiting the highest industrial workforce participation in the world (p. 303). The book makes the case ‘that domestic structures—the family's material and emotional labors, gender relations, consumption needs, and private desires—shape society and economic relations as fundamentally as vice versa’ (pp. 10–11).

After the Introduction, Chapter 1 immerses the reader in the conditions of destroyed Germany under Soviet occupation and the early, frustrated efforts of the Socialist Unity Party (SED) to attract women voters. While women were overwhelmingly concerned with provisioning and the Soviet Union's retention of German prisoners of war, the party blamed Germans for their suffering and stressed the imperative of production no matter how harsh personal circumstances were. Chapter 2 continues the theme of the SED's relationship to women voters into the period of the 1950s, and traces the effects on women and the family of the SED's planks of education reform, collectivization of agriculture, and reducing the influence of the churches. Chapter 3

takes up workforce policy and, like Chapter 2, shows how the effort to promote working-class and rural laboring citizens in education and the workplace in effect advantaged men over women, since families of those classes tended to pull daughters and wives out of school and work earlier, keeping their skills lower. While the workforce grew, so did gender segmentation—which still meant that the party's goal of making women into versatile workers who could be mobilized across the economy remained partially frustrated. During the 1950s, the party-state pursued goals that its functionaries knew were contradictory: it wanted women to train themselves further and to work more for pay, but also wanted them to increase the birth rate. Harsch takes us through policies that cut alimony and pensions to push women into the workforce at the same time that birth control and decent [End Page 548] childcare were hardly available and abortion was restricted. The phenomenon of the *Hausarbeitstag*, a monthly day off for women to do housework (it originated in the Nazi era), illustrates Harsch's overall argument for the persistent importance of family issues. While the party sought to eliminate it, women and men fiercely defended it, and they won. Chapter 4 deepens the focus on the natalist policy of the state, including medical care for pregnant women, maternity subsidies, birth control, and abortion. Chapter 5 turns to consumption, arguing that women were the arbiters of quality for child care, housing, and the socialization of services such as meals and laundry. Chapter 6 focuses on family law concerning marriage, divorce (proposed reform in this area led to vehement resistance from women and the churches), (hetero)sexuality, children born to single mothers, parental authority, and children's well-being. Here as ever, the party viewed each issue in terms of its effect on mobilizing women and the next generation as workers, without antagonizing men too much. Finally, a massive Chapter 7 revisits each of the themes in the context of the 1960s, when various new gestures toward consumption showed that the party still prized productivism above all, but was willing to compromise with women and families to achieve it. Harsch treats the Honecker years (1971–89) more as a postscript QED than as an era to be analyzed in its own right. Honecker made living well—and therefore consumption—into the goal of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), not just its means to increased production.

Harsch highlights at the outset the ironies that threaded through these processes. The state ignored the family—yet the family became more important than ever to ordinary East Germans, as the source of rest and renewal that people in other industrialized countries gained through consumption-related activities. In fact, the family arena ended up spawning ‘needs and desires that the socialist economy could not satisfy’ (p. 5). This was the ‘revenge of the domestic’ of Harsch's title.

Whether the concessions of the East German state actually helped women is a question Harsch takes up in the Epilogue. Policies did support a highly conventional gender role for women, although generous subsidies for mothers in the GDR's last years may have promoted an emergent gender role of the never-married mother (p. 313). Harsch contrasts her project to the work of feminist scholars who have stressed the top-down nature of state policies and assumed passivity of women, perhaps because those scholars did not want to focus on women's actual strong defense of conventional family roles. However, the contrast between feminist scholarship and Harsch's book, as depicted on pp. 312–13, does not seem so clear to this reviewer. While Harsch wants to highlight the origins of policies more than their effects, some of her most intriguing material concerns the effects of productivist policies such as ‘the best provisioning to the best worker’ (p. 178) on, for example, single mothers. Her entire project rests on the classic feminist

insight regarding the importance of unpaid reproductive work in the home for the formal economy. She also shows that male sexism played a major role in frustrating the state's productivist goals for women: East German men insisted on being free of demeaning housework and child care, free of competition for scholarships and wages, and free of female supervision (e.g. p. 197). One of Harsch's major overall findings is **[End Page 549]** that East German women sought to avoid paid work altogether, or paid work commensurate with their skill level, and often avoided further occupational training or higher education. This leads me to see this book as a contribution to the story of the global diversity of feminisms and women's movements. As Barbara Einhorn noted in her 1993 book *Cinderella Goes to Market*, Western feminism with its emphasis on access to work and public equality with men was too close to official Communist feminism and ignored Eastern European women's experience of the compulsion to work. Harsch's book provides much empirical material that shows us why, for East German women, freedom meant the freedom not to work and the freedom to immerse themselves in private spaces such as the family.

This book, with its long chapters and cursory background on the GDR in general, is not for the novice. However, it is indispensable for anyone else interested in the nature of state socialism, the preconditions of its collapse, and gender.