

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

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The home front of World War II is increasingly recognized by historians as a vital part of not only 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 war time consumption was organized and experienced, many papers also highlighted transnational exchanges and learning processes.

HARTMUT BERGHOFF (Washington) introduced the conference topic by highlighting the significance that all major powers attributed to civilian consumption during World War II, building on the lessons from the preceding war. The „modern“ home front under conditions of total war was seen as paramount to maintaining civilian morale which meant that a shift to military consumption was inherently limited. Minimum standards of provisioning and a sense of distri-

butional justice had to be ensured, consumers were mobilized to participate in production, conservation, and distribution efforts. Consumption in fashion and entertainment also served as a form of distraction while planners and marketing professionals in many countries fostered forms of „virtual consumption,“ the promise of a consumerist postwar future which created a lasting legacy. SHELDON GARON (Princeton), 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 World War I 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 failed) 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 (Pittsburgh) 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 (Mar-

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burg) discussed the role of neighborhood organizations in organizing rice rationing and the increasingly centralized distribution system which 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 (Jena) showed that while coffee consumption – due to a collapse of imports – almost entirely shifted to surrogate products, tobacco remained „vital“ to the war effort. Cigarette production continued, but after 1944 the state increasingly lost control over the rationing process as black markets emerged. For the Western Allies, the situation was entirely different, as INES PRODOEHL's (Washington) paper demonstrated. She analyzed the Combined Food Board, an international body set up in 1942 to organize the distribution of U.S. agricultural surpluses to allied nations. While shortages in areas such as fats and oils riddled Western Allies as well, American abundance and the global access to goods ensured that starvation was of little concern in the West.

Differences in available supply and the distribution of food stuffs made for very different experiences in home front consumption by civilian consumers. In the United Kingdom, as INA ZWEINIGER-BARGIELOWSKA (Chicago) 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 country-side and the possibility to circumvent rationing in restaurants posed challenges to the „fair share“ principle and its promise to mitigate class distinctions. Still, many postwar Britons would go on to memorialize a mythical „wartime community.“ Many Germans, too, FELIX RÖMER (London) argued, viewed the home front situation in a relatively positive light. Based on U.S. surveys among German POWs, he analyzed 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, the maintenance of sufficient caloric intake outweighed the negative experience of deteriorating

rating food quality, which was not least due to the vivid memory of conditions during the First World War. DONALD FILTZER (London) analyzed Soviet home front experiences by looking at infant mortality rates. Poor hygiene and pervasive illnesses as well as shortages in milk and fuel presented ripe conditions 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 programs, but also speaks to the already high levels of mortality prior to the war and the continuity in experiences of deprivation and scarcity that for many Russian consumers spanned from the interwar to the postwar period.

The subsequent panel on wartime advertising provided a stark contrast to the realities of malnutrition in some countries and provided furthermore surprising parallels between liberal democracies such as the UK and the US and the more organized economy of Nazi Germany. DAVID CLAMPIN (Liverpool) related the British case where advertisers were keen to contribute to the war effort, but also careful to maintain brand-awareness and to encourage future consumption. Postwar visions of consumerism took the form of either 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 HENTHORNE (New York) argued, also blurred the line between government propaganda and commercial ads. The overriding concern of U.S. industry, however, was to insure a return to an unfettered market economy in the postwar years. The consumerist world of tomorrow was to be a world of free enterprise. German advertisers, as PAMELA SWETT (Hamilton) showed, also pursued their own commercial interests. While consumer goods ads 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 admen, too, and Swett's examples suggested a surprising degree of continuity from the pre- to the postwar period.

Wartime nations thus frequently relied on „virtual consumption,“ the deference of immediate consumer satisfaction in anticipation of later rewards. Next to advertising, the commercial entertainment industry was utilized to boost morale and to influence consumer desires. MILA GANEVA (Oxford, OH) 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 SERGEJ ZHURAVLEV (Moscow) showed, new fashion magazines appeared during the war. While textiles were extremely difficult to attain, wartime photographs attest to a continuous 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 theater and ballet as cultural institutions were displaced from the major population centers. ERINA MEGOWAN (Washington) 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 NEIL GREGOR (Southampton) suggested, the continued practice of regular attendance of symphonic 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 in material goods meant that surplus incomes 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 (London) 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 long-rooted and well-developed prior to a war which did not fundamentally challenge them. On the other hand, the war left its mark on postwar mass consumption. It widened the transatlantic gap in consumption levels, it shifted tastes through wartime migration and exchanges, and it impacted 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 (Washington) discussed the wartime and postwar studies of U.S. 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 (Calgary) showed the impact of the war on economists and policy experts. Canada's experiences with strategic austerity, with rationing, price freezes and consumer surveys, which pre-dated those of its U.S. American neighbor, informed postwar efforts in controlling consumer spending and inflation within the framework of a Keynesian economic policy. JAN LOGEMANN (Washington) similarly argued that the wartime expansion of state-sponsored market research in the United States acted as a catalyst for postwar 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 postwar consumer's republic. In the Soviet Union, OLEG KHLEVNYYUK (Moscow) 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 soldier came into contact with consumption levels in other parts of Europe, pressures for reform mounted leading to a „new course“ after Stalin's death.

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The impact of war preparations on innovations in the food industry, finally, was at the center of UWE SPIEKERMANN's (Washington) 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 (Washington) and Andreas Gestrich (London), emphasized the surprising degree to which continuities could be traced in various areas of consumption from the pre- to the postwar eras. Especially for the more developed consumer economies, World War II was not as decisive a break in the long-term development of mass consumption. It did provide, however, 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 also 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. The 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 shape the cultures of mass consumption in subsequent decades.

#### **Conference Overview:**

Welcome: Andreas Gestrich (GHI London)

Introduction: Hartmut Berghoff (GHI Washington)

Keynote: Sheldon Garon (Princeton University), The Transnational Home Front: One Perspective from Japan

*Panel I: Feeding the Home Front / Management*

Chair: Nikolaus Katzer (GHI Moscow)

Wendy Z. Goldman (Carnegie Mellon, Pittsburgh), The Hidden World of Soviet Wartime Food Provisioning: Rationing, Inequality, and Corruption

Nicole Petrick-Felber (University of Jena), Deprivation and Indulgence: the Nazi Consumption Policy on Tobacco and Coffee

Erich Pauer (University of Marburg), Neighbourhood Associations and Food Distribution in Japanese Cities in the Second World War

Ines Prodöhl (GHI Washington), The Food Front: Coordinating the Provision and Consumption of Food in the United States, Great Britain, and Canada

#### *Panel II: Food / Experience*

Chair: Uwe Spiekermann (GHI Washington)

Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska (University of Illinois at Chicago), Food Consumption in Britain during the Second World War

Felix Römer (GHI London), Consumers in Uniform: The German Home Front seen from the Frontlines

Donald Filtzer (University of East London), Children on the Soviet Home Front: Nutrition, Health, and Mortality

#### *Panel III: Advertising*

Chair: Hartmut Berghoff (GHI Washington)

David Clampin (University of Liverpool), British Commercial Press Advertising in the Second World War and the Definitions of the Post-War World

Cynthia L. Henthorn (Independent Scholar, New York), Selling a better America: Advertising Strategies of the World War II on the American Home Front

Pamela Swett (McMaster University, Hamilton), Ads amid Ashes: Commerce and Consumption in Germany, 1939-1945

#### *Panel IV: Fashion & Culture*

Chair: Jan Logemann (GHI Washington)

Mila Ganeva (Miami University, Oxford, OH), Vicarious Consumption: Fashion Media and Film in Germany during the War Years 1939-43

Erina Megowan (Georgetown University, Washington), Cultural Consumption and Civilian Mobilization: Evacuated Cultural Institutions and the Soviet Hinterland in the Second World War

Neil Gregor (University of Southampton), Consuming the Canon: The Symphonic Concert Hall and its Audiences in Germany 1939-1945

Sergej Zhuravlev (Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow), War and Fashion: the Soviet Experience

Keynote: Frank Trentmann (Birkbeck College, London), The Lesson of War: Circulation, Constraint and Collective Provision in Consumer Societies

*Panel V: Legacies*

Chair: Felix Römer (GHI London)

Jan Lambertz (USHMM, Washington), Measuring Human Needs in the Era of the Second World War

Bettina Liverant (University of Calgary), Strategic Austerity on the Canadian Home Front

Oleg Khlevnyuk (Russian State Archive, Moscow), The War after the War: The Soviet Mobilization Model and Mass Consumption in the 1940-50s

Jan Logemann (GHI Washington), From Wartime Research to Post-War Affluence: European Émigrés and the Engineering of American Wartime Consumption

Uwe Spiekermann (GHI Washington), A Consumer Society shaped by War: The German Experience 1935-1955

*Conclusion and Final Discussion:*

Hartmut Berghoff (GHI Washington) / Andreas Gestrich (GHI London)

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