

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

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Conference at the GHI London

Conveners: Hartmut Berghoff (GHI Washington), Andreas Gestrich (GHI London), Nikolaus Katzer (GHI Moscow), Jan Logemann (GHI Washington), Felix Römer (GHI London), Sergey Kudryashov (GHI Moskau)

The home front of World War II is increasingly recognized by historians as a vital part of not only military strategies during a war that saw an unparalleled degree of civilian mobilization, but also as a catalyst for broader social developments during the twentieth century. Especially historians of the United States have looked at the home front's role in spurring on the Women's movement or the African-American Civil Rights struggle. The war, however, was also a crucial test and catalyst for the emergence of mass consumer societies in the twentieth century. In Germany, for example, Nazi leaders were determined to avoid the civilian protests of World War I. American political leaders similarly paid close attention to "the consumer" during the War, which had become increasingly central to Keynesian economic approaches in the aftermath of the great Depression. In the UK, Labor's postwar expansion and the setting up of the National Health Service were clearly linked to the war experience and the desire for a better life after the deprivation and suffering of war.

This conference will look at the role of the consumer and civilian morale in the war efforts of Germany, Japan, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Choosing the five major un-occupied war powers – focusing in the Soviet case on the territories beyond the combat zone – allows for comparisons across a wide spectrum of political regimes. While mass consumption was long associated primarily with liberal democracies, research on Nazi Germany as well as Communist countries has demonstrated the degree to which these regimes as well had to engage the growing importance of mass consumption - even if in the Soviet case the structures of a mass consumer society didn't fully develop until after the war. In the context of the war, the state rather than the market played a central role in organizing consumption across all regimes. This was especially true for countries like the Soviet Union, where consumption hardly went beyond the level of subsistence, depending particularly strongly on rationing and mobilization. Next to the comparative perspective, transnational transfers are of vital importance to this topic. Despite their differences, the societies under consideration still maintained varying degrees of contacts and exchanges when it came to preparing and organizing home-front consumption. To what degree did wartime enemies learn from the experiences with and approaches to home front organization of their counterparts prior (e.g. lessons of World War I), during, and after the war?

Wartime consumption includes a wide range of aspects that will be considered comparatively. Securing civilian nutrition was a central element in wartime efforts to maintain the home front. Rationing and price controls were part of the war experience in all societies under consideration here, and the conference will ask how it was organized and how sacrifice was

legitimized. Advertising and the commercial entertainment industry were utilized to boost morale and to influence consumer desires. Wartime nations frequently relied on “virtual consumption,” the deference of immediate consumer satisfaction in anticipation of later rewards. What postwar promises were made to civilian populations, and what kind of visions of postwar consumption – from individual affluence to public welfare supply - were created and advertised?

Next to the organization of home front consumption, we are interested in actual social practice and the experience of consumers. To what degree did consumers have a voice, either mediated through polling and market research or by means of consumer organizations? What was the experience of minority consumers, women and other more specific segments of the consumer market? To what degree did alternative or illegal forms of provisions like home gardening, parcels from soldiers, theft and black markets spread? Finally, the conference will ask about the impact of the wartime consumer regimes both for the immediate postwar period and for longer range developments. What role did wartime consumption play, for example, in the emergence of military and commercial Keynesianism in the United States, for the shape of postwar Communism, or for the success of liberal consumer societies in postwar West-Germany and Japan?

To address these questions we invite historians of consumption, economic and social historians, new military historians, and cultural historians who work on these five nations during the World War II era to share their research. Comparative papers are especially encouraged as the conference hopes to comparatively assess the consumer experience of the war as well as the broader economic visions that underpinned them in four broad segments:

- I. Lessons from World War I: Political Legitimization and Avoiding Scarcity
- II. Organizing Homefront Consumption: Between State and Market
- III. Wartime Consumers: Experience and Social Practice of Homefront Consumption
- IV. Wartime Legacies: Impact on Postwar Consumption Regimes.

Within these broad categories we invite submission on a wide array of topics including, but not limited to: wartime nutrition, textiles and fashion, systems of rationing and price controls, advertising and market research, consumer organizations and businesses, as well as entertainment and commercial leisure.

Please, send a title, short abstract (max. 500 words), and CV to the GHI London (ghil@ghil.ac.uk) **by December 15, 2012**. Conference language will be English. For further inquiries you can contact Felix Römer (roemer@ghil.ac.uk) or Jan Logemann (logemann@ghi-dc.org).