MATTERS OF TASTE:
THE POLITICS OF FOOD IN DIVIDED GERMANY, 1945-1971

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I. Origins of the Project

My initial interest in studying the politics of food in Germany arose during the four years that I lived in Berlin after graduating from college. Moving to Berlin ten years after unification as someone who knew almost nothing about the Cold War history of the country, I was surprised by the ways in which daily life, and especially specific foods and ways of eating, were explicitly connected to either the former East Germany (GDR) or West Germany (FRG). This was not an academic but a personal observation: comments from friends and roommates, the Berliner Zeitung, TV and radio shows, all shared an apparently self-evident post-Cold War culinary vocabulary that to me was incomprehensible. When I eventually moved back to the United States to enroll in a doctoral program at the University of Michigan, I thought that here was finally a chance to try to understand this “oddity” of contemporary Germany. As a result, I returned to Germany in 2006 to begin my official dissertation research on a topic that I at the time called Ernährungspolitik (the politics of nutrition/food). At that time, I could not even have conceptualized many of the themes that were to shape the final project: medical disagreements over the definitions of hunger and obesity, collective feeding programs in schools and factories, domestic kitchen design, collective memories and fantasies attached to specific foods and ways of cooking.

Before I actually entered the archives, my idea was to do a comparative project on the postwar politics of food through the lens of Konsumkultur (consumer culture) and Alltagsgeschichte (everyday history). Both of these strategies of writing history have been particularly productive in recent innovative work on East Germany; for a historian of food, both were particularly attractive because they take material objects – in my case actual food itself – seriously. Following in the tradition of some of the most exciting recent work on consumer culture in German history, I anticipated writing a lot about shopping – about the well-known struggle to get good, or even adequate, groceries in the GDR.1 I also expected to document the tensions surrounding

the foods that post-unification Germany had immortalized as icons of East German food culture: most of all, absent and deeply desired bananas, but also Spreewaldgurken, Tempo-Linsen, and the omnipresent cabbage, sausages, and potatoes. West Germany, in my expected narrative, was going to serve as a normative foil against which East German development could be highlighted. To tell the truth, I was not really interested in exploring the FRG’s oft-repeated trajectory from Hungerjahre to Wirtschaftswunder and had accordingly allotted an embarrassingly short amount of time for the obligatory trip to Koblenz, where the Federal Republic’s archival holdings were kept.

Based in Berlin, I began my research year in the East German archives. My first major research site was the archive of the former Central Institute of Nutrition of the Academy of Science of the German Democratic Republic, an institute that, unusually, survived the Wende and has since been remade and renamed, now the German Institute for Nutritional Research (Deutsches Institut für Ernährungsforschung, or DIfE). I began my research by introducing myself to the institute’s librarian, Dagmar Kollhof, who had worked at the DIfE since the early 1980s and proved to be a wealth of information about food sciences, as well as everyday life in the GDR. Most importantly, she was an enthusiastic supporter of my vaguely described project on Ernährungspolitik.

One day early on in my research, I was sitting in the library thumbing through institutional records from the 1950s when an elderly man walked up to me. “Are you Frau Weinreb,” he asked, “the woman who is interested in Ernährungspolitik in the GDR?” He introduced himself as Dr. Martin Zobel, one of the most important nutritionists of East Germany, and a man who had worked with the Institute since its formation during the Soviet occupation. With great conviction, Dr. Zobel explained to me that he had “exactly what you need” to complete this project. I was, of course, incredibly excited; at the time, I myself had little idea what I was looking for. Rather mysteriously, he handed me a piece of paper with the handwritten citations of ten articles: “Here it is,” he said again, “exactly what you need.” With bated breath, I thanked him profusely and immediately tracked down and xeroxed the articles, located in nutritional and economic journals spanning the four decades of the GDR. When I had gathered them all, I finally sat down to read them – only to realize, painfully, that they were all about the implementation and development of East Germany’s school meal program. I was both frustrated and bored and after going through
them several times to make sure I had not missed any references to banana crises, or to popular anger over poorly stocked grocery stores, I put away the articles and returned to combing through the archives looking for the stories of high conflict that I envisioned when I conceptualized Ernährungspolitik.

A few months later, with a vast amount of fascinating material from the DIfE but no clearer idea of what the “politics of food” really meant, I traveled to my first West German archive. I began my research at the wonderful city archive in Cologne. Happily for me, the remarkably friendly and knowledgeable archivist here also “knew” exactly what I needed for this project. “Ah,” he said, “Ernährungspolitik. You need the files from the occupation years – the ‘hunger years.’ That was the time when food was political.” As with school lunches, at the time I was not particularly interested in the hunger years, a time in German history that seemed to have been exhaustively studied and whose symbolic and material meaning for postwar Germany seemed clear. Indeed, the hunger years were the single aspect of the “food history” of postwar West Germany to have already received a remarkable amount of scholarly and popular attention. However, being polite, I smiled and nodded – and accepted the material that he had prepared for me: a slim folder titled simply Hungertod. To be honest, I was a little disappointed with the content. Instead of lurid details of mass starvation and suffering, the file contained two brief cases – a doctor’s narrative of the death of a woman named Henriette Michel, and an autopsy report. Nonetheless, I dutifully transcribed them both.

Neither of these incidents – the articles on the East German school meal program, or the Cologne Hungertod folder – seemed particularly interesting to me at the time, nor did they immediately provoke any reflection about what my project was about. Instead, I set aside the convictions of my East and West German informants in my quest to find materials to tell the story that I wanted to tell. It was not until I had completed my research year, and finally began to process my materials, that I remembered what those two researchers – and many others I had casually talked to over the course of my research – had told me. Perhaps Dr. Zobel was on to something, I thought, as I realized that much as I had tried to avoid it, the materials that I had gathered on the GDR were dominated by the issue of collective feeding programs, in particular in schools and factories. And despite my initial intention to begin the dissertation with the year 1949, my
holdings from the Federal Republic included a disconcerting amount of material on the immediate postwar years.

As a result, I began to think more carefully and historically about the category of hunger in German history, which led to a new understanding of my project as reaching back not only to the Third Reich but to the deprivations of World War I and the experiences and memories of the infamous British Hunger Blockade. When my postwar sources evoked hunger, it was not simply a physical sensation but a personal memory, a historical legacy or cultural symbol. The further back in time I explored, the more I came to understand, as James Vernon recently reminded us, that hunger always has a history.4 Never was German hunger something that existed in a vacuum, as an exclusively German concern. Indeed, much of what gave German hunger in particular, its power as a category was the fact that it was recognized as significant by non-German powers, especially British and American politicians and economists. Unexpectedly, military leaders and politicians ranging from Herbert Hoover to Winston Churchill to Henry Morgenthau became key figures for thinking about the ways in which the German past informed memories, fantasies, and expectations of hunger and satiety after the Second World War.

After the First World War, most of the world believed that the primary cause of Germany’s defeat had been Britain’s infamous Hunger Blockade. Through most of the war and after its end, Great Britain had used its naval power to block overseas imports of food into the enemy country. The resulting domestic food shortages devastated the German civilian population, ultimately eroding popular support for the war.5 This mass hunger, experienced as an unjust weapon of war and the cause of military defeat, definitively shaped the interwar years.6 Hunger became inextricably linked with German experiences of war and of defeat. As the Berlin Medical Association painfully explained in a 1919 convention documenting the harm the blockade had done to German bodies: “[W]e have already spent of our bodies as much as is possible; no other nation has ever quietly and patiently stood such privations.”7 Long after the blockade had been replaced by the more general deprivations of the global depression of the interwar years, Germans continued to evoke the Hunger Blockade as an explanation for both the loss of the war and the general chaos of the Weimar years.

During the hungry thirties, the Nazi Party actively promoted the view that the First World War had been lost not by military defeat but due

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5 For a discussion of the importance of food concerns for popular German attitudes toward the state see Belinda Davis, *Home Fires Burning: Food, Politics, and Everyday Life in World War I Berlin* (Chapel Hill, 2000).


to a hunger-based collapse of the home front: “In the [First] World War, our weapons remained unvanquished; it was hunger that made the Volk cave in.” During the war, Hitler promised the populace that they would never suffer from hunger again, identifying himself as a safeguard against that most nefarious of threats. As a 1944 Nazi pamphlet put it: “[A]s paralyzed as the Germans were in the face of the threat of hunger before 1933, just as thorough were the defensive measures that Adolf Hitler established when he came to power. Today the front stands firm against hunger.” That same year, a moment when civilian rations had dropped dramatically and the food distribution system was in complete disarray, an optimistic nutritionist reported that “simple statistics do not adequately convey the degree to which the current food situation is better than that of the First World War.”

Parallel to such reassurances, Hitler’s propaganda apparatus warned the public that German defeat would result in mass starvation. Not only had the blockade confirmed Germany’s nutritional vulnerability; it had also established the Allies as wielders of the devastating “hunger-weapon,” and the Axis powers—and especially Germans—as their favorite targets. As I explored these themes, I realized that I had to grapple with hunger as a crucial category of experience and self-identification that cast a long shadow over the postwar era.

I also increasingly came to think that any narrative about food and nutrition in the GDR needed to address collective feeding programs. Indeed, I originally conceptualized this theme as paradigmatically “communist.” In other words, collective feeding programs were important for understanding East German history because the country was communist. This belief echoed West German discourse; nutritionists from the FRG explicitly linked family meals with liberal democracy and collective eating with both Nazism and Communism.

My early discovery that West Germany had canceled its school lunch program in 1950 at first seemed to support these linkages. However, when I examined the evolution of collective feeding policy, I discovered not only that the Nazi Party had discouraged school meals during the Third Reich, instead steadfastly promoting maternal meal preparation for German children, but also that capitalist countries had embraced school lunches after 1945 even more consistently than communist ones. On June 4th, 1946, United States President Truman famously signed the National School Lunch Act, claiming that “[C]ongress has acted with great wisdom in providing the basis for strengthening the nation through better nutrition for our school children ... In the long view, no nation is any healthier than

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11 Von der Decken, “Die Front gegen den Hunger: Ernährungskrieg 1939/43.”

12 “Schulspeisung gefährdet Eßkultur” BArch B 142 / 447.

its children or more prosperous than its farmers; and in the National School Lunch Act, the congress has contributed immensely both to the welfare of our farmers and the health of our children.” 

Early Cold War America in fact claimed that school meals would “dispel the gloom of Nazism and Communism from the face of the earth,” as “dictator nations exist upon hungry bodies and befuddled minds.”

In this postwar embrace of the school meal, it comes as little surprise that a 1951 UNESCO study of childhood health found that school meal programs were being expanded in every country examined, including India, Czechoslovakia, and France, with the exception of the Federal Republic.

Thus, rather than designating the Federal Republic as democratic or Western, the absence of school meals should be seen as a specifically West German cultural form of self-identification. In the words of the young nation’s leading nutritionists, “German parents want to have their children at home for their meals for educational reasons and to strengthen family life.”

As a result, it was claimed that school meals could never be part of West Germany’s nutritional policy. The East German state, by contrast, embraced school meals as a positive marker of modernity, while also casting them as a socialist virtue. Here school meals were an expression of “the humanistic character of the socialist social structure, in which children are cared for and treated as a precious resource. Concern and care for the young generation is an essential part of the socialist state, and another site that reveals its superiority over capitalist society.”

As I traced these narratives, I realized that neither specific ways of eating nor the presence or absence of hunger mapped neatly onto Cold War or German/non-German divisions. Instead, categories of hunger, satiety, and overabundance intersected in unpredictable places and in fascinating ways both over time and across the East-West divide.

The dissertation that emerged from my research, titled Matters of Taste: The Politics of Food in Divided Germany 1945-1971, traces the political and cultural economy of food in East and West Germany from the years of occupation through the first decades of the Cold War. By using food as its primary lens of analysis, my research attempts to develop a new analytical and methodological approach to modern European and global history. It does so by exploring the ways in which food concerns, nutritional policies, and hunger fantasies shaped the development of the two postwar German states. My work reveals the interconnectedness of the GDR and the FRG and challenges many of
the chronological and geographic divisions that have defined both German and Cold War historiography. It also highlights the ways in which ideas of gender, nation, and race, particularly the categories of Slavs and of Jews, were implicated in the everyday food practices of the populations of the two German states. In other words, theories and practices of cooking, shopping, eating, and feeding others were central to postwar definitions of communism, capitalism, and democracy. Matters of Taste offers new insights not only into the history of the FRG and the GDR, but into the global networks that shaped and were shaped by World War II and the Cold War. My wide chronological scope, reaching from the Nazi years through to unification in 1989/90, allows me to trace longer-term institutional developments as well as cultural discourse. The scope thus allows continuities and ruptures to emerge over both space and time, connections which are contextualized by both World War II and the Cold War.

II. Hunger and Germany

The outbreak of the Second World War meant that concerns over mass hunger suddenly shifted from the Third World to Europe, where food and nutrition were understood as central to the war itself, and in turn to the postwar world. The war, with its origins in global depression and its resolution characterized by promised prosperity and the division of the world into socialist and capitalist halves, has long been mythologized as the decisive turning point of the twentieth century. This was a war whose scale and impact were measured in terms of food lost and people starved. It was a time when the recognition of the global ramifications of hunger meant that postwar reconstruction centered on nutrition and food distribution, ensuring that nutritional science was “critical to an internationalist vision for the reconstruction of postwar Europe.” The postwar era revealed a commitment to the “vast enterprise of providing food for health for all people,” an undertaking “beset with difficulties” and “requiring international collaboration” in order to succeed. Both the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the United Nations Children’s’ Fund (UNICEF) were responses to the hunger generated by the war, underscoring the fact that “the construction of a postwar international order began with food.” Indeed, the postwar period was a time when hunger seemed the greatest enemy of civilization at the same time that global food production was skyrocketing. Although the official “global food crisis” was considered over by the beginning of

19 Vernon, Hunger, 151.
the 1950s, it ensured that the postwar era was shadowed by concerns over food shortages.

Rather than being a clear medical or biological state of being, hunger was and is a highly mutable concept. In the case of defeated and divided Germany, moreover, hunger was uniquely contested, consequential, and public. In the aftermath of the Third Reich and the Holocaust, ruled by the conflicting powers of the Americans, Soviets, British and French, dependent upon foreign food aid while convinced of their own imminent starvation, the people of Germany were unsurprisingly obsessed with their hunger. Critically engaging with and historicizing this obsession challenges widely held assumptions that hunger is a category worthy of historical analysis only when it is obviously present. Both the Cold War and the postwar relied upon the intertwined categories of hunger and satiety in order to define the years between 1945 and 1989, shaping them in reference to a time of hunger (the past of the war and the Depression) and a space of hunger (the Socialist East, the exploitative West, and the Third World).

Not only the reality and fear of famine, but also the production, distribution, and consumption of food shaped the emergent Cold War. Struggles over food production and consumption across divided Germany shaped not only specific policies but also emerging redefinitions of the place of the factory, school, and home in the new postwar order. The hunger suffered by Germans after the war was connected causally and symbolically to the (non-German) hunger caused by Germans during the war, most infamously in the context of the Holocaust. Both the rhetorical evocation and deliberate manipulation of hunger were central to Nazi social and economic policy, and in quite different ways for the capitalist and socialist societies that emerged out of defeat and occupation. At the same time, though, divided Germany was not simply the most obvious stage for “watching” the larger Cold War unfold; instead, the populations and states of both East and West Germany actively shaped postwar developments. Out of a hungry past, the two German states attempted to construct new, ideologically opposed postwar identities. In West Germany, debates over cooking and eating were central in the project of redefining the ideal worker, child and housewife – three central figures for the transition of the FRG from a Nazified society and pariah-state to one of the most successful modern democracies and capitalist economies in the postwar world. In different but related ways, the GDR struggled to create communist and German versions of these paradigmatic...
modern bodies – ones that were equally central to their productivist, rather than consumerist, ideology. My dissertation argues that this vocabulary of food and hunger was as connected to the past “hot” war as they were to the current “cold” one.

During the years of his rule, Hitler displayed a remarkably sophisticated grasp of the political power of food and hunger. The Nazi Party came to power during the hungry thirties, when much of the world was suffering from food shortages and economic depression. Nonetheless, Nazi Germany was alone in extracting such meaning and power from the physiological experience of hunger; nowhere else did hunger become a necessary category of belonging; and nowhere else did hunger seem both the most feared enemy and the most intimate friend of the state. Propagating a narrative of the German past in which military defeat and civilian suffering were both the cause and result of mass hunger, the Nazis measured military success and economic development through control over food. In other words, German national survival was cast as a battle against hunger.

Over the course of the Third Reich, hunger was continually redefined in the attempt to convince the population that it was well fed, and, simultaneously, that the Nazis were its only defense against a global plot for German starvation. Drawing upon Christian imagery of self-abnegation and the purifying force of hunger, Nazi rhetoric used hunger-based fantasies to define the Volksgemeinschaft and the Aryan race. According to the Nazis, military victory guaranteed access to vast food supplies; defeat, however, was linked to starvation. Nazi media regularly reported on mass famines in India, Asia, and Africa, blaming them on deliberate “hunger-policies” of the “British, Americans and Bolsheviks”; it assured the population that the Allies actively hoped for the “extermination of the German people through hunger.” Such warnings proved remarkably successful at maintaining civilian allegiance to the Third Reich. The Nazi Party used hunger and food discourse to construct the Volksgemeinschaft by identifying a specifically Germanic sort of hunger that was intrinsically different from the hungers suffered by other races, especially Slavs and Jews.

At the same time that the Nazis were developing their own unique “hunger discourse,” the Allies were also evoking similar fears of widespread famine. As the war dragged on, and casualties grew to previously unimaginable numbers, all sides agreed that control over food supplies would determine victory and defeat. The Allies, and indeed most of the world, saw Germany as the primary source of the

22 For more on the importance of the Hunger Blockade for the Nazi Party, see Ludolf Herbst, Der totale Krieg und die Ordnung der Wirtschaft: Die Kriegswirtschaft im Spannungsfeld von Politik, Ideologie und Propaganda, 1939-1945 (Stuttgart, 1982).

widespread hunger that existed in Europe for the entire war period, albeit in different places and at different times. The Western Allies linked starvation to the Third Reich not so much because of what we now think of as the Holocaust, with images of starving concentration camp inmates, but out of fear of the devastating impact of Nazi food seizures and the destruction of food production capabilities across Europe. In particular, the famines of Western Europe, especially in Belgium and the Netherlands, preoccupied the American and British forces during the war. Jews and communists from Europe and the United States also cast the Third Reich as a “Hunger Reich,” but they focused their critique on the Nazi treatment of the occupied lands of Eastern Europe, often specifically focusing on inequitable and racially based rationing programs (see Figure 1). Thus, all participants in the war – Axis and Allied forces, soldiers and civilians, Nazis, communists and Jews – imagined, experienced, and strategized the war with a vocabulary of food and hunger. As a result, the forces that were to occupy defeated Germany shared with the local population a language of fears and aspirations based on calories and nutritional status.

After the end of the war, the mass emergence of hunger on German soil seemed almost inevitable, especially to the men and women living in the four zones of occupation. In the aftermath of the war and the Holocaust, the German past had been officially gutted of all positive force, leaving a population without a center, and with empty bellies. At the same time, this emptiness offered Germans a remarkable opportunity. The end of Europe’s Second World War was a moment and a place primed to recognize, fear, and empathize with starvation. The use of hunger as a weapon by both Axis and Allied forces during the war, the unprecedented scale of wartime hunger and civilian famine, drops in agricultural productivity and a shift away from colonial and toward globalized trade relations, along with global food shortages, all meant that the Allied forces had been predicting postwar hunger since the early days of the war. At the same time, a widespread belief that hunger caused political unrest and revolution,
and that it had led to the rise of Nazism, meant that German hunger received particular attention in international postwar discourse.

I argue that the hunger experienced by Germans after World War II served multiple purposes, connecting the current moment with the Nazi past while simultaneously engaging with new concerns over the threat of global hunger and the politics of food aid. Negotiations over this hunger were contested, unstable, and had tremendous consequences not only for the development of Germany but for the establishment of international languages of humanitarianism and for food aid policy at large. I became interested in exploring the multiple meanings attached to hunger during the years of occupation, and particularly in the multiple, and often mutually exclusive, categories of identification and community-formation that aligned with the diagnosis of “being hungry.” There are three primary framings for hunger that dominate the archival records. The first category is that of German-ness; immediately after the end of the war, hunger became the single most meaningful marker of a German identity at the same time that it proved profoundly unknowable. By concentrating on medical discourse, the rich body of articles and medical reports by German and Allied doctors diagnosing and analyzing the state of the German civilian population after the collapse of the Third Reich, my research explores the fluid and ultimately indefinable nature of “hunger” as a quantifiable medical category.

The centrality of hunger for the postwar era meant that almost as soon as the war was over, Germans began describing this time as the “Hunger Years.” Men and women in all four zones experienced their collective and individual hunger as inseparable from military defeat, occupation and, gradually, reconstruction. In the aftermath of the collapse of the Third Reich, the first months and years of occupation witnessed the emergence of a collective narrative of German hunger that was rooted in the various traumas of the twentieth century, and that made German-ness itself synonymous with the constant threat of hunger. The German Volk was remade as a people joined not by links of blood and soil, or a shared experience of war and defeat, but rather by the common experience of hunger: “[T]he hunger disease today has attacked our entire Volk and knows no social distinctions.”

The voices of German civilians, politicians, doctors, and public figures all agreed that “we hunger all together.” By asserting this politicized and internationally relevant form of suffering, these German voices documented the degeneration of their bodies in painful detail in order

24 Ferdinand Bertram, “Über Ernährungsschäden vom Standpunkt der zentralen Regulierungen Teil II,” Deutsche Medizinische Wochenschrift, no. 5/8 (February 1948.)

to display their innocence and powerlessness, just as these performances of suffering forged new bonds of shared victimization.

In the specific context of occupied Germany, hunger also acquired the ability to explicitly transform its sufferer into a victim of Nazism. I explore the ways in which hunger became a specifically postwar category of suffering, one that was granted an apolitical universality in accordance with international political and economic pressures to establish new networks of humanitarian aid alongside international networks of trade and exchange. The liberation of Nazi concentration camps created a new scale for measuring hunger, which came to be associated with the most grotesque crimes of the Third Reich, particularly the mass starvation of Jews and Soviet prisoners of war. The Holocaust’s new vocabulary and images of hunger shaped the development of the postwar food economy and global food aid programs. As a result, German doctors and civilians knowingly exploited the vocabulary and imagery that had been produced by Nazi starvation policies in order to align themselves with the victims of the Third Reich. Not only did their hunger mark them as innocent victims of dictatorship; it also allowed Germans to display a particularly modern self-identification. In their own scrawny bodies, defeated Germans saw an expression of their own suffering, as their connection to Nazism and the horrors of the war melted away with their excess flesh.

At the same time, the new Cold War categories of “communist” and “capitalist” were translated and performed as both gustatory and political. It is not a coincidence that the first great clash of the Cold War, the Berlin Airlift, revolved around the feeding or starving of the German civilian population. Indeed, I argue that a central purpose of the airlift was to validate some hungers and invalidate others. On the one hand, the airlift defined non-Jewish, anti-communist civilian Germans as the ultimate postwar victims of hunger. It also, equally importantly, established the central food-based categories of the Cold War that shaped German division: the communist Soviets as deprivers of food, and the capitalist Americans as providers (see Figure 2). The occupation and division of Germany not only provided a central stage for watching the developing Cold War take shape. The conflicts and compromises between the Allied powers, and between individual occupation powers and the German civilian population, went on to become crucial for the nature and scope of the global Cold War itself.
III. Eating and Feeding in the Cold War

Because the end of the war brought with it the complete breakdown of the German economy, ushering in a time of grim shortages and widespread hunger, the immediate postwar era focused an inordinate amount of attention on the regulation of consumption and the increase of productivity. Thus, after the war both the FRG and the GDR came to see domestic food production—wives’ and mothers’ “home cooking”—as necessary for the successful (re)construction of the German family and state. Yet, despite radically different rhetorics over the gendered nature of labor, both East and West Germany expressed great discomfort with the meaning and nature of female domestic labor, especially cooking. It is against this backdrop that the private home, and above all the dinner table, became one of the most important places for postwar Germans to negotiate the relationship between everyday life and modernity. Both East and West Germans claimed the family meal as central to negotiating individual and collective relationships to the past and the future, and for the shaping of labor and leisure during the postwar decades.

The Home-Cooked Meal

In the aftermath of a devastating war and even more devastating defeat, women were seen as the primary placeholders of a “German-ness” that had been rendered largely untenable in the eyes of the world. Through her tireless struggles during the hunger years, the German woman had come to embody the values that had traditionally defined German culture: a strong work ethic, sense of self-sacrifice, dedication, and absolute commitment to a higher good: her family. In particular, women’s work at feeding their families during these years of shortages signaled Germany’s transition from Nazism toward a new socialist or capitalist modernity.26 The family meal, a model of food production and consumption that had only become widespread in the early twentieth century, symbolized all that postwar Germans imagined they had lost due to the war and occupation, and all they hoped to regain: familial integrity, physical and spiritual health,

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economic stability, and material well-being. In the two German states, the family meal was central to negotiations over the definition of labor, exchanges between genders and generations, and the relationship between the individual and the collective. In both the socialist GDR and the capitalist FRG, remaking the family meal was both symbolic of and a necessary prerequisite to creating a healthy postwar German society.

The Federal Republic constructed the home-cooked meal as the symbolic heart of the West German economic miracle, the literal and metaphoric sustenance of a healthy and “occidental” German family. Postwar West Germans assigned a remarkable array of tasks and responsibilities to the home-cooked meal. It was supposed to maintain and improve the health of all eaters; it was to buoy up the economy and strengthen the consumer marketplace; it was a German housewife’s main outlet for creativity, pleasure, and self-expression; it should provide a needed counterpart to the German man’s stressful and rushed work environment by offering a vital opportunity to relax and slow down; it was a primary site of socialization and familial interaction; it was one of the last remaining ways to preserve German culture; and it was a site of childhood education. In the words of a 1953 consumer guide for housewives, purchasing and preparing food was “the core basis of all female activities, perhaps even the single most important one because it is the most natural expression of the highest task of the woman: motherhood and caring for the family.”

Because women’s cooking was thought to shape the family that consumed it, changing the kitchen seemed the easiest and most effective way of remaking that family, incorporating it into a new capitalist and consumer-based society while preserving, through the continued insistence on female cooking, traditional gender and familial relations. Indeed, through her kitchen, the housewife was located at the heart of West Germany’s economic miracle. As the primary shopper of the family, she became the icon of consumerism, and food was one of her most important commodities. Yet at the same time, her consumption of food transformed her into a producer of food for her children, thus making her not simply the “model consumer” but a complex figure who regulated familial consumption, production, and reproduction. (See Figure 3.)

In dramatic contrast, the GDR was not caught up in an all-consuming search for the “harmonious unity” of a “traditionally” prepared and consumed home-cooked meal. Here, modernity was
officially embraced and celebrated; the establishment of a socialist state demanded a radical remaking of the traditional German diet and eating culture. Early on, socialist nutritionists declared an official battle with tradition. In 1950, less than a year after the country’s founding, nutritionist Richard Schielicke announced that “the movement away from the old traditions, which are found in abundance in our cuisine, is an absolute necessity.”

In the East, modernity’s impact on family life was defined by an increase in female employment but this was seen as positive both for the women themselves and, crucially, for their families. Heinrich Gräfe, leading dietician and public relations figure at the Institute of Nutritional Research, explained that the “incorporation of women into the public world” meant that “we must realize that their thousand-year-old duty to be responsible for the shaping of daily food intake can no longer be maintained.”

East German cookbooks condemned “the humiliation and exploitation associated with kitchen work,” which was structurally linked to unappreciated labor, marital inequality, and improperly nourished children; all these were culinarily based problems to which socialism offered an alternative: the public canteen.

Thus, in the GDR, the primary freedom that the state offered women was not the freedom to shop but to work. As in the West, both consumption and reproduction remained associated with women, but they were explicitly subordinated to the “right” to perform paid labor. As a result, food and diet were shifted from the sphere of consumption to that of production. Household work, and especially cooking, was often denigrated or cast as an unpleasant chore but its nature as work was never denied. Domestic labor was an obstacle to be overcome in the process of engaging women in the workforce.

30 Heinrich-Karl Gräfe, Richtige Ernährung, gesunde Menschen. (Leipzig, 1967), 120.
The solution was communal meals, which were intended to reduce home cooking to a simple evening meal and the more elaborate Sunday lunch. Canteen cooking took on the primary responsibility for maintaining the biological and cultural health of the population. Despite this shift, family cooking retained tremendous significance in the GDR; it continued to consume the largest percentage of female household labor, it played an important role in socialization practices and defining familial structure, and it was located at the troubled heart of the GDR’s complex and conflicted attempt to remake categories of production and consumption.

**School Meal Programs**

While the importance of domesticity and the ideological construction of the home for the Cold War have long been acknowledged, less attention has been paid to two other major sites of postwar economic and social development: the school and the factory. My dissertation begins to address this gap through careful studies of these places of postwar modernity and Cold War competition, with a chapter each on debates surrounding the factory canteen and the school meal program.

In the aftermath of war and occupation, the school acquired particular importance in connection with debates over children’s health, the role that children were to play in the reconstruction of postwar Germany, and the appropriate relationship between the family and the state. These tensions were especially explosive when it came to the issue of the school lunch. One of the first major policy decisions of the FRG was its controversial decision to cancel the school lunch program in 1950. This made West Germany virtually the world’s only industrialized nation without school lunches. In contrast, the GDR selected the school lunch program as one of its flagship programs, developing a system of school meal distribution with one of the world’s highest participation rates. Indeed, throughout the duration of the Cold War, and despite growing pressure to remake and liberalize West Germany’s educational structure, the country’s mainstream medical establishment remained firmly convinced of an inherent tension between childhood health and school meals. Dr. Werner Droese, Director of the Institute for Child Nutrition in Dortmund, wrote in 1970 of the feeding dilemmas faced by the full-day school. Warning that “it is almost impossible for a school’s collective feeding program to appropriately acknowledge the different appetites and individual
tastes of the schoolchild,” Droese feared the negative impact of such meals on the fragile body and more fragile ego of the growing child.\textsuperscript{33}

The West German schoolroom was imagined as a place to nourish democracy alongside individualism – both of which seemed gravely threatened by any sort of collective feeding program.

Unsurprisingly, the story was dramatically different in the Eastern part of the divided country. Here the end of occupation and the founding of the GDR did not lead to the end of school meals, but rather to their increased political, economic, and cultural value, as they were deliberately integrated into the formation of a new socialist state. While the East German government and its medical and educational authorities assumed that this new prioritization of \textit{Schulspeisung} would be rapidly embraced by the population, in fact it took over a decade for the general population and, most of all, for mothers, to accept school meals as part of their children’s daily diet. Indeed, the social and economic goals of school meals as well as their cultural meaning changed over the course of the early postwar years due to pressures from mothers and children as well as changing economic realities. By exploring institutional changes and policy reform alongside letters of complaint from parents, teachers, and occasionally even children, I trace the highly differentiated evolution of school meals in the GDR, from one of the most contested state policies to its flagship nutritional program. Although the two German states shared basic nutritional standards and expectations for individual diets, they taught their children about diet in quite different ways. In the FRG, nutrition proved a way of teaching about the lost German lands that had been ceded to Poland, Czechoslovakia and the USSR after the war, whereas in the GDR, it was a way to encourage a locally focused “healthful” integration into the international socialist family/community.

\textbf{The Workplace Canteen}

In contrast to these radically divergent approaches to feeding children in East and West Germany, the workplace canteen was constructed as a site for negotiating the meaning and value of labor in \textit{both} East and West Germany. In both German states, there was great concern over the impact of modern work on “worker health,” a category that implied a strong and effective masculinity, a racially delineated body, and an economically profitable model of productivity. Despite a consensus that canteens were an unavoidable aspect of a “modern...
economy. East and West German nutritionists and economists saw their ideal function as dramatically different. In the GDR, the factory was claimed as the new center of a German socialist identity. In a land that identified itself through its workers, the factory was seen as the ultimate, even only, site of authentic labor. Canteen meals were literally intended to create a new collective, one opposed to the Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft*. In the West, the factory canteen was the only form of collective eating supported by the state, but this support was contingent on a highly classed and gendered definition of what the West German worker was. Here, canteens paradoxically became a way to reaffirm traditional class hierarchies and familial eating models.

During the early decades of the division, the feeding of workers was a crucial economic concern in both East and West Germany; the *Wirtschaftswunder* of the FRG demanded well-nourished laborers as much as the socialist system idealized collective feeding. Nutritionists in East and West Germany, and indeed throughout much of the world, argued that collective meals and eating outside of the home were definitional to industrial modernity, and they promoted workplace canteens as both necessary and advantageous for a strong national economy. In the GDR, nutritionists, economists, and social theorists crafted a model of the factory canteen as the symbolic crux of the country’s development. Indeed, the canteen had an ideological significance in the GDR unmatched by any other aspect of the food economy:

[O]f all the policies which were created to realize our goal [of socialism] since the new construction of our entire society after the collapse of 1945, particularly significant is the enabling of our workers to partake in the communal feeding program, which distributes a warm meal during their time of work in the factory, and not simply any meal, but a meal that in always improving quality, preparation and healthfulness matches the requirements of the newest nutritional sciences.34

East German canteen meals are particularly interesting because they complicate the traditional critique made of the Soviet zone of occupation and East Germany, namely that the Soviet authorities and then the East German government focused their energies on production at the expense of consumer culture and consumption.35 There was one

34 “So sollte eine Werkküche geplant und eingerichtet werden,” *Die neuzzeitliche Gasträtte*, no. 6 (1956).
sort of consumption which even the most radical communist could not put aside until the reconstruction of the German economy was complete: the feeding of workers. The factory canteen was seen as the crux of adult socialist society, a place where all East German men and women came together to eat and to learn about nutrition. The canteen did little to change traditional culinary gender hierarchies, as women continued to be the primary domestic food producers. However, both men and women, as workers, were also seen for the first time as productive consumers of food.

In contrast to the GDR, West Germany lacked a unified opinion as to the shape and aims of workplace canteens, places that proved difficult to integrate into the Federal Republic’s self-understanding as a consumer-based and family-centered society. Unlike the situation in socialist countries as well as in most of Western Europe, where canteens were conceptualized as primarily blue-collar institutions, here the canteen was integrated into the middle-class ideal of the Wohlstandsgesellschaft or “Prosperity Society.” West Germans linked full bellies with the successful overcoming of the Nazi past and their integration into the anti-communist, Christian West. As a result, these full bellies were ideologically over-determined—and they were not associated with the workplace collective but with the private family table. West Germans assumed an innately human, and especially German “internal revulsion toward mass feeding, toward the Abfütterung [feeding of animals] or however else the workers tend to disparagingly name the canteen meal.”

Canteens were thought to threaten Germans’ hard-won democratic individualism. Rather than liberating women and strengthening community, West German nutritionists saw canteens as both cause and effect of a marked degeneration in the family.

Consequently, the West German canteen was remade as both capitalist and Christian, complete with frequent references to the communal eating traditions of the New Testament, as well as pseudo-ethnographic invocations of a Germanic heritage of shared meals. As canteens removed workers’ diets from housewives’ control, they become alternate sites of leisure, pleasure, and consumption. Thus, the FRG’s canteens were reshaped to confirm and strengthen firmly held notions of the interdependence but separateness of the public and private spheres, and of production and consumption. Rather than emphasizing the nutritional makeup of the food, West German canteen advisors focused on the pleasure of the consumer; tasty

36 “Für und Wider den grossen Topf,” Das Großküchent-Magazin 1, no. 3 (1949).
rather than healthy meals promised to increase an employee’s sense of indebtedness to his employer.

IV. Culinary Memories and Hunger Fantasies in Unified Germany

My dissertation’s three thematic chapters on the home-cooked meal, school meal programs, and workplace canteens trace the changing nutritional debates, economic policies, and cultural expectations that surrounded the figures of the housewife, schoolchild, and worker through the Cold War. Of course, these three categories were disturbingly fluid, and in fact they often overlapped and flowed into one another. Men cooked, women worked, and children both cooked and worked. Nonetheless, my dissertation argues that specific ways of eating were central to the delineation of these three categories as key societal tropes. These three bodies all needed, in different ways, to be resuscitated and reclaimed after the horrors and hungers of the war and occupation. Food provided the means to realize this vast project of creating “new Germans” for two new German states. At the same time, although this project was a specifically German one, it was also inextricably intertwined with larger, international Cold War projects to define a new post-war modernity that was split between communism and capitalism. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, the end of the Cold War itself was also a gustatory experience.

On November 9, 1989, the Berlin Wall fell. In the days and weeks that followed, throngs of East Germans rushed across the newly permeable border. Giddy men, women, and children filled the small towns and cities that had lined the western side of the Wall. West Berlin, in particular, was overwhelmed; roads were impassable, shops sold out of most of their products, and normal life briefly ground to a halt. That same month, the Federal Republic’s satiric magazine Titanic published an issue dedicated to this historic moment. The November 1989 cover image depicted a smiling “Zonen-Gaby,” or “Gaby from the [Eastern] zone.” (See Figure 4.) In her left hand, she clutches an enormous cucumber, carefully peeled so that strips of green skin fall down the cucumber’s flesh like a banana peel. The headline is Gaby’s proud declaration: “My first banana.” The Titanic picture was only the most famous in a veritable flood of cartoons and images memorializing the fall of the Wall, an overwhelming number of which focused on bananas.
Bananas, indeed, seemed well-nigh ubiquitous during the drama of unification. In Berlin, groups of West German retirees gathered at the Brandenburg Gate to greet East German newcomers with free bananas. Photos of frantic grocers trying to protect mounds of bananas from the appetites of long-deprived Easterners projected a mixture of humor and very real fear. Bananas had long been an obsession for both East and West Germans, who recognized them as one of the most important symbols of postwar prosperity. In the early 1950s and over the angry protests of France and most of Western Europe, West German chancellor Konrad Adenauer had successfully negotiated the Federal Republic of Germany’s exclusive right to import bananas tax-free, making them one of West Germany’s cheapest fruits and ensuring that West Germans would become Europe’s leading banana consumers. West Germany’s incredibly cheap banana supply was enabled by the country’s reliance on the American-controlled banana trade, the United States’ infamous access to its neighboring “banana republics.”

It was after World War II, in the wake of decolonization and the emergence of the Cold War, that the international banana market exploded. American control over the market was solidified through the consolidation of the banana industry in Central and South America. (In contrast, former European colonial powers like France and England were contractually bound to import bananas from their former colonies—Guadalupe, Martinique, Grenada, St. Lucia—at far higher prices.)

Adenauer’s economic policy was intended to elevate bananas to a position of particular significance within divided Germany—it was a fruit deliberately transformed into one of the most important symbols of postwar prosperity and luxury as well as Western consumption. Bananas were steadily integrated into daily eating habits, as housewives were taught to broil, fry, and mash them, serving them with sweet desserts as well as savory roasts, in drinks and as confections. In 1961, the country produced its first cookbook dedicated exclusively to banana recipes. In 1989, the year of unification, West German banana consumption reached a new peak, importing 800,000 tons.
of bananas, with the average West German eating 14 kilos a year. In contrast, the government of East Germany had little access to bananas, though even the geeky Gaby was unlikely to have never enjoyed the mystical pleasures of the fruit. The small socialist country’s primary source of tropical fruits, Cuba, was not a banana producer, and supplies from North Africa and Asia were unreliable, of inferior quality, and often prohibitively expensive. Even during the peak of the GDR’s consumer prosperity, bananas, like most tropical fruits, were available only during holidays and special events, and then in limited quantities.

The ubiquity of bananas in German unification discourse cannot be explained by the fruit’s excessive consumption in the West and its scarcity in the East. Figures like Gaby derived their power and resonance not from the real absence of the fruit in the GDR, but from West German assumptions of a specific and insatiable East German hunger. This particular fantasy had endured from the hunger years through the decades of division and ensured that, when the Wall fell, West Germans were convinced that it was an appetite for bananas which had finally motivated the people of East Germany to “tear down that wall.”

Although the skyrocketing levels of banana consumption in the immediate aftermath of unification quickly stabilized, there is no doubt that unification radically increased former East Germans’ banana eating habits. East Germans, however, were not the only ones whose banana consumption was changed by the events of November 1989. With German unification, the European Union finally called a halt to the country’s decidedly special treatment. In 1991, German newspapers began to warn with horror that “Brussels is determined to raise the banana price drastically” – indeed, prices rapidly rose, becoming equivalent to those of the rest of Western Europe for the first time since the end of the war. Although East German appetites could not really be held responsible for bananas’ rising price and resulting decreased availability, the coinciding of reunification with the establishment of a standardized EU banana import tax certainly did not go unnoticed. When I first moved to Berlin in the late 1990s, I was completely perplexed by the frequency of headlines in the papers grimly tracing the rising cost of bananas. No longer were bananas cheaper than homegrown produce, cheap enough to be given away with impunity to poor friends and hungry relatives. Small wonder that a 1991 cartoon depicted a West German man slipping on a banana peel and screaming as he fell: “Damn reunification!”

39 Ursula Brunner and Rudi Pfeifer, Zum Beispiel Bananen (Göttingen, 1993), 73.
41 Eulenspiegel (May 1991).
In today’s unified Germany, the former German Democratic Republic is popularly remembered in terms of specific flavors, smells and “tastes,” a phenomenon described with the term Ostalgie, or nostalgia for the East. The phenomenon of Ostalgie frequently focuses on food products and recipes “native” to the former GDR. Movies like the international hit Goodbye, Lenin highlight processed foods, especially sausages and Spreewald pickles, as evocative symbols of the vanished country. Exhibits on the former East Germany inevitably display an array of canned, pickled, and packaged foods alongside kitchen utensils and cooking equipment. An entire genre of cookbooks dedicated to the recipes of the GDR has emerged, popular among citizens from both former German states. Some are primarily intended as entertainment and include anecdotes, songs, and advertisements from the GDR in an effort to recreate lived experience from a dietary perspective. 42 Taken for granted in all of these representations of the former GDR, however, is the fact that such culinary information preserves a meaningful and revealing aspect of the vanished country.

My research argues that hunger and food were crucial for how both East and West Germans understood themselves and each other for the entire duration of the Cold War. By exploring the ways in which food concerns, nutritional policies, and hunger fantasies shaped the development of the two postwar German states, my dissertation explores the interconnectedness of the GDR and the FRG while embedding both states within the global networks that were produced by World War II and the Cold War. Concerns over food, hunger, and nutrition connected schools, factories and private homes in East and West Germany and were pivotal for specifically postwar refashions of the worker, child and housewife. Unsurprisingly, the particular nexus of food, politics, and popular practice that emerged during the Cold War has had a long legacy. In present-day unified Germany, concerns over high numbers of immigrants, poor educational testing results, and economic stagnation have led to reconsiderations of school lunch policies and other collective feeding programs, eliciting strong reactions from state officials, parents, factory employees, business owners, and political activists. 43 Thus, while I show that evolving practices of cooking, shopping, eating and feeding others were central to specifically postwar definitions of communism, capitalism, and democracy, my research also opens up larger questions of the relationship between production, consumption, and cultural identity that resonate in other contemporary contexts. The specific weight and meaning of the German past, the war, and the Holocaust, shaped


43 A recent New York Times article, for example, explored how an ongoing switch to all-day school schedules—and consequently expanded school lunch programs—brought to light stark divides over questions of economic policy, family life, eating practices, and proper gender roles. Katrin Bennhold, “In Germany, a Tradition Falls, and Women Rise,” New York Times, January 17, 2010.
the food worlds of the Cold War Germanies. Memories and expectations of hunger and satiety framed individual and collective visions of the German past and future. Claiming and rejecting specific sorts of hunger, rationales for developing strategies of feeding Germans and non-Germans, as well as the encouragement of appetites both for specific foods and ways of eating, all were tied to the contested process of Vergangenheitsbewältigung. My dissertation argues that precisely these domestic, bodily, and gustatory concerns made up some of the most significant and meaningful ways for Germans to negotiate the links and breakages between their past, present and future.

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