THE CONSUMER ON THE HOME FRONT:
SECOND WORLD WAR CIVILIAN CONSUMPTION
IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Joint Conference of the German Historical Institutes London, Moscow, and Washington at the GHI London, December 5-7, 2013. Conveners: Hartmut Berghoff (GHI Washington), Andreas Gestrich (GHI London), Nikolaus Katzer (GHI Moscow), Jan Logemann (GHI Washington), Felix Römer (GHI London), Sergey Kudryashov (GHI Moscow). Participants: David Clampin (Liverpool), Donald Filtzer (London), Mila Ganeva (Oxford / Ohio), Sheldon Garon (Princeton), Wendy Z. Goldman (Pittsburgh), Neil Gregor (Southampton), Cynthia L. Henthorn (New York), Oleg Khlevnyuk (Moscow), Jan Lambertz (Washington), Bettina Liverant (Calgary), Erina Megowan (Georgetown), Erich Pauer (Marburg), Nicole Petrick-Felber (Jena), Ines Prodöhl (GHI Washington), Uwe Spiekermann (GHI Washington), Pamela Swett (Hamilton), Frank Trentmann (London), Sergej Zhuravlev (Moscow), Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska (Chicago).

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, e.g. in gender and race relations. Collaboratively organized by three German Historical Institutes, this conference looked at the relationship between 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. In addition to posing comparative questions of how war time 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 World War II, building on the lessons from the preceding war.
The “modern” home front under conditions of total war was seen as paramount in maintaining civilian morale, which meant that a shift to military consumption was inherently limited. Minimum standards of provisioning and a sense of distributional 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 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. In the first keynote address of the conference, Sheldon Garon 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. Using Japan as his vantage point, Garon highlighted shared challenges in maintaining production and morale, as well as in food security and rationing. Like other powers, the Japanese paid close attention to the lessons of World War I and 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 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 neighborhood organizations in organizing rice rationing in Japan 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 showed that while coffee consumption almost entirely shifted to surrogate products, due to a collapse of imports, 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 Prodöhl’s 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 supplies 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. A “flat rate” rationing system promised a sense of equitable sacrifice, but black markets, self-supplied consumers in the countryside 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 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. From soldiers’ point of view, he concluded, the maintenance of sufficient caloric intake outweighed the negative experience of deteriorating food quality, which was not in the least due to the vivid memory of conditions during the First World War. Donald Flitzer 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 rife 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 furthermore provided surprising parallels between liberal democracies, such as the United Kingdom and the United States, and the more organized economy of Nazi Germany. David Clampin related the British case wherein 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 Henthorn argued, also blurred the line between government propaganda and commercial ads. The overriding concern of the U.S. industry, however, was to ensure a return to an unfettered market economy in the postwar years. The consumerist world of the future was to be a world of free enterprise. German advertisers, as Pamela Swett 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 advertising executives, too, and Swett’s examples suggested a surprising degree of continuity from the pre- to postwar period.

Wartime nations thus frequently relied on “virtual consumption,” the deference of immediate consumer satisfaction in anticipation of later rewards. In addition to advertising, the commercial entertainment industry was utilized to boost morale and to 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 Sergej Zhuravlev 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 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 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 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 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 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 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 American neighbor, informed postwar efforts in controlling 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 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 Khlevnyuk showed that basic structures of
provision remained in place from the 1930s to the 1950s, but victory
in the war promoted a growing gap between consumer expecta-
tions 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 center of Uwe Spiekermann’s
paper, which traced the effects of efforts by German nutrition experts
to improve military food. Iconic consumer goods of the postwar
“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 and
civilian home fronts 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- to
postwar eras. Especially for the more developed consumer econo-
mies, World War II 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 com-
parative 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 war-
time 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.

Jan Logemann (GHI Washington)