

Revenge of the Domestic



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"Revenge of the Domestic" examines gender relations in East Germany from 1945 to the 1970s, focusing especially on the relationship between ordinary women, the Communist Party, and the state created by the Communists, the German Democratic Republic (GDR). The book weaves together personal stories from interviews, statistical material, and evidence from archival research in Berlin, Potsdam, Leipzig, Merseburg, and Chemnitz to reconstruct the complex interplay between state policy toward women and the family on the one hand, and women's reactions to policy on the other. Donna Harsch demonstrates that women resisted state decisions as citizens, wageworkers, mothers, wives, and consumers, and that in every guise they maneuvered to overcome official neglect of the family. As state dependence on female employment increased, the book shows, the Communists began to respond to the insistence of women that the state pay attention to the family. In fits and starts, the party state begrudgingly retooled policy in a more consumerist and family-oriented direction. This "domestication" was partial, ambivalent, and barely acknowledged from above. It also had ambiguous, arguably regressive, effects on the private gender arrangements and attitudes of East Germans. Nonetheless, the economic and social consequences of this domestication were cumulatively powerful and, the book argues, gradually undermined the foundations of the GDR.

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