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The Experiences of Women in the GDR

Introduction

In *The Communist Manifesto*, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels described the goals of Communism and the theory behind it. Marx and Engels argued that the forces behind global history are a result of class struggles, of the ruling class subjugating the working class.¹ They describe the modern society in which they lived as one where the disparity, the class conflict, between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat is apparent with capitalism. Marx and Engels believed that a revolution was coming and once the revolution began, it would change society. Unlike previous revolutions which shifted power to a new ruling class instead of the workers, this proletariat revolution would usher in a new era of societal, economic, and political equality under the new model of communism.

In regard to women, *The Communist Manifesto*, says that, “The bourgeois sees in his wife a mere instrument of production.”² Just as the bourgeois is claimed to covet the production means such as factories, the male portion of the bourgeois exploit the women of society as if they were a piece of machinery to be used. Marx and Engels argue that Communists are liberators of class and of gender and see Communism as a means to achieve equality between nations and the sexes by uniting the working force of the world.

In Marx and Engels’ lifetime, society was patriarchal and restricted for women. Communism, as Marx and Engels proposed, offered the chance of equality between the

¹ Friedrich, Engels and Karl Marx. “The Manifesto of the Communist Party.” In *The Communist Manifesto*. Penguin Books, 2002, 218-257.

² Friedrich, Engels and Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, 240

sexes. In a Communist run country, such as East Germany during the Cold War era, what did that say for women in the workforce and women's education? Jan Gross stated the question well when he asked, "How is the labor force, and family structure and life, affected by the unprecedented activation of young people and women?"³ What are the realities of such ideals?

This paper will answer the question, "what was a woman's experience in the GDR?"

The Split: The Creation of East Germany

The question posed is important to answer and analyze. After World War II and the split in Germany between the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), society fundamentally changed between the East and the West. In the communist GDR, women and men were both expected to work, whereas before society existed in a patriarchal context. Women were expected to stay at home and care for the children and do any household chores. The ideology behind the GDR was that both men and women had to be active members in waged labor. How did this affect society? How did this affect the standing of women, or was it a gilded liberation?

Communism promised equality in all regards in society between all races and between the genders. A communist system would remove the class systems, that kept the workers oppressed and the ruling class wealthy and in power, and provide all citizens with work—work that did not take advantage of the worker. These and several others are the claims that communist leaders and believers would promote, but the question is, was it true? Were women in East Germany liberated in ways that they were not under a capitalist system? Did the West provide women with less resources for education, employment, and as a whole, equality? Was the standard of living in East Germany comparable to West Germany?

³ Gross, Jan. "War as Revolution." In *The Establishment of Communist Regimes in Eastern Europe, 1944-1949*, edited by Norman Naimark and Leonid Gibianskii, Westview Press, 1998, 18.

After Germany's defeat during World War II, the country and the capital, Berlin, was split among four nations: The United States, Great Britain, France, and the Soviet Union. The Western powers were in control of West Germany and West Berlin while the Soviet Union took control of East Germany and East Berlin. From 1949 until 1989, East Germany was led by a one-party, communist rule.⁴ In 1989, the wall separating East and West Germany came down, and soon after. The communist system in East Germany collapsed and the two sides (East and West Germany) started the process of reunification. When the wall came down and the two countries became one again, the world looked at the differences that existed between a free market and a communist planned economy. The results favored West Germany.

Women in Waged Labor

For the communist system of work, women were vital to the workforce. There was an expectation that women would join the workforce alongside men. If the norm before was that the men worked and the women were expected to remain at home and care for the home and children, this shift in the demographics of the workforce would fundamentally change women's role in society. As the historian Donna Harsh states, "East German Communists believed that the most important step toward women's equality was their participation in waged labor."⁵ For women to be able to participate in waged labor, reproductive rights and access to childcare would have to be provided since women would be outside of the home.

In the 1970's, the Communist party of the GDR, the SED, introduced new policies for the workforce.⁶ Many of these policies were geared toward women in the workforce due to the strain women were feeling in their double roles, although some related to pensions and

⁴ U.S. Department of State: Office of the Historian, *A Guide To The United States' History Of Recognition, Diplomatic, And Consular Relations, By Country, Since 1776: East Germany (German Democratic Republic)*

⁵ Harsch, Donna. "Sex, Divorce, and Women's Waged Work." In *Private Lives and State Policy in the Early German Democratic Republic in Gender Politics and Everyday Life in State Socialist Eastern and Central Europe*, edited by Shana Penn and Jill Massino. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, 98.

⁶ Allison, Mark. "More from Less: Ideological Gambling with the Unity of Economic and Social Policy in Honecker's GDR." *Central European History* 45, no. 1 (2012.): 102-105.

general wage increase. This was commonly called the double burden.⁷ Women in the GDR had the option and were encouraged to participate in waged labor unlike those in the West, but there were issues and inconsistencies with doing so. Women who worked were also expected to take care of household duties and any childcare needs. The Familiengesetzbuch der DDR, Einführungsgesetz zum Familiengesetzbuch der DDR—the 1965 Family Code—stated that men and women were to share equal responsibilities with household work and children.⁸ The reality was much different. In a 1970 study, of 47.5 hours of household chores women completed 37.1 hours and men completed 6.1 hours of work, the rest was completed by children and grandparents. To combat this, the SED lowered the weekly hours of working mothers, although it did not extend to all mothers. Mothers who qualified were given one day off a month to complete household chores and paid maternity leave was extended.⁹ In addition to these policies, women's retirement age was set at 60 years old compared to 65 for men.¹⁰ As a result of the policy changes, the rate of pregnancies rose. These new policies geared toward working mothers also included the other side of the coin. In 1972, abortion within the first twelve weeks was made legal in the GDR.¹¹ Contraceptives were also increasing in frequency and acceptance at this time, in the early years of the GDR they were scarce.¹² These policies shifted control and options to women.

With more freedoms and shifts in social stigma, the number of single mothers and births occurring outside of marriage rose in the GDR. In 1989, when the GDR collapsed, a

⁷ Martens, Lorna. "The Reality of Women's Lives." In *The Promised Land? Feminist Writing in the German Democratic Republic*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2001, 170.

⁸ Telman, D.A. Jeremy. "Review of Law & Social Change." In *Abortion and Women's Legal Personhood in Germany: A Contribution to the Feminist Theory of the State*. 24 *N.Y.U. Rev. L. & Soc. Change* 91, 1998, 114-119.

⁹ Allison, Mark, *More from Less: Ideological Gambling with the Unity of Economic and Social Policy*, 105

¹⁰ Allison, Mark, *More from Less: Ideological Gambling with the Unity of Economic and Social Policy*, 102-113.

¹¹ Harsch, Donna. "Society, the state, and abortion in East Germany, 1950-1972." *American Historical Review* 102, no. 1 (February 1997): 53.

¹¹ Martens, Lorna, *The Promised Land?*, 191.

¹² Harsch, Donna, *Sex, Divorce, and Women's Waged Work*, 112.

third of all births occurred outside of marriage.¹³ For comparison, in 1990 in West Germany, births outside of marriage were at 10.5 percent.¹⁴ Single mothers would still need to participate in waged labor. To aid single mothers and families in general, childcare centers became a resource. They operated during the typical workday hours and offered care from birth until the age of three, but those were unpopular with the majority. Most parents sent their children for preschool.¹⁵ The availability of childcare centers and programs geared toward childcare gave women the option to work rather than care for children as it had been done traditionally.¹⁶ By working and having their own paycheck, women gained independence. They did not have to rely on a husband and the logic followed that this also meant women did not need a husband at all. Women could work and have children, without a man in the picture if they so choose.

The childcare centers were generally thought of as a valuable resource and worked fairly well, but there was a lack of flexibility. This lack of flexibility affected single working mothers especially. The childcare centers did not allow children to attend if they were sick. In a two parent scenario, there could be a dialogue between husband and wife of who would stay home to care for the child until he or she is able to return. A single mother did not have that luxury. If they had a parent alive and able to care for their child, they may have been able to hand the child off in times of sickness, but often times, it resulted in a single mother missing work. Childcare was liberating in several ways to women, enabling many to work and be mothers at the same time, but in regards to single mothers, it lacked support.

Divorce and Motherhood

¹³ Harsch, Donna, *Sex, Divorce, and Women's Waged Work*, 112

¹⁴ Kröhnert, Steffen and Samuel Skipper. "Demographic Development in Eastern Germany." In *Europe's Demographic Future – Growing Regional Imbalances*, (2008).

¹⁵ Martens, Lorna, *The Promised Land?*, 185

¹⁶ Stand, Kurt. "Ambivalences, Contradictions, Choices: The Legacy of GDR Socialism." In *Socialism and Democracy* 26, no.1, (2012): 58-84.

Many of the expectations and societal standards in regard to gender transformed under the communist system. As stated previously, women had the ability to choose when to become a mother, to marry and have children, to have children and not marry, and enter the workforce, which had largely been closed off to them. The 1965 Family Code granted them another step toward independence and equality. Before communism was implemented in East Germany, divorces were held and viewed very differently. In divorce proceedings one party was viewed as being ‘guilty’.¹⁷ This label was abolished under communist rule, and in addition, couples had the option for divorce when dissatisfaction grew between husband and wife, not just for instances of infidelity or abuse. Unlike in the West, GDR women were more likely to be granted custody. A large part of this was due to the fact that in the West, attitudes toward working mothers were negative, whereas in the East women entering the workforce was becoming the norm. The Family Code based custodianship on the child’s best interests, and did not stipulate that to receive custody women could not work.¹⁸ Single motherhood was supported.

Multipolitik

When looking at policies and societal shifts in the GDR, and in comparison to women in the West, it appears on the surface that the communist government did indeed create more equality between the sexes. Communism appeared to have opened women the door into the workforce, granted women rights in marriages and in single parenthood, as well as reproductive rights. Did women become more than “a mere instrument of production?” Was equality truly achieved? The answer is not so simple.

The GDR presented the image of the ideal woman as someone devoted to Socialist ideals, who participated in waged labor, and filled the role as mother as well. In the West, it

¹⁷ Edwards, Geoffrey. *GDR Society and Social Institutions: Facts and Figures*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1985, 13-15.

¹⁸ Martens, Lorna, *The Promised Land?*, 87

was the norm and expected that a woman would remain home and fill the traditionally female roles of mother, housekeeper, and wife. In the East, the expectation was that women would be ‘mothers’ and a ‘wife’ and were supposed to work. The government promoted that GDR women were in fact equal to their husbands, but this clearly is not the case, and in a larger context, women were not in fact equal to their husbands. Communism had mixed results in terms of equality of the sexes.

In her book, *The Promised Land?*, Lorna Martens writes on the female experience in the GDR, analyzing feminist writings from women who lived there. On the topic of childbirth and motherhood, she writes:

The real reason why women have been excluded from careers and relegated to the lowest-paid, lowest-status productive labor, is not, first and foremost, any social construction of femininity, but rather the fact that their childbearing function and childrearing activity make them uncompetitive on the labor market¹⁹

The GDR answered the question of women in the workforce and women’s place in society with *Muttropolitik*—Mommy Politics— the expectation and encouragement of the dual role in society as participants of the workforce and also mothers.²⁰ Martens goes on to say “childbearing is time consuming and work-intensive.”²¹ Working mothers were held up to standards of being superwomen, but the reality is that they were not. The GDR tried in the 1970’s and 80’s to lift some of the burden placed on women and it had some positive effects, but there were deep rooted issues that were left unresolved.

¹⁹ Martens, Lorna, *The Promised Land?*, 85

²⁰ Fisher, Pamela. “Abortion in post-Communist Germany: the end of *muttropolitik* and a still birth for feminism.” In *Women's Studies International Forum* 28, no. 1 (2005): 21-36.

²¹ Martens, Lorna, *The Promised Land?*, 85

In the 1950's many members of the SED "wanted a high birthrate, not sexual experimentation" and were not concerned with female sexual satisfaction.²² With access to abortion and contraception, the birthrate was lower than it was before these programs. It was a complicated tightrope to walk. Women were needed in the workforce, but to have them in the workforce required loosening of previous restrictions and changing policies. Some of the policy change such as access to reproductive healthcare, impacted the birthrate and the GDR needed women to have children. The children would eventually become the workers who would replace their parents. Without children there would be no workforce to support the aging, to support the socialist society of the GDR. The incentives of the policy change in the 1970's were intended to ease some of the burden, but more so intended to increase the birth rates, which it was able to accomplish. This still put woman into the difficult position of serving as two vital roles in society—mother and worker.

Women who took advantage of the paid maternity leave and wished to return full time to the workforce were often unable to. With a greater number of women out of the workforce during pregnancies and the paid year-long maternity leave, many workplaces did not have the funds to bring women onto the payroll full time again.²³ This would mean that women either had to work part time, diminishing their paycheck and independence, or remain out of the workforce. The policy that was supposed to alleviate the burden placed on women, often added to it. Overall, the policy was positively received and to an extent it did work, but the changes of reintegrating women back into the workforce after maternity leave was not an easy process. In addition to the struggles of returning to work, childcare lacked the necessary flexibility for parents and especially for single mothers, who were growing in numbers. The

²² Harsch, Donna, *Sex, Divorce, and Women's Waged Work*, 107

²³ Allison, Mark, *More from Less: Ideological Gambling with the Unity of Economic and Social Policy*, 22

majority of childcare and education workers were women and with the incentives for motherhood, shortages of labor affected childcare and education.

Conclusion: “What were women’s experiences in the GDR?”

In the years under the Communist system of government of the GDR, women experienced the opening of the door into waged labor and steps toward. They saw the lessened restrictions on abortions and the access to contraceptives. Social policies and stigmas changed the perceptions of single motherhood and allowed for more equal divorce proceedings. Social programs such as childcare and paid maternity leave offered women the opportunity to both work and be a mother. On the surface it appears that women experienced great leaps toward equality, but the reality is not so clear and often contradictory.

Women were able to enter the workforce, but even in 1989, the year before reunification, women’s average pay was a quarter lower than their male counterparts.²⁴ The policy of *Multipolitik*, tried to mold the East German woman into a superwoman, balancing being a worker and a mother, creating the issue of the double burden. Compared to the West, there were more opportunities for independence and entering the workforce, but the same patriarchal views and expectations persisted. Women overwhelmingly continued the stereotypical expectations of womanhood and were expected to do so as seen by the 1970’s policy of having one day a month dedicated to domestic duties.

The reality of life in the GDR for women was often a gilded experience as they were expected to balance two demanding roles on their shoulders.

²⁴ Harsch, Donna, *Sex, Divorce, and Women’s Waged Work*, 112

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