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Women's Discontent in the German Democratic Republic During the
Honecker Era

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by

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Summary

The aim of this study is to investigate the nature of women's discontent in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) during the Honecker Era. It will focus on women's experiences as a social group, using individual stories to reveal trends and developments in the outlooks and approaches of women living under the East German communist regime during the 1970s and 1980s. Women's discontent in the GDR ranged from criticism of mundane matters that personally affected them and their families, to more fundamental critiques of the regime's policies. This thesis incorporates all these different levels of discontent.

The thesis is divided into two parts. Part 1 examines general discontent amongst women in the GDR. Chapter 1 aims to understand the true extent of women's emancipation in East Germany by examining the effects of GDR women's policies and evaluating women's roles at work and in the home. Chapter 2 analyses women's petitions, identifying the main themes and reflecting on the language used by women, in order to give an insight into the actual issues that affected women in their day-to-day lives.

Part 2 concentrates on more specific, organised discontent amongst women in the GDR, particularly in the 1980s. Chapter 3 explores the experiences of lesbians in East Germany, focusing particularly on the development of homosexual and lesbian groups, organised both within and outside of the Church. Chapter 4 provides a comprehensive study of the formation and structure of women's peace groups and their activities and changing principles, with particular emphasis on the East Berlin 'Women for Peace' organisation. Part 2 helps to illustrate the development of a new kind of women's consciousness in the GDR and an understanding of the role of women's opposition groups and women's networks in the dissident movement in the build up to the *Wende*.

Overall the broad analysis of aspects of women's discontent in this thesis attempts to fill in gaps in current research on women in the GDR. But this study also hopes to make a wider contribution to GDR history as a whole. In this way, the assessment of women's reactions to changing events in the public and private sphere, and in reverse, the state's changing attitude towards women, should provide real clues to the nature of the GDR's political framework.

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Abbreviations

BArch - *Bundesarchiv*, Federal Archive
BLA - *Brandenburgisches Landeshauptarchiv*, Berlin State Archive
BLHA - *Brandenburgisches Landeshauptarchiv*, Brandenburg State Archive
BPKK - *Bezirks Partei Kontrollkommission*, Local District Party Control Commission
BRD – *Bundesrepublik Deutschland*
DDR – *Deutsche Demokratische Republic*
DFD – *Demokratischer Frauenbund Deutschlands*, Democratic Federation of Women
FDGB - *Freier Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund* – Confederation of Free German Trade Unions
FDJ – *Freie Deutsche Jugend*, Free German Youth Organisation
FRG – Federal Republic of Germany
GDR – German Democratic Republic
GZ – *Archiv Grauzone*
HSDVP - *Hochschule Deutsche Volkspolizei*
MDA – *Matthias Domaschk Archiv*
MfS – *Ministerium für Staatssicherheit*, Ministry of State Security
PKK - *Partei Kontrollkommission*, Party Control Commission
RHA – *Robert Havemann Archiv*
SBZ (*Sowjetische Besatzungszone*), the Soviet Occupation Zone of Germany.
SED – *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, Socialist Unity Party of Germany
SAPMO - The Foundation for the Parties and Mass Organisations of the GDR
Stasi – *Staatsicherheitsdienst*, State Security Service

Introduction

One of the most striking aspects of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) during the Honecker era,¹ was the high percentage of women in the paid labour force, compared to women in other European industrialised countries.² The East German administration had introduced comprehensive legislative measures designed to fully integrate women into the sphere of production, accompanied by loud rhetoric about women's equality and emancipation from patriarchal constraints. From its foundation in 1949 the GDR had guaranteed equality in its constitution and from 1968 this was underlined with the added pledge that 'the promotion of the woman, particularly in vocational qualifications, is a national and social task'.³

Aims and Structure

But what was every day life really like for the women for whom this legislation was intended? Is it possible to uncover women's attitudes in relation to the success of the above policies and indeed with regard to other aspects of day to day living in East Germany? This thesis aims to investigate the nature of women's discontent in the GDR during the Honecker Era, 1971 – 1989. In this way it will focus on women's experiences as a social group, using individual stories to reveal trends and

¹ Erich Honecker was First Secretary of the Central Committee of the SED from 1971 and General Secretary and chairman of the Council of State (*Staatsrat*) from 1976 to 1989.

² Including apprentices and students 91.1 % of women were in the labour force in the GDR in 1989. From statistics in Gunnar Winkler, *Frauenreport '90* (Berlin, 1990). In comparison 55 % of women were in the paid labour force in the FRG in 1988. According to statistics cited in Nancy Lukens & Dorothy Rosenberg (eds.) *Daughter's of Eve: Women's Writing from the German Democratic Republic* (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), p. 5

³ Verfassung der DDR, 1968, Art. 20,2. As cited in Renate Ellmenreich, *Frauen bei der Stasi – Am Beispiel der MfS-Bezirksverwaltung Gera*, Der Landesbeauftragte des Freistaates Thüringen für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdiensts der ehemaligen DDR informiert (Erfurt, 1999), p. 5

developments in the outlooks and approaches of women living under the East German communist regime during the 1970s and 1980s.

This study will approach the field of women's history in the GDR from below, examining the changing experiences and attitudes of women to their roles at work, at home and in political life. In this sense it hopes to contribute to the new domain of *Alltagsgeschichte*, or the history of the every day lives of 'ordinary' citizens. It will do this particularly through its concentration on the testimonies of 'ordinary' women in the first half of the thesis, which also sets out to give a wide-ranging analysis of the implementation and consequences of social policies directed at women for the female population in particular and East German society as a whole in the Honecker era. However the study will not exclude the experiences of those women whose lifestyles and attitudes set them apart from acceptable expressions of discontent. Thus the second half of the thesis examines in detail the activities of women in the dissident or fringe groups that emerged in the GDR in the 1980s.

This thesis focuses on women's discontent, partly due to the nature of the sources. Since there has been little extensive research of *Eingaben* or petitions in the GDR by British, American or other historians writing in the English language,⁴ and no research in English that focuses specifically on women's petitions, one aim of this thesis was to base a large proportion of the study on the evaluation of petitions.

⁴ At the start of this project there had been no broad investigation into petitions in English but in late 2005 Mary Fulbrook's book, *The People's State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2005) was published which included a chapter, 'The People's own voices? The culture of complaint and the privatisation of protest' that incorporated an examination of petitions. However these petitions were all from collections at SAPMO.

Petitions, by their very nature, concentrate on the disruption of every-day life,⁵ and therefore have an emphasis on complaint and conflict. Women's discontent can range from criticism of quite mundane matters that personally affect them and their families, to more fundamental critiques of the regime's policies and what is perceived as their negative effects on the whole East German population. This thesis intends to incorporate all these different levels of discontent. Yet it is important to point out that in concentrating on dissatisfaction this research will also inevitably highlight the aspects of women's lives in the GDR that they were more satisfied and contented with.

It is also crucial to underline that this study does not attempt to suggest that *all* women in the GDR led unhappy, unfulfilled lives and that they were in some way victims of the regime. Discontent exists in all societies and this exploration is seeking to uncover which particular issues East German women were concerned and dissatisfied about, to discover whether distinctive trends or patterns existed. It is thus an exploration of certain *aspects* of women's discontent in the GDR that does not claim to be wholly comprehensive. The limitations of a four-year project necessitated concentration on certain key areas.

Part 1 of the thesis focuses on the experiences of 'ordinary' women in the GDR. It is divided into two chapters. Chapter 1 examines the effects and specific problems associated with the implementation of women's social policies as well as providing a detailed examination of women's roles particularly in the home and the work place but also in the SED and the mass organisations. Chapter 2 is an evaluation of

⁵ Ina Merkel, Felix Mühlberg, 'Eingaben und Öffentlichkeit', in Ina Merkel (ed.), *Wir sind doch nicht die Meckerecke der Nation! Briefe an das Fernsehen der DDR* (Berlin, Schwarzkopf & Schwarzkopf, erweiterte Neuausgabe, 2000), p. 15.

women's petitions, identifying the main themes while also reflecting on the language used by women in their petitions and attempting to understand the reasons why they chose to write to certain people or institutions. Part 2 is an analysis of women's contribution to the fringe and dissident scene in the 1980s. It does this by concentrating on women's roles in the lesbian and homosexual groups in Chapter 3 and on the activities of women's peace groups in Chapter 4. Part 2 of the thesis also attempts to evaluate whether a women's movement actually began to emerge in the last decade of the GDR.

Methodology

This thesis uses material from two main archives – SAPMO and the *Robert-Havemann Gesellschaft* (Robert Havemann Society), which is then supplemented with sources from regional archives as well as certain published sources. Part 1 was based on evidence largely collected at the *Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen* (The Foundation for the Parties and Mass Organisations of the GDR – SAPMO) at the *Bundesarchiv* (Federal Archives) in Berlin. This archive contains the collections of the central decision-making institutions of the GDR and so is an important starting point for information about the ideological and political background of Honecker's policies. SAPMO also provides useful data from the *Institut für Meinungsforschung in der DDR* (Institute for Public Opinion Research in the GDR), a government funded body that conducted regular surveys on the East German population during the GDR. SAPMO also houses statements called *Stimmungs- und Meinungsberichte* (literally 'mood and opinion reports') about women's reactions to certain SED (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschland*,

Socialist Unity Party of Germany) Party Conferences or to international events. Finally the archive holds collections of petitions sent to state bodies and mass organisations in the GDR. This thesis draws mainly on those petitions that were sent to the offices of the DFD (*Demokratischer Frauenbund Deutschlands* – Democratic Women’s Federation of Germany) and *Abteilung Frauen* (the Women’s Department) but also refers to women’s petitions received by *Abteilung Sicherheitsfragen* (Department of Security Issues) and *Abteilung Kirchenfragen* (Department of Church Issues).

Material from the SAPMO archive was enhanced by sources from the *Landesarchiv Berlin* (Berlin State Archive, BLA), *Brandenburgisches Landeshauptarchiv* (Brandenburg State Archive, BLHA), in Potsdam and the *Sächsisches Staatsarchiv* (Saxony State Archive) in Leipzig. Here collections of petitions sent to local departments, were accessed, for example those sent to the BPKK (*Bezirks Partei Kontrollkommission* – Local District Party Control Commission). Further *Stimmungs-und Meinungsberichte* were used from these archives, as well as information from factory *Brigadebücher* (brigade log books).

The second half of the thesis drew much of its material from the *Robert-Havemann Gesellschaft*. The *Gesellschaft* comprises three archives, the *Robert-Havemann-Archiv*, the *Matthias-Domaschk-Archiv* and the *Grauzone Archiv*. The *Robert-Havemann-Archiv* holds the records of certain individuals active in the GDR’s opposition, including the personal collection of the peace dissident Bärbel Bohley, which was valuable for this study. The main theme of the *Matthias-Domaschk-Archiv* is opposition and repression in the GDR and the archive contains an

important collection of correspondence, memoranda and testimonies from the women's peace groups the *Frauen für den Frieden* (Women for Peace), with particular focus on the East Berlin based group. This archive also holds material about the homosexual groups *Sonntags-Club* and *Courage* as well as important press articles from the East and West media recording GDR opposition activities. The *Grauzone Archiv* is an extensive collection of documents recording the women's movement in the GDR in the 1980s and this was used mainly for its material on lesbian groups in East Germany. Unfortunately, a large proportion of the *Grauzone* collections is uncatalogued and therefore difficult to access. However Samirah Kenawi, who formerly managed the archive, has put together a comprehensive compilation of documents from the women's groups in the collection in published form, *Frauengruppen in der DDR der 80er Jahre* (Herausgegeben von Grauzone, Berlin: 1995), which was utilised in this study.

The thesis is also supplemented by material from the *Evangelisches Zentral Archiv* (the Central Evangelical Church Archives) in Berlin and from the SAPMO library which holds for example some useful material from the investigative surveys on youth opinion carried out by the *Zentralinstitut für Jugendforschung* (Central Institute for Youth Research). The collection of East German *Neues Deutschland* newspapers kept at the London School of Economics (LSE) was also consulted.

While this study is mainly based on empirical research it is complemented by written and oral interviews. In January 2003 questionnaires were distributed by the author in Erfurt and Eisenach in Thüringen, via acquaintances in a doctor's surgery and a dentist's surgery, to women of all ages who had lived in the GDR. Further

questionnaires were distributed in the Berlin. 53 completed questionnaires were returned, which proved to be a useful starting point for this research, establishing a background understanding of women's memories and responses to aspects of their former life in the GDR. Part 2 of the thesis was also enhanced by interviews with Ursula Sillge, founder of the *Sonntags-Club* in Berlin for lesbians and gay men; with Tina Krone, a former member of the women's peace group *Frauen für den Frieden, Berlin*, and with Barbara Einhorn, a journalist and academic from New Zealand who was interrogated and imprisoned by the Stasi in December 1983 along with four members of the *Frauen für den Frieden* (two were released without charge), after she had met and exchanged information with the group.

Unfortunately, the *Bundesbeauftragte für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen DDR* (Federal Commissioner for the Records of the State Security Service of the former GDR, BStU), did not grant access to their archives for this research project although some material from the files of the Ministry of State Security in regard to the *Frauen für den Frieden, Berlin* group was available in photocopied form at the *Matthias-Domaschk-Archiv*. The *Lila Archiv*, which contains material about lesbian and homosexual groups and other aspects of the women's and resistance movements in the GDR was closed due to lack of funding, on the two separate occasions that access to the archive was attempted for this study.

Much of the research in this thesis is based on women's petitions, which are referred to throughout the main text but especially in Part 1 as a means of pinpointing general areas of discontent among 'ordinary' women. There has been

some debate in German historiography about the usefulness and reliability of petitions as a source. Concern mainly revolves around the belief that petitions painted a one-sided picture of life under the East German regime because they are related to concerns, complaints or problems experienced by members of the population who hoped to seek redress. However, this research has discovered that, certainly as far as women's petitions are concerned, by depicting their problems the petitioners also gave a clear idea of what conditions they conversely expected under 'normal' circumstances, thus balancing and broadening out this one-sided view.

It is important to note, however that it is not possible to compile a database for the scientific or statistical analysis of petitions. This is because much of the material remains incomplete. Thus, for example, records only exist of petitions sent to the DFD from 1978 onwards. In addition, some petitions remain in their original form but for others only a report of their contents has been kept. Often there was also no follow up correspondence connected to the petitions so it is not always possible to discover the end result of each particular case.⁶ Sometimes GDR institutions themselves recorded statistical information about the petitions sent to certain institutions. In most cases, however it is impossible to tell which data refers to women's petitions and which to those sent by men. But the statistics relating to petitions sent to the *Abteilung Frauen* have been useful for this study because the majority of petitions received by this department were from women. Further discussion about the methodological limitations of petitions will be outlined in the Introduction to Part 1 and in more detail on page 81 of Chapter 2.

⁶ The exception was those petitions that were dealt with by the BPKK in Berlin-Friedrichshain, which were always accompanied by a closing report.

Some of the other source material used in this thesis also had to be approached with a note of caution. For example, the *Stimmungs-und Meinungsberichten*. It is likely, due to the controlled nature of public debate that existed in the GDR, that East Germans felt conditioned to give their accounts in a certain way, with emphasis on the positive aspects of certain policies, for example, whilst omitting mention of any concerns they may have had. With regard to the women's opinion reports cited in Chapter 4, for example, concerning international events during the early 1980s, women might have specified the dangers of the weapons positioned by the USA and NATO, even while feeling threatened by missiles on *both* sides of the Cold War divide.⁷ Yet these opinion reports are still useful for conveying general mood and for illustrating what was considered acceptable public opinion at the time. The surveys conducted by the Institutes for Public Opinion and Youth Research are largely recognised as disclosing more accurate information, although opinion may have been biased in certain directions, again for the reasons outlined above. It is also worth treating statistics compiled by GDR institutions, for example, in the yearly *Statistisches Jahrbuch der DDR* with some prudence on account of a tendency towards the slight inflation or exaggeration of data that was made available to the public, at home and abroad.

Historiographical Context and the Contribution of this Research

At present the historiography for this subject area is patchy. German historians of women's history have tended to concentrate their research on specific but disparate spheres, such as the role of the DFD in generating the political participation of

⁷ A large proportion of the population would have been aware about proposed stationing of Soviet SS-20s in the GDR because it was possible to watch West German television in many areas of East Germany.

women or the activities of certain independent women's groups both before and during the *Wende* (literally 'turning point', referring to the collapse of the communist system in East Germany and the dissolution of the GDR between 1989 and 1990).⁸ There is one notable exception to this trend, Heike Trappe, *Emanzipation oder Zwang? Frauen in der DDR zwischen Beruf, Familie und Sozialpolitik* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1995). This book identifies women's changing position during the GDR, whilst also recognising the limitations of certain social policies directed at women. However, although it offers a useful social history of East German women, there is no reference to women's attitude to politics or their involvement in the dissident scene.

In the English genre, most emphasis has been on the effects of reunification on women from the former GDR. The fascinating collection of papers given at a conference held by WIGS (Women in German Studies) at the University of Nottingham in September 1993 is a good example.⁹ Two other notable works in this area are Rachel Alsop, *A Reversal of Fortunes? Women, Work and Change in East Germany* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2000) and Helen H. Frink, *Women After Communism – The East German Experience* (Oxford & Maryland: University Press of America, 2001). However neither of these studies is based on empirical research; the first uses quantitative and qualitative data, from a rather narrow sphere, i.e. a textile and clothing enterprise (TKC) in Cottbus, and the second is a sociological

⁸ For example, Grit Bühler, *Mythos Gleichberechtigung in der DDR – Politische Partizipation von Frauen am Beispiel des Demokratischen Frauenbundes Deutschlands* (Frankfurt & New York: Campus Verlag GmbH, Band 752, 1997), Ingrid Miethe, *Frauen in der DDR – Opposition Lebens- und kollektivgeschichtliche Verläufe in einer Frauenfriedensgruppe* (Forschung Politik Wissenschaft Band 36, Leske & Budrich, Opladen, 1999) and Anne Hampele Ulrich, *Der Unabhängige Frauenverband – Ein frauenpolitisches Experiment im deutschen Vereinigungsprozesse* (Berlin: Berliner Debatte Wissenschaftsverlag, 2000)

⁹ Elizabeth Boa & Janet Wharton (eds.), *Women and the 'Wende': Social Effects and Cultural Reflections of the German Unification Process*, German Monitor 31 (Amsterdam & Atlanta: Rodopi, 1994)

study based on interviews and observations. Barbara Einhorn also takes the *Wende* as a starting point in her studies on women in eastern Europe, which also provide a useful analysis of the development of women's movements, particularly poignant because of her associations with the women's dissident scene in the GDR.¹⁰

A groundbreaking article by Myra Marx Ferree, 'The Rise and Fall of "Mommy Politics": Feminism and Unification in (East) Germany' (*Feminist Studies*, Vol. 19, Issue 1, Spring 1993) first began the debate about the 'gendered' nature of women's social policies, which Marx Ferree suggests had lasting effects of segregation. Yet the author left plenty of scope for further archival investigation, since her study was based on published material and interviews.

Jeannette Madarasz was one of the first historians to write in English about women in the GDR as a social group.¹¹ However, her book was unable to reach many in depth conclusions about women's experiences because it was such a broad based study, concentrating on three other social groups, writers, Christians and youth. The most recent and important contribution to our understanding of 'ordinary' East German women's lives in the GDR has been made by Mary Fulbrook, with her absorbing chapter on 'gender' in *The People's State*, which analyses women's experiences at work, in education, in the family and in the East German political organisations. Yet this short chapter (that is nevertheless brimming with valuable interpretation and analysis) leaves room for further research, particularly because its

¹⁰ For example, Barbara Einhorn, *Cinderella Goes to Market: Citizen, Gender & Women's Movements in East Central Europe* (London: Verso, 1995) and Barbara Einhorn, 'Feminism in Crisis: the East German Women's Movement in the "New Europe"', Tony Barta & Adrian Jones (guest eds.), *The Australian Journal of Politics & History* (The University of Queensland, Volume 41, No. 1, 1995)

¹¹ Jeannette Z. Madarász, *Conflict and Compromise in East Germany, 1971-1989: A Precarious Stability* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003)

source material is based exclusively on the collections at the SAPMO archive and it makes only brief reference to women's activities in the lesbian and peace groups.

Through a broad analysis of women's discontent this thesis attempts to 'plug the gaps' in current research on women in the GDR. But by concentrating on women as a social group it should also be able to make a wider contribution to GDR history as a whole. The assessment of women's reactions to changing events in the public and private sphere, and in reverse, the state's changing attitude towards women, should provide real clues to the nature of the GDR's political framework.

Part I

The first part of this thesis focuses generally on women as a social group during the Honecker era. The intention is to uncover the lives of ‘ordinary’ women in the GDR. However the term ‘ordinary’ is difficult to define. In this thesis it is taken to mean those women who were not in paid positions of authority in any political party, although they could be party members or members of any of the GDR’s mass organisations. Thus the definition is intentionally broad, with the objective of taking into account as many women’s testimonies as possible.

Chapter 1 aims to understand the true extent of women’s emancipation in the GDR. It does this by examining women’s roles at work and in the home, attempting to understand the effects of GDR women’s policies in these spheres and highlighting any of their negative consequences. Despite Part 1’s focus on ‘ordinary’ women there is also a section on women in the SED, the Stasi and the DFD in this chapter, which is essential in the light of recent debate amongst GDR historians on levels of participation and collusion in East Germany.¹ This chapter helps to provide context for the rest of the thesis and provides a useful balance, since the other chapters concentrate so heavily on different aspects of discontent.

Chapter 2 uses women’s petitions to give an insight into the actual issues that affected women in their day-to-day lives. Petitions were letters of complaint sent to the GDR’s institutions. They are a valuable source since the analysis of petitions from the same period helps provide a snap shot of attitudes and mood during a

¹ For example this is explored in detail in Mary Fulbrook, *The People’s State*.

particular time. Once stripped of their socialist terminology they become perhaps the most reliable contemporary source for understanding the history of ordinary people in the GDR. When it came to women's petitions, for example, many of them emerge as heartfelt protests that reflect the reality of the way in which Honecker's reforms were implemented.

Part I of the thesis helps to place women's lives into the context of political and economic change, created when Erich Honecker replaced Walter Ulbricht as General Secretary of the SED (Socialist Unity Party of Germany) in May 1971. Both SED officials and the general population had great hopes for the future of the GDR after Honecker came to power. And in many ways the 1970s has been seen as East Germany's 'golden age' when the country developed all the trappings of a modern industrial state and social policy became a high priority.² Examining the attitudes of women as a social group to these changes and understanding the significance of the policies within the framework of women's everyday lives will help to widen our understanding of this era.

² Martin McCauley, *The German Democratic Republic Since 1945* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1983), p. 171 & p. 183

Chapter 1

Women's Equality in East Germany. Just how emancipated were women in the GDR?

A central feature of the GDR was its policies regarding women. The social equality of men and women was loudly glorified at home and considered an achievement abroad. This chapter aims to interpret the way in which women's policies were implemented in the GDR and to analyse their effects on East German women and the rest of GDR society in order to understand the true extent of women's emancipation.

Women's policies in the SBZ, 1945-1949

The GDR had a long history of egalitarian policies throughout the decades, stemming from the immediate post war period 1945-1949, when the eastern sector of Germany had been the SBZ (*Sowjetische Besatzungszone*), the Soviet Occupation Zone of Germany. In August 1946 the Soviet Military Authority (SMA) passed Order number 253, which 'decreed a unified payment for workers and employees for equal work regardless of their sex and age'¹. During the Soviet occupation women were encouraged to take up paid employment, in an attempt to make the ideal of the 'working woman' the norm, and to fulfil a fundamental element of socialism. In fact the huge demographic imbalance between the sexes during this period forced women to play an active role in the rebuilding of their

¹ SAPMO-BArch, Abteilung Frauen DY 30 IV 2/17 26, 'Löhne und Arbeitsbedingungen: Befehl Nr. 253 vom 17. August 1946', p. 7

towns and villages in the Soviet sector. There were 16 per cent, or three million more women than men living in the SBZ.² The ratio of women to men was 135:100 in 1945³, although in some cities, like Berlin and Dresden the ratio was much higher.⁴ Many women overcame the gender division by taking on new types of work in the SBZ, the most visible of which included the tens of thousands of *Trümmerfrauen* ('rubble women') who helped clear the streets of the debris of demolished buildings, left behind by the Allied bombing campaigns. These women became idolised in GDR folklore for casting off traditional gender roles and breaking down class barriers. In 1971 Erich Honecker remembered the remarkable work of women in the late 1940s, stressing that it was women who carried much of the burden of reconstruction at this time.⁵

However it is important to point out that despite the many achievements, women's paid employment in the SBZ did meet with problems. Firstly the transition of gender norms in female employment was perceived by the general population as an exceptional and temporary situation that would end after the crisis brought by war and destruction had come to an end.⁶ Secondly, many male employers refused to implement the equal pay for equal work policy. Men argued that their work would become devalued and production more expensive if women were paid the same as

² According to figures in K. McAdams, "Ersatzmänner". *Trümmerfrauen and Women in "Men's Work" in Berlin and in the Soviet Zone, 1945-50*, in Peter Hübner, Klaus Tenfelde (Hrsg.), *Arbeiter in der SBZ-DDR* (Essen: Klartext Verlag, 1999), p. 159

³ G.E. Edwards, *GDR Society and Social Institutions: Facts and Figures* (London: Macmillan, 1985), p. 76. Contemporary estimates often gave a higher ratio.

⁴ In Dresden in the fall of 1945 the population comprised of 39 per cent men and 61 per cent women, while in Berlin the difference was even starker with a population consisting of 37 percent men and 63 percent women. According to Norman Naimark, *The Russians in Germany. A History of the Soviet Zone of Occupation, 1945-1949*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 127

⁵ G.E. Edwards, *GDR Society and Social Institutions: Facts and Figures*, p. 76

⁶ See for example an article in the *Neue Zeit* concerning the Berlin *Trümmerfrauen* - 'the people at the Head Office for Employment know very well that this difficult and monotonous work cannot be left to women long-term; it is justified by an extreme state of emergency...' SAPMO-BArch, Abteilung Frauen, DY 30 IV 2/17 25, 'Die Trümmerfrauen von Berlin', 20.09.46, p. 123

them. Employers often opted for a literal translation and refused to pay women the same wages as men because they were not performing *exactly* the same work.⁷ Also when it came to providing training for women at work, many employers were unable to escape the traditional mindset that women would marry and leave the workplace and the training would be wasted. Lastly, it is notable that despite the massive drive for female employment huge numbers of women dropped out of employment in the Soviet Zone after the initial months following the war. Although the absolute number of women who worked for wages increased right after the war it declined from late 1947, as women gave up their jobs, so that by 1950 fewer women were employed than in 1939.⁸ So the glorification of women's work in the SBZ by the SED from the 1960s onwards, actually only tells part of the story, and indeed these problems were to have lasting influence in the GDR, so that for example, in the 1970s and 1980s there were still very clear divisions of male and female labour.

Another legacy of the SBZ that was carried over into the GDR was the tendency to prohibit separate women's groups in the workplace. Part of the Stalinist strategy of centralisation insisted that there could be no separate women's sections in the SED, bringing about the closure of the FDGB's women section in 1948 and dissolving many *Frauenaktive* and DFD factory groups in the workplace. Regarding the FDGB (*Freier Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund* – Confederation of Free German Trade Unions) the sentiment was that since 'equal rights for women [had]...been

⁷ For example, in a Halle sugar-refining factory, women did not receive equal wages to men because as far as the factory administration was concerned women and men performed different work; men lifted and carried sacks while women used a cart to move them around. As described in K. McAdams, "'Ersatzmänner'. Trümmerfrauen and Women in "Men's Work" in Berlin and in the Soviet Zone, 1945-50', Peter Hübner, Klaus Tenfelde (Hrsg.) *Arbeiter in der SBZ-DDR*, p. 165

⁸ Donna Harsch, 'Approach/ Avoidance: Communists and women in East Germany, 1945-9', *Social History*, May 2000, p.170

achieved in principle,' a special women's section was no longer necessary.⁹ However, this inability to recognise the innate differences and needs of women in the workplace, was later rejected as women's brigades and factory groups were founded to encourage women's integration into the workplace.

The Ulbricht Years, 1949-1971

The GDR's first constitution of 1949 firmly cemented the principle of the equality of men and women as a fundamental right. This included the right to work, the right to receive the same wages for the same work, the special protection of women in the working process, the same right to education, the common responsibility of men and women for the education of children as well as the establishment of motherhood as a condition for national protection.¹⁰ These rights were further strengthened in September 1950 when the Law for the Protection of Mother and Children and the Rights of Women (*Gesetz über den Mutter-und Kinderschutz und die Rechte der Frau*) introduced a wide range of benefits including a variety of improved child-care facilities, prenatal and maternal medical care, advice and counselling centres for women with young children and the introduction of maternity hospitals with improved facilities.

However the law also contained a contentious element, Article 11, which made the status of abortion in the GDR stricter than any other socialist country in Europe.

⁹ Elizabeth Heineman, *What Difference Does a Husband Make?: Women and Marital Status in Nazi and Postwar Germany (Studies on the History of Society & Culture)* (Berkeley & London: University of California Press, 1999), p. 186

¹⁰ Karin Hildebrandt, 'Historische Exkurs zur Frauenpolitik der SED', in Birgit Bütow, Heidi Stecker (Hrsg.), *Eigenartige Ostfrauen – Frauenemanzipation in der DDR und den neuen Bundesländern* (Bielefeld: Kleine Verlag, Band 22 – Reihe Theorie & Praxis der Frauenforschung, Institut Frau & Gesellschaft, 1994)

Since 1947 liberal regulations had been in place in the SBZ, legalising abortions on social, ethical and medical grounds.¹¹ But through article 11 of the new law, the medical grounds was the only one of the original ‘indications’ to remain in place, and the social grounds, responsible for the termination of so many unwanted pregnancies during the grave conditions of the post war period, was replaced by eugenic grounds. According to the new regulations ‘the artificial interruption of pregnancy shall only be made where the *life or health* of the pregnant woman *would be seriously endangered* if she carried the child to full term or where one of the parents suffers from a serious hereditary disease.’¹² Failure to comply, was punishable through imprisonment. From 1946 to 1950 the total number of abortions had nearly equalled the number of live births,¹³ and the country’s new SED government was clearly alarmed at the prospect of a declining population, as Minister President Otto Grotewohl indicated in his pamphlet ‘Healthy Family – Happy Future’ in which he referred to the ‘unhealthy ratio in the number of women and men’ since 1945 and proclaimed that ‘A new society needs new people’.¹⁴

Likewise during the 1950s the steady emigration of people into West Germany before the Berlin Wall was built in 1961 was of grave concern to the government, so that the participation of women in the East German workforce remained an economic necessity. During the Two Year Plan (1949-50) and the first Five Year Plan (1951-1955) efforts were made to get women into heavy industry areas like

¹¹ In practice lawyers and doctors had authorised abortions in 1945 and 1946, even before these regulations were officially in place, mainly as a consequence of the mass rape of German women and girls by Soviet soldiers. See chapter 2, ‘Soviet Soldiers, German Women, and the Problem of Rape’ in Norman Naimark, *The Russians in Germany, A History of the Soviet Zone of Occupation, 1945-1949*

¹² K.H. Mehlan, ‘German Democratic Republic,’ in Paul Sachdev (ed.), *International Handbook on Abortion*, (London: Greenwood Press, 1988), p. 171

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 174

¹⁴ Kirsten Thietz (Hrsg.), *Ende der Selbstverständlichkeit? Die Abschaffung des §218 in der DDR – Dokumente*, ([Berlin: Basis Druck Verlag, 1992](#)), p. 64

electronics engineering, mechanics and building work. At the 5th *Parteitag* (Party Conference) of the SED in July 1948 the foundation of the so-called *Hausfrauenbrigaden* (Housewives' Brigades) was called for, which was founded to encourage more women, and in particular married women to work. Paid employment outside the home changed in status for women as the Ulbricht era progressed, from being a right to a duty. This was clarified in the new constitution of 1968, which stated: "Socially useful activity is an honourable obligation for each citizen who is able to work. The right to work and the obligation to work are unified."¹⁵

During the 1960s the GDR was seen as progressive in enabling women to attain economic independence from men. The changes in the law, which made divorce easier to accomplish, particularly by women, only served to increase this feeling. However despite this, as was common throughout the entire four decades of the GDR's existence, during this period, 'women's duties' in the home appear to have been simply reaffirmed.¹⁶

Honecker's *Muttipolitik*

As Fulbrook points out, historians of East German women's history have tended to divide GDR policies with respect to women into two major phases. The first she describes as an early progressive and idealistic phase in the 1950s and 1960s, which was concerned with the emancipation of women from patriarchal constraints and the attainment of full equality for women with men, while the second was a more

¹⁵ Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, *DDR-Geschichte in Dokumenten* (Bonn: 1998)

'Verfassung der DDR: Arbeit – Recht und Pflicht, 1968', p. 194

¹⁶ Mary Fulbrook, *The People's State*, pp. 153-154

pragmatic phase in the 1970s and 1980s, principally concerned with ensuring that women would produce more children and could successfully combine motherhood with an effective contribution to the workforce.¹⁷ Myra Marx Ferree, for example, in her article, ‘The Rise and Fall of “Mommy Politics”: Feminism and Unification in (East) Germany’ splits GDR women’s policies into two phases; stage one from 1949 to 1972, which she describes as ‘Equality Politics’, and Stage Two from the early 1970s onwards which she describes as “Mommy politics”.¹⁸ In a similar way Karin Hildebrandt in her article, ‘Historische Exkurs zur Frauenpolitik der SED’ distinguishes three phases in SED women’s policies in the GDR; the integration of women into the work process (1946-1965), the concentration on further education and qualifications for women (1963-1972) and the compatibility of career and family (1971-1989).¹⁹ Fulbrook herself suggests that this sort of periodisation oversimplifies the position since both ‘pragmatic and idealistic considerations were present throughout’ when it came to family policy and ‘to make a sharp break with Honecker’s accession to power is both to overlook significant continuities and more subtle long term changes.’²⁰

Although Fulbrook points out the problems with identifying phases with regard to women’s policies, it is difficult not to set apart the push to increase the birth rate whilst simultaneously maximising women’s potential in the workplace, that began in earnest with Honecker’s accession to power in 1971, since it was such a startling

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 149

¹⁸ Myra Marx Ferree, ‘The Rise and Fall of “Mommy Politics”: Feminism and Unification in (East) Germany’, *Feminist Studies*, Spring 93, Vol. 19, Issue 1

¹⁹ Karin Hildebrandt, ‘Historische Exkurs zur Frauenpolitik der SED’, Bütow, Birgit, Stecker, Heidi (Hrsg.), *Eigenartige Ostfrauen – Frauenemanzipation in der DDR und den neuen Bundesländern* (Bielefeld: Kleine Verlag, Band 22 – Reihe Theorie & Praxis der Frauenforschung, Institut Frau & Gesellschaft, 1994)

²⁰ Mary Fulbrook, *The People’s State*, p. 149

new approach compared to earlier decades. The emphasis on improving women's qualifications that had begun in the 1960s continued into the 1970s but now women's policies also carried a clear pro-natal agenda. Even GDR publications explicitly distinguish 'the compatibility of work and family' as a real goal of the time.²¹ And indeed the 1977 *Arbeitsgesetzbuch* included a separate section on 'The special rights of the working woman and mother.'

From 1963 the birth rate fell continually each year, so that by 1969 the annual death rate exceeded it.²² The government was predictably alarmed and commissioned various studies to uncover the reasons behind the declining birth rate.²³ In order to tackle the decline Honecker brought in a package of measures to promote and support mothers. The first of these in 1972 introduced incentives for early marriage and young motherhood. Couples were entitled to interest free loans of 5000 East German marks when they married as long as both partners were under 26 years of age. The amount that they had to pay back was reduced with each child produced in the marriage. So for a first child 1000 Marks was deducted, 1500 was deducted for a second child and 2500 Marks for a third.²⁴ In addition a grant of 1000 Marks was paid for the birth of every child born in the GDR, whether inside a marriage or not. Maternity leave was also extended to 18 weeks and women who gave birth to their second child were granted a 'Baby Year' away from work on almost full pay.²⁵ The

²¹ For example Herta Kuhrig, & Wulfram Speigner (Hrsg.), *Wie emanzipiert sind die Frauen in der DDR?* (Leipzig DDR: Verlag für die Frau, 1979), p.96 'Zur Vereinbarkeit von Berufstätigkeit und Familie' is the title of a section within an article 'Zur Verwirklichung des Rechts auf Arbeit' in the book.

²² David Childs, *The GDR: Moscow's German Ally* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1983) p. 256

²³ See for example, SAPMO-BArch 'Abteilung Frauen' DY30 /vorl. SED 16714 'Ideologische Probleme bei der Geburtenentwicklung und Aufgaben unserer Grundorganisation'

²⁴ Mike Dennis, *The Rise and Fall of the German Democratic Republic, 1945-1990* (Essex: Pearson Education Ltd, 2000), p. 149

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 150

government also simultaneously pledged to increase the number of state run crèches and kindergartens and to enhance the quality and amount of facilities attached to the workplace such as shopping, laundry facilities, health care centres and kindergartens.²⁶ In this way, the theory was that women who had children would be able to manage the combination of motherhood and employment more easily.

What was significant about these policies, already evident in 1972, was the fact that they were aimed specifically at mothers leading them to be nicknamed *Muttipolitik* (Mummy policies). So for example maternity leave was only applicable to mothers and not transferable to fathers. When the next large package of family policies was introduced in 1976 the emphasis on mothers and the potential of these measures to widen the gender divide became even starker. The new policies included the extension of maternity leave to 26 weeks, the introduction of a 40-hour working week for full time female workers with two or more children without a wage reduction (the normal working week was 43 and $\frac{3}{4}$ hours in the GDR), an increase in basic holidays for mothers of three or more children and the establishment of one paid housework day (*Haushaltstag*) for single mothers over 40 years of age who were employed full time, later extended to all full time working mothers. The merits of this last policy were controversially debated, particularly after the *Wende*, because although the *Haushaltstag* was undoubtedly a welcome chance for women to catch up on domestic matters, it is also perceived to have cemented women's links to housework and childcare.²⁷ Men were not eligible for the housework day unless they were single parents or their wife was ill.

²⁶ Mary Fulbrook, *The People's State*, pp. 153-154

²⁷ Rachel Alsop, *A Reversal of Fortunes? Women, Work and Change in East Germany*, p. 28

After 1976 the government also became suddenly aware of the conflicting interests of the social and economic measures for mothers and families. The policies were engendered to make it possible for women to contribute fully to the workforce, for example, and yet employers were starting to see women as an economic liability. Also, despite the pledge and continuing drive to introduce more childcare, after the ‘Baby Year’ was introduced it gradually became less socially acceptable for crèches to look after very small children because people became used to seeing mothers caring for their babies at home.²⁸

The responses I received in the anonymous questionnaires I distributed in 2003 to women who lived in the former GDR display a wide range of feeling about the benefits of *Muttipolitik*.²⁹ One woman, born in 1945, and who had two children during GDR times, was grateful for the measures but also hinted at the idea that East German women suffered from a ‘double burden’ when she said, “The policies took care of the whole life of a woman – from getting a job to retiring. That had advantages and disadvantages because job and family meant equality but also brought a double amount of stress.”³⁰ Another respondent, a teacher, born in 1948, was extremely positive about the socio-economic measures aimed at women in the Honecker era, stating: “You felt secure, children were more welcome than they are today, your career wasn’t hindered through having children and you got every support from the state.”³¹ But other women in my survey hint at disappointment and suspicion when describing their attitude to the *Muttipolitik*. One woman for

²⁸ Heike Trappe, *Emanzipation oder Zwang? Frauen in der DDR zwischen Beruf, Familie und Sozialpolitik* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1995), p. 73

²⁹ The 53 women came from a range of age groups and backgrounds, but were largely located in the Thüringen area, although there were also some respondents who had lived in East Berlin.

³⁰ This respondent experienced several personal changes during the GDR – she got married, was divorced and then lived in a partnership with someone.

³¹ She was a teacher, married with one son.

example, a grandmother during the Honecker era, dismissively claimed, “They were part of the party apparatus”.³² Another woman indicates that her family experienced the shortcomings of these policies, “With three children we weren’t considered a large family (*Kinderreich*). I saw no advantages for women through these policies.”³³

Women in the workplace

Women’s employment was at the heart of the SED drive to realise equality between men and women in the GDR. This campaign followed a Marxist-Leninist worldview that true socialism could not be attained without the full and equal participation of all members of society, regardless of their sex, in the production process. The GDR constitution read that, ‘The promotion of women, particularly in vocational qualifications (*beruflichen Qualifizierung*), is a social and national task.’³⁴ Also enshrined in the constitution from the GDR’s foundation was the right to equal pay for equal work for men and women. However, despite the earlier drive to improve women’s education and training during the Ulbricht era, Langenhan and Roß claim that many women often still did not hold the appropriate qualifications to actually give them the same chance at attaining better jobs.³⁵ In addition the fact that women usually took most responsibility for childcare, housework and shopping meant that they often did not put themselves forward for the better paid, more

³² She was a teacher, born in 1917.

³³ She was a dentist’s assistant, married, born in 1943.

³⁴ Verfassung der DDR, 1968, Art. 20,2. As cited in Renate Ellmenreich, *Frauen bei der Stasi – Am Beispiel der MfS-Bezirksverwaltung Gera* (Erfurt: Landesbeauftragte des Freistaates Thüringen für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdiensts der ehemaligen DDR, 1999), p. 5

³⁵ Dagmar Langenhan & Sabine Roß, ‘The Socialist Glass Ceiling – Limits to Female Careers’, in Konrad H. Jarausch, *Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR* (New York & Oxford, 2004), p. 179

demanding positions because these jobs would not be compatible with these responsibilities.

Nevertheless, the SED's crusade to bring women out of the home and into the workplace appeared to be a success. By the early 1960s over 70% of women between the ages of 16 and 60 were in paid employment and by 1977 this figure had reached 87%.³⁶ When Honecker declared in 1971 that "the 'women's question' had been solved",³⁷ he was referring to the fact that such a large percentage of women worked and that it was now an accepted norm in GDR society that women were expected to go out and work.

In July 1975 the *Institut für Meinungsforschung in der DDR* (Institute for Public Opinion Research in the GDR) undertook a survey intended to gain an insight into the thoughts and behaviour patterns of GDR citizens concerning the position of women in society and in the family. There were separate questionnaires for both men and women. Those who took part in the survey were from a range of age groups although only 3.1% was over 60 years. The participants of the survey worked in different sectors of employment, although 63.1% declared themselves to be *Arbeiter(in)/Facharbeiter(in)*.³⁸ The women's questionnaire contained the

³⁶ Figures include women in education and training and on maternity leave cited in David Childs, *The GDR: Moscow's German Ally* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1983) p. 253

³⁷ Grit Bühler, *Mythos Gleichberechtigung in der DDR – Politische Partizipation von Frauen am Beispiel des Demokratischen Frauenbundes Deutschlands* (Frankfurt & New York: Campus Verlag GmbH, Band 752, 1997), p. 7

³⁸ SAPMO-BArch, DY 30/IV/2/2 0.42, 34, 'Umfrage zur Rolle der Frau in Familie und Gesellschaft'. 64.1% of the participants were married and almost 65% had at least one child. Some had educational and training qualifications beyond school leaving age but 52.6% had left school at the 8th class and undertaken no more studying or training. The survey was conducted in 12 industrial companies with men and women and solely with women in 2 department stores and 2 hospitals. 1983 questionnaires were completed by women and 1516 questionnaires completed by men, according to statistics on 19.11.75.

following question. (The percentages denote what fraction of women answered in a particular way):

In a conversation a colleague said that she could not imagine her life any more without being in paid employment (*ohne beruflich tätig zu sein*).

Express whether this is also your opinion?

- | | |
|-------------|-------|
| - yes | 64.6% |
| - no | 29.6% |
| - no answer | 5.8% |

The replies are consistent with SED rhetoric, in that the great majority of women agreed that they could not imagine not being in paid employment. However it is significant in a socialist society where women were supposed to embrace their equal opportunities in the work place that almost 30% *could* imagine life without a job, and that almost 6% did not feel strongly enough to answer.

Another question in the women's questionnaire probed into the reasons why women thought their jobs were necessary:

Would you please tell us for which reason you are employed?

- | | |
|---|-------|
| - because I must support the family by myself | 25.9% |
| - in order to be independent economically and in relation to other family members | 12.3% |
| - in order to contribute financially to the family's living costs | 53.6% |
| - because I would like to achieve something useful for society | 22.1% |

- in order to develop my career 21.5%
- because the work in the household alone does not satisfy me 34.7%
- no answer 1.6%

The respondents were allowed to answer in more than one category. Despite this it is still possible to see that high up in women's motivation to work was the financial factor, which seems to be rated above all other motives for the reason why women saw their paid employment as necessary.

The responses I received in the anonymous questionnaires I distributed in 2003 to women who lived in the former GDR, also suggest that economic factors figured strongly in the reasons that women went out to work. Many women seem to have valued going out to work for its own sake but placed a real emphasis on financial reasons for doing so. The respondents to my questionnaire, 13 years after the end of the GDR should not have felt any restrictions to answer in a certain way, as those who responded to the government funded survey by the *Institut für Meinungsforschung* may possibly have done. However the analysis of my questionnaire does pose some important questions about the mixture of myth and reality that emerges when relying on memory.

In response to the following question in my questionnaire, "How important was your work for you? Did it make you financially independent?" 34 out of 53 respondents (64%) answered that work was important to them and that yes, they were financially independent in the GDR. Elaborating on her answer one of these women who was born in 1943, had been married during the GDR with one child

and worked as a graduate management expert (*Diplom-Betriebswirt*) described how for her, “Work was very important. Through it I was financially independent, I had job recognition and growing feelings of self-worth.” Such a response appears to underline the achievements of the state’s women’s policies and their success at producing self-confident, economically independent and above all satisfied and contented working women. Indeed the question provoked other responses similar to this.

The way in which another woman answered the question, however, did not paint such a rosy picture of trouble-free independence for women in the GDR. This respondent was a mother of three who got divorced during GDR times. She explained, “In the GDR divorced husbands didn’t have to pay for their wives – I was forced to work”.³⁹ This sort of response helps to highlight the difficulties women encountered as single mothers in the GDR. Another respondent, also a mother of three who was widowed, wrote, “I had to go to work in order to feed the family. [I] received no support”. This woman was born in 1918 and so will have brought her children up in the early years of the GDR under Ulbricht.

Other respondents to my questionnaire were not able to say whether or not they were financially independent in the GDR. One woman, a teacher born in 1930, who was married with one child, explained, “I can’t say because both salaries were put together and jointly administered.” Indeed the necessity of a second income to provide for a family was a point that came up time and time again in the questionnaires. Six women specifically stated that a second income was necessary

³⁹ This woman was born in 1931, so her children were probably teenagers during the early Honecker years.

to provide for a family. This suggests that these women did not feel that they would have been able to survive independently of their husband's wage. One of these women, an industrial watch-maker, married with two sons, described how, "As a woman you had to earn as well. One wage for a family was very little."⁴⁰ Another woman described how, "Work was important for independence: a) for me, b) for the children (Mothers had to work otherwise the children had shortages) and it was necessary financially."⁴¹

Startlingly revealing in the analysis of the questionnaires was the fact that seven respondents (13%) specifically stated that they were not financially independent during the GDR. Two of these also said that work was not important to them, one woman explaining that in the GDR, "For many years, when the children were young I wasn't working."⁴² Of the other five, four believed that they had been financially dependent on their husbands whilst living in the GDR, and another, who was only 22 when the Berlin Wall fell and had been undertaking an apprenticeship at the time, said that she relied financially on her parents with whom she lived.

The responses in the questionnaires show that not all women were as liberated from patriarchal constraints as GDR rhetoric implied. But also lurking behind many of the responses, is the fact that firstly it was difficult to make ends meet in the GDR and secondly that many women were mainly employed in lower paid jobs than men and in lower paid sectors of the economy, which made matters of day to day living even harder for them. The ruling elite might have boasted about its achievements at

⁴⁰ This woman was born in 1941 and lived in Kreis Eisenach, Thüringen

⁴¹ This woman was a physiotherapist, born in 1933, married with 3 children and lived predominantly in Thüringen

⁴² This woman was born in 1951, was married with 3 children and now works as a dentist's assistant.

home and abroad by authorising the publication of impressive statistics about the number of women in work in the GDR but this doesn't tell the full story.

For one thing, many women encountered problems when trying to obtain the job they wanted. There are numerous petitions, for example, from women dissatisfied with the career opportunities available to them or their female relatives. One woman opens her petition to Frau Thiele, chairwoman of the DFD, in a very striking manner, asking, "What must I do, what must a woman in socialism do in order to observe something of equal rights?"⁴³ She proceeds to describe her marriage as "miserable" and to describe how she has made many efforts to find work over the past 15 years but all to no avail meaning that she still remains dependent on her husband, so is unable to divorce him. The careers she has trained for, range from book-keeper to auxiliary nurse to working within the field of children's education. There are many reasons why her plans to work in those fields were thwarted, first of all, notably, she claims that she was unable to obtain kindergarten places for her three children so had to give up any job she had found when they were small. More recently, however she describes how her applications to work as a secretary at the VEB Interhotel and at a travel agency were rejected, despite her skills for example in foreign languages, because of "socio-political disorganisedness".⁴⁴ Her latest attempt at a job, working as an auxiliary nurse in an old people's home, she was forced to give up after 14 days because of an "allegedly missing cadre document". She believes there is an underlying reason why she is not being allowed to work that has something to do with the fact she worked in a

⁴³ SAPMO-BArch, DY 31/ 564, DFD, p. 214, Eingabe from Christa Hermann, dated 26.05.80

⁴⁴ Ibid

“western foreign country”, namely France, from 1959 to 1965 until she came to Dresden to marry her husband.⁴⁵

Perhaps she is close to the truth. Not allowing people to work where they chose was one way in which the state could penalise certain citizens for their behaviour. In Frau Hermann’s case perhaps her close contact with the West was considered suspicious. In other cases though there was no obvious reason why a woman should not have been able to work in a certain field.

In November 1981 a woman wrote to Ilse Thiele about the difficulties her daughter-in-law was having trying to find a job placement. Interestingly she mentions that she had seen Thiele a few days earlier at a DFD district executive committee training session in Karl-Marx-Stadt. She wrote “you mentioned in your remarks, how difficult it is as a woman to receive a job that corresponds to their training.”⁴⁶ Frau Reiner is writing to explain how she herself was experiencing this problem in her family. She says that her son and daughter-in-law are both recently qualified lawyers. However, while her son found a job straight away in Berlin, her daughter-in-law has not been able to find one. She points out that there is no reason for it since her daughter-in-law is a reliable, conscientious and industrious *Genossin* who received honours in her *Arbitur* (similar or equivalent to A Levels) and diploma exams. She describes how her daughter-in-law was told numerous times at different firms as they turned her away for a job, “Yes, if you were a man you could begin here with us.”⁴⁷ Could this be an example of the negative side effects of SED

⁴⁵ Ibid

⁴⁶ DY/31, 566, DFD, Eingabe from Getrud Reiner, dated November 1981. See also chapter 2, p. 111 further further reference to this source.

⁴⁷ Ibid

women's policies, nicknamed *Muttipolitik*? Perhaps the entitlements that were granted to mothers, including the paid 'Baby year', household day and shorter working week, meant that employers were put off female candidates, particularly younger ones, in favour of men who would cause them less hassle.

What is interesting is that this way of discriminating against women may have even affected young girls. Dr. Eva Walch wrote to Ilse Thiele in April 1980 because she was upset that her daughter Susanne hasn't been granted a place at a sixth form college. She is infuriated that Susanne has been overlooked for a place in favour of a boy despite the fact that she has, "a slightly better standard of work and the same social and out of school activities" as him.⁴⁸ She says that her daughter wants to be a foreign language teacher of English, French and Russian and describes how she sees the situation as a backwards step in the area of equality in the GDR. "If a boy is preferred to a suitable girl with the same career aspirations," she wrote, "because one knows that a female teacher is later less flexible than a male teacher due to child birth and child care, then we are moving backwards away from the equal rights positions that we reached a long time ago and are moving economic-practical reasons into the foreground in a way that is incomprehensible to me."⁴⁹

Dr. Walch's arguments were evidently persuasive in this case and she was informed in a letter two months later that her daughter could attend the Immanuel-Kant-Oberschule in Berlin the following September. However cases like these perhaps highlight the reason behind the incredible shortage of women in better paid jobs, or in higher positions of authority in the GDR.

⁴⁸ DY/31, 565, DFD, p. 274 Eingabe from Dr. Eva Walch, dated 14.04.80

⁴⁹ Ibid

Despite Dr. Walch's concern that her daughter would not be able to be a language teacher, teaching was one of those traditional female occupations that was dominated by women in the GDR along with nursing and social care. However within these areas there were very few women in leadership positions. Around a third of all head teachers in secondary schools and sixth form colleges were women but in the top positions, women were represented even less.⁵⁰ Thus women only totalled 8.9% of departmental heads in the Ministry of Education and made up 2.9% of deputies.⁵¹ Similarly, although an impressive 52.6 % of all doctors were women, only 12.8% of those doctors in leadership positions or *Chefärzte* were women.⁵² In other fields representation of women in the top positions was even lower.

The GDR government itself appears to have been concerned by the small numbers of women in better paid jobs and higher positions. A report by Inge Lange, leader of the women's department and the women's commission, on a 'Study by the Women's Department of the Central Committee of the SED about women in leading functions in industry, agriculture and state apparatus' in 1987-88 contained a section evaluating the problems in this area. It concluded that the reason for smaller numbers of women in leadership positions in these fields was because consciously or unconsciously in order for women to acquire these positions higher standards were imposed on them in comparison to men.⁵³ This is due to the fact that women were generally perceived to be less capable than men, partly because of family and maternity obligations and also because of persevering traditional

⁵⁰ According to figures in Mary Fulbrook, *The People's State*, pp. 162-163

⁵¹ Ibid

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ SAPMO-BArch, Buro Inge Lange, DY 30/IV 2/2.042, 46, p. 35, 'Studie von Abteilung Frauen ZK SED über Einsatz von Frauen in leitenden Funktionen in Industrie, Landwirtschaft, Staatsapparat'

attitudes that women were not up to the physical and psychological responsibilities demanded of a leader. Women were achieving more and better qualifications but they still were not attaining the best jobs and positions. The report suggests that in order to change this they should select female graduates as they enter the workforce to begin their working life in leadership and management roles.⁵⁴

Indeed failure to maximise the potential of women with training skills and qualifications in the GDR comes up in official reports time and time again. For example, a report about ‘problems in the political and technical qualifications of women, in particular involving the female production workers as well as the utilisation of women in leadership functions in the field of electro-technology/electronics and optics of the district [Potsdam]’ revealed the deficiencies in qualified women at all levels in the cadre leadership functions in the sixteen electronic factories on which the study was based.⁵⁵ Out of a total of 27,994 employees at the 16 factories, 5,591 (20%) had a college/university or technical college education. Of these 4,341 (15.4%) were men and 1,268 (4.6%) were women. 2,357 (42.2%) of these graduates had been assigned leadership functions; 1,951 (34.9%) were male graduates and only 406 (7.3%) were female graduates. In other words 44.9% of male graduates and 32% of female graduates were employed in leadership functions.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 39

⁵⁵ BLHA (Brandenburgisches Landeshauptarchiv) Rep 530, Nr. 6505, ‘Information über einige Probleme der politischen und fachlichen Qualifikation der Frauen, insbesondere der Produktionsarbeiterinnen sowie des Einsatzes von Frauen in Leitungsfunktionen im Bereich der Elektrotechnik/Elektronik und Optik des Bezirkes’, 22.9.78

⁵⁶ *Ibid*

The report also noted that female workers seemed to be increasingly keen to make their contribution to the fulfilment of the national economy plans (*Volkswirtschaftspläne*) for the 30th Anniversary of the GDR in 1979. However this readiness was not supported or promoted by the cadre leadership, contradicting the push for increasing growth in achievement and qualifications amongst women in the electronics and electro-technology fields and in the entire national economy.

Contradictions like these seem to have been rife in the area of work and employment in the GDR. Another one surrounded the employment of women in traditionally male areas. While the number of women achieving qualifications in female areas such as teaching and health care continued to rise, the number of qualified women in traditional male areas, including electronics, according to the above quoted report, stayed relatively low. The drive in the 1950s to increase the number of women in heavy industry and construction and building work had died down by the 1970s when the government decided it was not productive, since women's physical make up meant that working in these areas could be detrimental to their reproductive health. Yet the continued encouragement of women to study physics, chemistry and engineering and to be visible in 'male occupations' such as tram or bus driving appeared to show that sustained attempts were being made to end gender stereotypes. However, despite this, some women were still on the receiving end of some negative gender typecasting.

A female small business trader wrote a petition to Ilse Thiele in February 1981 complaining that she is referred to with the term '*mithelfende Ehefrau*' or 'assisting

wife' in her job.⁵⁷ She had given up her job as a despatcher in a VEB factory to work with her husband in his shop. She has no wage, was forced to give up her membership of the FDGB trade union and misses the *Arbeitskollektiv*. She thinks the term '*mithelfende Ehefrau*' is offensive and says that the only way she would be able to gain more recognition in her job would be to divorce her husband and work as his girlfriend. That way she claims she would get a wage and be able to join the FDGB again. She asks whether, having given men further possibilities to develop their professional careers during the *IX Parteitag* whether the *X Parteitag* will bring anything positive for '*mithelfende Ehefrauen*'?⁵⁸

The SED discouraged part time work, regarding it of doubtful economic use, standing in the way of the complete integration of women into the work process.⁵⁹ In a lengthy publication about women in East Germany that boasted about the GDR's achievements in women's equality, published by the *Verlag für die Frau* in Leipzig, it stated that since 1971 the number of women in part time work had decreased for the first time, which was described as a 'positive trend'.⁶⁰ A report by the SED Kreisleitung Weißensee Frauenkommission on the results of an investigation into political-ideological problems among women and the causes of shortened working hours in the *VEB Elfe* and *VEB Telefon – und Signalbau* factories showed concern about the number of women who preferred to work part

⁵⁷ SAPMO-BArch, DFD, DY/31, 566, Eingabe from Erika Queck, February 1981

⁵⁸ Ibid

⁵⁹ Hartmut Zimmerman unter Mitarbeit von Horst Ulrich & Michael Fehlauer, *DDR Handbuch*, Bundesministerium für innerdeutsche Beziehungen (Bonn: Verlag Wissenschaft & Politik, 1985) p. 446

⁶⁰ Herta Kuhrig & Wulfram Speigner (Hrsg.), *Wie emanzipiert sind die Frauen in der DDR?* (Leipzig DDR: Verlag für die Frau, 1979), p.124. Notably this was also published in the FRG under Pahl-Rugenstein Verlag, Köln, 1979

time.⁶¹ The report stated that through purposeful ideological work led by women's discussions they would attempt to restrict the amount of part time work permitted. However they were facing a tough battle since:

In recent times the requests for shortened working hours are more frequent from female colleagues who have only been working in the factory a short time and it was impressed upon them that only full day employment was possible. In retort there were such remarks that if part time work was not granted they would be forced to look for shorter working hours in another factory.⁶²

This report was from April 1972 at the time when the drive for increasing the ability of women to undertake full time work and raise a family was just beginning. But the resistance these policies faced in the area of part time work reveals the heavy burdens carried by many mothers, many of whom had to fit in childcare, housework and grocery shopping around paid employment. Unless the SED-led government greatly improved its record in the availability of clothing, fresh and preserved foodstuffs and consumer goods like washing machines and cars then some women would always prefer part time work and many female graduates would always choose jobs which involved less responsibilities and status and thus did not make the most of their qualifications.

⁶¹ BLA (Landesarchiv Berlin), C Rep 92, 3764 'Bericht über die Ergebnisse einer Untersuchungstätigkeit zu politisch-ideologischen Problemen nach dem VIII. Parteitag unter den Frauen und Ursachen für verkürzte Arbeitszeit in den Betrieben VEB Elfe und VEB Telefon – und Signalbau Berlin', 18.04.72

⁶² Ibid

Women in the Home and the Family

One reason why there was not more progress in women's experiences of equality in the workplace was because traditional stereotypes and attitudes persisted at home, which were carried over into women's paid work. The civil code of 1965 specified that both parents should equally share in household duties and child rearing. However measures such as the 'Baby Year' and *Haushaltstag* seemed to contradict this. Indeed many women's experience of the extended maternity leave was that after having had time away from their job their husbands began to take it for granted that they would take care of the majority of the domestic chores, even after they returned to work. In a shortage socialist economy like the GDR housework was no straightforward matter. Many East German women reported spending as much as 40 hours per week on housework, which American sociologist Helen Frink explains by saying:

This time allotment seems inconceivable, but women insist it was accurate. To understand how a woman could devote 40 hours a week to housekeeping, we must imagine family care in a socialist economy: carrying bed sheets by streetcar to the nearest large-scale laundry or retrieving them clean three weeks later, standing in line to buy whatever could be had, gardening and canning or preserving food, knitting, sewing,

altering or repairing clothing, bartering for spare parts or building materials, or arranging for repairs of household goods.⁶³

In the women's survey conducted by the *Institut für Meinungsforschung in der DDR* (Institute for Public Opinion Research in the GDR) in July 1975 women were asked the following question about housework. (The percentages denote what share of women answered in a particular way):

Married partners should deal with the housework together.

What's the situation in your family?:

- we deal with the housework predominantly together – 34.0 %
- The bulk of the housework is predominantly done by me – 33.4 %
- The bulk of the housework is predominantly done by my husband – 0.4 %
- I cannot answer, since I am not married – 28.8 %
- no answer – 3.4 %

Although 34 % of women believe that the majority of the housework was shared it is telling that only 0.4% declare that their husbands did the greatest share. The government became very interested in the division of housework and frequently conducted research about the attitudes and realities of sharing housework in families. The following table breaks down the average time spent on different household chores by different members of the family per day:

⁶³ Helen Frink, *Women After Communism – The East German Experience* (Oxford & Maryland: University Press of America, 2001), p. 30

TABLE 1

Expenditure of time for housekeeping activities in families where wife is employed full time, 1985 (per day in hours, minutes)⁶⁴

Activity	In total	Husband's share	Wife's share	Children's share
Housekeeping activities altogether	6,30	1,42	3,49	0,59
Preparation of mealtimes	1,48	0,18	1,17	0,13
Cleaning the flat	1,07	0,10	0,45	0,12
Repairs	0,53	0,42	0,04	0,06
Shopping, 'ferreting out' services – and administrative applications	0,55	0,15	0,28	0,12
Manufacturing of Objects	0,20	0,02	0,16	0,02
Other housework	0,24	0,09	0,07	0,08
Gardening	1,40	1,00	0,27	0,13

⁶⁴ Gunnar Winkler, (Hrsg.), *Sozialreport '90, Daten und Fakten zur Sozialen Lage in der DDR* (Berlin: Verlag die Wirtschaft, 1990)

This table not only reveals that on average women did the majority of the housework but it also shows that housework was broken down into traditional gender specific areas. Thus for example, men did the majority of the repairs and the gardening while women did most of the grocery shopping, meal preparation and clothes washing.

Some women did complain about the tight scheduling of their lives. Because it was so difficult to find time to get everything done at home, many women really valued the 'housework day'. Thus those who did not qualify for it complained about its unfair terms, saying that they should not be ineligible just because they were too young or conversely because their children had left home.⁶⁵ In April 1980 a grandmother wrote to Ilse Thiele concerned about the busy lives of working mothers.⁶⁶ She says that her daughter begins work at 7 am and has to drop her child off at kindergarten beforehand. She says most people have to go to bed before 8 pm and try to fall asleep in broad daylight. But what concerns her is, "the little ones, torn from sleep at 6 in the morning, sometimes at 5 o'clock."⁶⁷

Another even more serious letter was sent to the leader of the Department of Health Policies (Abteilung Gesundheitspolitik) Professor Dr. sc. med. Seidel by a female neurologist from Dresden about the consequences of the heavy burdens placed on mothers as a result of their full-time employment.⁶⁸ Her conclusions were formed through her own experiences as a married mother of three children as well as the

⁶⁵ Table 6 on p. 119 shows that petitions about housework to the SED's women's section, *Abteilung Frauen*, were reasonably common.

⁶⁶ SAPMO-BArch DFD DY/ 31 564, Eingabe Hilde Kumbier, dated 06.03.80, p.273

⁶⁷ Ibid

⁶⁸ SAPMO-BArch, Büro Inge Lange, DY 30/IV 2/2.042 33, p. 126. Letter from Magdalene Trappe to Herrn OMR Prof. Dr.sc.med.Seidel, 19.02.86

shared experiences of friends and relatives and through observations during her medical work with out-patients since 1979. She believes that mothers are psychologically and physically overtaxed. She describes how a normal working day takes its toll on women:

Young women are already exhausted, when they begin their actual working day, after the journey to the crèche and kindergarten and to the workplace. After the end of office hours there follows: shopping troubles, efforts towards housekeeping, possibly trying to get hold of a workman, picking up the children. There are often social responsibilities (e.g. in parents' committees, participation in school meetings etc.) or family obligations (e.g. assistance with parents or grandparents)... Problems with children again and again demand flexibility, [produce] victims of time and [demand] the renouncement of the satisfaction of one's own needs. In the long term the signs of excessive demand on all family members arises, especially in mothers.⁶⁹

The letter writer, Frau Trappe, has met women suffering from the effects of this sort of overwork because some of them turn to her, in her role as neurologist, for support. She favours a reduction in women's working hours as the ultimate solution to the problem and believes that part time employment should be granted more easily to women without the requirement of the obligatory medical certificate.⁷⁰ Frau Trappe claims that, "Full employment is at the expense of the woman and the family", and that it is a big factor behind the high divorce rates in East Germany.

⁶⁹ Ibid

⁷⁰ Ibid

She believes that an appreciation of the socio-biological functions of women has not yet been realised particularly in the key areas of school teaching and in the media. Also, and perhaps more urgent, she believes that the material help promised to families through socio-political measures, has not been achieved. Frau Trappe therefore, writing in 1986, has not been convinced by the emphasis on the compatibility of motherhood with full time employment that had been current since 1971, and indeed she points out the flaws in the current system, even suggesting that part time employment of mothers would be more economically beneficial to the GDR.

It is interesting however, to see that in many ways Frau Trappe speaks in the same language as the regime when it comes to discussing the 'women's question'. In this way she makes no hesitation in stating that it should be *mothers* who change their lifestyles to accommodate the problems of family life by working part time. Thus she offers no suggestions for lifestyle changes for fathers or no suggestions for new policies aimed generally at providing new facilities for families (although the latter may be as a result of what she perceives to be failed socio-economic policies in the past).

The government was concerned that some women were still choosing part time work despite their efforts to discourage it. It is important to point out that in the GDR part time work did not mean 'half time' employment like it often does today, but employment of less than 40 hours per week. In 1989 only 27.1 per cent of employed women in East Germany worked part time but out of this figure 80 per

cent of women actually worked more than half time.⁷¹ In comparison in the FRG in 1988, where part time work was taken to mean less than 34 hours per week, 32.2 per cent of employed women worked part time, and of these women, 54 per cent worked less than 21 hours.⁷² But despite the fact that part time work only affected small numbers of women in the GDR, and that many women still worked substantial hours when they were employed in a part time capacity, the SED still frowned on this type of work for women. There are various reasons for this. The propaganda stated that part time workers were not fully integrated socialist personalities but in reality the regime did not want people to have too much of their own autonomy and perhaps even more importantly, due to the economic problems of the GDR, the state required all citizens to contribute their maximum potential to East German society.

The government funded Institute for Public Opinion Research in the GDR, asked the following question in its questionnaires in 1970 and again in 1975 about why some women chose part time employment.

The following table compares the differences in the way in which people answered this question in the two different years.⁷³ (The percentages denote how respondents answered. They were allowed to agree with more than one statement.):

⁷¹ As cited in Nancy Lukens & Dorothy Rosenberg (eds.), *Daughter's of Eve*, p. 5

⁷² *Ibid*

⁷³ SAPMO-BArch, DY 30/IV/2/2 0.42, 34, 'Umfrage zur Rolle der Frau in Familie und Gesellschaft', pp. 66-67

TABLE 2**Reasons why women choose part time employment**

	1975		1970	
	<u>Women</u>	<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>	<u>Men</u>
- the education and care of the children	71.0	69.5	60.9	58.8
- the burden of housework	40.5	41.8	44.1	48.9
- state of health	36.8	25.6	33.8	31.8
- high expenditure of time through shopping	21.2	26.2	22.9	32.1
- the desire of the marriage partner	17.3	19.1	11.7	13.7
- the material conditions for a good standard of living are ensured when a woman works part time	15.8	15.1	15.0	19.0

standard of living are ensured when a woman works part time

It is interesting that both men and women saw childcare and children's education as the reasons far above all others why women might choose part time work rather than full time employment. In similar numbers both male and female respondents also picked out housework as being the second most likely factor that would make women opt for part time work. However, it is revealing that male respondents believed in significantly higher numbers compared to females that shopping and the lack of service facilities were reasons that women might choose to work shorter hours. But while this does demonstrate that men recognised the great lengths of time required for shopping and acquiring service facilities, it also perhaps indicates that men saw these areas as women's responsibility. Also telling is the fact that there was not a huge proportion of respondents who agreed with the statement that

“a good standard of living could be ensured when a woman worked part time”, indicating that many people accepted that two full time wages were necessary.

It is notable that the percentages of men and women who see housework as a reason for women to work part time slightly decreased between 1970 and 1975. Could this reveal a small improvement in the provision of household items like washing machines and fridges that made housework easier, as consumerism became an explicit goal of production as the 1970s progressed? With the fall in the number of men who agreed that couples/families were ensured a good standard of living when the female partner only worked part time it is perhaps evident that more men had to accept by the mid-1970s that two wages were necessary to live comfortably in the GDR. The major change between the two years however, is that by 1975 many more of the survey's respondents believed that childcare and children's education played a key part in women's decision to work less hours. This could on the one hand reveal changing priorities in the outlook of East Germans, for example, and a new emphasis on parents spending time with children and the importance of a good education. On the other hand, however, this could also reveal inadequacies in childcare provision in the GDR so that that many women were forced to work less hours in order to look after their children.

The Provision of Childcare

In the 1950s and 60s the GDR government realised that the comprehensive recruitment of women into the workforce could never be achieved unless childcare

facilities were made extensively available at affordable prices.⁷⁴ Thus the number of state-run crèches and kindergartens and also those provided by factories and other workplaces for pre-school children steadily expanded during the Ulbricht era. So, for example, according to official data, the number of crèche places (for babies and children 0 – 3 years) increased from 50,171 in 1955 to 81,495 in 1960 and to 116,950 in 1965.⁷⁵ The government was proud of its achievements in childcare. A book designed to promote the GDR and its accomplishments to the English speaking world, published in 1959 gave the following information to the question, “How are the children of working mothers looked after?”:⁷⁶

One of the major factors securing the right of women to follow a profession is the provision of a comprehensive system of state-organised child care. A large, ever-expanding network of municipal and factory nurseries, kindergartens and after-school clubs has been created. Thus the mothers are able to go to work without having to worry about their children who are well looked after by trained children’s nurses and educationists.⁷⁷

The VIII. Party Congress in 1971 made the care and education of pre-school children a top priority. Thus new promises were made about increasing the availability of childcare. These promises went hand in hand with the social package

⁷⁴ Annemette Sørensen, & Heike Trappe, ‘Frauen und Männer: Gleichberechtigung – Gleichstellung – Gleichheit?’, Johannes Huinink & Karl Ulrich u.a., *Kollektiv & Eigensinn – Lebensverläufe in der DDR & danach* (Berlin, Akademie Verlag, 1995), p. 197

⁷⁵ Staatlichen Zentralverwaltung für Statistik (Hrsg.), *Statistisches Jahrbuch der DDR 1980* (Berlin), ‘Kinderkrippen und Dauerheime für Säuglinge und Kleinkinder nach Bezirken’, p.338

⁷⁶ Committee for German Unity, *GDR – 300 Questions, 300 Answers* (Berlin: Committee for German Unity, 1959), p. 157

⁷⁷ Ibid

of provisions introduced in 1972 and 1976 that were designed to boost the birth rate and to encourage mothers to take up full time work. Focusing on the example of crèche provision there was indeed a huge boost in the number of crèche places between 1970 and 1975 if official statistics are to be believed. During this time crèche places increased by a massive 68,241 from 166,700 in 1970 to 234,941 in 1975.⁷⁸ After 1975 the number of new crèche places made available each year continued to rise steadily so that there was an increase of around 50,000 new places by 1980.⁷⁹ This was in fact similar to the rate in which places had been provided between 1965 and 1970, indicating that the increase in childcare provision was a long term SED policy not just confined to the Honecker era, as propaganda at the time would suggest.

In real terms these new crèche facilities provided the equivalent of 612 places per 1000 children in 1980 compared to 291 in 1970.⁸⁰ With regard to kindergartens (for children aged 3 to 6 years) the availability was more extensive, with 922 kindergarten places per 1000 children in 1980 compared to 645 in 1970.⁸¹ The increase in childcare provision remained at the forefront of SED women's policies into the 1980s, as demonstrated in a lengthy document by Inge Lange's office in preparation for the 10th Party Congress of the SED in 1981, which included a section on the need to increase crèche and kindergarten places between 1981 and

⁷⁸ This steady expansion in places had already begun in earnest before the 1971 Party Congress with 15,000 new creche places provided between 1970 and 1971. Staatlichen Zentralverwaltung für Statistik (Hrsg.), *Statistisches Jahrbuch der DDR 1980* (Berlin), 'Kinderkrippen und Dauerheime für Säuglinge und Kleinkinder nach Bezirken', p.338

⁷⁹ Statistisches Amt der DDR (Hrsg.), *Statistisches Jahrbuch der DDR 1990* (Berlin), 'Kinderkrippen und Dauerheime für Säuglinge und Kleinkinder', p. 378

⁸⁰ Mike Dennis, *The Rise and Fall of the German Democratic Republic, 1945-1990*, p. 150

⁸¹ Ibid

1985.⁸² While these targets were met it is notable that after 1985 the rate in which new places became available slowed right down and that during the 1980s there was practically no increase at all in the provision of kindergarten and crèche places in the factory/workplace and indeed a slight decline in 1988 and 1989.⁸³

Perhaps by the mid-1980s the SED believed the demand for childcare had been met. Indeed, when evaluating the responses to the question ‘In your opinion how was childcare in GDR times compared to today?’ in the anonymous questionnaires I distributed in 2003, it was apparent that, at least according to my sample, many women from the former *Bundesländer* had been overwhelmingly satisfied with the childcare system in the GDR. In fact this was one of their enduring memories of that time. Certainly many of those women who replied believed that a place was guaranteed to anyone who wanted one. The GDR government certainly boasted of its record in childcare and tried to make sure that the population was fully aware and appreciated it. In a 1977 edition of *Für Dich*, the GDR’s women’s illustrated weekly magazine, there was an article comparing the rights of women in East Germany and the USSR to those of women in various western countries including France, the USA and the FRG. When it came to the section on ‘Mother and Child Protection’ the article highlighted that in France only 40,000 crèche places were available to 800,000 children, while in the FRG only 20,000 crèche places were at the disposal of approximately eight million employed women.⁸⁴

⁸² SAPMO-BArch, Büro Inge Lange, DY/30/IV 2/2.042 29, ‘Vorbereitung 10. Parteitag SED, 1980-81 – Analyse Ergebnisse Frauenpolitik: Berufstätigkeit Frauen, Struktur, Qualifikation, Kinderkrippen, Schule Geburtsrate Familie –Schlussfolgerungen für Frauenpolitik SED – Zuarbeitbericht ZK, p. 128

⁸³ Statistisches Amt der DDR (Hrsg.), *Statistisches Jahrbuch der DDR 1990* (Berlin), ‘Kinderkrippen und Dauerheime für Säuglinge und Kleinkinder’, p. 378

⁸⁴ Robert-Havemann Archiv, *Für Dich*, 51/1977, p. 8

However, although the availability of childcare was high, there was still evidence that some women could not work in the jobs they wished to because they were unable to attain a kindergarten or crèche place for their child. Some women clearly thought that the system was prejudiced towards helping single mothers. A report of a petition sent to the DFD in 1979 outlines the complaint of a married mother with two small children who was unable to secure a crèche place for her youngest child after the end of her ‘baby year’, despite having applied for a place over a year earlier when she was pregnant.⁸⁵ She makes a dramatic statement about how she sees the current childcare situation, accompanied by a threat, which is reproduced in full in the report:

Soon one will feel punished for leading a normal way of life, since unmarried couples who live together, single mothers and female students are all able to get their children cared for without difficulties. Sometimes indeed I consider that a divorce would not be unpleasant to our harmonious marriage, but under the given conditions would be the most effective means [to obtain a crèche place].⁸⁶

This sort of threat does not appear to have been unusual. In another petition from a young mother of three children whose husband is in prison, and who is also unable to secure a crèche position for her youngest child, the writer makes a similar threat.⁸⁷ Sabine Genzel wants to return to work and lives with her family under very difficult financial circumstances. She states that, “From my husband I presently receive 110, - - marks monthly. How are my children and I to live, if I am not given

⁸⁵ SAPMO-BArch, DFD, DY31/565, p. 63, report of Eingabe from Petra Preuß, December 1979

⁸⁶ Ibid

⁸⁷ SAPMO-BArch, DFD, DY31/564, p. 189, Eingabe to Ilse Thiele from Sabine Genzel, 16.05.79

the possibility to work?” She continues to ask, “Do I first need to separate from my husband in order to receive a crèche place?”⁸⁸

Another petition from a women’s collective at a ‘*Konsum-Spezielverkaufsstelle für Fleisch und Wurstwaren*’ in the small village of Oberoderwitz near the Czech border demonstrates how the childcare system often meant that the kindergarten or crèche placements acquired by a family were often located either very far from the place of work or residence.⁸⁹ The work collective are requesting on behalf of a new colleague who has moved from Eibau to Oberoderwitz, that kindergarten placements be found for her two younger children and a school place for her older child nearer to her workplace.⁹⁰ At present their colleague who has had to move in with her parents in order to take the job, has been refused new childcare arrangements for her children and is having to undertake a 12 kilometre journey each day by public transport back to Eibau in order to drop her children off at day care and school. Obviously this is having a negative impact on the worker involved and her work colleagues. She is unable to carry out her full shift and as a result has to do extra weekend shifts and her colleagues have to make up any work she has missed. The collective write that they feel let down by the Oberoderwitz municipal authorities who have only been able to offer kindergarten places from September and they are writing in January. It is revealing that the women began their letter by stating that they have chosen to write to Thiele, head of the DFD, since the matter is exclusively a women’s problem, demonstrating how women in the GDR accepted

⁸⁸ Ibid

⁸⁹ Fulbrook, Mary, *The People’s State*, p. 56

⁹⁰ SAPMO-BArch, DFD, DY DY/ 31, 564, p. 316, Eingabe sent by the women’s collective at 0424 Fleischwaren, 8716 Oberderwitz, dated 16.01.78

that the arrangement of childcare was their responsibility. They enquire, “Now we ask you, Comrade Thiele how does this correspond to the socio-political measures regarding mothers and women with several children? It is not easy to be employed anyway in trade as a mother of three children.”⁹¹

On the whole however, the development of childcare facilities does seem to have been one of the GDR’s overriding success stories. According to the sample of women who replied to my anonymous questionnaires only one out of 54 said that the present childcare system in the *neuen Bundesländer* (the new federal states in the reunited Germany) was better today than in GDR times. Some women pointed out the flexibility of the system that catered for all ages of children, explaining that there were after school clubs for schoolchildren and *Kinderhorten* or day homes for children during the school holidays when parents could not take time off work or were working awkward shifts. Many also described the variety of activities undertaken by children in the GDR’s pre-school facilities such as painting, handicrafts, singing, and using musical instruments as well as learning number, alphabet and language skills. Another big bonus was that childcare was cheap, since it was heavily subsidised by the government, a point acknowledged by some of the respondents to my questionnaire. A publication for English speaking readers called ‘Introducing the GDR’ written in May 1973, stated that every year the government ‘allots considerable financial means’ to crèches and children’s residential homes.⁹² It affirmed that ‘while the actual monthly expenditure for every inmate of a day crèche is 177 marks a month, parents pay only 27.50 marks.’

⁹¹ Ibid

⁹² Verlag Zeit im Bild, *Introducing the GDR* (Dresden: 1973), p. 151

In fact the only real criticism of the childcare facilities in the GDR was about the nature of the way in which children were educated. As one respondent put it, a musician and mother of two children, childcare in the GDR was “essentially better [than today] but unfortunately politically characterised – i.e. it was socially good but state-controlled.”⁹³ Some women felt that their children were being encouraged to adhere to norms of group behaviour and were discouraged from developing their individuality at pre-school.⁹⁴ Other mothers did not like the emphasis on play with military toys.⁹⁵

Increasing the birth rate

To understand the relationship between East German women and the state during the 1970s and 1980s it is essential to analyse how effective the increase in childcare facilities combined with the other elements of Honecker’s package of social reforms for mothers and young couples, were in reversing the trend towards a declining birth rate in the GDR. The birth rate had fallen from 301,472 in 1963 to 179,127 in 1974.⁹⁶ From 1974 however it began to pick up, as demonstrated in the following table:

⁹³ She was born in 1952, was married and lived in Erfurt an later Eisenach.

⁹⁴ Helen Frink, *Women After Communism – The East German Experience*, p. 63

⁹⁵ For more information, see Chapter 4 on ‘Women’s Peace Activists’

⁹⁶ David Childs, *The GDR: Moscow’s German Ally* p. 256

TABLE 3**Birth rate 1974 - 1981**

Year ⁹⁷	Live births (to nearest 100)	Absolute change in 1000s	Compared to previous year in per cent	In comparison with 1974, (which is taken as 100)
1974	179,100			100
1975	181,800	+ 2,700	101.5	101.5
1976	195,500	+ 13,700	107.5	109.2
1977	223,200	+ 27,700	114.1	124.6
1978	232,300	+ 9,100	104.0	129.7
1979	235,200	+ 2,900	101.2	131.3
1980	245,100	+ 9,900	104.2	136.8
1981	237,500	- 7,600	96.9	132.6

These statistics would suggest that the measures to encourage women to have more children met with success. However, it is notable that the birth rate never recovered to pre-1963 levels and the rise reached its peak in 1980, when it began to steadily decline again.⁹⁸

The GDR invested a great deal of time and money trying to ascertain what they called the population's '*Kinderwunsch*' or the number of children desired by men, women and couples. For example, the *Akademie der Wissenschaften der DDR*,

⁹⁷ SAPMO-BArch, Abteilung Frauen, DY30/vorl. SED, 36878, Irene Zickenrott, 'Information über die Geburtenentwicklung 1981', Berlin, 18.05.82

⁹⁸ Mary Fulbrook, *The People's State*, p. 154

Institut für Soziologie und Sozialpolitik (Academy of Sciences in the GDR, Institute for Sociology and Social Policy) undertook a study in October 1982 to find out about family life and the number of children desired by women.⁹⁹ It involved a sample of 2489 women aged between 18 and 40 years and 651 families from Berlin-Marzahn, Berlin-Pankow, Wismar, Riesa and fourteen villages in the Templin district.¹⁰⁰ The average number of children wanted by this sample of women was 1.94 children. This could be broken down in the following way:

- 61 % of the women wanted 2 children
- 17.5 % wanted more than 2 children
- 20 % wanted one child
- 1.5 % of women wanted no children¹⁰¹

However what is interesting in this study is that when asked how many children the women would want if their standard of living was higher, the *Kinderwunsch* (now called the ‘ideal’ *Kinderwunsch*) slightly increased. In this case the average number of children desired by women went up to an average of 2.17 children per woman.¹⁰² The *Akademie der Wissenschaften* interpreted this in a positive manner, since according to their calculations the healthy reproduction of the population was guaranteed if women had on average 2.1 children each and the ideal *Kinderwunsch* surpassed this. What it demonstrated however, was that as with many other areas of GDR life, the success of the mother and child policies were tied up with the success

⁹⁹ SAPMO-BArch, Büro Inge Lange, DY 30/IV 2/2.042 64, ‘Sofortinformation über die Durchführung einer Bevölkerungsbefragung zum Kinderwunsch von Frauen und zur Lebensweise von Familien’, 30.10.82,

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, p. 10 (Anlage)

¹⁰¹ Ibid, p. 1

¹⁰² Ibid, p. 2

of economic policies. Without an improvement in living conditions this ‘ideal’ *Kinderwunsch* would never be achieved.

A further study by the Institute for Sociology and Social Policy explored this in more detail in 1983.¹⁰³ The following extract from the study, which begins very positively when referring to current standards of living in the GDR, proceeds to outline the factors that make women decide against having further children:

The standard of living now attained makes it possible for all families in the GDR to have as many children as they wish. This conviction also prevails in the attitudes of young people. Many young women however see problems with the decision [to have] a third child; with regard to the housing conditions, which are often already a consideration when it comes to [having] a second child. The women nearly always count on substantial changes to their material conditions with a (further) child [...] 61 % of the women think that their housing conditions would not be suitable for life with a further child. 12 % of the women think that they could not continue their professional work as before; 13 % think that the financial expenditure for a (further) child would be too high.¹⁰⁴

The study identified which areas needed to be addressed for young families to fulfil their desire to add to their family. The three most common were firstly attaining suitable living conditions, a factor that was crucial for families of all social classes.

¹⁰³ SAPMO-BArch, Büro Inge Lange, DY 30/IV 2/2.042 64, ‘Information über Hauptergebnisse einer Bevölkerungsbefragung im Jahre 1982 zu den Ursachen der gegenwärtigen Kinderzahl in den Familien’, 09.09.83. This study used the same size sample of women from the same areas.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, pp. 4-5

Secondly, current education and child-care circumstances were important and were a factor that could be particularly ascribed to young women who worked within the intelligence services. Thirdly the financial situation of the family played a key part in the decision process and according to the survey this was important predominantly for young blue and white-collar female workers.¹⁰⁵ Since living conditions were exposed as so vital in the decision to have children for people in all social classes, the study went on to underline the importance of the housing construction programme. A considerable portion of the remainder of the study was therefore devoted to the need to improve housing conditions in order to increase the desire for more children, with the recognition that with regard to all circles interviewed, the arrival of each extra child beyond the second one meant a reduction in housing comfort.¹⁰⁶

As well as generating social and economic improvements the GDR government hoped to increase the birth rate by encouraging women to have children at a younger age. Popular scientific publications repeatedly emphasised that the most biologically favourable time for a pregnancy was between a woman's twentieth and twenty-fifth birthdays.¹⁰⁷ It was also publicised that the most favourable distance between two births was two to three years. Of course early pregnancy was also encouraged through the financial incentives offered to young people if they married and had children. The idea was that the earlier young people set up a family, the sooner more children would follow.¹⁰⁸ Indeed this policy does seem to have met with success. A report into the development of the socialist personality in

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, p. 5

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, p. 6

¹⁰⁷ Heike Trappe, *Emanzipation oder Zwang? Frauen in der DDR zwischen Beruf, Familie und Sozialpolitik*, pp. 71-72

¹⁰⁸ *ibid*, p. 71

girls and young women in the GDR by the Central Institute for Youth Research found that young workers of both sexes believed that the age between 20 and 23 was the most favourable for having a first child.¹⁰⁹ Another investigation that took place in 1978 broke down the number of children that its sample of 1,921 women and 1,789 men had parented into different age groups. (The figures are in percentages):

TABLE 4

Number of children, 1978

*Women*¹¹⁰

		Age in years			
Number Of children		18-20	21-24	25-29	30-35
	None	79.2	35.1	12.2	6.6
	1	16.9	48.0	43.7	30.5
	2	2.6	16.1	39.4	47.8
	3	0.3	0.8	3.1	11.1
	4 or more	0.0	0.0	1.4	3.8

¹⁰⁹ SAPMO-BArch, DC/4, 234, 'Forschungsbericht zu Fragen der sozialistischen Persönlichkeitsentwicklung von Mädchen und jungen Frauen in der DDR', Zentralinstitut für Jugendforschung, Direktor: Prof. Dr. habil. Walter Friedrich, Leipzig, Juli 1975, p. 55

¹¹⁰ SAPMO-BArch, DY 30/IV/2/2 0.42, 34, 'Umfrage zu einigen Fragen von Kind und Familie in der Gesellschaft', Berlin, 1978, p. 167

Men

Age in years

Number		18-20	21-24	25-29	30-35
Of	None	90.5	56.1	19.6	7.1
children	1	5.8	32.8	50.5	40.7
	2	2.5	10.0	25.7	40.9
	3	0.0	1.1	2.9	9.2
	4 or more	0.4	0.0	0.7	2.1

The table referring to the sample of women shows that in the 21 to 24 age group almost 65 % had at least one child. At the other end of the scale only 6.6 % of those women aged 30 to 35 years had no children. If these women were typical of East German women at the time then this would suggest that in 1978, as the birth rate was steadily climbing in the GDR, the trend was indeed towards having children young.¹¹¹ The table referring to the male participants shows that the majority of the men were slightly older than women when they had children suggesting that if this sample is typical of East German men at the time, that men generally chose younger partners with whom to have children.

¹¹¹ Of course it is difficult to make assumptions when this report is based on such a small sample of the overall population of the GDR. Although the study claimed to be based on men and women from across a wide section of society, there does seem to have been a particular emphasis on white and blue-collar workers. (They made up 62.4 % of the female participants and 66.2 % of the male participants). Also it cannot be ruled out that the participants were chosen for a particular purpose. There were also more participants in certain age groups, which may slightly affect the percentages.

One consequence of women having children at a young age during the Honecker era was that the previous generation also became grandparents at a younger age. An article celebrating the new wave of youthful grandmothers appeared in a 1977 edition of the GDR's official women's magazine *Für Dich* declaring, '*Die Geburtenquote steigt – die Omawelle rollt.*'¹¹² ('The birth rate rises, the wave of grannies rolls!') The increasing numbers of women aged between 40 and 45 with grandchildren meant that traditional views and judgements about grandmothers were being overturned. It quoted the experiences of several young grandmothers. One woman, a work group leader, Christa Bärbel M., when asked whether she would help bring up her grandchild, explained that grandmothers should help out in emergencies but, "to give my job up, to give up everything that I have worked so hard to build up? No. [...] As far as I'm concerned if my daughter wants to work – I want to as well!"¹¹³ This is a clear example of how the drive to keep women in full time employment while boosting the birth rate, was also extended to grandmothers. Obviously if large numbers of grandmothers of working age began to reduce their working hours to care for grandchildren, it would be disastrous to the policy's success.

The article was also keen to highlight how recent measures like the 'baby year' and the shorter working week for mothers made it easier for women to be with their young children. Gisela M., a 45-year old grandmother who was employed as a shift worker, looked back at the time when her own children were young saying, "Mine were in the week-long crèche, I missed so much – the first tooth, the first step... Now my heart goes out when I see all of this with my grandchild. And it makes me

¹¹² RHG (Robert-Havemann Gesellschaft), *Für Dich*, 52/1977, p. 24

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 24

happy that my daughter and other young mothers have time for their offspring.”¹¹⁴

In this way the article not only glorifies the new role of grandmothers but simultaneously promotes the ease with which mothers can bring up children while being fully employed during the Honecker era.

Another consequence of the trend towards having children young was that many young mothers had not completed their studies when they became pregnant. In fact between 1972 and 1975 combining studies or apprenticeships with motherhood was actively encouraged.¹¹⁵ By the late 1970s the number of students with children was still rising, from 4,310 or 7.9 % of the total female student population in 1977 to 5,279 or 9.6 % in 1979.¹¹⁶ Female students at universities and technical colleges were given extra financial support, special rooms in halls of residences were adapted for married couples and children and crèches were set up on campuses.¹¹⁷ A common question in the surveys by the Institute for Opinion Research and Central Institute for Youth Research was whether women and girls thought they should ideally wait until the end of their studies to have a child or whether they believed it was possible to be both a mother and a student. The downside of encouraging students to have children was that although the number of students who became pregnant increased, some students did not complete their studies once they had had their baby.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴ Ibid

¹¹⁵ Heike Trappe, *Emanzipation oder Zwang?*, p. 71

¹¹⁶ These figures exclude research students. SAPMO-BArch, Abteilung Frauen, DY30/vorl. SED, 36878, ‘Information zum Stand der Aktivitäten und Ergebnisse bei der weiteren Einflussnahme auf die allseitige Förderung der Studentinnen mit Kind’, Berlin, 26.02.81

¹¹⁷ Heike Trappe, *Emanzipation oder Zwang?*, p. 71

¹¹⁸ See SAPMO-BArch, DC/4, 234, ‘Forschungsbericht zu Fragen der sozialistischen Persönlichkeitsentwicklung von Mädchen und jungen Frauen in der DDR’, Zentralinstitut für Jugendforschung, Direktor: Prof. Dr. habil. Walter Friedrich, Leipzig, Juli 1975, p. 55

Evidence that many young women found the new social measures for mothers appealing is demonstrated by the fact that growing numbers of women chose to have children outside of marriage. In 1980 almost a quarter of all births (23 %) were registered to unmarried mothers.¹¹⁹ By 1981 the analysis of the birth rate by the Women's Department, recognised that the children being born to unmarried women represented a significant and vital part of maintaining the new healthy birth rate in East Germany.¹²⁰ Fulbrook points out that the ever-growing tolerance of giving birth outside of marriage could be seen in the collapse of the stigma previously attached to the status of being 'illegitimate'.¹²¹ Many unmarried women with children lived in cohabiting relationships but some were single mothers, who despite the evident strain of their role, evidently believed that with the extensive range of affordable baby and childcare facilities, single motherhood was perfectly feasible in the GDR.

Another contributor to the phenomenon of single motherhood was the growing incidence of divorce in East Germany. The divorce rate rose steadily during the Honecker era, having remained reasonably stable during the 1950s and 1960s following a temporary increase in divorce immediately after the war.¹²² After the USA, the Soviet Union, Cuba and the UK, the GDR had the highest divorce rate.¹²³ Compared to the FRG the divorce rate seemed particularly high, with 38 per cent of marriages ending in divorce in 1988 in the GDR compared to 31 per cent in West

¹¹⁹ SAPMO-BArch, Abteilung Frauen, DY30/vorl. SED, 36878, 'Zur Information zu aktuellen Problemen des Heiratsverhaltens und der Geburtenentwicklung in der DDR', 01.06.81, p. 2

¹²⁰ SAPMO-BArch, Abteilung Frauen, DY30/vorl. SED, 36878, Irene Zickenrott 'Information über die Geburtenentwicklung 1981', 18.05.81, Berlin, p. 3

¹²¹ Mary Fulbrook, *The People's State*, p. 119

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 118

¹²³ Nancy Lukens & Dorothy Rosenberg (eds.), *Daughter's of Eve*, p. 8

Germany in 1987.¹²⁴ There were a number of reasons for the rise in divorce. First of all the high divorce rates were a consequence of the growing tendency of GDR citizens to marry very young, which itself was partly a result of the financial incentives handed out by the state to young couples who married. Another reason was that it was relatively easy to obtain a divorce in the GDR. The waiting period for a court hearing was short and generally it only took a few weeks from the first initiation of proceedings to the granting of a decree for divorce. There was also no obligation to have a lawyer and divorce costs were calculated on income and were therefore reasonable.¹²⁵ In 93 % of cases the custody of the children went to the mother,¹²⁶ another reflection perhaps of the enduring traditional roles of men and women in GDR society.

The increasing occurrence of single motherhood was monitored by the state. A study about family life in 1982 involving 2489 women and 651 families identified concerns relating to single mothers such as the financial difficulties incurred when purchasing day to day household items and perhaps more worryingly, from the point of view of the successful completion of economic and production goals, the study also highlighted the problems encountered by single mothers in fulfilling the combination of full time employment and bringing up children.¹²⁷ The study stated, 'These women have substantial problems with reconciling [motherhood and employment] – they are usually very heavily aware of the demands on their

¹²⁴ Ibid

¹²⁵ Sabine Berghahn & Andrea Fritzsche, *Frauenrecht in Ost und Westdeutschland – Bilanz Ausblick* (Berlin: Verlagsgesellschaft, 1991), p. 142

¹²⁶ Ibid

¹²⁷ SAPMO-BArch, Büro Inge Lange, DY 30/IV 2/2.042 64, 'Sofortinformation über die Durchführung einer Bevölkerungsbefragung zum Kinderwunsch von Frauen und zur Lebensweise von Familien', 30.10.82, p. 8

time.’¹²⁸ Notably the study suggested that single mothers nearly always ‘pronounced a clear desire for partnership’, indicating that perhaps conventional relationships were generally perceived by East German women as the most desirable set-up in which to bring up a family.

Various measures were brought in to make life more manageable for single mothers. Those single mothers who could not find a crèche place were allowed to continue their baby year at home for up to three paid years, as opposed to married women who were also permitted to do so but were not paid. The government also encouraged work places to provide facilities that made family life easier for single mothers. An article in *Für Dich* praised a factory where measures had been taken to help single mothers. At this particular television production factory, single mothers were not forced to undertake shift work at unsociable hours, when arrangements for child-care could be difficult. As one single mother who worked at the factory, aged 25 with two children gratefully observed, “When you’re alone with children, you cannot make a late shift each second week as would be possible with a regulated family life.”¹²⁹ As a result of measures like these however, many married women felt penalised and discriminated against, as could be judged from the rise of petitions by mothers threatening divorce to ease their situation. In this area, therefore, when the government wanted to maintain the rising birth rate and make all mothers perceive their value to society, it was difficult to strike the correct balance.

¹²⁸ Ibid

¹²⁹ RHG/ *Für Dich* 51/1977, ‘Richtig im Bilde Was man im Fernsehgerätewerk Stassfurt fuer alleinstehende Mütter übrig hat’, Dagmar Szczukowski, p. 20

Abortion

Soon after Honecker took over leadership of the GDR as General Secretary of the Central Committee of the SED the Law concerning the Termination of Pregnancy was passed on 9 March 1972. The nature of this law, which made abortion available on demand for all women in the first three months of pregnancy, helps to highlight Fulbrook's assertion that it is difficult to draw sharp distinctions between the Honecker and Ulbricht eras. This is because the law appeared to contradict the general emphasis on reversing the declining birth rate and encouraging women to have more children that was the main policy with regard to women during the 1970s and 1980s.

Before 1972, the GDR had actually had a very strict abortion code that kept the number of approved abortions stable at around 700 to 800 per year.¹³⁰ It was governed by section 11 of the 1950 law, 'Protection of Mother and Child and the Rights of Women', which stated that, "the artificial interruption of pregnancy shall only be made where the *life or health* of the pregnant woman *would be seriously endangered* if she carried the child to full term or where one of the parents suffers from a serious hereditary disease."¹³¹ The penalty for interrupting pregnancy for any other reason was imprisonment. American historian Donna Harsch has conducted research that suggests that the dramatic increase of illegal abortions in the late 1950s and early 1960s as well as the huge numbers of petitions sent to various state bodies from women and their families describing personal reasons

¹³⁰ Kirsten Thietz (Hrsg.), *Ende der Selbstverständlichkeit? Die Abschaffung des §218 in der DDR – Dokumente*, p. 85. This was actually one of the lowest rates of legal abortion in the industrialised world.

¹³¹ K.H. Mehlan, 'German Democratic Republic,' in Paul Sachdev (ed.), *International Handbook on Abortion*, (London: Greenwood Press, 1988), p. 171

why they were desperate to be allowed an abortion, made the Ulbricht government relax the rules in 1965, with an amendment to article 11.¹³² But the 1965 alterations opened the floodgates for applicants and also dramatically increased the number of petitions concerning abortion because more women now felt that under the new conditions their circumstances entitled them to an abortion. When Honecker came to power he may have been under pressure for these reasons to relax the law even further, hence the introduction of the new abortion legislation of 1972. In fact the law was justified by rather obscure reasons; the Politburo issued figures to assure Party leaders that the abortion legislation would not be damaging to the population rate since the present decline of births remained “within reasonable limits”. But this was not true and the decrease in the number of births from 1963 to 1969 was actually 79%!¹³³

In actual fact, however, the new abortion law tied in well with the other social policies of the early 1970s designed to enhance the population’s sense of well-being and fulfilment in the GDR at this time. These included the drive to increase consumerism, the launch of a comprehensive housing construction programme, improvements in working hours and an increase in the minimum wage as well as a cultural thaw between 1971 and 1976 that meant jeans appeared in shops, the playing of beat music was allowed and a backlog of controversial works were published.¹³⁴

¹³² Following this legal abortions could be granted on an additional five grounds to the current medical and eugenic considerations. The following circumstances could now be taken into consideration: if the woman had become pregnant as a result of rape or incest; already had five children; had had a fourth child less than fifteen months after her third child; she was older than forty or younger than sixteen. As described in K.H. Mehlan, ‘German Democratic Republic,’ in Paul Sachdev (ed.), *International Handbook on Abortion*, pp. 171-172

¹³³ Donna Harsch, ‘Society, the State, and Abortion in East Germany, 1950 – 1972’, p. 81

¹³⁴ Mike Dennis, *The Rise and Fall of the German Democratic Republic, 1945-1990* (Harlow, Essex: Pearson Education Ltd, 2000), pp. 145-6, 149, 154

An article entitled, 'Only Wanted Children' in the GDR's women's magazine *Für Dich* explained in April 1972, 'The new regulation helps women to retain their health and decide what time in their lives they want to have children – wanted children.'¹³⁵ The government intended to stop the decline in rates of childbearing without resorting to coercive measures. Consequently promoting the desire for children as well as the right to limit the number of children now became two sides of the same coin, as the abortion law was introduced at the same time as the other social benefits for mothers and young married couples and families.

The new law was used by many couples in the GDR as an alternative means of birth control. Indeed the propaganda booklet 'Equal Rights for Women in the German Democratic Republic' produced in English in Berlin in 1973 for foreign readers suggested that, 'The Law of March 9, 1972, provides new possibilities for married partners to order their family relations by carefully considering all the circumstances.'¹³⁶ The law worked well for the regime; following a dramatic rise in the number of abortions to 113,232 in 1973, abortion rates then stabilised to between 80,000 to 95,000 per year, which by the later 1970s was balanced out by the increasing number of births.¹³⁷

In comparison, the regulations surrounding legal abortions in West Germany were much stricter than in the GDR which forced a revival of the abortion debate after German reunification. When this occurred many women from the *neue*

¹³⁵ Kirsten Thietz, (Hrsg.), *Ende der Selbstverständlichkeit? Die Abschaffung des §218 in der DDR – Dokumente*, 'Nur Wunschkinder', *Für Dich*, April 1972, p. 156

¹³⁶ Dr. Herta Kuhrig, *Equal Rights for Women in the German Democratic Republic* (Berlin: Publications of the GDR Committee for Human Rights, No. 5, 1973)

¹³⁷ Mary Fulbrook, *The People's State*, p. 153

Bundesländer (new federal provinces) were horrified at this time at the prospect of losing what they had begun to see as a 'basic right'.¹³⁸

Women in the Party, the Mass Organisations and the Stasi

There was a continuous drive during the Honecker era to recruit more women to become members of the SED. The 8th Party Congress in 1971 had called for the SED to 'win over' the best female workers, in particular those women involved in production, to their ranks, and to entrust the most capable female comrades with party leadership functions.¹³⁹ A report for use in the 9th Party Congress by Inge Lange's office, noted that much of the work for this recruitment campaign had taken place within the confines of the FDJ, the GDR's youth organisation.¹⁴⁰ This emphasis on finding committed and impressionable youth who could be moulded to a particular ideal was typical of a modern communist dictatorship. But what was particularly important in the recruitment of young girls to the SED was that many would become mothers to the next generation of East Germans, so that their Marxist-Leninist education took on a special importance.¹⁴¹

However despite this campaign the number of male party members and candidates always exceeded the number of females in the SED by a wide margin. Between 1975 and 1980 the number of women in the Party grew by just 2.5 %, from 31% of

¹³⁸ See Elizabeth Clements, 'The Abortion Debate in Unified Germany', in Elizabeth Boa & Janet Wharton (eds.), *Women and the 'Wende': Social Effects and Cultural Reflections of the German Unification Process*, German Monitor 31 (Amsterdam & Atlanta: Rodopi, 1994)

¹³⁹ SAPMO-BArch, Büro Inge Lange, DY/30/IV 2/2.042 27, '1975-1976, Vorbereitung 9. Parteitag SED – Zusammensetzung Arbeitsgruppe Frauen zur Vorbereitung Parteitag – Analyse über Ergebnisse Frauenpolitik', 'Zugehörigkeit zur Partei- Funktionen in der Partei', 05.12.75, p. 55

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 56

¹⁴¹ Ibid, p. 57

all members and candidates in 1975 to 33.5 % in 1980.¹⁴² That amounted to 682,675 female members of the SED and 39,130 candidates or 721,805 altogether, which was only a small percentage of the adult female population of the GDR. A breakdown of female members and candidates in 1981 according to age, reveals that those women who were in the SED ranks, were spread out through different age groups¹⁴³:

TABLE 5

A breakdown of female members and candidates of the SED in 1981

Age	Number of women, end of 1981	Percentage
Up to 25	124,847	16.7
26-30	97,623	13.0
31-40	133,687	17.8
41-50	137,988	18.4
51-60	132,664	17.4
61-65	35,181	4.7
Over 65	87,563	11.7

In fact there were almost twice as many female members and candidates under 30 years of age (29.7 %), as over 60 (16.4%), showing that the SED did have a certain amount of success in recruiting young women to its ranks.

¹⁴² SAPMO-BArch, Abteilung Frauen, DY30/vorl.SED, 36878, 'Information zum Anteil der Genossinnen an den Leitungen der Partei im Ergebnis der Parteiwahlen 1980/1981', 20.04.81, p.1

¹⁴³ SAPMO-BArch, Abteilung Frauen, DY30/vorl.SED, 36878, 'Information über die Entwicklung von Genossinnen in der Partei im Jahre 1981', 22.04.82, p. 1

What was more negative however, was the small number of women who had leading positions in the SED. A report from 1980/81 informs that 29.7 % of party functionaries were women, which was a small rise from 27.1 % in 1975/76.¹⁴⁴ But higher up the ranks of the SED leadership, there were less and less women. In 1980/81 there were 298 female members of the secretariat of the district committee, which amounted to 11.5 % of the total, a small increase from 268 members or 10.4 % in 1975/76.¹⁴⁵ Higher up still, in the upper echelons of the party-state apparatus there were no female full members of the Politburo and only two female candidate members; Margarete Müller, director of the Industrial and Agrarian Association of Plant Production, Friedland (AIV *Agrar-Industrie-Vereinigung*), and Inge Lange, head of the Women's Department.¹⁴⁶ In this way then, the proportion of women in leadership functions within the Party and government in the GDR similarly reflected the general lower representation of women compared to men in managerial and leadership positions in areas of employment in East German society.

For those women who were in the SED, there is no fixed reason why they became members. Some women inevitably chose to become members for personal gain, i.e. to help them advance in their careers or to give greater opportunity to their families. Other women probably felt more pressurised to join the SED through an employer's influence or that of a family member. Whatever the reason, however there is no

¹⁴⁴ SAPMO-BArch, Büro Inge Lange, DY30/IV 2/2.042, 29, 'Teilanalyse zur Leitungstätigkeit der Partei in den Bezirken und Kreisen bei der Verwirklichung der Beschlüsse des IX. Parteitages zur Frauenpolitik', p. 7

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 8

¹⁴⁶ Mary Fulbrook, *The People's State*, p. 166-167. Together with Margot Honecker, wife of Erich Honecker and the GDR Education Minister, these women were the only women to exercise any real power in the GDR, although their lack of full membership of the Politburo did curtail their influence.

doubt that many women used their status as *Genossinnen* (comrades) to gain themselves more authority in other aspects of their life. This is demonstrated in petition writing for example, where women often explain at the beginning of their letters how long they have been a Party member in the hope that this will help them attain a more prominent place in the housing queue or a better chance of acquiring a childcare or a school place for their child at a certain institution. One young woman writing from the small town of Salzwedel in 1978 evidently hoped that being a member of the SED would help her in her application to adopt a baby, writing, “I have been a member of the DFD since February 1974 and since March a member of the SED, am 28 years old, married and we have a five-year old daughter. My husband has been a comrade since 1975.”¹⁴⁷ It is significant that she also cites the credentials of her husband; this was very common in women’s petitions – in the GDR as in many societies if one’s family members were held in high regard this could help one’s own advancement, while the reverse was also true and those people with family or acquaintances of ‘ambiguous’ character were often discriminated against. In the same way, a husband writing on behalf of his wife regarding an incidence of mistreatment in her DFD group, obviously believed that his wife’s respectful standing as a well-rounded socialist *Genossin* should have some credence, stating, “Since 1959 she is a member of the party and visited the *Kreisschule des Marxismus- Leninismus* for two years.”¹⁴⁸ In return for the authority membership gave them, women in the SED were expected to behave in a certain manner and could lose a position as a Party functionary, if they, for example, had secret western contacts or watched FRG television.

¹⁴⁷ SAPMO-BArch, DFD, DY/ 31, 564, ‘Eingabe from Gudrun Danz’, 14.08.78, p. 91

¹⁴⁸ SAPMO-BArch, DFD, DY/ 31, 564, ‘Eingabe from Harold Große’, 20.04.80, p. 165

In the MfS (*Ministerium für Staatssicherheit*, Ministry of State Security) there was a similar pattern regarding the employment of women in the officer class. Women amounted to only 15.8 % of those employed by the MfS in 1971, falling slightly to 15.7 % in 1989.¹⁴⁹ And while the number of female employees stayed almost the same in the Honecker era, this figure had decreased considerably since 1954 when it had been as high as 25 %.¹⁵⁰ In the Stasi, as in the Party and state apparatus, more women were employed in the lower positions, such as secretarial and clerical posts, than in the leadership positions.¹⁵¹ Women also worked as unofficial collaborators (IMs) but again, they did so in much smaller numbers than men. For example, only around 10 % of those IMs working for the Rostock Regional Administration in 1989 were women.¹⁵² Mike Dennis describes the reasons why more men than women worked as IMs:

Recruiting officers much preferred men to women for a variety of reasons: the heavy burdens already borne by women in the home and at work; women's alleged gossipiness; and the greater ease with which men were able to absent themselves from home for clandestine meetings.¹⁵³

It is even more difficult to pin-point the reasons why women agreed to become IMs. Dennis classifies motives for men and women under five broad themes: 'political and ideological conviction; coercion and fear; personal advantage; emotional needs;

¹⁴⁹ Mike Dennis, *The Stasi – Myth and Reality* (London & Edinburgh: Pearson Education Ltd., 2003), p. 80

¹⁵⁰ Ibid

¹⁵¹ Ibid

¹⁵² Ibid., p. 94

¹⁵³ Ibid

and a desire to influence official policy.’¹⁵⁴ The IM Monika H., who worked under the cover name Karin Lenz, informing on the activities of the peace groups ‘Women for Peace’ and later the ‘Initiative for Peace und Human Rights’ displayed many of these motives for becoming an informer. She had a disturbed childhood, having been brought up in a children’s home and she was also a committed socialist. Asked whether she had any doubts when she first started working for the Stasi, she replied:

Honestly no. On the contrary I was surprised that the state security service had not already come to me earlier. Because I was really an absolutely reliable *Genossin*. I said to myself, you are also a completely courageous one... You would also hold your mouth, you would lock yourself up in the enemy lines and would then say to your comrades, what the evil enemy does. Yes, clearly child’s beliefs today!¹⁵⁵

Later, however, when faced with the enemy, in the form of the ‘Women for Peace’, who became her friends and were “not the enemies, I had imagined”,¹⁵⁶ Monika H. did begin to have doubts but fear and the desire to be a good socialist made her continue as an informer. Explaining why she did not reveal her true identity when she was confronted by members of the group who suspected her in January 1989, she later wrote to the women involved that, “I was racked by the most diverse fears:

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 97

¹⁵⁵ Irene Kukutz & Katja Havemann, *Geschuetzte Quelle – Gespraechе mit Monika H. alias Karin Lenz* (Berlin: BasisDruck Verlagsgesellschaft, 1990), p. 37

¹⁵⁶ Ibid

... fear (it sounds so unbelievable) to lose you; and a massive fear of the Stasi and (today it seems comical or worse) I wanted to be a courageous communist.”¹⁵⁷

The only women’s organisation in the GDR, the DFD (*Demokratische-Frauenbund Deutschlands*, Democratic Women’s Federation of Germany) was unique in that there was no alternative alliance for men. It was also unique in that significantly several other eastern European socialist countries considered it unnecessary to have a separate organisation concerned solely with women’s issues.¹⁵⁸ The DFD had been founded in 1947 to mobilise and educate women in terms of their political consciousness, to enable women to contribute to Germany’s democratic reconstruction and to facilitate their entry into the paid labour force.¹⁵⁹ The organisation had evolved out of the *Frauenausschüssen* (the women’s committees) that had regulated women’s post-war reconstruction work and called for ‘equal pay for equal work’. In its early years therefore, the DFD stood for the emancipation of women in the sense of equality and freedom from social dependence,¹⁶⁰ albeit with a particular slant towards the construction of socialism on German soil.

Initially the DFD was responsible for preparing progressive legislation on behalf of women, such as the ‘Law for the Protection of Mother and Child’ in 1950, able to perform in this role because of the small number of seats it held in the *Volkskammer*

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid*, from a letter to Bohley, Kukutz & Havemann, 23.02.90, p. 10

¹⁵⁸ Barbara Einhorn, ‘Socialist Emancipation: The Women’s Movement in the German Democratic Republic’, Sonia Kruks, Rayna Rapp & Marilyn B. Young, *Promissory Notes – Women in the Transition to Socialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989), p. 284

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid*

¹⁶⁰ The definition according to the encyclopaedia, *Meyers Universallexikon* (GDR) of 1978, as cited in Ansorg & Hürtgen, ‘The Myth of Female Emancipation’, p. 165

(the GDR parliament).¹⁶¹ However, as the decades progressed, the DFD became more and more dominated by the SED's women's department, the *Abteilung Frauen*, so that it lost its autonomous ability to influence policies, falling instead into working as a satellite functionary of the SED. This role was reinforced through the launch of DFD advisory centres in the 1970s and 1980s, whose task it was to back up and support the SED socio-political measures or *Muttipolitik* of 1972 and 1976 and beyond.¹⁶² The DFD seemed to attract most support in the countryside, where groups were more established as part of the local community.

By the time Honecker came to power in 1971 the DFD had officially fulfilled its basic aims. But from being an organisation that at its inception appeared to broadly represent the interests of a wide range of women, the DFD in the 1970s and 1980s became more and more distanced from the needs and interests of GDR women. This sentiment was echoed in an interview by Grit Bühler in which Frau A, who had been a member of the DFD, told her that the organisation's claim to represent all women's interests was not true and that "The DFD functioned as a protector of the SED's interests".¹⁶³

One problem was that the DFD continued to target housewives, crafts-women and women attached to the churches.¹⁶⁴ Yet these women were no longer the norm in

¹⁶¹ Jeannette Madarasz, PhD Thesis, University College London, *Ordinary Socialism? Communication, Compromise and Co-Existence in the GDR – A Case Study of Four Social Groups* (2002), p. 103

¹⁶² Grit Bühler, *Mythos Gleichberechtigung in der DDR – Politische Partizipation von Frauen am Beispiel des Demokratischen Frauenbundes Deutschlands* (Frankfurt am Main & New York: Campus Forschung, 1997), p. 71

¹⁶³ *Ibid*, p. 85

¹⁶⁴ These groups of women were singled out, for example, in a report by the Bundesvorstand des DFD entitled, 'Welche Ergebnisse konnten vom DFD bei der Verwirklichung der Beschlüsse des IX. Parteitages der SED in bezug auf die Frauenpolitik erreicht werden?', 27.10.80, (SAPMO-BArch DY 30 IV 2/2.042, 29) p. 3

the GDR but were minority groups. Another problem was the DFD's ageing leadership, a significant number of whom had been continuously re-elected over many years.¹⁶⁵ In 1987 only 25 % of the DFD's membership was under 35 compared to 45 % of the female population as a whole.¹⁶⁶

For a time the DFD's membership, which had languished at the beginning of the 1970s appeared to pick up. In 1970 the DFD had 1,283,739 members.¹⁶⁷ A report for the 9th Party Congress of the SED in 1975/76 noted that "the stagnation of member conditions for many years could only be overcome by an entrance of approximately 100,000 members."¹⁶⁸ And this aim was achieved and eventually surpassed over the next 15 year period. A DFD report from 1980 claimed that the number of members had risen by 259,769 women since 1976, so that by the end of 1980 1,427,349 members belonged to the organisation.¹⁶⁹ By 1987, however the Statistical Year Book of the GDR recorded the membership of the DFD as 1.5 million women.

Despite the success of the membership drive, it is important to point out that out of five million adult females in the GDR, the DFD, even by the late 1980s was certainly not an all-encompassing organisation, that could claim to have reached out to all women. One attraction of the DFD may have been that as with SED

¹⁶⁵ Jeannette Madarasz, *Ordinary Socialism? Communication, Compromise and Co-Existence in the GDR*, p. 104

¹⁶⁶ Barbara Einhorn, 'Socialist Emancipation: The Women's Movement in the German Democratic Republic', p. 286

¹⁶⁷ Grit Bühler, *Mythos Gleichberechtigung in der DDR*, p. 65

¹⁶⁸ SAPMO-BArch, Büro Inge Lange, DY 30/IV 2/2.042, 27, 1975-1976, Vorbereitung 9. Parteitag SED – Zusammensetzung Arbeitsgruppe Frauen zur Vorbereitung Parteitag – Analyse über Ergebnisse Frauenpolitik', p. 175

¹⁶⁹ SAPMO-BArch, Büro Inge Lange, DY 30 IV 2/2.042, 29 'Welche Ergebnisse konnten vom DFD bei der Verwirklichung der Beschlüsse des IX. Parteitages der SED in bezug auf die Frauenpolitik erreicht werden?', 27.10.80, p. 2

membership, women believed it helped them gain personal advantage in GDR society. Certainly many *Freundinnen* (friends – as DFD members were known) attempted to use their DFD positions to achieve added influence when petitioning state bodies.¹⁷⁰ However it is very telling that as the GDR began to disintegrate in 1989 its membership dropped by 500,000.¹⁷¹ The DFD's successor, the *Demokratische Frauenbund e.V.* had only 35,600 members in 1995, demonstrating that the DFD's GDR membership showed no lasting loyalty to the organisation.

Like the DFD, the FDGB (*Freier Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund* – Confederation of Free German Trade Unions) also placed emphasis on the political-ideological education of women, with the belief that economic and social benefits would occur as a result. A section from a report about the future tasks and responsibilities of the FDGB regarding women in the 1980s read:

The Marxist-Leninist education of employed women and their socialist consciousness are to be further promoted and developed, thus their whole strength can be used for the fulfilment of the demanding tasks for the all-round stabilisation of the Republic, above all to also increase a high economic performance.¹⁷²

¹⁷⁰ See for example, SAPMO-BArch, DY 31, 565, Eingabe from Christel Peters, 22.3.79 and DY 31, 567, p. 64 Eingabe from Edith Reinke, 28.06.82, p. 136

¹⁷¹ This was between Spring 1989 and the end of 1989. According to figures by Grit Bühler, *Mythos Gleichberechtigung in der DDR*, p. 78

¹⁷² SAPMO-BArch, Büro Inge Lange, DY 30 IV 2/2.042, 29 'Vorläufige Schlußfolgerungen, die sich aus der Analyse über die Durchführung der Beschlüsse des 9. FDGB-Kongresses zur weiteren Festigung der gesellschaftlichen Stellung der Frau und zur Verbesserung ihrer Arbeits- und Lebensbedingungen ergeben' no date, p. 1

This statement also highlights how the FDGB reiterated state demands for women to reach production targets. Unlike trade union organisations in the west, the FDGB did not attempt to defend women's 'rights' or protect their well-being at work but instead seemed to follow orders set down by the SED. Thus the FDGB would often pressurise women to work overtime and special shifts.¹⁷³ In fact far from helping working women the FDGB seemed to perpetuate women's helplessness and inability to change difficult working conditions.

Conclusion

It is difficult to analyse the true extent of women's emancipation in the GDR because East German women's understanding of the word is very different from the current interpretation. For example, there was no notion of self-fulfilment in the GDR perception of emancipation and equality.¹⁷⁴ The SED followed Engels' theory in *Der Ursprung der Familie* (The Origin of the Family) that women's emancipation would evolve from their participation in production as part of the paid labour force. Yet what the Party failed to understand and to enforce was that Engels also said that true equality between the sexes would only become a reality when household labour had been transformed into a public industry. The Party apparatus of the SED state remained male-dominated, and evidently did not want to alienate its original supporters. For this reason, for example, it never introduced material incentives or practical provisions to make sure men took on a greater role in domestic chores.

¹⁷³ Leonore Ansorg & Renate Hürtgen, 'The Myth of Female Emancipation – Contradictions in Women's Lives', Konrad H. Jarausch (ed.) *Dictatorship as Experience – Towards a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR* (New York & Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2004), p. 171

¹⁷⁴ Mary Fulbrook, *The People's State*, p. 154

The legal and institutional framework in the GDR was changed to permit equality but this was not accompanied by the transformation of general attitudes. This can be seen in the fact that there was no marked shift by men into traditionally female occupations. Honecker's government was never really interested in the welfare of women as individuals but instead it was more concerned about women's contribution to the GDR's economic growth. This is highlighted by the specific singling out of women's involvement in production, which was increasingly pushed to the limit and the pressure on women to produce more children for the state. During the 1970s and 1980s the GDR's mass organisations and the SED Party never really represented women's interests but simply encouraged these aims.

It would be easy to list the GDR's success at reaching its targets regarding women and compare its achievements to the FRG but that would not be a fair form of analysis. One reason is because while Honecker's policies were aimed at a wide range of women from a range of different family backgrounds, from those led by single mothers, to young married couples and to families with lots of children, there were still many women left out. In fact those women who fell short of the ability to reproduce or to become gainfully employed were largely ignored by the state. These included the elderly, some disabled women and to a lesser extent lesbians.

Many women did not feel discontented about their understanding of their status in the GDR. Some questioned the reality of equal rights in their petitions but this may not have been out of a real conviction that equality had not been achieved in the GDR but rather as a way of improving their personal circumstances by reproducing

the SED's rhetoric. In actual fact most women did not analyse the gendered language of women's social policy in the way that some members of the women's groups began to do in the late 1980s. The fact that the regime generally did not inform the population about statistics that could indicate gender inequalities, or did not analyse statistics in western terms, meant that most women did not perceive tensions in gender relations or discrimination towards women in the way that women in the united Germany do today.¹⁷⁵ After the *Wende* the GDR's social policies began to look extremely attractive when women constituted 64% of those unemployed,¹⁷⁶ childcare facilities became scarce and women from the former East Germany had to accept compromises regarding abortion legislation. But in actual fact during GDR times the benefits enjoyed by East German women had existed in conjunction with economic deficiencies and shortfalls in civil liberties and had only been possible in a the context of one-Party dictatorship.

¹⁷⁵ Jeanette Z. Madarász, *Conflict and Compromise in East Germany, 1971-1989: A Precarious Stability* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 133

¹⁷⁶ Bergmann-Pohl's, 'Frauen im vereinten Deutschland: Wertewandel oder Verzicht?' in Elizabeth Boa & Janet Wharton (eds.), *Women and the 'Wende': Social Effects and Cultural Reflections of the German Unification Process*, p. 15. Statistic for 1992

Chapter 2

Women's Petitions in the German Democratic Republic

The petitioning system had been part of the East German constitution from its conception in October 1949. GDR citizens were permitted to direct their concerns and complaints to the appropriate state institutions, individuals or mass organisations. This could take a variety of forms – the great majority were written but they could also be made orally, by telephone or in person for example. The German term for this form of communication between citizen and state is *Eingabe*. Unfortunately the English translation ‘petition’ gives the impression that an *Eingabe* was a list of signatures attached to a set of demands, which is misleading, since the majority were simply letters usually composed by one individual but sometimes by a household or a group of friends highlighting personal grievances. Petitions were also significant because they guaranteed an answer to the petitioner within four weeks.¹ This chapter will analyse those petitions sent by women during the Honecker era but before it can do this some understanding of the history of petitions and of current historiographical discussions surrounding petitions is required.

Petitions – an established German tradition and a modern historiographical debate

Petition writing had a long tradition in Germany, stemming back to earlier German constitutions from 1849 up to and including the Weimar Constitution of 1919. In the GDR petitions were the only available outlet for complaint and redress short of

¹ Mary Fulbrook, *The People's State*, p. 271

legal action, which existed only in theory anyway. They embodied a private discourse between public and state since their contents were not published in the GDR. Steffan Elsner has noted that the petition was a ‘one-way mirror’, through which the government could see the otherwise un-communicated thoughts of its citizens but in which they could see nothing but themselves.² Indeed the GDR government itself used petitions to evaluate the mood and attitudes of the East German people.

According to research by Felix Mühlberg, at least two thirds of all GDR households wrote a petition between 1949 and 1989.³ And while Jochen Staadt believes that Mühlberg’s assumption is misleading since there were frequently multiple complaints about the same thing, Staadt himself claims that statistically speaking every second adult GDR citizen must have composed at least one petition.⁴ While the real number of petitions will probably never be known, it is nevertheless clear that petitions are an almost inexhaustible record of contemporary description of everyday East German life. In this sense they are invaluable to historians as a source for assessing genuine GDR attitudes and opinions.

The significance of petitions to historians of the GDR has undergone increasing debate over the last 10 years. An early view established by German historian Jochen Staadt and summed up in the title of his article: ‘Petitions. The GDR’s

² Steffen H. Elsner, ‘Flankierende Stabilisierungsmechanismen diktatorischer Herrschaft: das Eingabewesen in der DDR’, *Berichte und Studien*, no. 20 (1999), p. 77. As cited in Leon Quinn, *The politics of pollution?: Government, environmentalism and mass opinion in East Germany, 1972–1990* (PhD thesis, University of Bristol, 2002), p. 41

³ Felix Mühlberg, ‘Konformismus oder Eigensinn? Eingaben als Quelle zur Erforschung der Alltagsgeschichte der DDR’, *Mitteilungen aus der kulturwissenschaftlichen Forschung*, Nr. 37, Februar 1996

⁴ Jochen Staadt, ‘Eingaben: Die institutionalisierte Meckerkultur in der DDR – Goldbrokat, Kaffee-Mix, Büttenreden, Ausreiseanträge, und andere Schwierigkeiten mit den Untertanen’, *Arbeitspapiere des Forschungsverbundes SED-Staat*, Nr. 24, Dezember 1996, p. 2

institutionalised culture of moaning: Gold brocade, coffee-mix, carnival speeches, applications for travel visas and other awkward complaints' prevailed in many circles.⁵ In the article Staadt saw petitions as small-minded, consumerist whinges, which although useful for highlighting the differences between the official self-portrait of socialism and the every day reality, also underline the pronounced culture of grumbling in the GDR.⁶ Yet Staadt is a specialist in 'high politics' and he confined his analysis to just one type of petition, namely those addressed to the *Staatsrat* (Council of State). Other historians of GDR *Alltagsgeschichte*, or 'everyday history' have begun to disprove this view with more thorough research of different types of petition. Historians Ina Merkel and Felix Mühlberg have most notably challenged Staadt's analysis, particularly in their book, '*Wir sind doch nicht die Meckerecke der Nation*' : *Briefe an das DDR Fernsehen* ('We are not the grumblers of the nation' : Letters to the GDR television corporation).⁷

In the field of women's history, American historian Donna Harsch conducted fascinating research into women's petitions during the Ulbricht Era in the 1950s and 1960s.⁸ Her research was based around petitions written to the central office of the division of Mother and Child and also to senior SED figures, by East Germans seeking abortions. Not only did she discover that the volume of these petitions increased over the course of the two decades but also that the language of the petitions had changed. In the 1950s most petitions were penned by husbands for

⁵ This view was repeated for example by J. Janert in her article, 'Die Meckerecken der DDR. Neue Beiträge zu einer Kulturgeschichte des Nörgelns in Ostdeutschland – Die Eingaben spiegelten den DDR - Alltag. Dem Menschen stand der Sinn nach einer eigenen Wohnung, nach sauberen Ferienhotels und weichem Toilettenpapier', *Die Zeit*, November 12 1998, p. 47

⁶ Staadt, 'Eingaben – Die institutionalisierte Meckerkultur' pp. 3-4

⁷ Ina Merkel & Felix Mühlberg, '*Wir sind doch nicht die Meckerecke der Nation*' *Briefe an das DDR Fernsehen* (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 1998)

⁸ Donna Harsch, 'Society, the State, and Abortion in East Germany, 1950 – 1972', *American Historical Review*, V. 102, February 1997

their wives, citing medical grounds in their request for abortion. But by the 1960s the majority of these petitions were written by women themselves, often referring to the 'rights of woman' over her own life and body. These findings led Harsch to conclude that the abortion reform of 1972 which gave women the right to decide on and receive abortions was largely down to the pressure put on the authorities by women's petitions. In this area then, Harsch has shown that petitions had a significance far greater than simply highlighting a culture of grumbling.

A comprehensive investigation into women's petitions in the GDR in the Honecker era has not yet been carried out. This chapter will attempt to consider a wide range of petitions written by women to various bodies and mass institutions during the 1970s and 1980s. It will concentrate on those written to the GDR's mass women's organisation – the Democratic Women's Federation (DFD) and the Party Control Commission (PCC) but it will also analyse petitions from women to political figures like Erich Honecker, as well as to local companies, and the departments of culture, church matters (*Kirchenfragen*) and security matters (*Sicherheitsfragen*). Having broken down the petitions into main themes this chapter will then analyse whether there is any specific language used by women in their petitions, and it will finally examine what the petitioning system tells us more generally about the SED-regime and the way in which it retained its authority.

Housing problems

The contents of women's petitions covered a wide range of different themes. But by far the most prevalent complaint was about accommodation. The condition of

housing in the GDR was a grave problem. Many of its major cities had been subject to severe bomb damage during World War II, yet immediately after 1945 the policy in the Soviet zone was to focus on reparation payments rather than rebuilding. Even those apartment buildings that were not damaged in the war, were often decaying and decrepit. According to research cited by Tony Judt, in 1989 two in five dwellings in the GDR were built before 1914, compared to less than one in five in the FRG.⁹ A quarter of all dwellings in East Germany had no bath, one third only had an outdoor toilet and more than 60 % lacked any form of central heating.¹⁰ In the socialist GDR, the state was responsible for housing its people, perhaps explaining why by far the largest type of complaint received in petitions were about inadequate housing conditions. Table 6 (p. 119) shows the breakdown in the category of petition received by the *Abteilung Frauen* (SED Women's Section) for various years in the 1970s and 1980s where statistics are available. Except for the latter half of 1972, where they come a close second to social problems, petitions regarding housing conditions (*Wohnungsprobleme* and *Wohnbedingungen*) are by far the highest number received each year. Indeed when counting all the data given, more than double the amount of petitions were received on housing problems than any other single issue during these years. Unfortunately it is quite difficult to extrapolate a great deal of information from some of the other categories given like 'social problems', 'work problems' and 'legal questions' because these categories seemed to include such a wide range of problems, whose definitions changed each year.

⁹ Tony Judt, *Postwar – A History of Europe since 1945* (London: William Heinemann, 2005) p. 623

¹⁰ Ibid

When it came to complaints about housing however, it is interesting to see that women did not confine their complaints to the GDR's women's institutions, the *Abteilung Frauen* or the DFD. Instead they wrote to any organisation or body that they thought might be able to help. A typical complaint was sent in January 1983 by a 20-year-old woman from Berlin to the PKK (*Partei Kontrollkommission* – Party Control Commission), which controlled disciplinary matters amongst Party members.¹¹ Her petition incorporated a wide range of criticism about her lodgings. She was a student living alone with her five-month old son in a one-room bed-sit full of damp and without its own bathroom. There was no room for her baby's cot and not enough space to do intensive study at nights and weekends. She criticised the GDR's system for the allocation of apartments. When she had applied for an empty apartment in the same block as her grandfather, for whom she was the main carer, she was turned down. She wrote, "I cannot understand that I, at that time a pregnant woman, was refused this apartment along with married couples who had likewise applied for it. In the end it was assigned to a divorced, single man, Mr Schütz, who applied much later."¹² She was further shocked to discover that when her sick grandfather died in December 1982 his flat did not automatically go to her, despite the fact that she'd cared for him since her grandmother's death a year earlier.

The reason behind her petition appears largely to be an appeal for her grandfather's apartment, which she supports by portraying a positive socialist image of herself, explaining that she was active in the FDJ leadership of her company right up to the birth of her son and emphasising that, "It is my firm will to successfully qualify as

¹¹ BLA, C Rep 902, 6151, 'Eingaben an die BPKK – 1982', Eingabe from Gabrielle Buntrock to the ZPKK, dated 24.01.83

¹² Ibid.

an engineer for information processing so that I can give more back to my socialist fatherland and [so that I can] carry out and represent more effectively the good policies of party and government, which serve the peace and well being of the people.”¹³ Cases like Frau Buntrock’s, where family members were disappointed not to be designated their family’s apartments when they became vacant, were not unusual. In a similar petition in June 1987, a woman complained on behalf of her boyfriend who did not receive his grandfather’s apartment after he went into an old people’s home, even though, she declares, he was entitled to it.¹⁴

Many petitions written by women about their apartments during the Honecker era complain about inadequate lighting, leaking roofs, broken heating systems and most commonly overcrowded conditions, particularly when children were involved. In 1978 a grandmother from Dresden wrote a petition about her grandson’s health, which she believed was suffering as a result of the “unbearable conditions” in which he lived. Building work in her daughter’s apartment block resulted in “dirt, dust, noise, knocking and din” with another consequence being the regular cordoning off of the toilets.¹⁵ A daughter wrote to her father’s previous employer at a heavy mechanical engineering factory in October 1976 asking whether, further to her earlier application, a new two-room flat for her parents could be provided as soon as possible because her elderly father was suffering from a prostate condition

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ BLA, C Rep 902, 6879, ‘Eingaben KPKK – 1987’, Eingabe from G. Catrin Klaus to the KPKK regarding her boyfriend Genosse Thomas Blankenberg, Abschlußbericht, 04.06.87

¹⁵ SAPMO-BArch, DFD DY/ 31, 565, Eingabe to Ilse Thiele from Margit Sachs, dated 07.02.78

and had to climb down two flights of stairs to get to the toilet as well as to gain access to warm water and a bath.¹⁶

In another case an 80-year-old woman wrote in June 1981 to Ilse Thiele to say that she had been trying to acquire a new flat for two and a half years because her current accommodation was “ramshackle” and needed to be renewed. She wrote, “With 80 years behind me I would like to spend the end of life with my husband in safe and orderly housing conditions.”¹⁷ Despite being an SED Party member she claimed that she was constantly fobbed off by the authorities. This petition and others like it indicate that providing care provision for the elderly in East Germany was not a top priority. Indeed the inadequacy of state pensions is another popular theme in women’s petitions.¹⁸

Waiting lists for new apartments were very long in the GDR and many women wrote petitions desperate to jump the queue, like the mother who had just given birth to triplets but wanted alternative accommodation for her two grown up children (aged 20 and 22) to be found as soon as possible because there was simply no longer enough room for them in the family apartment.¹⁹ Another example is a petition from a 29 year old translator with two children complaining that her family’s two and a half room flat was too small as one of the rooms was set apart as an office for her husband who was undertaking a PhD thesis for his physician

¹⁶ Staatsarchiv Leipzig, VEB Schwermaschinenbau S.M. Kirow Leipzig, Nr. 2087, Eingabe from Sigrid Kartzsch to VEB Schwermaschinenbau, S.M. Kirow, BGL Vorsitzender on behalf of her parents Ehepaar Barthel, dated October 1976

¹⁷ SAPMO-BArch, DFD DY/ 31 566, Abschrift of Eingabe from Else Kerber of Groß Schwechten, dated 06.06.81

¹⁸ See for example, Berlin Landesarchiv, C Rep 902, 6152 Eingabe from Hildegard Kalxdorf to Erich Honecker, dated 21.09.72 and SAPMO-BArch, DFD, DY/31, 566, Eingabe from Frau Dünnebier, p. 55

¹⁹ From SAPMO-BArch, DFD DY31/ 568, dated March 1983

training. She declared the half sized room was not big enough for her children's beds and that she was expecting another baby in a few months time.²⁰

A heart rending petition by a 21-year-old mother in the process of a divorce reveals how the situation became more complicated when it came to divorce or separation. This young mother, Simone Forgber, had been living in her parents-in-law's two-room apartment but after her relationship with her husband broke down and he left the flat, she claims that his parents forced her to leave as well. Her petition relates a moving story describing her walking the streets one night with her 23-month-old son with nowhere to go. Eventually a colleague agreed to take her in but she stresses that this is no long-term solution. She describes how, "It is incomprehensible to me what I have had to go through in a socialist and particularly in a child friendly state."²¹ She is extremely critical about the Housing Department at Penig Town Hall, where she says she was rudely dismissed whenever she appealed for help, eventually being told she would be eligible for her own apartment in three to four years' time.

Frau Forgber's letter ends in dramatic fashion, with an extremely powerful threat that states she sees no other way than to send a copy of her petition, detailing how a young mother with a toddler is treated in a socialist state, to her mother in the FRG for her to publish in the western press. Her last sentence before signing off states, "Normally such a thing only occurs in capitalistic conditions, but not in a worker and a peasant's state. It sounds like a story, it is sad but it is the truth."²²

²⁰ SAPMO-BArch, DFD DY31/ 601, Eingabe from Karin Krieger, dated 07.02.88

²¹ SAPMO-BArch, DFD DY31/568, Eingabe from Simone Forgber (nee Hoffmann) from Penig, dated 15.10.88

²² Ibid

Unusually a follow-up report, dated less than a month later, 11.11.88, is included with this petition, which includes a number of positive statements by Frau Forgber, describing how she has not only now been issued with her own two-room-apartment, but is also receiving money from her ex-husband each month towards the care of her son. She is also happy in her 'work collective', which has a convenient crèche nearby and has recently joined a new DFD group whose members are looking out for her. The report also tellingly contains the following account about how the authorities expected Frau Forgber to understand the reasons behind the beneficial changes in her life, "In the discussion I however also made it clear to Frau Forgber that the fact that we helped her and her child was not from fear that her mother might possibly publish in the FRG and the western press but because it was our obligation [to help] since we do not permit that a citizen of our country is treated in such a way [and because] we expect no-one to face their problems alone."²³

As part of an ongoing 'socio-political programme', the 'unity of economic and social policy' was announced in 1971.²⁴ An integral part of this, if not the most important element, was a massive housing construction policy that aimed to 'solve the housing question as a social problem by 1990'.²⁵ Honecker was very much the inspiration behind the new scheme and was particularly enthusiastic about the drive

²³ SAPMO-BArch, DFD DY31/568, report of Simone Forgber case, dated 11.11.88

²⁴ Hermann Weber, *Geschichte der DDR* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag GmbH & Co., 1999), p. 390

²⁵ As cited in Mike Dennis, *German Democratic Republic – Politics, Economics and Society* (London: Pinter Publishers Ltd, 1988), p. 61

to increase the number of new homes being built.²⁶ The planners behind the scheme intended to construct or renovate 3.3 to 3.5 million dwellings between 1971 and 1989.²⁷ However, surveys carried out in 1990 revealed that considerably less new apartment buildings had been built than had been officially propagated.²⁸ Certainly the construction and renovation of housing was not occurring quickly enough to meet demand. The high number of petitions complaining about inadequate housing conditions in the late 1970s and early 1980s were a clear indication that SED policies did not achieve the widespread results that were claimed in the East German media. Accommodation is a good example of how the early Honecker years had aroused great expectations; but from the mid-1970s, it became increasingly clear that raised expectations would not be fulfilled.

Divorce and separation

Judging by the large numbers of petitions containing requests for new accommodation by women recently separated or divorced from their husbands or partners, a shortage of apartments in the GDR caused and even prolonged major distress for families at this sensitive time. Gaining a divorce did not automatically entitle one partner to new accommodation. As a result many unsavoury situations were created with former husbands and wives still living together with their children and sometimes even new partners in limited flat space. In November 1979, for example, a woman with three small children under five years questioned why

²⁶ Mary Fulbrook, *The People's State – East German Society from Hitler to Honecker* (London: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 52. Fulbrook records how Honecker wanted to be seen personally handing over the one-millionth new home in Berlin-Marzahn to an ordinary working-class family.

²⁷ Mike Dennis, *The Rise and Fall of the German Democratic Republic, 1945-1990* (Harlow, Essex: Pearson Education Ltd, 2000) p. 154

²⁸ 1.73 million new buildings had been constructed compared to the official figure of 1.92 million, which was still far lower than predicted. From *ibid.*, p. 155

she was forced to continue to live together with her former husband. She describes it as “unreasonable” and states that “the healthy development of three children is endangered”. She asks why her situation doesn’t seem to affect the authorities, especially when it is the so-called ‘year of the child’ and states dramatically, “Up until now I was convinced of the child-friendly attitude of our state”.²⁹

Another woman described in her petition how she left the family home with her two school age children shortly before her divorce to live with an acquaintance in a one-room apartment. She had believed she would be allocated a new flat once the divorce was finalised but now realises she was mistaken and is appealing for help.³⁰ In December 1979 an artist wrote to Frau Dorit Roth, leader of *Abteilung Kultur*, about her family’s predicament. In an emotional letter she says that her divorced husband arrived a week ago to take up his right to live in the marital home until another could be found for him. But his arrival was just a few days after she had given birth to her second child and she describes how living together is intolerable and she is in despair.³¹ She received an upbeat reply from Frau Roth observing that her new daughter must be a “lovely Christmas present”. Yet she also affirms that it is not always possible for the authorities to find apartments for divorced marriage partners with the great demand for accommodation, but that “I wish you great strength for the solution of your problems”.³² In this way, despite the personal

²⁹ SAPMO-BArch, DFD DY/31, 564, p. 282, Eingabe by Gabriele Kopelke to the DFD, dated 10.11.79

³⁰ SAPMO-BArch, DFD DY/ 31 566, Eingabe from Michaela Krostina to Ilse Thiele, November 1981

³¹ SAPMO-BArch, Abt. Kultur, DY31 1097, Eingabe from Sabine Grzimek to Dorit Roth, dated 15.12.79

³² SAPMO-BArch, Abt. Kultur, DY31 1097, Letter from Dorit Roth to Sabine Grzimek, dated 10.01.80

reply, Frau Roth appeared to wash her hands of the problem without actually offering any solution herself.³³

These cases of divorce and separation were serious and problematic enough but far graver was the fact that the lives of some east German women were in danger because they were forced to remain living with abusive or alcoholic partners. Indeed there appear to be a proportionally high number of petitions from women complaining about incidences of violence from male partners, many of which were linked to alcohol. Of course it is difficult to infer from this whether domestic violence was more common in the GDR, without comparing statistics to other countries. But nonetheless alcohol fuelled violence certainly seems to be a consequence of the growing problem of alcoholism in the GDR which, according to figures quoted by Fulbrook, was suffered in one form or another by approximately one in eight, or 12 per cent of the East German population.³⁴

One woman wrote a petition to the Berlin Friedrichshain division of the BPKK (*Bezirks Partei Kontrollkommission* – Local District Party Control Commission) in April 1984. She had divorced her husband four years earlier but he continued to live with her.³⁵ She felt annoyed and vulnerable since her ex husband often arrived home drunk. In her petition Frau Zimmerman gives the impression that the accommodation situation in the GDR could be abused by certain people like her ex husband who made no move to find a new flat, happy to remain in the former

³³ See section later in the chapter on ‘Petition rhetoric’ for more about this case.

³⁴ Mary Fulbrook, *The People’s State*, p. 105. She also mentions on p. 103 how alcohol consumption levels had risen by an alarming rate (e.g. spirit consumption had quadrupled) between the early 1960s and the early 1980s. And crucially she states on p. 104 that the number of divorces held to be related to alcohol abuse was as high as 20 % even in 1965.

³⁵ BLA, C Rep 902, 6155, ‘Eingaben an die BPKK, 1982 –1986’, Eingabe from Simone Zimmermann to the BPKK, dated 03.04.84

marital home despite the difficulties it caused his former wife. Her own attempts to find him a new flat herself were unsuccessful without his cooperation. Her particular case was solved after the BPKK intervened and Manfred Zimmermann was given a new flat and moved out.³⁶

Another woman, Frau Fritsche, gave a detailed account in her petition of the various terrifying threats uttered by her violent husband, whom she had divorced six months earlier but who still had a room in the apartment where she lived with her three grown up daughters.³⁷ She was terrified of being left alone with her ex-husband. She claims that he has frequently made attempts to strike and to choke her and has now threatened to assault her without witnesses. She says he has been stalking her in the apartment and by car for two weeks in pursuit of an opportunity. She quotes him warning he will knock out her teeth and scar her face and “warm up hell” for her.³⁸ She describes how she and her daughters cower with fear locked in the ‘children’s’ room when he enters the flat.

Frau Fritsche, appears to have reached her wit’s end and has been directed to go for a two-week cure treatment visit by her doctor. She gives her parents’ address and two other contact addresses, since she is too terrified to go back to the flat. She declares she will “only go back to my apartment again if my divorced husband is assigned another apartment.”³⁹ According to Frau Fritsche her ex husband has a new girlfriend in whose apartment he spends most of his time, only going to the former marital home “to strike and threaten us in order to annoy and damage us”.

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ SAPMO-BArch, DFD DY31/564, Eingabe from Karin Fritsche of Frauenstein, dated 30.05.80

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ Ibid

She declares she has got no life any more and wants to regain her health. She pleads for her case to be dealt with immediately, asking, “Where is the protection for mothers and children? I ask you dear Comrade Thiele what must I go through to entitle me to a calm, peaceful and secure life?”⁴⁰

A petition sent in November 1975 to Comrade Wansierski in the Department of Security, Central Committee of the SED by a female police officer (*Deutsche Volkspolizei*) complained about the behaviour of her violent ex-husband while at the same time questioning the fairness of the allocation of apartments.⁴¹ She says that since she and her husband divorced she has been given notice to vacate the family apartment since it is an official residence of the HSDVP (*Hochschule Deutsche Volkspolizei*, College for the German People’s Police), of which she is not a member. Her husband meanwhile is being granted another comfortable apartment because he *is* a member of the HSDVP. She is extremely disgruntled because she and her 4-year old son have been told they must wait seven to eight years for a similar standard apartment and meanwhile have to live in a flat where the only toilet is outside in the *Hinterhof* or back yard.

Comrade Deerberg proceeds to list many reasons why her ex-husband does not deserve his comfortable apartment, claiming that he has slandered her name in the neighbourhood and violently attacked her. The attack caused her to file an official report on the advice of her doctor about which she claims that no action was taken. He continued to harass her, even turning up drunk and relieving himself outside her apartment door one evening and forcing her to radio for help from her car on

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ SAPMO-Barch, Abteilung Sicherheitsfragen, DY 30/ IV B2/ 12/ 211, Eingabe sent by Christa Deerberg from Berlin, dated 26.11.1975, p. 24

another occasion. This petition is not only another example of alleged violence against women but it shows that even a police officer felt her only chance of recourse was through a petition, underlining how helpless women in this situation felt in the GDR. Although it is difficult to jump to conclusions from just one case, this petition does also have implications for the way East Germany's police force was depicted in official propaganda. But of course it is important to note that in western European countries, such as Britain, there were also allegations of unjust and unprofessional behaviour amongst the police force in the 1970s and 1980s.

Consumer goods

Another popular theme in women's petitions concerned the availability of consumer goods in the GDR. This issue, like housing, was again central to the regime's propaganda, which gave the impression that the GDR had an economy equal to if not better than that of the FRG. On 1 December 1988, for example, Honecker went so far as to claim that fundamentally the GDR's living standards were higher than that of the Federal Republic of Germany.⁴² Yet West German television, which was beamed into thousands of East German living rooms every day and demonstrated to GDR citizens that there was an abundance of better quality consumer items available to FRG citizens across the border.

A petition sent in 1988 by a DFD group in Weimar to the *Bundesvorstand* (Federal Administration) of the DFD begins by describing the importance of their city to the German Democratic Republic. "Weimar has – we may state confidently – a well-

⁴² Hermann Weber, *Geschichte der DDR*, p. 454

known name and is a point of attraction for tourists in and out of the country. We are proud of our city and participate gladly in all required cultural events.”⁴³ Yet the petition asks why, despite its importance, is there still a “supply question” in Weimar? Ursula Dohl, who has written the petition “in the name” of her DFD group but who alternates between “I” and “we” in the letter, believes that the sheer number of people using the city is overlooked. She states that the number of inhabitants is swelled by two million tourists and visitors a year, 8,000 students and 50,000 people living on the outskirts of Weimar, resulting in “empty shelves, and for working women, especially those workers in industry and agriculture, when work’s finished for the day, there’s not much left to choose from and gaps in the assortment [of goods] on offer.”⁴⁴ According to the petition, items which are difficult to obtain include shoes, textiles, bedding, stockings, children’s clothing, “good” books, records and household appliances. The petition also expresses dissatisfaction with the fruit and vegetable supply in Weimar.⁴⁵

Scarcity of goods was a widespread complaint in the GDR. In particular, fruit, including bananas, grapes, oranges and more exotic fruits, was notoriously difficult to obtain. It was commonplace for news of a delivery of bananas to spread like wildfire, leading to huge queues outside shops. In fact long queues, limited choices and opening hours were typical at most stores and a certain amount of barter and exchange was a normal way of life in order to compensate. East Germans also regularly resorted to underhand methods to obtain certain items, like the black

⁴³ SAPMO-BArch, DFD DY31/601, Eingabe sent by Ursula Dohl on behalf of DFD-Gruppe 56/1, dated 28.09.88, p. 16

⁴⁴ Ibid

⁴⁵ Ibid

market, or striking up a friendship with the local shopkeeper to be served goods ‘under the counter’.⁴⁶

Mike Dennis claims that the amount of time spent by households on shopping for groceries, on average about four hours per week, hardly changed throughout the Honecker era.⁴⁷ As Ursula Dohl indicates in her petition it often fell to women to purchase the foodstuffs and other items for the family, usually in addition to working full time and taking control of the childcare arrangements. Thus it is understandable that many women felt pushed for time, their situation aggravated by the difficult shopping conditions. In April 1983 Marianne Vaupel from the small town of Nauen in Brandenburg wrote to the local authorities asking to be allowed out of work, so that she could go shopping for certain goods.⁴⁸ Some of the time pressures and constraints would clearly have been alleviated if her plea had been accepted.

There appeared to be definite regional disparities in the GDR with regard to supplies of food and consumer goods, with people living in East Berlin and Leipzig for example, cities which were seen by the authorities as showcases for the GDR, having greater access to more and better quality items.⁴⁹ It is clear from the petition from Frau Dohl of Weimar that she acknowledges and is bitter about such regional differences, referring to the fact that Kromsdorf, a village on the edge of Weimar, gave over its entire vegetable produce to the cities of Erfurt and East Berlin as well

⁴⁶ Some examples in David Childs, *The Fall of the GDR- Germany's Road to Unity* (Edinburgh: Pearson Education Limited, 2001), p. 28. Also in Mary Fulbrook, *The People's State*, p. 230

⁴⁷ Mike Dennis, *The Rise and Fall of the German Democratic Republic, 1945-1990*, p. 149

⁴⁸ BLHA, Rep. 401, 27240, ‘Eingaben und deren Bearbeitung – Jahrgang 1983’, Eingabe from Marianne Vaupel of Nauen, April 1983

⁴⁹ Mary Fulbrook, *The People's State*, p. 63. Leipzig was important because of the famous trade fair, the *Leipziger Messe*, held there each year.

as to the Soviet Army units stationed in southern GDR. Her petition underlines that she has no unrealistic expectations about a solution but that she would like to see a comprehensive examination of the 'supply problem', saying, "Of course we know that the needs of the people are growing and the resources for the entire satisfaction of needs do not yet exist (*die Kapazitäten für die gesamte Bedarfsdeckung noch nicht vorhanden sind*) and we therefore expect no miracles."⁵⁰ But overall the petition's message is clear: "all women of our DFD group and indeed all the women and citizens of the city of Weimar" deserve some sort of recognition that the distribution system is unfair and for a re-evaluation to take place.⁵¹

Comments in written questionnaires distributed in 2003 to women of all ages in Erfurt and Eisenach, Thüringen are consistent with the sorts of opinions outlined in Frau Dohl's petition.⁵² Although the questionnaire contained no specific question about access to goods and foodstuffs, a good third of the 53 women who responded chose to mention scarcity of certain items in their observations about life in the GDR. Some examples include, "Money was of minor importance – we didn't earn much and there wasn't much you could buy. Everything that was of reasonable quality was exported."⁵³ "There wasn't much fruit from the south."⁵⁴ "The supply of fruit and vegetables was worse [than after reunification]."⁵⁵ "It was difficult to

⁵⁰ SAPMO-BArch, DFD DY31/601, dated 28.09.88, p. 16. The shortages in Weimar probably felt even more acute in the year before Dohl had written as a result of the regime's official celebrations to mark the 750th anniversary of Berlin in 1987, which meant that even more supplies than usual were earmarked for the East German capital.

⁵¹ Dohl would like the social policies of party and state "to be brought convincingly and noticeably nearer to home." SAPMO-BArch, DFD DY31/601, dated 28.09.88, p. 16

⁵² I distributed questionnaires to women via acquaintances in a doctor's surgery and a dentist's surgery in Thüringen in January 2003.

⁵³ Comment made by a mother of 2, dentist, born in 1939, married, lived in Cottbus and Eisenach

⁵⁴ Comment made by mother of 3, married, dentist's assistant, lived 'in the countryside'

⁵⁵ Comment made by mother of 1, waitress, born 1949, lived in Eisenach

get hold of certain things”.⁵⁶ “The supply of everyday articles (“*Waren des täglichen Bedarfs*”) was poor. It took longer to secure the family’s supply of goods.”⁵⁷ “Certain farm produce you only got after waiting for a long time.”⁵⁸

One woman, born in 1957 and living in Eisenach before the fall of the wall, gave a fascinating insight when she wrote in response to the request to comment on ‘anything else important to you concerning your life in the GDR’ – “The search for food and West German money to get hold of building materials and other difficult to obtain consumer items”.⁵⁹ This comment underlines how utterly vital western currency was for improving one’s life in East Germany. It was the ultimate bargaining tool and people tried to attain it through West German friends and relatives. As Mary Fulbrook asserts, ‘Deutschmarks could open a lot of doors, both unofficially and, increasingly, also officially in the state-fostered pockets of Western consumer society’.⁶⁰ Stores called *Intershops*, which were first launched in 1955 to encourage West German visitors to spend their Western currency, had opened their doors to GDR citizens in 1974 – but only if they had western money. These shops sold the best of Soviet bloc consumer goods as well as imports from the West.⁶¹ Thus they stocked American jeans (including the popular Levi brand) Japanese gadgets, televisions, Scotch whisky, Black and Decker tools and French and Italian wine. Yet their existence served to divide East German society into those who had access to Western currency and those who did not.⁶² Thus it

⁵⁶ Comment made by mother of 1, teacher, married, born 1948, lived in Mosbach/Eisenach

⁵⁷ Comment made by mother of 1, nurse, born in 1946, married, lived in Erfurt and Seebach

⁵⁸ Comment made by mother of 2, married, lived in Eilenburg in *Bezirk Leipzig*

⁵⁹ Comment made by a BMSR technician, born 1957, married, 2 children, Eisenach

⁶⁰ Mary Fulbrook, *The People’s State*, p. 231

⁶¹ David Childs, *The Fall of the GDR*, p. 28

⁶² Mike Dennis, *The Rise and Fall of the German Democratic Republic, 1945-1990*, p. 149

undermined the idea of ‘real, existing socialism’ and its visions of a ‘classless’ society.

The other point of interest in the above quote by the woman from Eisenach is that she specifically mentions the difficulty in obtaining building materials. Their scarcity no doubt exacerbated the often pressing need for repair in many apartments. Mary Fulbrook states that many materials were illegally ‘liberated’ from the workplace to compensate for scarcities.⁶³ To make matters worse, plumbers and electricians were few and far between, so that East Germans were used to doing their own DIY repair work on their apartments, when petitions and other such applications to local government failed.

When it came to consumer durables like televisions, washing machines, refrigerators, cars and microwaves, the numbers of GDR households possessing such items did increase more quickly compared to other countries in the Soviet bloc.⁶⁴ But since East Germans more often compared their standard of living to the FRG, where many more households possessed consumer durables, then this was another cause for dissatisfaction and many women wrote petitions with complaints in this area. One woman for example protested to the Brandenburg authorities that she hadn’t yet received a washing machine.⁶⁵ She couldn’t understand why the delivery had been cancelled. Other women wrote petitions wanting delivery of a

⁶³ Mary Fulbrook, *The People’s State*, p. 56

⁶⁴ According to statistics in Mike Dennis, *German Democratic Republic*, p. 76

⁶⁵ Brandenburg State Archive, Rep. 401, 23795, April 1986

car.⁶⁶ There was a notoriously lengthy waiting period for receiving a new automobile. It took between 12 and 17 years on average to receive a new Trabant.⁶⁷

Essential items like bread, milk and rent prices were heavily subsidised by the government. Other 'luxury' items were not. The problem was that huge numbers of items were not classed as essential and thus were expensive to buy. In a petition sent in 1988, a woman from Berlin complained about the price of *Strumpfhosen*. She wrote that with a GDR income of between 800 and 1000 East German marks per month the sum of between 10 and 14 Marks for a pair of tights is too expensive.⁶⁸ This sort of petition is typical. The Politburo used consumption as a way of approaching the standards of the Federal Republic, but in reality the systems in the two countries were so different, that it was very difficult to compare. There was no competition for buyers in the GDR's planned economy which meant that the availability of goods could never measure up to West Germany's open market.⁶⁹

Travel

After housing complaints and dissatisfaction with goods availability, one of the most common themes in women's petitions concerned applications to travel, usually to the Federal Republic of Germany but also elsewhere. These women often appeared to write their petitions as a last resort, having tried but failed to gain a visa through all the normal channels. One woman wrote a petition requesting to be allowed to go to the christening of the new grandchild she had not yet met in the

⁶⁶ See for example Helga Neumann's petition from Potsdam, Brandenburg State Archive, Rep. 401, Nr. 27203, April 1980

⁶⁷ Mike Dennis, *The Rise and Fall of the German Democratic Republic, 1945-1990*, p. 149

⁶⁸ SAPMO-BArch, DFD, DY/31,602, Eingabe sent from Berlin, 1988, p. 193

⁶⁹ One reason why so many 'ordinary' East Germans were happy about reunification into the FRG.

FRG.⁷⁰ The Evangelical Church in Berlin-Brandenburg wrote a letter to the municipal authorities of Berlin (*Magistrat von Berlin*) on behalf of a certain Frau Frischat asking if she would be allowed to go to the FRG for one week at the beginning of December 1979 to celebrate a sibling's 80th birthday.⁷¹ Although it was not usually too difficult for pensioners to obtain a travel permit to the west, Frau Frischat's application had already been refused by the *Volkspolizei*.

Travel to the Federal Republic could theoretically be granted at personal request for occasions like important family celebrations or the death of a relative but in reality travel visas were given quite arbitrarily. For example, a clearly wounded member of the DFD wrote to DFD chairwoman Ilse Thiele in 1978 with the request to hand in her resignation because she and her husband had been forced to miss the funeral of her father-in-law in the Federal Republic. They had been granted a visa to go to West Germany but with the wrong dates. They were only allowed to cross the border four days after the funeral despite their protests that there had been some kind of error. She says, my mother-in-law thinks the mistake was our fault. The petitioner from the village of Olbersdorf near the Czechoslovakian border was disillusioned with the whole travel application system, which she says "I had always believed was fair".⁷²

With cases involving western contacts it is difficult to know whether administrative error was truly to blame or whether there were other reasons behind negative decisions for travel requests. Many women writing petitions about their applications to cross the border complain that they were viewed suspiciously by both state and

⁷⁰ SAPMO-BArch, DFD, DY/31, 565, Eingabe from Frau Streufert, 23.07.82

⁷¹ Evangelical Church Archive, Berlin, C Rep 104, 356, letter dated 05.11.79

⁷² SAPMO-BArch, DFD, DY/31, 565, p. 95, Eingabe from Ulla Ruft, dated 20.11.80

Party bodies and even employers because they had western contacts or because they had aspirations to go abroad.

Genossin Hannelore Prüfer, for example, wrote in her petition sent in Jan 1977 that she wanted to marry a man from Cameroon, who had been living in the GDR for 16 years, and travel back to his homeland to live with him there. She says that her leader and party secretary at the Pharmaceutical Industry where she works has declared that she sees her employee's resolution to go to Cameroon as a decision for capitalism and that she will be accordingly forced to undergo the relevant Party consequences.⁷³

Another woman, a member of the SED, wrote a petition in 1976 to the local Party Control Commission in East Berlin asking why she has lost her job. The resulting correspondence indicates that it was due to 'un-permitted western contact that had taken place at her parents-in-law's flat since 1970'.⁷⁴ The final report reveals that when questioned she admitted this contact but that she felt she could not share her concerns about the situation with her fellow comrades firstly in case her husband found out and hit her and secondly because she was afraid that if the secret contact became known she would be forced to separate from him and despite his violence she did not want to be a single mother, 'standing alone' as is the German phrase, with her children.⁷⁵

⁷³ BLA, C Rep. 902, 4291, Eingabe from Genossin Hannelore Prüfer, dated 14.01.77

⁷⁴ BLA, C Rep 902, 3424, Eingabe from Renate Schrepffer, dated 30.11.76

⁷⁵ Ibid

In another petition a woman writes that she feels responsible for her husband losing his job since it was she whose western friends have got him into trouble.⁷⁶ She has been writing to a woman from Austria for three years but on the very same day that the friend and her family came over to visit for the third time last summer her husband lost his job. She complains, “I maintain a close and cordial friendship with peace loving women from all over the world but my husband is punished for it”.⁷⁷ Addressing the situation directly she says, “Please do not think that we had ideas about leaving the GDR.”

Some women petitioning to be allowed abroad dressed up their desire to travel in terms of an acceptable socialist mission. So for instance, a 20 year old DFD member from Erfurt wrote a petition to Ilse Thiele in November 1980 asking whether it would be possible for her to go to Helsinki with a collective of women to meet her pen friend who has been following the life of her “socialist land with great interest and who wants to know more”. She declares that she’s proud of her socialist Fatherland and is keen to share her knowledge.⁷⁸

Other issues

It is fascinating to discover that a certain number of petitions seem to have been sent merely with the intention of settling personal spats and rivalries between party or DFD members or with the aim of ‘telling tales’ on other comrades.⁷⁹ There were countless revelations about colleagues’ extra-marital affairs in petitions, for

⁷⁶ SAPMO-BArch, DFD, DY/31, 565, p. 1, Eingabe from Brigutte Lemme, dated 06.09.80

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ SAPMO-BArch, DFD, DY/ 31,565, p. 95, Eingabe from Ulla Ruft, dated 20.11.80

⁷⁹ As one would expect a high volume of the petitions received by the BPKK dealt with issues like these.

instance. A good example of a particularly intense ‘backbiting’ campaign by female Party comrades was described by a DFD member who wrote to Ilse Thiele in March 1983 to hand in her notice as chairwoman of the work group ‘*Geschwister Scholl*’ (Scholl Siblings) after having been accused for over a year by these women, she claims falsely, of stealing money from the group’s funds.⁸⁰ While this sort of attempt to step down from a position of authority in the Party, or a mass organisation, would not have been encouraged, on the other hand scheming rivalries were not discouraged, since they helped to maintain a certain amount of paranoia in society, that could be exploited by the authorities.

Another popular theme in women’s petitions is difficulty in obtaining childcare provision. This is quite surprising in a country that prided itself on providing a kindergarten place for every child. One interesting case is that of Frau Genzel who wrote to DFD chairman Ilse Thiele in May 1978, saying that she has three children and applied for a crèche place for the youngest child who is eight months old but this has been turned down.⁸¹ She says that her husband is in prison due to paragraph 181 and at the moment she receives about 110 Marks monthly from him. She cannot work because she must look after her baby but with that income she asks “how am I and my children to live if I am not given the opportunity to work?”⁸² She asks, “Should I separate from my husband in order to receive a crèche place? Since this is certainly not in the interest of our socialist social order, I ask many

⁸⁰ SAPMO-BArch, Eingabe from Frau Müller, SAPMO-BArch, DFD, DY/31, 568, pp. 91-92

⁸¹ SAPMO-BArch, DY/31, 364, p. 189, Eingabe from Sabine Genzel, dated 16.05.79

⁸² Ibid.

times over for support to find a solution to the very urgent problems of me and my family.”⁸³

Another petition by a woman who has been off work with her *Mutterjahr* but is also desperate to return to work but unable to find a crèche place comes up with the same solution. She complains that single mothers and students have no problems attaining kindergarten places for their children and declares, “Sometimes I consider that a divorce ... under the given conditions would be the most effective means.”⁸⁴ She believes she is being punished for her way of life.

The state as agony aunt?

One of the things that is extremely striking regarding women’s petitions is that as well as the usual complaints one would expect to find in for example, a letter to a local councillor or a politician in a western country, there are also huge numbers of extremely personal divulgements. Women pour out intimate details about their families’ lives and reveal their deepest fears and regrets, for instance about mental illness, breakdowns or domestic violence; issues that in another country would perhaps be expressed to a counsellor or a social worker. This suggests two things; firstly that many women wrote their petitions because they felt desperate and had ‘nothing to lose’,⁸⁵ since the state had failed to provide any alternative means for seeking redress. But secondly this intimacy could also imply that petition writers did not see the authorities as the oppressive enemy, as is often assumed but rather

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ SAPMO BArch, DFD, DY/31, 565, Eingabe from Petra Preuß, dated 06.12.79

⁸⁵ Although they still had to keep their petition couched within certain acceptable rhetoric.

saw petitions as a genuine means to voice criticism and perhaps see their situation remedied.⁸⁶

A very vivid example is a woman who wrote to Ilse Thiele, chairwoman of the DFD, in May 1978 declaring that she is in a desperately unhappy situation.⁸⁷ She described each different stage of her ten-year marriage in detail in her petition. Her husband was a pilot and she says the marriage began well despite their constant separation and the fact that he would often bully her when he was home. Misfortune then struck when she was seriously injured in a winter skiing accident, which resulted in prolonged hospital treatment. At this time their young son was cared for by her parents and spent longer and longer at kindergarten while her husband humiliated her and compared her unfavourably to other women. She turned to alcohol to help her cope.⁸⁸ She suffered from breathing difficulties, sleep disturbance and depression. She claims that her husband used her situation to file for divorce and to receive custody of their child. She declares that she has now received six blood transfusions, is out of hospital and mentally and physically well but has only been allowed to see her son twice since the divorce. But she cannot imagine leading a life without him. She writes to Ilse Thiele, “As a member of the DFD I turn to you in my emergency in hope that you will be understanding as a woman and a mother.”⁸⁹

Petition rhetoric

⁸⁶ See Mike Dennis, *The Stasi: Myth and Reality*, p. 218 and Mary Fulbrook, *The People's State*, pp. 284-285

⁸⁷ SAPMO-BArch, DFD DY31/ 564, Eingabe to Ilse Thiele from Silvia Birnbaum, dated 08.05.78

⁸⁸ This is another example of excessive drinking, which became a common problem in the GDR and is discussed in detail by Mary Fulbrook in *The People's State*, pp. 103-106

⁸⁹ SAPMO-BArch, DFD DY/31, 564, Eingabe to Ilse Thiele from Silvia Birnbaum, dated 08.05.78

Indeed, it is interesting to read the reasons given by women for writing their petitions to a particular person or institution. There was no system that stipulated that petitions about certain issues should be addressed to a particular department, so individual women would use their own judgement about where they thought their particular concern would be taken most seriously. Like the woman in the above case, many other women who wrote to Ilse Thiele explain that they chose to send a letter to her because they identified with her as a wife and a mother. Another woman who wrote to Thiele about her daughter's limited career choice explains that she strategically picked the chairwoman of the DFD for her connections:

I considered for a very long time, which way I could go with such a large problem. My conclusions were that you as chairmen of our Federal Administration and [as] a member of the central committee of our a party and the Council of State are the most competent personality, when it comes to clarifying questions regarding the implementation of the equal rights of women in our society⁹⁰.

The police officer who wrote a petition about the behaviour of her ex-husband, also a member of the police force, explained why she wrote to Comrade Wansierki of the Central Committee of the SED's Department of Security, saying, "Worthy Comrade, please excuse me for turning to you with my request, but I know nowhere else where I can get advice."⁹¹ In this way she went straight to the highest authority

⁹⁰ SAPMO-BArch, DFD DY/31, 601, Eingabe to Ilse Thiele from Elfriede Gey, dated 18.07.89, p. 61

⁹¹ SAPMO-BArch, Abteilung Sicherheitsfragen, DY 30/ IV B2/ 12/ 211, Eingabe sent by Christa Deerberg from Berlin, dated 26.11.1975, p. 24

on police security matters. In the same way the artist Sabine Grzimek wrote to Dorit Roth, leader of the Department of Culture, thirteen days after the birth of her daughter, to sort out the complicated and difficult living situation with regard to her ex-husband, obviously believing that Roth was able to exert influence when it came to helping solve problems for artists.⁹²

Many other women addressed their petitions to the General Secretary and chairman of the *Staatsrat* himself, Erich Honecker, like, for example, the mother of four who wrote to him concerning the amount of money she was receiving from the state to help support her children. She apologises for writing to him in the first line of her letter, saying, “It is not my way to complain to you, particularly since you are swamped with much work and you are at the hub of everything...But I am also writing as a comrade and I am very active in my local community.”⁹³ While this regard for Honecker as a friend by many petition writers, reveals a certain amount of success for his leadership, in reality it is unlikely that Honecker read many of the petitions sent personally to him, and they were usually redirected to what was deemed the most appropriate institution, in this case the Department for State Security Matters. Certainly this forwarding on of petitions to ‘more appropriate’ bodies was very common. Thousands of petitions landed in the offices of the Ministry for State Security, for example, even when the petitioners had not actually addressed their letters there.⁹⁴

⁹² SAPMO-BArch, Abt. Kultur, DY31 1097, Eingabe from Sabine Grzimek to Dorit Roth, dated 15.12.79

⁹³ SAPMO-BArch, Abteilung Sicherheitsfragen, DY 30/ 1170, Eingabe sent 15.10.85

⁹⁴ Mike Dennis, *The Stasi: Myth and Reality*, p. 217

Notably one woman explained in her petition that she is writing to Thiele because she recently met her. She says that she saw her in the DFD district executive committee training session in Karl-Marx Stadt on 26.11.81, speaking about the difficulties for women finding jobs corresponding to their training.⁹⁵ She writes in her petition, “We have experienced this in our family and I would like to report the details to you.” She wants help finding a job for her daughter-in-law. Evidently she managed to have a conversation with Thiele at the end of the training session but “there was too little time” and she declared, “My husband and I stand as comrades in the middle of societal life but our influence does not extend to Berlin”.⁹⁶ Here then is evidence that women believed they could achieve things by capitalising on their contacts and influence, and also by painting the perfect picture of themselves as good ‘socialist personality’, wholeheartedly devoted to the greater good of the community and socialist state. Indeed sometimes influence and respect do seem to have helped. Claudia Richter, for example, who had been a Party member for 11 years and was a journalist for Berliner Verlag, Redaktion “Wochenpost” complained to the BPKK that her present 1 ½-room flat is too small for her family of four and was awarded a new flat.⁹⁷

To maximise their chances of receiving a remedy, it is perhaps understandable why many women would begin their petitions with a long list of evidence outlining their socialist achievements before they launched into their complaints. For example, the 20-year-old girl living in a cramped one bed apartment with her baby, who was angry not to have been given her late grandfather’s flat, explained how she was active in the FDJ leadership of her factory until the birth of her son and declared

⁹⁵ SAPMO-BArch, DFD, DY/ 31, 566, Eingabe to Ilse Thiele from Getrud Reiner, November 1981

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ BLA, C Rep. 902, 6154, Eingabe from K. Erika Mönnich, dated 20.10.83

that it was her firm aim to qualify successfully as an engineer in order to “give more to my socialist Fatherland and to represent and carry out the good policies of Party and government which serve the peace and well-being of the people.” In the same way an elderly woman, concerned that perhaps she was not granted a travel visa because she was in the Hitler Youth as a child, wants recognition of her true character and is at pains to point out in her petition that she and all of her children and their partners are members of the Party.⁹⁸

Many of the women’s petitions are fascinating for the socialist language they employ. Women tried to prove that their case had been dealt with in a manner that was out of line with official policy, in order to achieve redress. Thus one woman whose husband had lost his job, quoted from the statute book and declared “our state guarantees work to everyone”. Other women were much more explicit in their criticisms. And as cited earlier the woman whose ex-husband still lives with her and is worried about the effect this will have on her children asserts, “Up until now I was convinced of the child-friendly attitude of this state”.⁹⁹ Another woman who has been unable to find work in the area she would prefer says, “I expected this kind of thing in the Federal Republic but not here in the GDR!”¹⁰⁰

The language of the communist dictatorship is certainly reproduced by these women in their petitions but whether this is from an internalisation of the regime’s terminology, or simply a resigned understanding that this is the only acceptable channel through which to air their grievances, is difficult to tell. But the above cases

⁹⁸ SAPMO-BArch, SED Abteilung Sicherheitsfragen, DY 30/ 1170, Eingabe from Charlotte Borrmann, 16.07.86

⁹⁹ For example, SAPMO-BArch, DFD, DY/31, 564, p. 282, Eingabe by Gabriele Kopelke to the DFD, dated 10.11.79

¹⁰⁰ SAPMO-BArch, DFD, DY/ 31, 568, Eingabe from Eva Eichler, p. 16

in which women reprimand the state and express disappointment at its failure to live up to their expectations do suggest that some women really believed that they could somehow manipulate the regime in their petitions. Another means of manipulation used by women was threat making.¹⁰¹ In some cases this worked. For example, the 21-year old divorcee with a young son who threatened to get her mother who lived in the FRG to publish her case in the western press, was in fact granted a new apartment.¹⁰²

But in actual fact, although it is difficult to be certain because of the gaps in follow-up reports accompanying petitions in the archives, it was difficult to detect a precise formula for success in petition writing, since problems often seemed to be dealt with very arbitrarily. For example, a crèche place is found for the woman whose husband is in prison but the artist who wrote to the leader of the Department of Culture was given a personal reply but offered no solution to her problem.

What *was* certain however was that women had to be extremely careful when they wrote petitions not to overstep the mark because there could be consequences if they did. As Fulbrook underlines, petition writers could not denounce the status of the GDR or the leading role of the Party in any way.¹⁰³ They also had to be careful not to make themselves vulnerable to charges of faction building or inciting opposition, crimes which many members of society might not even realise they were committing. A mother of five, for example, wrote a long petition in 1986 to

¹⁰¹ Fulbrook has also discovered this in her research, pointing out that after establishing their credentials as good socialists, petition writers might make some sort of threat, in effect threatening to withdraw commitment, *The People's State*, p. 283

¹⁰² SAPMO-BArch, DFD DY31/568, Eingabe from Simone Forgher (nee Hoffmann) from Penig, dated 15.10.88

¹⁰³ Mary Fulbrook, *The People's State*, p. 285

the DFD primarily about her disappointment with the social benefits that had been introduced during the eleventh Party congress that year but she also mentioned a whole host of other grievances, such as the scarcity of meat, fruit and vegetables in her town, the lack of provision for pensioners, the distinct lack of fashionable clothes for young people to buy and the shortages of local doctors – to name just a few on her list.¹⁰⁴

Her mistake however, was to reveal that she had discussed the situation at great length with other women. At the time of the party conference she was visiting a health resort where she says the women, who were between 35 and 60, waited in anticipation for the results of the conference. She goes on to write “Rarely have I experienced such disappointment, discontent and excited discussions as I did there.”¹⁰⁵ She then proceeds with great gusto, “Does anyone amongst you [i.e. the DFD] know the deep discussions and criticisms amongst the population, particularly among women?...” and more damningly she states “the optimistic contributions of the press only reflect broad public opinion in the rarest of cases. True opinion is never heard.”¹⁰⁶

In a further petition written by the same woman in 1989 she goes on to explain that following her first letter she received no reply but just a visit from two DFD colleagues from Leipzig who interrogated her about her letter. She says she was made to feel like an “enemy of the state” and was accused of talking “not just for myself but for many other women”, which she was told she was not permitted to do

¹⁰⁴SAPMO-BArch, DFD, DY/31, 602, pp. 18-20, Eingabe from Ingebeborg Ranft, dated 10.07.86

¹⁰⁵ Ibid

¹⁰⁶ Ibid

since she had insufficient political training.¹⁰⁷ Her response was to stand down from the DFD. Having waited three years to do so, she says that she should have written this second letter long ago but “as so many other citizens in similar situations,” she says “I had resigned myself to the circumstances.”¹⁰⁸ It is interesting to note here that in her first petition, written in 1986 this woman used the customary SED language and signed off with socialist greetings, while this is absent from the second letter, which ends very abruptly in comparison.

Conclusion

Analysis of women’s petitions suggests that women did see the petitioning system as a legitimate means of communication with the state, and as a means of achieving personal improvements in their living conditions. Although redress was not guaranteed most female petition writers seem to have believed that if remedies were available, they would be delivered to those who put forward the most deserving case. In this way women accepted the notion that the state claimed direct responsibility for almost every aspect of the running of day-to-day life in the GDR. Of course this idea was omnipresent in the GDR, with slogans such as “*Alles zum Wohle des Volkes*” (Everything for the Benefit of the People) only encouraging the population’s sense of the state as paternalistic provider.¹⁰⁹ SED rhetoric actually went further with its message of the GDR’s paternalism, by conveying an idealistic vision for a harmonious society. The following local government report outlining services and provision required for towns and communities is a good example:

¹⁰⁷ SAPMO-BArch, DFD, DY/31, 602, pp. 14-17, Eingabe from Ingeborg Ranft, dated 13.10.89

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Slogan cited in Mary Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship*, p. 29

good housing conditions, childcare and shopping facilities, clean streets and pathways, well-maintained gardens, playgrounds and sports facilities, quality restaurants, the care of citizens of advanced age, the shaping of an interesting cultural life, including youth dances, discotheques and harvest festivals, the cultivation of village traditions and furthering a sense of *Heimat*... civil defence, disposal of rubbish and sewage, ensuring the winter road service and other communal political tasks essential to life.¹¹⁰

This extract is taken from a report that encourages the strengthening of state power in local municipalities. It illustrates how ‘Real, existing socialism’ sought to provide a minimum standard of living, in conjunction with guiding citizens towards a ‘socialist human community’ under the direction and authority of the SED leadership. However, these high levels of responsibility for the population’s well-being in effect meant that East German citizens could always find fault with the state for more issues, hence increasing numbers of petitions.

However, the existence of the petitioning system as the only available route to express discontent gave the state greater control over the population. People were encouraged to turn to state bodies in their role as providers and to feel that they could openly complain about aspects of their lives. But at the same time they were inhibited by the threat of intimidation from expressing themselves in any other way than the accepted rhetoric. This analysis of women’s petitions fits into the framework devised by German historian Jarausch, which sees the GDR as a *Fürsorgediktatur* or ‘welfare dictatorship’. This term links the state’s paternalistic

¹¹⁰ As cited in *ibid.*, p. 49 From SAPMO-Barch, DY 30/ vorl. SED 36878, ‘Information über Probleme und Aufgaben zur weiteren Stärkung der Staatsmacht in den kreisangehörigen Städten und Gemeinden’

concern for the well-being of the East German people with the controlling ‘coercion’ side of the regime.¹¹¹

Jarausch believes that the Politburo of the SED attempted to overcome the dictatorial administration of one party rule supported by the state security service (Stasi) by ruling with a ‘patriarchal political style that demonstrated its concern for the powerless populace with a unique combination of social services, material security, artistic cultivation, etc’.¹¹² According to Jarausch the SED provided a wealth of social services in offering affordable food, housing, public transport, nurseries and FDGB holidays amongst other things. In this way the GDR population felt a sense of security and belonging and so demonstrated political acquiescence.¹¹³

Of course, there were many flaws in the regime’s system of welfare. The high numbers of petitions highlight that the state was often unable to deliver its promises. The social problems highlighted in women’s petitions reveal that the regime was resting on an unsteady power base.¹¹⁴ These petitions demonstrate real holes in the state’s social policy. Aside from the obvious failings in housing, food supply and crèche availability, it is particularly alarming that the state seemed unable to protect some of its most vulnerable citizens, for example, the elderly and

¹¹¹ Jarausch’s thesis is that the term ‘welfare dictatorship’ depicts socialism’s ‘vision of an egalitarian social reform’, while simultaneously highlighting the forced nature of this socialist utopia in the GDR. Konrad H. Jarausch, *Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR* (New York & Oxford, 2004), p. 60

¹¹² *Ibid*

¹¹³ Many women pushed this system to the limit of course, considering the brave language used in some of their petitions! But in many ways that is why the petitioning system existed, so that people could ‘let off steam’ through writing petitions while at the same time demonstrating acquiescence in other areas.

¹¹⁴ Indeed economic failings have been named by some historians to have played their part in the regime’s downfall.

female victims of domestic violence. Nevertheless Mary Fulbrook has discovered that many former East German citizens retrospectively remember living ‘perfectly normal lives’ in the GDR. But while it is probably true that women began to get used to the daily reality of the state’s economic failings, the idea of ‘normalisation’ should be approached with care, since many of the state’s failings, as demonstrated by petitions, were extremely serious at the time.

Honecker believed that access to a warm, dry apartment, cheap basic food and steady work would make the average GDR citizen happy.¹¹⁵ Not only was this world view very simplistic but it was not even achieved; plenty of citizens did not live in adequate housing, access to foodstuffs was not always available and for women in the GDR, who had to contend with the demands of running a household and finding childcare, steady work was not always available. Even when individual problems were solved there appears to have been no attempt to find a universal solution for the problem as a whole.¹¹⁶ But perhaps this was an intended failing of the system, indicative of the state’s coercive side. By only focusing on individual complaints, the petitioning system encouraged the atomisation of society helping the SED to retain its power, despite the Party’s repeated inability to deliver when it came to social policy.

¹¹⁵ Burghard Ciesla & Patrice Poutus, ‘Food Supply in a Planned Economy’, Jarausch, Konrad. H, *Dictatorship as Experience* (New York & Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2004), p. 144

¹¹⁶ This point is backed up by Werner who points out that although petitions picked up on economic deficiencies, only specific problems were addressed and not linked to deficiencies in other social areas, so that shortcomings remained offering old reasons for new petitions. Oliver Werner, “‘Politisch Überzeugend, feinfühlig und vertrauensvoll”? Eingabenbearbeitung in der SED’, p. 465

TABLE 6**Evaluation of petitions received by *Abteilung Frauen* 1972-1984¹**

Subject:	Years													
	'72 (1)	'74 (2)	'75 (1)	'75 (2)	'76 (1)	'76 (2)	'77 (1)	'77 (2)	'78 (1)	'79 (1)	'79 (2)	'84 (1)	'84 (2)	TO TAL
Social problems ²	70	4	5	6	6	17	9	4	3	15	9			149
Housing problems	57	24	30	15	31	19	26	42	38	53	40	60	49	484
Work problems	39	27	24	14	18	10	15	8	13	8	8	12	12	208
Housework day	15		5	3										23
Recent legislation/party conferences	23	8			24	18	6	3				31	31	144
Legal questions ³	4	14	5	10	11	12	5	4	5	5	6	9	7	97
Travel out of the GDR	3	1												4
Pension questions			4											4
Problems for large families				3	5	1								9
Questions re: study				5	2									7
Crèche places ⁴					5									5
Other		2	3	8	8	10	3	12	12	17	9	12	5	101
TOTAL	211	80	76	64	110	87	64	35	71	98	72	124	43	

Key:

(1) indicates first half of year, i.e. January to June,

(2) indicates second half of year, i.e. July to December.

Gaps occur in the available data. Thus data for second half of 1972 to first half of 1974 is missing, for second half of 1978 and for 1980 to 1983 is missing.

¹ Statistics from SAPMO-BArch, Abteilung Frauen, DY/30 vorl. SED, 26789

² For example, accommodation for disabled children, inquiries about marriage credit for young married couples, securing a crèche place

³ For example, marriage decisions, arrests, maintenance payments.

⁴ It would appear that except for 1976, petitions concerning crèche places were counted under social problems.

Part II

Part 1 of this thesis examined general discontent amongst women in the GDR between 1971 and 1989, focusing firstly on the implications of *Muttipolitik* and secondly on the popular recurring themes in women's petitions. Part 2 will concentrate on more specific, organised discontent amongst women in the GDR, particularly in the 1980s. It will examine two separate groups of women; lesbians and female peace activists. Women in these two groups were discontented for different reasons in the Honecker era and in the early 1980s some of them began to form clubs and organisations, which rose in popularity as the decade progressed.

Women's opposition groups

In fact women were involved in a great many of the minority organisations that formed in the GDR, largely outside the remit of state structures, during the 1980s focusing on themes like peace, homosexuality, the environment and later human rights. These organisations have been called at various times opposition, resistance, dissident or simply minority or fringe groups. It was in the homosexual and peace groups that women were better represented, and had more influence. There have even been suggestions that the combined activities of the women in these groups led to a distinct women's movement in the GDR in the 1980s.¹ Simultaneously the gradual interconnection of dissident organisations by the late 1980s, which led to more sophisticated forms of pressurising for reform, has been described as evidence

¹ For example, see 'Einleitung', Samirah Kenawi, *Frauengruppen in der DDR der 80er Jahre – eine Dokumentation* (Herausgegeben von Grauzone, Berlin: 1995)

of a growth of political activism in the GDR at this time, that helped provide the necessary backdrop for the events of Autumn 1989 culminating in the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Those women involved in homosexual and peace organisations did not originally set out to oppose the regime. With regard to the lesbians who formed their own clubs, they initially wanted to create networks and friendships with other lesbians and gay men, since opportunities to meet homosexuals in the GDR rarely existed. In this way the foundation of homosexual organisations reflected the emergence of a homosexual sub-culture in the GDR. Perhaps for this reason lesbian and homosexual groups have largely been labelled ‘fringe’ rather than opposition or dissident groups despite the fact that some lesbians became involved in peace workshops and women’s conferences, which pushed them further into the realm of oppositional activity. Some lesbians, alternatively, became involved with secular homosexual organisations, which attempted to create free space for recreation and for discussion about homosexual issues within the boundaries set down by the state. Indeed by 1989, in contrast to other dissident groups, the state, although still ambiguous in its policy towards homosexuals, had shown signs of accepting homosexuals and wanting to incorporate them further into GDR society.

Women’s peace groups however, were described as opposition or dissident groups by the regime from their conception forwards. These groups were created by women in order to promote peace, reflecting the general anxiety of many East German women about the developing Cold War situation in Europe in the early 1980s. Yet unlike other women in the GDR, the women in the peace groups

proposed alternatives to official policy, immediately making it clear why, in a one-party state, they would be categorised as dissidents in opposition groups. At the time women in the peace groups were reluctant to label themselves as opposition groups, but some, for example Tina Krone and Irena Kukutz,² have no problems with this classification now, particularly since the interests of the peace groups broadened in the late 1980s to cover other topics such as human rights, democracy and freedom of speech. Chapter 4 gives further details about the ways in which these peace groups were forced into positions of opposition due partly to their treatment by the authorities, and also partly through their own gradual realisation of additional aspects of the East German regime that they contested.

The changing climate: The Cold War in the 1980s

In order to understand why certain women felt compelled to establish peace groups, it is necessary to comprehend the significance of the escalating tensions that began to unfold between the two powers on each side of the Cold War divide as the 1970s, a reasonably stable decade for international affairs, drew to a close. World harmony, was shaken by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, and was further unsettled by military putsches in Bolivia. The rise of the republican Ronald Reagan to presidency in 1981, with his emphasis on high defence spending, military intervention and the triumph of ‘freedom’ over communism, was a direct challenge to the imperialist Brezhnev administration in the USSR, upsetting the balance of East-West power. Of immediate concern to the GDR were events in Poland, where in 1980 the government was forced to recognise the ten million

² These two women were members of ‘Women for Peace, Berlin’ (*Frauen für den Frieden*) Interview Tina Krone and Irena Kukutz, “Die Bewegung ‘Frauen für den Frieden’ als Teil der unabhängigen Friedensbewegung der DDR”, p. 1287

strong Trade Union Solidarity movement. The example of this working class 'revolution' on East Germany's doorstep was of severe concern to Honecker. He favoured immediate Soviet intervention to prevent the spread of this uprising to other members of the Soviet bloc, an indication perhaps of his future repressive attitude towards dissidents in his own country.

Western condemnation of Soviet aggression in Afghanistan was rapid, swiftly generating a new round of the arms race, which began as soon as Reagan's administration announced its decision to treble the production of Pershing II atomic rocket production when he was elected to power in November 1980. At the same time the Social Democrat Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) Helmut Schmidt, confirmed that he would be upholding the NATO double resolution to station medium range rockets in West Germany. It was against this backdrop that a dissident scene, centred around initiatives for peace, began to emerge in the GDR.

The role of the church

It is vital to consider the role of the Protestant Church in the study of opposition groups in 1980s' East Germany, since so many of them came under its jurisdiction. The 'Church-state agreement' of 6 March 1978 was the significant turning point with regard to the position of the church in GDR society. At the time this contract between the Protestant Church and the SED leadership actually meant different things to both sides. Privately Honecker and the SED had hoped they would be able

to 'co-opt Christians for their own purposes'.³ The Church on the other hand placed more emphasis on the idea of mutual recognition that had been highlighted at the meeting, and hoped that the agreement would strengthen its role in socialism.⁴

The Church-state agreement did give Christians more space to worship but some Christians also believed that in addition to the greater ease in organising church activities, they now had more freedom to air their own political views within the church and its organisations. Thus, it has been argued that from the perspective of Honecker who hoped to commit the church to a strengthening of socialism, the agreement was 'misunderstood' from the start.⁵ Yet it is important that the double impact of the agreement is not forgotten. Thus, while on the one hand the agreement encouraged a greater numbers of political dissidents to operate from within the church, on the other hand the state now also had a measure of indirect control of dissident activities. It managed this through targeting church groups with Stasi informants and by attempting to encourage members of the church hierarchy, through conspiratorial discussions with state functionaries and Stasi officials, to guide groups attached to the church in a less political and more religious direction.

A huge proportion of dissident groups in the 1980s chose to meet 'under the roof' of the Protestant Church, as was the popular phrase. Lesbians and female peace activists were no exception. Indeed the Protestant Church was in many ways fundamental in the rise of a 'women's movement', since such a great proportion of events associated with the women's groups took place under its roof, from debates and workshops to fetes and conferences. Dozens of women's groups were

³ Mary Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship*, p. 110

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 113-114

⁵ *Ibid*

connected to the Protestant Church in the 1980s, while only four were organised under the jurisdiction of the Catholic Church. Of course the very nature of the Roman Catholic Church in East Germany and its jurisdiction from Rome meant that the leadership did not attempt or desire to negotiate an agreement with it. Protestant Church was more established in East Germany, than the Roman Catholic Church. In 1964 59.3 per cent of the population were Protestants and 8.1 per cent were Catholic.⁶

In general terms the trend for dissident groups to meet in rooms belonging to the Protestant Church can be put down to the greater personal space and freedom of expression that the church allowed its organisations as a result of its interpretation of the Church-state agreement. Dissident groups often profited from the church's access to western media, literature and funding, as well as printing and photocopying facilities. Groups organised within the church could use various high profile religious and parish events as a platform to publicise their own activities and also as a means of networking.

Despite these benefits, which are expanded on in relation to lesbian and peace groups in chapters 3 and 4, it is still perhaps unclear, on account of its alleged misogynistic past and perceived discriminative relationship towards women, why women's groups would choose the church as their organisational point and source of contact. However, it seems that in 1980's East Germany many female dissidents preferred the transparency of the church's history and approach to women, compared to the more ambivalent attitude of the state, which, for example, claimed

⁶ Mary Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship*, p. 103. These figures declined however as the regime wore on.

equality in the GDR was an indisputable fact with no room for debate. At this time the Protestant Church in East Germany was prepared to take part in discussions about equality and feminism, in an attempt to resolve key issues with regard to women.⁷ In the same way the church welcomed theological discussions about homosexuality and debates about the ordination of homosexual ministers. It was partly this apparent openness to discussion and change, and, its lack of organised discipline (despite its partnership with the state) that attracted dissidents who were not necessarily committed Christians to the church in the 1980s.

A women's movement?

The growing numbers of women involved in fringe and oppositional organisations, like the lesbian and homosexual groups and the peace groups in the 1980s, has led to suggestions that there was a women's movement in the GDR at this time. Yet there has been debate between writers, like Freya Klier, who despite her role as a political activist herself in the 1980s, does not believe that a women's movement existed in any coherency, and Anne Hampele, who argues that it did.⁸ Certainly, it is not enough to presume that a women's movement occurred simply because there were a large number of women's groups in the last decade of the GDR. In fact the existence of a women's movement suggests a change in female consciousness and a deliberation of feminism, as well as some level of coordination between women's groups. And indeed, the examination of lesbian groups and peace groups in chapters

⁷ Samirah Kenawi, *Frauengruppen in der DDR der 80er Jahre*, p. 16

⁸ Anne Hampele, 'Frauenbewegung in den Ländern der ehemaligen DDR', *Von der DDR zu den FNL: Soziale Bewegungen vor und nach der Wende* (Forschungsjournal Neue Soziale Bewegungen 1/1992)

3 and 4 would indicate that something like this was beginning to occur among lesbian and women's peace groups in the GDR in the late 1980s.

The first clear sign of a women's movement is that many of the women who campaigned for peace and many of the lesbians involved in homosexual groups chose to break away from working with men in their dissident activity quite early on. They decided this for various reasons, ranging from the belief that they would work more effectively without men, to the need to create their own space for the discussion of women's issues. Indeed it is significant that lesbians and peace women may have started out with specific agendas for discussion regarding peace and homosexuality but that these widened to include subjects like motherhood, gynaecology, abortion and equality, particularly when this related to the realities of daily life for women in the GDR. It is also notable that lesbians began to campaign for peace and environmental issues and that both groups of women joined forces in greater numbers in regional and GDR wide women's events. In addition, as contacts with western women's groups grew, lesbians and female peace activists increasingly became familiar with western notions of feminism. Thus while, a concrete women's movement may not yet have been solidly constructed by autumn 1989, the roots had certainly been laid and a network system between female dissidents was in place.

Summary

The aim of Part II is to uncover the specific grievances of lesbians and female peace activists and to explain why the organisations these women created attempted to

rectify these problems. Chapters 3 and 4 will place lesbians and peace women into the broader context of attitudes towards homosexuality and peace issues in the GDR in the 1970s and 1980s. It will examine not only the actual activities of women in the peace and homosexual groups, but also the groups' structures, methods of organisation and successes and failures, in order to gain some understanding of the wider impact of their actions on East German society as a whole.

Chapter 3

Lesbians in the GDR during the 1970s and 1980s

“To be a lesbian – is that a political issue?”

In the GDR there was enormous emphasis on a particular type of ‘normal woman’, deemed to be a well-qualified, fully employed mother living in a heterosexual relationship. As a result many women with different life choices and experiences felt that they and their contributions to East German society were largely overlooked. One particular group of women who encountered this problem were lesbians. Despite its slogans about equality, the GDR remained a very traditional society that valued heterosexual partnerships and marriage and maintained stereotypical roles for men and women in the home and workplace. The existence and lifestyles of lesbians brought into question not only the ideal of the normative female but also society’s claims about the institution of marriage, thus threatening the balance of the patriarchal system. This chapter will analyse the ways in which lesbians led their lives in East Germany. It will look at how they formed friendships and relationships, their contribution to the homosexual organisations and the so-called ‘women’s movement’ that emerged in the 1980s and it will examine how attitudes towards homosexuality and lesbians changed during the last two decades of the GDR.

Homosexuality during the Ulbricht era

In the 1950s and 1960s as elsewhere in the world, homosexuality was viewed with fear and misunderstanding in East Germany. GDR physician Rudolf Neubert spread

the view, with his popular book, *Der Geschlechterfrage* (The Question of the Sexes), that homosexuality was caused by a ‘deformation of the inner glands’.¹ Neubert also warned that in the GDR ‘the number of these genuine homosexuals is small, bigger is the number of those, who through unfavourable environmental influences and seduction, in particular during the adolescent period, feel more strongly drawn towards their own sex.’² In this way the analysis of Neubert and others like him continued along the same vein as Nazi teachings, which also accused homosexuals of asocial and misinformed deviance from the norm.³ These interpretations were reflected in the GDR Criminal Code (*Strafgesetzbuch*), of which Section 175 criminalised homosexuality. Although this was relaxed in 1957 it was not removed until the new Criminal Code of 1968. Section 175a, which forbade homosexual activity between men over 21 and men below 21 years of age remained law until 1968.⁴

Notably both of these laws specifically referred only to sexual relations between men but lesbians were also punished during this period. One example is the case of Gunna Bohne, who was born in 1941 and lived in Dresden. When the Berlin Wall was erected in August 1961 she had been involved in church youth activities. In what she describes as the “never-ending political hysteria” that ensued, Bohne was questioned by the Stasi about her contribution to church projects.⁵ During her

¹ Rudolf Neubert, ‘Abweichungen der Sexualität’, *Die Geschlechterfrage* (Rudolstadt: 1956), in Matthias Judt (Hrsg.) *DDR-Geschichte in Dokumenten* (Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 1998), p. 208. *Die Geschlechterfrage* was first published in 1955 but re-printed many times afterwards.

² Ibid

³ Dagmar Herzog, *Sex After Fascism: Memory and Mortality in Twentieth-Century Germany* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 197

⁴ Robert Havemann Gesellschaft (RHG), Archiv Grauzone (GZ)/ A1, 2576, Christina Schenk, ‘Bedingungen und Perspektiven lesbischer Existenz in der DDR’, p. 18

⁵ Christina Karstädt & Anette von Zitzewitz (Hrsg.), ... *viel zuviel verschwiegen. Eine historische Dokumentation von Lebensgeschichten lesbischer Frauen in der Deutschen Demokratischen von*

interrogation the question of her sexuality was brought up. At this point Bohne who did later 'come out' as a lesbian, was still unsure of her sexual orientation. But her interrogators, who consisted only of men, probed her about her relationships with several women, startling her by their knowledge of, amongst other things, the details of her intense friendship with a school friend some years earlier. Bohne's experience reveals how the Stasi could adeptly blackmail lesbians about their private relationships into revealing incriminating information. Bohne herself said that she was unable to detect the meaning behind their questions and exclaimed:

It's none of your business how I live privately. What on earth do you want from me and what has all of this to do with political imprisonment and with these other things that you are throwing at me?⁶

Bohne was imprisoned for three and a half years after this interview; her crime unclear. But it was in prison, where there was a lesbian prison warden and where she experienced several close relationships with other female inmates, that she became convinced of her homosexuality.

Of course, in addition to the uncertainty about whether it was Bohne's sexuality that led to her imprisonment, it is also far from certain how typical a case like hers was at this time. What *is* evident however, is that during the Ulbricht years, lesbians were forced to lead quite a secretive existence, partly because homosexuality was not talked about in schools, on television or in magazines or newspapers. Women who questioned their own sexuality in the GDR at this time therefore had no

Lebensgeschichten lesbischer Frauen in der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik (Berlin: Hoho Verlag, 1996), testimony of Gunna Bohne, born 1941, p. 72

⁶ Ibid

reference points and often could not put a name to their sexual feelings or experiences. In addition, during the 1950s and 1960s it was extremely difficult for lesbians to meet new partners as no meeting places existed and there were no advertisements in the media. One lesbian, Gabriele S. who took the decision in the 1960s to suppress her sexuality in favour of marriage and having a family, pointed out that even having a different appearance was challenging at this time. She noted that it was difficult for a girl to dress differently, for example, in boy's clothes when she was growing up. She said:

At the end of the '50s, beginning of the '60s, when I was a young person, it was not like today, when in general you can't tell if it's a boy or a girl. At the time it was still strictly divided, and often people said about me: "Is that a boy or a girl?" I suffered very much because of that."⁷

Gabriele S. reveals how she struggled with society's reaction to her, indicating that although she dressed in a certain way to show that she was different, at the same time she also wanted to be accepted by people, saying, "On the one hand I wanted it, on the other hand I wasn't able to bear the reaction at all."⁸

Establishing a communication network between lesbians in the Honecker era

Fulbrook indicates that there was a shift in attitude towards homosexuality in the GDR so that by the 1970s and '80s gay men and lesbian women were no longer

⁷ *Ibid.*, testimony of Gabriele S, born 1943, p. 107

⁸ *Ibid*

perceived as ‘abnormal’ or ‘ill’.⁹ A change in opinion was indeed reflected in the GDR Criminal Code with the abolition of Section 175 in 1968 and the replacement of Section 175a, with Section 151. It is significant that Section 151 outlawed sexual activity for the first time between an adult and a minor (aged below 18 years) ‘of the same sex’ rather than just between men, meaning that homosexual activity now *legally* included sexual relations between women. It is also notable that homosexuality was decriminalised in the GDR a whole year before it was decriminalised (through the modification of Paragraph 175) in the FRG. This fact, along with the relaxed laws surrounding abortion in the GDR, which was decriminalised in 1972, four years before the much stricter law permitting abortion in the FRG, could be interpreted as reflecting a much stronger trend towards sexual liberalisation in East rather than West Germany.

Of course shifts in perceptions and understanding of homosexuality in the GDR did not take place over night but rather occurred extremely gradually, and perhaps, as this chapter will demonstrate, the changes were due, to some extent, to the actions of many East German homosexuals themselves. According to Ursula Sillge, who became a prominent member of a homosexual group in the 1980s, East Germans still had embarrassed and old-fashioned opinions about homosexuality when Honecker took over leadership of the GDR, “In the ‘70s it was difficult. The people at that time were still inhibited and restrained in such a way, that they had difficulties forming the word “homosexual” in their mouth[s] let alone speaking of ‘lesbians and gays’”.¹⁰

⁹ Mary Fulbrook, *The People's State*, p. 164

¹⁰ Christina Karstädt & Anette von Zitzewitz (Hrsg.), ... *viel zuviel verschwiegen*, testimony of Ursula Sillge, born 1946, p. 138

Sex education books at school in the Honecker era still only informed about heterosexual relationships and marriage, although interestingly this was also the case in the FRG.¹¹ What was GDR specific however, was the emphasis in the media, the work place and educational institutions on the importance of heterosexual relationships and the procreation of children for the good of the socialist state, almost as though striving to create a traditional heterosexual family was a necessary and fundamental part of developing into a true socialist personality. A 27-year old skilled worker summed this up when she described how she tried to come to terms with her sexuality in the late 1970s, “I re-read my sex education book, but there it only states things about marriage. In the GDR we’re really pleased if a man and woman live together and in addition if they produce children for the state. These marriages are security for the state, through which it has small cells everywhere.”¹² With this prominence on heterosexual behaviour and the special place of the nuclear family in East German society, it is not difficult to understand how isolated many lesbians felt in the GDR.

In addition, in the 1970s, as in earlier decades, lesbians still found it very difficult to meet other lesbians, until a breakthrough in communication was established through the newspaper, the *Wochenpost*. The newspaper had a section of short adverts (*Annoncen*) where people advertised that they wanted pen friends. Lesbians began using these adverts as a means of meeting other lesbians for friendships and relationships. However, writing these adverts was not straightforward, since the women had to keep within certain linguistic boundaries, unable to use the words ‘lesbian’, ‘gay’ or ‘homosexual’. The expected etiquette was to state the wish to

¹¹ Ilse Kokula, “*Wir leiden nicht mehr, sondern sind gelitten*”: *Lesbisch leben in Deutschland* (Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1987), p. 157

¹² Gerda A. in *ibid.*

exchange letters with a (female) friend and to provide details of one or two hobbies. In this way Ursula Sillge, who herself used *Wochenpost* to contact other lesbians, says that the adverts were “quite strongly controlled”.¹³ Three examples follow, which reveal the different ways in which women managed to bend the rules:

- a) Searching for an understanding (female) friend, who will give me back my faith in life. Am 43/1.43 metres, female. Shift-worker. Only serious letters. Photo desired, although not a condition. Frankfurter Allee, Berlin.
- b) Young woman, 27 years, searches for “You” up to 50 years, for togetherness, interested in nature, FKK [*Freikörperkultur*, naturism] and everything beautiful. Letter with picture desired, although not a condition. Papsidorfer Straße, Dresden.
- c) Young woman, 33 years, 1.57 metres, searches for nice (female) friend, purpose – leisure activities. Berlin.¹⁴

It was through the adverts in the *Wochenpost* that Sillge managed to create a large ‘get-together’ for lesbians in April 1978. She had been introduced to a group of homosexual men who named themselves HIB (*Homosexuelle Interessengemeinschaft Berlin* – Homosexual Community of Interests, Berlin) and were based in Mahlsdorf, a suburb of East Berlin, and she decided that something needed to be done for lesbians as well. She wrote to the three or four women she had contacted through the *Wochenpost* in East Berlin, each of whom also knew one

¹³ Interview with Ursula Sillge by Kate Boyce, 31.03.05

¹⁴ As cited in Christina Karstädt & Anette von Zitzewitz (Hrsg.), ... *viel zuviel verschwiegen*, no date, p. 45

or two women. Through this “snow-ball system” 40 women were invited and on the day, 100 women actually turned up to attend the informal gathering in the cellar of Berlin-Mahlsdorf’s Gründermuseum.¹⁵ In one of the first examples of the way in which lesbians began to push back the boundaries of what was acceptable in the GDR, Ursula Sillge actually wrote to the police headquarters for permission for the event, saying, “It’s about the personal happiness of women in life, who want to have a girlfriend and not a husband. We don’t want to get drunk, to celebrate an orgy and we offer no political resistance but we want to talk through our problems and be social.”¹⁶ Remarkably they were granted permission but on the day two policemen would not let them into the cellar rooms. Instead, around 40 of the women managed to congregate in Ursula Sillge’s flat.

In 1971 an independent feature film by Holger Mischwitzky, better known by the pseudonym Rosa von Praunheim, helped encourage the gay rights movement in West Germany. With the title, ‘It’s Not the Homosexual Who Is Perverse, but Rather the Situation in Which He Lives’ (*Nicht der Homosexuelle ist pervers, sondern die Situation in der er lebt*), it was a response to the decriminalisation of homosexuality in the FRG in 1969. Following its release and, in 1973, its broadcast on West German television, gay rights groups were formed all over the Federal Republic of Germany and there were countless public debates about homosexual behaviour and conduct.¹⁷ Through access to West German television, and illegal smuggling of material, many homosexuals in the GDR also managed to see the film during the 1970s. East German homosexuals recognised its significance as a tool

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, testimony of Ursula Sillge, p. 136

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 136-137. The *Verordnung über die Durchführung von Veranstaltungsverordnung* required that permission was sought from the *Volkspolizei* to hold events.

¹⁷ Dagmar Herzog, *Sex After Fascism*, p. 223

towards fighting homophobia and bringing homosexuals out of the back streets and into mainstream West German society, and wanted to see similar steps occur towards bringing about the acceptance of homosexuality in the GDR. Yet in East Germany a significant homosexual sub-culture had not been able to develop yet, so there was a long way to go before East German lesbians and gay men could make the same demands.

One East German lesbian, Anna, described the implications of the film for her and her partner, “What was important for me was: We saw the film by Praunheim in 1973. Afterwards we also tried to find other homosexual people. Until then we only had contact with heterosexuals.”¹⁸ She said that they had differing objectives for making friends with homosexual couples. “If it was two men, then we could act as though we were two homosexual pairs. We looked for women because we wanted to exchange [information].”¹⁹ They placed an advert in the *Wochenpost*, and became friends with a male couple. It is interesting that despite the film’s emphasis on bringing homosexuality into the open, Anna and her partner used their gay friends to do things like going away on holiday together, “always playing ‘heterosexual couples’”, which while helping them take part more easily in leisure activities, Anna admits “was then very complicated”.²⁰ It is also an indication that at this time East German tolerance of homosexuality still had strict limits.

¹⁸ Christina Karstädt & Anette von Zitzewitz (Hrsg.), ... *viel zuviel verschwiegen*, testimony of Anna, born 1943, p. 94

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Ibid

The emergence of homosexual and lesbian organisations

As more lesbians got in touch with one another in East Germany in the late 1970s, many of them wanted more formal spaces to meet. Gay men and lesbians began to seek out certain cafés where their presence was accepted to use as regular homosexual ‘haunts’. In East Berlin, for example, ‘Café Senefelder’ was popular amongst homosexuals and in Dresden there was the ‘Mocco-Stube’ café. However, even in these relatively ‘safe’ retreats the staff could sometimes make things difficult. One lesbian remembers sitting “harmlessly” in the ‘Mocco-Stube’ café looking at photographs with a female friend when she was suddenly taken by the arm by a waiter and forced to leave.²¹ Another problem was that these cafés became meeting places dominated by gay men rather than lesbians.²² In despair one lesbian composed a letter to Honecker with some friends in the late ‘70s, saying, “we don’t want to go into the pubs but we want to have a room where we can meet up and chat with each other.”²³ In the end, however, they decided not to send the letter and relied on meeting up in one another’s apartments.

When it came to the creation of formal homosexual clubs that met regularly, it was predominantly gay men who established the first groups. HIB (*Homosexuelle Interessengemeinschaft Berlin*) was founded in Berlin-Mahlsdorf in 1974 as a discussion forum in response to the von Praunheim film and the sessions were largely attended by men. In Leipzig a ‘Homosexual Self-help Group’ (*Homosexuelle Selbsthilfegruppe*) was set up in 1976 and had around 10 members

²¹ Christina Karstädt & Anette von Zitzewitz (Hrsg.), ... *viel zuviel verschwiegen*, testimony of Gunna Bohne, p. 78

²² *Ibid.*, testimony of Gabriele S, referring particularly to Café Senefelder in East Berlin, p. 110

²³ *Ibid*

who were nearly all male, although it had been founded on the initiative of a lesbian. This group was interesting because although it was largely male it obviously relied heavily on the leadership of the female initiator since it fell apart after she left in 1978.²⁴

There was a fascinating venture on the part of psychologists at the Department of Psychology in the “House of Health” (*Haus der Gesundheit*) in Berlin who invited lesbians to take part in a discussion circle in 1979. Supposed discussion topics were difficulties in career, bisexuality and ‘coming out’. However it soon transpired that the main reason for the discussion circle was less to create an opportunity for women to grapple with issues of lesbianism and feminism but rather more as a means to conduct scientific investigations of various hormone drugs. Professor Günter Dörner held a meeting with the twenty or so women who had accepted the invitation, telling them about his planned hormone therapy for the prevention of homosexuality. Amazingly, despite not answering the question about why homosexuality needed to be prevented, the majority of the lesbians agreed to give a blood donation for the hormone tests. Ursula Sillge, however refused saying, “I don’t feel myself to be a patient, I am therefore not willing.”²⁵

Once the women realised the extent of the clinical examination and scientific research and understood that the discussion circle would only be granted a “blessing ‘from above’” if they complied with the conditions laid down by the psychologists, they recoiled, not wanting to become mere objects of investigation, and the group

²⁴ Samirah Kenawi, *Frauengruppen in der DDR der 80er Jahre – Eine Dokumentation* (Berlin: Herausgegeben von Grauzone, Dokumentationsstelle zur nichtstaatlichen Frauenbewegung in der DDR, 1995) p. 223

²⁵ Christina Karstädt & Anette von Zitzewitz (Hrsg.), ... *viel zuviel verschwiegen*, testimony of Ursula Sillge, p. 138

dissolved.²⁶ The whole thesis behind the scientific investigation was reminiscent of much earlier decades when homosexuality was labelled an illness by scientists and doctors. It is quite incredible that it took place as late as 1979. However, the scheme does indicate a willingness by certain elements of the state to work with homosexuals, albeit with certain boundaries in place, that could perhaps be exploited in the future.

Lesbians ‘under the roof’ of the Protestant Churches

It was not until 1982 that a group of lesbians found a more viable way of creating an organisation that represented their own interests by looking outside the GDR’s formal political structure and seeking the protection of the Protestant Churches.²⁷ On 9 February 1982 a conference was held in Berlin entitled ‘Theological Aspects of Homosexuality’ led by the ‘Homosexuality Working Group’ (*Arbeitskreis Homosexualität*), which had been set up by members of the Student Religious Society (*Evangelischen Studentengemeinde*, ESG) in Leipzig. This event marked the beginning of the inner-church dialogue about homosexuality.²⁸ It also resulted in the creation of the ‘Homosexual Self-Help Working Group’ (*Arbeitskreis Homosexuelle Selbsthilfe in der Kirche*) in Berlin, which split into two separate groups after its second meeting – ‘Lesbians in the Church’ (*Lesben in der Kirche*) and ‘Gays in the Church’ (*Schwule in der Kirche*).

²⁶ Ursula Sillge, *Un-Sichtbare Frauen – Lesben und ihre Emanzipation in der DDR* (Berlin: Links Druck Verlag, 1991), p. 92

²⁷ Mary Fulbrook, *The People’s State*, p. 165

²⁸ Samirah Kenawi, *Frauengruppen in der DDR der 80er Jahre*, p. 83

Although lesbians had participated in the homosexual groups that had sprung up towards the end of the '70s and the beginning of the '80s, until the emergence of the 'Lesbians in the Church', the homosexual movement in the GDR had more or less been led by, and concentrated on, the issues of gay men.²⁹ The short time in which gay men and lesbians worked together in the 'Berlin Homosexual Self-Help Working Group' reveals that although lesbians and gays wanted to take the first step towards their emancipation together, that in the end the men and women involved decided they had different concerns and priorities to each other.

Until 1986 the group 'Lesbians in the Church' was the only independent lesbian organisation. Other homosexual groups also emerged in 1983, for example, the 'Church Working Group on Homosexuality, Dresden' (*Kirchlicher Arbeitskreis Homosexualität, Dresden*) and the 'Homosexual Working Group at the Evangelical City Mission, Halle' (*Arbeitskreis Homosexualität bei der Evangelischen Stadtmission Halle*). But these groups were mixed, with both lesbians and gays involved. What they all shared in common however, was that they chose to organise themselves under the protective roof of the Protestant Church.

The Church-state agreement of 6 March 1978, engineered to cement a more harmonious relationship between the SED and the church, brought new concessions to the Protestant community that opened the door to freer space for discussion and organisation within the church.³⁰ Without the agreement it is unlikely that conferences like that of February 1982 on the theological aspects of homosexuality

²⁹ RHG/GZ/WA23 Heike Noack, 'Emanzipation der Frauen in der DDR unter besonderer Berücksichtigung von Frauen mit gleichgeschlechtlicher Lebensweise', Diplomarbeit, Martin-Luther-Universität Halle- Wittenberg, 1996, p. 80

³⁰ Mike Dennis, *The Stasi: Myth and Reality*, p. 144; Mary Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship*, p. 206

could have taken place. Such debates, however, as was also reflected with the peace movement, meant that East Germans, who may not previously have been regular church worshippers, attached themselves to the Protestant Church in order to take advantage of the greater freedom of movement and expression that came hand in hand with the reduction of restrictions. There were also more practical advantages, such as church groups being able to make use of typewriters and church printing equipment, as well as photocopiers, thus making it easier to publicise their activities to more people. Ursula Sillge, who later founded the mixed homosexual group in Berlin, *Sonntags-Club*, which lay outside the jurisdiction of the church, but who nevertheless had contact with homosexual church groups, recognised the benefits that their members had³¹:

It was of course easier for the people who used these rooms in the church with regard to the organised work. They could also photocopy. On the top [of the photocopies] was written 'Only for internal church use' but that wasn't taken very seriously... And they could use the rooms and the church was, so to speak, a little like a protective roof.³²

But the decision to organise themselves under the umbrella of the Protestant Church was not straightforward. Once the 'Lesbians in the Church' had split from the male members of the 'Homosexuality Working Group' they attempted a few meetings in one another's apartments but as one member, Ramona Dreßler describes, "It was very difficult because of the law on events that forbade private meetings with a

³¹ For example she was in frequent correspondence with Eduard Stapel, one of the initiators of the *Arbeitskreis Homosexualität der Evangelischen Studentengemeinde, Leipzig*.

³² Interview with Ursula Sillge by Kate Boyce, 31.03.05

political theme.”³³ The group tried to make their meetings acceptable under the terms of the law but as Dreßler explained further, “Because it was very stressful to always meet with a bible or for someone’s birthday in order to be relatively safe from the police and the Stasi, we came on the idea to find a room in the church, which would protect us.”³⁴

Having originally met in rooms at the Philippus Chapel in Hohenschönhausen they ran into difficulties a year and a half later when they tried to look for somewhere else in a more central position and were turned down by some churches. Even after being accepted by the Gethsemane Church in Prenzlauer Berg the minister had to negotiate on their behalf with the parish church council and the ‘Lesbians in the Church’ were given a probationary period of six months and had to accept the presence of a female pastor in their meetings.³⁵ They were also instructed to begin at least every second meeting with a prayer.

Despite these initial hindrances Ramona Dreßler says that the situation became more relaxed, “Later we were in charge ourselves. Neither the pastor came, nor any minister. We could actually do what we wanted.”³⁶ In fact she also fully praises the role of the church at the time, saying, “It was a platform for any opposition.”³⁷

³³ Ramona Dreßler in Christina Karstädt & Anette von Zitzewitz (Hrsg.), ... *viel zuviel verschwiegen*, p. 156. This law was the *Verordnung über die Durchführung von Veranstaltungsverordnung* of 30/06/80 which forbade events or meetings with more than three people without gaining prior permission from the *Volkspolizei*.

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ Ramona Dreßler, Bettina Dziggel & Marinka Körzendörfer in Christina Karstädt & Anette von Zitzewitz (Hrsg.), ... *viel zuviel verschwiegen*, p. 159. See Mike Dennis, *The Stasi: Myth and Reality*, pp. 144-5 for discussion about the difficult balancing act when trying to welcome autonomous groups into the church without putting its relationship with the state and the SED at risk.

³⁶ Ramona Dreßler in Christina Karstädt & Anette von Zitzewitz (Hrsg.), ... *viel zuviel verschwiegen*, p. 159

³⁷ Ibid., p. 164

Another member of 'Lesbians in the Church' also points out the significance of the church in 1980s East Germany:

The church was the melting pot of the people, in which criticism was practiced in relation to structures within GDR society. The Protestant Church, particularly in Berlin-Brandenburg, 'meddled' with society. It was not only occupied with the Christian work prescribed to it by the state.³⁸

One of the most controversial actions of the 'Lesbians in the Church' was their attempt to honour the lesbians who had died at the hands of the Nazis by visiting the Ravensbrück memorial. A report by one of the women describes what took place:

Eleven women, of which the majority were lesbian, wanted to honour the murdered women and their lesbian sisters on 20 April 1985 in the concentration camp Ravensbrück. It didn't take place, the police prevented it.[...] The state organs – after a petition from the women – excused the police for this action.³⁹

It is difficult to understand the reasons why the lesbian group were prevented in this way from paying their respects to those lesbians who died during the Third Reich. Perhaps it was simply a reflection of the fact that the SED had its own agenda when honouring the 'victims of fascism'. Or perhaps the police intervened because the 'Lesbians in the Church' had chosen to undertake a very public display, away from

³⁸ Marinka Körzendörfer in *ibid*

³⁹ RHG/GZ/A1, 2584, Dörthe Beyer, 'Verhalten gegenüber Minderheiten', no date

the protection of the church. GDR state repression in this area is highlighted when reflecting on FRG policy at this time, where tributes to those who suffered and were killed at the hands of the Nazis were frequent and open. But the experiences of the 'Lesbians in the Church' at Ravensbrück caused the women to analyse the significance of the affair, and ask themselves whether 'to be a lesbian – is that a political issue?'⁴⁰

Although the 'Lesbians in the Church' was the original, and for a time, the only independent lesbian group in the GDR, at the end of the 1980s four more lesbian groups were also founded outside Berlin 'under the roof of the church'. The first was simply called 'Lesbian Group, Jena' (*Lesbengruppe Jena*) which emerged out of the 'Homosexual Love Working Group' (*Arbeitskreis Homosexuelle Liebe*) in Jena in 1986, when the leader Bärbel Klässner organised mid-week meetings for the lesbian members at her apartment. In 1987, after tensions with the members of 'Homosexual Love Working Group' and various complaints by Klässner's neighbour about the meetings, the 'Lesbian Group, Jena' broke away from the male contingent and enlisted the support of the Evangelical Student Religious Society in whose rooms they subsequently met.

The 'Lesbian Group, Halle' formed in 1988 following a church conference in Halle entitled, 'Had you thought that we were so many? – Lesbian women in the church'.⁴¹ The lesbian organisers were offered rooms in the church and organised themselves into a discussion circle and a 'coming-out group'. Around thirty women belonged to the group and they regularly broached theological subjects and

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* For further analysis, see section below, 'Developing lesbian identities in the GDR'

⁴¹ Samirah Kenawi, *Frauengruppen in der DDR der 80er Jahre*, p. 173

undertook bible study. The 'Lesbian Group, Halle' engaged in some joint work with the 'Homosexual Working Group At the Evangelical City Mission, Halle' and later had contact with the '*Lila Pause*' lesbian group in Leipzig. '*Lila Pause*' emerged in 1989 out of the Leipzig 'Homosexual Working Group', in close co-operation with the Evangelical Student Religious Society with whom it organised several different events and produced an information booklet called the 'Lesbian Post' (*Lesbenpost*).⁴² Indeed many of the new lesbian groups, shared a common beginning, having nearly all broken away from mixed sex homosexual groups to form their own organisation. This had also occurred in Erfurt in 1987 when the 'Lesbian and Gay Working Group' (*Erfurter Lesben und Schwulen Arbeitskreis* – ELSA) that sometimes met in church rooms split into two, creating the lesbian group '*die Elsen*'.⁴³

Christina Schenk, a founding member of 'Lesbians in the Church' in East Berlin explained why tensions were able to develop between gay men and lesbians, 'Lesbians and gays live in the first instance as women and men, and are thus socially unequal in society.'⁴⁴ For the men and women in these church groups, 'homosexuality is only the smallest common denominator.'⁴⁵ The women in 'Lesbians in the Church' working separately from men, were now able to focus on women's issues, as one member Ramona explained, "Everything that affected women – we discussed. Whether it was very early history or Ernest Bornemann's

⁴² Ibid., p. 224

⁴³ Ibid, p. 135

⁴⁴ RHG/GZ/ A1, 2576, Christina Schenk, 'Bedingungen und Perspektiven lesbischer Existenz in der DDR', p. 30

⁴⁵ Ibid

“Das Patriarchat” (The patriarchy), whether it was women in religion or matriarchal religion or feminist theology.”⁴⁶

The Secular Homosexual Groups

Not all homosexual groups to emerge in 1980s East Germany became single sex organisations. One group that was founded in East Berlin in the late 1980s, for example, the ‘*Sonntags-Club*’ (Sunday Club), successfully existed as an organisation for both lesbians and gays, and significantly, it organised itself *outside* the authority of the church. The *Sonntags-Club* developed out of HIB (Homosexual Community of Interests, East Berlin), one of the earliest homosexual discussion groups in the GDR, which had originally been predominantly male but had since accepted lesbian members. Some acquaintances from HIB formed an unofficial friendship circle, which eventually led to the establishment of *Sonntags-Club* in February 1986, after years of discussions with different political and cultural institutions.⁴⁷ It was the first secular homosexual group to be recognised by the state. Yet to achieve and retain this recognition, its leaders had to agree to compromises in order to maintain the balance between their own needs and wishes, and those of the authorities. This could perhaps be interpreted as a heavy burden for such a small organisation to bear, in contrast to the homosexual groups ‘under the roof of the church’, who had the weight of parish councils and clergy men and women behind them. On the other hand, however, the very existence of the

⁴⁶ Ramona Dreßler in Christina Karstädt & Anette von Zitzewitz (Hrsg.), ... *viel zuviel verschwiegen*, p. 161. Notably, this account also reveals the very Christian nature of the women’s debate.

⁴⁷ Samirah Kenawi, *Frauengruppen in der DDR der 80er Jahre*, p. 94 Most crucially those they consulted included a group of academics at Humboldt University but also for example, Ursula Sillge also spoke to a justice minister whose son she knew to be gay. In our interview Ursula Sillge told me, “*Ich hatte den Sonntags-Club im Auftrag der Partei gegründet*”.

Sonntags-Club could be seen as a huge success for homosexuals and a big step towards their integration and acceptance in East German society.

To gain permission to meet formerly in the first place the initiators of the *Sonntags-Club*, which as yet had no official name, agreed on paper that it would run in conjunction with the marriage and sexual counselling services so that homosexual members could receive psychological and sexual counselling, where appropriate.⁴⁸ The *Sonntags-Club* first met in a youth club with a small theatre, having been turned down by other clubs that were too fearful to accommodate a homosexual group, in case they overstepped the mark and this brought repercussions for the club premises itself. For the first year, everything was organised by word of mouth and dates of events were passed on informally person-to-person. Without printing leaflets, or producing paperwork, or even at this stage naming the group, it was more likely to stay on the correct side of the law and be permitted to continue meeting.

Despite these compromises Ursula Sillge, a founder member of *Sonntags-Club*, believed that homosexual groups under the roof of the church, “also had their problems with the church.”⁴⁹ The idea behind secular homosexual organisations like *Sonntags-Club* was that the concessions that had to be made might as well be made with the state authorities. Thus *Sonntags-Club* was the result of a small section of the homosexual community trying to force the development of a nationally accepted homosexual organisation (*Bürgerinitiative auf staatlicher Basis*

⁴⁸ Christina Karstädt & Anette von Zitzewitz (Hrsg.), ... *viel zuviel verschwiegen*, testimony of Ursula Sillge p. 141. This agreement was made with what Sillge describes as an academic group (*Wissenschaftlergruppe*).

⁴⁹ Interview with Ursula Sillge by Kate Boyce, 31.03.05

– a citizens’ movement on a national basis). Its aim was also to reach gays and lesbians who were not interested in joining Christian groups.

It was not until 1987, after the number of those attending events had expanded to reach 50 to 100 people on certain occasions, that the group was named *Sonntags-Club* on account of its regular Sunday meetings.⁵⁰ By this time the group had been forced to improvise with excursions following the closure of the youth club where it met for several months.⁵¹ A club council was developed, a key principle of which was “gender parity between women and men, on a 50-50 basis”, so that the numbers of gay men and lesbians in decision-making positions was always equal.⁵² In contrast, founder member Ursula Sillge, points out that the mixed male and female church organisations “were mostly dominated by men”.⁵³

The *Sonntags-Club* developed many subordinate branches within the group as a whole. These included discussion circles on bisexuality and for parents with gay children as well as literature, film, photography, walking and driving groups. The driving group consisted only of female members, who drove out to various destinations in their *Trabants* for weekend excursions. At special events organised by *Sonntags-Club* there would be such sizeable turnouts that it was difficult for members to discuss personal issues with one another, but the smaller hobby clubs provided this opportunity and allowed people to talk in twos and threes.⁵⁴ In an example of how possible conflict with the SED was averted, the club council was

⁵⁰ Christina Karstädt & Anette von Zitzewitz (Hrsg.), ... *viel zuviel verschwiegen*, testimony of Ursula Sillge p. 142

⁵¹ Interview with Ursula Sillge by Kate Boyce, 31.03.05. For example, boat trips, walking trips, museum visits and meals at restaurants.

⁵² *Ibid.* There were 10 lesbians and 10 gay men on the club council.

⁵³ *Ibid*

⁵⁴ *Ibid*

forced to explain to suspicious Party members that these interest groups were not political but represented practical spheres of interest.⁵⁵ One difficulty faced by the *Sonntags-Club* was trying to produce a club programme of all these fixtures and meetings when legal restrictions existed on printing. This obstacle was overcome by several people copying programmes out numerous times by hand and later through using xerographic copying or photocopying machines in the workplace secretly or after handing over bribes to other colleagues.

Perhaps the most significant sub-group within *Sonntags-Club* was the 'Post Group', which answered letters from all over the GDR. One woman, Henrike, a member of the 'Post Group', remembers that they received many letters from lesbians who were extremely lonely and that they attempted to reply to every one, offering practical advice.⁵⁶ An extract from a letter written by Henrike to a young woman who lived in a small village in Thüringen runs as follows:

Dear Ines!

I belong to *Sonntags-Club* and have undertaken to reply to your letter. We thank you for showing your trust. We can well imagine your situation; it is not easy. But now everything isn't as bad as at the time when I was young (I am 46 years old). There is some explanation about homosexuality in magazines and other media now. In addition secular organisations and homosexual groups have also developed in the GDR. Many groups have developed within the Protestant Church, others, so to speak, [have

⁵⁵ Christina Karstädt & Anette von Zitzewitz (Hrsg.), ... *viel zuviel verschwiegen*, p. 147 & Ursula Sillge, *Un-Sichtbare Frauen*, p. 102 - They had to name the sub-groups *Interessengebieten* (areas/spheres of interest) instead of *Interessengruppen* (interest groups).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, testimony of Henrike, born 1942, p. 130

developed] as citizen's initiatives on a national basis... If you attend events in such groups you will soon not feel so alone with your problems and maybe also find a partner.⁵⁷

However, as with many of the church groups, not everything was harmonious in the *Sonntags-Club*. Small factions began to emerge, some perhaps because of the very fact that the *Sonntags-Club* was a state-approved homosexual organisation. One member of the club, a former FDJ leader, wanted to enforce a similar structure on the group as he had known when in charge of the local section of the national youth organisation. Another who was working as an IM for the Stasi created a secret SED group of gay men within the *Sonntags-Club*.⁵⁸ As with other small organisations the *Sonntags-Club* experienced infiltration by Stasi informers. Leader Ursula Sillge, claims that there were twelve IMs reporting on her and that they spread rumours about her to other homosexual groups.⁵⁹ She says, "That was always the reason why many lesbians in the church groups or gays were mistrustful of me because they thought I worked together with the Stasi. That's naturally rubbish! [...] And because of this I was so happy that the [Stasi] files could be opened again."⁶⁰ Although Sillge herself never worked for the Stasi and was never a member of the SED, some of those on the club's council were Party members or were secretly Stasi informants.

A new homosexual youth group called 'Courage' that was founded in February 1988 in Berlin was the result of five gay men breaking away from the *Sonntags-*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, letter from Henrike in the name of the 'Post Group' of the *Sonntags-Club*, dated 28.05.88, p. 131

⁵⁸ Ursula Sillge, *Un-Sichtbare Frauen – Lesben und ihre Emanzipation in der DDR*, p. 101

⁵⁹ Interview with Ursula Sillge by Kate Boyce, 31.03.05

⁶⁰ *Ibid*

Club after a series of arguments. Dozens of other secular groups emerged in towns across the GDR in 1988 and 1989, for example in Gera, where the group, similar to the *Sonntags-Club*, operated in conjunction with the marriage and sexual counselling service and in Potsdam, where meetings began in cultural centres. In Weimar a secular group was established that named itself ‘Felix Halle’ after the KPD lawyer who had demanded the deletion of paragraph 175 in the 1920s.

Before the *Sonntags-Club* was founded SED officials apparently put pressure on the founders to join the church homosexual groups.⁶¹ This lends weight to the idea that the Party believed it could better control groups organised within the church. The *Sonntags-Club*’s beginnings were uncertain, with the founders not knowing whether or not they had official backing. *Sonntags-Club* members were forced to act as loyal citizens while some simultaneously held opinions that deviated from the official line, and sometimes they acted unlawfully, for example when they printed advice about HIV and aids on the back on their leaflets without obtaining the appropriate permission. Sillge claims, “I always had to think – how far can I go?”⁶² This is not only an indication of the state’s influence over the group but also displays the limits of political activism in the GDR by women, particularly mothers, since Sillge had a young daughter at the time and feared imprisonment. However the concessions of *Sonntags-Club* members paid off, since the state showed itself prepared to make concessions too and finally granted the group a permanent premises in 1989. In addition, the fact that so many more homosexual clubs were established in the last years of the GDR, outside the remit of the church, and within established state

⁶¹ Ursula Sillge, *Un-Sichtbare Frauen – Lesben und ihre Emanzipation in der DDR*, p. 102

⁶² Interview with Ursula Sillge by Kate Boyce, 31.03.05

institutions, reveals how far the authorities now recognised the existence and significance of lesbians and gay men in East German society.

Developing lesbian identities in the GDR

While all of these organisations were emerging during the 1980s, discrimination still existed against lesbians in the GDR. Ursula Sillge, who worked as a legal clerk at the urban district court describes experiencing prejudice at this time when she disclosed her identity as a lesbian and then was turned down for a job elsewhere after her cadre file (*Kadreakte*) was handed over, which included details about her homosexuality.⁶³ Many lesbians also encountered difficulty when trying to live together. Anna remembers having to overcome many obstacles before her partner was officially allowed to move into her flat in 1985. It took half a year altogether, after writing letters to the AWG, the Berlin municipal authorities and the KWV, before they were finally given permission to live together.⁶⁴ Until December 1988 section 175 of the criminal code, which outlawed sexual relations between an adult and a minor, which was specified as being below 18 years of age, of the same sex, meant that homosexuals were unequal in the eyes of the law to heterosexuals since the age of consent for heterosexual sex was 16.⁶⁵

However an information leaflet produced by the 'Lesbians in the Church', written post-1985, stated that the situation with regard to homosexuality had changed recently, so that homosexuality was 'no longer described as a psychological illness,

⁶³ Interview with Ursula Sillge by Kate Boyce, 31.03.05

⁶⁴ Christina Karstädt & Anette von Zitzewitz (Hrsg.), ... *viel zuviel verschwiegen*, testimony of Anna, p. 96

⁶⁵ Notably the age of consent for homosexual sex in the UK was still 21 at this time.

a perversion with a diagnosis number, but a possible form of sexuality.’⁶⁶ Indeed, there almost seems to have been an attempt to inform the general public about homosexuality in late 1980s with the government encouraging GDR authors and artists to explore the subject in fiction, poetry and film.⁶⁷ Now magazines, like the women’s weekly *Für Dich* and the youth magazine *Jungen Welt*, as well as the youth radio station DT64 began to feature short pieces of advice about what to do if a family member or friend was gay. Yet notably representations of homosexuals in any form of media were still rare and when they did exist they usually depicted gay men rather than lesbians. The leaflet by ‘Lesbians in the Church’ emphasised that although homosexuality was accepted or at least tolerated in men, lesbians were still not accepted by society, which cruelly gave them names like “man-woman”.⁶⁸

An analysis of the motives behind the foundation of the lesbian and homosexual groups, as well as an examination of the clubs’ programmes, helps reveal the problems that lesbians encountered in East German society and how they hoped that the new organisations would overcome them. According to the information leaflet by the ‘Lesbians in the Church’ their group was created in order that those involved could, ‘learn how to better handle their problems, to actively proceed against dominant prejudices and to create possibilities’.⁶⁹

One of the biggest problems to face women after they realised that they were homosexual was ‘coming out’ about their sexuality to friends and family. Many

⁶⁶ ‘Informationspapier vom Arbeitskreis Homosexuelle Selbsthilfe – Lesben in der Kirche’, in Samirah Kenawi, *Frauengruppen in der DDR der 80er Jahre*, p. 87. Undated but post 1985.

⁶⁷ Günter Grau (hrsg.), *Lesben und Schwule was nun?*, p. 9

⁶⁸ ‘Informationspapier vom Arbeitskreis – Lesben in der Kirche’, in Samirah Kenawi, *Frauengruppen in der DDR*, p. 87

⁶⁹ Ibid

lesbians suffered from isolation, loneliness, depression and alcohol addiction during this phase in their lives. Ramona, who became a member of the working group 'Lesbians in the Church', explained, "Because I was alone with it for many years I needed this working group really badly to stop me being dragged under."⁷⁰ Thus one of the primary aims of the group was to help lesbians overcome the obstacles of 'coming out' through mutual support. To this end, their information leaflet, which featured a five-step breakdown of the 'coming-out-phase' was a useful reference point for lesbians and their families.

An excerpt from a 1987 Berlin *Sonntags-Club* programme (interesting also for its socialist perspective) reveals how the provision of support and guidance for young people with 'coming out' issues was also a chief goal of this club:

We know how difficult it often is to come to terms with oneself and the environment, if a man/woman notices: I am homosexual! We want to give homosexuals and bisexual women and men the possibility:

- to come out from their isolation now and then,
- of not having to hide themselves
- to receive more self-confidence
- and possibly to find a partner for a shared life together.
- Certainly you'll find friends and discussion partners.

⁷⁰ Ramona Dreßler in Christina Karstädt & Anette von Zitzewitz (Hrsg.), ... *viel zuviel verschwiegen*, p. 155

Only homosexual citizens, who are able to deal supremely well with their homosexuality can have a real sense of well being in society and develop socialist personalities.⁷¹

Another major aim of the lesbian and homosexual groups was to try to break down taboos with regard to homosexuality in the GDR. They did this by providing factual information in their leaflets, such as the percentage of people in the GDR who were homosexual; 4 % according to the *Sonntags-Club* and 5 % according to 'Lesbians in the Church'.⁷² Bärbel Klässner, leader of the 'Lesbian Group, Jena' described how, "We have included life history reports by women [in our information sheets] for the public. We simply wanted to point out how lesbians live in the GDR, in order to lessen communication barriers, mainly between heterosexual women."⁷³ Now that the establishment of homosexual groups had created a significant and accepted sub-culture for lesbians and gays in the GDR, homosexuals believed it was imperative for them to be accepted into mainstream society. A section from an information leaflet for the Berlin group 'Courage' read:

We want to achieve the situation where it is generally accepted that the most important factor is the human being, and the sexuality, whatever it may be, can be experienced in a way in accordance with human dignity. Only then is it possible for the personality of an individual to develop, and to make his/her full contribution to society. We do not see the need for a sub-culture.

⁷¹ RHG/ ESt 05 Eduard Stapl, 'Sonntags-Club – Was ist das? Was soll das?', 1987

⁷² According to 'Verhalten gegenüber Minderheiten' produced by Dörthe Beyer for the 'Lesbians in the Church', no date, RHG/GZ/A1 2584, and a letter from Henrike in the name of the 'Post Group' of the *Sonntags-Club* to Ines, dated 28.05.88, in Christina Karstädt & Anette von Zitzewitz (Hrsg.), ... viel zuviel verschwiegen , p. 131. It is unclear how they arrived at these percentages. Today they might be seen as an under-estimation.

⁷³ Bärbel Klässner in Günter Grau (hrsg.), *Lesben und Schwule was nun?*, p. 122

We want full integration, and are sure that it is possible. Who doesn't wish other people to be happy as well?⁷⁴

There were cases of lesbians being imprisoned during the 1970s and 1980s in the GDR for having sexual relations with a minor. Some of these imprisonments occurred as a result of evidence from the parents of the underage woman, that 'proved' for example, that the girl had been lured by the older woman into her apartment through an advert in the *Wochenpost*. The 'Lesbians in the Church' had experienced the strength of this law, after the older girlfriend of a 17-year old member of the group was admitted to a psychiatric hospital.⁷⁵ The 'Lesbians in the Church' believed that the law was unjust and wrote a petition about their beliefs to the public prosecutor. The group's information sheet described the futility and indeed the pain that was in their view caused by parents who tried to destroy their daughter's first relationship instead of offering 'tolerance and understanding' during the 'radical change' (*Umbruch*) period of 'coming out'.⁷⁶

One of the main discussion topics during meetings at these homosexual groups involved attempts to clarify self-identity. A report about a lesbian workshop that took place in October 1988 in Dresden by the 'Lesbians in the Church', illuminates the depth of analysis achieved by the approximately twenty participants during this event in order to explain what being a lesbian meant to them in the GDR. The report explained, 'We no longer want to be integrated in the usual criterion of 'homosexual' and we say sometimes tentatively, sometimes loudly: We are not

⁷⁴ RHG/ ESt 05 Eduard Stapl, 'Arbeitsgemeinschaft "Homosexualitaet" COURAGE', no date

⁷⁵ Christina Karstädt & Anette von Zitzewitz (Hrsg.), ... *viel zuviel verschwiegen*, p. 167

⁷⁶ 'Informationspapier vom Arbeitskreis – Lesben in der Kirche', in Samirah Kenawi, *Frauengruppen in der DDR*, pp. 88-9

female gays (*Schwulen*), we are lesbians, we are women, we are sometimes mothers.’⁷⁷

This sentiment was at the very heart of the reason why so many lesbians, particularly in church groups, split from the male contingent of homosexual organisations. They realised that the problem behind the difficulties of their acceptance in society could be attributed not only to their homosexuality but also to the fact that they were women. As Christina Schenk, who was a member of the ‘Lesbians in the Church’, describes it, ‘Lesbians were exposed to a double disdain in the framework of the citizen’s depiction of women – they were not taken seriously as women and not recognised as people on account of their homo-erotic feelings’.⁷⁸

Many lesbians wanted to begin a whole debate about the societal and legal position of women in the GDR. As Bettina Dziggel from ‘Lesbians in the Church’, explained, “We brought women’s policies, that were made or prescribed in the GDR, into question, i.e. the equal rights of the woman, that existed on paper.”⁷⁹ Not all lesbians believed that this debate about patriarchy and equality could viably take place in the presence of gay men. As Christina Schenk said, “Here the elements of traditional sex roles played a part like the fact that it’s nearly always the case in the “mixed” groups that lesbian women are more or less in the clear minority. Men are usually dominant, which can particularly be seen in language behaviour. Women

⁷⁷ RHG/GZ/A1, 2584, ‘Frauenarbeit und Lesbenwerkstatt, 13-16 Oktober 1988’

⁷⁸ RHG/GZ/ A1, 2576, Christina Schenk, ‘Bedingungen und Perspektiven lesbischer Existenz in der DDR’, p. 16

⁷⁹ Bettina Dziggel in Christina Karstädt & Anette von Zitzewitz (Hrsg.), ... *viel zuviel verschwiegen*, p. 164

are quieter...”⁸⁰ She believed that if lesbians wanted to find themselves, to make themselves stronger then they had to go their own way.⁸¹

Of course not all lesbians agreed. Ursula Sillge, who describes herself as a feminist and recognised many of the issues that threatened equality in the GDR, like the fact that women were not permitted to openly discuss equality and the fact that the ‘baby year’ was called ‘mother year’ and not ‘parent year’, believed that the best place for lesbians to come to terms with their situation was in a mixed homosexual group.⁸² She said, “In *Sonntags-Club* we lay claim to the principle to work together, indeed on the basis of equality. I cannot sweepingly say that women are incapable of speaking, if they are thrust into a group. They’re all very different. It’s naturally so that we looked around and encouraged the women and helped them if they wanted to be more active.”⁸³ Andrea, a lesbian who was a member of the mixed homosexual youth group ‘Courage’ agrees with this idea, saying, “I personally am also of the view: I cannot achieve emancipation, if I split into a second group away from men. If I am to emancipate myself and want to assert myself as a woman, then I reach that, in my view, in the discussion – and also in the confrontation – with men.”⁸⁴ For this reason some lesbians, for example those in the *Sonntags-Club*, became involved with projects to educate gay men about the risk of HIV and aids, a subject which was not openly discussed in the GDR, while other lesbians saw this as an issue that didn’t affect them.⁸⁵

⁸⁰ RHG/GZ/ A1, 2576, Christina Schenk, ‘Bedingungen und Perspektiven lesbischer Existenz in der DDR’, p. 29

⁸¹ Christina Schenk in Günter Grau (hrsg.), *Lesben und Schwule was nun?*, p. 123

⁸² Interview with Ursula Sillge by Kate Boyce, 31.03.05

⁸³ Ursula Sillge in Günter Grau (hrsg.), *Lesben und Schwule was nun?*, p. 125

⁸⁴ Andrea in *ibid.*, pp. 124-5

⁸⁵ Interview with Ursula Sillge by Kate Boyce, 31.03.05

Expanding networks in the lesbian and gay communities

Even before the lesbian and homosexual groups were founded, many lesbians sought literature from abroad in order to understand their sexuality and to come to terms with their situation. They sometimes did this through smuggling books over the border on rare occasions when they visited the FRG or through browsing through books on display at the yearly Leipzig trade fair.⁸⁶ Ursula Sillge took this a step further when she built up the 'LiLa Archiv' that was connected to the *Sonntags-Club*, that included amongst other things editions of the West German gay magazine 'Magnus' and the West German lesbian magazines 'Lesbentisch' and the 'UKZ'. An advert on the reverse of a *Sonntags-Club* programme read, 'We are looking for books, newspapers, pictures, films, documents. Who can report anything on the lives of lesbians and gays in the past?'⁸⁷

The *Sonntags-Club* also developed contacts with homosexuals in other towns in the GDR. In this way lesbians and gay men from Potsdam, Gera, Dresden and Rostock requested information from the *Sonntags-Club* about the best way to establish a homosexual group in the GDR and after receiving advice they set up their own secular groups in these towns.⁸⁸ Following this the *Sonntags-Club* invited members of the new clubs to an 'exchange of experiences' (*Erfahrungsaustausch*) in January 1988 and a second similar event took place in Dresden in February 1989.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Ibid and testimony of Gabriela S. in Christina Karstädt & Anette von Zitzewitz (Hrsg.), ... *viel zuviel verschwiegen*, p. 110

⁸⁷ RHG/ ESt 05 Eduard Stapl, from a *Sonntags-Club* programme, 1985

⁸⁸ Interview with Ursula Sillge by Kate Boyce, 31.03.05

⁸⁹ Ursula Sillge, *Un-Sichtbare Frauen – Lesben und ihre Emanzipation in der DDR*, p. 104

There were many conferences and workshops that lesbian and homosexual groups participated in all over the GDR during the 1980s. For the homosexual church groups, for example, every year from 1983 there took place a ‘co-workers conference of the homosexual church working groups’ (*Mitarbeiter(innen)tagung der kirchlichen Arbeitskreise Homosexualität*). However, lesbians found it difficult to bring the topics that were important to them to the forefront of the discussions until 1987 when the theme at the conference was the ‘argument between lesbians and gays inside the church working group’.⁹⁰ This subject was further explored by the ‘Lesbian Conference Preparatory Committee’ (*Vorbereitungskreis Lesbentagung*) that brought together women from the lesbian groups in Jena, Weimar, Halle, Leipzig, Dresden and Berlin between autumn 1988 and November 1989.⁹¹ From 1988 lesbians in the church also organised their own workshops, separate from the gay men in the church, indicating the extent to which a common lesbian self-awareness had developed.

In Summer 1988 the ‘Lesbian Group, Jena’ decided to create a lesbian newspaper, ‘*frau anders*’ that could pass on information between groups and could, in the words of one of its founders, “reach women who still live in small towns or villages where there are no groups, so that they have contact, so that they know what there is.”⁹² They knew it was potentially illegal work but decided that “‘*frau anders*’ is a political newspaper. “Simply, because the lesbian way of life is a political issue – reluctantly seen by society.”⁹³ Contacts were established with other women’s groups first of all because ‘Lesbian Group, Jena’ needed to raise money to enable

⁹⁰ Samirah Kenawi, *Frauengruppen in der DDR der 80er Jahre*, p. 40

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 50

⁹² Kerstin Rösel in Christina Karstädt & Anette von Zitzewitz (Hrsg.), ... *viel zuviel verschwiegen*, p. 192

⁹³ Kerstin Rösel and Christiane Kloweit in *ibid.*, p. 189

the first edition of the newspaper to take off in January 1989. In order to print the newspaper a toner was required, which was only available in the west at that time, and so the group developed friendships with the 'Maria and Martha' network in the FRG and the student religious society in the town of Tübingen in Württemberg. Once the first edition of '*frau anders*' had been printed and circulated, the group found itself becoming a point of contact for lesbians across the GDR, similar to the earlier experiences of the *Sonntags-Club*'s 'post group'. The newspaper contained articles exploring what it meant to be lesbian, poems about the female identity and women's position in patriarchal societies, as well as information about homosexual literature, films and upcoming events. '*frau anders*' was essential for bringing together all the elements of the lesbian movement across the GDR. It is also a good example of the strong influence of West German gay and lesbian organisations on lesbian networks in the GDR.

In an attempt to move away from the homosexual sub-culture many lesbians also became involved with other women's groups, primarily peace organisations. It is this process that has led to the claim that a women's movement was developing in 1980's East Germany. In Berlin this co-operation began very early on when lesbians joined heterosexual women in their campaign to oppose the military service law of March 1982, which would mobilise women in defence of the state in case of war. In conjunction with the women who later joined 'Women for Peace' in Berlin, one of the first actions of the 'Lesbians in the Church' after they were established as a group, was for its members to sign the petition opposing the

military service law.⁹⁴ Following this, lesbians also took part in many of the peace workshops held with female peace groups across the GDR. It is interesting to note that some lesbians claim that they initially became involved in these events simply to begin the process of breaking down discrimination on the part of heterosexual women.⁹⁵

In 1984 the 'Christian Women for Peace, Halle' organised the first *Frauentreffen* or women's conference and further *Frauentreffen* followed in Berlin in 1985, in Leipzig in 1986, in Magdeburg in 1987, Karl-Marx-Stadt in 1988 and in Jena in 1989.⁹⁶ The conferences brought together women from lesbian groups, peace groups and church circles as well as feminist theologians. Those who attended discussed items like violence against women, rape, feminist theology and the consequences of gender role stereotypes in children's education. In a similar way, the lesbian church group in Dresden organised a yearly *Frauenfest* (Women's fete) between 1985 and 1987, whose original aim had been to develop a specific lesbian self-understanding and self-awareness, as an offshoot of the gay movement. But in the last two years other women's groups were invited to the event, and the final *Frauenfest* was organised in conjunction with the '*Frauengruppe Dresden*'. This type of GDR wide women's event, initiated by lesbians demonstrates how lesbians played a leading role in the creation of a women's movement in the GDR. It has been suggested that lesbians were more highly motivated to develop a women's movement because they sought the establishment of their own niches in GDR

⁹⁴ RHG/GZ/WA23 Heike Noack, 'Emanzipation der Frauen in der DDR', Diplomarbeit, p. 87. For more information about this petition and the activities of the 'Women for Peace', see chapter 4.

⁹⁵ For example, Marinka Körzendörfer as cited in Christina Karstädt & Anette von Zitzewitz (Hrsg.), ... *viel zuviel verschwiegen*, p. 160

⁹⁶ Samirah Kenawi, *Frauengruppen in der DDR der 80er Jahre*, p. 23

society anyway, and they were perhaps more sensitive to collaboration between women because of their life choices and living situations.⁹⁷

The ‘gentle revolution’ of autumn 1989 however took many women in the lesbian groups by surprise. Bärbel from ‘Lesbian Group, Jena’, for example, described how the co-operation between heterosexual and homosexual women’s groups was interrupted by the *Wende*, “From the homosexual movement lesbians themselves began independent initiatives, and these lesbians and the women’s movement came closer together. And a network of lesbian and women groups – all of that was desired, and also partially built, and then the ‘*Wende*’ interfered.”⁹⁸

Lesbians did not participate in the political events in great numbers. Gunna Bohne, declared, “I must say that today I’m also very disappointed, very sad and also quite furious that only a fraction of lesbians and gays were active during this ‘radical change’ (*Umbruch*).”⁹⁹ Also voicing disappointment while indicating that by 1989 there was still a long way to go before lesbians and gays could be fully integrated and accepted by heterosexual East German society, Ursula Sillge said, “Of course naturally the lesbian and gay groups were not prominent in this collapse of the GDR, because there was also an acceptance problem.”¹⁰⁰ In her estimation therefore, even the dissidents were reluctant to accept working with homosexuals. This perhaps puts the co-operation of lesbians and peace women into context, although Sillge was talking about lesbians *and* gay men.

⁹⁷ RHG/GZ/WA23 Heike Noack, ‘Emanzipation der Frauen in der DDR’, Diplomarbeit, p. 98

⁹⁸ Bärbel in Günter Grau (hrsg.), *Lesben und Schwule was nun?*, p. 122

⁹⁹ Christina Karstädt & Anette von Zitzewitz (Hrsg.), ... *viel zuviel verschwiegen*, testimony of Gunna Bohne, p. 81

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Ursula Sillge by Kate Boyce, 31.03.05

Yet there were some lesbians and gays who *were* active during the *Wende*, although these were mainly men and women who had also become involved in resistance groups. Christina Schenk is a good example. She was a lesbian who had at one time been a former member of the SED but who had later lost faith in the Party and helped to found the original 'Lesbians in the Church' in Berlin. Although disappointed with aspects of the SED regime, with an attitude similar to many female peace activists, she never wanted to overthrow socialism but to reform it from within. She was an initiator of the radical women's group, '*lila offensive*' (Purple Attack), which came together in Autumn 1989 to compile a statement of principles (*Grundsatzpapiere*) by women with suggestions on the feminist transformation of society. When more than 1,200 women from over 60 different women's groups including *lila offensive* came together in the *Volksbühne* theatre on 3 December 1989 to found the umbrella organisation the UFV (Independent Women's Federation *Unabhängigen Frauenverbandes*),¹⁰¹ Schenk played a prominent part, even becoming a leading candidate. In fact the UFV, which demanded not only equal pay for equal work, reproductive choice, freedom from exploitation as sexual objects in pornography (notably more of a western-feminist style demand) amongst other things, also very significantly called for equality of rights for lesbians.¹⁰² This demonstrates the influence of lesbians like Christina Schenk in securing lesbian rights as a central theme in an organisation, that was, after all, the culmination of a decade of activism and networking by women's groups in the GDR.

¹⁰¹ Barbara Einhorn, *Cinderella Goes to Market: Citizen, Gender & Women's Movements in East Central Europe* (London: Verso, 1995), p. 203

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 204

Conclusion

In some ways the desire of lesbians and gay men to find their own space in society corresponds to the notion of *Eigen-Sinn* ('a sense of one's interests'), a concept that has been applied to the GDR by Thomas Lindenberger and others.¹⁰³ Using the *Eigen-Sinn* model, the attempt by homosexuals to set up personal and private networks and generate their own sub-culture, shows that they were taking control of their own social lives in order to achieve self-fulfilment. GDR society in the 1970s and 1980s did not offer lesbians and gays the opportunity to be themselves and pursue their own interests and so they looked beyond official structures to create their own opportunities.¹⁰⁴ In this way homosexuals were actively trying to find a means of coping with life in a dictatorship but although some individuals later went further, when joining peace demonstrations or publishing potentially illegal magazines, for example, their initial desire to establish their own space should not be mistaken for resistance.¹⁰⁵

The establishment of *Sonntags-Club* and later other secular homosexual groups revealed that the state was prepared to make concessions with the homosexual community. It is an example of how the SED leadership was prepared to respond to

¹⁰³ See for example, Thomas Lindenberger, 'Die Grenzen der Diktatur. Zur Einleitung' in Lindenberger (ed.), *Herrschaft und Eigen-Sinn in der Diktatur. Studien zur Gesellschaftsgeschichte der DDR* (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 1999), Jan Palmowski, 'Workshop Report: Between Conformity and Eigen-Sinn. New Approaches to GDR History', *German History*, vol. 20, No. 4 (2002) and for a general discussion Corey Ross, chapter 3, 'State and Society in East Germany' in *The East German Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of the GDR* (London, New York: Arnold, 2002)

¹⁰⁴ This is a very brief explanation of *Eigen-Sinn* and one needs to be wary of generalisation and using the model to describe all manner of behaviour in a dictatorship.

¹⁰⁵ Of course some historians do interpret *Eigen-Sinn* as resistance, although this was not the original understanding of the theory. See chapter 1 of Esther von Richthofen, *Bringing Culture to the Masses. Control, Compromise and Participation in the GDR. A Case Study of Bezirk Potsdam* (PhD thesis, UCL, London, 2006)

popular developments and adjust cultural policy to focus more broadly on the interests of the East German population.¹⁰⁶ By the late 1980s the state began to recognise that if it did not accept gays and lesbians and embrace them as significant and important contributors to socialist society, they could turn against it and become part of the resistance movement instead. Thus the state's official youth organisation, the FDJ, began to publicly welcome young homosexual people into its network in 1988, even sending representatives to the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) held in Vienna in 1989. But this pragmatism came too late and was not all-embracing enough. The homosexual community did witness a huge triumph during the last decade of the GDR with the abolition of Section 151 of the Criminal Code in December 1988 when homosexuals were made equal in the eyes of the law, many years earlier than in the UK, for example. Yet the state's attitude remained ambivalent towards homosexuals with many gay men and lesbians being discriminated against at work or being refused recognition of their same sex relationships and facing obstacles when trying to live together.

Of course, many lesbians and gay men themselves succeeded in building a huge network of homosexual organisations so that by 1990 homosexual groups existed in all district cities except Suhl and Neubrandenburg.¹⁰⁷ Yet lesbians and gays were not satisfied with the creation of a homosexual sub-culture and they wanted more, desiring to be accepted into the mainstream of society. This aspiration and the urge to focus on women's issues led many lesbians in these groups to disaffiliate themselves from gay men and set up their own organisations with contacts to other women's groups, particularly in the peace arena. These lesbians went on to play a

¹⁰⁶ See *ibid* for further examples.

¹⁰⁷ Ursula Sillge, *Un-Sichtbare Frauen – Lesben und ihre Emanzipation in der DDR*, p. 104

definite contribution to an increasingly public debate about the societal and legal position of women in the GDR as they became part of a distinctive 'women's movement' in the late 1980s. At the same time men in the 'gay movement' did not manage to successfully define a similar common self-awareness and identity that crossed over into the united Germany.

Chapter 4

Women Peace Activists in the German Democratic Republic

“Matters of peace are, for us women, issues of the heart.”

The beginning of the 1980s saw a revival of Cold War conflict and aggression. Anxiety levels were particularly high in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), which after all was itself an early creation of the Cold War and was situated right on the dividing line of the conflict. This chapter will firstly provide a detailed analysis of the reactions of East German women to GDR foreign policy and the Cold War drama played out between the USA, NATO and USSR. In this way it will attempt to establish women's impressions of East Germany's significance in world affairs. This examination will help to explain the origins of the women's peace movement in the GDR. A comprehensive study of the formation and structure of women's peace groups and their activities and changing principles, with particular emphasis on the East Berlin 'Women for Peace' organisation, will next illustrate the development of a new kind of women's consciousness in the GDR and an understanding of the role of women's opposition groups and women's networks in the dissident movement in the build up to the *Wende*.

Women's responses to the new phase of the Cold War

As the two superpowers on either side of the 'Iron Curtain' began to align their new weapons against each other it became apparent that the GDR was also becoming increasingly militarised. Military instruction, for example, had been introduced as a

mandatory subject in the 9th and 10th grades of GDR college track high schools.¹ Expenditure on defence too, rose throughout the 1980s. The International Institute for Strategic Studies calculated that GDR defence expenditure grew from \$385 per capita in 1981 to \$457 in 1984, higher than any other NATO or Warsaw Pact country outside of USSR and USA.²

Increasing military spending however did not prevent Honecker from re-affirming the long-standing message that the GDR was a 'peace state'. Rather than being a contradiction, in the eyes of the government the country's defence capability and the preservation of peace were intertwined.³ Evidence of this was reflected when, for example, Honecker thanked socialist soldiers for safeguarding peace and preventing recourse 'to the language of weapons' at an SED Congress in 1986.⁴

Meanwhile the East German media enthusiastically backed the peace campaign with the endless repetition of phrases such as 'securing the peace' (*Friedenssicherung*), and the assertion that never again would a war be allowed to emanate from German soil.⁵ The mass organisations, including the trade unions, the FDJ and the DFD all launched into their own peace activities, supporting the official line, which asserted that the villains responsible for the current arms struggle were NATO, the USA and her western allies. To publicize the GDR position on the threat to peace abroad, largely amongst non-Communist western

¹ Christian Joppke, *East German Dissidents and the Revolution of 1989* (London: Macmillan, 1995), p. 80

² As quoted in Mike Dennis, *The German Democratic Republic – Politics, Economics and Society* (London & New York: Pinter Publishers, 1988), p. 185

³ Christian Joppke, *East German Dissidents and the Revolution of 1989*, pp. 80-81

⁴ As cited in Mike Dennis, *The German Democratic Republic – Politics, Economics and Society*, p. 184

⁵ It is significant that this expression that was also widespread in West Germany.

peace groups, the GDR had its own Peace Council (*Friedensrat*), which was part of the Warsaw Pact members' World Peace Council.⁶

Women in the GDR were specifically targeted to show their support for SED peace policy (*Friedenspolitik*). On International Women's Day in 1980, the greeting from the Central Committee of the SED to all East German women and girls was recorded in *Neues Deutschland*, the Party's official newspaper. After NATO's decision to position missiles in the FRG, women were informed where their loyalties should lie:

International Women's Day 1980 falls at exactly the time that we are determined to defend the peace. In this fundamental matter for humankind, the women and girls of our country know that they are firmly linked with the women of the Soviet Union and the other socialist brother countries, and with all the peace loving forces of the world. They fight together against the Brussels' missile decision of NATO, against all the machinations of the imperialists, above all certain circles of the USA, which want to destroy the results of the thaw [in world politics] and to intensify the international situation further.⁷

Statements called *Stimmungs- und Meinungsberichte* (literally 'mood and opinion reports'), collected from women of all ages and backgrounds on various aspects of GDR life, indicate that such speeches were effective. The women were questioned

⁶ David Childs, *The GDR: Moscow's German Ally* (London: George Allen & Unwin), 1983, p. 297

⁷ From the 'Dank und Anerkennung allen Frauen und Mädchen der DDR', Grussadresse des Zentralkomitees der SED anlaesslich des Internationalen Frauentages in *Neues Deutschland*, 8-9/3/80 in LSE Library archives, v. 1980/1

about their thoughts on particular party congresses of the KpdSU (CPSU – Communist Party of the Soviet Union) or the SED, or about international events. For example, after Honecker's speech at the Third Conference of the Central Committee of the SED, a housewife from Aue-Zelle was reported as saying, "The speech of Comrade Erich Honecker made a deep impression on me; above all his persistence and confidence, but also the concern with which he speaks about the preservation of the peace."⁸

Many women went even further in their opinion statements to reveal that they endorsed the world view publicly upheld by Honecker, which saw NATO and more specifically the USA as the main protagonists preventing world peace. Thus, for example, in November 1981 a female farmer in Rostock, described how, "The women and mothers of our place are deeply concerned about the threatening danger of a nuclear war, brought about through the aggressive circles of world imperialism, particularly the USA, by their atomic armament."⁹ This sort of support by women conforms to Günter Gaus's theory that, "no other issue has more united the East German populace with the regime than the disarmament issue".¹⁰

While a certain amount of scepticism needs to be exercised about the accuracy of these opinion reports,¹¹ they certainly seem to reflect the great fear many women felt about the escalation of the arms race. There was an extreme anxiety about the unknown destruction that could be caused by nuclear war. A common sentiment for many women, who had seen first-hand the devastation caused by war during Allied

⁸ SAPMO-BArch, Abteilung Frauen, DY 30/vorl. SED 36850 'Betreff: Stellungnahmen und Meinungsäußerungen zur 3. Tagung des ZK der SED', Astrid Lehmann, 24.11.81

⁹ *Ibid.*, Franziska Grossmann, 24.11.81

¹⁰ As cited in Christian Joppke, *East German Dissidents and the Revolution of 1989*, p. 79

¹¹ See introduction for further explanation about the reliability of *Stimmungs & Meinungsberichte*.

bombings and Soviet advances at the end of the Second World War were those expressed by a housewife from Magdeburg, “As a child I witnessed the Second World War and I want my children saved from witnessing an even more terrible war.”¹² In another opinion report a female factory worker revealed that these turbulent times had a distinctive significance for women, pronouncing that “matters of peace are, for us women, issues of the heart.”¹³ She suggests that women in the GDR were determined to play their part in the struggle to safeguard the peace for the future generation.

East German women acknowledged the changing mood of international politics in all manner of official, personal and political published statements and appeals. Women’s desire for peace was even expressed in women’s *Brigadebuecher* (Brigade log-books). Women who worked in the ‘Greta Wolter’ children’s crèche in Finsterwalde, Brandenburg for example, ended their 1987 logbook with a picture of a child and a dove and the statement, “We love peace”.¹⁴ Throughout the 1980s their logbooks report favourably on the GDR’s position in the international community and her stand for peace, in much the same way as many *Stimmungs- und Meinungsberichte*.

Another important source which highlighted women’s anxieties about the deteriorating international situation were petitions or *Eingaben*. In a petition, which

¹² SAPMO-BArch, Abteilung Frauen, DY 30/vorl. SED, 36850, ‘Stellungnahmen und Meinungen von Frauen zum Appell des Zentralkomitees der SED, der Parteivorstände der DKP und der SEW an die Parteien der Arbeiterbewegung, die Gewerkschaften und die Jugendverbände, an alle Menschen in Europa, die in Frieden leben wollen’, Rosemarie Rietig, Magdeburg, 27.9.83

¹³ SAPMO-BArch, Abteilung Frauen, DY 30/vorl. SED, 36850, ‘Stellungnahmen und Meinungen zur 4. Tagung des ZK der SED’, Frau Morgenstern, Freital, 25.6.82

¹⁴ Brandenburg State Archive Potsdam, VEB FIMAG Finsterwalde, Rep. 904, Nr. 670, Brigade book, Creche " Greta Wolter " 1987

again suggests the effectiveness of state propaganda, an elderly lady blames the U.S. administration and its moves to station nuclear weapons in the FRG as the reason for impending world catastrophe. She exclaims, “We don’t want Europe to be transformed into an atomic desert.”¹⁵ She asks, “Did we not pledge in 1945 – Never again will there be war?” She ends her letter with the lament “I wish I was 35 again”. She believes that women could provide great counter strength to war if they massed together but says sadly, “I alone am too weak to provoke such a mass movement.”¹⁶ It is important to point out here that while the SED wanted to rouse passion in East Germans in support of the GDR’s foreign policy, the Party did not encourage the foundation of independent pressure groups, however noble their aim.

Not all petitions regarding foreign policy towed the official line. A petition from one woman sent at the end of 1982 to the central administration of the GDR’s official women’s organisation, the DFD, deviated sharply from the attitudes recorded in the mood and opinion reports by revealing a lack of faith in the GDR’s foreign policy programme and confusion as to what was actually being done. Attached to her letter were a number of newspaper articles, about people working for peace and she asked: “Everyone’s talking about peace but what are *we* doing?”¹⁷

Women also wrote increasing numbers of petitions expressing concern about the trend towards militarisation, especially with regard to children. These petitions, written by both individual women and groups of women, included appeals for the removal of various military board games from the market, which the petition

¹⁵ SAPMO-BArch, DFD DY31/ 567, Eingabe to Genossin Thiele from Erika Wetterich, Claubitz, 18.2.82, p. 157

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ SAPMO-BArch, DFD, DY/31, 568, 20.09.82, pp. 39-40

writers feared would encourage children to see war games as normal and indeed enjoyable. One such petition highlighted women's confusion about what they perceived to be a contradiction in education policy – why are children taught the song at the school “*Kleine weisse Friedenstaube*” ‘Small, white peace pigeon’ and yet *also* given killing games to play?¹⁸ Another woman stipulated that her son should not be allowed to join his class on a visit to a Soviet military museum.¹⁹ In a political letter (*Zuschriften*), similar to a petition, written to the Ecumenical Assembly for justice, peace and retaining of creation, (*Oekumenische Versammlung fuer Gerechtigkeit, Frieden und Bewahrung der Schoepfung*), one mother-of-three was concerned that children as young as four years old were being subjected to military education at kindergarten. Her daughter's kindergarten teacher encouraged them to practice marching to school and to pretend to get into a tank in order to go to the toilet.²⁰

Women's opposition to the military service law

On March 25 1982 shortly after Honecker had made his customary speech at the International Women's Day celebrations applauding women's “determination to fight for peace”,²¹ the SED introduced an amendment to the military service law.²²

¹⁸ MDA, RSch 17, RSch 4.01.1.1.2., ‘Eingabe, Betr.: Manoeverspiel fuer Kinder “Wiesel ruft Eidechse”’, to the *Verlag Junge Welt* from Aktionskreis Anstiftung zum Frieden, 21.2.1982

¹⁹ Berlin Landesarchiv, C Rep 104, 476, ‘Beschwerden und Eingaben der Bevölkerung 1958 – 1984’, Report of an Eingabe from Christine R. Rohrpasser to Rat des Stadtbezirks Berlin-Lichtenberg, dated 11.11.1982

²⁰ Christian Sachse, (Hrsg.), “*Mündig werden zum Gebrauch der Freiheit*”: *Politische Zuschriften an die Ökumenische Versammlung 1987-89 in der DDR* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2004), Dokument 138, pp. 142-143

²¹ SAPMO-BArch, Buero Erich Honecker DY 30/2323, ‘Toast des Generalsekretärs des SK der SED und Vorsitzenden des Staatsrates der DDR, Erich Honecker, auf dem Empfang zum Internationalen Frauentag am 8. März 1982’, p. 44

According to Section 3, paragraph 5 of GDR law women between the ages of 18 and 50 years could now be mobilised in defence of the state in case of war. This military service would be compulsory and refusal could carry a punishment of up to five years imprisonment.²³ For a small number of women in East Berlin, the introduction of this law, which directly affected them, was last straw in a string of contradictions and inconsistencies in Honecker's so-called 'peace state'. This small circle of friends felt strongly enough to write individual petitions about their refusal to participate in compulsory military service if they were ever required to do so.

One of these petitions, addressed to the Central Committee of the SED, from an artist called Bärbel Bohley, began with a common theme in which she reminisced about her memories of growing up in the aftermath of war. She wrote, "I was born in 1945 in Berlin and spent my childhood in this destroyed city. The ruins of World War 2 were my playgrounds. How often I heard adults say we'd rather have dry bread, but no more war in our time!"²⁴ In this way Bohley skilfully used the same language as the East German media to demonstrate that far from being a lone dissident voice, her outlook and experiences were not dissimilar to others of her generation who had grown up in the GDR. Her petition concluded with the powerful assertion, "I know that in order to contribute my part to the preservation of the peace, my place is not in the army."²⁵ She was underlining in other words that military service was not, in her opinion, in keeping with the GDR's claim to be a 'peace state on German soil'.

²² The details of the military service law for women were specified in section 3 - paragraph 5, section 6 - paragraph 3, section 12 - paragraph 4, section 10 - paragraph 2, section 11 - paragraph 2 and section 43 - paragraphs 1 and 2.

²³ According to Section 43, paragraphs 1 and 2

²⁴ RHA/ Bbo 038, 21.04.82, p. 1

²⁵ Ibid

Another petition from Irena Kukutz, was addressed to “the People’s Chamber of the GDR”, subtitled, “the chosen representatives of the people”.²⁶ It opened with the following powerful statement, “I do not feel represented by you who have decided ... that ... now I, a female citizen, wife and mother am also subjected to the obligation of military service”.²⁷ Thus, in an early indication of the breadth of criticism that the women would later express, Kukutz’s petition was not only an attack of the military service law but it was also a criticism of the GDR’s entire constitution. She points out that the new law did not correspond with preceding GDR foreign policy saying, “The reason for the introduction of this innovation ... after détente, Helsinki and the general acknowledgement of the peace policies of the GDR remains obscure to me.”²⁸

Growing support amongst women brings a collective challenge

Although several petitions were sent, only Kukutz’s petition received an official reply. This letter which suggested that the amendment to the law embodied “a realisation of women’s equal rights”²⁹, did not reassure the women. They were passionate enough about the unjust and unwarranted nature of the law to decide to compose a collective petition to engender maximum impact.

Thus in October 1982 a small group of seven women, including Kukutz, Bohley and Katja Havemann, widower of dissident Robert Havemann, sat down together to

²⁶ RHA/ Bbo 038, 28.04.82, p. 3

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ MDA, Frauen fuer den Frieden, 1982, Letter from the Ministerrat der DDR to Irena Kukutz, 21.5.82

draw up a joint petition and add their signatures at the end. The women were taking a considerable risk because collections of signatures were forbidden in the GDR,³⁰ although they were attempting to exploit the loophole in the petitioning system where the law was less clear about collective letters. But the women believed it was a risk worth taking, as conveyed by Ulrike Poppe, who also helped draw up the petition:

“The [individual] petitions were not answered, and thereupon came the idea to compose a common text for which signatures could be collected, probably knowing that that could involve criminal consequences. Although we were aware of the risk, we found it necessary to react consistently instead of only addressing the state with individual letters.”³¹

The women were friends and acquaintances, some of whom knew each other from their work supporting the families of conscientious objectors or through their husbands who had links to oppositional activities. (For example, the authors Lutz Rathenow, Ruediger Rosenthal and Reiner Fluegge were the husbands/partners of Bettina Rathenow, Karin Teichert and Almut Ilse respectively.) In fact the roots of many women’s groups in the 1980s were private friendship circles, although many other groups did not originally have such close contact with dissidents. When they met for the first time in Bohley’s apartment they were clear that the petition would be a joint effort. Explaining their working method one of the women involved, Almut Ilse described how they “sat down to write the petition together”.³² The

³⁰ Irena Kukutz, *Grenzüberschreitend... [Widerstehen... ist leider schon besetzt] Frauenprotest im Kalten Krieg, Erfahrungsberichte und Dokumente* (unpublished), p. 7

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 14

³² Testimony of Almut Ilse in *ibid.*, p. 13

women seemed to have been eager to become involved in such a venture. Bettina Rathenow, another of the women involved, explained she was delighted that she wasn't the only woman with "this feeling" about the new law and thought, "We must do something against it, we must give our refusal [to do military service], we must give out a sign!"³³

In their petition they portrayed themselves as representatives of a cross-section of female East German society, saying that they were "women, both with and without children, some of us Catholic, some Evangelical and some with no ties to the Church, some of us are experienced in war, others saved from this bad experience".³⁴ They went on to stress that "one thing connects us: we are *not* unimportant, and we will not give our silent agreement to a law that imposes completely new obligations on women, which conflict with our own self-perceptions." They protested that no public discussion had been allowed about the amendment to the law, explaining that they were forced to draw up the petition in order to initiate dialogue. The petition continued to state daringly that they refused to be involved in compulsory military service, since they saw its introduction for women not as a sign of women's equal rights, but as contrary to their conception of femininity.³⁵ But by far the most outstanding component of what was already an exceptionally bold petition was that it attracted the signatures of more than 150 East German women before it was posted, addressed to Erich Honecker³⁶. In the context of a modern dictatorship, where joint petitions were actively discouraged this was a

³³ Testimony of Bettina Rathenow in *ibid.*, p. 10

³⁴ RHA/ Bbo 038, 12.10.82, p. 4

³⁵ A point which would lead to conflict with western feminist groups in the future.

³⁶ *Ibid*

large number of signatures to collect. Indeed it far exceeded the expectations of those who had formulated it.³⁷

For such numbers of women to sign they must have felt very strongly about the law. There appear to have been several reasons for this, although a passionate concern and responsibility for the future of their children was a reason that came up time and again, as was expressed by Tina Krone, who signed the petition and who also later became a member of the 'Women for Peace, Berlin'. She was anxious for the welfare of her two-year-old son, worried that if she and her husband were called up "what would happen to him, what would happen to us?"³⁸ Karin Teichert, one of those who formulated the petition was also concerned about what she called "the enormous consequences for children" which could involve "children's homes amongst other things".³⁹ Indeed this was an argument that Teichert used to persuade women to sign the petition, when she invited friends round to her apartment, laid the petition out for them to read and pointed out the difficulties compulsory military service could involve for mothers.⁴⁰ When Ulrike Poppe asked friends whether they wanted to sign the petition, she found herself entering a debate in which questions were asked like, "Has the time now come when we must say NO? Is this the right means?"⁴¹

³⁷ Irena Kukutz, "Die Bewegung 'Frauen fuer den Frieden' als Teil der unabhaengigen Friedensbewegung der DDR", in *Materialien der Enquete-Kommission "Aufarbeitung von Geschichte und Folgen der SED-Diktatur in Deutschland"* Band VII/2 (Baden-Baden & Frankfurt am Main: Nomos Verlag & Suhrkamp Verlag, 1995), p. 1299

³⁸ Interview with Tina Krone by Kate Boyce, 15.07.04

³⁹ Testimony of Karin Teichert in Irena Kukutz, *Grenzueberschreitend... Frauenprotest im Kalten Krieg*, p. 10

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10

⁴¹ Testimony of Ulrike Poppe in *ibid.*, p. 14

Of course the experience of male family and friends who had already taken part in military service also played a part as expressed by Almut Alsen, who helped draw up the petition:

“We saw that it was for it a nightmare, this NVA (*National Volksarmee* – National Armed Forces): - time to be somehow got through. It attacked one’s substance and personality to the extreme. I saw many going through serious crises, because their whole self-determination was taken from them. Many made themselves constantly drunk, because they simply could not bear it any longer. And all this, in order to learn to kill.”⁴²

Tina Krone, who signed the petition described how she was concerned about the lack of clarity about when the new military service law would be put into practice, aware that in the most extreme case the situation could be war. She was frustrated that the SED had her at their disposal in such a way. But the real spur that persuaded her to sign the petition, after she had contemplated it for a long time, was the thought that her son might ask her sometime in the future "You knew, why didn't you do anything?"⁴³ In the end that induced her to say - "No. At this point I won't go through with it. Here I simply say a public no".⁴⁴ Indeed this idea of a 'public refusal' to take part in military service was shared by many of the women who drew up or signed the petition. Bettina Rathenow, for example, declared that, "I felt challenged to do something. I found it important to say as a woman, no – the

⁴² Testimony of Almut Alsen in *ibid.*, p. 13

⁴³ Interview with Tina Krone by Kate Boyce, 15.07.04

⁴⁴ *Ibid*

army is not a possibility for me at all.”⁴⁵ In this way the military service law amendment was the catalyst that made these women want to stand up against the authoritarian way in which their country was governed.

The women who signed the petition were not just from East Berlin and outlying areas but also from other cities like Dresden and Halle. Collecting the signatures was difficult, as women were aware in their Stasi controlled society of the recriminations involved in supporting an attack on a regime policy, which is what signing the petition amounted to. Tina Krone, for example, said that as she signed “I knew that I would certainly face trouble and career disadvantages”.⁴⁶ As a result Almut Ilsen said that women needed ‘courage’ to sign the petition, describing how an old school friend struggled to admit to her that she did not want to add her signature, while on the other hand she acquired signatures from some women she did not know very well at all.⁴⁷ It was also a complicated affair since the signatures were collected on different sheets of paper and co-ordinated at the end, rather than risk the petition being misplaced or falling into the wrong hands. The original list of names was kept in the *Konsistorium* of the Protestant Church in Berlin-Brandenburg as a safety precaution because at this time the church had far more freedom and privacy in its production of internal documents than other institutions in the GDR.

⁴⁵ Testimony of Bettina Rathenow in Irena Kukutz, *Grenzüberschreitend... Frauenprotest im Kalten Krieg, Erfahrungsberichte und Dokumente*, p. 10 In the same way she asserted the need to “give out a sign” by refusing to take part in military service See above, footnote ²⁴

⁴⁶ Interview with Tina Krone by Kate Boyce, 15.07.04

⁴⁷ Testimony of Almut Alsen in Irena Kukutz, *Grenzüberschreitend... Frauenprotest im Kalten Krieg, Erfahrungsberichte und Dokumente*, p. 13

It was a remarkable achievement given the circumstances, that over 150 women's signatures were collected. But for those women who did sign there were indeed consequences after the petition was sent. The women had written that they wanted to engage in dialogue with the authorities about the law, although Katja Havemann admits that "in reality we scarcely expected it".⁴⁸ But the dialogue they did receive as a result could hardly have been of the kind the women had in mind. Some women were called into their local council offices. Others were visited at home. Katja Havemann received a letter that was like a "police summons". When she went to her appointment she was met by "two blokes" but it "was no discussion and instead they began to ask me why I had added my signature to this letter; what I understood by the peace policy of the GDR."⁴⁹ One of the men introduced himself as Chief of the Interior (Fuerstenwalde) but she suspected that he and his colleague were actually Stasi employees. Similarly Almut Alsen received a call from two men whom she described as "pretending to be SED-people".⁵⁰ Irena Kukutz received a very bewildering visit from a man and a woman, who insisted on coming into her apartment despite her entreaties that she was ill and had only just got up.⁵¹ They questioned her about her views on the GDR's moves for peace, disarmament, NATO's resolution for the deployment of arms, Reagan and atomic weapons. They also tried to find out if she was a ringleader behind the petition, making a connection with the original petition she wrote alone against the military service law. She was uncomfortable because she did not know what was behind these questions. Afterwards they told her she was "correct in fundamental questions and

⁴⁸ Testimony of Katja Havemann in *ibid.*, p. 8

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 13

⁵⁰ Testimony of Almut Alsen in Irena Kukutz, *Grenzüberschreitend... Frauenprotest im Kalten Krieg*, (unpublished), p. 14

⁵¹ MDA/Dokumentation "Frauen fuer den Frieden" 1982. Account by Irena Kukutz, 'Mittwoch, den 24.11. gegen 11.00 Vormittags', p. 1

only of a different opinion in certain areas.” When they left she asked herself, “What did they want? Perhaps really only to hear what I personally thought.”⁵²

On 6 December 1982 the West German *Der Spiegel* magazine published the petition in its 49th issue. This helped to focus international interest for the first time on the East German peace women, and the related issues of women’s role in East German society and the increasing levels of militarisation in the GDR. The publication firmly forced those women who had been involved in the petition into the dissident East German scene and it resulted in even more penalties by the Stasi. Those who had signed were encouraged to retract their signature, which as one Stasi document revealed “in most cases... could not be achieved”.⁵³ Tina Krone who worked as a German and English teacher described how during the aftermath of the petition, “I was frequently sent to the school inspector by the personnel department and every month I was intensely interrogated by the head teacher and I’d unexpectedly find an SED party secretary sitting in on my lessons.”⁵⁴ She was under immense pressure to take back her signature and in the end her refusal to do so led to her dismissal and the ruling that she could no longer work as a teacher. In the GDR teachers bore a duty to be upright citizens who passed on good socialist instruction to the next generation of East Germans. And in her words, “Pacifists were not looked upon kindly in the GDR and generally seen as enemies”.⁵⁵ Tina Krone was not alone. Bettina Rathenow who helped compile the petition also lost her job as a teacher. Others found that their careers were disadvantaged. Bärbel

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ From the Stasi Akte von Bärbel Bohley, as cited in Irena Kukutz, “Die Bewegung ‘Frauen fuer den Frieden’ als Teil der unabhaengigen Friedensbewegung der DDR”, p. 1299

⁵⁴ Interview with Tina Krone by Kate Boyce, 15.07.04

⁵⁵ Ibid

Bohley, who earned her living through her artwork, for example, was eventually forced to leave the Berlin Section Leadership of the Federation of Educated Artists.

The level of threat that the Stasi perceived in the women is evident in the great lengths they went to make their lives more difficult, hindering their prospects and careers. Also around this time an inofficial co-worker (IM) Monika Haeger, code named Karin Lenz, had planted herself among the women, ready not only to report back the women's plans to the Stasi but also to turn them against one another. All in all the Stasi were trying to demoralise the women, making it more and more difficult for the women to continue meeting, thereby halting further 'anti-regime' actions.

But at this time despite the Stasi's hunt for ringleaders none of the women who had been involved in the petition were properly organised into any kind of group. Yet they had proven to themselves and others that they could undertake a huge risk, carry it through and generate a big impact. The results of their action reached further than they had imagined, not only in the support the petition generated amongst women in their own country but in the widespread propagation it had received largely through its publication in the highly esteemed West German *Der Spiegel* magazine. After the publication Almut Ilsen explained, "The people in the West wanted to know why we did it. Many women from the east came and thought we were already an established group."⁵⁶ Ulrike Poppe said that writing the petition was "the foundation stone of our group".⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Testimony of Almut Ilsen in Irena Kukutz, *Grenzüberschreitend... Frauenprotest im Kalten Krieg*, p. 13

⁵⁷ Testimony of Ulrike Poppe in *ibid.*, p. 15

The emergence of ‘Women for Peace’

Many of the women connected with the making of the petition continued to meet to discuss its impact. These meetings also allowed women to share their experiences about their treatment by the authorities. On these occasions it became apparent that the military service law was only the beginning of their grievances and that they wanted to continue to meet to find out ways to counter what they saw as the contradictions in the GDR ‘peace state’. Thus on 11 December 1982, with 35 women present, the first meeting took place in the rooms of a church in Neuhagen where the women declared themselves to be ‘*Frauen fuer den Frieden*’ or ‘Women for Peace’. They were reasonably young, as was to become the trend in other women’s peace groups, mostly between 25 and 40 years old and the majority had a university diploma – they included teachers, nursery teachers, librarians, a metal-worker, a dentist, a publisher, an interpreter, an artist and a pastor; in other words they belonged to a wide range of occupations but most had a professional slant. The ‘Women for Peace, Halle’ and the ‘Women for Peace, Eisenach’ were established around the same time after the Berlin based women had received positive support for the petition in both cities. The response in Halle had been particularly impressive, with 50 women adding their signatures.

The ‘Women for Peace’ had considerable western influence even taking their name from western groups. There was a ‘Women for Peace’ group in West Berlin and others existed in the rest of the FRG, which had come together in national conventions in Darmstadt and Kassel in 1980. There were also various other ‘Women for Peace’ groups all over the western world, from the USA to

Scandinavia. Indeed the beginning of the 1980s seemed to initiate the start of a new era in women's peace activities when thousands of women around the world began to take part in highly publicised protests independently of men. From some of these groups, like the British women of Greenham Common, the 'Women for Peace, Berlin' later drew strength and inspiration. In other ways however, the East Berlin based 'Women for Peace' was very different to western groups, dictated by the unique circumstances in the East German state in which it had evolved. Their reasons for working without men in the first place, for example, were originally very different from western feminist ideas about the importance of women only groups.

Writing the petition had shown the women who became 'Women for Peace' in East Berlin that they could work together effectively without men. But it had not been straightforward. Many of the women knew each other through their politically active husbands and at first these men wanted to join in with the petition writing. The men had experience and contacts and thought they knew how the petition should be written.⁵⁸ Almut Ilsen recalled how during the first meeting to compose the petition, when one of the men was trying to formulate what should be written they threw him out. They said at this point enough was enough, "it was a women's topic and we wanted to regulate it ourselves. At that instant it was clear that we did not want to have men joining in."⁵⁹ Bettina Rathenow agreed when she said, "we wanted to do our own thing and then also be responsible for it."⁶⁰ Their experience was remarkably similar to the experiences of the lesbians in homosexual church groups who felt that their meetings were being dominated and organised by the

⁵⁸ Testimony of Bettina Rathenow in *ibid.*, p. 11

⁵⁹ Testimony of Almut Ilsen in *ibid.*, p. 13

⁶⁰ Testimony of Bettina Rathenow in *ibid.*, p. 11

male members and who thus broke away from them to form their own independent groups.

Tina Krone, who became a member of the 'Women for Peace' in East Berlin, explained how they continued to work without men, which made "the working atmosphere freer and more productive".⁶¹ She said that the women really appreciated this autonomous and independent political life.⁶² There was a further advantage of working without men, when it came to Stasi surveillance. Irena Kukutz explained, "They always looked for the man in the background, the 'wire puller'. They were not used to dealing with women. This was new to them."⁶³

The East Berlin 'Women for Peace' was typical of dissident groups in the GDR in that it was originally established during a meeting in the rooms of a Protestant church. However although the group continued to meet occasionally in church buildings, it more regularly met in different members' apartments and often in Bärbel Bohley's studio, which was large enough to accommodate the organisation of big events. Without a strong influence from the church those in 'Women for Peace' in East Berlin made sure that they kept their independence, without being forced in a certain direction. It also perhaps indicates the bravely confrontational stance of this group *vis a vis* the state because its situation outside the jurisdiction of the Protestant Church meant that it was left much more vulnerable to interference from the state authorities.

⁶¹ Interview with Tina Krone by Kate Boyce, 15.07.04

⁶² Ibid

⁶³ As cited in Christian Joppke, *East German Dissidents and the Revolution of 1989*, p. 93, Interview with Irena Kukutz, 24.06.91

The 'Women for Peace, Halle', on the other hand met more regularly within the confines of the church and in fact at one stage the group had to rename itself the 'Christian Women for Peace, Halle' and justify themselves before the minister of the Bartholomaeus Church explaining why they wanted to be a church group and whether they were "Christian enough".⁶⁴ The experiences of the women in the Halle group, similar to those encountered by women in lesbian church groups, reveal the double-edged nature of the protection offered by the church. Tensions sometimes arose within groups because some women saw peace and Christianity as irrevocably intertwined, while other women wanted to distance themselves from Christianity. Added to that, gaining the co-operation of the church was not as straightforward as some groups hoped. The process seemed to rely on the judgement and conviction of individual pastors and ministers rather than on the institution of the church as a whole. In the words of Tina Krone it was not that the church simply said, "Come everyone, and we will welcome you with open arms."⁶⁵ Women in peace groups had to make a stark choice between working within or outside of the church and the consequences that came with both decisions. Unlike homosexual groups however, there was never a chance that female peace activists could be granted official recognition as nationally accepted secular groups since these women did not simply want their own space but instead they demanded fundamental changes in GDR policy.

⁶⁴ Samirah Kenawi, *Frauengruppen in der DDR der 80er Jahre – Eine Dokumentation*, p. 167

⁶⁵ Interview with Tina Krone by Kate Boyce, 15.07.04

The expansion of the women's peace groups

Over the next few months and years many other women's peace groups began to emerge in the GDR. In 1988 an official Stasi document estimated that there were about 14 peace groups of about 150 women in the GDR.⁶⁶ For some of these groups the petition against the military service law had been their catalyst. Others like 'Women for Peace, Leipzig' emerged later, inspired by the achievements of the existing groups. The majority of the women's peace groups adopted the name 'Women for Peace' – in all there were eight groups with this name. Other groups had different names, often simply called "Women's Group" as in Karl-Marx-Stadt and Schwerin, but they still had peace initiatives as their main focus.

The 'Women for Peace, Weimar' underwent several name changes, reflecting the way and place in which they chose to meet. After 1984, for example, the group stopped meeting in private flats and began to meet in the protected rooms of the evangelical Johanneskirche, becoming known as the 'Women's Group of the Johannes Church' and later when they met under the roof of another church they became the '*Frauenteeestube in der Herderkirche*'. They were also referred to as the '*Frauenteeestunde*' and after 1989 as "Xanthippe". This group is fascinating because of its roots in earlier independent opposition groups. One of the members, Petra Streit, had founded a women's friendship circle in Weimar as early as 1979.⁶⁷ Some of the 'Women for Peace, Weimar' had been members of the '*Montagskreis*',

⁶⁶ As cited in Irena Kukutz, Irena Kukutz, "Die Bewegung 'Frauen fuer den Frieden' als Teil der unabhaengigen Friedensbewegung der DDR", document 1, p. 1288

⁶⁷ RHG/ Kristina Fritz, 'Die Initiative "Frauen für den Frieden" Weimar – eine oppositionelle Frauengruppe in der DDR' Wissenschaftliche Hausarbeit zur Ersten Staatsprüfung für das Lehramt an Gymnasien, p. 59

(Monday Circle), that had male and female members and met in 1982 to discuss political issues.

The Weimar peace women were encouraged to form their own group after the 2nd Berlin Peace Workshop had visited their city in 1983. At this workshop they had forged a close link with the women from 'Women for Peace, Berlin', a link which continued when activists from the East Berlin group like Ulrike Poppe spoke regularly at their meetings. The Weimar group's associations are an important example of the complex support networks that were built up between different women's groups in the 1980s. As well as the East Berlin 'Women for Peace' the Weimar group worked closely with another women's organisation, the *Frauengruppen Weimar*. They also worked with other organisations within the evangelical church, helping to prepare the annual Women's Assembly in Thüringen and they played a key part in GDR-wide gatherings of women's groups.

The increasing influence of the 'Women for Peace'

The 'Women for Peace' Berlin is recognised as the original and leading group in the women's peace arena in the GDR. An analysis of the group's activities during mid-1983 to early 1984, which was perhaps its most eventful period of existence, helps to clarify the broadening aims and strategies of the women's peace movement in East Germany, as well as the obstacles that it increasingly met with.

In May 1983 the group sent an open letter offering support to the 2nd Conference for European Atomic Disarmament to be held in West Berlin. Later 'The Women for

Peace’ participated in the Peace Workshop held on 3 July in a East Berlin church, where the women displayed the banner: “Just imagine – there will be war and no one will win”.⁶⁸ The amount of interest generated by the women at this event alarmed the state security services. A Stasi document recorded that as ‘far as is known 91 females requested further information [about the work of the ‘Women for Peace’] by placing their addresses in an open mail box’ at the event.⁶⁹

From 6 – 12 August 1983 the ‘Women for Peace’ took part in ‘*Fasten für das Leben*’, ‘Fasting for Life’, fasting along with many other peace groups throughout Europe and using the event to gain support for their views. They then went on to organise a ‘Community Day’ (*Gemeindetag*) in September 1983, attended by 400 to 500 people, the majority of whom were women, where they discussed themes relating to peace, the consequences of atomic war and Einstein’s adage: ‘In the shade of the atom bomb all people are brothers’ – although the women added ‘sisters’ to this.⁷⁰

Yet it was a telegram sent by the ‘Women for Peace’ to the German Bundestag in November 1983 that generated most publicity. This telegram was sent to try to prevent the deployment of further NATO rockets in the FRG. However the women made it clear in the text that it was not just the disarmament of NATO and U.S. weapons they wanted to see but disarmament in both East *and* West and the breakdown of military alliances on both sides. This is the main difference between the members of ‘Women for Peace’ and those women who undertook official peace

⁶⁸ Irena Kukutz, “Die Bewegung ‘Frauen fuer den Frieden’ als Teil der unabhaengigen Friedensbewegung der DDR”, p. 1304

⁶⁹ Ibid

⁷⁰ RHA/ Bb048

work in the GDR, for example, in the women's organisation, the DFD and the reason why the GDR authorities could not tolerate their activities.

The telegram read: "We women in the GDR stand decidedly for disarmament in east and west, for an atom [weapon]-free Europe and for the dissolution of the military power blocs in Europe. Only in these efforts can we recognize a way to prevent the threatening nuclear disaster."⁷¹ This appeal to Bundestag delegates was accompanied by countless children's photographs, collected by the women themselves. The telegram disturbingly went on to proclaim: "All weapons in east and west are directed toward us and our children. We will be the victims in a new war."⁷² This is an instance of an activity that, in the words of one member of the 'Women for Peace', was "typically female", something "men would not have thought of".⁷³

One of the problems facing the 'Women for Peace' was the lack of knowledge of the policies being implemented by the SED regime. The military service law, for example, had been passed very quickly and quietly. Many East German women did not even know it existed.⁷⁴ The women who drew up the petition had therefore distributed copies of the terms of the military service law headed by a huge, glaring title: "WOMEN - you are included in plans for WAR SERVICE!"⁷⁵ As the women became formally established as the 'Women for Peace, Berlin', they continued to propagate information about activities and events in this way, printing small numbers of leaflets and circulating them amongst friends and acquaintances, in

⁷¹ RHA/ Bbo050, p. 1 & 2

⁷² Ibid

⁷³ Interview with Tina Krone by Kate Boyce, 15.07.04

⁷⁴ Supported by my interview with Frau Hannelore Doberschuetz, August 2004

⁷⁵ MDA/Dokumentation "Frauen fuer den Frieden" 1982.

much the same way as highly coveted western magazines exchanged hands. Yet this was an extremely risky affair, not least because all typewriters had to be registered in the GDR, so that if anti-regime material was discovered it could be traced.⁷⁶ For this reason many posters and flyers produced by alternative women's groups in the GDR were hand written.

At the same time as taking part in innumerable anti-domestic militarisation campaigns in the GDR the 'Women for Peace' also built up dozens of contacts and links with peace activists in other countries. The 'Women for Peace' group in West Berlin always retained close ties to the main East Berlin group. It was this group who were largely responsible for the publication of the petition in *Der Spiegel*. The West Berlin group were also very useful in smuggling correspondence from abroad to the East Berlin group across the border. They also held very public campaigns at Checkpoint Charlie and alerted international leaders on their behalf when the occasion arose. In the same way the West German Green Party were a strong link to the FRG political system, with Bundestag member Petra Kelly in particular proving a valuable contact. It was Kelly who had presented the telegram and distributed the photographs to the other members of the Bundestag.

In Britain the East Berlin 'Women for Peace' had contacts with large influential peace groups such as the CND but also smaller with provincial groups, like for example, a tiny British peace group in Devon, England, who exchanged some cards and letters with Bohley in the summer of 1983. They told Bohley, "we admire your courage and want to express our solidarity with you all. How different our countries

⁷⁶ This claim was made by Krone during our interview.

are, but how similar our aims seem to be! We both question our governments' policies on military matters, and we both are criticised for doing so..."⁷⁷

The intervention of the state security service

But it was contact with a group of END (End Nuclear Disarmament) women from Britain that was eventually to lead to imprisonment for some of the members of 'Women for Peace'. Barbara Einhorn, an academic from New Zealand living in Britain, had made contact with the 'Women for Peace' in East Berlin through the END women's group and had visited them twice in the autumn of 1982. She arranged to return in December 1983 in order to gather information for a pamphlet on women's peace organisations in the GDR that she was intending to publish on her return. According to Einhorn it was members of the 'Women for Peace' who requested that the CND women publish the booklet because they desired more publicity.⁷⁸ They had collected reports and photos to exchange with Einhorn. Yet before this arranged meeting took place the international climate had changed; NATO was beginning to deploy their first Cruise and Pershing missiles in the FRG, the Geneva negotiations were breaking down and the USSR was making plans to station SS21s and SS22s for the first time on East German soil in retaliation.⁷⁹ Bärbel Bohley wrote to the West Berlin group in November 1983, saying, "I write this with the feeling that I will shortly be imprisoned. The situation in the GDR is

⁷⁷ RHA/Bbo 009, letter dated 24/08/83

⁷⁸ Interview with Barbara Einhorn by Kate Boyce, 20.07.05

⁷⁹ MDA, "Frauen fuer den Frieden 1984", END Journal, Jan-Feb 1984, 'Imprisoned peace women released – charges dropped', p. 5 and interview with Barbara Einhorn by Kate Boyce, 20.07.05

such that ever more hostility is shown against those people who stand for disarmament in both east and west.”⁸⁰

The meeting took place on 7 December 1983 and information was successfully exchanged about the women’s groups on both sides. But on 12 December as Einhorn attempted to cross the border back into West Berlin she was arrested, her handwritten notes of their conversations were confiscated and she was imprisoned in the Hohenschönhausen prison in East Berlin. The four members of ‘Women for Peace’ with whom she had spoken were also arrested and interrogated and two of them, Bärbel Bohley and Ulrike Poppe, were also imprisoned in Hohenschönhausen.⁸¹ The women were charged with paragraph 99, section 1 of the GDR criminal code which forbade anyone from passing on unclassified information which could potentially harm the image of the GDR.⁸² However, Einhorn, who had intended to also include material about the peace activities of the GDR’s official women’s organisation, the DFD, in her booklet claimed in a letter published in the British press shortly after her imprisonment that, “Neither I nor the GDR women... had any such anti-state intentions. Our concern was purely to promote contact and understanding between women’s peace groups through the exchange of information.”⁸³

Barbara Einhorn was released after four days and Bohley and Poppe after six weeks’ imprisonment. It was not clear exactly why they were released but it may

⁸⁰ RHA/Bbo 048, signed and dated, 18.11.03

⁸¹ The other two women, Jutta Seidel and Irina Kotko, were released on 13th December 1983 after 24 hours interrogation.

⁸² MDA, “Frauen fuer den Frieden 1984”, END Journal, Jan-Feb 1984, ‘Imprisoned peace women released – charges dropped’, p. 5

⁸³ MDA, “Frauen fuer den Frieden 1984”, letter from Barbara Einhorn to the editor of The Guardian, January 12th 1984. Reprinted in the *Frankfurter Rundschau* on 14.01.84

have had something to do with the huge amount of protest generated by their arrests. Other 'Women for Peace' groups in the GDR immediately voiced their hostility to Bohley and Poppe's arrests. The 'Women for Peace, Halle', for example, sent a petition to the *Generalstaatsanwalt* (Prosecutor General) appealing to "Let Poppe and Bohley return to their families!"⁸⁴ Referring to the fact that both women were being forcibly parted from their children, they asserted that, "Since we ourselves are mothers, we can feel what it means for these women, their children and their children's fathers to have to spend Christmas, this 'celebration of the peace' in such way. We cannot imagine what the two women could be supposed to have done, to make such a harsh measure necessary."⁸⁵ In a stark reminder that the GDR itself was supposedly a 'peace state' they testified that the women were "no enemies of the state" and warned that "so long as the reasons for the imprisonment are not clear, speculation will be rife that cannot be in the interest of the GDR's peace movement".⁸⁶

In the FRG there were also huge protestations against the arrest of the women. The 'Women for Peace' in West Berlin wrote a letter to Margot Honecker, pointing out that the GDR publicly supported the work of western peace activists in the past and that the 'Women for Peace' were only backing this same campaign: "We know that you grant the activities of the western European peace movement a lot of room in your country's media. We ask you to give support to the fact that similar activities

⁸⁴ MDA, "Frauen fuer den Frieden Okt. Bis Dez. 1983", Eingabe from the Frauen fuer den Frieden, Christlicher Arbeitskreis Halle to the Generalstaatsanwalt der DDR, dated Weihnachten 1983

⁸⁵ MDA, "Frauen fuer den Frieden Okt. Bis Dez. 1983", Eingabe from the Frauen fuer den Frieden, Christlicher Arbeitskreis Halle to the Generalstaatsanwalt der DDR, dated Weihnachten 1983

⁸⁶ Ibid

with the same goal in your country should not be punished with prison.”⁸⁷ The political group ‘*Alternative Liste für Demokratie und Umweltschutz*’ (Alternative list for democracy and environmental protection) wrote to General Secretary Erich Honecker of its shock and dismay at the arrests, requesting not only the release of the women but also “freedom for their peace work”.⁸⁸ The Green Party was immediate in voicing its objections, writing damningly in a press release just two days after the arrest of the four GDR women: “The GDR government has spoken a lot about détente and disarmament in the last months. However the actions of the GDR authorities in the case of the four women speaks of another spirit: Suppression and persistence in carrying out the militarisation of their own country.”⁸⁹ In this way the interrogation and imprisonment of the members of ‘Women for Peace’ served to highlight the contradictions in GDR policy to the western world. The FRG’s media encouraged this revival of interest in the affairs of East German dissidents and there were articles about the women’s plight in many of the West German national newspapers, including the influential popular weekly magazine, *Der Spiegel*, which had featured the collective petition the year before.

Further afield the women also received great support. The END and larger CND organisations had been alerted immediately about the imprisonment of the women, after one of their members Barbara Einhorn was herself arrested and interrogated for almost a week. After her release the END and CND launched into “a well-coordinated and carefully thought out strategy aimed at the quick release of Bärbel

⁸⁷ RHA/ Bbo 048, letter from “Frauen fuer den Frieden, West Berlin” to Frau Margot Honecker, 20.12.83

⁸⁸ RHA/ Bbo 048, letter from the “Alternative Liste” to Erich Honecker, 16.12.83

⁸⁹ RHA/ Bbo 048, ‘Presseerklaerung von Rebekka Schmidt, Sprecherin des Bundesvorstande der Gruenen’, 14.12.83

and Ulrike from prison.”⁹⁰ This involved communication with the GDR’s ambassador in London, several British M.P.s and Amnesty International as well as letter writing campaigns all with the aim of putting pressure on the GDR government to free Bohley and Poppe from prison. Actions by the CND and END along with those actions that also took place by peace movements in other western countries encouraged the IPCC (International Peace Coordinating Centre) to support the writing of an Open Letter to Erich Honecker at a conference in mid-January 1984 in Stockholm, which demanded the immediate release of the women.⁹¹ This was compiled by representatives from peace organisations in Finland, Denmark, Norway, Ireland, Sweden, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, the FRG, Switzerland, the U.K., Italy, the U.S.A. and Canada.⁹² How far the huge number of protests from innumerable peace groups, were responsible for Bohley and Poppe’s release is uncertain, but certainly, the fact that the two women could obtain such immense support is testament to the success and ever-increasing influence of the ‘Women for Peace.’ The GDR authorities doubtless hoped to see a lessening of western media interest in East German dissident activity after the releases.

If the Stasi hoped to intimidate the ‘Women for Peace’ through the arrests and bring about an end to their activities then it was not entirely successful. Tina Krone describes how some women were indeed afraid after the arrests.⁹³ In fact some of

⁹⁰ MDA, “Frauen fuer den Frieden 1984”, ‘British Efforts to get Bärbel Bohley and Ulrike Poppe Released’, Report by END GDR Working Group, February 1984

⁹¹ MDA, “Frauen fuer den Frieden 1984”, ‘British Efforts to get Baerbel Bohley and Ulrike Poppe Released’, Report by END GDR Working Group, February 1984 and Irena Kukutz, “Die Bewegung ‘Frauen fuer den Frieden’ als Teil der unabhaengigen Friedensbewegung der DDR”, pp. 1310-1311

⁹² Irena Kukutz, “Die Bewegung ‘Frauen fuer den Frieden’ als Teil der unabhängigen Friedensbewegung der DDR”, p. 1311

⁹³ Interview with Tina Krone by Kate Boyce, 15.07.04

the members applied for visas and escaped to West Berlin.⁹⁴ But many of the women were now more determined to fight and stand up for what they believed. It was actually at this point that Krone herself made the decision to become a full member of the group: “With me it had the effect that I decided to join the group in order to say ‘No, that’s not allowed’”.⁹⁵ She did not think it was right that peace women should be treated like criminals. She was not alone. New peace groups like ‘The Women for Peace, Weimar’, also emerged at this time. If anything the peace women active after Bohley and Poppe’s arrests were inspired by these women’s bravery and even more determined to overcome the militant oppression that existed in the GDR. After the arrests too, the ‘Women for Peace’ were much more high profile, aware that further activities would catch the attention of the western media, particularly in the FRG but also further afield.

During its peak in 1983 the ‘Women for Peace’ had around 40 members and about 20 committed members remained at the start of 1984.⁹⁶ By this time the group had been infiltrated by three or four unofficial co-workers (IMs), working for the Stasi, one of whom, Monika Haeger, was actually part of the group’s core, and, in the words of Tina Krone, she “played a devastating role”.⁹⁷ She attempted to weaken the group by splitting it into two. Haeger took photographs and made reports, so that the Stasi were always aware of the group’s next move. The women did not know that Haeger worked for the Stasi although they later suspected.⁹⁸ But having

⁹⁴ Irena Kukutz, “Die Bewegung ‘Frauen fuer den Frieden’ als Teil der unabhaengigen Friedensbewegung der DDR”, p.1312. Barbe Linke left in this way according to Barabara Einhorn, 20.07.05

⁹⁵ Interview with Tina Krone by Kate Boyce, 15.07.04

⁹⁶ Irena Kukutz, “Die Bewegung ‘Frauen fuer den Frieden’ als Teil der unabhaengigen Friedensbewegung der DDR”, p.1311

⁹⁷ Interview with Tina Krone by Kate Boyce, 15.07.04

⁹⁸ Katja Havemann, Irena Kukutz and Bärbel Bohley confronted her in 1989 but she denied she worked for the Stasi. According to interview with Tina Krone by Kate Boyce, 15.07.04. See Irene

Stasi informers in their midst was the price they had to pay for working together, and the women preferred to work as a group, despite the knowledge that all illegal groups would be susceptible to informers. But the awareness of the Stasi presence made the work of the 'Women for Peace' more difficult and the organisation tried to change.

Having earlier rejected the protection of the church, the women in the 'Women for Peace, Berlin' now made enquiries about working under the roof of the church again. However, their local church community declared itself unable to provide space for all women's groups and since one women's group already used its rooms, the women were turned away.⁹⁹ It is worth questioning here how much more this refusal actually had to do with the imprisonment of two of the group's women, and the church's desire to distance itself from high profile dissidents in order to maintain better church-state relations, than lack of space. The women instead continued to work in the ways they had previously, meeting in each others' apartments, often with music playing in the background to disguise their voices in case of Stasi bugging devices.¹⁰⁰ However they did not turn their backs completely on the church and continued to take part in more '*politische Nachtgebet*' (political night time prayers), organised by groups in the shelter of the Protestant Church. Although in this period not quite as high profile, the 'Women for Peace' continued to encourage an expansion of their influence and ideas in East Germany by helping to organise GDR wide women's conferences, one on Halle in September 1984 and

Kukutz & Katja Havemann, *Geschuetzte Quelle – Gespräche mit Monika H. alias Karin Lenz* (Berlin: BasisDruck Verlagsgesellschaft mbH, 1990) for more detail about the confrontation and Haeger's later admission to the women about her work as an IM.

⁹⁹ Irena Kukutz, "Die Bewegung 'Frauen fuer den Frieden' als Teil der unabhaengigen Friedensbewegung der DDR", p.1311

¹⁰⁰ This technique was experienced by Barbara Einhorn, as reported in interview with Barbara Einhorn by Kate Boyce, 20.07.05

the other in Berlin-Weissensee in March 1985, in which many different women's groups participated, including lesbian organisations.

Expanding agendas and feminist visions

A major concern of the 'Women for Peace' groups was the growing militarisation that was taking place inside the GDR, a theme which also troubled women who were not affiliated to any group.¹⁰¹ What particularly alarmed the 'Women for Peace' was the military aspect of the education of their children; the fact that children were encouraged to play war games, and sing songs like "*Soldaten sind vorbei marschier*" (the soldiers march on by) at school and in the Young Pioneers. In a report by the 'Women for Peace, Dresden', the women describe how they boycotted Young Pioneer events, preventing their children from attending. They also spoke to teachers and wrote petitions.¹⁰² They were horrified to read in the programme for education in kindergartens that: "The children are to be educated to hold contempt for the enemies of the people; those who threaten the peace, the Soviet Union and all socialist countries."¹⁰³ To the 'Women for Peace' the effects of such militaristic teaching and the style in which children were taught, could have dangerous consequences. In the report they also wrote: "We fear that the creativity, independence and critical ability of our children is promoted too little, the fear of enemies – capitalists and imperialists – which is generated is difficult to break down and will lead to 'black and white' thinking in children."¹⁰⁴ Some of the women in the East Berlin peace group actually helped found a self-help nursery

¹⁰¹ See section on 'Women's responses to the new phase of the cold war.'

¹⁰² 'Zuegnis der Betroffenheit' (Text der 'Frauen fuer den Frieden, Dresden' zur Ökumenischen Versammlung in Dresden) in Samirah Kenawi, *Frauengruppen in der DDR der 80er Jahre*, p. 322

¹⁰³ Ibid

¹⁰⁴ Ibid

school as an alternative to the state kindergartens, with the aim of making children aware of peaceful means of conflict resolution.¹⁰⁵ However, even that was not immune from the intervention of the state authorities who closed it down as the following report from a West German newspaper reveals:

On 16 December the children's nursery at 14 Husemannstrasse in Prenzlauer Berg in Berlin was bricked up. Ulrike Poppe of the 'Women for the Peace' in East Berlin had two children there. The nursery was suspected of being a meeting place for alternatively thinking young people and as a stronghold of education directed against the state.¹⁰⁶

By the mid 1980s 'Women for Peace' groups began to branch out into other areas beyond opposing domestic militarisation and nuclear weapons. They began to support environmental issues, with discussions on the problems of nuclear energy, especially after the Chernobyl disaster. The women also became involved in many local issues. The East Berlin group campaigned to prevent a road being built through the Jewish cemetery in the Weissensee district of the city. Irena Kukutz sent a petition to the local SED leadership, requesting that this the largest Jewish graveyard in Germany, be protected.¹⁰⁷ The planned actions and activities of the 'Women for Peace' and Irena Kukutz against the intended road were recorded in

¹⁰⁵ Barbara Einhorn, *Cinderella Goes to Market: Citizen, Gender & Women's Movements in East Central Europe* (London: Verso, 1995), p. 207

¹⁰⁶ RHG/Bbo 050/Frauen fuer den Frieden (3). From an article entitled, '(Seit dem Stationierungsbeschluss) DDR-Staat verhaftet die eigene Friedensbewegung', ('(Since the resolution to station rockets) the GDR state arrests its own peace movement') in *Tageszeitung*, 23.12.83

¹⁰⁷ MDA, "Frauen fuer den Frieden Okt. Bis Dez. 1986", Eingabe an die SED-Kreisleitung, Berlin-Weissensee von Irena Kukutz, 30.05.86

the Stasi files.¹⁰⁸ Even a localised campaign like this one was regarded as potentially damaging to the regime and did not go undocumented by the Stasi.

Another increasingly popular topic for discussion amongst the women's peace groups was feminism. The term was originally an alien concept for East German women, developing as it did in the 1960s and 1970s in the west. As Tina Krone said about the 'Women for Peace, Berlin': "We did not conceive of ourselves as feminists."¹⁰⁹ However, western groups often assumed that the 'Women for Peace' were feminist because they were made up only of women. For example, the small Devon peace group who exchanged information with Bohley in 1983 asked, enquiring about the nature of the 'Women for Peace', "Is your group only women because you are all feminists?"¹¹⁰

Barbara Einhorn claims that in 1982 during her first visit to the women in East Berlin who became the 'Women for Peace', she took part in lengthy discussions with them about the merits of women only peace groups. At this point the East German women still considered themselves in solidarity with men who were also against nuclear weapons. She brought them a book about the achievements of the Greenham Common women. It was after this that the women firmly established their women only group. Einhorn believes that "In the end the women became convinced of the worth, of the value of women only groups."¹¹¹ This claim is supported by the members themselves who explained how the successful organisation of the joint petition made them recognise that a group of women could

¹⁰⁸ MDA, "Frauen fuer den Frieden Okt. Bis Dez. 1986", Kopie BStU, 000182

¹⁰⁹ Interview with Tina Krone by Kate Boyce, 15.07.04

¹¹⁰ RHA/ Bbo 009, 24.08.83

¹¹¹ Interview with Barbara Einhorn by Kate Boyce, 20.07.05

be effective and did have valuable issues to raise, “The work on the petition had provided us with an important experience, i.e. that women can argue very seriously and productively among themselves – not just over cord samples[!]. Also those women, who otherwise only let their men talk, found they had something to say and could do that in our circle.”¹¹²

Other ‘Women for Peace’ groups had even stronger feminist views. The ‘Women for Peace, Dresden’ compiled a lengthy statement to explain why their group consisted of just women. Their main conclusion was that an all-female group gave them the chance to escape from what they saw as the restrictions of a patriarchal society, responsible in their words for “eritocracy, ecological crisis, hierarchical thinking and militarism“¹¹³ Alternatively the ‘Women for Peace, Dresden’ provided a “‘protected area’...to recognize and accept our strengths and weaknesses.”¹¹⁴

In a similar way a central theme of the work of the ‘Women for Peace, Weimar’ was the self-reflection and reappraisal of their lives as women and their contribution to East German society. One member of the group, Ulrike-Lilly Koßmann explained how, “Thus the main objective of the women’s group was [... regarding] the whole personal life [...] how we continue to develop, how we can consciously live and also consciously experience [...] how we can live and survive here.”¹¹⁵ The women took as their starting point the gulf between what they described as the

¹¹² As cited in Anne Hampele Ulrich, ‘Frauenpolitik und neues Frauenbewusstsein in der DDR’ in Hampele Ulrich, *Der Unabhängige Frauenverband – Ein frauenpolitisches Experiment im deutschen Vereinigungsprozesse* (Berlin: Berliner Debatte Wissenschaftsverlag, 2000), p. 50. See section on ‘The emergence of ‘Women for Peace’ for further explanation about why the women initially chose to form a group without men.

¹¹³ Samirah Kenawi, *Frauengruppen in der DDR der 80er Jahre*, ‘Warum gerade Frauengruppe?’ p. 109

¹¹⁴ Ibid

¹¹⁵ Interview on 06.08.03 as cited in RHG/ Kristina Fritz, ‘Die Initiative “Frauen für den Frieden” Weimar – eine oppositionelle Frauengruppe in der DDR’, p. 65

ideological claims of women's equality and the social reality of women's every day lives in the GDR. Many of their meetings became almost like 'self-help' sessions as the women shared and dissected their personal problems and relationships, in a safe environment with no taboos.¹¹⁶ The group was also inspired by examinations of GDR feminist literature. As Mary Fulbrook points out there was a wide range of East German female authors during the Honecker era, including Christa Wolf, Irmtraud Morgner, Helga Königsdorf, who inspired social-critical debate by their creative explorations of women's roles and female emancipation.¹¹⁷ By 1987 when the 'Women for Peace, Weimar' also focused its attention on women's health problems and incidences of violence and rape against women, the group had changed its name to '*Frauentestube*' (Women's tea room) perhaps to reflect the members move away from peace issues to women's issues.¹¹⁸ At the *Frauentreffen* (Women's Conference) that year in Magdeburg the group launched a project to examine the situation of women in the whole of the GDR. The following extract from the leaflet distributed at the conference clearly illustrates the group's perspective:

I have my experiences, know the life of my friends, decipher GDR women's literature and read in the newspaper (at the times when it reports about women) that we are equal and that everything's going well for us etc.

The experiences of many women and the GDR women's literature says something different to the few reports in the newspapers.

What is the real situation of women in the GDR?

¹¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 64-66

¹¹⁷ Mary Fulbrook, *The People's State*, p. 170

¹¹⁸ See section on 'The expansion of the women's peace groups' for further description of the group's name changes.

As in other countries we must also describe our situation ourselves.¹¹⁹

Forced into new roles as dissidents?

The women's peace groups in the GDR may have begun from the same starting point, campaigning for peace issues, but they did not remain a homogenous unit. As the decade wore on the groups pursued different interests like feminism and human rights, most groups coming together to discuss their experiences at the GDR women's conferences (*Frauentreffen*) that met each year after 1984 and included lesbian and other women's groups.¹²⁰

Unlike other women's peace groups, the women in the original 'Women for Peace' in East Berlin never actually gave up working on issues with men. As Tina Krone said, "We were always prepared to work with men."¹²¹ As early as 1983, for example, Bärbel Bohley, Katja Havemann and Barbe M. Linke, were also members of the '*Fastengruppe in der Erlöserkirche, Berlin*' which was made up of men and women and was also involved in peace issues. As part of this group the women signed a letter expressing solidarity with the West Berlin women's group for a forthcoming fast before the West group begin a peace march to Geneva, saying: "We fast together in east and west - simultaneously, for the same cause, with the same fears and with same or similar hopes... We feel encouraged, if everywhere people are fasting with us for disarmament."¹²²

¹¹⁹ 'PROJEKT – Wie leben Frauen in der DDR?' in Samirah Kenawi, *Frauengruppen in der DDR der 80er Jahre*, p. 300

¹²⁰ See section in chapter 3 on 'Expanding networks in the lesbian and gay communities' for further information about the location of these *Frauentreffen*.

¹²¹ Interview with Tina Krone by Kate Boyce, 15.07.04

¹²² **RHA/Bbo 055 Verschiedene Dokumente (1), May 1983**

After the release of Bohley and Poppe from Hohenschönhausen in 1984 members of 'Women for Peace, Berlin' increasingly joined in with the activities of other mixed-sex opposition groups and organisations, based around ecology and human rights, like the Ecology Library (*Umweltbibliothek*), and the IFM (Initiative for Peace and Human Rights). Later in the decade some members became involved in further confrontations with the state that were well documented in the western press. In January 1988, for example, Bärbel Bohley demonstrated with male and female members of the IFM about human rights issues, during official Rosa Luxemburg celebrations. She was arrested at the demonstration and imprisoned for a second time, having held up banners with the other activists displaying Luxemburg quotations like, "Freedom is always the freedom of those who think differently." (*Freiheit ist immer die Freiheit des Andersdenkenden*).¹²³

The turn towards human rights was partly down to the new mood of liberalism initiated by the Soviet President, Mikhail Gorbachev, when he spoke loudly of reforms in terms of *perestroika* ('restructuring') and *glasnost* ('openness'). These expressions soon caught on in the East German dissident scene and encouraged the GDR's opposition to look to the Eastern human rights movements for inspiration rather than relying solely on the influence of the western campaign for peace.¹²⁴ The GDR peace movement had also failed to prevent a new round of nuclear

¹²³ RHA, Pressedokumentation, Die Luxemburg-Liebkecht-Demo am 17 Januar 88 und die Folgen, Westpresse, Januar 1988, *Taz*, 18.1.88

¹²⁴ See Christian Joppke, 'The Incomplete Turn to Human Rights Dissidence' in *East German Dissidents and the Revolution of 1989*, p. 100 & p. 230. Joppke specifically mentions the influence of Eastern European dissident group Charter 77 and its Prague Appeal of 1985, which emphasised the indivisibility of the struggles for human rights as well as the importance of Helsinki.

rearmament in 1983/4,¹²⁵ and while other female peace activists turned to feminist issues, the East Berlin peace women, while never neglecting their peace campaign, were attracted to the problem of human rights. Ulrike Poppe claims that they were forced into a new role of ‘dissident’ that had not been their original intention: “In the beginning I did not see my peace engagement as being in opposition to the state; it was more like setting a different accent while pursuing a common goal. But the hoped-for dialogue never happened. By being incriminated and persecuted, we were pushed into a frontal opposition to the regime. This is how we discovered the issue of human rights.”¹²⁶

In this way then, the ‘Women for Peace’ had found their voice, acquired highly effective organisational and tactical skills,¹²⁷ and continued to use them even after the missiles they had opposed had been deployed. The constraints they endured at the hands of the Stasi caused them to broaden their oppositional stance, not just towards matters of foreign policy but also towards the state security service itself and the force that held it in place – the SED Party and its key position of power. Tina Krone, a member of the East Berlin group, believed that although they avoided calling themselves an opposition group at the time, she would not hesitate in calling the ‘Women for Peace’ an opposition group now.¹²⁸ But she claims that the women were socialists and for the most part had no desire to leave the GDR, just to see improvements in the way their country was run. By the mid-1980s the group recognised that they ‘were against the army, the Stasi and SED domestic and

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 100

¹²⁶ Interview with Ulrike Poppe, 09.07.91, in *ibid.*, p. 95

¹²⁷ Mary Fulbrook, *The People’s State*, p. 170

¹²⁸ Interview with Tina Krone by Kate Boyce, 15.07.04

foreign policy.’¹²⁹ In this way the women were part of a growing tide of political activists who had started life in small environmental or peace groups but soon realised they did not want to improve the GDR in just these areas but in all areas of socialism.

With the advent of the ‘gentle revolution’ in autumn 1989 women in the peace groups began to join different political organisations. Members of the peace groups from southern GDR, like those in the ‘Women for Peace, Weimar’, who were perhaps orientated in a more feminist direction, tended to join the UFV, the Independent Women’s Federation, which brought together ‘Party women’ and those from the ‘women’s movement’ during the uncertain months of late 1989 and early 1990 in order to represent the (at times quite radical) interests of GDR women in the new German constitution.¹³⁰ Members in other ‘Women for Peace’ groups, however, particularly the East Berlin based one, joined citizen’s movements like the ‘New Forum’ (*Neuen Forum*) and ‘Democracy Now’ (*Demokratie Jetzt*).¹³¹ But whatever political organisation they chose, the women brought with them from their time in ‘Women for Peace’ many invaluable concepts and structural ideas about operating in a non-hierarchical, democratic and peaceful way.

¹²⁹ Ibid

¹³⁰ Ingrid Miether, *Frauen in der DDR – Opposition Lebens- und kollektivgeschichtliche Verläufe in einer Frauenfriedensgruppe* (Forschung Politik Wissenschaft Band 36, Leske & Budrich, Opladen, 1999), p. 81

¹³¹ The Berlin peace women Bärbel Bohley, Irena Kukutz, Jutta Seidel and Katja Havemann were active in the ‘New Forum’, while Ulrike Poppe joined ‘Democracy Now’.

Conclusion

The activities of the 'Women for Peace' fit loosely into the pattern described by Mary Fulbrook in *Anatomy of a Dictatorship* about the three phases of opposition movements in the GDR in the 1980s. The women's peace groups emerged in 1982 during the first phase (1978-1984) when according to Fulbrook, 'dissidents ... used the free spaces provided by the Church for more open discussion'.¹³² After Poppe and Bohley's imprisonment the 'Women for Peace' lowered their profile during what has been labelled as the second phase between 1984 and 1987. In Fulbrook's final phase, 1987-1989, she states that there was more visible repression but simultaneously more sophisticated pressure groups emerged from below.¹³³ Certainly at this time many members of 'Women for Peace' become members of larger, more intricately organised and all-encompassing groups.

The 'Women for Peace' groups became an established part of the political resistance very quickly.¹³⁴ From the start they were perceived as a threat by the regime. Nevertheless their original aims in many ways embodied the fears of many East German women, who had grave concerns about the escalating international situation and hoped for peace, as is evident in the huge numbers of official statements, petitions and even factory *Brigadebücher*, written by women on this subject. The 'Women for Peace' groups represented a female response to the escalating Cold War situation although the groups' members made no claims to endorse the views of all GDR women and they took their campaign much further than most of the female population would have been prepared to go. Tina Krone

¹³² Mary Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship*, p. 201

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 202

¹³⁴ In stark contrast to the lesbian and homosexual groups for example.

admitted that most East German women preferred to be left alone to get on with their everyday lives.¹³⁵ Certainly most women expressed their fear about the state of international affairs, using the regime's language of blame and support, condemning NATO and the USA and upholding the actions of the Soviet Union and other socialist states.

The 'Women for Peace' groups, however were not afraid to challenge official SED policy, beginning with foreign policy, and then as they became more firmly entrenched in the opposition scene, continuing to stand up for issues like democratic rights and freedom of speech. They were heavily influenced by the western peace movement but with the threat of interrogation, house searches, loss of career and even imprisonment, these women risked so much more than their western European counterparts.

The prominence of women in the East German peace movement makes the GDR a fascinating and unique case, since it was in fact the only country in Eastern Europe prior to 1989, where specifically women's peace groups were established.¹³⁶ They emerged after 1982 out of a collective women's response to a specific change in the law aimed explicitly at women. The women involved quickly became aware of the value of women only groups but nevertheless sometimes represented a contradiction by endorsing the advantages of female activism while simultaneously continuing to work on projects with men. Even so many members of the women's

¹³⁵ Interview with Tina Krone by Kate Boyce, 15.07.04. It was apparent in an informal interview with a friend's mother, Frau Hannelore Doberschütz, August 2004, that although many women did have concerns they preferred to discuss their worries privately and did not feel strongly enough or brave enough to take part in any joint campaign.

¹³⁶ Barbara Einhorn, *Cinderella Goes to Market: Citizen, Gender & Women's Movements in East Central Europe*, p. 206

peace groups developed feminist perspectives and contributed to a growing debate about the role of women in GDR society, which was taken up at the same time by other female activists, notably those women in the lesbian and homosexual groups.

Peace was the unifying factor in the East German dissident movement, and increasingly the female peace activists co-ordinated their activities with other members of the resistance. The women brought with them useful skills about grass roots organisation and played a distinct part in a dissident scene that numbered only a minority of GDR citizens but nevertheless embodied a sizeable challenge to the SED-regime, arguably contributing directly to its destabilisation in 1989.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to make a unique contribution to the new wave of GDR *Alltagsgeschichte* (every day history).¹ It focuses on women as a social group in East Germany between 1971 and 1989, with the first part of the study concentrating on general discontent amongst women and the second part examining more specific and organised aspects of women's discontent, particularly in the 1980s. In the course of this analysis it has become clear that discontent in the GDR was not a black and white issue. The majority of women were contented with many aspects of their lives in East Germany and their complaints lay only in specific areas, such as housing conditions and the inadequate availability of certain consumer items. Even the small minority of women who voiced more deep-seated criticisms, for example about a lack of official acceptance and understanding of lesbians' life choices or, with regard to female peace activists, about their concerns for the growing militarisation of GDR society, were not originally opposed to the existence of the regime itself. Outright condemnation of fundamental elements of GDR political structure and institutions only came later.

Many East German women appreciated the paternalistic aspects of the GDR, for example the fact that the state provided them with housing, jobs and childcare facilities. However they were disgruntled that these provisions did not go far enough. The analysis of the petitioning process in Chapter 2 revealed that women

¹ For other recent contributions see for example, Hans-Hermann Hertle & Stefan Wolle, *Damals in der DDR: Der Alltag im Arbeiter- und Bauernstaat* (Munich: C. Bertelsmann Verlag, 2004) and Mary Fulbrook, *The People's State*

often attempted to manipulate the system through their petitions. Despite the sometimes arbitrary manner in which the problems were resolved, it did seem that women recognised through petition writing that they had a chance to improve their individual circumstances. Their grumbling was not just a pointless release of frustration, symptomatic of an impotent society. Instead, by reproducing the state's language they could attempt to reap personal gains. They did this through indirect flattery; by expressing disillusionment that the state had fallen short of the standards they had come to expect. Phrases like, "Up until now I was convinced of the child-friendly attitude of this state" and "I expected this kind of thing in the Federal Republic but not here in the GDR!" were typical.²

Another way of manipulating the state was through threats; a good example is the woman who threatened to let her mother publish in the western press the details of the abominable way in which she and her 23 month old son had been treated by the housing authorities, after which she was awarded her own flat.³ Women also tried to prove their value to society through their socialist credentials, listing how many years they and members of their family had belonged to the Party and to state organisations like the DFD and FDJ. The petitioning system highlights how those women who best understood the state's limitations had the best chance of success. Women who had thoroughly internalised the regime's rhetoric did not, for example, choose to petition as a group and expose themselves to accusations of inciting opposition. So long as women remained within the boundaries laid down by the regime they could attempt to improve their situation but any overstepping of the

² For example, SAPMO-BArch, DFD DY/31, 564, p. 282, Eingabe by Gabriele Kopelke to the DFD, dated 10.11.79 and DY/ 31, 568, Eingabe from Eva Eichler, p. 16

³ The case of Simone Forgher. SAPMO-BArch, DFD DY31/568. For further information, see chapter 2.

mark and they faced consequences, usually involving intervention by the state security service.

In this way the GDR fits into the concept of *Fürsorgediktatur* or ‘welfare dictatorship’ coined by Konrad H. Jarausch. This model captures the central contradiction between the East German regime’s emancipatory rhetoric and repressive practice.⁴ Thus the regime introduced policies intended to provide individual care and collective assistance,⁵ for example subsidized housing, public transport and childcare, while simultaneously controlling the population through political repression. The system of domination and intimidation created through one Party-rule, Stasi surveillance and the existence of the Berlin Wall gave the SED-regime authority and stability. It meant that when the state socialist project fell short of its welfarist goals, although they had limited room for manoeuvre through the petitioning system, East Germans were more or less kept in check. Lack of economic resources and an obsession with the successful completion of over ambitious production goals, meant that the state’s social policy often fell short of the mark so that the welfare aspect of the dictatorship was inefficient and not fully comprehensive.

An integral part of the social policies provided by the state were the so-called *Muttipolitik* (policies aimed at women, nicknamed Mummy policies). These included extended provision for paid maternity leave, an increase in childcare places, access to abortion on demand, a household day and a reduction of the

⁴ Konrad H. Jarausch, ‘Care and Coercion: The GDR as Welfare Dictatorship’, in Jarausch, *Dictatorship as Experience*, p. 60

⁵ These are the connotations captured by the term ‘*Fürsorge*’ according to Corey Ross, ‘The GDR as dictatorship: Totalitarian, Stalinist, modern, welfarist?’, in Ross, *The East German Dictatorship – Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of the GDR* (London: Arnold, 2002), p. 41

working week for mothers of two or more children. They were designed to increase the birth rate whilst simultaneously maximising women's potential in the workplace. East German women had an ambivalent attitude towards *Muttipolitik*. Although many women complained about certain aspects, quibbling about access to childcare places or about who should qualify for the household day, or more seriously complaining about exhaustion from working full-time while raising a family, many women also found much that was appealing in *Muttipolitik*. Their appreciation of these policies can be seen not only in women's responses when describing life in the regime, for example in the anonymous questionnaires I distributed to women in the *neuen Bundesländer* in 2003, but also in the fact that the state did in fact manage to reverse the trend of a declining birth rate for a short time (1974-1980) and growing numbers of women chose to have children outside marriage.

In the official language of the SED-regime these social policies for women underlined the existence of equality for men and women in GDR society that had been guaranteed in the constitution since the state's foundation in 1949. For the regime there was no room for argument here; women's emancipation was a given, demonstrated by the fact that such high percentages of women were full time participants of the paid labour force. However, in reality, simply enabling (and indeed pressurising) women to work full time did not amount to equality.⁶ Despite the persisting Party slogan that the GDR offered 'equal pay for equal work' women did not earn as much as men, since they remained predominantly employed in the

⁶ It became not only a right but also a duty to work after the 1968 amendment to the constitution.

lower paid sectors of the economy and were under-represented in managerial and leadership positions, particularly outside the 'caring' professions.

Also, where the GDR's legal and institutional framework was changed it was not accompanied by the transformation of general attitudes in society. With regard to gender roles, the GDR, like its western neighbour the FRG, remained 'conservative' in outlook. More women may have been involved in the production process than in West Germany but traditional stereotypes and attitudes persisted particularly in the home. This meant that women continued to shoulder the vast majority of domestic chores in the household, from caring for children to cooking and cleaning, even during the later years of the GDR. This situation resulted in what has been dubbed the 'double burden', meaning that East German women were forced to cope with the double strain of raising a family and working full time. Inevitably employment ambitions and possibilities were curtailed by traditional domestic arrangements. Even when the state provided more kindergartens and crèches to allow women to undertake paid work in greater numbers, the responsibility usually fell to mothers to bring and collect children to and from these institutions.

Much of the reason for this predicament for women in the GDR lay within the gendered language of socialist policy itself. *Muttipolitik*, as the nickname suggests, specifically targeted 'mothers', rather than 'parents', thereby releasing men from their formal responsibilities as fathers.⁷ In an example that highlights the appropriateness of the term 'welfare dictatorship', women were made to feel grateful for the regime's generous support for motherhood whilst simultaneously

⁷ Ferree, Myra Marx, 'The Rise and Fall of "Mommy Politics": Feminism and Unification in (East) Germany', p. 94. It was Ferree who originally began the discussion of the gendered language of *Muttipolitik*.

becoming overburdened and discriminated against. Rather than focusing on women in isolation, family policies that recognised the complex interconnections between the sexes would have brought the GDR closer to real equality.

When some women became involved in fringe and opposition groups in the 1980s, many of them began a process of self-reflection and reappraisal of the position of women in GDR society. They became aware of the distinct differences between rhetoric and reality in East Germany. In this way they simultaneously expressed discontent about the innate discrimination in GDR women's policies, and solidarity in their joint recognition of the need for change. Infiltration of western 'feminist' ideas played a big part in what has been described as the beginning of a 'women's movement' in East Germany. Feminism had been current in countries like Britain, the USA and even the FRG from the early 1960s but it came late to the GDR. Its delayed arrival was not only due to the presence of coercive surveillance measures preventing the spread of western ideas and the growth of independent national movements but also because the state had successfully made the concept redundant. There was no room for 'women's lib' in the GDR when the population was constantly plied with the message that women had already been liberated.

Indeed, it must be stressed that the small numbers of women who began to debate feminist ideas in the late 1980s, were just a minority of East German women. Paradoxically the majority of women in the GDR were actually apolitical, despite the highly politicised nature of the East German state. At one extreme the majority of women's petitions were to do with personal problems rather than macro political issues, while at the other extreme only a minority of women joined the resistance

(although within the dissident groups themselves they were actually as well represented as men⁸). Political activity involving anything more than a reproduction of the regime's values and aspirations was too difficult and dangerous for the majority of East German women.

As for those women who did join minority groups in the 1980s, their existence was in many ways quite incredible after the regime's attempts to atomise the population, through systems like the petitioning process. But the search by dissident women for their own space to engage in private leisure activities and debate,⁹ and more alarmingly (for the authorities), opportunity to put together illegal material opposing state policy, is a symbol of the breakdown of the regime's stable power base, as its policies of 'care and coercion', began to flounder. The impaired economy and the infectious surge of proposals for liberal reform that blew over from Gorbachev in the East gave dissidents like the peace women courage and confidence to call for change.

Crucially even at this time, when the GDR's security systems went into pathological overdrive, certain dissident women still won personal triumphs over the state. It was in 1987, for example, that the first secular homosexual group, the *Sonntags-Club* led by a lesbian leader, was given official recognition. This was the latest in a series of personal victories by women, including individual success stories with regard to petitions and perhaps most crucially and controversially the right to obtain an abortion on demand.

⁸ According to research by Jeannette Madarasz, *Conflict and Compromise in East Germany, 1971-1989: A Precarious Stability* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) p. 135

⁹ Made possible as a result of the Church-state agreement.

The state's failure to recognise the qualities of many women, for example, their leadership abilities, multitasking proficiency and organisational skills led the authorities to seriously underestimate the strength of women's groups in the 1980s. Thus the 'Women for Peace' groups were able to successfully propagate their ideas at home and abroad, despite Stasi threats, intimidation and imprisonment, while the male-dominated regime wasted time searching for male ringleaders. These groups also demonstrated the most sophisticated expressions of discontent amongst German women, and managed to co-ordinate their activities with other members of the opposition in the ecological and human rights spheres.

It is important to recognise however, that despite the limitations of Honecker's women's policies, the domination of the state-party apparatus by men and the 'traditional' values that dominated family life, the GDR was certainly not 'a dictatorship of men over women', in the way that Nazi Germany has been described, for example by feminist historian Gisela Bock.¹⁰ Although women may have earned less than men and sometimes talked about the desire for two incomes, the financial and legal status of women in the GDR meant that they were not dependent on men, as is reflected for example, in the fact that by 1989 more than two thirds or 69 per cent of divorces were instigated by the female partner.¹¹ Women's ability to transcend subordination in GDR society was also illustrated in their ability to collude with the East German welfare system.

It is notable that during the reunification process, the loudest female voices campaigning to save the GDR belonged to those in the former dissident movement.

¹⁰ Gisela Bock, 'Antinatalism, Maternity and Paternity in National Socialist Racism', in David F. Crew (ed.) *Nazism and German Society, 1933-1945* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 110-140

¹¹ Figures given in Mary Fulbrook, *The People's State*, p. 118

While many ‘ordinary’ East German women voted along with men for the CDU-dominated, centre right coalition in March 1990 in what was effectively a vote for the GDR’s dissolution, paradoxically it was the dissident women who wanted to protect its existence. With the coming of the *Wende* these women had joined organisations like the ‘New Forum’ and the feminist party ‘UFV’, embracing the chance to gain new ‘rights’ for women, including the overturning of gender specific policies. But despite their vocal complaints during the last years of the GDR these female activists expressed their bitterness and disappointment about restrictions on abortion, lack of job opportunities and childcare facilities, that came hand in hand with unification as they found themselves struggling to protect the social and economic ‘rights’ that they had taken for granted under the old East German communist regime.

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