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# Did Communist rule in the German Democratic Republic live up to its rhetoric regarding women's emancipation?

Felicity Cooke

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Communism in the German Democratic Republic offers an interesting assessment of the reality/perception paradigm. Despite attempts to convey ideas of absolute equality between the sexes, as perceived by the legal and theoretical frameworks created by the state, the GDR remained unable to overcome realities of economics, the 'double burden' and entrenched gender roles within East German society to achieve their aims. By examining each of these aspects in turn, this article will illustrate that whilst some improvements regarding female emancipation were made in the public sphere, little progress was made within the private, and as such the reality remained at odds with the idealised perception of communist equality.

The 'women's question', as it is referred to by numerous historians, provides an interesting appraisal of the success of communist regimes in central and eastern Europe. Indeed, in the discussion surrounding the fall of communism and the transitional politics which followed, much commentary has noted the positive position of women under communism when compared with their status within emerging democracies.<sup>1</sup> It cannot be assumed, however, that this reflects

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<sup>1</sup> R. Kay, 'Introduction: Gender, Equality and the State from Socialism to Democracy?' in R. Kay (ed.), *Gender, Equality and Difference During and After State Socialism* (London, 2007), 12.

complete cohesion between the political rhetoric on the subject and the realities of women's emancipation during communist rule. Here, using secondary materials produced by both contemporaries of communist rule and more modern historians, the degree of emancipation achieved by women in the German Democratic Republic will be examined. Following an assessment of the rhetoric and legislation established by the GDR, the question and historiography of ideology versus economic necessity with regards to women's place in the workforce will be considered, as will the realities of working restrictions and the 'double burden' and entrenched gender roles within East German society. This will conclude that whilst improvements were made in the *public* sphere, women remained conventionally oppressed within the private.<sup>2</sup>

As a nation built upon a Marxist-Leninist foundation<sup>3</sup>, policies and rhetoric regarding women in the GDR were based upon the writings of Marx, Engels, Bebel and Zetkin, and followed the basic understanding of oppression due to gender as being a direct result of – and subordinate to – capitalism and the class struggle.<sup>4</sup> This view of women and their position in society meant that if a fully socialist state was in place then they would naturally be emancipated; no one group could oppress another as the means of production had ceased to be privately owned.<sup>5</sup> Equality was considered to mean enabling women to participate in the workforce and find paid employment, and this was the primary focus of GDR policy relating to women, alongside issues regarding the family and children.

For the purposes of this exercise, legislation will also be included under the term 'rhetoric', as it effectively operated as such during communist rule. In the first constitution of the GDR the equality of

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<sup>2</sup> H. Bridge, *Women's Writing and Historiography in the GDR* (Oxford, 2002), 27.

<sup>3</sup> H. Frink, *Women After Communism* (Maryland, 2001), 9.

<sup>4</sup> Bridge, *Women's Writing*, 27.

<sup>5</sup> Kuhrig, in E. Finzel, "'Equality' for Women, Child Rearing, and the State in the Former German Democratic Republic' (2003) 26:1 *Women's Studies International Forum*, 47.

men and women was stated explicitly, and was reiterated in the revised constitution of 1968, which stated that other aspects pertaining to women's emancipation should be protected by the State.<sup>6</sup> In the interim years between the two constitutional revisions, laws were put in place to ensure that women could perform fully in both of their duties, as both mother and worker<sup>7</sup>, and this continued until the fall of the GDR in 1989. The duality of roles protected and promoted by the State led to the 'double burden' which will be discussed later, but it does illustrate that the position of women was important enough to the SED Government to merit legal protection.

In practice, the legislative rhetoric was successful to a large extent. During the Honecker era approximately half of the labour force was female<sup>8</sup>, and by 1987, 88.6% of women of working age were employed<sup>9</sup>. The dramatic rise in divorce rates, the majority of which were applied for by women, have also been interpreted as suggesting that women had attained a level of economic independence which meant they were no longer forced to be dependent upon a husband or marriage that had ceased to be fulfilling.<sup>10</sup> Of course, these improvements in the place of women within the public sphere were not absolute; the majority only found employment in the lower echelons of professions, and despite a move towards promoting more women in previously 'male' occupations – particularly following Party Secretary Ulbricht's comments in 1963 that "we cannot build socialism with hairdressers alone" – women remained almost completely unrepresented in the upper reaches of occupations.<sup>11</sup> Whilst they may have been emancipated in the classical socialist sense in that they could participate in production, they still had not reached true *social* equality.

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>7</sup> D. Rosenberg, in S. Wolchik & A. Meyer, *Women, State and Party in Eastern Europe*, (Durham NC, 1985), 346.

<sup>8</sup> M. Fulbrook, *Interpretations of the Two Germanies, 1945-1990*, (London, 2000), 60.

<sup>9</sup> Finzel, "'Equality' for Women" 49.

<sup>10</sup> D. Childs, *The GDR: Moscow's German Ally*, (London, 1983), 260.

<sup>11</sup> Rosenberg, *Women, State, and Party*, 349.

Historians have debated whether this increase in women in the workplace was in fact due to adherence to communist ideology or was rather due to the economic necessities of the period and the nation. Commentators writing during the German Democratic Republic years appear more inclined to view the increase in women in the workforce as vital to ensure the stability and growth of the nation's economy. For example, Childs highlights the post-war economic climate experienced in both the GDR and other European states, and regards this major demographic change as a reason for increased pressure upon women to participate.<sup>12</sup> Rosenberg also refers to the chronic labour shortage due to war, and that it was essential for many women to take up jobs simply to survive.<sup>13</sup> Whereas Childs makes no mention of the ruling SED Party's ideology, Rosenberg does admit to some changes in the reasoning behind female participation in later years, however it is still suggested that economics played the more dominant role in determining their position. This is a view rejected by twenty-first century interpretations, where historians such as Fulbrook view the regime as having had a 'very real' ideological commitment to equality between the sexes, rather than an exploitative reaction towards circumstance.<sup>14</sup>

Regardless of whether the changes in women's ability to work were due to political justifications or economic needs, it is clear that whilst they may be considered partially successful in the realms of employment, the GDR did not manage to produce a government that gave a fair representation to women. Although female participation was discussed by the Party on occasion, it does not appear to have been a central concern, and just as in the workplace, the number of women involved in the higher, more powerful positions decreases dramatically.<sup>15</sup> Of course, it could be argued that given that this was not part of the explicit rhetorical – and by consequence, legislative – aims of communist rule in the GDR it

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<sup>12</sup> Childs, *The GDR*, 253.

<sup>13</sup> Rosenberg, *Women, State, and Party*, 348.

<sup>14</sup> Fulbrook, *Interpretations of the Two Germanies*, 60.

<sup>15</sup> Rosenberg, *Women, State and Party*, 347.

cannot be considered to have failed in this area. However, it is fair to assume that a nation striving for complete equality between all citizens would also seek to have balance within the political organisation, and as such the lack of action and attention paid to this area of policy can be deemed to illustrate an inability to live up to communist ideology.

Although perhaps not strictly undermining the rhetoric of the GDR government and their policies, the ‘double burden’ and household role of women under communism remained a subject of tension. The duality of the role that women were expected to fulfil of both worker and mother – mother being not only to do with childcare but effectively housekeeping also – appears to have been endorsed by communist theorists such as Clara Zetkin. She notes that a socialist society should enable a woman to ‘fulfil her task as wife and mother to the highest degree possible’.<sup>16</sup> In this vein, motherhood was considered central to the role of women under communism in the GDR, and although again this has been attributed to economic reasoning in a similar manner to employment, it does adhere to communist ideology. This issue is perhaps more contentious with a feminist interpretation of ‘emancipation’ rather than a communist one; if socialism recognises equality as being entirely based upon employment then this would naturally differ from the western feminist view of the right to choose one’s own path.

Despite this, it remains a central point of concern regarding the ‘women’s question’ that economic equality did not ensure that the entrenched gender roles and sexism within German society were addressed. The accounts relayed by Christel Sudau of the casual sexism encountered in daily East German life<sup>17</sup> are testimony to the fact that women were not truly free. Moreover, there remained a lack

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<sup>16</sup> C. Zetkin, *Only in Conjunction with the Proletarian Women will Socialism be Victorious* (1896), <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/zetkin/1896/10/women.htm>>, accessed 13 March 2010.

<sup>17</sup> C. Sudau, ‘Women in the GDR’ (1978) 13 *New German Critique*, 69–70.

of equality within the private sphere, with the majority of household work and the main care of children being left to the woman. In this area the legislation appears to have been oxymoronic. In the family code of 1965 it was explicitly stated that men and women were equal within the home,<sup>18</sup> however in the event of a child falling ill it was only the mother who could take paid time away from work to look after them. This further illustrates that the ideas espoused by the GDR government were not put into practice, and that reality did not live up to rhetorical perception.

Ultimately it is clear that despite some great improvements regarding the 'women's question' not every aspect of female emancipation was achieved, and the practicalities did not entirely live up to the rhetoric. The attitude towards women in the workplace changed dramatically,<sup>19</sup> to such an extent that it was considered to be socially unacceptable for a women not to work. In this way the GDR did live up to its rhetoric to some extent. If the most basic Marxist interpretation of gender equality is used, then certainly women were fully engaged in the means of production. However, given their lack of representation in the more senior ranks of employment and in politics it is clear that with a more nuanced analysis they did not achieve full freedom as it would be considered today. Moreover, within the household and in the psyche of East German society there remained a strong belief in outdated gender roles. This concurs with Bridge's discussion of the relative success of the GDR in the public sphere whilst failing to provide women with emancipation in the private sphere. Of course the realities of the regime as considered by Fulbrook should also be recognised. The material shortages, political oppression and lack of freedom experienced by GDR citizens was experienced by both men and women alike with no distinctions between the two.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps in this way true emancipation of women was in fact achieved; they were just as equally lacking in freedom as their male counterparts.

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<sup>18</sup> Rosenberg, *Women, State, and Party*, 346.

<sup>19</sup> Childs, *The GDR*, 258.

<sup>20</sup> Fulbrook, *Interpretations of the Two Germanies*, 91.

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