

Carola Sachse. *Der Hausarbeitstag: Gerechtigkeit und Gleichberechtigung in Ost und West, 1939-1994.* Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2002. 504 pp. EUR 32.00 (paper), ISBN 978-3-89244-508-1.



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Dusting off the Housework Day

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One of the less heralded consequences of German reunification was the end of the *Hausarbeitstag*, a day off work given to women for the purpose of doing housework, which had survived in the German Democratic Republic until its end. The practice, started (as unpaid leave) by the Nazi regime during the war with the goal of reducing unscheduled absenteeism among “Aryan” women workers in the armaments industry, had largely faded away by the 1970s in the few West German states in which it had found a foothold. Carola Sachse’s new book chronicles the conflicts in both Germanies over whether or not there should be such a thing as a housework day and, if so, for whom. She makes use primarily of court records and materials from the archives of trade unions, political parties, and government agencies. She appends a nine-page list of court cases dealing with the subject. Sachse quotes frequently from the material she has turned up, ranging from East German women couching their claim to housework days in socialist rhetoric to male West German judges discussing women’s domestic roles with supreme self-confidence.

The main part of Sachse’s book is structured around the various actors in this drama—unions, political parties, courts, and the women and men directly affected. She then discusses perceptions of housework and the many different types of households, as reflected in debates over who was and was not entitled to a housework day. This discussion is followed by a discussion of ideas of fairness and equality, and how and whether they varied between men and women or East and West. The structure is conceptually clear but at times repetitive.

Laws providing for housework days, introduced by the Communists, were passed in Bremen, Hamburg, Lower Saxony, and North Rhine-Westphalia before the establishment of the Federal Republic. It is the law in North Rhine-Westphalia which comes in for Sachse’s particular scrutiny, since it was concise rather than precise and thus the subject for much judicial interpretation. In particular, the entitlement was not clearly linked to a six-day, 48-hour work week, a link which caused the other states’ laws to become less and less significant as the five-day week became more and more common. Efforts were made to establish a uniform law for the en-

tire Federal Republic or to abolish housework days altogether. As Sachse documents, however, although parties and trade unions were divided on the issue, they were united in their caution in dealing with the subject. In the end, the matter was decided by the courts. Sachse documents in particular detail the 1962 decision linking the housework day in North Rhine-Westphalia to the six-day work week, reversing a decision by the same court two years earlier. A 1979 decision gave unmarried men the same right to a housework day as unmarried women, but by this time the number of workers affected was small.

In the West, the qualification for a housework day was based on the possession of one's own household. This could be, and of course in the immediate postwar years often was, quite modest—critics of the laws complained about the inclusion of *Heizplattenmaedchen*. In the East, on the other hand, it was contingent on having other people in the household for whom one was caring. Unmarried women with no children under sixteen years old did not ordinarily qualify, but married women without children did, as long as their husbands were employed full-time.

Sachse points out that this situation constitutes an important exception to Elizabeth Heineman's thesis that civil status was more important in the West than in the East. In late 1965, the decision was made to extend the housework day to unmarried women with children up to eighteen by denying it to married women without children, but the latter part was quickly reversed after objections from the women affected and their husbands. Sachse attributes the favored treatment of childless married women to the government's fear that if they were denied their housework day they would choose to deny the state their non-housework days by leaving the paid labor force. Unmarried women were less likely to have that option. Their discontent was treated as a matter to be handled by the individual employers, dealing with particular cases of hardship without creating a general (and expensive) entitlement. In the 1970s, housework days were finally extended to unmarried women above the age of forty, and to single fathers or husbands whose wives were invalids.

Sachse emphasizes the role of the housework day as a means by which society recognized the value of women's housework. She documents that women perceived it as such, and that consequently its loss was part of an overall devaluation of housework, which came to be classified as a leisure activity to be performed on the weekends. Sachse's book presents a nice complement to works such as those by Sibylle Meyer and Eva Schulze dealing with women's day-to-day experiences of housework, or the various scholarly and popular works focusing on the portrayal of women's roles in the mass media.

Doing a comparative study between the two Germanies is a tricky business, a fact of which Sachse never loses sight. The institutions with which she is dealing, such as courts and labor unions, functioned quite differently in the two German states, and the people had different possibilities of influencing the decisions made. The prevailing ideologies of women's roles differed as well. Sachse points out the differences but nonetheless manages to do a real comparison, and to give full weight to the experiences of the GDR, rather than bringing it in here and there as a foil for the history of the Federal Republic. The book is thus a case study in German/German political history as well as women's labor history.

The book is Sachse's *Habilitationsschrift*, readable by the standards of the genre, but dense. It will probably not be of interest below the advanced graduate-student level. The lack of an index other than one of persons is an inconvenience; the inclusion of a list of abbreviations is useful, since they are liberally used in the text.

The housework day is a fascinating institution, a rare attempt to provide compensation to women for their housework and to deal with the still-unresolved problem of combining paid employment and domestic life. It deserves the attention Sachse has given it.

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