

## [Schramm on Berghoff and Logemann and Römer, 'The Consumer on the Home Front: Second World War Civilian Consumption in Comparative Perspective'](#)

Review published on Monday, August 13, 2018

**Hartmut Berghoff, Jan L. Logemann, Felix Römer, eds.** *The Consumer on the Home Front: Second World War Civilian Consumption in Comparative Perspective*. London: Oxford University Press, 2017. ix + 371 pp. \$120.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-878426-5.

**Reviewed by** Manuel Schramm (Technische Universität Chemnitz) **Published on** H-German (August, 2018) **Commissioned by** Jeremy DeWaal

**Printable Version:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=50137>

The history of consumption has become intertwined with transnational and global history, as can be seen in the recently published overview by Frank Trentmann[1] as well as in the historiographies of specific goods.[2] The collection of essays under review is a result of an international conference held by the German Historical Institutes of London, Washington, and Moscow in 2013 and is devoted to the transnational history of consumption in World War II. In his succinct introduction, Hartmut Berghoff argues that the experience of total war meant more than just an interruption of the path toward a consumer society, but rather formed an important part in its development. All of the countries engaged in the war (with the possible exception of the Soviet Union) faced similar challenges, not only in feeding the civilian population, but also in appeasing the growing demands of consumers who had grown accustomed to a certain standard of living in the interwar years.

The collection of essays discusses the experience of the home front in Germany, the United States, Canada, Japan, and the Soviet Union. Most of the contributions, however, focus on one country. Only Jan Logemann's essay discusses the transnational connections between the United States and western Europe. In turn, the volume is more comparative in a traditional sense, rather than following the trend toward transnational history, which has focused on examining transnational connections and movements. This is not necessarily a disadvantage. The collected essays demonstrate a high quality of scholarship that certainly justifies reading the book. It is not clear, however, why other countries such as Italy, France, or China have not been included. The contributions are not ordered according to countries, but to subjects, which invites the reader to compare the individual cases. The first part is devoted to food procurement, the second to advertising and the media, the third to fashion, and the fourth to the legacy of the war. This order appears logical and only the inclusion of Nicole Petrick-Felber's essay on the Nazi tobacco policy in part 1 (food procurement) seems odd.

The contributions contain much that is known, but also a lot of new material and fresh ideas that derive from the book's comparative focus. The essays on Japanese and German commercial advertisements during the war by Pamela Swett and Annika Culver, for example, illustrate an interesting difference: whereas in Germany, advertisers avoided war topics or alluded to them in an indirect way, Japanese advertisers tried to appeal directly to the consumers' patriotism by praising

Citation: H-Net Reviews. *Schramm on Berghoff and Logemann and Römer, 'The Consumer on the Home Front: Second World War Civilian Consumption in Comparative Perspective'*. H-German. 08-13-2018.

<https://networks.h-net.org/node/35008/reviews/2193898/schramm-berghoff-and-logemann-and-ro%CC%88mer-consumer-home-front-second>

Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.

the army and depicting soldiers or machine guns. Similar contrasts apparently existed in fashion: civilian clothing in the Soviet Union was influenced by military styles, whereas German fashion magazines and movies ignored the war (Mila Ganeva, Sergey Zhuravlev). Different strategies for economic development after the war existed as well, as Bettina Liverant demonstrates. The Canadian government tried to steer a middle path between British austerity and American liberalization.

The central thesis of the book is formulated in a concluding chapter by Frank Trentmann. He argues that the war “put in play dynamics that would be of enormous significance for the postwar years, changing the quality as well as the quantity of consumption” (p. 333). He cites the diffusion of new products and styles through the military, the change of tastes, and the increase in public spending as examples. This is certainly an interesting suggestion to regard the war years as more than just an interruption on the path to consumer society. However, the thesis as formulated by Trentmann seems a bit exaggerated. Certainly, as Uwe Spiekermann demonstrates for Germany, the spread of convenience food after the war owed much to wartime research on food processing. But does this really mean that the postwar world of mass consumption would have looked entirely different without the war effort? This appears to be overstated. In some ways, the war was not as important a factor as Trentmann claims. Oleg Khlevniuk argues, for example, that in the Soviet Union the death of Stalin and the ensuing transformation of communist rule into a “softer” dictatorship was more important than either the beginning or the end of the war. Still, the volume presents some stimulating new research that can be recommended to all students of twentieth-century Germany or the history of consumption more generally.

#### Notes

[1]. Frank Trentmann, *The Empire of Things: How We Became a World of Consumers from the Fifteenth Century to the Twenty-First* (London: Penguin, 2017).

[2]. Peer Vries, *Zur politischen Ökonomie des Tees. Was uns Tee über die englische und chinesische Wirtschaft der frühen Neuzeit sagen kann* (Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 2009); Christian Berth, Dorothee Wierling, and Volker Wunderlich, eds., *Kaffeewelten. Historische Perspektiven auf eine globale Ware im 20. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015); and Angelika Epple and Dorothee Wierling, eds., *Globale Waren, WerkstattGeschichte* no. 45 (Essen: Klartext, 2007).

**Citation:** Manuel Schramm. Review of Berghoff, Hartmut; Logemann, Jan L.; Römer, Felix, eds., *The Consumer on the Home Front: Second World War Civilian Consumption in Comparative Perspective*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. August, 2018. **URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=50137>

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).