



Images from the popular TV series *Czas honoru* [Time of honor].

# Beasts, demons, and cold bitches

Memories of communist women in contemporary Poland

by **Agnieszka Mroziak**

Polish publications aimed at popularizing historical knowledge devote an inordinate amount of space to communist women – that is, to women who were involved with the communist movement prior to World War II, and who were later members and sympathizers of the Communist Party of Poland (1918–1938), the Polish Workers’ Party (1942–1948), and the Polish United Workers’ Party (1948–1990). These women self-identified as communists and shared the communist ideals. In examining recent publications, I am mostly referring to works published on the Polish market, which are a combination of non-fictional literature (i.e. biographies, reports, interviews) and fictional literature (i.e. novels, short stories). Their authors (who are usually male) attempt to engage their readers with a non-complicated plot that is filled to the brim with shocking content, scandals, and rumors, and the works are being “sold” using legitimizing subtitles that suggest that they are the result of journalistic investigation or archive research. Such works present the basic historical facts – au-

## abstract

I am examining recent works published on the Polish market aimed at popularizing historical knowledge, both non-fictional and fictional literature. I show that they devote an inordinate amount of space to communist women. The function of the images of communist women of Stalinist times, as presented in the publications being discussed here, does not merely boil down to providing a historical reckoning with the emancipation policies of the People’s Poland project. These women are also – and perhaps primarily – a useful tool in contemporary debates on women’s rights. In their role as the anti-model of the emancipation policy, female communist dignitaries serve as a cautionary tale against the excessive liberation of women.

**KEYWORDS:** women’s rights, history writing, emancipation.

thenticated with comments by so-called “witnesses of the times” and professional historians – in a thick coating of phantasms, myths and, not infrequently, stereotypes.

In publications such as Przemysław Słowiński’s *Boginie Zła* [Goddesses of evil] (2010), Tadeusz M. Flużański’s *Bestie* [Beasts] (2011), Sławomir Koper’s *Kobiety władzy PRL* [Women of the authorities of People’s Poland] (2012), and Marek Łuszczyna’s *Zimne* [Cold ones] (2014), as well as in the popular TV series *Czas honoru* [Time of honor] (2008–2013), which was aired by Pol-

ish public television, and in the Oscar-winning movie *Ida* (2013),<sup>1</sup> female communists fill the role of “evil women”. For even stronger effect, this role is often juxtaposed with the “brave and pure girls” of the 1944 Warsaw Uprising, the Home Army patriots, Girl Scouts, or nuns. These authors usually present communist women of the Stalinist era as being rare (and frequently use the same few recurring names, such as Wanda Wasilewska, Julia Brystiger, and Helena Wolińska), but as particularly noxious and insidious – as

women who abused their power and used it against their male subordinates. In *Czas honoru* and *Ida*, the characters of female communist dignitaries – a minister and a prosecutor – were based on the infamous biographies of Brystiger and Wolińska. At the same time, these authors stress that the power wielded by communist women was specious and non-sovereign, as these women were always anointed by men.

IT IS DIFFICULT to shake off the impression that contemporary stories about female communists are driven by male fears and by the obsessions of the authors, and are based on old concepts of women who transgress traditional gender roles and are typically described as “beasts”, “goddesses of evil”, “cold bitches”, or “lovers of the mighty of this world”.<sup>2</sup> In Słowiński’s book, female communists are portrayed as yet another link in the long chain of “evil women” in the history of humankind; they share the limelight with such infamous heroines as Lucrezia Borgia, Catherine the Great, Magda Goebbels, and Ulrike Meinhof. Łuszczyna, in turn, opens his gallery of “Polish women who were called criminals”, “common felons”, and “psychopaths” with the story of Julia Brystiger – one of the most demonized of all Polish communist women. Like Wolińska, Brystiger is a particularly useful object of attention among all the aforementioned authors for a number of reasons: first, in her role as director of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Departments of the Ministry of Public Security, she allegedly personally surveilled parties, political organizations, and religious groups; second, she was said to be particularly bent on the brutal questioning of suspects; third, she was known for her intriguing beauty, which was purportedly appreciated by Picasso himself;<sup>3</sup> fourth, she rumored to have remarkable sexual appetites; and, fifth, but not least, she was known for her constantly emphasized Jewish origins. The image of a “comrade Minister”, as constructed by these authors, encompasses all the possible impressions that are encoded in the stereotypical figures of “a beautiful Jewess” and a “Judeo-communist”: a demonic quality, sexual transgressions, and criminality.<sup>4</sup> The accumulation of fears, obsessions, and fantasies that are associated with these figures is clearly visible in one scene from Łuszczyna’s book: in this scene, Brystiger is in a conversation with Primate Stefan Wyszyński, and is described as a “snake hissing in a corner of a chapel”<sup>5</sup> – alternating between being seductive and being dangerous. In another scene – one that is frequently cited, although it only addresses the account given by Brystiger’s alleged victim, an account that is as yet still unconfirmed by any other sources – Brystiger is depicted as a ferocious sexual deviant who takes great pleasure in torturing young “cursed soldiers”.<sup>6</sup> At this point, the authors’ uneasy fascination with the purported sexual wantonness and violence of the “comrade Minister” reaches its apogee, and comes close to bursting into perversion.

The sexual life of communist women seems to be of primary interest to the authors of pop-historical publications: it is described as “prolific”, “knowing no bounds”, or, at other times, as being completely subjugated to the whims of men, whether party comrades or superiors. The authors eagerly quote the derogatory wartime nickname that was applied to communist

### Wanda Wasilewska (1905–1964)

Polish writer, publicist, and politician. Before WWII, Wasilewska was a member of the Polish Socialist Party; during the war, appointed by Stalin, she became the Chairperson of the Union of Polish Patriots and co-organizer of the Polish Army in the USSR. After the war, Wasilewska settled in Kiev as a member of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR and as a post-war peace movement activist.



### Julia Brystiger (1902–1975)

Polish-Jewish social and political activist. Before the war, Brystiger was a member of the Communist Party of Western Ukraine; she was imprisoned for communist activity, which was illegal at the time in Poland. Between 1945 and 1956, she was the Director of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Department (responsible for countering the anti-communist underground) and of the 5<sup>th</sup> Department (responsible for the infiltration of churches and intelligentsia circles) of the Ministry of Public Security. Although Brystiger was accused of torturing prisoners, she was never formally charged or tried. After she finished her political career, she took up writing.



### Helena Wolińska (1919–2008)

Polish-Jewish political activist, prosecutor, and academic teacher. Before WWII, Wolińska belonged to the Polish Union of Communist Youth. During the war, she served in the People’s Guard and the People’s Army. Between 1949 and 1954, Wolińska was a military prosecutor in political trials that resulted in death sentences and lifelong imprisonments. After her political retirement, she turned to academic work (she received her PhD in 1962 with a thesis titled *Pregnancy Termination in Light of Penal Law*). In the wake of the anti-semitic purges of March 1968, Wolińska was fired; she then emigrated to Great Britain, where she was naturalized. Toward the end of the 1990s, the Polish authorities applied to the authorities in Great Britain for her extradition, accusing her of having aided in the execution of 24 Home Army soldiers in 1950–1953. In 2006, the British authorities rejected the request.



women: “transient field wives” (shortened to TFW). The authors also provide something that is akin to a psychosexual analysis of these women’s personalities, based on rumors – that is, on information that is not confirmed, but that is still suggestive. For example, Łuszczyna conducts an interview with a “renowned Polish sexologist” (unnamed in the book), who authoritatively states that Julia Brystiger (universally referred to as “Bloody Luna”), who purportedly was the owner of an ominous drawer that she allegedly used to slam on the genitals of young Home Army soldiers, was driven by a “desire for vengeance”:

**Imagine a sensitive, educated, intelligent, pathologically ambitious woman, who’s climbing up the career ladder at any cost, in awful times, through the beds of hideous schmucks, who most certainly did not smell of the men’s equivalent of Fragonard [which was purportedly Brystiger’s favorite scent – A.M.]. If you had been a TFW for a number of years, would you have any warm feelings left toward men? [...] She’d clench her teeth and ignore the opinions about her. Yet she was harboring a sensation of harm and disgust toward herself, she was not able to shut down those emotions. [...] She got lost, directing all the hatred she felt toward herself and her career fornicators against young, handsome guys whose love she had never known. – So, tearing off testicles of young WiN soldiers? was revenge for Berman and Minc? – And for men generally, because it was them as the species who were guilty of the fact that her career was not as she had wished it to be, and at a price which she never accepted deep in her heart.<sup>8</sup>**

The misogynistic, pathologizing language of this conversation reveals not only the great depths of the male fear of female sexuality – of its imaginary power to castrate men – but also a strong contempt for all expressions of emancipation, the crowning of which is the political power of women. Both fear and contempt find their manifestations in a refusal to acknowledge the political autonomy and agency of communist women and in the determination to push them into the sphere of female biology, instincts, and drives. Thus, Wasilewska (called “Stalin’s favorite”),<sup>9</sup> Małgorzata Fornalska (called “Bierut’s woman”),<sup>10</sup> and Brystiger and Wolińska (referred to as “transient field wives”)<sup>11</sup> are ultimately characterized as being torn by their passions and using their sexuality to secure their positions, while continuously moving within the orbit of male influence. These women are brought down to the role of “private women”: rather than being depicted as “women with power”, they are shown as “women of power” – that is, as the daughters, wives, sisters, and lovers of influential men.

Through these “demonic women”, who are after all easily pacified and tamed by being pushed into traditional roles, communism alternately reveals its monstrous, criminal

face and appears grotesque and exaggerated. In this context, communism’s most serious crime is to upend the gender order. At the same time, the caricature-like quality of communism stems from the fact that this is just a specious upending, as the emancipation of women is specious too: in reality, women never ceased to fulfill traditional roles, as proven by the biographies of prominent female politicians of the Stalinist period.

**THE FUNCTION OF** the images of communist women of Stalinist times, as presented in the publications discussed here, does not merely boil down to providing a historical settlement with the emancipation policies of the People’s Poland project.<sup>12</sup> These women are also – and perhaps primarily – a useful tool in contemporary debates on the equality of women’s rights, transformations of the models of family and parenthood, and the changes that are occurring in the community under the influence of policies that give women greater decision-making power in politics. In their role as the anti-model of the emancipation policy, female communist dignitaries serve as a cautionary tale against the excessive liberation of women, which is manifested in their sexual wantonness and abuse of power. These tales of our heroines, which feed into a moralizing narrative of crime and punishment, sin and redemption, and guilt and atonement, are intended to show just how harmful this liberation is to women themselves, as it brings about life tragedies, unhappiness, and loneliness. This narrative teaches us that “women of power” always meet a sad end: they are lonely and heartbroken (e.g., Wasilewska was married three times and was allegedly cheated on and abused by her last husband, the Ukrainian playwright Oleksandr Korniychuk); they are marginalized or even spied on by their former comrades (e.g. the Security Services conducted a surveillance campaign dubbed “Egoist” against Brystiger from 1962–1974); or they are forced to emigrate (e.g., Wasilewska stayed in Kiev after the war, while Wolińska moved to Britain in the aftermath of March 1968). Their road to redemption and their return to the fold of society can only occur through conversion to Catholicism, which is purportedly desired by them. Thus, despite an absence of proof, the authors of these tales

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stubbornly repeat the rumors that tell how Wasilewska, Brystiger, and Fornalska became devout Catholics toward the end of their lives, or even how these women financially supported the Catholic Church.<sup>13</sup> By means of a normative gender narrative, the lives and work of female communists are shoved into well-known and recognizable frames, thus making these women more palatable to society and controlling women who elude the now-binding conservative norms of “Polish femininity” – which comprise women who are patriotic, virtuous, and motherly, and who know their place in the world. ✕

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## references

- 1 P. Słowiński, *Boginie zła, czyli kobiety okrutne, żądne władzy i występne* (Chorzów: Videograf II, 2010); T. M. Plużański, *Bestie: mordercy Polaków* (Warsaw: 3S Media, 2011); S. Koper, *Kobiety władzy PRL* (Warsaw: Czerwone i Czarne, 2012); M. Łuszczyna, *Zimne: Polki, które nazwano zbrodniarkami* (Warsaw: PWN, 2014); *Czas honoru* (TVP, 2008–2013); *Ida*, dir. P. Pawlikowski (2013).
- 2 See K. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies, vol. 1: Women, Floods, Bodies, History*, transl. C. Turner, S. Conway and E. Carter (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).
- 3 According to one rumour, in the mid-1920s, Brystyger was to pose for Picasso in Paris, where she studied.
- 4 See B. Umińska, *Postać z cieniem: Portrety Żydówek w polskiej literaturze* (Warsaw: Sic!, 2001).
- 5 M. Łuszczyna, *Zimne*, 17.
- 6 Brystyger's "black legend" is actually based on the unverified account of her alleged victim – a man whom she apparently tortured with utmost cruelty (by beating his genitals, among other tortures), and who purportedly died in the aftermath of her questioning. However, the most recent biography of Brystyger indicates that this alleged torture victim not only did not die, but also did not become infertile (he became a father). See P. Bukalska, *Krwawa Luna* (Warsaw: Wielka Litera, 2016).
- 7 WiN (Wolność i Niezawisłość, Freedom and Independence) was a civil-military anti-communist organization that formed in 1945, and remained active into the early 1950s. Its purpose was to fight against the communist authorities, and it used attacks that also involved civilians. The organization advocated the need to liberate Poland from Soviet dominance, return to pre-war traditions, and "cleanse" the country of Jews. Its members were hunted down by communists, and were arrested, tried, and sentenced to prison or death. The members of this organization are now referred to as "Cursed Soldiers" and are glorified by the Polish right. The National Day of Remembrance of the "Cursed Soldiers" has been celebrated in Poland on March 1, since 2011.
- 8 M. Łuszczyna, *Zimne*, 33–34.
- 9 S. Koper, *Kobiety władzy PRL*, 33–85.; S. Słowiński, *Boginie zła*, 131–139.
- 10 S. Koper, *Kobiety władzy PRL*, 171–207.
- 11 T. M. Plużański, *Bestie*; S. Koper, *Kobiety władzy PRL*, 209–226; S. Słowiński, *Boginie zła*, 121–129.
- 12 Małgorzata Fidelis writes about emancipation policies in the People's Poland in her book *Women, Communism, and Industrialization in Postwar Poland* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
- 13 *Zaćma* [Blindness] (2016) a movie by the Polish director Ryszard Bugajski, materializes the popular phantasm of a female communist as a "sinner-turned-believer" and a "prodigal daughter" who longs to return to the fold of the national (Polish) and religious (Catholic) communities. Bugajski's movie provides a spin on Brystyger's fate after her retirement from the Ministry of Public Security, and is a study of the (self-)humiliation of a communist woman. The "way of the cross" that the movie's heroine goes through in the course of a single night in the twilight zone between dream and reality, including her attempt to "atone" for her sins, strips Brystyger of her special status of politician and as the director of a department; it deprives her of pride and dignity and returns her to her "proper" – that is, "feminine" – role as a weak and indecisive creature. In this movie, we begin to see Brystyger as a woman only when she humbles herself, and even more so when she is humiliated by her real and imagined victims and begs for a forgiveness that we, the viewers, may deny to her with boundless pleasure.

### Stefan Wyszyński (1901–1981)

Polish Roman Catholic priest, and Primate of Poland from 1948–1981. Wyszyński was the initiator of the 1950 agreement with the communist authorities, which made him fall into disfavor with Pope Pius XII. In 1957, he supported Władysław Gomułka, the first secretary of the PUWP's Central Committee (CC). Between 1957 and 1966, Wyszyński organized the millennial celebrations of the Baptism of Poland. Mediator between the Polish People's Republic and the leaders of the Solidarity movement in 1980–1981.



### Jakub Berman (1901–1984)

Communist activist, and politician. From 1944 to 1956, he was a member of the Political Bureau of the PWP/PUWP, a member of the Presidium of the Council of Ministers (1952–1954), and the deputy prime minister (1954–1956). Berman was responsible for overseeing education and culture, and was also the Minister of Public Security. Called "the grey eminence," during the "thaw" (1954–1957), Berman was accused of orchestrating political repressions and was removed from the party. He was rumored to have been one of Julia Brystyger's numerous lovers.



### Hilary Minc (1905–1974)

Communist activist, economist, and politician. Before the war, Minc was a member of the Polish Young Communist League and of the CPP. After the war, he was the Minister of Industry and Trade (1944–1949) and the deputy prime minister (1949–1957). Minc was a supporter of economic centralism. He was removed from the party in 1959. Minc was also rumored to have been one of Julia Brystyger's lovers.



### Małgorzata Fornalska (1902–1944)

Polish communist activist and politician. Before the war, Fornalska was a member of the Communist Party of Poland. She spent many years in prison for illegal communist activities. In 1942, she was one of the founders of the Polish Workers' Party. In 1943, she was arrested by the Gestapo in Warsaw and jailed in the Pawiak prison. She was shot in July 1944. In her private life, Fornalska was the partner of Bolesław Bierut (1892–1956), who was the first secretary of the CC PUWP (1948–1956), the president of Poland (1944–1952), and the prime minister (1952–1954).

