

Introduction.

Writing women's history in times of illiberal revisionism

Through the past century, East-Central Europe has been the scene of numerous spectacular political upheavals and often

violent political change: from the Russian Revolution of 1917, the Second World War, and the Warsaw Uprising of 1944 to the 1956 revolution in Hungary and the Velvet Revolution of 1989, to Maidan protests of 2014 and the subsequent war in Ukraine. All these events have since been transformed into potent political myths, and their leaders serve as national or revolutionary heroes, their interpretations shape future political projects, and their commemorations define the values underlying contemporary collectives. Women played active roles in all of these watershed events, as feminist scholarship on gender and war in the region and beyond has shown.¹ Their participation, however, has often been ignored by mainstream accounts,² which largely reproduce the gendered division between

the front and the rear or the home front, and symbolically subjugate women's emancipatory goals to revolutionary or national ones.

Stemming from this perceived absence of women and their political participation in official narratives about the past, the rationale for women's history of wars,

revolutions, and political upheavals seems to have been straightforward. First and foremost, it inscribed women back into the "blank spots" of official narratives about the past. In fact, from the 1970s onwards, women's and gender history constituted itself as a vigorous field of study mostly in reaction to the absence of women and gender from written history and collective memory. Hence the systemic omission of women from history, called "the problem of invisibility" by the prominent feminist scholar Joan Wallach Scott,³ has long remained the foundational issue for women's history. In consequence, the feminist perspective has largely functioned as a critical tool to uncover female figures active in the past, as well as to explore and document women's contribution to society.⁴ Against



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“THIS REVISIONIST STRAND OF NATIONALIST HERSTORY HAS CERTAINLY MADE SOME WOMEN VISIBLE IN NARRATIVES ABOUT HISTORICAL EVENTS, BUT IT IS ALSO HIGHLY PROBLEMATIC.”

this background, it is much rarer to find women's history works that have attempted to revise mainstream accounts of the past and reformulate knowledge about politics using these discoveries. It can be argued that this relative underrepresentation of significance-driven revisionism⁵ has, in turn, led women's history to function largely as an appendix to political history, a separate field with little bearing on mainstream understandings of political processes.

HOWEVER, AS THE papers in this special issue alert us, absence and invisibility are not necessarily the key challenge and point of departure for feminist research on wars and political upheavals in East-Central Europe. In fact, some countries in the region have recently witnessed what can be called the 'herstorical turn' – an outbreak of interest in women as participants in historical events, accompanied by a departure from viewing the past in a 'male stream'⁶ framework. Even more telling is the fact that this shift has often been carried out, not by feminists, but by right-wing actors. Among them have been right-wing authors engaged in herstory writing, neoconservative political groups that use women as symbols of the national struggle, and newly founded national memory institutions that research and commemorate women as national heroines and martyrs. In this issue, the articles by Andrea Pető and Weronika Grzebalska reflect on the recent mainstreaming of women into history in a nationalist framework as part of a broader illiberal shift in Hungary and Poland. As they argue, women's history has become one of the spaces where the values and narratives underlying the new anti-modernist project of the New Right are being forged and popularized.

Of course, the phenomenon of nationalist herstory is not a novelty. Across the region, various women 'worthies' and their biographies have often been used as

symbols of independence movements or broader political projects. Like feminists who have engaged in the ethical task of righting injustice by recording the stories of individuals and institutions "whose experience [they] share and whose life stories and world views they often find laudable",⁷ right-wing circles have also studied and celebrated their women worthies in frameworks rooted in conservative or nationalist politics. In fact, it can be argued that nationalist herstory has often been an effective avenue for ensuring women's visibility in the political process, recovering female figures from the "epigons' niche" of women's history⁸ and mainstreaming them into the very center of national history. This has even led some right-wing historians to claim that the marginalization of women's history research stems from its rejection of the national-militarist tradition and the role it gives to women's emancipation. In line with this narrative, Undersecretary of State Magdalena Gawin of the Polish Ministry of Culture under the illiberal party *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (PiS) has recently argued that "research on women does not enter the mainstream because it is often written against the national tradition."⁹

AS THE ARTICLES in this issue demonstrate, this revisionist strand of nationalist herstory has certainly made some women visible in narratives about historical events, but it is also highly problematic as it often reproduces traditionalist notions of femininity, masculinity and ideas about women's "proper" place in history and society. In doing so, it has often distorted the political significance of women's participation and downplayed the importance of gender politics as a tool of manpower mobilization. Looking at women soldiers in the WWII Red Army and the Ukrainian Armed Forces fighting in the Donbas region, Olesya Khromeychuk argues that the primacy of the nationalist interpretative framework for making sense

of the war effort has resulted in the marginalization of women in historical narratives about the past. Reproducing the gendered imageries of national projects which cast men as the metonym of the nation and women predominantly as its metaphor,¹⁰ mainstream accounts of both these conflicts portrayed women's contributions as exceptional and subsidiary. Similarly, Zuzana Maďarová argues that the dominant narrative of heroism and suffering under Communism has created a paradoxical image of female activists as "strong women who resist the authoritarian regime but are obedient towards their husbands and fathers"¹¹ through her analysis of the memory of the Velvet Revolution in Slovakia. Agnieszka Mrozik analyzes the portrayals of women communists in the Stalinist period in Poland, produced in the framework of nationalist history during the illiberal turn. She argues that biographies of women dignitaries served the broader political function of delivering a cautionary tale against "excessive" liberation of women, so that female communists were often presented as beasts and demons rather than political agents. Similarly, Nadezda Petrusenko argues how conservative historians from the early 20th century pro-governmental tradition in Russia have presented female terrorists as mad and promiscuous. By showing how conservative historians depoliticized women by explaining their radicalization with reference to emotional and psychological dysfunctions, the latter two articles unveil the broader gendered power relations in history writing. In all three articles, the authors show how the discursive framework of anti-Communism or counterrevolution has often appropriated their political agency and concealed the motivations of their ideological engagement.

Contributions in this issue remind us that right-wing historical revisionism is itself an example of value-driven revisionism, a tool used for the production of the

nation here and now, aimed at weaving a certain value system into the very fabric of society's self-knowledge. As such, it has often used women's history instrumentally in the service of these broader political and ideological goals. Yet much of women's history has shared the same predicament. In fact, Andrea Pető makes the important assertion that this high degree of reliance on value-driven revisionism has been the fundamental weakness of women's history in the region and elsewhere. Because it has attempted to write women into history based on "a new system of values becoming hegemonic",¹² it has become increasingly "vulnerable to populist redefinitions".¹³ In this hegemonic struggle between value-driven revisionisms, women's history and feminist research have long been fighting a losing battle. In fact, as the ongoing illiberal shift demonstrates, feminists do not have a monopoly on writing women's history, just as they cannot count on their monopoly on representing women politically.

HOW, THEN, can women's history escape this vicious circle of value-based revisionisms engaged in a power struggle for cultural hegemony? One way to go about it can be found in canonical feminist scholarship that argued for the need to reach the level of significance-driven revisionism by using gender as a category of analysis: i.e., tracing how the political process has been shaped by the production and mobilization of notions of gender by different actors.¹⁴ By revealing how a specific organization of the private sphere plays a crucial role in the production and legitimization of a particular political order – and many ostensibly private practices are, in fact, activities necessary for upholding the political process – significance-driven gender history of political upheavals becomes an indispensable tool for understanding political processes themselves. ✕

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Women in the 1956 Hungarian Revolution

“The women of 1956 were presented in the frame of ‘national feminism’, in which women's actions were evaluated in terms of how useful they were for the national project. **Page 42**

Roots of illiberal memory politics

Remembering women in the 1956 Hungarian Revolution

by **Andrea Pető**

Most studies on memories ignore their own audience, as Wulf Kansteiner warned us some years ago.¹ Because stories matter and because memory can be assigned and attributed to certain social groups, there will necessarily be competing memory cultures. Kansteiner argued that collective memory is a result of complex processes of production and consumption that acknowledge different traditions, values, and interests.² This is very true in the case of the memory politics of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, which has recently been transformed and now includes a new focus on women's experiences and memories, perhaps a surprising development at first glance.

In discussing the gender history of 1956, the main question is whose stories are being told.³ This means that when discussing women's memories of 1956 we need to distinguish the producers and consumers of collective memory from the traditions of gendered memory and the appropriations of memory. Appropriation was used by Michel de Certeau in underlining that consumption is not a passive process. The producers of memory are building on their own meanings and values through the consumption of culture, which is at the same time a revisitation of culture.

Never has so much money been involved in commemorating the 1956 Revolution than for the commemorations in 2016. The *Official Gazette* announced the government decision 1728/2015 to commemorate 1956, which was backed by unprecedented – and not very transparent – public funding.⁴ There were 2,500 proposals submitted for grants from this fund, of which 1,600 were supported. In 650 villages and cities, a total of 1,430 events were held to commemorate the 1956 Revolution.⁵ The history of the 13

days of the 1956 Revolution, which was quickly crushed by the Soviet occupation of the country, was a key foundational narrative of post-1989 Hungarian democracy, and therefore it is no surprise that the Christian-Conservative FIDESZ-KDNP government paid such special attention to this celebration. This article explores the roots of the paradigm change of gender politics of commemorating the 1956 Revolution by the illiberal Hungarian state.⁶ It argues that the women's history turn in commemoration practice is a part of this paradigm change in memory politics and that it has its roots in revisionist history writing.

The absence of women in the historiography of the 1956 Revolution

The bloody foundation of a collaborationist state was laid after the Soviet occupation of Hungary that crushed the revolution on November 4, 1956, and imprisoned or executed many of its participants. Already from the beginning of the Soviet occupation of Hungary, different interpretations of the events have been written both in conflict and in dialogue with one another, and have constructed a divided collective memory. Before 1989, the history of the failed 1956 Revolution was already a target of

meaning-making processes. Collaboration with the Kádár regime was at the center of these debates and became the basis of self-definition for different political actors after 1989. History writing has always been a process in which different groups in communication with each other produce new narratives and create discursive spaces, and this is why it is crucial to trace how women's memories are represented, constructed, and appropriated.

The history of 1956 was taboo before 1989 as the Kádár regime (1956–1989)

abstract

In 2016, commemorations of the 60th anniversary of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution brought new conflicts in memory politics. This article analyzes the reasons for women's absence from the historiography of the 1956 Revolution and discusses how the polypore state is using the populist turn to introduce hegemonic narratives and to include women in the narrative of "national feminism".

KEY WORDS: 1956 Revolution, revisionist history, memory politics, appropriation, polypore state, illiberal memory politics, familism, 'new history', women's history.



Erika Szeles on the billboard.

PHOTO: ANDREA PETŐ

was founded on the crushed revolution in collaboration with the Soviets. The frame of history writing was heavily ideological, and it labeled the 1956 Revolution a “counter revolution”, aiming to fill up the rhetorical space about the events while politics enforced historical amnesia of the revolution through effective censorship and imprisonment.⁷ Forgetting, omission, and amnesia were successful tools for depoliticizing Hungarian society after 1956. Bloody oppression led to the largest wave of migration as 200,000 men and women fled Hungary over the course of only four months.

After many had emigrated, participants in the 1956 Revolution started to write a different history abroad in order to record their version of events. Outside Hungary, for example, the Imre Nagy Institute in Brussels (1959–1963) was focusing on writing about 1956 as the political history of important men.⁸ Hungarian émigrés were writing the history of 1956 without a particular interest in women because their main framework of interpretation was anti-communism and political history. Women were present in the histories as wives and daughters of important male politicians, but they were not seen as worthy of the attention of historians other than as mirrors to the activities of great men.⁹

Inside Hungary there have been different layers of silence about the 1956 Revolution. Members of the democratic opposition, including János M. Rainer – the future director of 1956 Research Institute and biographer of the executed prime minister, Imre Nagy – were writing in samizdat publications.¹⁰ The samizdat *Beszélő* featured an article on 1956 in every issue because it worked with the truth paradigm and its aim was to delegitimize the foundational myth of the Kádár regime. The articles were countering the false statements and narratives of the Kádár regime based on testimonies and archival research in order to set up a hegemonic position for the interpretation of the 1956 Revolution through the truth paradigm. This was a very different form of memory politics from that of the Polish opposition where dissidents were promoting the resurgence of romantic nationalism in opposition to the internationalism of communist historiography. After 1989, the official 1956 Research Institute grew out of the risky process of collecting and indexing the oral history testimonies of distinguished members of the democratic opposition. In the oral history collection, women as wives and daughters only remember the deeds and actions of their fathers, partners, and husbands.

THIS APPROACH OF writing the history of 1956 without women both in Hungary and internationally is far from innocent. Horowitz warns in analyzing the gendering of the Holocaust that, while the gender-neutral approach produces a unified version of the past “that unintentionally ends up occluding experiences particular to women”, the concentration on essentialist differences “inadvertently reproduces the marginalization of

women”.¹¹ When women are denied the acknowledgement of their active role, they are also denied future involvement in political processes. Writing a history of their own was a key political demand of emancipatory struggles like the women’s movement and worker’s movement and meant revising the already existing canon and writing a counter-canon.

After 1989, one might wrongly assume that the collapse of communism brought a major change in the historical narrative about 1956, especially because forced amnesia together with the meta-narrative of “counter-revolution” had produced a variety of conflicting meanings of 1956 that were already visible during the festive reburial of Imre Nagy on June 16, 1989. Stefan Auer warned in 1989 about the real political dilemma regarding the legacy of 1956, namely how a regime that was set up as a result of

peaceful roundtable negotiations could relate to the legacy of a violent revolution. Intellectuals, the driving force of the 1989 transition, were advocating the concept of a “self-limiting revolution”, the idea of a “return to normality”, and the ideals of an ethical civil society and “anti-politics”.¹² For Hannah

Arendt, 1956 was an example of a “spontaneous revolution”, in the term coined by Rosa Luxemburg, and this was diametrically opposed to the ideals and values of the participants in the Hungarian Roundtable Talks.¹³ The popular memory of the “boys of Pest” – very young, working-class men who were fighting with weapons against the occupying Red Army – was sidelined in the canonized historiography of 1956 after 1989 as being an example of political radicalism. Workers’ councils that played a key role in 1956, praised by Arendt, as alternatives to the party system, were difficult to appropriate in the transition process driven by political parties and not by movements.¹⁴ The post-1989 neoliberalization of Hungary was based on stripping workers of their rights and slicing up the trade union movement and privatizing its property. This transformation was led by political parties attempting to create apolitical neoliberal subjects, and not by a popular movement.¹⁵

AFTER 1989 THERE was a great public need for consumption and appropriation of the past and for access to new information, which led to the opening up of formerly closed archives. Narratives written by professional historians and individual stories about the events remained necessarily separate. As part of this new division of memory, the story that could be told after 1989 in the public sphere was exported by Hungarian dissidents and followed the traditional gender stereotypes. Instead of a meta-narrative of “counter revolution”, family stories were told in which women were seen only as wives and victims.

After 1989, the variability and plurality of the interpretation of past events also gave legitimacy to the 1956 Revolution. A remembered past is connected to identity formation, and omitting and ignoring the memory of women in the events of 1956 occurred in parallel with excluding women from political citizen-

ship and the revival of stereotypical male and female images in the collective memory.¹⁶ Women's memory of 1956 was missing from the historiography because it could hardly fit in the framework for constructing gendered political citizenship after 1989, and this for several reasons.

FIRST, BECAUSE the image of the armed female fighters was disturbing to the social order, there was also little discussion of women as leaders or as politicians. Women's agency and autonomy were non topics. Second, the 1956 Revolution was also fought against communist emancipatory politics, and it was in several aspects a conservative revolution. It lasted for only 13 days, which was not enough time for the internal political conflicts and contradictions to play out publicly. Demands of the workers' councils, such as overturning the liberal abortion laws in Hungary and installing a nationalist, pro-natalist agenda labeling the right to abortion a communist trick to destroy the nation, were not generally publicized during important debates about redefining reproductive rights after 1989.¹⁷ Third, in their life stories, conservative and far-right female politicians entering political life after 1989 narrated 1956 as a turning point in their lives – as the moment when they became anti-communists. Therefore, the memory of 1956 was necessarily more empowering for conservative and far-right female politicians than for progressive forces.¹⁸ For the few female politicians on the progressive side, relating to these events of 1956 was not an option because they had a strong anti-communist agenda and progressive politics failed to relate critically to the state communist period. Instead, the rhetoric of anti-communism was successfully used to discredit the traditions and values of progressive politics. Fourth, due to the continuity of gender stereotypes in family memory, the history of 1956 has been the story of heroic men and loving female relatives who also suffered but who cared for their beloved sons and partners. Remarkable female politicians were rare during communism, and also rare in the democratic opposition.¹⁹

Including women in history: framing matters

This historiography based on the omission of women fundamentally changed when the history of the women's silent demonstration of December 4, 1956 was written by Borbála Juhász as a master's thesis submitted to CEU in Budapest. Juhász analyzed women as political actors and identified the different axes of forgetting in historiography.²⁰ The history of tens of thousands of women who silently protested against the Soviet occupation in Budapest and in some other cities, the only public protest against the Soviet occupation, has been omitted from the historiography of 1956. Silence about the event is even more disturbing as Hannah Arendt, in her reflection on the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, considered this women's demonstration to be the last revolutionary political action: "The silent procession of black-clad women in the streets of Russian occupied Budapest, mourning their dead in public."²¹ Although this demonstration was not broken up by the Soviet Army, as Arendt claimed, it was still the beginning of a new era of women's participation in politics.

Mourning and maternal feminism proved to be powerful political strategies during the military occupation.²²

WOMEN SLOWLY BECAME acceptable and worthy topics of historical research, but without the traditional framing being questioned. The first step in the analysis of women's presence in 1956 is to count them in photographs and among the imprisoned and executed. Mária Palasik analyzed the number of women in the photo collection of the 1956 Institute and in the archives of the State Security Services.²³ She pointed out after analyzing photos of iconic events of the revolution that, for example, women were present in the demonstration in front of the Parliament on October 23rd. As night fell, the women left due to possible threats to their safety, so women are missing from the photos taken at the same spot later that day.²⁴ The proportion of women in the photos was about 10% (depending on the time when the photo was taken), and they made up about 4% of those who were persecuted after the revolution.²⁵ The distribution of charges and indictments handed down against women has raised methodological questions because women were not only indicted for multiple charges, but also often arrested for political reasons or charged with criminal or economic offenses and not with political offenses, so that they are missing from the statistics. Palasik claims that 14.8% of women who were arrested were charged with participation in armed clashes, 14.8% with making provocative statements, 18.3% with spying and putting up posters, 9.5% with giving medical aid to fighters, 8.3% with editing and distributing flyers, 7.1% with denunciations, 4.1% with participating in women's demonstrations, 3% with hiding weapons, and 0.6% with membership in the revolutionary national guard. Only 8.3% were charged with participating in workers' and revolutionary committees or parties.²⁶ This distribution, compared with the percentage of women in the post-1945 people's tribunal cases, shows that the gender distribution was very much the same and was reflective of traditional gender stereotypes.²⁷ These results also show that gender inequality in women's participation in public life had not really changed during the forced emancipation process of communism.

Three other directions have been taken in researching women's participation in the 1956 Revolution. The first was the book by Kőrösi and Molnár, which used the testimonies of children to introduce the concepts of silences and silencing in intergenerational memory. The book features testimonies of children about their mothers and how they coped while their fathers were in prison.²⁸ The second line of inquiry was pursued by Zsófia Eszter Tóth, who analyzed the absence of references to 1956 in her interviews with female workers in a textile factory in Budapest. 1956 as an event only featured in their stories because they were assigned empty flats by the state due to the massive emigration that took place after the Revolution. Tóth claimed that women workers were rarely in leadership positions and that the workers' councils were only recruiting them as secretaries.²⁹ The third was a major book by Zsuzsanna Bögre who interviewed women and reconstructed the history of 1956 through the narratives of women.³⁰ Four topics emerged from her interviews



The play by Andor Szilágyi about Ilona Tóth in the Hungarian National Theater.

PHOTO: ANDREA PETŐ

– the first day of the Revolution, the solidarity that was fostered during the Revolution, the moral purity of the people, and the date of the Soviet invasion, November 4. The meaning-making process of using exact dates of canonical events and the pompous style of narration were due to the timing and context of the interviews as these interviews were recorded in 2003. The first Orbán government (1998–2002) had started a re-canonization of the narrative and had opened up space for women's stories in the national feminist framework of victimhood and suffering.³¹

This absence of women as political actors in the history of 1956 was, surprisingly, replaced by their presence in the celebration of 1956 in 2016, which brought a number of events commemorating women in 1956. This increase in the visibility of

women also resulted in recycling the article by Borbála Juhász – which is available online without any reference to the original work – in political speeches, articles, blog posts, and exhibitions because there was no other relevant research available on this topic. The most visible change in the politics of memory has been the surprisingly large number of billboards in Budapest advertising the deeds and martyrdom of women in the 1956 Revolution. Twenty-three persons were portrayed on these billboards, and 20 of them were easy to identify, including 5 women. But most notably, university students, workers's councils, military personnel, and prominent members of the revolutionary government were missing from this commemorative line-up. The absence opened up space for presence as they were

replaced by street fighters from Budapest who were only representing the social and economic deprivation during communism.³² Even the commemorative postage stamp issued for this occasion featured women in arms. The radical popular memory of 1956, which had been marginalized in 1989, had returned by 2016. The women on the billboards – Havrilla Béláné Sticker Katalin (1932–1959),³³ Sponga Julianna (1937–1990),³⁴ Szeles Erika (1941–1956), and Wittner Mária (1937–) – were all from poor and troubled families and worked in precarious jobs when the Revolution opened space for them to believe that they were agents of their own fate.³⁵ Wittner, who survived a death sentence, became a face of the anti-communist political regime and later a FIDESZ MP.³⁶ Ilona Tóth (1932–1957), a medical student and also from a poor family, allegedly killed a young soldier whom she believed worked for the Hungarian State Security Agency. The debate over whether it was a show trial or whether she was really a murderer is ongoing among historians.³⁷

Manipulation of photos had already started in 1956. Photos about fighting women with weapons in Budapest were mostly staged by the mostly young western freelance photojournalists who were covering the fighting. Some of the fighting and escape scenes that were widely circulated in the press were staged in peaceful Austria for the western media who did not want to venture out for a risky journey to Hungary behind the Iron Curtain. It is no surprise that in 2016 the billboards appropriated these staged photos for their own purposes.³⁸ The mediatization of the revolutionary events and personalities continued on the billboards as bodies were Photo-shopped out and rifles were added to maximize the effect.³⁹

THE SUDDEN PROMINENCE of some women whose stories of 1956 had not been featured before (except Ilona Tóth) is due to the “women’s history turn” in history writing. This new school of history writing is a way for the illiberal state to appropriate the memory politics of historical events for its own purposes. The major traveling exhibition about women in 1956 was entitled “56 Teardrops – Women’s Destinies” and summarized the contents of this shift in memory politics:

In memoirs and historical publications, very often the only focus on women’s activity in 1956 is the silent women’s demonstration of December 4th. However, women were caring for the wounded, printing flyers, helping in kitchens, and sometimes even participating in the fighting; therefore, the crushing of the revolution impacted them. As museologist Fanni Lukács, one of the curators of the exhibition, said to the Hungarian News Agency, the exhibition also highlights that women and girls lost their husbands and fathers in the fighting, and this fact influenced their lives greatly. There were

instances when one was not allowed to return to the elementary school because her father had participated in the revolution. Others were fired from their jobs or imprisoned.⁴⁰

Absence was replaced by the presence of women, but within a framework in which the history of women was written in terms of suffering, sacrifice, and victimhood, and not in terms of agency or subjectivity. During the celebrations in 2016, the women of 1956 were presented in the frame of “national feminism”, in which women’s actions were evaluated in terms of how useful they were for the national project. “National feminism” is emerging from revisiting the history of 1956, and it is reducing stories and testimonies to politically acceptable notions of patriotic femininity and setting them up as an example for present-day Hungarian women. In the case of the 1956 Revolution, female street fighters are only presented as victims of communist repression and not as women who decided to take part in an armed struggle. The sexual harassment and violence committed

against street fighters by their fellow heroic fighters have also not been discussed publicly.

Genesis of the memory politics of the illiberal state

In 2010 and in 2014, FIDESZ – in coalition with the Christian Democratic Party – won the elections in Hungary and set up a new system of governance called: the System of National Cooperation (NER).⁴¹ During the past years, FIDESZ has been under international pressure to comply with written laws and European liberal values. And despite taking over all kinds of policy agencies, state institutions, and funding opportunities – FIDESZ has not encountered nor invited the formation of any effective political opposition. This proves that FIDESZ over the past years has set up a successful form of governance, which is not setting the stage for future electoral victories, but also indicating new paths for obviously successful governance. In recent years, political scientists and political analysts have been forced to reconsider not only their analytical toolkit, but also their concepts in order to try to understand this new phenomenon – calling it “democratic authoritarianism”, an “illiberal state”, or a “mafia state”, just list few of the new terms. Along with the Polish sociologist Weronika Grzebalska, in comparing Hungary and Poland we argued in our previous work about a new form of governance stemming from the failures of globalized (neo)liberal democracy, which created states that are weak for the strong and strong for the weak.⁴² Based on its *modus operandi*, we call such a regime an “illiberal polypore state” because it feeds on the vital resources of the previous political system while contributing to that system’s decay. Hungary, indeed, is an example.

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ORDER TO PROVE TO
BE A VICTIM.”**

THE POLYPORE STATE works with what is referred to as “mnemonic security”, and with the control of hegemonic forms of remembrance.⁴³ The translation of history and its application, and thus its identity-shaping effects, have become a geopolitical factor. After 1989, fueled by anti-communist sentiment within the former Eastern Bloc countries and by the memories of retributions that took place during the Soviet occupation, anti-communism became the foundation along with the revision of the progressive political tradition at both the national and international level. Memory politics plays a key role in this process. Different states are silencing stories about their own acts of discrimination that are integral parts of their history in order to show themselves to be a victim. The memory politics of the “polypore state” is to duplicate, depoliticize, and empty the narrative about women’s presence and agency during the 1956 Revolution in order to appropriate the Revolution’s meanings and to attribute meanings of victimhood and anti-communism.

These developments are not unique to Hungary, as it is demonstrated in this special issue. The recent turn of “herstory” writing in Central European countries has left feminist historians and secular human rights activists puzzled. However, the illiberal memory politics is not coming from nowhere.

Gábor Gyáni, the renowned Hungarian historian, mentioned two reasons for this when analyzing developments in the historiography of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 in 2006. The first is the post-structuralist turn in history writing after 1989 that undermined the professional standing of historians in public life.⁴⁴ If everything is a narrative or a discourse, anybody can be a historian. This democratization has opened up spaces and opportunities outside the profession for constructing new narratives. From the 1970s, as a part of this “new history”, feminist history aimed to make women visible in order to transform the writing of history. Those who were engaged in what at first glimpse might be considered a hopeless activity believed in the impact of their work – to make the world a better place by writing a different history that would help to “right the injustice”. This was particularly evident in the fact that those who were interviewed for the first collections of testimonies on the events of 1956 by members of the democratic opposition were also those were missing from the official history of the events. Collecting women’s oral history collects information about the event and the meaning-making process.⁴⁵ By telling our own story, we gain power over our lives, and therefore women’s testimonies also give importance to women’s actions.

Representatives of “new history” argued that writing political history was the center of national history writing,⁴⁶ as it was in the case of writing the history of 1956. National history and political thinking are processes of inclusion and exclusion. In the

center of this narrative is the male citizen, who is fighting for the nation. Everybody else, including women and ethnic minorities, is on the margins. As Gianna Pomata has argued, gender history is analyzing national and universal history in terms of the roles that gendered characteristics and symbols have played in historical events and processes.⁴⁷

The novelty of “new history” is the inclusion of class, gender, and ethnicity as categories of analysis. But this “new history” is not merely a genre of “writing of history”, but rather is constructed as an alternative “culture of history”, marking systems and points of connections to the past by constructing pluralities of interpretations instead of a single canonized narrative. This narrative strategy offers a new path for gendering history, but it is still supposed to fit in and refer to the “old canon”, and thus be but one of several narratives about nation and democracy. This plurality of discussion also influences the definition of what sources count as legitimate because the question is no longer “what happened”, but rather how to redefine the relationship to the past based on visual sources, statues, testimonies, and rituals.

THE CANON OF women’s history writing its place in the national historiographies of Central Europe after 1989. As Liakos points out, “Writing history means to internalize the canon, and to be ascribed in a mental geography prescribed by the canon.”⁴⁸ At the same time women’s history was necessarily pushed towards a particular history, pointing out a void in prior historiography. This negative approach is aptly characterized by Liakos: “The idea of not belonging to the canon creates a consciousness

of absences and failures which could be described as a ‘negative consciousness’: negative in the sense that the consciousness is not defined by what the subject is, but by what the subject is not, that is, the adoption of a perspective of self-exclusion.”⁴⁹ Therefore, writing women’s history defined itself as separate with the hope of filling in the void.

Writing women’s history in Central Europe has a specific intellectual history.⁵⁰ In this paradigm, women’s history found a place

for itself, joining the stream demanding the revision of history based on oral history testimonies, while beginning through conferences and conference volumes to build up its own canon, or a canon of their own, to paraphrase Virginia Woolf. During this process in the early 1990s, women’s history partly functioned as a revisionist history because it undermined and/or revised the previous canon by bringing in a new group, namely women, as a legitimate focus of historical analysis.

Writing women’s history emerged in that region as a part of the European neoliberal modernity in the transition of 1989 from communism to democracy. But the normative power of

“ORAL HISTORY BECAME A POPULAR METHOD OF COLLECTING STORIES OF ‘HOW THE 20TH CENTURY HAS REALLY HAPPENED’ WITH THE AIM OF CREATING A COUNTER CANON TO COMMUNIST HISTORY WRITING.”



Women's demonstration on December 4, 1956, in Budapest.

PHOTO: FORTEPAN COLLECTION NO. 85716, DONATED BY GYULA NAGY

Europe (the EU) and the international framework has been weakening in recent years. The triple crises – the financial crisis of 2008 and the refugee crisis together with security problems – contributed to the previously consensual neoliberal concept of Europe becoming multilayered and to the emergence of new actors. Alternative concepts of Europe have gained momentum, and different forms of illiberal governance have influenced, among other important institutions, the infrastructure of writing history.⁵¹ These characteristics of writing women's history as a revisionist history were connected to “negative consciousness”, which made it extremely vulnerable to reconceptualization during the second transition of the build-up of the polypore illiberal states and the associated populist turn.

THE REASON WHY women suddenly came to the center of the celebration of the 1956 Revolution in 2016 was the revisionist character of women's history. History writing and teaching history still treats women's history as separate, or, as Virginia Woolf wrote nearly a hundred years ago, as an appendix. Paradoxically, the practitioners of women's history mostly consider this separation and particularism as a fruitful and promising path for developing women's history.

According to Tucker's typology, historical revisionism uses three strategies: *significance-driven* revisionism, that is, when there is a change in what historians find significant in history, *evidence-driven* revisions, when new evidence is discovered, and *value-driven* revisionism, when historical events and processes are re-evaluated because a new system of values becomes hegemonic.⁵² These three kinds of revisions cannot be divided so strictly, but women's history writing can mostly be considered as belonging to value-driven revisionism, which makes women's history vulnerable to populist redefinitions. Women's history writing has never reached the status of significance-driven revisionism, especially because it is a part of “new history”.⁵³ Demanding that women's stories should be included based on ethics is not enough, because this process of revision is a political

power struggle, and the actors should understand how politics works and how people are mobilized for different struggles.

GÁBOR GYÁNI also argued that the second cause is the fact that the post-modern turn was combined with the emerging importance of personal recollections about events (ego documents, oral histories, testimonies, diaries, etc.) as sources.⁵⁴ Only personal sources about the history of 1956 were considered as authentic and true, in opposition to the history of falsifications during the Kádár regime of 1956–1989. While the “age of witness”⁵⁵ in Holocaust historiography addressed experiences of new victim groups and came up with unprecedented and innovative methods of historical research, the case of writing the history of the 1956 Revolution in Hungary has resulted in the opposite – including a marginalization of professional historians and an overwhelming description of personal experiences instead of theorizing, as well as marginalizing the experiences of certain groups while prioritizing those of others, such as women.

The history of 1956 is mostly based on oral tradition. Because the Revolution lasted only 13 days and was followed by bloody repression and heavy censorship, documents were either produced by the repressive state or remained in the oral tradition. As connected to the demand of “recovering the truth”, this means that testimonies were labeled as true, not just authentic. The positivistic credo of Langlois and Seignobos, written in 1898 in *Introduction aux études historiques* “L'histoire se fait avec des documents. Pas de documents, pas d'histoire?” still pursues historians today. “New post-structuralist history” has not stopped following the “source driven” nature of history and rational idealism, saying that all of history can be truthfully understood if there are enough sources available. These sources, however, were mostly oral sources presenting a claim to authenticity and truth in a historical culture in which multiple stories were competing for hegemonic status.

Writing the history of 1956 started off in the positivist and rationalist idealist frame. Several books were published of collec-



The Hungarian National Opera announcing 56 themed performances.

PHOTO: ANDREA PETŐ

tions of interviews that were to be analyzed as written memory documents. The spoken words of testimonies became written documents. Collections of interviews are hosted at the Institute of Political History (the former Institute of Party History and Oral History Collection of the 1956 Institute). The 20th Century Institute and the House of Terror started collecting their own testimonies from survivors whom they had selected to create their own collection. Testimonies serve in this paradigm as authentic and true memories. Families and the private sphere were sites where, it was hoped, the state could not penetrate, and they were the main sites of identity formation defining “us” and “them”. Family was also the site that was the most resistant to statist feminist emancipation and where expectations regarding femininity and masculinity had not changed much, thus leading to the emergence of “familialism” after 1989 in gender equality politics.⁵⁶

THE THIRD FACTOR contributing to the change of illiberal memory politics is that after 1989 there was a shift in memory studies towards a truth paradigm that sought to counteract the previous manipulative historiography of communism. The category of memory has been placed in the center of scholarly investigations, and in this process a memory boom of alternative personal stories and new methods of oral history has resurfaced. “Truth” has become a personalized matter, making the individual subject the subject of history writing. In this paradigm, women’s history writing was introduced seemingly on a winning ticket as life stories became an acknowledged subject after 1989. At the same

time, the quickly emerging new historical canon integrated both the previously dominant truth framework and new truths, including women as the subjects of history writing.⁵⁷

The truth paradigm as a framework for history writing was necessarily strengthened in Central Europe after 1989. The idea was that political freedom made it possible to access the veracity of history because political manipulation was no longer imposed on readers. Previously inaccessible archives were opened up for researchers, and this was the period of “archive fever” described by Jacques Derrida.⁵⁸ The belief is that the truth and its explanations are there in the archives and you just have to find it because, and here is the chance for conspiracy theories, the archives were closed and hidden from you by unidentified powers, although these powers are mostly understood to be “the communists”. Oral history became a popular method of collecting stories of “how the 20th century really happened” with the aim of creating a counter canon to the communist history writing.⁵⁹

Towards a new paradigm of gendered memory politics

The illiberal memory politics’ use of the women’s history turn is informed by the populist turn. Duncan Light pointed out, while analyzing the transition of 1989, that the various nations of Central Europe were moved “by the desire to construct new post-communist identities, characterized by a democratic, pluralist, capitalist and largely westward-looking orientation”.⁶⁰ Now a deepening reversal is present – these identities are not democratic, not pluralist, not capitalist, and certainly not westward looking. Instead, as I pointed out in my article on far right memorialization practices in Hungary, the community of jointly experienced suffering defines national identity. And community itself is seen as anti-pluralist. The newly emerging and victorious anti-modernism, which from a social and spiritual point of view questions neoliberalism, also turned history into an ideological weapon in order to reach its political aims and to offer a livable, real, and acceptable alternative future. This anti-modernism goes hand in hand with revisionist history writing (and “history politics”), which defines the nation as a community of victims (always referring to those who caused the suffering) and offers redemption in the near future. As a result of this revisionist history writing, large meta-narratives are being constructed, new methods are being used, and new sources are being discovered, all of which refer to the position of the narrator of the story. This narrative position, as Eric Hobsbawm wrote in *The Guardian*, comes down to “my truth is as valid as your truth”.⁶¹ This stance entails a general opposition to universalism in non-traditional history writing. This anti-universalism and the relative statute of truth connect revisionist history writing to women’s history writing. This connection is transformed into a socializational fight, to use the words of Gramsci, and both streams define new historical sources as legitimate historical sources.⁶² The revisionist history writing is fighting against communist history writing, while women’s history writing opposes the sanctification of social hierarchies.

The revisionism of “new history” together with the truth

paradigm informed by anti-communism made the previous narrative about 1956 vulnerable when the populist turn brought in the “my truth is as valid as your truth” framework. As a result of the populist turn, the memory politics of the illiberal state is focusing on people, not on leaders – “the people” have spoken – and it is no longer individuals who are the agents of history. The commemoration of 1956 labeled the events as the revolution of the masses, as was emphasized on the official website:

We can say it out loud now, that this revolution did not have leaders, in this revolution and freedom, people raised their arms because their real leaders had been executed, forced to emigrate, or imprisoned, and those who replaced them were servants of foreign, soviet occupying forces who betrayed them.⁶³

The familial turn as a major component of the polypore state emphasizes women’s roles as caregivers, wives, and daughters. The roots of familism go back to the 1956 Revolution and can be found in the historiography written by émigrés and members of the democratic opposition, together with the missing paradigm shift in 1989. The evidence for this is in what has happened with the visual representations of those women who were selected to be on the billboards. The women on the billboards are represented as innocent and caring women with light makeup – while tough street fighters are presented as victims – and heavily Photoshopped. This type of history writing is based on the fetishization of complementary gender differences, just as we saw prior to 1989. And if it is not accompanied by a critical scrutiny of its production, it can be fraught with the same dire consequences as ignoring the very same differences.

The emerging anti-gender discourses have had a major impact as far as the future of writing women’s history is concerned. The turn in women’s history writing is a hegemonic fight, in the Gramscian sense, for control of the process of writing history. Revisionist history writing is successfully applying the same methods and theories used in women’s history writing, and by doing so it is creating another counter canon. As far as the politics of presence is concerned, there are women in history, but in a fundamentally different frame. The triple crises of 2008 also determined the challenges which women’s history writing faces as a form of revisionist history writing, while at the same time anti-gender movements are challenging the definition of gender.⁶⁴

The professional response to the institutionalized memory politics of the illiberal state remained in the frame of “negative consciousness”. At the major scientific conference in Eger titled “1956 and Socialism” held on September, 8-10, 2016, only six out of nearly 100 conference papers focused on the history of women in 1956. In all six papers, all published in a women’s studies journal, women were discussed as prostitutes, workers, wives, and as symbolic representations.

THE GOVERNMENT OFFENSIVE to use public spaces for the memorialization of its version of history also mobilized civil resistance.

The group “Living Memorial”, which was founded to protest against the Monument of German Occupation on Liberty Square also participated in this resistance with a guerilla exhibition.⁶⁵ They set up a series of four panels entitled “Living ‘56: The Non-amended Memory of the Revolution” in front of the controversial and highly popular House of Terror museum to show what was missing from the remembrance. All of the panels included a small inset with the text: “Did you know that this was also part of the 1956 Revolution? Do you agree that no one should appropriate history? These are a couple of things that are being left out of the official narrative.” The signs were then dedicated to the intellectuals and politicians, to the journalists and writers, to the Imre Nagy group, and to students and workers detailing the roles they played in the revolution. Needless to say that all were men. The illusion of 1989 – that un-politicized memory spaces are possible because there is a consensus on what the good fight is – is still present among historians. The illusion that the present backlash will be over at some point is still haunting the profession, which does not seem to recognize that this is not an innocent omission but a socialization fight to hijack the memory of 1956. Unlike the case of Holocaust memorialization, the turn towards witnesses’ testimonies was not based on a consensus, but rather on conflicting hegemonic claims. The “new history” writing opened up space for an even “newer history” that is using the same revisionist methods. Only a rethinking of relationships to politics and to the political can change power relations in this hegemonic fight. The belief that the memory of 1956 is a living memory, and that it is possible to reintegrate the previously omitted social groups and personalities into the revised history of 1956, is a fight that was lost from the beginning. ✕

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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 Mrozik**

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-

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. Płużański’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),¹ 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

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.

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”.² 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 3rd and 5th 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;³ 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.⁴ 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”⁵ – 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”.⁶ 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 3rd Department (responsible for counter-ing the anti-communist underground) and of the 5th 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.⁸

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”),⁹ Małgorzata Fornalska (called “Bierut’s woman”),¹⁰ and Brystiger and Wolińska (referred to as “transient field wives”)¹¹ 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.¹² 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

**“THIS
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Oleksandr Kornychuk); 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 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.¹³ 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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- 4 See B. Umińska, *Postać z cieniem: Portrety Żydówek w polskiej literaturze* (Warsaw: Sic!, 2001).
- 5 M. Łuszczyna, *Zimne*, 17.
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- 8 M. Łuszczyna, *Zimne*, 33–34.
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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 Brystiger'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 Brystiger'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).





Andriana Susak went straight from Maidan to the warzone. She joined a volunteer battalion and served as a shock trooper under the nom-de guerre "Malysh" ("Kid").

PHOTO: KLEOPATRA ANFEROVA

Experiences of women at war

Servicewomen during WWII and in the Ukrainian armed forces in the conflict in Donbas

by **Olesya Khromeychuk**

Women's relationship to war is more complex than men's "because society with its traditional gender divisions of labor has assigned the official task of fighting to men," argues Nicole Ann Dombrowski.¹

This does not mean, of course, that women do not fight in wars. As Simone de Beauvoir puts it in her now classic text, historically "women were known to take part in bloody wars or vendettas; they showed as much courage and cruelty as males".² The problem of women's invisibility as actors of political violence, therefore, is not in their supposed inability to fight in wars. The problem is in societies' ongoing inability to see women in roles that do not fit traditional gender norms. Beauvoir herself and many scholars before and especially after her have tried to make women visible in all spheres of life, including warfare. Nevertheless, the dilemma of how to represent women in the context of war persists. If non-military (although not necessarily unmilitarized) women are usually fitted into categories of civilian victims and mothers-sisters-daughters-lovers-wives of military men, those who become members of the military are usually perceived as exceptional female warriors.³ Indeed, female members of the military are relatively rare, but, as Barbara Alpern Engel argues, they form "a substantial minority".⁴ Ignoring them because of their numerical inferiority would mean neglecting war stories of thousands of individuals who can offer a narrative of war different to the customary heroic tale of male glory on the battlefield. However, emphasizing their participation in war carries the danger of hailing them precisely as extraordinary, thereby strengthening the assumption that "ordinary" women are inherently peaceful and that the job of fighting wars should be reserved for men whose gender predisposes them to soldiering. The ways in which these dilemmas are dealt with (or ignored) are indicative of the attitude of state and society towards its female citizens.

abstract

This paper examines women's contribution to war and the perceptions of that contribution by comparing experiences of women in the Red Army during the Second World War and in the Ukrainian Armed Forces in the conflict in the Donbas region. Through comparative analysis, the paper argues that in both cases structural gender discrimination was ingrained in the military, which accepted women's contribution to war in times of need, but treated that contribution as subsidiary, thereby distorting men's and women's experiences of warfare and facilitating the instrumentalized militarization of women.

KEYWORDS: Gender, war, militarization, Second World War, conflict in Donbas.

In this paper, I examine perceptions of servicewomen's contributions to war by comparing two cases: women in the Red Army during the Second World War and in the Ukrainian Armed Forces in the conflict in the Donbas region. In spite of their distance in time and the difference in scale and type of respective conflicts, the similarities in the two cases are startling. I focus on the discrepancy between the contribution of women to the war effort and the perception of this contribution within their respective societies and demonstrate that in both cases, regardless of their roles in warfare, women were perceived as an auxiliary force, supporting men in fighting wars. Specific individual women who did not fit into the auxiliary category have been presented as exceptional, but rather than challenging gender stereotypes, accentuation of their exceptionality has been more likely to reinforce the general perception of women's contribution as essentially supportive. I argue that structural gender discrimination was ingrained in the military, which accepted women's contribution to war in times of need, but treated that contribution as subsidiary. Such auxiliarization of most women's contributions to war on the one hand, and the turning of others into exceptional heroines, reinforces male participation in war as the norm, distorts the reality of war as experienced by both women and men, and facilitates the instrumentalized militarization of women. There is a significant body of literature analyzing

the participation of women in the Red Army. It is rich in detail about the types of roles women performed and the attitude the Soviet state adopted towards their recruitment.⁵ The literature on contemporary servicewomen in the Donbas is much scarcer, and I will rely on the few published sources available to date.⁶ In both cases, I will refer to interviews with the former servicewomen, which I collected in 2015–2016, and other sources such as published interviews and media material.

Servicewomen's partial visibility in the two cases discussed here means that their exact numbers are not known. The Red Army estimates vary significantly. Oleg Budnitskii relies on an official Soviet state estimate and argues that "according to the Ministry of Defense, 490,235 women were called up by the army and the navy during the war".⁷ Anna Krylova states that more than 900,000 women served in the Soviet Armed Forces during the Second World War.⁸ Roger D. Markwick and Euridice Charon-Cardona offer an even higher estimate. They write:

Between August 1941 and October 1944, the GKO [State Defense Committee] and NKO [People's Commissariat for Defense] decreed the mobilization of an estimated 712,529 women for the Red Army and Navy [...]. 463,503 were still in the Red Army as at 1 January 1945; 318,980 of these women were actually on the fighting front. If we add the 512,161 "civilian volunteers" (*volnonaemny[i] sostav*) in the Red Army, but not in the Red Navy, as at 1 January 1945 (medical, food, supplies, laundry, repair personnel, etc.) [...] the total number of women who served with the Soviet armed forces in the course of the war was just in excess of one million.⁹

The number that is usually quoted in literature about Red Army women is 800,000.¹⁰

In the Ukrainian case, there is also no clear figure for the participation of women in what is officially known as the anti-terrorist operation (ATO).¹¹ According to the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, as of October 9, 2017, 6,282 women had received the "status of participants of military action for their participation in the anti-terrorist operation".¹² This figure, however, did not include a number of categories of servicewomen: those who served in the war zone illegally, volunteers who worked at the front irregularly, around 500 women who were part of the National Guard, and those who were part of the Ukrainian Armed Forces but did not serve in the ATO zone for any lengthy period.¹³ Indeed, Maria Berlins'ka, who is one of the authors of the first sociological study of women who are fighting in the Donbas region, says that no one has objective figures on servicewomen engaged in the ATO because of their complex status at the front.¹⁴

In the cases of both the Red Army in WWII and the conflict in Donbas, most women who joined the conflicts did so voluntarily. Reina Pennington states, "Legal precedents in the Soviet Union made it possible for women to fight. Women's political and legal equality was guaranteed by the constitution of 1918, which also established universal military service for men, and voluntary military service for women."¹⁵ The *Vseobuch* (*Vseobshchee voennoe obuchenie*, Universal Military Training Administration) aimed to ensure that citizens between eighteen and forty years

of age received military training; the *Osoaviakhim* (*Obshchestvo sodeistviia oborone, aviatsyonnomu i khimicheskomu stroitel'stvu*, Union for Assistance with Defense, Aviation, and Chemical Construction) provided paramilitary training for civilians, and the *Komsomol* (*Vsesoiuznyi leninskii kommunisticheskii soiuz molodezhy*, All-Union Leninist Young Communist League) "was charged with instilling political militancy in the young".¹⁶ Women took part in all of these. When the Soviet-German war broke out, many women of the generation who grew up persuaded by the state that the war was imminent and that all citizens had to prepare for it rushed to seek ways to contribute to the war effort. However, as Markwick and Charon-Cardona point out, "To the profound disappointment of most politically active young women, when the hour came to exercise their rights to bear arms alongside their menfolk, they were rebuffed."¹⁷ In the USSR, gender equality was proclaimed in principle, but not implemented in practice. As Pennington states, "women were usually relegated to lower-ranking positions at work and filled many traditional women's roles at work and at home."¹⁸ Anne Eliot Griesse and Richard Stites argue, "Pronatalist, sexist, and suspicious of spontaneity, Stalinism assured that the Soviet high command would have a deeply ambivalent attitude to the participation of women in the next war."¹⁹ This ambivalence led to the chaos in the initial recruitment of women during the Second World War.

Krylova states, "Throughout 1941, rank-and-file male officials in military commissariats were on their own in deciding what to do with young women. There were neither clear orders nor general direction from the centre." She argues that at this stage, the leadership did not encourage women to volunteer, but did not prevent them from entering the armed forces either.²⁰ Stalin and his leadership were not willing to openly change their conservative position on the role of women, and they did not wish to provide evidence for Nazi propaganda that stated that the Red Army was in

"THE LOSSES PERSISTED, RAPIDLY DRAINING MALE RESOURCES, WHILE AT THE SAME TIME THERE WAS NO SHORTAGE OF WOMEN WILLING TO SERVE AT THE FRONT."

such a desperate position that it recruited female battalions.²¹ The reality of the huge losses in the initial stages of the war, however, meant that recruitment of female combatants could not be ruled out. The leadership therefore decided to conduct covert recruitment of women into combat roles, and the first secret order that gave permission to form three women's air regiments was issued on October 8, 1941.²² The losses persisted, rapidly draining male resources, while at the same time there was no shortage of women willing to serve at the front. Necessity proved to be the mother of invention, and in 1942 militarization of women occurred on a mass scale. This stage of women's recruitment, however, as Markwick and Charon-Cardona argue, "was not done with any fanfare,"²³ and "in spring 1942, a second, secret phase of women's mobilization [...] was launched by Soviet authorities, desperate to compensate for nearly 6.5 million, overwhelmingly male, casualties."²⁴ The drive to militarize



Red Army women snipers celebrate victory in 1945.



PHOTO: RIANOVOSTI

A Red Army woman sniper on the Baltic Front, ca. 1944.

women on the one hand, and the official rhetoric that continued to emphasize that women's primary responsibility was maternal on the other, resulted in the "stubborn official ambivalence towards women soldiers".²⁵ Women were thus encouraged to join the military, but their involvement in the army was not widely advertised and their position in the armed forces was often unclear. However, this did not prevent thousands of women from volunteering to enter the military and from going to the front.

Many saw their contribution to the war effort in the context of the defense of their motherland. What constituted the motherland, however, differed for many of them. Some understood it in ideological terms as propagated during the pre-war decades by the Komsomol; others were simply keen to defend their towns, villages, and homes from the occupying enemy.²⁶ As Engel states, "Soviet citizens rallied to the defense of their homeland, some because of their feelings about the government, the Communist party, and the leadership of Joseph Stalin, others despite their feelings."²⁷ There were also, however, women whose mobilization was not strictly voluntary: some Komsomol members simply received a draft notice to join the army. Feoktista Rabina from Novosibirsk was one of them:

I was summoned by the call of the Party. [...] I came to work and they told me that a draft card was waiting for me. I was told: "Here is your referral to the city Party committee." I took it and went there. They met me there and said: "You have to go to the frontline". I thought: "How can I go to the frontline if I am not a nurse, don't have medical education?" [...] But I was a candidate for Party membership. [...] So they sent me to work for the KGB.²⁸

Women went to the front not only out of patriotic duty or the call of the Party, but for a variety of other reasons. Markwick and Charon-Cardona argue that "some young women wanted revenge; some yearned for excitement; others were lonely or simply anxious to escape the appalling deprivation and duress of life on a half-starved home front."²⁹ Like men, women had no say

in where they would be posted, but their gender meant that they were viewed not as soldiers in their own right, but as substitutes for men.

Recruitment of women to fight in the Donbas has also been characterized by chaos and lack of clear information.³⁰ In the Maidan protests, which preceded the start of the hostilities in eastern Ukraine, women were often marginalized, encouraged to fulfill traditionally feminine roles as cooks and caregivers and presented as helpers of male revolutionaries, despite the fact that they took a very active part in the protests.³¹ As soon as the protests in central Kyiv had ended, the conflict in the Donbas began, and some of the most active participants of the protests departed for eastern Ukraine from the still upturned Independence Square, the main site of the protests. They formed the core of the volunteer battalions, and included women. Among them was Iuliia Tolopa, an 18-year-old Russian national and nationalist, who had come to Kyiv to see whether the portrayal of events in Ukraine by the media in her own country corresponded to reality.³² During the Maidan protests, her Russian nationalism evolved into Ukrainian nationalism, and she decided to fight on the side of the Ukrainian state and joined one of the buses heading to the ATO zone. She said that when she got to Luhans'k, a battalion commander decided who out of those who had arrived on the bus should be accepted to serve in his battalion and who should be sent back. Tolopa passed the "test", and she was given a rifle and started to fulfill combat duties.³³ At first, Tolopa served as a "combat fighter" (*strilets*) and later became an infantry fighting vehicle commander.³⁴

Another woman who went straight to the warzone from the Maidan was Andriana Susak. Like Tolopa, she joined a volunteer battalion. With the *nom-de-guerre* "Malysh" ("Kid"), she served as a shock trooper (*shтурмовик*), but was officially registered as a seamstress.³⁵ This peculiar situation can be explained by the fact that the recruitment of women into the armed forces in Ukraine is regulated by a restrictive list of occupations that are open to women.³⁶ This meant that until June 2016, servicewomen were formally accepted into only a limited number of positions in the military, performing traditionally feminine tasks such as that of a



PHOTO: KLEOPATRA ANFEROVA

Iuliia Tolopa was 18 years old, and a Russian nationalist when she changed opinion and decided to join the Ukrainian side of the conflict.



PHOTO: PRIVATE

Maria Berlins'ka, right, is one of the authors of the first sociological study of women who are fighting in the Donbas region.

nurse, musician, librarian, accountant, hairdresser, tailor, baker, chef, etc.³⁷ The law, however, was observed mostly on paper. The initial high losses of the army, the widespread evasion from conscription, and a steady flow of female volunteers willing to go to the frontline meant that the commanders on the ground accepted women and gave them the tasks they were most suited for, disregarding their gender and the official regulations.³⁸ Therefore, when it came to recruitment, the commanders in the Donbas, like those in the Red Army, were left to their own devices, improvising according to immediate circumstances. Women therefore ended up serving not only in "permitted" positions, but also as combat fighters, reconnaissance officers, snipers, etc. However, they either had no documentation at all, and thus were at the frontline illegally, or found themselves in a semi-legal position by being registered as office administrators, chefs, accountants, etc., while performing other duties.³⁹ Two years into the conflict and following much pressure from female veterans, the list regulating women's recruitment was expanded by 63 positions and included jobs such as sniper, driver, gunner, reconnaissance agent, and others, making it possible to legalize some of the women who were already performing these tasks.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, as Tamara Martsenyuk, Ganna Grytsenko, and Anna Kvit argue, "Two-thirds of all military positions remain inaccessible for women in Ukraine," and the expansion does not apply to all branches of the armed forces or to positions at officer level.⁴¹

As in the case of the Red Army, the women who have volunteered to fight in the Donbas have done so for different reasons. Motivations have ranged from feelings of guilt and helplessness as their compatriots were risking their lives on the frontline to following their children or partners who were already in the military, to hoping to build their own military careers.⁴² Many also have spoken of the desire to fight for Ukraine, but as in the case of the women in the Red Army, this has not always translated into loyalty to the state or a particular ideology; it refers rather to the idea of the defense of the motherland and its people (*narod*).⁴³ As in the Red Army, the actual roles women have

performed in the Ukrainian army defy traditional gender norms, but women continue to be perceived as an auxiliary force temporarily helping men to fight the war.

The roles women played in both cases are difficult to separate into categories of combatant and non-combatant. Enloe argues that the problem lies in the fact that the term combat is "infused with patriarchal understandings of masculinity (that is, what femininity is not)".⁴⁴ She specifically addresses the question of servicewomen who are not registered as combatants, but whose roles require them to be located in the combat zone: "Nurses, in practice, have served in combat regardless of official prohibitions banning their presence there. They have served in combat not because of unusual individual bravery – the stuff of nursing romances – but because they have been part of a military structure that has needed their skills near combat."⁴⁵ The Second World War saw not only Soviet female pilots, snipers, and gunners, but also non-combatants deployed at the frontline and in direct danger. According to Pennington, "More than 40 percent of all Red Army doctors, surgeons, paramedics, and medical orderlies, and 100 percent of nurses, were women."⁴⁶ Engel argues, "Only the troops themselves had greater casualties than women physicians who served with rifle battalions".⁴⁷ In the case of the conflict in the Donbas, the term "woman combatant" is an oxymoron, and in reality "seamstresses, accountants," and "office managers" are used in combat. Andriana Susak explains her situation at the frontline:

My commander came and said: "Andriana, we need to make a combat order. Everyone is being registered as part of the fire support company. How on earth can we explain that we have a seamstress [at the frontline]?" And I said: "Tell them that I am sewing socks for the boys. Include me in at least one combat order for all the time I have spent in the warzone."⁴⁸

The commanders, therefore, were fully aware of the precarious position of their servicewomen who performed combat roles.⁴⁹



Hanna Kolomiitseva served during the Second World War as a wireless operator and air gunner.

The cases of the Red Army and of the Ukrainian Armed Forces confirm, albeit differently, the reluctance of military officials to reconcile the reality of servicewomen's experiences with their official position in the military hierarchy. Enloe states that "to close the gap between myth and reality would require military officials to resolve their own ideological gender contradictions, something many are loathe to do."⁵⁰ Thus, in both cases, although women ended up fulfilling a great variety of roles, those in traditionally feminine jobs were perceived as helping the men to fight the war, while those performing combat duties were seen as male substitutes, engaging in these positions temporarily and only due to the circumstances, and their exceptionality was emphasized. In both cases, there was a degree of secrecy when it came to the recruitment of women; their contribution was accepted, but not widely advertised.

Jean Bethke Elshtain states, "War is a structure of experience."⁵¹ We tell war stories in order to make sense of war experiences. These stories, in turn, perpetuate our understanding of war, including its gender order. Elshtain argues that although the accepted view of women is of "the noncombatant many" – "embodying values and virtues at odds with war's destructiveness, representing home and hearth and the humble verities of everyday life" – there also exist tales of the "ferocious few," that is, "women who reversed cultural expectations by donning warrior's garb and doing battle".⁵² However, as Elshtain points out, "their existence as fact and myth seems not to have put much of a dent in the overall edifice of the way war figures in the structure of male and female experience and reactions."⁵³ As both cases studied here demonstrate, fulfilling "masculine" duties does not guarantee being treated the same as men. In a situation where labor in the military is divided according to traditional perceptions of gender roles, a soldier of even the lowest rank is likely to have a higher

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standing than a woman, regardless of the nature of her actual involvement in the army. An assumption that participation in the military can grant marginalized groups, including women, a chance to acquire full citizenship, and, subsequently, a greater degree of equality has been criticized by scholars and refuted by numerous examples in history.⁵⁴ The two cases discussed here demonstrate not only that "exceptional" women did not necessarily acquire full citizenship, but point to the fact that this very "exceptionality" sometimes prevented them from attaining the respect of a society guided by gender stereotypes. The labels that were applied to them also extended to the "ordinary" servicewomen.

One of the popular tropes in stories of Red Army servicewomen is their supposed promiscuity. Red Army women have frequently suffered from the label of a "field wife" (*pokhodno-polevaia zhena*, PPZh) and the assumption that they went to the frontline to find themselves a husband.⁵⁵ Hanna Kolomiitseva, who served during the Second World War as a wireless operator and air gunner, recounted that her father made her promise not to form any intimate relationships in the military: "When I was joining the army, my father told me, 'You are my pure [*chistaia*] girl; I beg you to come back the same.' I gave him my word. He said, 'Don't let anyone kiss you on the lips, only on your cheek.' And that is what I did."⁵⁶ Given the ratio of women to men at the frontline, and that soldiers were granted leave only in the event of serious wounding or "in exceptional cases for special achievements", sexual relations at the front took many forms from consensual to coercive.⁵⁷ The practice of securing a "field wife" was widespread – for women, this often meant that one sexual partner, especially of a senior rank, would protect them from the sexual harassment of others; for men, especially in senior positions, it meant a feeling of entitlement to

seek sexual favors from servicewomen under their command. Anna Bebykh, a searchlight operator during the Second World War, had to prematurely leave the hospital where she was being treated for her wounds because she was being sexually harassed by a man in a senior position:

When I was in the hospital, I was harassed by a major. Can you imagine? He kept trying to kiss me. For goodness sake! I started to scream. I discharged myself from the hospital. I said to the doctor, "What is this?" And she answered, "Well, they got accustomed to it." I said, "Who made them accustomed to it?" [and she answered]: "Well, there are different people out there."⁵⁸

It is notable that Bebekh's story includes not only complaints about men's behavior, but that it also hints that women themselves were to blame for such behavior and confirms the widespread disdain for the so-called "field wives". However, Pennington argues, "male veterans seem more likely to categorize military women as 'field wives'. Female veterans often distinguish between a small group of 'field wives' and other women."⁵⁹

Seven decades later, military women still find it difficult to avoid the assumption of promiscuity. Iryna Kosov'ska, a member of the Ukrainian Volunteer Corps, explicitly compares the way women were perceived in the Second World War and how her contemporaries were viewed. She states that "both during and after World War II many women who had served in the army faced unfounded insults, gossip, and humiliation based on the assumption of their promiscuity." She continues by arguing that such views are still held in Ukraine today: "Many elderly women I encountered claimed that promiscuity was the only reason why a girl would join the army."⁶⁰ The perception of women who come to the frontline as potential sexual partners rather than military comrades also persists among military men. This creates the need to secure a "protector" against others' sexual harassment, thereby creating a modern-day equivalent of the so-called "field wife". Although such semi-consensual relationships put women into precarious positions, and make them highly dependent on their male partners, as Marta Havryshko argues, violence in military partnerships in the conflict zone receives little attention because it occurs in the context of mass extreme violence, where individual expressions of violence can seem insignificant.⁶¹ In the case of the conflict in the Donbas, with only a few exceptions, the discussion of gender-based violence perpetrated by "our boys" as opposed to the enemy remains taboo.

One of the reasons for the lack of discussion of the mistreatment of women by their fellow military men is the heroization of military men and the adoption of militarized culture in which heteronormative militarized masculinity is celebrated and unchallenged. While the Red Army men were hailed as heroes, regardless of their actual achievements in the military, decorated women were often reluctant to wear their medals at victory parades in order to avoid the accusation that their awards were not for "combat services" but for "sexual favors" ("*za boevye zaslugi*" / "*za polovnye uslugi*"). Zoia Nyzhnichenko said that when

she told people that she had served as a nurse during the war, some replied, "Oh, yes, she served there, we all know *how*".⁶² Women therefore preferred to hide their military past. Karen Petrone tells the story of Vera Malakhova, who also served as a nurse and even took part in the Battle of Stalingrad:

Her husband encouraged her to wear her medals to a May Day parade a few years after the war, saying "Put them on. You're going with me, you earned them. I know everything there is about you, and you earned them honestly." Nevertheless, when her husband lagged behind, a man accosted her, saying "Here comes a frontline W[hore]."⁶³

As this story demonstrates, a woman needed a man, in this case her husband, to "guarantee" her adequacy as a soldier, though even such guarantees did not fully protect her from the public perception.

While women in contemporary Ukraine can talk about their experiences in the military more openly, their stories still cause a certain degree of discomfort in a society that largely expects women to be at home rather than fighting in a war. Oksana Ivantsiv, one of the makers of a documentary film about women who fight in the Donbas, says that women find it hard to return from the war zone for the fear of being rejected by society:

I heard stories about men who are ashamed to go to the train station to meet their wives who are coming back from the war, because they feel uncomfortable and do not know how to react. At the same time, we have completely opposite instances when men [returning from war] are welcomed as heroes.⁶⁴

The perception that women should not seem braver than men or be seen to take a leading role is internalized by servicewomen. Susak remembers when during one of the attacks she tried to encourage male recruits to come out from their hiding place:

During one of the assaults, paratroopers hid under the "Ural" [a large army truck], we were fired at, and I had to motivate these young guys somehow. They were really young, twenty, twenty-two years of age. So, I come under this "Ural" and simply drag them out, saying: "Let's go, there is no fire any more, let's go, don't worry!" And they see that I am a woman. [...] I am standing first in line, but the boys say, "Look, at least go to the back, please." And I say, "Fine, you lead the way, it's okay."⁶⁵

Thus, even in times of danger and when the inadequacy of gender stereotypes is obvious, both men and women are prepared to perform traditional masculinity and femininity in order not to disturb the gender order prevalent in the war and dominant outside of the war zone.

Traditional gender norms are not disturbed with any lasting

results even by the existence of celebrated servicewomen such as the Red Army sniper L'udmyla Pavlichenko or the Ukrainian pilot and veteran of the war in Donbas Nadiia Savchenko. Both women might have made women's presence in the war zone more visible, but this did not translate into significant practical improvements for the majority of women in the military.⁶⁶ Individual women who were hailed as heroines were used instrumentally by their respective states. Markwick and Charon-Cardona argue: "Pavlichenko's reputation as a lethal sniper was not just deployed on the battlefield or the home front. Soviet authorities clearly believed the 'heroic' role of women in general and her reputation in particular could sway international public opinion in support of the war against the 'fascist hordes'."⁶⁷ She represented the USSR in the USA, Canada, and the UK, urging the Allies to open a second front in western Europe. The Sunday Mirror's impression of Pavlichenko is very telling about the role she was supposed to fulfill as a soldier and as a woman. The 1942 article details the meeting between the "heroine of Russia's [sic] front line" and "just a woman of Britain":

"I am Mrs. Collett," she said to this sturdy, upright woman the world respects as a soldier.

Then she bent down, placed the flowers in Lieutenant Pavlichenko's hands, and opened her mouth to speak. [...] No words came. She wanted to say so much, but instead, she placed her hand on the soldier-woman's shoulder and talked by looking into her eyes.

Yes, they both understood – the mother and the soldier. To both of them that look meant that one day their children would be free to walk the streets in peace. The ordinary woman of Britain was saying to her counterpart in Russia: "Thank you for helping that day nearer."⁶⁸

These two women, despite the fact that one of them had 300 kills as a sniper to her name, are still presented as women, contemplating the peaceful future as women should.

The situation with Savchenko is similar. After she was captured in the Donbas, she was put on trial in Russia for allegedly directing a mortar attack that killed two Russian journalists in eastern Ukraine and was sentenced to twenty-two years in prison. She quickly became "a symbol both of a new chapter in Ukrainian history – and the ensuing stand-off between Russia and Ukraine."⁶⁹ The hashtag #freesavchenko was used by politicians, diplomats, and activists in the conflict and became synonymous with a call to support Ukraine.⁷⁰ Thus a woman who was once prevented from training to become a pilot because of the gender restrictions in the Ukrainian military suddenly became a heroic figure and an embodiment of Ukraine itself: resilient and defiant, but in need of international support.⁷¹

The examples of Savchenko and Pavlichenko are indicative of a trend in which the roles women take on in the military have little influence on women's wider emancipation. Both women served as role models for other women, but neither of them set herself the aim of ensuring gender equality in the army, and their experience and fame did not suffice to challenge the wider restrictions servicewomen faced. As Dombrowski argues, it would be naïve "to insist that women can transform military culture without understanding how military culture transforms 'women'".⁷² The examples of Savchenko and Pavlichenko, but also those of the less "remarkable" women discussed above, demonstrate that participation alone, even in high numbers and in "masculine" roles, or as outstanding fighters, does not necessarily lead to the reform of the patriarchal culture of the military and beyond. On the contrary, the presence of women in the military as temporary helpers or substitutes for men can in fact serve to reinforce the gender order that is already in place.

An acceptance of gender stereotypes is conducive to the celebration of traditional gender war roles, with the military man at the pinnacle of the hierarchy. Militarization of society, in turn, strengthens traditional gender order outside the war zone. This vicious circle produces a situation in which women's entrance into the military can only be publically visible on a symbolic level. It is difficult to imagine an exhibition telling the story of the USSR's involvement in the Second World War without the famous 1941 poster by Iraklii Toidze "Motherland is calling", depicting a woman wrapped in red garb holding a piece of paper with the military oath on it. The army of loyal children is represented by the rifles behind the woman. While this symbolic image of a woman was omnipresent, the stories of real women were much harder to come by.

The portrayal of "woman" not only as motherland but as a mother was widespread during the war. In the post-war years, when the Soviet population had to come to terms with its colossal losses, the cult of motherhood only grew stronger. Post-war society, which understood heroism as an ultimate value, awarded women who gave birth to five or more

children with the title of "Heroine Mother". Engel states that although in the post-war period "the state-controlled media continued to praise women for their accomplishments and sacrifices on the home front, it virtually effaced their military role. And in postwar monuments, fiction, art, and film the warrior is invariably male and only men fight at the front."⁷³

The collapse of the USSR renewed an interest in the history of the war and women's participation in it. Svetlana Alexievich's *Unwomanly Face of War* caused a sensation in the post-Soviet countries and beyond, but outside of academic debate, its mark on the way servicewomen were perceived was limited.⁷⁴ Even now it is difficult to find examples of popular rhetoric that challenges the previously established stereotypes. Although female veterans are becoming more and more visible as fewer male vet-

"THE PORTRAYAL OF 'WOMAN' NOT ONLY AS MOTHERLAND BUT AS A MOTHER WAS WIDESPREAD DURING THE WAR."

erans are around to attend the parades, much of the celebratory or commemorative practices related to the Second World War in the post-Soviet region are focused on the the heroic male narratives of the glorious victory. Women's war stories are not excluded entirely, but as in the actual war, they take a subordinate place to the narratives about male soldiers.⁷⁵

In the context of the hostilities in eastern Ukraine, the representation of Ukraine's military history has become increasingly important for the state. Since the Maidan protests and throughout the conflict in the Donbas, the representation of Ukrainian military men as modern-day Cossacks has increased.⁷⁶ The representation of women has continued to emphasize their symbolic and auxiliary place: on the one hand, they have been portrayed as symbols of the motherland, and on the other, their image has been highly sexualized.⁷⁷ Servicewomen have not been entirely invisible, but they have also tended to be objectified, as in a series of so-called patriotic pin-ups depicting scantily-clad women in uniforms from various branches of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, widely circulated on the social media.⁷⁸

As the conflict progressed, the militarization of society became ubiquitously visible from the highly gendered army recruitment posters on the streets of Ukraine – for instance, depicting a little girl saying, “Daddy, will you defend me?” – to the fashion style of Ukrainian politicians.⁷⁹ From the start of the conflict, President Petro Poroshenko could regularly be seen sporting a full military uniform. Battalion commanders-cum-people's deputies preferred camouflage to business suits to attend parliamentary sessions. The former prime minister, Yulia Tymoshenko, while not wearing a real uniform, chose stylized military jackets for public appearances. This made a particularly uncomfortable sight given the dismal state of the Ukrainian army, which lacked basic uniforms, not to mention the total absence of uniform supplies for servicewomen at the front.⁸⁰

The militarization of society did not stop with politicians' wardrobes. Since the start of the conflict in the Donbas, the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory (*Ukrains'kyi instytut natsional'noi pam'iaty*, UINP), the central executive body operating under the Cabinet of Ministers, has prepared a number of projects and exhibitions celebrating the military.⁸¹ In contrast to the post-war representation of the Red Army, women have not been excluded from the projects. On the contrary, a special exhibition entitled “War Makes No Exceptions: Female History of the Second World War,” opened in 2016 and has been touring the country since. Among thirteen stories selected by the UINP to tell about women's experiences are several about servicewomen, including three members of the Red Army.⁸² The exhibition recognizes that during the Second World War, “at the frontline, women mastered all military professions: in aviation and the navy, in infantry and cavalry, intelligence, communications and medical care.

There even appeared a linguistic problem, as words such as tank operator, infantryman, and machine gunner had no feminine equivalent.”⁸³ The UINP stresses that “the theme of the tragic and heroic women's fates will also help to make connections with the participation of our female compatriots – the military, physicians, and volunteers – in the contemporary confrontation with Russia's armed aggression against Ukraine,” thus recognizing the parallels between the participation of women in the Second World War and in the ongoing military conflict.⁸⁴ However, the exhibition does not raise the question of the gender inequality within which women functioned in both cases. The parallels highlighted by the UINP emphasize the victimhood and/or heroism of the women, but not the ongoing inadequacy of the legal system, supplies, and even the language used to describe servicewomen's experiences both now and seventy years ago.⁸⁵

The UINP continued to prepare exhibitions on the theme of war and the Ukrainian military tradition, and in 2016 it presented a project called “Warriors: History of the Ukrainian Military.”⁸⁶ Two women were included among the twenty warriors displayed in the exhibition. One represented the women of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army,⁸⁷ and the other depicted an actual ATO veteran, Iryna Tsvila, who was described on the poster as a “warrior of the ‘Sich’ volunteer battalion.”⁸⁸ The word “warrior” (*voiak*) was used in its masculine form, thus highlighting the preference of the official institutions to avoid the feminization of military professions even in language.⁸⁹ While the poster depicted a female warrior, it did not even mention the participation of women more broadly in the volunteer battalions in the conflict in the Donbas. This partial visibility of women thus strengthens the overall image of them as a symbolic and supportive force and emphasizes the prevalent ideas of gender roles.

“THE INSTRUMENTALIZATION OF WOMEN'S MILITARIZATION, THE PREJUDICES, AND THE GENDER NORMS PREVALENT SEVENTY YEARS AGO CONTINUE TO PLAY A PART TODAY.”

The conflicts discussed here resulted in the militarization of their respective societies. In the USSR, militarization was total, with the economy and much of the population working exclusively for the needs of the army and the front.⁹⁰ In Ukraine, the hostilities in the Donbas region, although of a much smaller scale, also encouraged milita-

rization of many aspects of life.⁹¹ In such contexts, the militarization of women was inevitable, and there were many women who, like men, chose to contribute to the war effort. However, the entrance of women into the military, in both cases, was seen as a contingent measure, and for the duration of the conflict only. Pennington argues that “while women were at the front, the Soviets instituted gender segregation in the educational system and the exclusion of women from the newly created Suvorov cadet schools.” She continues by stating, “Performance was irrelevant to Soviet decision making about whether to allow women to remain in military service, and there is strong evidence that during the postwar period, the Soviet government deliberately obscured women's wartime achievements.”⁹² Tradi-

tional gender roles were also reinforced outside of the military with the heroization of motherhood and the strengthening of pronatalist policies.

In the case of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, it is too early to draw firm conclusions. There is evidence of some reforms, especially the expansion of the list of available positions in the army. Martsenyuk and Grytsenko point out that the Ministry of Defense has hired “an external gender expert, who works closely with the ministry representatives in different structures.”⁹³ The reforms, however, have been introduced as a reaction to the situation on the ground and to pressure from veterans and feminist activists, and they continue to be very limited. As in the case of the post-war USSR, much will depend on the general attitude to gender equality in Ukraine both among politicians in power and in society more widely, which at the time of writing leaves much to be desired.⁹⁴ The experience of women’s active participation in the Second World War, to some extent, shapes the understanding of women’s roles in war and provides role models for women who join the contemporary Ukrainian Armed Forces.⁹⁵ At the same time, the instrumentalization of women’s militarization, the prejudices, and the gender norms prevalent seventy years ago continue to play a part today.

The cases discussed here point to the fact that militarization of women might not only fail in challenging gender stereotypes, but might even result in their consolidation. In both cases, the roles women occupied directly reflected the demands of the army, but their recruitment was chaotic and influenced by gender stereotypes. Women fought in the ranks of a state-sanctioned military and saw their contribution to warfare as part of the defense of the motherland. Their popular image, however, was more linked to the motherland itself than the warriors who defended it. Those women who challenged the stereotype of women as a supporting force did not escape being perceived as women first and foremost. Their exceptionality was instrumentalized by their respective states and simply served to prove the rule. The study of servicewomen’s experiences of warfare juxtaposed with popular perceptions of them leaves a pessimistic impression of the potential of militarization for women’s emancipation and gender equality. Joshua S. Goldstein argues that “the gender-war connection is very complex” and “none of us knows the correct direction or doctrine that will end war, equalize gender, or unlink war from gender.”⁹⁶ He nevertheless believes that the “war system is not set in stone, nor driven by any simple formula, but is alive, complex, and changeable.”⁹⁷ Understanding how gender roles came to be formed within war systems and why they have changed so little over the decades creates possibilities to examine how they can be altered in the future. ❌

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- 6 See Maria Berlins’ka, Tamara Martsenyuk, Anna Kvit, and Ganna Grytsenko, “Nevdymyi batal’ion”: uchasť zhink u viis’kovykh diiakh v ATO (Ukr.), “Invisible Battalion”: Women’s Participation in ATO Military Operations (Eng.), (Kyiv: Ukrainian Women’s Fund, 2016); Tamara Martsenyuk, Ganna Grytsenko, Anna Kvit, “The ‘Invisible Battalion’: Women in ATO Military Operations in Ukraine,” *Kyiv – Mohyla Law and Politics Journal* no. 2 (2016): 171–187; Tamara Martsenyuk and Ganna Grytsenko, “Women and Military in Ukraine: Voices of the Invisible Battalion,” *Ukraine Analytica* 1 no. 7 (2017): 29–37; Marta Havryshko, “Henderne nasytstvo v partnerstvakh viis’kovykh: naratyv zhinky, iaka vyzhyla,” [Gender violence in military partnerships: the narrative of a woman who survived], *Povaha. Kampania proty seksyzmu*, September 14, 2016, <http://povaha.org.ua/henderne-nasytstvo-v-partnerstvah-vijskovykh-naratyv-zhinky-yaka-vyzhyla/>, accessed June 19, 2017; Marta Havryshko, “Mistsevi zhinky ta cholovichyi komfort u zoni zbroinoho konfliktu,” [Local women and male comfort in the military conflict zone], *Povaha. Kampania proty seksyzmu*, January 30, 2017, <http://povaha.org.ua/mistsevi-zhinky-ta-cholovichyi-komfort-u-zoni-zbroinoho-konfliktu/>, accessed June 19, 2017; Olesya Khromeychuk, “From the Maidan to the Donbas: the Limitations on Choice for Women in Ukraine” in *Gender and Choice in the Post-Soviet Context* ed. Lynne Attwood, Marina Yusupova, Elisabeth Schimpfoessl (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming). Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine.
- 7 Budnitskii, “Muzhchiny i zhenshchiny v Krasnoi Armii,” para. 15.
- 8 Krylova, *Soviet Women in Combat*, 169.
- 9 Markwick and Charon-Cardona, *Soviet Women on the Frontline*, 150. These figures are only for the regular army and do not include the partisans. Markwick and Charon-Cardona estimate that there were 28,000 women in the Soviet partisan units. See Markwick and Charon-Cardona, *Soviet Women on the Frontline*, 1.
- 10 See Martin McCauley, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Union* (London: Routledge, 2014); Barbara Evans Clements, *Bolshevik Women* (Cambridge:

- Cambridge University Press, 1997); Amnon Sella, *The Value of Human Life in Soviet Warfare* (London: Routledge, 2005).
- 11 The military hostilities in the Donbas, which started in April 2014 and are ongoing at the time of writing, are referred to in everyday speech in Ukraine as a war. The official term used by the Ukrainian authorities and much of the media was Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) until October 2017, when it was replaced by “security operations for the reestablishment of sovereignty and the territorial integrity of the country”. For further discussion see Nataliya Lebid’, “Vzhe ne ATO, ale shche ne viina”, [No longer ATO, but not war yet] *Ukraina moloda*, October 6, 2017, <http://www.umoloda.kiev.ua/number/3221/180/116472/>, accessed October 29, 2017.
 - 12 Official response of the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine to author’s information request, October 9, 2017, author’s private archive.
 - 13 As of November 2017, 55,629 women were employed by the Ukrainian Armed Forces (around 2,400 of whom joined in 2017). While many of them hold civilian posts, 24,298 (almost 10 per cent of total military personnel) hold military positions. Almost 3,000 women are officers, but there are no female generals. See “U Zbroinykh Sylakh Ukrainy prokhodiat’ viis’kovu sluzhbu i pratsiuut’ 55629 zhinok,” [55,629 women serve and work in the Armed Forces of Ukraine], Ukrainian Military Pages, November 22, 2017, <http://www.ukrmilitary.com/2017/11/female-soldiers.html>, accessed January 9, 2017; “Chysel’nist’ ukrains’koi armii nablyzhaet’sia do ‘zakonodavchoho limitu’,” [The number of Ukrainian army personnel is approaching the “legislative limit”], *Ukrinform*, October 3, 2017, <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-society/2317217-ciselnist-ukrainskoi-armii-nablizaetsia-do-zakonodavcogo-limitu.html>, accessed January 9, 2018; “V armii maie sluzhyty stil’ky zhinok, skil’ky bazhaie, – ministr oborony Ukrainy,” [The army should recruit all women who are willing to serve – Minister of Defense of Ukraine], *Povaha. Kampaniia proty seksyzmu*, November 24, 2017, <http://povaha.org.ua/v-armiji-maje-sluzhyty-stilky-zhinok-skilky-bazhaje-ministr-oborony-ukrajiny/>, accessed January 9, 2018; “V ZSU pochaly rozrobku bilyzny dlia viis’kovykh-zhinok,” [Ukrainian Armed Forces start developing underwear for servicewomen], TSN, September 28, 2017, <https://tsn.ua/ukrayina/u-zsu-pochali-rozrobku-bilizni-dlya-vyskovih-zhinok-999855.html>, accessed January 9, 2018. See also Berlins’ka, Martsenyuk, Kvit, and Grytsenko, “Nevydymyi batal’ion”.
 - 14 Maria Berlins’ka in “Viina – tse tezh zhinocha sprava, i nashi zhinky na fronti voiuut’ dobre, – avtorky proektu ‘Nevydymyi batal’ion’,” [The war is also a woman’s business, and our women are fighting well at the frontline – authors of the “Invisible Battalion” project], *Hromads’ke Radio*, June 9, 2017, <https://hromadskeradio.org/programs/hromadska-hvylya/viyna-ce-i-zhinocha-sprava-v-nas-na-fronti-ye-zhinky-i-vony-voyuyut-dobre-avtorky-proektu-nevydymyi-batalyon>, accessed June 10, 2017. See also Berlins’ka, Martsenyuk, Kvit and Grytsenko, ‘Nevydymyi batal’ion’: uchast’ zhinok u viis’kovykh diakh v ATO.
 - 15 Pennington, “Offensive Women,” 779.
 - 16 Markwick and Charon-Cardona, *Soviet Women on the Frontline*, 14. See also Pennington, “Offensive Women,” 779.
 - 17 Markwick and Charon-Cardona, *Soviet Women on the Frontline*, 32.
 - 18 Pennington, “Offensive Women,” 779.
 - 19 Anne Eliot Griesse and Richard Stites, “Russia: Revolution and War” in Nancy Loring Goldman, ed., *Female Soldiers – Combatants or Noncombatants? Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Westport CT.: Greenwood, 1982), 68.
 - 20 Krylova, *Soviet Women in Combat*, 28.
 - 21 For a discussion of the changing gender policy in the USSR, see Wendy Goldman, *Women, the State, and Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917–1936* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993). For analysis of the Soviet reaction to German propaganda, see Markwick and Charon-Cardona, *Soviet Women on the Frontline*, 44–46.
 - 22 See “Prikaz NKO SSSR 0099 ot 08.10.41 g. O sformirovanii zhenskikh aviatsonnykh polkov VVS Krasnoi Armii”, [Order NKO SSSR 0099, dated October 8, 1941, on the formation of women’s air regiments in the air force of the Red Army], in Markwick and Charon-Cardona, *Soviet Women on the Frontline*, 84–116.
 - 23 Markwick and Charon-Cardona, *Soviet Women on the Frontline*, 149.
 - 24 Ibid.
 - 25 Ibid., 151.
 - 26 Interviewee Hanna Kolomiitseva, June 8, 2016, Kyiv; Interviewee Feoktista Rabina, June 8, 2016, Kyiv; Interviewee Anna Bebykh, November 12, 2015, Kyiv; Interviewee Halyna Pavlikova, November 8, 2015, L’viv.
 - 27 Engel, “The Womanly Face of War,” 138.
 - 28 Interviewee Rabina.
 - 29 Markwick and Charon-Cardona, *Soviet Women on the Frontline*, 180.
 - 30 For a discussion of the military conflict in eastern Ukraine, see Serhy Yekelchuk, *The Conflict in Ukraine: What Everyone Needs to Know*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Andrew Wilson, *Ukraine Crisis: What It Means for the West* (London: Yale University Press, 2014).
 - 31 The events that have come to be known as the Maidan were a wave of protests, demonstrations and civil unrest that took place in Kyiv and throughout Ukraine in late 2013 – early 2014. The protests took place on and around Independence Square (*Maidan Nezalezhnosti*, better known simply as *Maidan*). See Olesya Khromeychuk, “Negotiating Protest Spaces on the Maidan: A Gender Perspective,” *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* 2 no.1, (2016): 9–47; Olesya Khromeychuk, “Gender and Nationalism on the Maidan,” in *Ukraine’s Euromaidan: Analyses of a Civil Revolution*, ed. David R. Marples and Frederick V. Mills (Stuttgart: Ibidem, 2015), 123–145; Sarah D. Phillips, “The Women’s Squad in Ukraine’s Protests: Feminism, Nationalism and Militarism on the Maidan,” *American Ethnologist* 41 no. 3, (2014): 414–426; Olga Onuch and Tamara Martsenyuk, “Mothers and Daughters of the Maidan: Gender, Repertoires of Violence, and the Division of Labour in Ukrainian Protests,” *Social, Health, and Communication Studies Journal. Contemporary Ukraine: A case of Euromaidan* 1 no. 1, (2014): 105–26.
 - 32 Interviewee Iuliia Tolopa, June 9, 2016, Kyiv.
 - 33 Iuliia Tolopa in “My znaiushy rosiis’ku BMP, i ia stala komandyrom – rosiianka z ‘Aidaru’,” [We found a Russian infantry fighting vehicle, and I became a commander – Russian woman from “Aidar”], *Hromads’ke Radio*, October 15, 2015, <https://hromadskeradio.org/en/programs/hromadska-hvylya/my-znayshly-rosiysku-bmp-i-ya-stala-komandyrom-rosiyanka-z-aydaru>, accessed June 14, 2017.
 - 34 Interviewee Tolopa. Tolopa’s position at the frontline was illegal, not only because of her gender, but also because of her nationality. In 2015, the number of foreign nationals fighting on the side of the Ukrainian state in the Donbas region was estimated at over a thousand. See Sviatoslav Khomenko, “‘Inozemnyi lehiion’ po-ukrains’ky: khorosha novyna chy zakon bez sensu,” [“Foreign Legion” Ukrainian-style: good news or a meaningless law?], *BBC Ukrainian*, October 7, 2015, para. 7, http://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/politics/2015/10/151007_ukr_army_foreigners_sx, accessed June 14, 2017.
 - 35 Andriana Susak in “Viina na Donbasi ochyma ukrains’kykh zhinok u dokumental’nomu fil’mi ‘Nevydymyi batalion’,” [The war in the Donbas as witnessed by Ukrainian women in the documentary film *The Invisible Battalion*], *Ukraine Crisis Media Center*, June 9, 2017, <http://uacrisis.org/ua/57284-nevidimij-bataljon#prettyPhoto/0/>, accessed June 11, 2017.
 - 36 See Decree no. 337, “Tymchasovyi perelik viis’kovo-oblikovykh spetsial’nostei riadovoho, serzhants’koho i starshyn’skoho

- skladu z urakhuvanniam tykh, na iaki dozvoliaiet'sia pryznachaty viis'kovosluzhbovtiv-zhinok, ta vidpovidnykh im viis'kovykh zvan' i taryfnykh rozriadiv posad," [Interim list of staff positions for privates, sergeants, sergeants-major, including those, for which the appointment of female military personnel is permitted, and the corresponding ranks and wage categories], *Ministerstvo Oborony Ukrainy*, May 27, 2014, <http://zakon3.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/z0600-14#n16>, accessed June 14, 2017.
- 37 See Decree No 337.
- 38 Although conscription was supposed to end in 2013, following the start of the conflict in eastern Ukraine it was resumed. See "Ukrainian Parliament Recommends Resumption of Mandatory Conscription," *Radio Free Europe: Radio Liberty*, April 17, 2014, <http://www.rferl.org/a/ukrainian-parliament-recommends-resumption-of-mandatory-conscription/25352661.html>, accessed June 14, 2017. The punishment for evasion of conscription is between two and five years' imprisonment, but throughout the conflict, men all over Ukraine found semi-legal and illegal ways to avoid the draft. See "Ukhylyvsia vid mobilizatsii – vidpovidai po zakonu," [Evaded mobilization – answer before the law], *Ministerstvo oborony Ukrainy*, <http://www.mil.gov.ua/ministry/aktualno/do-uvagi-vijskovosluzhbovciv/uhylivysya-vid-mobilizatsii-vidpovidaj-po-zakonu.html>, accessed June 14, 2017.
- 39 See Khromeychuk, "From the Maidan to the Donbas".
- 40 See Decree no. 292, "Zminy do Tymchasovoho pereliku viis'kovo-oblikovykh spetsial'nostei riadovoho, serzhants'koho i starshyns'koho skladu z urakhuvanniam tykh, na iaki dozvoliaiet'sia pryznachaty viis'kovosluzhbovtiv-zhinok, ta vidpovidnykh im viis'kovykh zvan' i taryfnykh rozriadiv posad," [Amendments to the Interim list of staff positions for privates, sergeants, sergeants-major, including those for which the appointment of female military personnel is allowed, and the corresponding ranks and wage categories], *Ministerstvo Oborony Ukrainy*, June 3, 2016, <http://zakon3.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/z0881-16/paran7#n7>, accessed June 14, 2017.
- 41 Martsenyuk, Grytsenko, Kvit, "The 'Invisible Battalion'," 183. See Decree no. 292.
- 42 Interviewee Tolopa, Interviewee Maria Berlins'ka, June 9, 2016, Kyiv. See also Berlins'ka, Martsenyuk, Kvit, and Grytsenko, *Nevydymy Batal'ion*, 25.
- 43 Interviewee Berlins'ka. See also Olesia Kotliarova in "Odkrovennia divchyny-dobrovol'tsia: zhinky na viini moral'no vytryvalishi," [Revelations of a female volunteer: women in war have higher moral endurance], *Dyvys' Info*, July 25, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YtOYQKmXAKw>, access February 6, 2017.
- 44 Enloe, *Maneuvers*, 223.
- 45 Ibid.
- 46 Pennington, "Offensive Women," 788.
- 47 Engel, "The Womanly Face of War," 141.
- 48 Andriana Susak in "Viina na Donbasi ochyma ukrains'kykh zhinok".
- 49 The semi-legal or illegal position of women at the frontline meant that they were ineligible for remuneration and benefits to which male combat fighters were entitled. See Berlins'ka, Martsenyuk, Kvit, and Grytsenko, *Invisible Battalion*, 24–25.
- 50 Enloe, *Maneuvers*, 223.
- 51 Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Women and War* (Brighton: Harvester, 1987), x.
- 52 Ibid., xiii, 8.
- 53 Ibid., 8.
- 54 See Enloe, *Maneuvers*; Nira Yuval-Davis, *Nation and Gender* (London: Sage, 1997).
- 55 "Pokhodno-polevaia zhena" is translated in many different ways, but it literally means a "marching-field wife". See Brandon M. Schechter, "Women in Arms: from the Russian Empire to Post-Soviet States," *The Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies* 17 (2016), <https://pipss.revues.org/4072>, accessed June 12, 2017.
- 56 Interviewee Kolomiitseva.
- 57 Budnitskii, "Muzchyny i zhenshchyny," para. 18.
- 58 Interviewee Bebykh.
- 59 Pennington, "Offensive Women," 809.
- 60 Iryna Kosovs'ka, "Eastern Europe's Women in World War II," review of *Zhinky Tsentral'noi ta Skhidnoi Levropy u Druhii svitovii viini: henderna spetsyfika dosvidu v chasy ekstrymal'noho nasytstva*, [Central and East European Women in the Second World War: Gendered Experiences in a Time of Extreme Violence], ed. Gelinada Grinchenko, Kateryna Kobchenko, Oksana Kis', (Kyiv: Art Knyha, 2015), *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* 2, no. 1, (2016): 231–236 (234). The Ukrainian Volunteer Corps was formed in the summer of 2014 as a military wing of the "Pravyi Sektor" (Right Sector) nationalist organisation. Unlike the units of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, volunteer battalions such as the Ukrainian Volunteer Corps were more flexible in their recruitment practices and thus more likely to accept women into their ranks. However, the nationalist ideology followed by this group affects their restricted perception of gender roles in the military and in society more widely. See Olena Bilozers'ka, "Zhinky v Dobrovol'chomu ukrains'komu korpusi 'Pravoho sektora'," [Women in the Ukrainian Volunteer Corps of the "Right Sector"], documentary film, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w64ZRrf4NuE>, accessed January 16, 2018.
- 61 Havryshko, "Henderne nasytstvo v partnerstvakh viis'kovykh," para. 4.
- 62 Interviewee Zoia Nyzhnychenko, June 8, 2016, Kyiv. Emphasis as in speech.
- 63 Karen Petrone, "Between Exploitation and Empowerment: Soviet Women Negotiate Stalinism," in *Gender Politics and Mass Dictatorship. Global Perspectives*, ed. Jie-Hyun Lim and Karen Petrone (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 125–141, (137).
- 64 Oksana Ivantsiv in "Viina – tse tezh zhinocha sprava". In 2017, Maria Berlins'ka produced a documentary film, *Invisible Battalion*, which highlights the reality of women's experiences at the frontline. See the *Invisible Battalion* Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/InvisibleBattalion/>, accessed October 30, 2017.
- 65 Susak in "Viina na Donbasi ochyma ukrains'kykh zhinok".
- 66 For Pavlichenko's story see Liubov' Vinogradova, *Angely mshcheniia: Zhenshchyny-snaipery Velikoi otechestvennoi* [Angels of vengeance: Women snipers in the Great Patriotic War], (Moscow: KoLibri, 2016). For a discussion of Savchenko's career, see Maxine Boersma, "How Nadiya Savchenko became Ukraine's Joan of Arc," *New Statesman*, November 21, 2016, <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2016/11/how-nadiya-savchenko-became-ukraines-joan-arc>, accessed June 14, 2017.
- 67 Markwick and Charon-Cardona, *Soviet Women on the Frontline*, 207.
- 68 "Two Women Met...", *Sunday Mirror*, November 8, 1942, The British Newspaper Archive.
- 69 Natalia Antonova, Maxim Edwards, Mikhail Kaluzhsky and Tom Rowley, "#FreeSavchenko," *OpenDemocracy Russia*, February 23, 2016, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/natalia-antonova-maxim-edwards-mikhail-kaluzhsky-thomas-rowley/nadiya-savchenko>, accessed June 13, 2017.
- 70 See "The Whole World Calls on Russia to #FreeSavchenko," https://storify.com/MFA_Ukraine/the-whole-world-calls-on-russia-to-freesavchenko, accessed June 13, 2017.
- 71 See Olesya Khromeychuk, "What Place For Women in Ukraine's Memory Politics?," *Open Democracy Russia*, October 10, 2016, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/olesya-khromeychuk/what-place-for-women-in-ukraine-s-memory-politics>, accessed June 13, 2017; Christopher

- Miller, "The Many Faces of Nadia Savchenko," *RadioFreeEurope: RadioLiberty*, July 2016, <https://www.rferl.org/a/the-many-faces-of-nadia-savchenko/27869488.html>, accessed June 13, 2017.
- 72 Dombrowski, "Soldiers, Saints, or Sacrificial Lambs?," 4.
- 73 Engel, "The Womanly Face of War," 149.
- 74 Svetlana Aleksievich, *U voyny ne zhenskoe litso* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1988); Svetlana Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face of War: An Oral History of Women in World War II* (London: Random House Publishing Group, 2017).
- 75 See National Museum of the History of Ukraine in World War II, <http://www.warmuseum.kiev.ua>, accessed June 13, 2017.
- 76 See Khromeychuk, "Negotiating Protest Spaces," 18–19.
- 77 See Amandine Regamey, "Falsehood in the War in Ukraine: The Legend of Women Snipers," *The Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies* 17 (2016), para. 24, <https://pipss.revues.org/4222#ftn29>, accessed June 19, 2017. See also Khromeychuk "From the Maidan to the Donbas".
- 78 "Patriotichniy pin-ap: zvablyvo oholeni divchata i kamufliazh," [A patriotic pin-up: seductively undressed girls and camouflage], *TSN*, October 2, 2014, <https://tsn.ua/tsikavinki/patriotichniy-pin-ap-zvablyvo-oholeni-divchata-i-kamufliazh-371856.html>, accessed June 19, 2017.
- 79 See "Tatu, ty mene zakhystysh? – patriotichni plakaty v Sievierodonets'ku," [Daddy, will you defend me? – Patriotic posters in Sievierodonets'k], *Znaj.ua*, August 27, 2016, <https://znaj.ua/news/regions/15440/tatu-ti-mene-zahistish-patriotichni-plakati-v-syevyerodonecku-foto.html>, accessed June 14, 2017.
- 80 Servicewomen in the Donbas struggled to find uniforms and shoes that fit them and had to either buy these items at their own expense or get them through volunteer organizations. In this, their situation was very similar to that of the Red Army women, who at least in the initial stages of the war had to improvise with uniforms and army boots that were made to fit men and were mostly too large. See Berlins'ka, Martsenyuk, Kvit, and Grytsenko, *Nevydymy Batal'ion*; Markwick and Charon-Cardona, *Soviet Women on the Frontline*; Aleksievich, *U voyny ne zhenskoe litso*.
- 81 The UINP invented an epithet for the Ukrainian people – an army-nation (*narod-viis'ko*) – thereby militarizing not only contemporary Ukrainians, but also their historic ancestors. See "Vitaemo zakhysnykiv i zakhysnyts' zi sviatom! Ukraintsi – narod-viis'ko," [Congratulations to the male and female defenders on the holiday! Ukrainians are an army-nation], *Ukrains'kyi Instytut Natsional'noi Pam'iaty*, 2015, <http://www.memory.gov.ua/news/vitaemo-zakhisnykiv-i-zakhisnyts-zi-svyatom-ukraintsi-narod-viisko>, accessed June 14, 2017.
- 82 See "Viina ne robyt' vyniatkiv. Zhinochi istorii Druhoi svitovoi," [War makes no exceptions. Female history of the Second World War], *Ukrains'kyi Instytut Natsional'noi Pam'iaty*, <http://www.memory.gov.ua/news/viina-ne-robit-vyniatkiv-zhinochi-istorii-drugoi-svitovoi-informatsiini-materiali-dlya-zmi-do-v>, accessed June 13, 2017.
- 83 "Viina ne robyt' vyniatkiv".
- 84 Ibid.
- 85 See Khromeychuk, "What place for women in Ukraine's memory politics?". Ukraine is not unique in such an approach to women's history by official institutions. For a discussion of the Polish case, see Weronika Grzebalska, *Plać Powstania Warszawskiego* [The gender of Warsaw uprising], (Warsaw: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 2014).
- 86 "Voyny: Istoriia ukrains'koho viis'ka" [Warriors. History of the Ukrainian Military], *Ukrains'kyi Instytut Natsional'noi Pam'iaty*, <http://www.memory.gov.ua/news/voyny-istoriya-ukrainskogo-viiska-ukrainska-povstanska-armiya>, accessed June 13, 2017.
- 87 For further information on the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, see Myroslav Shkandrij, *Ukrainian Nationalism: Politics, Ideology and Literature, 1929–1956* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015); Oleksandr Zaitsev, *Ukrains'kyi integral'nyi natsionalizm, (1920–1930 roky): Narysy intelektual'noi istorii* [Ukrainian Integral Nationalism, (1920–1930). Sketches on Intellectual History] (Kyiv: Krytyka, 2013); Grzegorz Motyka, *Ukraińska partyzantka 1942–1960. Działalność Organizacji Ukraińskich Nacjonalistów i Ukraińskiej Powstańczej Armii* [Ukrainian partisan movement 1942–1960: The activity of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army], (Warsaw: Oficyna Wydawnicza Rytm, 2006).
- 88 "Voyny: Istoriia ukrains'koho viis'ka". The "Sich" volunteer battalion was formed in June 2014. In December 2015, it became the 4th Company of the "Kyiv" Regiment of the Special Police Patrol Service.
- 89 For a discussion of the use of feminine forms in the Ukrainian language, see Liudmyla Smoliar, "Try prychny, chomu varto vzhlyvaty feminityvy," [Three reasons for using feminine forms], *Ukrains'ka Pravda*, October 28, 2017, <https://life.pravda.com.ua/columns/2017/10/28/227141/>, accessed January 16, 2018.
- 90 See Mark Harrison, *Accounting for War: Soviet Production, Employment, and the Defence Burden, 1940–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Robert William Davies, Mark Harrison and S. G. Wheatcroft, *The Economic Transformation of the Soviet Union, 1913–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
- 91 Since the start of the conflict, the defense budget of Ukraine has seen a significant increase. Since 2016, it has been at 5% of the GDP. See "Military Budget," *GlobalSecurity.org*, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/ukraine/budget.htm>, accessed June 15, 2017.
- 92 Pennington, "Offensive Women," 819.
- 93 Martsenyuk and Grytsenko, "Women and Military in Ukraine," 36.
- 94 The Ukrainian Parliament refuses to ratify the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence because the wording of the document contains terms such as "gender". See Valeriya Shyrokovska, "Dev'yat' zapytan' pro domashnye nasytstvo i Stambul's'ku konventsiyu v Ukraini," [Nine questions about domestic violence and the Istanbul Convention in Ukraine], *Povaha*, October 24, 2017, <http://povaha.org.ua/dev-yat-zapytan-pro-domashnje-nasytstvo-i-stambulsku-konventsiyu-v-ukrajini/>, accessed October 29, 2017; "Ukraine fails to ratify European convention on gender-based violence," *LB.ua*, November 17, 2017, paras. 3, 12, http://en.lb.ua/news/2016/11/17/2351_ukraine_fails_ratify_european.html, accessed June 19, 2017. See also "Ukrainian parliament considers bill to ban elective abortions," *Censor.net*, March 31, 2017, https://en.censor.net.ua/news/434136/ukrainian_parliament_considers_bill_to_ban_elective_abortions, accessed June 19, 2017.
- 95 See "Kazhut", shcho u viiny ne zhinoche oblychchia, ale vono i ne liuds'ke," [They say that war has an unwomanly face, but it is also inhuman], 112 UA, December 25, 2016, <https://ua.112.ua/interview/kazhut-shcho-u-viiny-ne-zhinoche-oblychchia-ale-vono-ne-liudske-359659.html>, accessed January 17, 2018.
- 96 Joshua S. Goldstein, *War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 413.
- 97 Ibid., 413–414.



Polish women, soldiers of the Warsaw Uprising, after liberation of POW camp Oberlangen.

Between gender blindness and nationalist herstory

The history of Polish women in WWII as the site of an anti-modernist revolution

by **Weronika Grzebalska**

abstract

This paper discusses the current “herstorical turn” in professional and popular historiography and memory of WWII in Poland: a growing interest in women and the distinctiveness of their wartime experiences. The paper starts by describing the three “ideal types” of professional and popular WWII history writing with regard to the position of women: the false universalism of a large part of professional historiography, the compensatory character of women’s history that adds women to the picture without reframing the picture itself, and the recent “herstorical turn”. Focusing on one dominant strand of this “herstorical turn” – nationalist herstory – the article reflects on the ways in which women’s history has become one of the platforms a broader illiberal political shift that is currently ongoing in Central Europe.

KEY WORDS: Poland, Warsaw Uprising.

In the decades following 1945 in Poland, women’s history of WWII constituted itself as field of study predominantly in response to the absence of women and gender from the historiography and the collective memory of the period. Both women’s historians and female combatants engaging in history writing critically acknowledged the invisibility of women in mainstream narratives about the war, and they sought in their works to make women visible as participants in armed resistance. In contemporary Poland, however, this state of affairs in the field of WWII history and memory, as well as the rationale for feminist historical interventions, have changed significantly. The second decade of the 2000s marks an important turning point for the visibility of women in the popular history and collective memory of WWII, and it is characterized by an outbreak of popular interest in women’s participation in the war. In recent

years, numerous books dedicated to women's participation in WWII have been published, along with documentaries, press articles, museum exhibitions, musical projects, social media initiatives, reenactment groups, and even t-shirts. In 2001 the Polish freedom fighter Elżbieta Zawacka observed critically that in the contemporary collective consciousness the Polish WWII soldier of any armed organization is a man,¹ but in 2014 the 70th anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising seemed to be all about women, with several books on the topic published and wide media coverage of the issue of women's participation.

Yet, while these various herstory initiatives certainly made women visible as actors and questioned the false universality of wartime experience, they often also uncritically naturalized femininity and masculinity, reproduced traditionalist ideas about women's place in WWII and its history, and used women's history as a didactic resource to promote a gendered and militarized concept of citizenship and nationhood. In fact, the major challenge that stands before feminist historians and herstory practitioners in today's Poland no longer seems to be the absence of women from historical narratives, but rather the mainstreaming of women into history in an illiberal, anti-modernist framework that fetishizes gender difference and reduces history writing to a tool for producing nationhood. The popularity of this nationalist herstory is of course part of a broader political shift that is currently ongoing in Central Europe. In this shift, a particular construction of WWII memory has become one of the discursive tools for the creation of an alternative illiberal mode of governance and community built on the rejection of liberalism and modernism and centered on the notions of nation, family, and tradition.²

My own work³ on the Warsaw Uprising⁴ of 1944 has been entangled in this broader shift. In the years 2009–2013, I was conducting an oral history project devoted to the gender politics of armed resistance in Warsaw. When I began my research, the myth of the Warsaw Uprising had been gaining ground, symbolically elevated and politically instrumentalized⁵ by the Right since 2004 as the origin story of the post-1989 national collective. The myth, however, has long been a largely masculine one, as women and gender did not sufficiently figure in this story. Yet, when my book was published in late 2013, it entered a completely different political and public context from the one I had originally intended it for. It was no longer primarily with women's invisibility and the "white spots" of collective memory that the book needed to enter into dialogue. Rather, it was the nationalist herstory "boom" that it had to engage with, along with the instrumentalization of history in the service of right-wing illiberalism and the intensified attacks from conservative historians and far-right groups against "gender" in academia and beyond,⁶ which also unfolded around the same time.

**"OF THE THIRTEEN
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Building upon the arguments and analyses presented in my previous work⁷ on the visibility and position of women in professional and popular historiography of the Warsaw Uprising, this paper discusses the current "herstorical turn" against the background of the state of mainstream professional and popular historiography, occasionally referring to history teaching and public memory about WWII as well. It describes the three "ideal types" of WWII professional and popular history writing with regard to the position of: the false universalism of a large part of professional historiography, the compensatory character of women's history that aimed to merely add women to the picture without reframing the picture itself, and the recent "herstorical turn" characterized by a growing interest in women and the distinctiveness of their experiences. Focusing on one dominant strand of this "herstorical turn" – nationalist herstory – the article also situates itself in the broader context of the illiberal political transformation that is currently ongoing in Poland. It reflects on the ways in which women's history has become one of the platforms for the production of a new anti-modernist common-sense that rejects liberal democratic values, as well as a tool for the re-militarization and re-gendering of citizenship.

False universalism of the history of the Warsaw Uprising

To understand the recent "herstorical turn", one must first situate it against the background of professional historiography on the Warsaw Uprising. As I have argued,⁸ this has up until very recently been written predominantly in the disciplinary framework of political and in military historiography, which centers its attention on what happened in the offices of politicians and diplomats, military headquarters, and on battlefields, limiting the scope of studied phenomena to the experiences of a narrow and predominantly male group of participants. As the German historians Angelika Epple and Angelika Schaser have observed, the political-military paradigm in historiography leads not only to the writing of the history of a particular male group in society consisting of political and military elites and worthy soldiers, but also to the universalization of their experiences as the history of the whole collective: "Under the guise of studying high politics, international affairs, anonymous structures and social developments, general history is quite often centered on the history of a specific male group in society – certainly without analyzing the masculinity of its members."⁹ The invisibility of women can therefore be understood as a side effect of applying a narrow framework of political and military historiography, which focuses its attention on the center of power – high military and political ranks – a sphere where women have usually been underrepresented.

The description provided by Epple and Schaser faithfully



Warsaw Uprising: Courier bringing new orders.

renders the character of the most renowned and widely read monographs on the Warsaw Uprising, e.g. those of Jerzy Kirchmayer,¹⁰ Jan Ciechanowski,¹¹ and Norman Davies.¹² Because their aim was to present the political and military course of the uprising and the decisions that led to it, these authors largely omitted women from the narrative about the past, limiting the story to one “written primarily by men, for men, and about men”, in which “women are, by design, supporting actors whose roles reflect masculinist notions of femininity and of women’s proper ‘place’”.¹³ If women appear in these works, they usually do so as witnesses accounting for the events, often lacking biographical information, and not as active agents.¹⁴ This political-military paradigm also prevails in school curricula – out of the thirteen history textbooks published after 1989 that I analyzed,¹⁵ none featured a name or image of a female member of the underground, and only one included a simple mention that women also took part in the uprising.

Likewise, the aforementioned paradigm has also shaped the official commemorative politics of the Polish Parliament.¹⁶ Out of the 188 commemorative acts issued between 1989 and 2015 that commemorated people, organizations, and events connected to the war and the military, only one celebrated a woman – Irena Sendlerowa, who rescued Jewish children. An additional five acts mentioned women in passing while commemorating other events or organizations, albeit always as an anonymous collective – as “women” or “daughters of the Fatherland”. Non-militaristic acts were not much better in this respect. Out of the rest of the total of 419 commemorative acts we analyzed, two memorialized female figures (the actress Helena Modrzejewska and the scientist Maria Curie-Skłodowska), and two more celebrated occasions associated with women as a collective (International Women’s Day and Women’s Suffrage).

While a simple lack of female figures in the narrative is an obvious example of women’s invisibility in mainstream his-

torical accounts, another instance is the omission of certain aspects of women’s collective or individual biography that could challenge stereotypical ideas about women’s wartime involvement and complicate the neat national master narrative. For instance, in books and encyclopedias women who participated in direct combat are often described as nurses and couriers. Likewise, in his description of the London mission of the emissary Elżbieta Zawacka, Norman Davies¹⁷ leaves out the fact that one of its goals – which Zawacka personally underscores¹⁸ – was to persuade the president-in-exile Władysław Raczkiewicz to improve the situation of women within the ranks by legally acknowledging their effort as military service equal to men’s. In fact, emancipatory aspects of Women’s military service¹⁹ are ignored by most his-

torical publications in favor of accentuating the patriotic dimension of women’s military participation. The Warsaw Uprising Museum is another good example of this false universalism of national experience and its consequence – the invisibility in the exposition of issues such as women’s gendered participation or Women’s Military Service as a specific organizational structure and a lack of focus on the gendered experiences of insurgents and civilians. In fact, when I approached the Warsaw Uprising Museum in 2010 to access data about the percentage of women among the insurgents, I was informed that this largest of archival institutions did not possess such data due to the fact that its database simply did not include the variable “gender”. This proved no obstacle for the helpful employees, but it revealed a lot about the character of public remembrance and history writing of the event before the “herstorical turn”. The primacy of national frames of reference rests on the assumption that men and women shared similar experiences because belonging to the same nation and undergoing the same national oppression was of much greater significance than any gender differences. This underscoring of the unity of national experience, ostensibly undifferentiated by gender or other social parameters, leads to the exclusion of issues that do not fit easily into such a narrative.

Filling in the blanks: women’s history as an appendix

The first group that was very vocal in its criticism of the invisibility of women and their military (and paramilitary) structures in historical works about WWII was female veterans themselves. In 1951, Major Wanda “Lena” Gertz complained in a letter to her subordinates that the Polish Historical Institute in London not only omitted women in its book on the Home Army, but also refused to financially support efforts by the women’s editorial committee to publish a supplement dedicated to women’s participation.²⁰ Two decades later, Lieutenant-Colonel Grażyna



Major Wanda "Lena" Gertz served in WW1 masqueraded as a man. During WWII she commanded a women's diversion and sabotage unit.



General Elżbieta Zawacka (in the center) and the commanders of the women's platoons, Garczyn 1939.

Lipińska analyzed three thousand publications on WWII and gave a speech in which she voiced concern that in the historical literature women usually lacked essential biographical information and often even surnames.²¹ In 2001, Brigadier General Elżbieta Zawacka summarized women's visibility in historical research on WWII on a similar note: "These issues are not reflected in research plans of academic institutions. It is very hard to find them in the abundant publications about the Polish underground during WWII. The existing literature is very limited in providing systematic knowledge about women's wartime participation, its geographical and quantitative scope, and the types of service women were able to participate in."²²

This disappointment with the omission of women from historical research pushed female combatants to launch various initiatives aimed at documenting and disseminating knowledge about their participation in WWII, among them publishing joint volumes, organizing conferences, setting up historical archives, and erecting monuments. The official politics of history in a given period has of course shaped the general conditions for research on women in the uprising. For example, while research on the Home Army was impossible under Stalinism,²³ the thaw of October 1956 brought about a new myth of "the unity of resistance" that permitted new research and publications on WWII.²⁴ After the thaw in the 1960s, Brigadier General Maria Wittek began the archiving of documents connected to women's military service that led in 1970 to the official founding of the Commission for Women's History in the Struggle for Independence in 1970. About the same time, materials about women's wartime participation were also being gathered by Elżbieta Zawacka. The first academic publications dedicated to Polish women's WWII participation started coming out in the 1970s and early 1980s, and although their focus was predominantly on members of the Peasant Battalions and the Polish People's Army,²⁵ and although they sometimes constructed women's participation in the framework of "the fight for the Poland of the working people",²⁶ several also concentrated on the wartime participation of women

who belonged to the Home Army and Polish Armed Forces in the West.²⁷ As the Polish sociologist Barbara Szacka has argued, along with the revival of romantic national liberation motifs and the growing significance of samizdat publications, the 1980s saw the popularization of the image of the Warsaw Uprising as a symbol of a heroic fight for freedom.²⁸ Following that shift, numerous memoirs of female insurgents were published, as well as historical works dedicated to women in the Warsaw Uprising and the Home Army, along with other formations.²⁹ In turn, Szacka observes, the breakthrough of 1989 initiated the period of "recovered memory"³⁰ – the opening of the archives in Central Europe was accompanied by efforts to write the "truer" history of WWII, countering the narratives from the communist period.³¹ On the wave of this revisionist turn, the Warsaw Uprising has gradually become elevated to the status of the founding myth of the post-1989 national collective. The sources of the symbolic potency and wide relevance of the event for the public cannot be reduced to a single political campaign, no matter how successful such a campaign may have been. However, with the erection of the Warsaw Uprising Museum on the initiative of the leader of the Law and Justice Party, Lech Kaczyński, it also became clear that the Right saw the event as a key building block of its counter-hegemonic narrative.³²

While broader political shifts have provided an important context for historical research and commemorative initiatives dedicated to the uprising and to WWII in general, I would argue that traditional historical watersheds such as 1989 have not affected history writing as far as the visibility and position of women and gender in these works is concerned. The majority of publications on female insurgents published after 1989 were still personal recollections and joint volumes authored by female veterans, and the historiographical articles and books³³ dedicated to women that came out after 1989 did not introduce new theoretical or methodological frameworks. In fact, women's history works published before and after 1989 have more similarities than differences. What is more, this observation is true of the

works written by conventional historians and of the writings of scholars associated with women's history. As the Polish historian Natalia Jarska observes, the tendency in historical publications on women during the occupation in WWII is that they "do not go beyond factographic description and heroic narrative, not asking the question of gender. The narrative on this topic is often essentialist and stereotypical."³⁴

One common feature of these works has been their methodological nationalism,³⁵ which is the tendency to analyze women's wartime participation solely in the national framework and to ignore critical socio-historical categories that could undermine the explicit primacy of the nation such as the concept of "gender" or "militarism". Another common characteristic has been what the Polish historian Dobrochna Kałwa called "methodological orthodoxy": the concentration on establishing "historical facts" – dates, names, and numbers – rather than understanding the sociopolitical processes that have shaped women's wartime situation, as well as adhesion to methodological rules of classical historiography and hostility to new methodologies and theoretical approaches such as those springing from gender studies.³⁶ Last but not least, what these works also share is that they treat "women" as a stable and essentialist category instead of reflecting on how such a category was created and mobilized in a given moment by various political actors.³⁷ All of these characteristics contributed to the ghettoization of women's history in WWII and the fact that their history has not been integrated with the broader history of the war and has resided on its margins, thus holding the status of a "feminine appendix" to the otherwise uncontested history of WWII rather than knowledge that could transform the way the war is conceptualized and narrated. Up until today, the Warsaw Uprising has not been the object of much feminist analysis apart from my own work. While the situation is less bleak in the case of feminist literature dealing with other aspects of WWII in Poland, many of these important works³⁸ have been written by authors working outside of Polish academia and have not been translated into Polish. As argued by Natalia Jarska, the body of Polish historiographical works that survey the war from a gender perspective is still in the process of being made.³⁹

Feminist activists and popular writers, however, have been an important part of the post-2010 "herstorical turn" that can be defined as a sudden increase in interest in women in the history of WWII, accompanied by the departure from viewing the past in a universalist framework in favor of acknowledging the gendered diversification of historical experiences and their unequal representation in history writing. In 2008, the feminist writer Sylwia Chutnik raised the topic of female civilian experience during the uprising in the book *Kieszonkowy atlas kobiet* [Pocket female at-

las], followed by a Warsaw city guide dedicated to women's history that also featured herstories from the Warsaw Uprising. In 2010, numerous screenings across the country of the documentary *Uprising in a Floral Blouse*,⁴⁰ produced by the feminist NGO Feminoteka, popularized the topic of women in the Warsaw Uprising. Since its premiere, the 20-minute feature has been shown at almost 30 events, been the topic of various press articles and even university courses, and been watched almost 9,000 times on YouTube and Vimeo. In 2012, the feminist and Vice-Marshall of the Sejm Wanda Nowicka organized a conference in the parliament dedicated to women in the uprising. While it is too early to make an informed judgment about the influence of the feminist strand of the "herstorical turn" on professional historiography, recent publications⁴¹ suggest that it could potentially play a positive role in influencing professional historians to study this topic in novel ways.

The anti-modernist memory boom and the securitization of memory

The growing emphasis on women as wartime actors that began in popular historiography and public memory in the second decade of the 21st century did not emerge out of the blue; on the contrary, it was preceded by a broader anti-modernist WWII memory boom orchestrated in large part by right-wing political actors, as well as attempts to securite a particular version of collective memory. As James Mark argued, due to the absence of judicial reckoning with communist political elites, and to

the brutal social costs of the neoliberal transition, 1989 was not broadly accepted as a heroic political myth; instead, the insecurity produced by the post-1989 era has been narrated by the Right in the region as the "unfinished revolution".⁴² Moreover, in the absence of convincing left-wing political alternatives, the insecurities and disenchantment produced by the period have been channeled into identity conflicts,⁴³ and memory wars have been their key example. Memory

"THE OMISSION OF WOMEN FROM HISTORICAL RESEARCH PUSHED FEMALE COMBATANTS TO LAUNCH VARIOUS INITIATIVES AIMED AT DOCUMENTING AND DISSEMINATING KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THEIR PARTICIPATION IN WWII."

scholars agree that in Poland the beginning of the era of what has been dubbed the "new politics of history"⁴⁴ – the growing emphasis on the promotion of nationalist and neoconservative narratives about the past by the state and right-wing political actors – was symbolically marked by the erection of the Warsaw Uprising Museum in 2004. Our research on the commemorative politics of the Polish Parliament in the years 1989–2015 confirms this claim.⁴⁵ As we observed, while an increase in the number of commemorative acts was visible even before 2005, the "memory boom" – the largest increase both in absolute and relative terms – occurred during the first Law and Justice government of 2005–2007. The subsequent governments led by the conservative liberal Civic Platform continued to pass commemorative acts

at a similar rate. This post-2004 era of the politics of history has witnessed an intensification of revisionist discussions on recent history – especially WWII and state socialism – together with the emergence of two potent military myths, that of the Warsaw Uprising of 1944 and that of the Cursed Soldiers,⁴⁶ who led the anti-communist resistance in the post-war period. Interestingly enough, while at the turn of the century Law and Justice worked to revive the memory of the Home Army and the Warsaw Uprising, the party later largely abandoned these issues and turned to celebrating the Cursed Soldiers instead. This is arguably because the myth of the Cursed Soldiers worked better with the main principles of the broader illiberal counter-revolution that Law and Justice began orchestrating. This counter-revolution claims that previous historical watersheds such as 1945 and 1989 should not be regarded as such because they brought the continuation of occupation and oppression rather than genuine change.⁴⁷ Cursed Soldiers fit better with this narrative because some of them stayed undercover in the forests after 1945 and did not accept the new post-war order.

An underlying feature of this memory boom has been right-wing anti-modernism. Stories about the glorious past produced by the Right are therefore implicated in broader narratives of cultural and national decline as a result of the communist experiment and subsequent Europeanization. As the religious studies scholar Arthur Versluis argued in defining anti-modernism, “[i]f the essence of ‘modernism’ is progress, a belief that technological development means socio-economic improvement, the heart of antimodernism is a realization that ‘progress’ has an underbelly – that technological industrial development has destructive consequences in three primary and intertwined areas: nature, culture, and religion”.⁴⁸

With the illiberal turn in Central Europe, these anti-modernist narratives have once again resurfaced, providing community and meaning to those faced with the dire consequences of contemporary risk societies. The rewriting of the past thus became the platform for the forging of an alternative to what has been seen as destructive and corrupt modern progress represented by Europeanization and globalized capitalism. Across Central Europe, illiberal right-wing actors emerged who refer to the modern world as the “civilization of death” and who promise an alternative to the modern liberal democratic model. This alternative emphasizes the cultural and socio-economic stability of family and of religious and national communities, and it offers a militarized concept of security. Yet, as the political scientist Timothy W. Luke argues, one should not culturalize politico-economic processes by obscuring the structural regimes that produce modernism with vague terms and binary oppositions such as “progress versus tradition” or “technology versus humanity”.⁴⁹ Modernity – Luke observes – has a lot to do with the “creative destruction of capi-

talism”, including the commodification of social relations, the hegemony of market rationality, and global capitalism.⁵⁰ What follows is that while the opposition to modernity’s battleground might predominantly be the culture of modern society represented by liberal and progressive values, it is in fact often fueled by deeper structural issues such as socio-economic insecurity or the political disempowerment of some parts of the population.

As indicated by Polish parliamentary discussions, through increased attempts at passing commemorative acts politicians in Poland have sought to discursively secure historical narratives of heroism and victimhood and a certain vision of present-day nationhood and citizenship. Similarly, the Estonian scholar Maria Mälksoo observed that after EU enlargement, Central and Eastern European actors in general attempted to protect and institutionalize particular narratives about WWII and communism, on both the national and transnational level.⁵¹ This securing of a certain flow of memory, she argued, could be seen as a way to provide ontological security to a state or society undergoing rapid transition or other threats to its unity and identity. At the same time, however, the illusion of ontological security comes at serious costs. One is the securitization of memory, that is, the removal of public remembrance from the realm of normal political debate and the framing of alternative memory cultures as a security threat. Another is the militarization of memory – the use of historical narratives to promote militaristic values, practices, and notions of citizenship. As Mälksoo observes, “The social framing of issues of historical remembrance as ontological security problems and the related lax use of military metaphors [...] condition and legitimate the rhetoric and the means of security for handling them, thereby enhancing the potential of

militarizing a state’s historical self-understanding and culture as a whole.”⁵²

As our research on commemorative acts of the Polish Parliament revealed,⁵³ militarism in general and WWII in particular have been an important strand of official remembrance culture in Poland ever since the beginning of the socio-economic transformation. Acts that commemorated people, events, and

organizations connected to the war effort constituted over 45% of all acts issued between 1989 and 2015.⁵⁴ This tendency to construct collective identity primarily in relation to war by securing a certain type of historical narrative has been further strengthened by the WWII “memory boom” that began in 2004. In the years 2005–2007, the number of acts commemorating military issues grew by 100% compared to those issued under the previous government. Yet political actors did not stop at the discursive securitization of memory, but turned to legal measures as well. In 2016 and 2017, several activists faced charges for using the altered symbol of the WWII Polish underground – Fighting Poland – in the context of women’s rights demonstrations.⁵⁵ In

“WHILE AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY LAW AND JUSTICE WORKED TO REVIVE THE MEMORY OF THE HOME ARMY AND THE WARSAW UPRISING, THE PARTY LATER LARGELY ABANDONED THESE ISSUES.”

one instance, the charges were pressed by an NGO dedicated to the Cursed Soldiers, in other cases the notification of a suspicion of criminal offence was filed by right-wing activists. The symbol of Fighting Poland has been legally protected since 2014 when the then-governing Civic Platform passed a bill to that effect, but attempts to legally ban activists from using it to promote struggles for an open society and human rights have begun only under the illiberal right-wing Law and Justice government.

Nationalist herstory

While the outbreak of women's history projects based predominantly on oral history sources in the context of the Warsaw Uprising is a recent occurrence, nationalist herstory as such is not a new phenomenon in Poland. The Polish historian Alicja Kusiak-Brownstein observed a similar proliferation of fighting women's autobiographies in the years of the formation of an independent Polish state after 1918. While these were written by the women themselves, the schematic character of these writings, including their entanglement with politically endorsed notions of patriotic femininity, and the careful selection of those that got published, led Kusiak-Brownstein to argue that in all these texts women "function as national metaphors of women's loyalty to their fathers, husbands, brothers, as well as the social and political institutions they represented."⁵⁶ Given the importance of WWII memory in the broader anti-modernist political project and the fact that women function in nationalist politics as metaphors of the collective and as the bearers of its values,⁵⁷ it is not surprising that women's history once again has become the key battleground for the definition of the contemporary collective.

As mentioned above, few feminist activists, writers, and academics have critically engaged in this ongoing discussion about wartime women, and it has been the newly established conservative memory institutions, right-wing authors, and reenactment groups that have played a leading role in revising history with a focus on women, researching and commemorating women as national heroines and martyrs and promoting wartime women as symbols of national struggle. Unlike feminist interventions that generally sought to open up a space for different experiences and memory cultures and to go beyond the national framework of analysis by introducing categories such as gender or militarism, works from the nationalist herstory strand are mostly written in the neo-traditional and anti-modernist framework. After the topic of women in the uprising first gained wider public relevance, the Museum instantly initiated several undertakings of its own. Patrycja Bukalska captured this new-found interest in women on the part of the Museum in the foreword to her book where she recalled: "In the summer of 2010 I received a call from the Deputy Director of the Warsaw Uprising Museum [...] He asked me if I had thought about a book on women in the Warsaw Uprising. From this conversation my work on *August Girls '44* started."⁵⁸ Also in 2010, the Warsaw Rising Museum announced a comic book contest about female participants, followed by a broad commemorative project dedicated to women entitled *Morowe Panny* [Brave Girls] in 2012. As part of this "herstory turn", numerous popular history books on female insur-



Members of Women's Military Training (PWK), 1932.

gents were published.⁵⁹ Several exhibitions⁶⁰ and campaigns⁶¹ were launched, along with social media profiles⁶² and music projects.⁶³ The outbreak of interest in the female insurgents of the Warsaw Uprising was swiftly followed by a similar offensive of projects dedicated to the female members of the post-war armed anti-communist resistance dubbed the Cursed Soldiers. In 2017, Polish public TV, which since 2016 has been used as a tool for broadcasting the party agenda, will air the first TV series dedicated to female members of the wartime underground.

One common characteristic of these works has been their neo-traditional frame, that is, the focus on the story of women predominantly as brave and patriotic role models. While the authors of these books⁶⁴ aim to recover the history of women, they are, in fact, only interested in a particular group of women – those whose lives can be presented in the framework of heroism and martyrdom. This rationale was directly laid out on the Facebook fan page "Poles Serving the Fatherland that commemorates female fighters of WWII: "Polish women are not only wonderful mothers and wives, they are also dedicated patriots, actively serving the Fatherland. Every Polish woman who contributes to national defense [...] deserves respect."⁶⁵ Similarly, the author of *Girls from the Uprising*, Anna Herbich, explained in an interview the principles of the selection of female figures for her book: "If women played hardball, they would not be heroes to me. A woman who killed, stole, sold her body, who wanted to survive no matter what, would not be my hero."⁶⁶ This focus on the herstory of heroines and martyrs points to the overriding function of this type of historical writing, namely, the production and legitimization of a specific version of nationhood. The goal of these works is not so much to uncover women's experiences for the sake of learning more about the politics of the event in question. Rather, women's stories are carefully selected and used to secure a certain narrative about the past. As another author, Barbara Wachowicz put it: "Memory is important. We cannot forget our history. It's a guarantee of tradition and Polishness."⁶⁷ Here women's history becomes just another way of



From the film *Uprising in a Floral Blouse* (2009). The text reads: "Washing yourself wasn't so important, it was more important to not get shot by the Germans", "When they're shooting it's better to be dirty than to be clean and die".

telling the same romantic narrative of what the Polish feminist Sławomira Walczewska has called the story of "knights and ladies"⁶⁸ – a narrative about the brave community of men protecting "women and children"⁶⁹ and their loyal female companions who sometimes fought by their side.

The nation-building function of this type of herstory writing is of course reliant on the production of a particular gender order because the life stories of women in WWII set a scope of propagated gendered attitudes and values for contemporary women. These propagated models draw on two politicized notions of patriotic femininity established in the Polish national canon over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries – the *Matka Polka* and the female soldier.⁷⁰ In current memory politics, these two patriotic feminine ideals are often discursively juxtaposed with the "Other" of the Polish national consciousness, namely Soviet women whose ostensible lack of femininity personifies the barbarism of the USSR⁷¹ and female communists who are portrayed as demonic and lecherous criminals.⁷² Therefore, as Alicja Kusiak-Brownstein noted in regard to women's life stories which served the goal of nation-building should not be read as multidimensional testimonies of women's experiences, but rather as a record of politically accepted notions of patriotic femininity.⁷³ Of course, such a nation-oriented framing of women's past results in numerous taboos and the erasure of those elements of their life stories that challenge or outright undermine the national narrative. Therefore, in national herstory works one will not read about women who did not want to fight or to sacrifice their children "on the altar of the Fatherland", about acts of oppression or violence performed by Polish soldiers, or about women's fight against the prevailing gender order.

While the neo-traditional narrative remains the dominant

way of telling the history of women during the Warsaw Uprising, nationalist herstory sometimes also relies on what can be described as the *Alltagsgeschichte* frame. Within this frame, women's wartime lives are narrated through the prism of the spheres of life that are marked as "private" and "feminine" – motherhood, fashion, beauty, and relationships – and as such have not been the focus of conventional political-military historiography. A good example is the book *Girls from the Uprising* whose cover blurb reads: "Sławka regrets to this day that she did not kiss a young insurgent who was in love with her. Halina gave birth to a son right before the uprising and saved his life in a miraculous way, and Zosia broke the rules of the conspiracy and revealed her name to her beloved. The author lets us see the uprising from an entirely new perspective: through women's eyes."⁷⁴ In some respect, the *Alltagsgeschichte* frame can be viewed as a promising alternative to both the pompousness of national martyrology and the

abstractness of general historiography because it takes everyday experiences of ordinary women as its starting point. This concentration on the microhistory of everyday lives, emotions, and relationships could indeed have the potential to transform the dominant historiography of the uprising that predominantly serves the function of producing a narrowly defined national identity. With this transformative intention in mind, the producers of the feminist film *Uprising in a Floral Blouse* proclaimed on their website: "Monuments are many, and we do not intend to build another one. We want to know how our grandmothers lived when they were our age."⁷⁵ Yet, while the move away from the nation-building orientation is promising, equating women's history with the private history of everyday life, and understanding a "women's perspective" as restricted to the experiences of motherhood, romance, and beauty, raises serious doubts. Especially if it is not followed by a similar interest in men's everyday practices. For instance, the all-female group DiSK, named after a WWII women's diversion and sabotage unit, concentrates mostly on reconstructing the customs, clothing, and make-up of female conspirators, and not the primary activities of DiSK such as military training and sabotage operations.⁷⁶ The same rationale motivated the contest organized by the fashion blogger portal *szafiarenka.pl* in cooperation with the author of *Girls from the Uprising*, Anna Herbich, who explained the contest's rationale in the following way: "Thousands of young women took part in this battle, who even in the most dramatic circumstances did their best to look good [...] If [young girls] want to commemorate them this way, I don't see anything wrong with that."⁷⁷

However, while nationalist herstory dedicates a lot of space to women and their experiences, gender differences are unreflexively accentuated, not problematized. No questions are asked

about the cultural and political forces that shaped the notion of femininity and masculinity in a given context, and when the invisibility of women in history is acknowledged, no attention is paid to the very processes that have contributed to omitting women. One example of this fetishization of gender difference can be found in the foreword to *August Girls*, 44, where the author writes: “Their stories about the uprising are also different from the ones we are used to. There’s little about operations and shooting, numbers, data, location of troops. There are more feelings, smells, colors, recollections of rain and a first cigarette.”⁷⁸ Yet, while underscoring the specificity of women’s stories, nationalist herstory leaves readers with a mere ascertainment that men and women are fundamentally different and thus have different wartime experiences. The gender order is perceived as historical and eternal and, therefore, unworthy of analysis. Yet the fetishization of gender differences can be fraught with the same dire consequences as ignoring such differences altogether. As Sara Horowitz alerts us, the concentration on essentialist difference “inadvertently reproduces the marginalization of women”⁷⁹ by depoliticizing them and portraying them as belonging primarily to the private or biological sphere.

Nationalist herstory has its merits and should not be underestimated. By presenting examples of women from the past as politically engaged actors, and popularizing herstory as a genre, it certainly provides a powerful alternative to male-dominated historical narratives. However, what all these right-wing revisionist herstory projects have in common is their anti-modernist undertone – the fact that stories about wartime women are used as a metaphor for a utopian state of cultural normalcy – a past where women were still “proper” women and men were “real” men, and a projected future society that will be designed according to anti-modernist values. In 21st-century Poland, women’s history has thus become one of the key battlegrounds for the (re) definition of the contemporary national collective. A particular construction of the history of wartime women is played against current emancipatory tendencies in Polish society and is used to counter the feminist movement and the changes in gender roles that it advocates. While providing a powerful alternative to the values, gender roles, and modes of citizenship promoted by the liberal democratic project, this nationalist herstory also has the effect of re-militarizing the notion of citizenship through the celebration of martyrs and heroes as role models. The productiveness of securing a certain version of the past for present political goals was further revealed in 2016 by the ruling Law and Justice party’s flagship project: the creation of a new branch of the armed forces called the Territorial Defense Forces, formed predominantly from local citizens and not professional soldiers. Not surprisingly, the Forces officially took over the military tra-

ditions of the Home Army, and the first three brigades bear the names of three Cursed Soldiers. While the forces are open to women, so far women constitute only 9 percent of the cadres.⁸⁰ Thus in the creation of the Territorial Defense Forces, right-wing memory politics, a militarized form of citizenship, and an anti-modernist gender regime have been symbolically woven together.

Conclusions

The sheer number of recently published works dedicated to women who participated in important events of the past, as well as the total sales figures of these books, clearly shows that nationalist herstory has fallen on fertile ground in 21st century Poland.⁸¹ The re-emergence of nationalist herstory as a dominant way of mainstreaming women into history in 21st century Poland challenges both the rationale for, and the ways of doing, feminist history, making it increasingly harder for professional feminist historians and public historians alike to conduct and promote their research the way they used to. As right-wing circles celebrate female fighters and mothers of fighters, it is no longer credible to assert that feminist scholars are the only ones revisiting history for the sake of women and working towards advancing women’s position in society and its culture of remembrance. As feminist scholarship in the region is being delegitimized and attacked by anti-modernists, it is increasingly harder to find institutional support and financial resources to conduct and disseminate academic research to counter the anti-modernist narrative. As discussions about women’s history are brought by right-wing actors out of academia and into the public sphere in the form of books, exhibitions, reenactments, and TV series, it

“PRESENTING EXAMPLES OF WOMEN FROM THE PAST AS POLITICALLY ENGAGED ACTORS, AND POPULARIZING HERSTORY AS A GENRE, [...] PROVIDES A POWERFUL ALTERNATIVE TO MALE-DOMINATED HISTORICAL NARRATIVES.”

is no longer enough for feminists to restrict their activity to academia either. Moreover, as women’s history is turned by the Right into a platform for the promotion of a nationalist, anti-modernist model of society, some activists argue that the topic of wartime women has been lost to the nationalists and that feminists should abandon it altogether. Yet, as a politically instrumentalized history of WWII once again

fires the imagination of the people, and is used by the Right as a building block of a new illiberal and militarized model of citizenship,⁸² the danger of having a single story of war and a single story of female empowerment is all the more serious. Therefore, the critical and deconstructive potential of gender as a category of analysis is more important than ever because it can show how things that are considered natural, innate, and infinite are actually carefully constructed and mobilized.⁸³ However, in the case of WWII the deconstruction of the militarized and nationalist master narrative is not enough. There is a need to complicate this politically-endorsed single narrative with more stories that

show different experiences, values, and goals. Here the role of feminist historians as discoverers and facilitators of alternative narratives is crucial.

Moreover, instead of a simple rejection of nationalist herstory of wartime women, I believe we need to do better at understanding the sources of the popularity of these narratives and the empowering aspects of anti-modernist projects in general. Despite its tendency to depoliticize and fetishize gender difference and subordinate women's life stories to the nation-building goal, it would be a mistake to perceive nationalist herstory as purely regressive and oppressive for women. In fact, there is much to suggest that women can experience these narratives as beneficial and empowering. Back in 2009–2010, when I interviewed female participants of the Warsaw Uprising, a few of them mentioned to me the role that stories of women who had actively engaged in national struggles – like the French Joan of Arc or the Polish Emilia Plater – played in their personal development, their understanding of female citizenship, and their decision to engage in resistance. I have since found similar tropes in several interviews with female members of contemporary Polish paramilitary organizations who pointed out how they had enjoyed nationalist wartime herstory prior to joining the largely masculinized paramilitary movement. Yet the empowering potential of nationalist herstory goes beyond inspiring some to challenge the dominant gender order. In fact, for some women it is not the gender transgression, but rather conforming to politically significant female roles such as that of combative/patriotic motherhood that is considered symbolically elevating. The popularity of nationalist herstory could thus be seen as stemming from its entanglement with what Andrea Pető has described as an alternative, anti-modernist model of emancipation⁸⁴ – one standing in opposition to the modernist tradition represented by cosmopolitan feminism and (neo)liberal progress and accentuating the empowering aspects of family, nationalism, and religion. Much like in the Vatican-promoted idea of the complementarity of the sexes, in this anti-modernist vision women are seen as essentially different from men in their ontology and social role, but equal in their dignity. The salience of this anti-modernist vision of emancipation grows out of the failures of the modernist model that entangled feminism with neoliberalism and tied women's value to the labor market.⁸⁵ For those who do not find the individualistic, market-oriented model of emancipation appealing, the anti-modernist vision offered by a nationalist herstory accentuating the importance of women's patriotic involvement may be seen as a feasible and dignifying alternative. ✕

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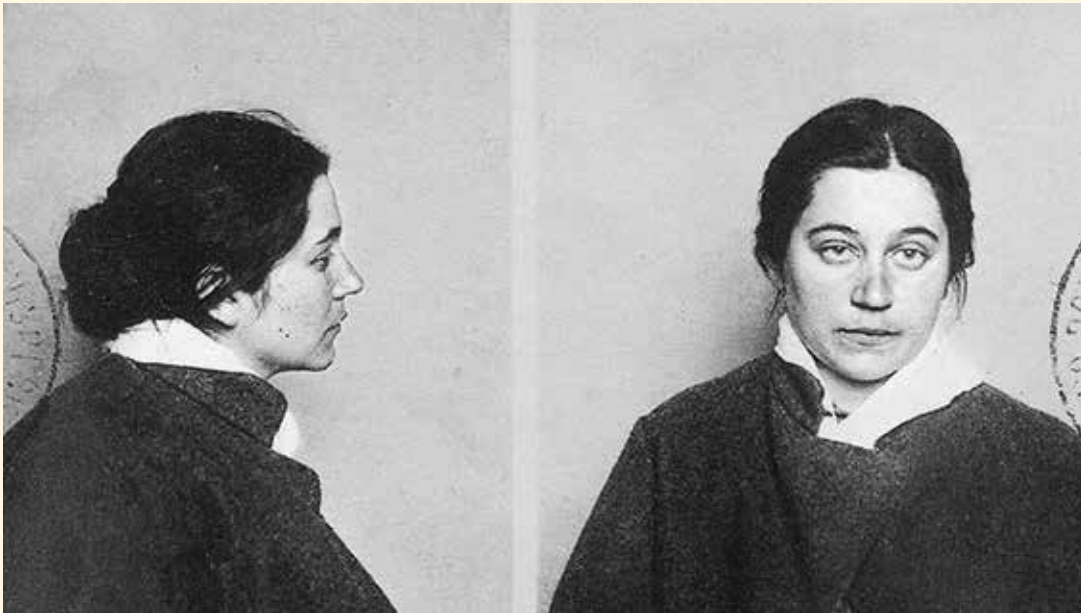
Note: Parts of this article are based on much revised and extended arguments and analyses presented in my previous work published in Polish: "Od fałszywego uniwersalizmu do fetyszyzacji różnicy..." [From False universalism to the fetishization of difference. the herstorical turn in the history of the Warsaw Uprising], *Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość* (No 2(26)/2015), 139–158.

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Natalia Klimova was a member of a terrorist group that took part in preparations for the famous explosion in the dacha of Prime Minister Petr Stolypin in August 1906. She was sentenced to life imprisonment in 1908. She later escaped prison and fled the country.

Female terrorists: political or just mad?

Conservative narratives in the historiography
of early 20th century female terrorism in Russia

by **Nadezda Petrusenko**

abstract

Most historians writing about revolutionary terrorism in Russia in the second half of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century have long treated it as the history of a righteous fight against the autocratic regime, which is the way the terrorists themselves represented their activities. However, conservative contemporaries of the terrorists, with a progovernmental perspective on revolutionary terrorism have until recently not been taken into account. This article discusses the main narratives employed by conservatives at the beginning of the 20th century to explain the political violence committed by women, and it shows how these narratives have been employed in the scholarly analysis of the topic. The article provides an answer to the question why progovernmental conservative views on the female terrorists and terrorism in prerevolutionary Russia have never been influential in the historiography.

KEYWORDS: terrorism, Russia, women, conservative narratives, historiography, conservative turn.

The revival of conservatism in the political life of contemporary Russia has influenced the work of Russian historians in many ways. Diverse aspects of the conservative past of the country have become popular research topics, and progovernmental conservative interpretations have been applied to different historical issues by researchers inspired by the state ideology.¹ Although political terrorism is one of the most important problems faced by Russia and the whole world nowadays, research on the history of Russian terrorism, and particularly on female participation in such activities, is present only marginally in the conservative turn in historiography. Such a lack of interest in women can be explained by interpretations of the feminine as being second-rate in the context of the current conservative “remasculinization of Russia”.² In addition, in the patriarchal culture that promotes traditional forms of femininity for women,³ women who participate in political violence are not seen as an interesting research subject. The

lack of interest in female terrorism in Russia in contemporary conservative historiography, however, cannot be explained by the absence of conservative views on the issue. Before 1917 and even after that conservative contemporaries of terrorist women wrote at length about female participation in political violence.

The purpose of this article is, therefore, to show why the conservative narratives have never become influential in the historiography of female participation in political terrorism. It will focus particularly on the conservative narratives and historiography of female terrorists from the beginning of the 20th century, who were the second generation of Russian terrorists and who received much attention from both scholars and laymen. In order to answer the central question of the article, I will first introduce conservative views on women in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century. Second, I will identify the typical narratives that appeared in prerevolutionary accounts of female terrorists written by conservative authors. Third, I will show what role these narratives have played in the professional historiography of female participation in political terrorism in Russia. In the final section, I will present the way contemporary conservative historians and laymen have approached this question.

Conservative perspective on women

During the second half of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century, the Russian authorities were seriously challenged by systematic political terrorism, which was used as a means of political struggle by many left-wing political groups. Members of these groups saw the tsarist regime as autocratic, and having no legal way to change the situation in the country they considered political terrorism as the only powerful means to resist tyranny.⁴ Women had even fewer legal rights than men in Russia at that time, and many of them joined terrorist units where they could enjoy the freedom and equality with men that were otherwise denied to them.

According to their conservative contemporaries with progovernmental views, however, women were not expected to take part in political activism of any kind. The female ideal of that time that was promoted by both the tsarist regime and conservatives was for a woman to be a good wife to her husband and a good mother to her children and to dedicate her life to her family.⁵ Female terrorists, the majority of whom chose not to start families in order to be politically active, were in the eyes of their conservative contemporaries individuals who deviated from that female ideal. Their wish to be present in the political arena that was considered to be an exclusively male domain⁶ was interpreted as an abnormality by the conservatives, who tried to find explanations for the women's behavior using various narratives.

Conservative narratives of female political violence

The tsarist regime, whose most hated representatives were the targets of political terrorism, and the conservatives, who supported that regime, saw women who participated in political terrorism first of all as law breakers. As a result, the attitude towards them was more or less similar to the attitude towards criminal women in prerevolutionary Russia. That attitude was based on Cesare Lombroso's criminal anthropology, according to which criminal women were seen as unnatural and unsexed.⁷ Women who committed violent crimes were seen as the worst kind of criminals because they contradicted the existing gender expectations about women as "naturally" peaceful. Their participation in violence was often attributed to extreme emotionality, which was considered to be a "typical" feminine feature at that time. As a result, female violence was attributed to emotional motivations like love, jealousy, or revenge.

However, political violence perpetrated by women could not be easily portrayed as stemming from such emotions.⁸ As a result, in order to explain female participation in political terrorism, the conservatives suggested particular narratives. In the following paragraphs, I will introduce the conservative narratives that would have particular importance for future historical works, and I will illustrate them with examples of conservative writing on some of the female terrorists in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century.

First of all, female terrorists were seen by conservatives as unnatural women, which was very much in line with the existing criminological perspective.⁹ Their participation in political terrorism was, therefore, often attributed to their failure to be "natural" women. Such a narrative was used, for example, by the philosopher Vasily Rozanov, an ardent advocate of patriarchal domesticity,¹⁰ in his article on Fruma Frumkina in *Novoe vremya* [New time], an influential conservative newspaper. Fruma Mordukhovna Frumkina (1873–1907) was a midwife born into a better-off Jewish family and was a member of the Party of Socialist Revolutionaries (PSR), the biggest socialist party in Russia at that time. On May 27, 1903, while in custody, she tried to cut the throat of the head of the Kiev gendarmerie General V.D. Novitsky, who was particularly notorious for his repressions of revolutionaries. On April 30, 1907, while in Moscow's Butyrki prison, Frumkina made an unsuccessful attempt to kill the prison

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warden Bagretsov. She justified that attempt by Bagretsov's cruel treatment of political prisoners.¹¹ In his article on Frumkina, Rozanov contrasts her profession of midwife to her participation in political terrorism. He writes that giving life and easing suffering, the "typical" duties of a "natural" woman and the basics of the midwife's profession, were rejected by Frumkina in favor of tak-



Maria Spiridonova was sentenced to hard labor for the assassination of provincial government councilor G.N. Luzhenovsky. In the right photo she is seen in centre of the top row.

ing lives and creating suffering.¹² In this way, Rozanov represents Frumkina as a deviant woman who consciously rejected her “natural” female duties in favor of activities considered as “unnatural” for a “good” woman.

Another way of approaching female violence for the conservatives was to see the perpetrator as insane.¹³ The narrative of madness was one of the first reactions to the political assassination committed by Maria Spiridonova. On January 16, 1906, Maria Alexandrovna Spiridonova (1884–1941), a member of the PSR, born into the family of a nonhereditary Tambov noble, fatally wounded the provincial government councilor G.N. Luzhenovsky who had ordered the brutal police suppression of a peasant uprising.¹⁴ Two days after the assassination of Luzhenovsky, *Tambovskie gubernskie vedomosti* [Tambov provincial gazette], a local conservative newspaper published in Spiridonova’s hometown, contained an editorial in which she was described as “some kind of insane, unscrupulous female revolutionary”.¹⁵ The assassination of Luzhenovsky was thus represented by the conservative author not as a political action, but as the result of Spiridonova’s madness.

In a different manner, the narrative of madness was used in the case of Natalia Klimova. Natalia Sergeevna Klimova (1885–1918) was born into a noble family in Ryazan and was a member of the Union of Socialists-Revolutionaries Maximalists, a terrorist group that took part in preparations for the famous explosion in the *dacha* of Prime Minister Petr Stolypin in August 1906.¹⁶ Aleksandr Ellis, the commandant of the Trubetskoi bastion, where Klimova was incarcerated after her arrest, wrote in his message to Maximilian Trusevich, the head of the police department “The prisoner Klimova doesn’t value her life, and in view of her extremely indomitable temper I request orders from Your Excellency about her temporary transfer to some hospital to prevent harmful consequences of the hunger strike.”¹⁷ A hunger strike was considered to be a popular and effective method by Russian revolutionaries to sustain the political fight against the regime even while in prison.¹⁸ However, the prison authorities chose to define Klimova in this case not as a political activist, struggling for her rights in prison, but as

a suicidal, unruly, and mentally unstable individual in need of hospitalization.

In addition, the attitude of conservatives towards both revolutionary women in Russia, who openly broke with the gender conventions, and women who committed violent crimes was based on assumptions about their sexual promiscuity.¹⁹ On February 19, 1906, *Tambovskie gubernskie vedomosti* characterized Spiridonova’s letter from Tambov prison, where she wrote among other topics about the sexual abuse that she had been subjected to after her arrest,²⁰ as “a work of pornography”. The author of the article wondered how Spiridonova’s womanly morals could have sunk so low as to allow her to write a letter of that kind.²¹ Spiridonova was constructed in this case as a promiscuous woman solely because she mentioned in her letter the sexual advances of the government agents who interrogated her. Her political engagement was not mentioned.

Conservative narratives in historical works on terrorism in Russia

The conservative narratives discussed in the previous section did find their way into works on political terrorism in Russia written by professional historians, but they have never been dominant there. In this section, I will explain what place these narratives have had in historical works on the topic.

The first research work on political terrorism in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century was written by a conservative progovernmental author. It was Alexandr Spiridovich, a major general of the Russian gendarmes, who in 1916 wrote a book on the history of the revolutionary movement in Russia, which was meant to be a textbook for the Secret Police. The book is written from the criminological perspective of that time as discussed above, and the revolutionary terrorists are represented there not as political activists, but first of all as people who broke the law. Female terrorists are mentioned in the book sporadically; Spiridovich does not take up the problem of women’s participation in political terrorism, and he represents terrorist women similarly to terrorist men. Some of individual terrorist women, including Natalia Klimova and Fruma Frumkina, are mentioned in the book in connection with their participation in political violence, but the author tries to maintain an objective tone in his book by avoiding any judgmental representations.²² Spiridovich writes about crimes committed by these women without discussing the reasons for their participation in political terrorism. As a result, the conservative narratives of female participation in political terrorism were not employed in the only research work on political terrorism in Russia written by a conservative from the beginning of the 20th century.

When it comes to professional historiography, the perspective that has dominated it from the beginning is not the conservative one. Oliver H. Radkey, the author of the first comprehensive scholarly work about the PSR,²³ used as his main sources interviews with émigré leaders of the party whom he met in the 1930s.²⁴ Radkey was also influenced by numerous works of Russian radicals who lived abroad and glorified the terrorists. As a result, the perspective of the conservatives is not at all present



Actress Alla Demidova as terrorist Maria Spiridonova in the film version of Mikhail Shatrov's play *The Sixth of July* (*Shestoe iulya*).

in his book. Besides that, under the influence of his mainly male informants, Radkey does not pay attention to the problem of female participation in political terrorism.

Radkey's work has become the starting point of almost all Western historiography on terrorism in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century, where the terrorists, including the women, were represented with sympathy as fighters against the autocratic regime.²⁵ Russian historians who started writing in the late 1980s and early 1990s about female terrorists in prerevolutionary Russia followed the majority of their Western colleagues in representing revolutionary terrorists as fighters against the autocracy. The reason for this was partly the influence of the Western historiography that emerged much earlier, and partly Russian scholars' focus on the sources created by the terrorists themselves. Thus, the mainstream historiography of female participation in political terrorism in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century has been dominated both in Russia and in the West by the narratives created by the terrorists and their sympathizers.

The narratives of female participation in political terrorism created by the conservatives before the revolution, however, re-emerged first in the Soviet Union. Soviet historians did not consider the political terrorism of the political parties that operated alongside the Bolsheviks in Russia prior to the revolution as an important research area. As a result, nothing was written about the female terrorists by professional historians. The conservative narratives of female participation in political violence, however, can be found in some works of fiction published in the 1960s, where female terrorists from the beginning of the 20th century were introduced as characters. As it will be shown later, the conservative narratives employed in these works influenced some later works on the topic. Particularly interesting for this article are Nikolay Virta's novel *Evening Bells* (*Vecherny zvon*) and Mikhail Shatrov's play *The Sixth of July* (*Shestoe iulya*).

“THE NARRATIVE OF SPIRIDONOVA AS MAD WAS ESTABLISHED IN THE CONSERVATIVE NEWSPAPERS IN THE COURSE OF REPORTING ON HER CASE.”

Maria Spiridonova was introduced as a character in both of these works.

In Virta's novel there is a character named Sashenka Spirova, whose appearance, biography, as well as the surname, resemble Spiridonova. Spirova is a member of a terrorist group of the PSR, but the author does not represent her as a devoted revolutionary. First of all, Spirova is introduced as a young woman of questionable sexual morals and as an “empty minx”, who was interested more in opportunities to meet men than in participation in revolutionary struggle.²⁶ Virta thus represents a terrorist woman first of all as promiscuous, very much in line with the tendency mentioned above of conservative authors from the beginning of the 20th century. One of the characters in the same novel is called Nikolay Gavrilovich Luzhkovsky. Luzhkovsky is introduced as a local attorney and one of Spirova's beaux. The name and occupation of that character recall Spiridonova's victim Luzhenovsky, who was a liberal attorney in Tambov before he started working for the government.²⁷ Although the assassination of Luzhkovsky does not take place in the book, by making him and Spirova personally involved, Virta undermines any political motivations of the female terrorist, implying that if the assassination was to be committed, it could only be a crime of passion. This, again, is reminiscent of the attitude of the conservatives from the beginning of the 20th century towards women who committed violent crimes. Virta thus interprets Spiridonova's case in his novel very much in line with the conservative criminological perspective from the beginning of the 20th century.

In Shatrov's play, Spiridonova is introduced after the end of her participation in political terrorism as the leader of the Left SR party, the radical wing of the PSR that became a separate political party in 1917. The party was considered as oppositional towards the Bolsheviks after the July uprising of 1918, which was organized by the leadership of the Left SRs against the Bolshevik dictatorship. Although it is not Spiridonova the political terrorist who is the focus of the play, Shatrov employs the conservative narrative of madness when he writes about her. The author often describes Spiridonova's way of talking as hysterical and characterizes her on one occasion as almost insane.²⁸ Shatrov's representation of Spiridonova was the direct continuation of the characteristics that were attributed to her by the Bolsheviks

after the July uprising.²⁹ As Sally A. Boniece has argued, such attributions were typical of the opponents of politically active women at that time, including the conservatives.³⁰ Furthermore, the narrative of Spiridonova as mad, as we have seen had been established in the conservative newspapers in the course of reporting on her case.

The literary works discussed above were never introduced by their authors as anything other than fiction. These works seem, however, to have become the source of inspiration for the emigrant Russian philologist Ekaterina Breitbart, the first person

who tried to question the glorification of the revolutionary terrorists in the mainstream Western historiography. In an article published in the Russian emigrant journal *Kontinent*, Breitbart suggested an alternative version of Spiridonova's attack on Luzhenovsky claiming that it was not a political crime, but a crime of passion. According to her, Luzhenovsky was a former lover who left Spiridonova, which was the reason for her, a hysterical young woman, to shoot him.³¹ The narrative about the love affair between Spiridonova and Luzhenovsky, which is not confirmed by any sources available to historians,³² recalls the narrative about the fictional Spirova and Luzhkovsky from Virta's novel. The introduction of Spiridonova as hysterical by Breitbart, also without any clear references to historical sources, also recalls the characteristics attributed to the former terrorist in Shatrov's play. In this way, Breitbart used in her article both the conservative narrative of promiscuity and the conservative narrative of madness to explain the assassination committed by Spiridonova. In addition, likewise, in line with the conservative authors from the beginning of the 20th century who preferred to see violent crimes committed by women as stemming from their emotions, Breitbart denies Spiridonova's political motivations.

Breitbart's article, however, did not change the mainstream historiography on female participation in political terrorism at the beginning of the 20th century. The main reasons for this were that Breitbart did not use any reliable sources of information to verify her ideas and that she did not go any further in her discussion than simply denying the information from the sources created by Spiridonova's sympathizers. The majority of professional historians have either ignored Breitbart's ideas or expressed a critical attitude towards them.³³ Only emigrant Russian historians Yuri Felshtinsky and Semion Lyandres as well as American historian Anna Geifman mention in their works Breitbart's ideas as a new approach to the question.³⁴ However, even these historians do not integrate Breitbart's ideas into their own arguments, but mention them only in notes, thus distancing their professional research from her article.

The 1993 book by Anna Geifman was the first scholarly work on political terrorism in Russia that instead of exclusively using sources created by the socialists and liberals, as other historians had before her, employed previously unused materials from the Foreign Agency of the Okhrana [the tsarist secret police]. In this way Geifman has offered an alternative view on terrorism in prerevolutionary Russia. Although her book does not have a gender perspective, the prominent female terrorists and their motivations for participation in political violence are discussed. In the chapter entitled "Psychologically Unbalanced Terrorists", Geifman writes about mental problems as the main reason for participation in political violence by both men and women. As a result, the conservative narrative of madness often appears in the accounts of different terrorist women. For example, according to Geifman, Fruma Frumkina became a terrorist because of feelings of inadequacy and a desire to confirm her own importance as an individual.³⁵ In addition, Geifman mentions that Spiridonova was accused of hysteria on numerous occasions.³⁶ Geifman also writes about Zinaida Vasilievna Konoplyannikova

(1879–1906), a village teacher who was born into the family of a soldier, and who on behalf of the PSR on August 12, 1906, assassinated General G.A. Min, who had brutally suppressed the Moscow uprising in December 1905.³⁷ Geifman interprets the famous narrative from the socialist accounts about Konoplyannikova's eagerness to be executed as a sign of suicidal tendencies.³⁸ As we have seen conservative authors at the beginning of the 20th century wrote about the suicidal tendencies of female terrorists.³⁹ In addition, Geifman offers an interpretation of Spiridonova's letter from Tambov prison that is quite similar to the interpretations of conservative newspapers from the beginning of the 20th century. The letter is characterized as containing irrational, troubled fantasies.⁴⁰

Geifman's book attracted much attention from scholars working on the history of political terrorism in Russia because, unlike the previously discussed article by Breitbart, it was based on reliable historical sources and contained well-grounded scholarly discussion. Although Geifman's book was recognized as a novel contribution to the research field, it did not start a new historiographical trend. In Russia, although contemporary professional historians actively use the results of Geifman's research, many of them express critical opinions about her main points, including those that stem from the prerevolutionary conservative narratives. For example, Oleg Budnitsky, a recognized authority in historical research on political terrorism in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century, does not share Geifman's opinion about mental problems as the main reason for individuals of both sexes to join terrorist units. According to Budnitsky, the mental illnesses of some individuals were rather the result of a hard life in the revolutionary underground and not the reason that led them towards participation in political violence.⁴¹ Budnitsky's position illustrates the eagerness of the majority of professional historians in Russia who write on prerevolutionary terrorism to continue working with their research questions within the tradition started by their Western colleagues who in turn chose to follow the narratives created by the terrorists and their sympathizers.

Conservative narratives in contemporary Russian historiography

The conservative turn in contemporary Russian historiography has left the research field of terrorism in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century almost unaffected. Conservative views on women's roles in society are applied to female terrorists from the beginning of the 20th century mostly by laymen who write about them in their Internet blogs or in newspaper articles. Most of the time the authors of such works explain the political activism of terrorist women as an irrational attitude towards political violence.⁴² In this way they employ the narrative of madness that was used by conservative authors prior to the revolution.

In historical works, the conservative turn is represented by only one work, the 2005 doctoral dissertation on the historiography of Russian terrorism at the beginning of the 20th century by Anatoly Bakaev, a member of the progovernmental party *United Russia* (*Edinaya Rossiya*) who had never been a member of the

professional historical community but had worked in different positions in Russia's Home Ministry for many years.⁴³ Although Bakaev does not touch upon the problem of female participation in political violence specifically, he expresses criticism towards apologetic biographies of Russian terrorists written by Russian historians in the 1990s. Bakaev is particularly critical of Konstantin Gusev's book from 1992 about Maria Spiridonova, entitled *The Holy Mother of the Esers* (*Eserovskaya Bogoroditsa*). According to Bakaev, it is wrong to call a woman who committed an assassination and who did not become a mother as a "Holy Mother".⁴⁴ His reasoning is obviously inspired by post-Soviet Orthodox conservatism and is reminiscent of the reasoning offered by conservative authors at the beginning of the 20th century who represented female terrorists as unnatural women who failed to fulfill their "natural" womanly duties.

Oleg Budnitsky has written a review of Bakaev's dissertation in which he accuses the author of plagiarism and homophobia.⁴⁵ Although Budnitsky's criticism was not directed towards Bakaev's interpretations of the reasons behind female participation in political terrorism, his general evaluation of the dissertation shows that the conservative progovernmental views expressed by Bakaev are not accepted by historians working in the research field. Other Russian conservative historians, as mentioned above, do not find the topic of female participation in political terrorism in Russia as interesting for their research.

Conclusions

This article has discussed the reasons for why conservative narratives of female participation in political terrorism in Russia have never been dominant in the historiography on the topic. It was shown that conservative contemporaries of the female terrorists discussed the women and their violent political activism at length in their works and offered explanations that could fit with their view on women as "naturally" confined to the domestic sphere and destined to motherhood. To explain women's participation in political terrorism, their conservative contemporaries represented them as unnatural women, as insane, or as promiscuous, implying that this is what led them to be interested in entering the political arena that, according to the conservatives, was reserved for men.

These narratives, although employed by some historians, have never been dominant in the research field mostly because the first influential works on terrorism in prerevolutionary Russia were written by historians influenced by the perspective of terrorists and their sympathizers who saw their activism as a righteous fight against tyranny. As a result, there was no place for conservative interpretations in the narratives constructed in these works.

Conservative interpretations have until recently not been revived by professional historians. In literary works written in the Soviet Union, where female terrorists were seen after 1918 as the opposition of the Bolsheviks, the authors represented their fantasies of these women which were not based on any historical sources. Ekaterina Breitbart, the first person who tried to challenge the dominant historiography with more progovernmental

interpretations, could not present any historical evidence that could support her theories. As a result, even historians who found her conclusions interesting did not use these ideas in their own works so as not to undermine their scholarly value.

The first professional work that tried to give more place to the conservative interpretations, Anna Geifman's book, was published after the tradition of writing about female terrorists as heroines fighting for the people's cause had been established by Western and Russian historians. As a result, although the professional historical community recognized the novelty of Geifman's conclusions and the high professionalism of her work, its publication has not yet led to any historiographical turn in research on female terrorism.

As a result, contemporary Russian conservative historians, besides their general lack of interest towards women's roles in history, do not have at hand any historiographical tradition of approaching female participation in terrorism in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century from a progovernmental perspective. The only historical work of that kind, the doctoral dissertation of Anatoly Bakaev, was rejected by the professional community of historians working within the research field and thus could hardly lead to further attempts in that area. The view of female terrorists as "unnatural" women who preferred political activism to their "natural" destiny of motherhood, which corresponds to the prevailing contemporary view on women's roles in Russia, is present only in the works of laymen who do not have to look for the approval of the professional historical community. ✕

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The butterfly effect in history-making

Conservative subjectivities of women in the anti-communist discourse in Slovakia

by **Zuzana Maďarová**

“My name did not belong to me any more. People pronounced it stammeringly, artificially and heavily. A substantive reason to feel out of place. And my way of speaking in a new language was suspiciously awkward. Every time I made a mistake, a hole opened up. And the locals liked smooth relations and fixed holes. My teacher tried to convince me: ‘Adapt. Just imagine that you walk down the street and everybody thinks you’re a local.’ But I knew that my face, shaped like a full moon, would betray me.”¹

In the novel *Die undankbare Fremde* [“The ungrateful stranger” or “country”]², the Swiss author Irena Brežná, who emigrated with her family from Czechoslovakia in 1968, reflects upon the place of a woman immigrant in a new language and a new society. As she suggests, one can try, learn, struggle, challenge, and conform, but the language resists, as does the society that creates it. The main character strikes back and looks for her own ways of speaking and living. The author examines a power game between a newcomer and a new country, as well as the story of their expectations, inclusion, and resistance. Readers may ask along with the protagonist: to what extent does a person need to integrate to become a part of the collective story; how much can one resist; to what extent can one create one’s own place in an appropriated language?

In the collective memory in Slovakia, women are still treated as strangers in the male-dominated mainstream discourse.³ While a few “women worthies”⁴ are publicly

commemorated, they are usually not a part of the country’s modern history and very rarely challenge dominant historical narratives.⁵ Placing women in history, as Gerda Lerner puts it,⁶ or placing major historical events in the life stories of female individuals, thus causes tension like that experienced by an immigrant in a new country. It invites women to search for language that would enable them to articulate their life stories while admitting that neither life nor a story can precede its articulation.⁷ This tension provides an opportunity to explore the ways women remember, and it also underlines the role of social context in the process of recollection and history production. Edna Lomsky-Feder argues that society frames and channels the way subjects create and represent their memories.⁸ She writes that personal memory is “embedded within, designed by, and derives its meaning from a memory field that offers different interpretations” of a given event.⁹ The remembering subject cannot freely choose an interpretation of an event (at least, not without consequences) as the memory field is not an open space. Rather,

there are distributive criteria that frame and channel a subject’s recollection and interpretation. These criteria may be particularly strict in a situation when memory fields are very limited for women.

This article is guided by two major assumptions: every account of experience is an interpretation and needs an interpretation¹⁰ and every historical interpretation is in need of exploration. In the context of women’s overall limited participation in the articulation of history in Slovakia, I explore some aspects of life stories of women embedded in the anticommunist discourse. I ask what types of subjectivity and

abstract

The oral history archive of the non-profit organization Nenápadní hrdinovia (The Inconspicuous Heroes) is considered as an example of a wider trend in Slovakia to exploit women’s memories for the purposes of conservative or nationalist interpretations of history, placing women in the traditional roles and discourses of victims, auxiliaries, and self-sacrifice. The purpose of this politics of remembering is to emphasize the totalitarian nature of the state-socialist regime by bringing forward the oppression and violence inflicted on women. Using the concrete oral history project as a vehicle and a case study for the argument, the article contributes to the understanding of the current discursive landscape of memory of state socialism and of gender in Slovakia.

KEYWORDS: gender discourses, history writing, oral history, populism.



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femininity these stories present and how they are embedded within a broader anticommunist discourse.

The relevance of this research project is twofold: rather than building upon feminist historiography projects developed in academia and civil society in Slovakia in previous years, the oral histories of women analyzed here are embedded in the conservative discourse in Slovakia. Since the oral histories presented gain political and media attention and involve schools from all around the country, the subjectivities they construct and present deserve close attention. At the same time, the conservative framework of the oral history projects discussed gains further significance in the context of a more general conservative turn in the public and political discourse in the country,¹¹ and in the context of historical revisionism in other postsocialist countries.¹² As Andrea Pető argues, an antimodernist variant of history writing is gaining momentum in post-communist Eastern Europe.¹³ Since the post-1989 political culture has been built upon anticommunism, the memory of communism and the leftist tradition are omitted and new memories are constructed, reproducing the same principle by which communist revisionist history production worked. History is constructed to serve its political aim, promoting the identities it envisions for the future.¹⁴ Traditional images of femininity and masculinity are reproduced in these processes. This development, facilitated by various conservative political actors, is embedded in a fundamentalist interpretation of history based on national and individual past suffering, but with the promise of future redemption.¹⁵

Emerging oral histories as an opportunity and a limitation

A need for searching and articulating women's voices in post-socialist countries is illustrated by the genesis of the international project "Women's Memory". As the feminist philosopher Zuzana Kiczková describes, in the first half of the 1990s, feminists from the US and Western Europe started visiting the postsocialist countries and researching the experiences and situations of local women. However, their work often resulted in gross generalizations, and women were represented in dichotomies: as either victims of the regime or heroines. Analyses and evaluations of the situation were often made without regard to the social, political, cultural, and historical context.¹⁶ "Many distortions were caused by the fact that the researchers used their own social criteria and experience, often very different from ours, and they used paradigms which could not always be applied to the experiences of women during socialism," Kiczková explains.¹⁷ A search for tools that would enable women to express their experiences in socialism – different from the experiences of men captured by general history and from descriptions made by the "Western" feminist researchers – led to an exploration of biographical narrative and oral history as research methods.

Oral history brings with it the opportunity to put women's voices at the centre of history, highlight gender as a category of analysis, focus on those topics that are important to women themselves, integrate women into historical scholarship, and

challenge the mainstream historical narratives and the common

definitions that obscure women's lives in the social, economic, and political spheres.¹⁸ While oral history has been considered a tool of empowerment for individual women who recollect and construct their stories, it can also illuminate the collective scripts of a particular social group¹⁹ and allow us to trace the ways in which society frames and channels subjects' stories and memory fields.²⁰ Feminist oral history often asks how historical memory is shaped by dominant ideologies and the intersection of gender, class, race, and other axes of power.²¹

Despite the opportunities, limitations and risks of oral history must not be overlooked,²² and the question "Whose voice has been represented?" is of particular relevance for this article. While oral history can be an opportunity for women to talk about their lives and topics that are relevant to them, the outcome of the interview and the narrative analysis are always influenced by the researcher as well as the narrator.²³ The researcher is inherently present in the story and shapes the overall discourse: they decide on questions, reflect answers, influence the course of the interview, and conduct the interpretation and analysis. The fact that the researcher is in a position of power should be reflected in the research process, and the relationship between the researcher and the participant ought to be a part of the interpretation.²⁴ Transparent research processes which do not further silence women participants and a clearly reflected researcher's position are some of the necessary ethical concerns of oral history.

In recent years, Slovakia has witnessed a burst of oral history projects. Personal stories have been recorded and archived by a number of actors, ranging from the Nation's Memory Institute, which is a public-law institution, to various nongovernmental organisations.²⁵ Although they have the potential to diversify or challenge the dominant popular memory,²⁶ most of these oral history projects have been presented in a way that supports the mainstream historical construction of a nation of suffering. For instance, the most extensive project of the Nation's Memory Institute is called *Witnesses of the Oppression Period* and contains more than 550 stories. As presented by the Institute's website, the structure of the database covers three main historical periods: Slovakia in the years 1938–1945; the transitional period (1945–1948); and the communist regime (1948–1989), which is the most extensive part of the collection with a more detailed structure. Regardless of the period, suffering and repression are the key topics. According to the titles of subtopics presented, the stories are framed as testimonies about the end of democracy, repression and Holocaust, concentration camps and gulags, communist totalitarianism, persecution and criminal legal processes, violent collectivization, the persecution of churches, and



normalization. The “other side” of history is constructed using stories of remedy and heroism, such as those about anti-Nazi resistance, dissent activities, anticommunist resistance, November 1989, and the fall of communism.²⁷

In this frame of national suffering and rare-but-precious heroism, new initiatives emerged aimed at further exploration of the “communist past”. In 2010, numerous institutions and more than 3000 citizens supported a public call to establish a Museum of the Crimes of Communism.²⁸ The Ministry of Culture was commissioned to realize the idea, but later the museum disappeared from the state agenda. At the moment, it is run by the nongovernmental organization *Nenápadní hrdinovia* [The inconspicuous heroes] and is financially and institutionally supported primarily by volunteers.²⁹ The organization aims to establish the Museum as a public institution because “the totalitarian period significantly influenced the history of our country, and for Slovakia it is very important, if not indeed necessary, to have a decent institution that would point out the crimes of this period and their victims.”³⁰ The dichotomy of victims and perpetrators is further reflected in the name of the institution, which is currently called the Museum of Crimes and Victims of Communism. It is worth mentioning that the institution is called a “museum” even though it has not been registered as such by the Ministry of Culture.³¹

Since the very beginning, the need for a Museum of Communism was legitimized by the existence of similar institutions in other post-socialist countries, the House of Terror in Budapest being one of the better examples. As Andrea Pető notes, the House of Terror, like other similar museums in the Baltic countries, employs the narrative built upon dichotomies of affective politics without significant factual basis. The museum becomes a place where history is supposed to be experienced through the body in search of a promised authenticity, and thus becomes a medium used in the process of redefining heritage.³² It seems that histories and ideologies of these anticommunist museums share some similarities with the Museum of Crimes and Victims of Communism in Bratislava, such as a dichotomist victims/perpetrators approach to history and the fact that they are embedded in the conservative discourse. Even though the Museum of Crimes and Victims of Communism is currently a minor institution in Slovakia, the experiences of other countries suggest that it may have the potential to shape the public memory more significantly in the future, and therefore it merits deeper inquiry.

The Museum is closely related to the other activities organized by “The Inconspicuous Heroes”, whose mission is that of “processing and spreading information about the period of oppression in Slovakia and in the world”.³³ One of the organization’s main activities is the oral history project “The Inconspicuous Heroes in the Fight against Communism,” a contest for primary and secondary school students who are asked to record personal stories of people persecuted during communism.

Every year, the project is chronologically framed by two anniversaries: the Candle Demonstration, which was the biggest mass demonstration against state socialism in Slovakia before 1989 and which was organized by Catholic dissent; and the Velvet Revolution which led to a democratic change after 1989. Thus the topic of the project is announced in March and the best stories are publicly presented in November.

In 2016, the topic of the project was ‘Girls and Women against Totalitarianism’, calling on students “to pay attention to women, girls, daughters, and their role in the fight against the communist regime and totalitarianism.”³⁴ While oral history projects in general – and this one in particular – have led to increased numbers of women who recollect the past publicly, the subjectivity they present is quite limited and very specific. This contributes to the construction of a narrow memory field for women who recall their pasts and narrow discursive spaces within which girls and women can create their own subjectivities. These initiatives do not build on previous activities which examined history from a feminist and gender perspective,³⁵ but rather present a conservative image of faithful women, nuns, mothers, and daughters who were willing to sacrifice themselves for the nation and their faith. This symbolic representation is not that surprising considering that the Museum of Communism was originally initiated by the Forum of Christian Organizations, an umbrella for around 50 Christian organizations, and that this is also the home

organization of the current head of the NGO Inconspicuous Heroes, who also works for the Nation’s Memory Institute. This limited representation of women’s subjectivity has not been publicly challenged by the political and cultural elites, who often present themselves as liberal, and the project “The Inconspicuous Heroes in the

Fight against Communism” has received substantial political and cultural support. For instance, the annual conference at which the chosen students’ stories are presented has been held twice under the patronage of the president,³⁶ and the mainstream media, including the newspaper which presents itself as center-left, revised stories of some personalities presented by “The Inconspicuous Heroes”.³⁷

To a certain extent, the oral history projects do help to diversify public discussion about different historical events and to shed more light on “the small histories”. It is also necessary to say that education on the modern history of Slovakia is usually limited to a couple of hours in the last years of high school, and that the Secret Church and the Catholic dissent played a key role in activities challenging state socialism before 1989.³⁸ These contextual factors have contributed to a wide and almost unreserved acceptance of the conservative oral history activities. Moreover, the obstructed conservative representations of femininity are also allowed to remain unchallenged because they are embedded in a broader picture

“IN RECENT YEARS, SLOVAKIA HAS WITNESSED A BURST OF ORAL HISTORY PROJECTS.”



of women's anticommunist subjectivity as constructed by the canonical dissenting authors.³⁹

The stories of resistance and suffering

"The totalitarian period significantly influenced the history of our country, and for Slovakia, it is very important to have a decent institution that will point out the crimes of the era and its victims," the Museum of Crimes and Victims of Communism states, adding that in the first phase it will focus on recording the stories of people who were unfairly condemned.⁴⁰ The oral history activities of The Inconspicuous Heroes, the organisation that runs the Museum, can thus be understood as part of this first phase. Stories collected and retold (these are not transcriptions of the interviews, but rather processed, edited stories with a common structure) as part of the students' project described above are of particular interest for this article. In the social context in which the historical agency of women is at best limited in public discourse and school curricula,⁴¹ these stories, widely represented in the media and accompanied by various events throughout the year, may have a significant impact on the social distribution of memory of women.⁴² Analysing two examples of women's life stories that received distinction in the project "The Inconspicuous Heroes in the Fight against Communism", I will illustrate how women's subjectivity is constructed through resistance and suffering. The object of the analysis is the story as retold and presented in the project, since the original narrative is not publicly available.

The story of Mária Štefunková appears to be a narrative of active resistance and mobilization followed by prosecution. In the early 1950s, a group of 300 women from different towns organized and marched to the office of the local authorities to get information about a new chaplain who had been arrested before arriving in the town of Zborov. As no one had any information on his whereabouts or the reason for his arrest, these women mobilized and organized two "visits" to the authorities to find out more and to get the chaplain released. During the second visit, they caused some material damage, breaking the door that the authorities had locked to prevent them from entering. The situation resulted in the prosecution of Mária Štefunková and four other women. All of them were rehabilitated after 1989.⁴³

In the award-winning story, the heroism of Mária Štefunková is constructed at three levels: her courage to fight for the chaplain and liberate him from prison; her strong will during her own incarceration; and her contribution to the nation and the religious community. All three levels are assumed to be driven by her deep faith in God. The story first describes how the women marched 10 kilometres to get to the local authorities, noting that they "did not stop praying" on their way. On their second visit, "they entered with

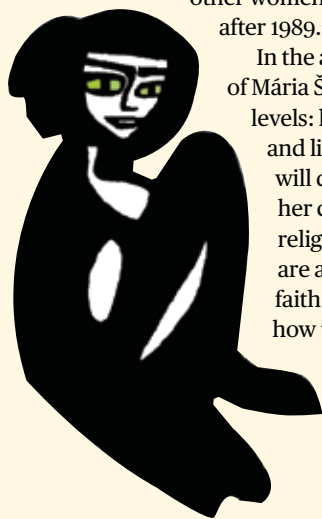
courage while singing Christian songs". In this spiritual narrative, their courage is followed by punishment, and the main character's resistance, which was at first expressed publicly (against the authorities), turns into an inner one, lived through the forbidden faith in prison. Despite its intense and active beginning, the main focus of the story is on suffering, with detailed descriptions of living conditions in the prison.

The second part, describing punishment, is also accompanied by more quotations from Ms. Štefunková. The detailed account of struggle and hardship carries implications of remedy and salvation. While there is a vision of returning to the family, the promise of spiritual salvation through suffering is even more significant. "When they took us for a walk, they bound our eyes. I spent Christmas there. I decided not to shed a tear, because these are joyful holidays and I was to be with my kids again in a year. Indeed, that's how it went. When I came to Košice, I found a cross engraved on the wall and the graffiti 'God is love, God is strength, God is our sanctuary.' [...] This is what gave me strength, because every time I knelt down to pray, they shouted at me, 'Get up! Hands up!'"⁴⁴

The mythical aspect of the narrative is further reinforced by the idealized notion of motherhood. As the story goes, the communist regime punished not only the individual woman but her whole family, as her small children were deprived of their mother for a year. The tragedy of a damaged family is presented throughout the story and the reader is reminded several times that the main character is a mother of three. Through motherhood, the main character is constructed as a good woman and a Christian who did not give up her faith, who endured injustice and resisted. It is also through motherhood that she makes her contribution to the community: "as she suffered for a priest, a great desire to have a son become a priest was born in her". She therefore "sacrificed" her two sons to God and they became priests. The closing of the story reinforces the dichotomy of good and bad, as the main character forgives the perpetrators and prays for their salvation.

Like other fundamentalist narratives, the story presented draws on religious legends and myths and builds on antagonisms by proclaiming members of the religious community (and potential members) to be guardians of truth and fidelity. The individual story thus becomes a collective story, "a socially and historically grounded story of the faithful remnant standing for righteousness in a society gone astray".⁴⁵ Fundamentalist narratives are evocative and compelling because they embrace religious myths and scriptural idealism in such a way that they place the readers in a story which must be either endorsed or rejected.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, to reject narratives presented by The Inconspicuous Heroes is not an easy task, as the reader would not only have to reject religious salvation but also the anticommunist struggle it represents. To challenge these narratives means to risk being called a communist.

The second story analyzed also describes suffering in prison preceded by engagement in a religious group, but offers more nuanced characters and motivations. The life story of Františka Muziková is framed by family relations and begins with an intro-



duction of her siblings and parents and the role that family plays in her life. Despite some difficulties, the relations are described as very good and empowering, which is documented by some happy memories from her childhood. Her later heroism is thus constructed as a heritage of her upbringing.⁴⁷

In the story presented, Ms. Muziková experienced the first difficulties in high school, where she was almost prevented from taking the state exams. She received a negative assessment from the representatives of the Communist Party with an explanation that her family owned land which was supposed to be collectivized. Only after the intervention of the school director, who cared about good results of the institution, was she allowed to finish her studies. After Muziková started working as a nurse at a hospital, she joined her colleagues in a religious group. She describes the group as a place for young people to meet, share their experience and spend their free time together. However, as a result of these meetings, she and her friends, her colleagues, and her younger sister were arrested. She was sentenced to two years of detention.

In this story, work is the main topic through which the main character's subjectivity is constructed, as well as her suffering and remedy. Work provides a symbolic site on which the distinction between good and bad is inscribed. For instance, the arrest takes place in the operating room where she was working and nobody was allowed to enter. This invasion of the protected, almost holy place where the staff was saving people's lives may symbolize the invasion of people's private lives by the political regime. At the same time, a dichotomous perspective is constructed between work for others and work against people.

Muziková's stay in various prisons and the difficulties she experienced there are also presented through work. According to the account, in Prague she was able to continue her work as a nurse, and after coming back to Slovakia she had to work manually very hard, sometimes even outdoors in cold weather. Her work is represented here not only as a punishment, but also a sacrifice she offered to protect older prisoners.

Later, it seems her release from prison did not bring the main character an immediate remedy, as it was very difficult for her to find a job: "Even though I was free, I could not get adequate employment, and the door kept closing in front of me as if I were unwanted." Through work the story constructs the main character as a good, exceptional person. Her hard work, which was always directed towards other people and was always supposed to help somebody else, represents the main distinction between the heroine and the others. Moreover, her work as a nurse seems to imply a "clean" personality in terms of physical and moral characteristics. This is illustrated by the episode in which a doctor in prison finds out that she has lice, which is described as one of the most embarrassing moments of her life. "For her as a

nurse, it was very embarrassing and it proved very bad hygienic conditions in prison," the story recounts. However, the parasites are presented not only as a matter of physical condition, but also as a consequence of the presence of "gypsies and prostitutes" who were also imprisoned. This distinction between different women is further reinforced by including political prisoners in the story and describing them as "the elite" of the nation. Although such a victimizing categorization of people and the implications of physically and morally "unclean" women challenge the pure image of altruistic work, this is not reflected upon in the story.

The story ends with Muziková establishing new family. Here, she is constructed as a threat and her husband as a very brave man for marrying her. As described, the husband "became more vulnerable" after their marriage and he was fired from his job because of her past. The quotation of the main character reaffirms this unequal relation: "They did not care that he had a three-year-old at home. [...] But I must say that he has never blamed me for my criminal past." In the narrative, the main character is constructed as accepting guilt for her "criminal" past, even though she was not a criminal at all. The story presents a humble woman who did what was necessary and tried to help where possible. She is also presented as an introverted person who did not speak much or miss people intensely and therefore coped with prison better than others.

The structure of the story of Františka Muziková reveals some inner tensions. While the participation in the religious group is a reason for her arrest, faith in God is not mentioned later. It is rather work that provides the fulfilment of life. Nonetheless, the story is given a religious framing by the title, "Always Faithful to God". Like the first story, the life of Františka Muziková is presented as suffering as a means to a better life, represented by her new family.

The picture of two sides in a struggle – one which destroys people's lives and one which suffers – is the background against which the life story takes place. The fundamentalist presentation of truth, heroes, and devils is not only the resource on which the story draws, but it is its message. The story thus does not challenge or examine the moral values it is embedded in, but rather confirms them.

Women's life stories in a broader discursive field of anticommunism

The stories of *The Inconspicuous Heroes* are constructed in a frame of national suffering which allows them to create the special forms of resistance and heroism. Anticommunist, dissident identities constitute a part of this frame, and an examination of their gender dynamics permits a better understanding of the broad social acceptance of the conservative women's identities.

The Czech literary scientist Jan Matonoha argues in his

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analysis of the canonical dissent literature (1948–1989)⁴⁸ that the discursive practice of these texts significantly contributes to the gendered disciplining of individual subjects and internalization of the patriarchal order.⁴⁹ The anti-regime literary texts from the period between 1948 and 1989 present a women's subjectivity which appears progressive at a first glance but in fact reaffirms patriarchal values that reproduce traditional gender roles. Matonoha claims that this paradox is a risky part of the texts that have high social capital and therefore a strong interpellative potential. In other words, readers of these texts "are being interpellated to constitute their solidarity with resistant discourses of [...] dissent on the grounds of identification with its symbolic capital and set of values and, concurrently, on the grounds of [a] volitional, marginalizing and unreflected patriarchal notion of gender roles."⁵⁰ As Matonoha argues, the ethos of dissent and counteraction against the oppressive regime intensified the interpellative potential of these injuring identities. His analysis illustrates that, although they appear nonconformist, heroic, and almost martyr-like, they employ traditional gender stereotypes. As a result of this paradox, the interpellative images, such as motherhood, partnership, and resistance to the political regime, and the discursive places where they occur may have a stronger effect on readers than the usual value attributes (physical beauty or social status, personal and social success, or personal prestige) presented by the mainstream culture.⁵¹

The subjectivities of women in the stories analyzed share some aspects of these characteristics. They present women with a strong positive image: they are brave and resistant towards the oppressive regime; they fight against injustice or sacrifice themselves for others. By appealing to the asymmetry of physical power and the power of faith in God, women's lives are constructed as David's fight against Goliath. They seem to be mythical warriors and role models for young girls. However, as in Matonoha's analysis of dissident literary texts, ambivalence can be found under the strong positive image.⁵²

The paradox of strong women who resist the authoritarian regime but are obedient towards their husbands and fathers extends to the dissident literary texts and can also be seen in the narratives of women's anticommunist subjectivities. These two sets of texts, the literary texts and the life stories, are different in style, purpose, quality of writing, and complexity of inner structures, but they share the ideals of women and reinforce patriarchal values. The life stories present women as silent sufferers and companions of men (priests, family members, or God) and offer women very clear remedies through or after their suffering – mainly a material family and spiritual salvation. In order to achieve these treasures, pain is necessary or inevitable, and needs to be borne bravely and faithfully. The clear distinction be-

tween male oppressors and female victims is further reinforced through women's forgiveness and generosity: suffering women are not angry; they understand, forgive, forget, and wish the perpetrators only good.

If traditional gender roles are an intrinsic part of anticommunist identities, as suggested by the well-known dissident literary texts, it is less surprising that there is almost no resistance against the monopolization of anticommunist female subjectivities by the conservative discourse. As Matonoha concludes, the discursive practice of dissident texts and their paradoxical injuring identities have contributed to resistance against feminism and to the silence about gender after 1989.⁵³ Furthermore, their heritage can also be traced in the conformity with which the current anticommunist identities are placed within the conservative gender order.

Tracing the butterfly effect in history-making

The history presented in the oral history project "The Inconspicuous Heroes in the Fight against Communism" is a fundamentalist one,⁵⁴ based on the suffering of the past and promising future redemption. Recent increased interest in women's life experiences in Slovakia has not led to the differentiation of women's subjectivities, but rather to limited, reductionist memory fields.⁵⁵ Oral histories currently present in the public discourse in Slovakia paradoxically go against some of the principles articulated by the feminists who started oral history projects in 1990s.⁵⁶ While

the initial oral history projects valued women's voices and struggled with methodologies to distinguish them from researchers' and narrators' voices, the current projects publish only the reproduced, retold stories without providing clear methodologies, researchers' reflections or narrators' initial stories. This raises questions about whose voice is really heard and what the purpose of the story is. At the same time, the stories of women fighting against communism reproduce the same dichotomy

the feminist oral histories had tried to avoid and overcome: the simplified dichotomous identities of women as heroines and/or victims.

In the projects analyzed, only a very specific type of women is allowed to publicly share their traumatic memories of state socialism, and only the traumatic memories can be publicly shared. Those represented are mostly religious women, good mothers, men's companions, decent, humble, and hard-working women who forgive and forget everything bad that happens to them. They can resist the oppressive political regime but are obedient towards and reinforce the conservative gender regime. The subjectivities they represent are embedded within the patriarchal order with obvious or hidden but indisputable, unchal-

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lenged hierarchies between the masculine and the feminine.

However, these limited and limiting constructions of female identities seem familiar in the anticommunist discourse that accepts, welcomes, and reinforce them. This phenomenon can be partially explained by the relation with the canonical literary texts written by dissidents, exiled authors, and alternative-scene authors from the 1948–1989 period, which reproduce and reaffirm the patriarchal order and injure the identities of women. While operating with extensive social capital, these texts have contributed to the silence on the issue of gender after 1989, and to a broader deficiency in understanding a democracy that overlooks inequalities related to gender and other dimensions.⁵⁷

The conservative anticommunist subjectivities of women are embedded in the dichotomous discursive field of heroism and suffering that does not allow a proper reflection of the stories presented. The readers have entered the field of absolute values where challenging a narrative seems like a subversion of the woman, heroine or victim; where a feminist reflection of the dominant frames of women's subjectivity may be interpreted as an attack on the narrator. Moreover, it is this monopolized connection between the conservative representation of femininity and resistance against oppression that makes "the other" vulnerable because, in this discursive field, to challenge the traditional gender roles or to embody another femininity is to risk accusations of being a communist (i.e., an oppressor). Although the reproduction of the patriarchal order in the current oral history projects in Slovakia has gone almost unnoticed so far, looking at the political context and seeing neighboring Eastern European countries where the conservative representation of women's identities is part of the ongoing historical revisionism raises some concerns and a number of questions. Coming back to the butterfly effect, one can at least ask what societal repercussions these seemingly small-scale conservative activities in history-making will have in future. ❌

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