

book reviews



Nikolay Aretov, *Zhelani i plasheshti: Chuzhdite zheni i muzhe v bulgarskata literature na gulgia devetnadeseti vek* (Desired and frightening: Foreign women and men in Bulgarian literature of the long nineteenth century), Sofia: Queen Mab, 2023, 280pp., BGN 20 (paperback), ISBN: 978-954-533-208-1.

Book review by **Milena Kirova**
St. Kliment Ohridski University of Sofia



Nikolay Aretov has written an intriguing study on the family life and intimate experiences of Bulgarians in the nineteenth century. A main object of the study are the norms that govern and legitimize relations between the sexes. The author discusses these norms, employing the model of French anthropology of the twentieth century (Claude Lévi-Strauss's theory of the "circulation des femmes") and Pierre Bourdieu's revision respectively, drawing on knowledge of biblical family laws, Christian Church rules, and Ottoman marital law in the nineteenth century. Notions of "foreign" men and women are derived from two main primary sources: literary and journalistic publications written during the Bulgarian national revival period, and documentary texts, mostly (men's) letters and memoirs, preserved from that era.

The main question in this study concerns the ways and means by which the socially established standards and practices of married life correlate with their depictions in that period's literature. According to the author, these relations are bidirectional because "literature cannot help but follow and reflect social realities, nor can it avoid trying to shape them, to steer them in a direction according to the ideological preferences of the authors, of the groups to which they belong, and of the age" (6). Researchers have so far focused on the subordinate position of women in family relations, but the real situation, according to Aretov, is more complex and therefore requires a methodologically diverse approach.

The book is organized in two main parts, each containing numerous chapters. The first part, entitled "The Problem of Marital and Sexual Relationships with Others," explores the issues already noted in general terms, using a variety of materials from historical, sociological, and ethnographic sources. Many cases are cited in which real people from the mid-nineteenth century to the present day violated the prohibition on marriage with foreign women, often with dramatic, even tragic endings. Next, Aretov examines the attitudes toward intermarriage in Bulgarian traditional literature; he extracts and defines several motifs that were popular in the mythology and folklore in the nineteenth century, including "the kidnapping of a woman-stranger," "the enforced conversion from Christianity to Islam," and "a vulgar (woman) foreigner seducing a male Bulgarian." Popular legends tell stories of royal marriages of Bulgarian



rulers with foreign princesses; in folklore, maidens commit suicide (or are slaughtered by their relatives) to avoid falling into Muslim hands; there is even the motif of a man selling his wife.

Detailed attention is paid to literary sources: Aretov, being an expert on Bulgarian nineteenth-century literature, comments on many works related to the topic of the book. The first (general) part concludes with a summary. It states that the picture of actual marriages in Bulgaria during the nineteenth century is quite patchy and not always consistent with what mythology and folklore present. Although the Christian religion forbade marriages with people from other religions and traditional law rejected interethnic marriages, there were a significant number of mixed couples. Most of these were indeed marriages between ethnic groups within the Ottoman Empire. There is also a noticeable disconnect between real life and literature, although poetry gradually opened up to romantic outpourings of intimate feelings toward the end of the national revivalist period.

The second part of the book consists of a number of separate chapters that present various—biographical or fictional (literary)—cases of love affairs and marriages between Bulgarian men and foreign women. It begins with stories that concern the personal lives of famous writers from the second half of the nineteenth century: Ivan Vazov, Petko Slaveykov, Lyuben Karavelov. Between them are two “cases” of literary works from the same era: the play *The Bishop of Lovech* by Todor Ikonov (1863) and the long story “The Morose Krastinka” by Iliya Blaskov (1870). A separate chapter focuses on three (among the few extant) memoirs in which nineteenth-century Bulgarians tell of their married life. Another chapter is devoted to the metaphor of the “bloody wedding”; the author traces three “similar, yet different” documented events that took place in Bulgaria between 1876 and 1910. In all of them, the metaphor became reality, the main characters experiencing dramatic adventures involving well-known public figures of the time.

The last (rather short) chapter deals with the only woman who is the subject, not the object, of a love affair. This is Clotilde Cvetišić, a little-known character in Bulgarian history. She was a Croatian from Zagreb who came to Bulgaria as a teacher and became the headmistress of a girls’ high school in Sofia. The well-known Czech professor of Slavic history Konstantin Ireček fell in love with her. The two became engaged while working in Bulgaria, but then their marriage was thwarted by Ireček’s family. Although there is very little evidence of the relationship between Ireček and Cvetišić, Aretov sees this case as proof that the position of a liberal-minded Central European intellectual of the late nineteenth century was not very different from the marriage norms established in Bulgarian society (understood by him as “oriental”) at the same time.

The entire study is written in clear and accessible language. It abounds with facts and biographical details from the lives of a large number of more or less famous nineteenth-century figures (writers, revolutionaries, and enlighteners), and contains valuable information for anyone interested in private life in southeastern Europe. I only find it odd that the book has two different titles: one (the one I mentioned) on the front and back covers, another (“Fears and desires: Mixed marriages in nineteenth-century Bulgarian literature”) on the last page, just before the back cover.

◆ Note

This publication is supported by the European Union-NextGenerationEU, through the National Recovery and Resilience Plan of the Republic of Bulgaria, project SUMMIT BG-RRP-2.004-0008-C01.



Eloisa Betti, Leda Papastefanaki, Marica Tolomelli, and Susan Zimmermann, eds., *Women, Work and Activism: Chapters of an Inclusive History of Labor in the Long Twentieth Century*, *Work and Labor: Transdisciplinary Studies for the 21st Century*, vol. III, Budapest: CEU Press, 2022, xiv + 354 pp., \$95.00/€80.00/£68.00 (hardback), ISBN: 978-963-386-441-8.

Book review by **Lex Heerma van Voss**
Fellow of the International Institute of Social History
Amsterdam, the Netherlands



This book brings together papers devoted to women's activism with a focus on work. They were originally presented at four conferences over the years 2015–2019. The volume builds specifically on the work of the Feminist Labor History Working Group within the European Labor History Network (ELHN). In the introduction, the editors give a brief historiographical overview of labor history, which has been revived over the past decades by moving away from a selective attention to the developed countries of the West and instead focusing on global developments. The editors acknowledge that in doing so, global labor history took into account the perspectives of subaltern studies and feminist history, but the former more than the latter. This is what the volume seeks to rectify.

The book is divided into three sections, but as the introduction mentions, they overlap, and many chapters are also relevant to other sections than the one they have found a place in. The first section is devoted to what has often been a central strategic question for organizing women: the choice between organizing as a single-sex organization or as part of a mixed-sex class-based organization. In other words, together with the men in an established organization already run by these men and usually not very open to women's issues, or in a separate organization, which has to be built from scratch but is focused on the needs and demands of women. Some male-run organizations did not even offer this choice, as they simply excluded women. This was the case with Portuguese mutual insurance organizations, which considered women more prone to illness, and therefore as "bad risks" to be excluded. If women were accepted as coworkers in an industry such as the Italian telephone service, they had to fight their male coworkers for the right to enter leadership positions. The fact that men in

workers' organizations, like the Barcelona *Comisiones Obreras*, themselves considered the place of the woman to be in the home formed another hurdle to organizing women in mixed-sex organizations. This could also lead, as in the Australian case, to thinking that women did not need their own pensions. Even when on the wave of feminism and left-wing policies of the 1970s Australian women acquired rights as workers and gained entry to jobs that had been considered the natural domain of the man, like shipping or train driving, the numbers of women taking up these jobs remained small.

The second section foregrounds "agency and activism at the workplace and beyond." A study of women's auxiliary groups in a 120-day strike by male ship repair workers in Genoa in 1955 shows that female relatives and other feminist groups were at the core of a large network that provided striking workers with the essential supplies to maintain the strike. In diverse ways this promoted women's emancipation from the patriarchal society they lived in. A study of the mixed-sex Greek tobacco industry between 1945 and 1970 shows how women workers developed their own specific demands and ways to express their dissatisfaction. A chapter on the agency of women workers in Yugoslavia in the fourteen years of the Socialist period focuses on two tactics. One is absenteeism through sick leave, which allowed women workers to devote time to reproductive tasks. The other is avoidance of party-state institutions, which favored direct production by skilled men over cleaning and running canteens, as done by women. A chapter on nurse activism in the US in the last decades of the twentieth century shows how nurses enforced the improvement of working conditions in healthcare in a period when new risks and higher patient–nurse ratios increased workplace health hazards.

The third section is titled "How the Personal Reveals the Political: Women Activists' Biographies and Beyond." The length of the papers included in the volume does not lend itself well to the deep assessment of a biography. An interesting discussion of two ways to look at peasant women's work in Yugoslavia in the 1930s is more about two positions: seeing peasant woman as a profession with demands and qualifications that differ from those of the male peasant, or looking for a link and political coalition between peasants and workers. This tells us more about two journals or two political currents than directly about "the personal." A study of the *camere del lavoro* in Milan between 1945 and 1965 uses as a source a biographical dictionary of the labor movement, but draws conclusions on a statistical level, more like a census, even if it examines some lives briefly. A discussion of the issue of vocational training and general education of women workers focuses on a network of five women calling attention to this issue within the international labor movement in the 1950s and 1960s. A study of the *commissions-femmes* in Lyon in the 1970s comes the closest to what I would consider a biographical approach. It is brimming with quotations on the different approaches of men and women toward organizing in the labor movement and zooms in on Gergette Vacher. She was a vibrant union official who stimulated women workers' activity, but took her own life when she felt frustrated by local union leaders' marginalizing of the women's committee and herself. The final chapter in this section, and the book, also stays close to activists' lives, with many quotations from personal memories, as it analyses the migration trajectories of female garment workers from Italy, Mexico, and China to the US.

The introduction draws the conclusion that the new women's movement of the 1970s put into motion much of the developments described in the individual chapters, and was a boost for women's activism regarding work in diverse ways. This is not really a surprise. One would hope that more trends and patterns would become visible, but perhaps we need even more cases for this to happen. The chapters discuss cases in international organizations, the US, Australia, and a large number of European countries, including Communist Yugoslavia and Francoist Spain. This is a diverse list, but, as the editors mention, it would be desirable to include the Global South in future collections.



Francisca de Haan, ed., *The Palgrave Handbook of Communist Women Activists around the World*, London: Palgrave, 2023, 701 pp., €213.99 (hardback), ISBN: 978-3-031-13126-4.

Book review by **Chiara Bonfiglioli**
University College Cork



The release of this handbook, the first dedicated to the lives of communist women activists around the world, has long been awaited among scholars in the field. The volume is edited by Francisca de Haan, who has pioneered the study of transnational women's history during the Cold War, particularly through her research on the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF), and who previously coedited (with Krassimira Daskalova and Anna Loutfi) the *Biographical Dictionary of Women's Movements and Feminisms: Central, Eastern, and South Eastern Europe, 19th and 20th Centuries*.¹

In 2007, a groundbreaking forum in the first issue of *Aspasia*, also edited by de Haan, asked in its title whether "feminist communism" could be seen as a contradiction in terms.² Rather than suggesting an answer, the forum's interventions opened a wide-ranging debate on women's role in socialist internationalism, communist parties, state-socialist regimes, and the left more generally. In the past two decades, the recovery of archival sources and biographical trajectories that highlight women's involvement with communist ideas and movements around the world has led to a significant advancement in the scholarship, both within national contexts and internationally. While new ground has been covered, scholars of women's participation in socialist internationalism must often confront male, Eurocentric, and anticommunist power structures that are at the core of mainstream national histories and historiographies. This volume constitutes an important scholarly and activist statement, emphasizing the need to reclaim the role of communist women activists as fundamental both to the history of the left and to the history of women's and feminist movements.

The contributors to the volume propose critical interventions that do not shy away from discussing the complexities connected to reconstructing the lives of the "fore-

mothers" addressed in the book. This is particularly the case when it comes to "professional revolutionaries" active between Europe and the Soviet Union between the end of the nineteenth century and the mid-twentieth, such as Clara Zetkin, Alexandra Kollontai, Dolores Ibarruri, Teresa Noce, Edwarda Orłowska, and Nina Popova, whose lives were shaped by extreme historical and political turmoil, from the clandestine lives endured under fascist and Nazi persecution and occupation to personal losses during the World Wars and subsequent upheavals. Their mythical status as founding figures of the revolution did not spare them from exile, purges, and political shifts. For this generation, self-censorship was common, and so was the emphasis on party life rather than personal life.

As in the case of Argentinian communist Fanny Edelmann, communist women's autobiographies and ego-documents are primarily accounts of their respective parties' victories and defeats and "hardly reflect the personal distress, self-renunciation, and fear that such experiences may have created" (659). The overturning of state-socialist regimes and the end of the Cold War also contributed to the oblivion cast onto these activists. The highly gendered representation of leftist women as manipulated, duplicitous subjects that embody the "evilness" of communism in their subversion of prescribed gendered and political roles is pervasive in popular culture transnationally. This distorted representation is critically addressed, notably, in the chapters dedicated to Ana Pauker, who came to stand for the ills of Stalinism in Romania before and after the fall of state socialism, and to Umi Sardjono, part of the Gerwani movement in Indonesia, an organization turned into a hated symbol of political subversion after the anticommunist army coup in 1965, which led to the killing of over half a million activists and to the ban of communist symbols.

Another obstacle that has prevented the acknowledgment of these leaders' roles in improving women's lives is their critical stance toward liberal feminism, due to their emphasis on the interconnectedness of workers', women's, and colonial people's liberation struggles, as in the case of the pioneering work of Claudia Jones. The volume succeeds in showing that "these women leaders, regardless of their views on what they often referred to as the 'bourgeois women's movement,' were deeply invested in improving *women's lives* from an obvious and incontestable understanding of the omnipresence of male domination, both in the world at large, and within socialist and communist parties," as De Haan argues in the introduction (2, emphasis in original). This is well expressed in the chapter about Chinese leader Deng Yingchao, in which Wang Zheng describes "the politics of concealment" (282) that was adopted by the All-China Women's Federation to introduce groundbreaking reforms and oppose patriarchal norms under the guise of dominant party discourse. Moreover, the book shows how in many countries under colonial and imperial domination, left-wing, anticolonial, and feminist agendas overlapped, as in the case of Aoua Keita in Mali or Arlette Bourgel in Algeria. Their trajectories make clear that women's participation in revolutionary movements was also a way to overcome traditional gender norms and to advocate for ordinary women's access to political, social, and economic rights.

Communist activists' pioneering work did not happen in isolation, but rather in concert with women's movements and coalitions, particularly mass-based women's organizations. Historian Gerda Lerner, a member of the Congress of American Women

in the 1940s, was critical of the tendency to emphasize leadership over coalition politics: “We were working our butts off to try and work with anonymous women and empower them and not—and not sit around and say follow this great leader. That’s not how we were thinking.”³

Some chapters in the volume succeed better than others in sketching the wider political contexts and coalitions that these women were part of, but this relative unevenness is understandable in such a volume, spanning different historical periods and continents, and based on a diversity of available sources. Many chapters also manage to overcome a solely national dimension and highlight the degree of cross-border exchanges, dialogues, and transnational knowledge production that took place between women of different generations, thanks to the circulation of communist literature as “traveling theory,” as well as to foundational conferences and events they took part in, from the antifascist, communist, and anti-imperialist networks of the interwar period to the internationalist congresses and encounters established during the Cold War, largely through the WIDF.

The rich case studies included in the volume are accompanied by useful suggestions for further reading, both in the form of original sources and secondary literature, making this handbook a key reference work that will certainly lead to further inquiries in an expanding and thriving field of scholarship.

Notes

1. Francisca de Haan, Krassimira Daskalova, and Anna Loutfi, eds., *A Biographical Dictionary of Women’s Movements and Feminisms: Central, Eastern, and South Eastern Europe, 19th and 20th Centuries* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2006).

2. Francisca de Haan, ed., “Forum: Is ‘Communist Feminism’ a Contradictio in Terminis?” *Aspasia* 1 (2007), 197–246. See also, from the same editor, “Ten Years After: Communism and Feminism Revisited,” *Aspasia* 10 (2016), 135–145.

3. “Voices of Feminism Oral History Project: Gerda Lerner Interviewed by Nancy MacLean, September 12–13, 2003, Madison, Wisconsin,” *Five College Compass Digital Collections*, <https://compass.fivecolleges.edu/object/smith:1342638> (accessed June 14, 2023), 16.



Milena Kirova, *Bulgarskata literature prez XXI vek (2000–2020)* (Bulgarian literature in the twenty-first century (2000–2020)), Part I, Sofia: Colibri, 2023, 287 pp., BGN 24 (paperback), ISBN: 978-619-02-1200-3.

Book review by **Noemi Stoichkova**
St. Kliment Ohridski University of Sofia



Nearly until the end of the twentieth century, literary history in Bulgaria was written in a mode that could be termed “a history of generals”: the study would roam along

the peaks of literary achievement and devote attention primarily to those authors who belong to the literary canon. Only at the beginning of the new century did the first attempts emerge to problematize this tradition and to create different types of literary history, for example the "alternative canon," the "annual" approach, thematic histories, and so on.

Literature written by women became the focus of these new endeavors, since the traditional history of Bulgarian literature included a very small number of women writers and invariably interpreted their presence through the themes and issues characteristic of literature written by men. The very first women's studies in literature were split between two trends. In the first case, a new, hitherto unwritten history of Bulgarian literature by women began to emerge. Its aim was to parallel the traditional history, to offer an alternative version of a literary canon. This approach took form in the two-volume *The Missing Canon* (vol. I, 2009 and vol. II, 2013), compiled and edited by Milena Kirova.¹

Today, ten years later, Kirova has published a book that gives a voice to the second trend in approaching literature written by women. In this case, women's writing is not separated from men's literature, but various female writers and their works are made visible as an integral and important part of the history of Bulgarian literature in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. This approach is feasible because contemporary literary history continues to be written, as the author herself says, even today. On the one hand, this brings literary history closer to literary criticism, but on the other, Kirova stresses the considerable difference in writing in both genres. According to her, literary criticism implies observation "under a microscope" (13), while literary history is an attempt to assemble "a complete mechanism out of a vast amount of disordered parts" (ibid.). Kirova's latest book is a pioneering work that aims to provide future generations with a detailed and structured picture of Bulgarian literature as it exists in our present.

The preface to the book addresses a number of important methodological questions: how, and whether at all, literary history can be written with such a narrow time frame; what the advantages and disadvantages are of writing from temporal proximity; what research approaches are most appropriate in this case; what the differences are between writing literary criticism and writing literary history; and so on.

This preface is followed by three main chapters. The first, "Till When Do the 1990s Last? The Long Twentieth Century," highlights those new and important phenomena and processes that marked the radical break with pre-1989 Bulgarian literature and set the horizon for future, twenty-first-century trends. A special place among them is given to "women's writing." Kirova calls this phenomenon "the 'new femininity' project." It emerged in the 1990s and continued to exist in the first decade of the new century in close relation to the arrival of literary postmodernism in Bulgaria. Authors of the "new femininity" project were often among the most prominent representatives of postmodernism in Bulgaria. At first they were only poets: Miglena Nikolchina, Virginiya Zaharieva, Amelia Licheva, and Nadezhda Radulova. It was only in the second half of the 1990s that women writers of postmodern prose, mostly novels, appeared: Emilya Dvoryanova, Maria Stankova, Kerana Angelova, and Albena Stambolova. They shaped a very strong movement, which continued to evolve in the first decade of

the twenty-first century, along with its transformations up to the present moment. An important conclusion of Kirova's research is that "superfeminine" and "nonfeminine," "high" and "low" femininity, albeit radically opposed to each other, formed a common platform against the clichéd patriarchal image of women.

Unlike traditional histories of Bulgarian literature, Kirova's book is not focused exclusively on major writers and works; she seeks to cover a wide range of authors and works, including those that belong to popular culture. This chapter next outlines trends that have developed away from "high" postmodernism, to some extent as an alternative to the serious issues raised in it. The author devotes space to phenomena such as the emergence of "chick lit" and crime novels written by women.

The second chapter deals with those phenomena and tendencies in Bulgarian fiction that are entirely new, that is, which appeared only in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Here, too, a significant place is given to Bulgarian women writers. Some of them parted with the ideas of the "new femininity" and took other paths. Examples are Maria Stankova, Albena Stambolova, and Teodora Dimova. The latter, along with Emilia Dvoryanova, are typical models of a turn toward literature with Christian themes and moral values. Among the many interesting questions raised in this chapter is: why do Bulgarian women write little, if any, comic literature? This problem was posed as early as the turn of the 1920s by the first academic historian of literature, Boyan Penev, and continues, as is evident, to be valid a century later.

After having discussed the novel and the short story, which have dominated the new century's fiction, the third chapter turns to poetry. Women are again seen at the fore: not only poets writing in Bulgaria, but also poets who have immigrated yet continue to write in Bulgarian and publish in their homeland. For the first time a comprehensive panoramic study of recent Bulgarian literature devotes space to ethnic and homosexual minority poetic communities, as well as to the flourishing of popular culture among Bulgarian poets at the turn of the century.

The fourth and final chapter is the most extensive, because it covers dramatic writing produced in the first two decades of the current century. This chapter is extremely significant, since dramatic writing has remained on the periphery of academic interest in Bulgaria. Kirova began to fill this gap earlier, in the detailed study of Bulgarian drama included in her three-volume *History of Bulgarian Literature between the Liberation and the End of World War I*.² Looking back, it is astonishing how few women have attempted to write plays in the history of Bulgarian dramaturgy, and that none of them have earned a name as significant playwrights, let alone a place in the literary canon. The situation changed abruptly at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and more precisely around the middle of the first decade. At first, the most popular woman playwright was the established writer Teodora Dimova, soon followed by Yana Dobрева; with the beginning of the second decade their numbers increased: Elena Alexieva, Olya Stoyanova, Zdrava Kamenova, and, of course, the most popular—Yana Borisova. According to Kirova, Borisova's work is emblematic of a significant problem that has emerged in the new Bulgarian dramaturgy: what is the place of the text in theatrical performance, and to what extent could it disappear? Experiments in this direction have been made in European theatre history since the 1920s, but only now are they reaching the Bulgarian stage and women are proving to be active participants in them.

This final chapter opens the way to the intended second volume of this major study. Kirova herself has said that the second volume is to be published in about a year's time. It will include extensive chapters on Bulgarian fiction and poetry published in the second decade of the twenty-first century, as well as two other chapters: one on the literature produced by Bulgarian writers living abroad, and another on the emergence and development of dystopian novels, whose tradition was virtually absent from Bulgarian literature until the end of the last century.

This book is a wonderful read for all interested in contemporary Bulgarian, Balkan, and European literatures.

Notes

This publication is supported by the European Union-NextGenerationEU, through the National Recovery and Resilience Plan of the Republic of Bulgaria, project SUMMIT BG-RRP-2.004-0008-C01.

1. Milena Kirova, ed., *Neslucheniyyat kanon: Bulgarski pisatelki ot Vazrazhdaneto do vtorata svetovna voyna* [The missing canon: Bulgarian women writers from the national revival to World War II] (Altera: Sofia, 2009); Milena Kirova, ed., *Neslucheniyyat kanon: Bulgarski pisatelki ot 1944 godina do nashi dni* [The missing canon: Bulgarian women writers from 1944 until today] (Sofia: Altera, 2013).

2. Milena Kirova, *Istoriya na bulgarskata literature ot Osvobozhdenieto do kraya na Puvrata Svetovna Voyna* [History of Bulgarian literature from the liberation until the end of World War I], vols. 1–3 (Sofia: Colibri, 2016, 2018, 2020).



Ina Merdjanova, ed., *Women and Religiosity in Orthodox Christianity*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2021, 336 pp., \$35 (paperback), ISBN: 9780823298617.

Book review by **Niya Neykova**
 Institute of Philosophy and Sociology
 Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Sofia



Women and Religiosity in Orthodox Christianity addresses a gap in understanding women's place and roles within a religion, seen as crucial to the interpretation of how this religion relates to human rights. Drawing on ethnographic research from Russia, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Moldova, Romania, Serbia, Finland, and the United States, the volume explores specific political, historical, and social conditions under which gender regimes operate. Through their wide geographical focus that provides options for comparative readings and raises general questions, the contributions to this volume show "women's perspectives" regarding Orthodox Christianity to be diverse and multiple.

Orthodox Christianity through its emphasis on tradition and continuity is presented—if we use the terms of Michel de Certeau—as a provider of institutional strategies (of the church and of the state) imposed from the top, while women are considered as those who rely on various informal and formal tactics to play and negotiate with these strategies from below. The volume shows contexts of countries where Orthodox Christianity is both a dominant religion and a minority religion—both former communist countries with a history of official oppression of religious practices and institutions, and countries with long-term experience of liberal democracy and religious freedom.

Case studies present women today as the majority of practicing believers in the Orthodox Church. They are perceived as experts in social activities of camouflaging and domestication of religion (in the contributions by Ketevan Gurchiani, James Kapalò, and Maria Bucur), and also of the transfer of religious faith to the younger generations (Ina Merdjanov's contribution). They find new forms of empowerment by discovering new spaces, such as digital media, in which to oppose ecclesiastic authority and express their views (the chapters by Eleni Sotiriou and Sarah Riccardi-Swartz). Women are considered more active than men both in monastic service, where they combine spiritual service with many other social undertakings in the artistic, ecological, and scientific fields (the contributions by Eleni Sotiriou and Milica Bakić-Hayden), and in everyday church-related activities, such as becoming parish school teachers, bookkeepers, and choir directors (Detelina Tocheva's chapter). Women also show the multivalent nature of agency in a global religious context by highlighting certain cultural forms and influences and downplaying others (in Helena Kupari and Tatiana Tiaynen-Qadir's contributions).

All these ethnographic illustrations of women's agency are at the core of the main question in this book, that of the contradiction between official masculine church domination, supported by discursive practices emphasizing women's traditional roles as wives, mothers, and caregivers, and unofficial feminized spaces in Orthodox Christianity, seen by the authors as having potential for female empowerment.

This question first needs juxtaposition between feminist and Orthodox Christianity's understandings of women's "empowerment." These two discourses are presented to some extent, but there is a certain lack of explanation of the ontological equality of men and women in religious texts, both being created in the image and likeness of God—an equality of the sexes that at the same time does not annihilate the natural distinction between them, nor does it imply the identity of their gifts, callings, and services in family and society.

On the contrary, the authors in this volume use rather secular conceptions of agency to assess religious women's actions and a sociological vision that, in addition to religious commitments and economic, political, and local cultural factors, is intended to reshape notions about the place and role of women in the Church that women have already been in the process of reshaping in the contemporary family and workplace in the neoliberal context. In this secular logic, out of the necessity to be compliant with cultural changes, some of the texts criticize the Orthodox Church when it expresses conservative opinions on gender-related topics. Devout Orthodox women are considered by feminist epistemologies to be socially conservative because they conform to notions of gender complementarity rather than equality and rarely

engage in resistance to patriarchy. In general, this second perspective sees both gender and religion as inherently linked to the unequal distribution of power and thus women's "empowerment" in the Church as directly related to human rights. For example, Detelina Tocheva describes the widespread unofficial recognition by both priests and congregations in Russia of single motherhood as a "normal" social specificity, something that does not impede women's professional service in the church.

This ambiguity is addressed in the very useful introduction by the editor, Ina Merdjanova. First, as she argues, women's religious commitments are not necessarily adverse to personal autonomy, agency, and feminist interests, as many secular feminists tend to consider. Second, she shows through an anecdote from her theological specialization in the early 1990s that the gender position of the Church described above could be disputable within different Christian denominations. The discussion she had with an Anglican theologian is illustrative: she expressed a view derived from her then favorite Russian religious philosophers about maleness and femaleness as transcendental, God-given identities, and he, as an Anglican theologian, asked again and again if she could really believe that.

In conclusion, the concept of neo-secularization proposed in this volume, as a complex dynamic of decline in religious authority today, is also extremely important in understanding the specificity of the debate about women's rights in Orthodox Christianity, especially in the case of the postcommunist countries. As Merdjanova shows, Orthodox Christianity, although visible today as a marker of national identity, has no substantial impact on the social norms and morality of the majority of people who identify as Orthodox. While I agree with these conclusions, for me there is still one open question remaining: If transformations need to be cultivated within, by the women in the Orthodox Church themselves, who indeed identify with the religious views, what is the potential of essentialist readings on femininity to inspire a strong feminist movement while retaining, at the same time, the foundations of Orthodox Christianity?



Katja Mihurko Poniž, Biljana Dojčinović, and Maša Grdešić, *Defiant Trajectories: Mapping Out Slavic Women Writers Routes*, Ljubljana: Forum of Slavic Cultures, 2021, 96 pp., free online publication, https://www.fsk.si/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/WWR_DefiantTrajectories.pdf (accessed 3 July 2023), ISBN: 978-961-94672-7-5.

Book review by **Marija Bosančić**
University of Belgrade, Faculty of Philology
Serbia



Defiant Trajectories: Mapping Out Slavic Women Writers Routes is a collection of six individual studies focused on the literary lives of important Slavic women writers and

intellectuals who lived and worked at the very end of the nineteenth and in the first half of the twentieth century—a period marked by continuous resistance against patriarchy. This resistance gave birth to the feminist ideal of a new liberated woman, making it possible for women be educated, emancipated, and noticed for their talent and intellect, and not only their reproductive role.

The contributions to this collection, published by the Forum of Slavic Cultures in 2021, are, in fact, the continuation of research presented at the Women Writers Route conference in Ljubljana, Slovenia, in April 2019. Not only are these studies connected through their focus on the lives of and the art created by some of the abovementioned new liberated Slavic women, but they also simultaneously and successfully map out the trajectories that led to new and freed spaces. By providing an extensive historical context, and through studies on Marija Jurić Zagorka, Ivana Brlić-Mažuranić, Divna Veković, Maria Konopnicka, Anna Akhmatova, Marina Tsvetaeva, Zinaida Gippius, Jelena J. Dimitrijević, and Zofka Kveder, the authors show that both the real and artistic lives of these women writers were tightly linked to the sociopolitical circumstances of their times.

When taken as a whole, *Defiant Trajectories*, in a comparative manner, introduces the reader to both the personality of each writer and her work. We are familiarized with their ideals, their ideas, and their pain, as the authors of these studies also convey the emotions that were the driving force behind the writings of each of these women—painting a rather detailed picture of their circumstances, time, and space.

In “The Gender of Croatian Modernity: Marija Jurić Zagorka and Ivana Brlić-Mažuranić,” Maša Grdešić analyzes extensively the artistic paths of these two contemporaries. Furthermore, Grdešić demonstrates how Zagorka and Brlić-Mažuranić are perfect examples to open the discussion of the development of feminist theory and gender studies in Croatia, which led to the scrutinizing of the exclusion of women writers from the literary canon. Although contemporaries, the two authors have always been juxtaposed through the prism of how they were perceived throughout their lives—Zagorka as the feminist activist and Brlić-Mažuranić as the writer whose works were without artistic value. Grdešić, however, points to the recent academic research that has demonstrated that both their lives and work have proven to be much more complex, and even contradictory, in comparison to dated stereotypes of femininity—hopefully leading to the realization that “Croatian modern literature is dominantly popular and feminine” (20).

Ksenija Rakočević focuses on Divna Veković in her article “Divna Veković—Our Heroine.” Apart from introducing this brave woman-intellectual, the author provides a considerable overview of the sociopolitical situation in Montenegro at the turn of the twentieth century. Rakočević explains that Montenegro is an environment deeply immersed in tribal culture, which “has powerful defence mechanisms by which it overcomes, subjugates or eliminates disobedient individuals” and, furthermore, “functions as a solid and resistant network into which the memory of collective and social values is deposited, forming a stable axiological system with a cult at its centre (in the case of Montenegrin culture, it is a cult of honour and valour), according to and against whose rigorous parameters the behaviour of an individual is measured” (23). Within such a context, Divna Veković managed to become the first woman Doctor of Philosophy, al-

though the society severely discriminated against and marginalized women. Outside Montenegro she was known for her translations of Petar II Petrović Njegoš, Jovan Jovanović Zmaj, and Vuk Karadžić into French. Unfortunately, her contemporaries and compatriots did not recognize or acknowledge her talent adequately.

In their contribution, Monika Rudaś-Grodzka, Katarzyna Nadana-Sokolowska, and Emilia Kolinko focus on one of the most prominent Polish women writers of the time—Maria Konopnicka. The chapter familiarizes readers with certain details from Konopnicka's personal life, in particular her fight against patriarchal conditions and the judgment she faced because of her civic initiatives and campaigns. Furthermore, the authors map out Konopnicka's travels, which reflected her state of being, at the time, "a cosmopolitan intellectual, a writer, and an artist trying to turn temporary spaces into homes" (36). Homes thanks to which, in fact, she wrote some of her best and most popular works.

The next contribution, "The Life and Literary Work of Russian Women Writers of the Early 20th Century: Their Artistic Merit, Cultural Contribution, and Meaning for the Present," written by Ekaterina Artemyuk, focuses on Anna Akhmatova, Marina Tsvetaeva, and Zinaida Gippius. Through individual discussions of the personal and public artistic lives of these women writers, Artemyuk points toward the similarities between them: despite gender discrimination and suffering social disfavor, they proved that women can remain unique while being active and inventive—in all respects equal to men.

Biljana Dojčinović depicts the life and work of Jelena J. Dimitrijević in "The European Routes of Jelena J. Dimitrijević." Dojčinović follows the travels of Dimitrijević—the most prominent Serbian woman writer among travelers. In chronological order, Dojčinović analyzes in depth the most important works of this author, while simultaneously considering the importance and impact that traveling had on her. Traveling through Europe, North America, Asia, and Africa enriched her spirit in many aspects. The constant yearning for the unknown opened new spaces for her—particularly with regard to attaining feminist and creative freedom. Her poems and travelogues are not mere descriptions of landscape but also exude social questions—they aim to deconstruct the cultural traditions, patriarchal hierarchy, and position of women in various social milieus; thus, they represent a peculiar critique of Europe and the European way of living.

The final study included in this collection is Katja Mihurko Poniž, "Zofka Kveder—Slavic Cultural and Feminist Icon of the Early 20th Century." Mihurko Poniž highlights the deep influence on the regional literary scene of the twentieth century of this author—known for her prose, literary critiques, editorial work, and feminist activism. This detailed portrayal of her life and its tragic end examines how and why Kveder became significant not only for Slovene but also for Yugoslav culture. Due to her bold attitude Kveder was not afraid to question the issues of women's subordination, gender stereotyping, femicide, prostitution, reproductive rights, free love, and many more. She openly criticized the society of her time and, moreover, rejected all traditional roles—becoming, certainly, a timeless icon of Slavic culture.

Overall, *Defiant Trajectories: Mapping Out Slavic Women Writers Routes* offers significant insight into the lives of all these women authors and makes it explicit that the

common ground between all of them was their fearless personalities, which did not conform to the rigid structure of patriarchal society. By being true to their identities and fighting for their freedom, Marija Jurić Zagorka, Ivana Brlić-Mažuranić, Divna Veković, Maria Konopnicka, Anna Akhmatova, Marina Tsvetaeva, Zinaida Gippius, Jelena J. Dimitrijević, and Zofka Kveder created their own space—metaphorically birthing and mapping out new trajectories and ways for new generations of women writers to, hopefully, create in a fairer and more equal world. This collection might be of interest to feminist -activists, literary scholars, writers, and artists who believe that one can always learn from the past. It is recommended to those who need motivation and strength to persist in achieving their goals and artistic ideas.



Jasmina V. Milanović, *Žensko društvo 1875–1942* (The women's society, 1875–1945), Belgrade: Institute for Contemporary History, The Official Gazette, 2020, 638 pp., RSD 2.970, ISBN: 978-86-519-2579-8.

Book review by **Zorana Simić**
 Institute for Literature and Art, Belgrade
 Serbia



This extraordinarily extensive study by Jasmina Milanović is the result of many years of diligent research in the area of women's history, and is the first ever completely systematic monograph on the founding and decades-long activity of one of the pioneering and most significant (women's) organizations in Serbia, the *Žensko društvo* (Women's Society, 1875–1942).

For sixty-seven years, starting as an elite association with its primary location in Belgrade and many branches in other parts of the country, the *Žensko društvo* survived, with minor interruptions, both despite and within numerous socioeconomic changes, political turbulences, and (state) reconstitutions in the area of today's Serbia. Thankfully, its history is largely recorded in the pages of its official newsletter, *Domaćica* (Housewife, 1891–1941), which the author also examines diachronically in a meticulous way. The topic and its range, however, placed before the author an extremely demanding task and a great responsibility: to present, through a microhistorical focus on the organization—alongside its periodical—not only its dynamic history but also the ways it interacted with even more dynamic contextual circumstances. It is quite valuable (for other researchers) that she managed to achieve this goal.

First, Milanović refers to the basic principles and courses of women's collective, mostly humanitarian, organizing in Europe, and specifically in Serbia, during the nineteenth century. She points to their (proto)feminist significance and far-reaching influence on the perception of women's roles and agency in public spheres. Within this methodological and macrohistorical framework, she moves on to the main sub-

ject of her research—elaborated through six more chapters—and provides a detailed review of the establishment and development of the Serbian *Žensko društvo* in the corresponding historical, social, political, and educational contexts, marked by deeply patriarchal and nationalist tendencies and obstacles. In addition, she offers bi-bibliographical information about its founders, members, and managers, and corrects along the way the omissions and inaccuracies in previous historical research. Thus, Milanović preserves from oblivion a multitude of women who managed to transgress the *feminine* boundaries of their private lives and cooperate publicly in what is today Serbia despite numerous barriers and hurdles.

Furthermore, the author carefully goes through various historical sources and testimonies on the functioning of the society (official and informal ones), all the while pointing out significant milestones and changes in its history. In this way, with the optimal measure of historiographical objectivity, in her fact-based research Milanović simultaneously tells an exciting story about internal and external conflicts, bigotry, and dis/agreements within the *Žensko društvo*, whose members, sources of (political) support, and positions in the corresponding public spheres significantly fluctuated from period to period.

Not surprisingly, the dynamics of the society were particularly turbulent in the periods of wars, as well as immediately before and after them, both at the local and global levels. The monograph demonstrates how the women members and associates of the *Žensko društvo* coordinated their multiple social positions and roles (philanthropic, humanitarian, as volunteer nurses, etc.) during the Balkan Wars and the First World War, as well as in the interwar period, in the then Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (henceforth Kingdom of SCS) (1918–1929) and the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (1929–1942). In the latter case, by situating the main subject of her research in the context of the increasingly massive and complex organizing of women, the author explores the history of disputes both among different associations and between individual associations and governance regimes. For instance, she considers the curious case of the *Narodni ženski savez* (NŽS, National Women's Union), the first mass women's association in the newly formed Kingdom of SCS. Briefly but convincingly, Milanović shows how its history was significantly marked by ethnic and nationalist tensions, competition, and rivalry, but also by differences in imagining optimal collective feminist practice.

Thanks to Jasmina Milanović's reconstructions, ongoing research into interwar feminism in the Kingdom of SCS and Yugoslavia has also received a new impetus: precisely this kind of historiography—here focused mainly on the *Žensko društvo*—is lacking in the cases of significant women's/feminist organizations such as the NŽS or *Ženski pokret* (Women's Movement).

By consistently attending to the nuances in the dialectics of women's and national or state issues, private and public spheres, emancipatory and conservative tendencies within women's initiatives and beyond them, social, humanitarian, cultural, and periodical models of engagement, and the dynamics of dis/agreements among (women) individuals and groups in specific forms of civil society during the last decades of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries in Serbia, Jasmina Milanović contributes significantly to research in various disciplines—mainstream national and

women's history, media and periodical studies, and gender studies in particular. Moreover, by enriching the work with numerous appendices, indexes, and reproductions of the society's regulations, papers, acts, and photographs, with carefully provided comments, notes, and biographies and portraits of members of the society, Milanović has done an exemplary job of tracing collective initiatives and organizations, both in Serbia and Yugoslavia, and beyond.

This study, at its core, figures as a fine feminist intervention, a necessary corrective to the official models, masculine norms, and narratives of historiography. At the same time, each of its possible readers—academic as well as nonacademic—is provided with a strong foothold for further research into women's history (in particular in Serbia and Yugoslavia), the history of periodicals, and intellectual history. Finally, while reading this well-conceived and vividly written book, pleasantly immersed in the period of about a century ago, readers are called to follow Milanović's path of responsible scientific work, a challenging but equally enjoyable endeavor.



Valentina Mitkova, *Pol, periodičen pechat i modernizatsia v Bulgaria (ot kraya na XIX do 40-te godini na XX vek)* (Gender, periodicals, and modernization in Bulgaria (from the end of the 19th century to the 1940s)), Sofia: St. Kliment Ohridski University Press, 2022, 261 pp., BGN 20, ISBN: 978-954-07-5588-5.

Book review by **Daniela Koleva**
St. Kliment Ohridski University of Sofia



This well-researched and well-written book combines two thematic fields in a fruitful way: the history of the book and women's history. Valentina Mitkova has developed an understudied aspect of Bulgarian modernization in the late nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, namely women's periodicals as a form of the modern public sphere. The author draws on feminist studies to highlight the emancipatory and modernizing role of women's periodicals as an "alternative public sphere," or "subaltern counter publics,"¹ which were also an "instrument of civilizational catch-up" (11). Thus, Mitkova succeeds in rethinking the more traditional problematics of women's history through new perspectives that capture the social and cultural conditioning of key categories such as "gender," "woman," and "author," and reveal the intellectual gender hierarchy, its preconditions and mechanisms.

The first chapter sets out the conceptual framework of the study. The author examines the concept of gender tutelage in the androcentric literary tradition, and the resulting gender censorship. She draws on feminist literary criticism to analyze women's writing in Bulgaria and the tension between its civilizing effort and its marginality and subordination ensuing from the authors' gender. She comes to the compelling conclu-

sion that despite the modernizing thrust of the time, the canon “reaffirms the patriarchal concept of male power and authority, tracing literary history as constructed on gender and genre hierarchies” (47). Mitkova approaches the heterogeneous feminist publications of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century with the conceptual toolkit developed by Karen Offen,² distinguishing between two types of women’s periodicals: those using “individualistic” and “relational” feminist argumentation. The former constructed modern female identity through inclusion in public and political life and explicitly stated their emancipatory agenda. The latter, the so-called “household” publications, eschewed politicization and sought to modernize the female world in its traditional dimensions (home, family, everyday life). The author argues that, regardless of the type of journal, women’s periodicals worked to turn women into active participants in the construction of the modern image of the country, transforming public attitudes toward “the woman question” and emancipating women. Thus, in the context of Bulgarian modernization, both types of periodicals were “tools for formulating alternative interpretations of women’s identity, for constructing women’s own narratives in the framework of the dominant androcentric public discourses, and—more generally—for expanding the public discursive field in the direction of a historically marginalized social group such as women” (66).

The second chapter focuses on women’s publications in the context of Bulgarian modernization. The argument begins with the “literary feminism” of nineteenth-century authors such as Petko Slaveykov and Ljuben Karavelov, who justified the need for women’s education “as a key element of the national modernization project” (69). Mitkova emphasizes the agency of nineteenth-century women writers as a tool for expanding gender roles. Their social activism manifested itself in the spheres of girls’ education, philanthropic and moral-reformist activities, and sponsorships and lectures. This chapter also traces gender asymmetries in the nation-state in the areas of women’s education, professional advancement, and political citizenship. It examines the emergence of modern feminism as a reaction to women’s exclusion from public life and full citizenship; the formation of the Bulgarian Women’s Union and its divisions; and the neotraditionalist discourses, the contradictory processes of emancipation, and the reactualization of patriarchal values in the interwar period.

Having thus outlined the cultural context, the author maps out the media landscape in Bulgaria in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in terms of its political orientations, causes, communicative strategies, and messages. Her conclusion is that the educational and enlightenment thrust of nineteenth-century nation-formation processes was largely preserved. Alongside this, as a new trend, commercial news publications similar to European ones emerged, combining serious and entertainment topics.

In the central third chapter, Mitkova applies the accepted typology of women’s periodicals to actual empirical material, examining several periodicals of each type in terms of their strategies for emancipating and modernizing Bulgarian women. Mitkova convincingly unpacks the alternative public sphere created by these publications, in which women were authors and readers, political subjects, and everyday actors in the construction of the country’s modern European image. Here, the author offers a careful and insightful discussion of individual periodicals and their editorial

teams. She makes grounded connections between the professional and social profiles of the publishers and the focus of their publications, their main themes, causes, tasks, and messages to their imagined readership. Thus, she raises—albeit does not explicitly discuss—an important methodological issue: the role of personalities and thus the importance of biographical methods for the study of women's history.

First, Mitkova examines several explicitly feminist publications (individualistic ones, the first type according to Offen) that appear to portray women as social and political subjects in the public sphere. Their causes are women's political representation and professional advancement; their topics include girls' education, suffrage, the international women's movement, peacekeeping, and similar themes. The dividing lines between different feminisms, informed by their strictly ("bourgeois") feminist or social democratic positions, are evident here. As the author notes, however, class demands and sensitivity to economic injustices coexisted with a non-class (pan-feminist) intransigence toward gender discrimination.

Next, Mitkova focuses on "household" (relational feminist) publications that cultivated a new "women's habitus" (156) in the private sphere. Noting their oscillation between essentializing and emancipatory attitudes, the author refines her analysis to demonstrate their role in the personal emancipation of Bulgarian women, and in tangibly transforming public attitudes on the so-called "woman question." I see these findings as a significant contribution to the intersection and cross-fertilization of the history of the book and reading and of women's history. The author convincingly demonstrates that the emergence of new authorities (outside the family), the cultivation of certain personal qualities, and the expansion of knowledge on health, domestic, pedagogical, and other topics actually contributed to readers' awareness of themselves as modern women, and thus to their emancipation. Wolfgang Iser's theory of the implicit reader³ provides a basis for Mitkova's reflection on the readership constructed by the periodicals, and more generally on reading as a modern cultural practice, which has its gendered specificities. This is a topic that merits further elaboration.

The monograph is noteworthy in at least one more respect: it opens up promising comparative perspectives. Tracing cultural influences between the Bulgarian national context and those of neighboring countries—mostly Serbia and Greece, but also Turkey in some cases—Mitkova foregrounds their intertwined histories and the parallel processes of modernization and cultural exchange. Thus, she outlines yet another domain for future research.

Given the indisputable merits of the book, it is disappointing that there is no proper conclusion to summarize the main theses and contributions of this valuable work, to evaluate the application of the chosen conceptual framework to the specific material at hand, and to correlate the results with those of other similar projects referred to in the text. Instead, the author goes beyond the temporal parameters she has set by extending her research to publications from the communist period—a supernumerary task going beyond the scope and the aims of the research. Still, and with no hesitation, I would recommend the book to readers interested in women's history and the history of the book and publishing, as well as to those looking for less well-known aspects of modernization in Southeastern Europe.

Notes

1. Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text* 25–26 (1990), 56–80.
2. Karen Offen, *European Feminisms, 1700–1950: A Political History* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).
3. Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).



Agnieszka Mroziak, *Architektki PRL-u: Komunistki, literatura i emancypacja kobiet w powojennej Polsce* (The architects of the PRL: Communist women, literature, and women's emancipation in postwar Poland), Warsaw: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, Lupa Obscura, 2022, 532 pp., PLN 59 (paperback), ISBN: 978-83-66898-84-4.

Book review by **Katarzyna Stańczak-Wiślicz**
Institute of Literary Research, Polish Academy of Sciences



Agnieszka Mroziak has been researching the history of Polish communist women for a long time. She has authored numerous articles and book chapters on women activists in the Polish communist movement after 1945, focusing on their contribution to the process of women's emancipation. In her first book, *Akuszerki transformacji: Kobiety, literatura i władza w Polsce po 1989 roku* (Midwives of transformation: Women, literature, and power in Poland after 1989) (2012),¹ Mroziak examined identity politics in the feminist movement and women's literature in post-1989 Poland, highlighting the general rejection of the legacy of the Polish People's Republic. In her most recent book, *Architektki PRL-u: Komunistki, literatura i emancypacja kobiet w powojennej Polsce* (The architects of the PRL: Communist women, literature, and women's emancipation in postwar Poland), she examines the very beginning of the communist system in Poland. Once again, she calls for bringing out of silence those who are absent from the mainstream historiography of postwar Poland, including women's history.

The book was born out of a sense of absence, Mroziak explains in the introduction. This founding statement is rooted in the fundamental principles of women's historiography, but she goes further, finding her place in the framework of "unconventional history" that, according to Ewa Domańska, turns to subjects marginalized, silenced, or ignored in the dominant historiographic narrative. The protagonists of *Architektki PRL-u* were ignored not only because they were women. They were also "leftist state-socialist feminists," prominent political subjects, decision-makers, and producers of the official political discourse of their times, subsequently removed from power and forgotten first by the official political discourse and then by historiography. Mroziak recognizes one more reason for her interest in the history of communist women

activists, pointing to the symbolic use of their images in popular discourse about the communist era: they personified national betrayal, Stalinist oppression, blindness, and irrational devotion to communism. In this way, their agency, their real contributions to Polish postwar history, were belittled and depreciated.

Mrozik intends to give them a place in historiography, to “find them” within the state—as insisted on by Chinese historian Wang Zheng, cited in the book. In this way, the book complements the growing interest in the history of women’s participation in political cultures and their contribution to social and political changes, represented for example by *The Palgrave Handbook of Communist Women Activists around the World*, edited by Francisca de Haan, which is the first volume to focus on women’s contributions to communism in a global perspective. However, attempts to integrate women activists into the history of communist-era Poland appeared only recently.² Certainly, Mrozik’s book is the first comprehensive attempt to examine women’s contribution to the construction of a new political system in Poland after 1945 from a critical feminist perspective.

Architektki PRL-u is thoroughly researched and based on impressive archival and library work. The author quotes multiple published and unpublished materials, including personal documents: letters, memoirs, drafts of books, and publications authored by her protagonists. She also uses oral history interviews and private correspondence, and other sources rarely used by historians: literature, popular journalism (advice columns in women’s magazines), handbooks and manuals, movies, and TV series. The variety of primary sources is followed by an extensive use of secondary literature and a multidisciplinary methodological approach, which allows the author to build a complex, multilayered story.

The book consists of seven chapters. The first two chapters, which follow the extensive introduction, focus on specific individuals, from Wanda Wasilewska, who became an icon of the communist regime, to Fryderyka Kalinowska—a completely forgotten women’s and human rights activist and Polish representative in the Women’s International Democratic Federation (WIDF). In these two chapters the author employs the biographical method with a critical feminist approach, which enables her to locate individual women’s lives within the historical social, political, and cultural context, and to highlight how individual stories at the micro-level are also collective ones at a macro-level.³ Mrozik does not present the complex biographies of her book’s protagonists, as this task would require further archival research. However, she succeeds in showing the relationship between the individuals and their historical period, the compatibility of the individual and the social and political, which is crucial for historical biography as a genre.⁴

In the next two chapters, Mrozik examines the discourses of women’s and girls’ emancipation in Poland through the late 1960s, placing them in the broader perspective of global cultural processes. At the same time, she introduces journalists, writers, and publicists, former “architects of the PRL” who, after the post-Stalinist thaw, played the role of “popular experts” contributing to women’s and youth magazines. Certainly, one of the book’s greatest strengths is its attention to these secondary figures, extending the narrative beyond the most prominent figures of politicians and Communist Party activists. In this part of the book, the author, combining the meth-

ods of biographical studies and critical discourse analysis, provides insight into the process of building the new identity of the (socialist or communist) “modern girl” and “modern woman.” Importantly, she shows the inner contradictions of this project, emphasizing that the model of the “modern girl” developed during the long 1960s in Poland actually represented the values of the urban intelligentsia. Similarly, Mrozik recognizes the conservative elements in the advice discourse addressed to girls and young women.

The final two chapters and the conclusion focus on issues of historical memory and of remembering and forgetting the legacy of the communist project of women’s emancipation and activism. This part of the book sheds light on aspects that have been ignored in previous historical publications of scholars working within the totalitarian paradigm, such as the role of communist youth organizations in the project of women’s equality. It is worth mentioning that the author highlights the conservative approach of some male party members to gender issues.

The importance of this book goes beyond the reconstruction of the lives and political careers of women communist activists. It is a major contribution to rethinking the history of communism in Poland, challenging the dominant and simplistic narrative of communism as a male movement, with men as thinkers and decision-makers and women as generally politically passive, or, if politically involved, irrational, “seduced,” deluded fanatics. Mrozik not only refers to the historiography, but she also recognizes how Polish communists used gender as a symbolic representation of Stalinist errors and distortions, and how during the Thaw they constructed the narrative of communism as a male-centered myth. Mrozik rejects the stereotypical interpretation of women as deluded fanatics and as actual victims of communism; she tries to reveal the motivations of her protagonists, to show their political engagement as a process resulting from various social, cultural, and political factors, and, most importantly, to emphasize their contributions to history as active political actors, producers of official political discourse, and decision-makers.

Mrozik succeeds in telling the story of women communist activists in Poland, placing them within the global context of post-1945 political and cultural changes. She emphasizes their role in the international women’s movement, primarily in the WIDE, as well as in the process of shaping the dominant ideological discourse in Poland. The author offers an extensive presentation of the discourses of women’s equality and girls’ emancipation and emphasizes their role in the project of communist transformation. In doing so, she introduces some interesting concepts, such as the “emotional emancipation” of girls, which certainly need further research. It should be noted, as well, that Mrozik examines discourses rather than historical practices. Her book is more about communism as an ideological project than about its implementation in Poland. The metaphor of “architects of the PRL” used in the title, rather than the builders of the communist regime, therefore seems accurate.

Overall, *Architektki PRL-u* makes a significant contribution to the history of women’s activism under state socialism, to the history of communism, and, generally, to the history of political discourses. It can also be defined as a “textual intervention”—Agnieszka Mrozik challenges the historical discourse on women’s roles in building the new political order after 1945 and gives them their rightful place in historiography.

Notes

1. Agnieszka Mrozik, *Akuszerki transformacji: Kobiety, literatura i władza w Polsce po 1989 roku* [Midwives of transformation: Women, literature, and power in Poland after 1989] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, Lupa Obscura, 2012).

2. See Natalia Jarska and Piotr Perkowski, "Droga do władzy: Kobiety w PZPR 1948–1989" [The road to power: Women in the Polish United Workers' Party 1948–1989], *Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość* [Memory and justice] 27 (2016), 231–246; Piotr Perkowski, "Droga do władzy? Kobiety w polityce" [The road to power? Women in politics], in *Kobiety w Polsce 1945–1989: Nowoczesność, emancypacja, komunizm* [Women in Poland 1945–1989: Modernity, equality, communism], ed. Katarzyna Stańczak-Wiślicz, Piotr Perkowski, Malgorzata Fidelis, and Barbara Klich-Kluczewska (Kraków: Univeristas, 2020), 45–101.

3. Barbara Merrill, "Understanding Women's Lives through Critical Feminist Perspectives: Working-Class Women Students in Higher Education," in *Discourses, Dialogue and Diversity in Biographical Research: An Ecology of Life and Learning*, ed. Alan Bainbridge, Laura Formenti, and Linden West (Leiden: Brill Sense, 2021), 143–156, here 149.

4. Barbara Caine, *Biography and History* (London: Macmillan Education, 2010), 1.



Miglena S. Todorova, *Unequal under Socialism: Race, Women, and Transnationalism in Bulgaria*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021, 218 pp., \$31.95 (paperback), ISBN: 978-1-4875-2841-6.

Book review by **Raia Apostolova**
 Institute of Philosophy and Sociology
 Bulgarian Academy of Sciences



Miglena Todorova's *Unequal under Socialism* sets out on a journey to instill doubt as a technology of investigation into Bulgaria's socialist past, but also in its capitalist present. The author's methodological lens—an "epistemology of doubt"—spreads over seven chapters, where the contradictory and intersecting makings of gender, race, and sexuality take center stage in the argument that neither socialism nor liberal democracy provide grounds for women's prosperity. Race and gender—the focus of Todorova's transnational feminist inquiry—are discussed with a critical focus on the making of differences, mostly under state socialism. The author also takes readers to the interwar and postsocialist periods to conduct a genealogical reading of race and gender relations in Bulgaria.

The introduction narrates both the analytical and political reservoirs of Todorova's *feminist epistemology of doubt*. Positioning herself as a postsocialist Balkan feminist, Todorova attempts to root suspicion in a few directions. Critical of studies within the totalitarian paradigm that has ruled much of the scholarly debate over the past thirty years, Todorova points to their inability to "capture the depth, heterogeneity, and complexity of socialist nation building and subjectivities" (10). The author also notes

her disappointment with Marxist feminists in the First and Third Worlds because of their alleged deafness to Second World feminists, resulting in a naïve appreciation of Marxist and socialist epistemologies. Simultaneously, Todorova's analytical frustrations are directed toward Balkan feminists as well, who, supposedly, "do not see" race (11) in their engagements within the field of women's studies. Todorova joins recent scholars who distance themselves from totalitarian paradigms (11) and colorblind, revisionist political theoretical frameworks (124) in order to seek a third, critical way of explanation.

Chapter 1 discusses debates on race, racial hygiene, and racial epistemologies in the interwar period, with the following three chapters devoted to race and gender realities under socialism. The notion of "socialist racialism"—discussed in detail in Chapters 2 and 3—deserves attention as it is the author's way to delineate her work from Eurocentric and colorblind analyses. To ground the notion, Todorova delves into the "socialist paradox," that is, the People's Republic of Bulgaria's commitment to antiracism and anticolonialism and the simultaneous reinforcement of racialized practices toward minorities within its borders. Todorova concludes that the structure of "socialist racialism"—the particularities of racial imagination within socialist states and the erasure of "belated" people—presupposes violence by "seeking togetherness, emancipation, and social, economic, and political inclusion" (60). Relying on assimilationist techniques of inclusion (in education, labor processes, cultural programs, and housing), state governance accordingly "was predicated on the violent erasure of . . . Roma and Muslim identities and histories" (61), whereby women suffered the most. Such violence, according to Todorova, pitted "unequal groups of women against each other" (78), whereby some groups of women closer to Eurocentric socialist standards of modernity were tasked with "reforming" other women, such as Roma, Muslim women, and sex workers.

Todorova asserts that capitalist racism and socialist racialism differ (the former relying on exclusion, the latter on inclusion); however, their underlying Eurocentric normativity and Christian morality bring them together. Todorova justly reminds us that inclusion is not violence-free. Yet by collapsing liberal, colonial, imperialist, socialist, and capitalist rationales into the same epistemological register (10), the work underappreciates the epistemic struggles against capitalist, imperialist, and colonial forms that took place in various theoretical, political, and economic fields. Such blurring of ideas, ideological lexicons, and knowledge apparatuses takes away from the complexity of Todorova's otherwise important insights into the makings of gender and race under state socialism.

Chapter 4 examines the practice of socialist internationalism. Todorova's analyses revolve around *Zhenata Dnes* (Woman today)—a magazine published by the Committee of Bulgarian Women. Reading through the magazine's pages, Todorova comes to the sharp conclusion that "The magazine's constant comparisons between prospering domestic socialism and the oppression of women abroad further erased the struggles of women domestically" (104–105). Inviting readers to weep over the conducting of extreme violence elsewhere in the world, the editors of *Zhenata Dnes* did not engage the possibility to expose structural domination, racializing practices, and gendered violence against Roma and Muslim women at home. Thus "socialist feminist inter-

nationalism connected women's struggles globally but not domestically" (105). The author raises important questions about the forms of enacting internationalism and its contradictory effects on domestic struggles against racializing practices, domination, and patriarchal relations. Todorova's problematization of *Zhenata Dnes* is to be taken seriously. In a surprising turn, however, while women state activists are criticized bitterly, Lyudmila Zhivkova—an actor well entrenched in a privileged position of power—is depicted with warm generosity and given the benefit of the doubt. Moreover, there are some disputable factual claims when it comes to the presence of foreign workers and students in the socialist period—for example that foreign workers received lower wages compared to their Bulgarian counterparts and lacked support (111), among others. Such inaccuracies instill doubt over some methodological choices in two ways: first, by treating anticommunist sources prior to 1989 and questionable media materials written after 1989 as credible (and only) sources of information, instead of as effects and enactments of Cold War and postsocialist political and ideological antagonisms; and second, by treating different subject formations—minority women and foreign labor power—within the same register of strategies of socialist internationalism.

Chapter 5 is a prelude to the author's concluding remarks. In this chapter, she turns toward the arrival of American cultural forms in Bulgaria in the 1980s, which, the author vividly argues, "exacerbated socialist racialism . . . supporting social imaginations linking Roma in Bulgaria and African Americans in the United States to each other and [biologizing] racial constructs originating in the United States" (131). Such processes had the effect of overwhelming the transition to liberal democratic and neoliberal forms of governing—the subject of Todorova's conclusion. There, she points to similarities between state-socialist and neoliberal rationalities of "integration" and launches a full-fledged assault against the Eurocentricity shared by both socialism and neoliberalism.

Miglena Todorova's book deserves the attention of both scholars and political activists at a time of extraordinary violence against women's, queer, and racialized bodies in former socialist states and beyond. Todorova's book would have gained tremendously if the author had engaged with historians and social theorists such as Wendy Goldman, Maria Bucur, Zhivka Valiavicharska, and Susan Reid, among many others, who have long endeavored to critically examine socialist and interwar gender and race relations. Despite some methodological concerns, the monograph achieves its goal to have readers engage in a critical search for emancipatory politics yet to come.



Zhivka Valiavicharska, *Restless History: Political Imaginaries and their Discontents in Post-Stalinist Bulgaria*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021, 275 pp., \$36.46 (paperback), ISBN: 978-0-2280-0583-4.

Book review by **Momchil Hristov**
St. Kliment Ohridski University of Sofia, Bulgaria



Zhivka Valiavicharska's book reconstructs the complex history of ideas in socialist societies from Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union through the case of Bulgaria. Political ideas are considered not as a state-managed ideology (as one well-established rendition would have it), but as practices and instruments in multiple struggles on an uneven and constantly changing terrain. The main subject of the book is the formation and transformations of a specific Marxist tradition that opposes the dogmatism of the Stalinist orthodoxy of Marxism-Leninism, but in the end creates an orthodoxy of its own, that "enables" (16) the ethnonationalist and pro-nativist politics of the socialist states from the 1960s to the 1980s.

The careful ethnographic reading of the history of theoretical struggles in the field of Eastern Marxism (see Chapter 1, "Journeys of the 1844 Manuscripts: Historiographic Shifts in Marxist Thought") shows that this tradition rested mainly on the interpretation of the "young Marx" and dethroned the productivist logics of Stalinist discourse, the latter marginalizing the historical role of the individual subject in favor of collective entities such as social class. Instead, post-Stalinist Marxists from Yugoslavia through Bulgaria to the Soviet Union put the focus on the "human" and constituted the paradigm of Marxist socialist humanism. Notions like alienation, praxis, and the holistically developed person became immanent critical weapons, directed toward "concrete socialist reality," exposing the nondemocratic nature of Stalinism, its bureaucracy, the alienation of urban life, and socioeconomic inequalities in socialist societies (44).

The new socialist humanism reworked Marx's heritage and formed a "radical" political imaginary that directed socialist states toward a wide range of reforms in leisure and reproductive work that "collectivized reproductive, domestic, and care work, and made available to ordinary people vast infrastructures of leisure, sports and creative life" (56). These reforms however did not automatically follow from the premises of socialist humanism and had to be won in a political battle. In one of the most captivating parts of the book (Chapter 2, "Gender and Social Reproduction the Socialist Way"), Valiavicharska analyzes the deep theoretical and political struggles of socialist women activists to highlight the economic centrality of social reproduction and household labor in particular, five years prior to Selma James and Mariarosa Dalla Costa's groundbreaking work on the topic, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of Community* (1972). Women activists' sociological research on topics such as "leisure," "time budget," and the "second shift" rendered visible the forms of exploitation to which women in Bulgarian socialist society were subjected, thus exposing the contradictions between government promises and the structural inability of women to enjoy creative life and to fulfill the socialist ideal of "holistically developed persons." One of the major outcomes of this activism was the reformulation of "social reproduction" to include not only biological reproduction, domestic and care work, housing, food, and healthcare, but also leisure, rest, culture, creative activity, and social life. Thus women activists "displaced the dominant role of 'labor' as an organizing social principle" (87) and opened the room for juridical-political interventions in favor of "women's social emancipation" (71).

Yet deeper study of socialist humanism's "epistemic logics" uncovers its "dark side" (112) in the face of Bulgarian state politics of ethnic assimilation of religious and

ethnic minorities. The next three chapters deal with the “dark side of humanist values.” According to Valiavicharska, the progressivist episteme of socialist humanism left unproblematized the male-centric, heteronormative, Orientalist, ethnonationalist, and statist premises on which it rested. Thus, ideas of socialist peoplehood, social totality, and progress slowly evolved toward hegemonic discourse (“hegemonic humanism”) that presented Pomak, Roma, and Turkish communities as backward and underdeveloped. Chapter 3 (“In the Darkness of Humanism”) retraces the gradual formation of “ethnonationalist doctrine in post-Stalinist Bulgaria” (91) through a “re-writing” of the national historical narrative, furnishing socialism with ethnonational genealogy of revolutionary struggles (95). Against this background, non-Bulgarian ethnic consciousness and identity were stigmatized as “dividing the ‘unity’ of the Bulgarian people” (102), hence the strategy of their cultural assimilation and historical erasure. The ethnonationalism of the socialist state from the 1960s onward is described as a set of institutional practices and ideas that Valiavicharska terms “ethno-statism” and that culminated in a “premeditated and state-organized ethnic cleansing” (95). It was a technology of social governance of the socialist society through a building of its homogeneity, a “thickening of national relations and an increase of the ethno-cultural monism” (100), as the historian Georgi Iankov, one of the architects of the assimilationist projects, put it. Marxist humanism, the author contends, constituted the political imaginary laying the conceptual foundations of a “quasi-colonial” project of the socialist modernization of minorities. The cruel irony is that the same progressive reforms that the humanist tradition enabled were used as a means of violence for the purposes of assimilation (114). Chapter 4 (“Stalinism to Post-Stalinism: Shifting Histories, Shifting Readings”) and Chapter 5 (“Violent Revivals”) deal with the unfolding of this project—the infamous “Revival Process”—and with the heroic everyday resistances of its targets.

Despite its emancipatory conceptual content, Marxist humanism contained a nationalist trap into which even some women activists fell. They naturalized motherhood and left unproblematized its enshrinement by the state as a “social obligation”; they reproduced the Orientalizing tropes about Muslims as superstitious and backward, thus collaborating in “population management projects with ethnonationalist agendas” (85). Even more strikingly, Valiavicharska contrasts these projects with minority politics from the Stalinist “era” and the 1947 Constitution that ended the persecution and assimilation by the former profascist government and gave minorities the right to national, linguistic, and cultural self-determination. Shortly after the beginning of de-Stalinization, however, the 1958 educational reform imposed the Bulgarian language as dominant, thereby emerging as a genuine “regime change with nationalist agenda” (94). The second socialist constitution from 1971 went even further, replacing “minority” with “citizens of non-Bulgarian origin,” rescinding from minorities the right to learn in their mother tongue. Besides that, it removed citizens’ right to trial and defense, thus opening the road to state violence (148).

Restless History shows socialist societies—and socialist Bulgaria in particular—in their contradictions and their ambivalent heritage, thereby unsettling the “reductive pictures” (17) of the mainstream interpretations in terms of totalitarianism. Against the idea of the supposed “isolation of the Socialist bloc” from the “developed” (West-

ern) world, against the allegation of the intellectual backwardness of socialist countries, we are shown their leading role in anticolonial theoretical and political struggles (see Chapter 6, “Ethnonationalism and the Global Orientations of Bulgarian Socialism”); against the thesis that social sciences and humanities in socialist societies were dogmatic, uncritical, and servile to the “Party state,” the book stresses the diverse theoretical struggles that led to new “hegemonic formulations” and eventually to a change of government direction; against the interpretation of the People’s Republic of Bulgaria as a mere “satellite” of the USSR, readers are presented with a set of ethnonationalist strategies aiming to strengthen Bulgarian sovereignty. Valiavicharska presents a history of the socialist experience on which we continue to ruminate to this day, and whose complex contents—reactionary or progressive—still haunt our times, but which we can grasp better after reading this book. In this sense the latter represents a historical anthropology of political thought “taking aim at the heart of the present” (as Habermas¹ once qualified Foucault’s work).

The book will be a useful companion to studies in the cultural history of socialism, political theory, the history of philosophy, the anthropology of modernization, the historical sociology of socialist societies, and its capitalist transmutations.

Note

1. Jurgen Habermas, “Taking Aim at the Heart of the Present”, in *Foucault: A Critical Reader*, ed. David Couzens Hoy (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986).



Susan Zimmermann, *Frauenpolitik und Männergewerkschaft: Internationale Geschlechterpolitik, IGB-Gewerkschafterinnen und die Arbeiter- und Frauenbewegungen der Zwischenkriegszeit* (Policies for women and men’s trade unions: International gender politics, female IFTU unionists, and the labor and women’s movements of the interwar period), Vienna: Löcker, 2021, 717 pp., €39.80 (paperback), ISBN: 978-3-99098-026-2.

Book review by **Birgitta Bader-Zaar**
University of Vienna, Austria



Susan Zimmermann, professor of history and gender studies at Central European University in Vienna, pursues two goals with her study of policies for women in international trade unionism. Her major aim is to (re)write the marginalized history of the women’s committee of the social democratic International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU, or “Amsterdam International”) and the IFTU’s international labor women’s conferences from the mid-1920s to the late 1930s. Her discovery of the archive of the—

officially named—International Committee of Trade Union Women or International Committee of Women Trade Unionists among the papers of the British Trades Union Congress at the University of Warwick served to realize this project. On the other hand, Zimmermann uses the case study to illustrate her approach to an integrative history of women's political activism that overcomes two strands of historiography: one arguing that women's involvement in masculinist labor unions only hampered their battle for women's interests and made them "hesitant and ambivalent" (650), even "pathetic," as a contemporary argued; and the other portraying opposition to male union leaders as heroic. Instead, she makes a case for a fresh perspective that carves out the "independent political concepts" of the women activists without "assuming per se their readiness to make compromises and 'conservatism' regarding women's policies or, conversely, an unflinching commitment to the interests of working women" (651).

This substantial book presents an extremely detailed study, often cross-referencing itself and therefore not easy to read, although Zimmermann phrases her arguments clearly. She understands her work as a foundation for further research and calls attention to points on which she can only speculate as well as questions that would merit further investigation. Personal papers of women labor activists and archives of IFTU member countries other than those she has already included in her study, that is Austrian, British, French, German, and Swiss records, could provide further knowledge. As Zimmermann has published her book in German, its outreach, however, may remain somewhat limited, especially as regards promoting further research. An earlier article in English summarizing some of her findings is available, though.¹

The book's introductory chapter outlines previous historiography, the author's goals, and trade union policies regarding women in interwar Europe, thus anticipating many of the issues that are brought up in later chapters. Chapter 2 deals with the formation of the IFTU's Women's International as a successor organization to the autonomous International Federation of Working Women (IFWW). Among competing organizations—the Communist International's trade union council (the Profintern), the Women's International of the Christian *Confédération Internationale des Syndicats Chrétiens*, the International Co-operative Women's Guild, and the Women's International of the Labour and Socialist International (LSI)—the IFTU had an interest in utilizing the IFWW's resources to organize women workers and in preventing independent women's organizations from gaining influence over the female workforce. The motives of the IFWW, in turn, mostly had to do with an interest in more intensive cooperation with the internationally resourceful and powerful IFTU, which would help with organizing women, but the masculinist base of the IFTU did entail considerable debate among its members. Finally, in 1925 the IFWW ceased to exist and the IFTU formed a women's committee with a restricted agenda regarding its organization. A call for a secretary for women's issues was ignored, and power and resources for the committee were suppressed in an attempt to prevent women's separate policies. Nevertheless, as Zimmermann notes: "Without the IFWW's challenge, without the forces within the IFWW that demanded autonomy and without those committed IFTU trade unionists in the IFWW who pushed for a merger, there might not have been any, or an even weaker IFTU Women's International" (142).

Chapter 3 deals with the activists of the IFTU women's committee and its efforts to step up the IFTU's activities for women's issues. Other topics are the IFTU's international labor women's conferences and its international cooperation regarding women's policies. With its five members—experienced women who looked back on long careers in trade unionism and came from Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom—the committee was clearly Europe- and center-oriented. Only around the mid-1930s was an Eastern European full member admitted, from Czechoslovakia, and alternate members from other countries were appointed. The committee's scope was restricted to gainfully employed working women, focusing on their special concerns and considering women's "mental and physical constitution" (149 and note 16). Its function was solely advisory and all its decisions had to be confirmed by the IFTU's Executive Board. Its meetings were actually led by the general secretary of the board. They were also hampered by the lack of language skills among the members, which limited debates and created misunderstandings. Nevertheless, decisions endorsed by the Executive Board were assigned the highest authority within the IFTU. The women's committee thus did have leeway to influence the IFTU's policies on women workers. And through the IFTU's privileged status in the International Labour Organization (ILO), members were active at the meetings of the International Labour Conference or were members of the ILO's Correspondence Committee of Women's Work. They were also involved in the League of Nation's Child Welfare Committee.

The following six chapters (4–8 and 10) take up specific scopes of action of the IFTU's Women's International, contextualizing them in international women's policies of the time. The activists' focus included women's wages and equal pay for equal work, the valorization of family and care work (throughout perceived as the women's sphere by the IFTU's women's committee), international policies on protective labor laws for women, peace and antifascist activism, and efforts to unionize working women, especially those in cottage industries and domestic workers. Several of these interconnected issues brought IFTU women into conflict with male unionists and did not always end in success. The wage question, for example, was a central agenda of unionism that, in turn, had a long tradition of reacting to women's low wages by defining women workers as competitors in the labor market, which required pushing them out of it altogether. The IFTU's Women's International reacted by campaigning for women's right to work and including not only skilled industrial workers, but also unskilled women, women working in cottage industries, and female domestic workers in its agenda. The committee's women were also involved in the ILO's plans for the Minimum Wage-Fixing Machinery Convention of 1928. They saw higher wages for men as a solution to relief of women's family work that would allow them a choice over whether they wished to work or not (rather than family allowances, which did not find support among all committee members). Furthermore, a rise in women's wages would entail a reduction of gender differences in income.

Protective labor laws for women, with the exception of maternity protection, evoked some disagreement among the members of the IFTU's Women's International. Essentially, they wished protective laws to apply to male workers as well. Nevertheless, they strictly opposed any revision of the ILO convention on the exclusion of women from night work in the early 1930s, again prioritizing women's (including

married women's) right to work. This was even supported by IFTU resolutions in 1929 and 1933. Less successful were efforts to unionize working women, especially those in cottage industries and domestic workers. Here, the Women's International failed to launch an international concerted action, "due to both resistance and disinterest on the part of the IFTU leadership and the IFTU federations, as well as indecisiveness and disunity on the part of the IFTU women unionists themselves" (606), as Zimmermann concludes. It also neglected to organize unionist training for women.

In Chapter 11 the author explains how and why the IFTU cut down women's activism. She contextualizes this break within the rise of the committee's internationalist involvement in the 1930s, which was inspired by intensified discussions and cooperation among international women's organizations on issues such as nationality of married women, the revision of the ILO convention on women's night work, and women's wages, a development Zimmermann outlines in more detail in Chapter 9.² The League of Nations and the ILO intensified their cooperation with women's networks, and the activists of the IFTU's women's committee became a part of this development, especially lobbying against organizations such as Open Door International, which advocated women's equal status in all respects, including the abolition of special protection laws for women. The issue of women's wages now came to the fore. In the context of a campaign for an ILO Equal Pay Convention, the IFTU's Women's International demanded support for the International Labour Office's survey of women's wages by member unions, which, however, the union men were not prepared to endorse for various reasons, among them probably concern that individual trade unions' policies in collective bargaining that were detrimental to women's wages might be brought to light. The question of activism for peace was another contentious issue between male unionists and their Women's International. In the early 1930s the women's committee had declined cooperation with nonsocialist organizations on disarmament within the League of Nations, opting against a separate policy from the IFTU that expected support for its own peace campaigns, which, nevertheless, were perceived to be a male preserve. Only in 1936 did the IFTU's Women's International begin to emphasize the fight against war as one of its special agendas. In 1937 it even gave outspoken support to cooperation with other women's networks, including nonsocialist groups, for peace. Publishing this resolution in the IFTU's bulletin without waiting for the Executive Board's endorsement, probably to put pressure on the board to become active on this issue, induced it to finally curtail the committee's activism. The fight against war was a "general campaign, which must be carried out by the Labour Movement as a whole," as the general secretary argued (509). Focusing on separate women's issues outside of the IFTU's leadership was not acceptable. Details on what exactly had, in the end, led to the curtailment of the women's committee were not available in Zimmermann's sources, as she notes. From then on, the committee was only to be consulted "when questions of interest to women arose," with the Executive drawing up the agenda, though members of the committee remained "free to submit proposals" (627).

Zimmermann concludes that the IFTU's Women's International reacted to capitalist dynamics by attempting to adapt gender relations to these developments in a way that would improve women's economic and legal status. This included normalizing and enhancing women's labor against its opponents, respectively helping women to

a free choice over whether to enter gainful employment via wages and valuing women's family and care work—even if members disagreed on the latter issue. The women's committee followed its agenda with great commitment, albeit refraining from any open criticism of the marginalization of women's issues within a masculinist-oriented IFTU.

At the end of her book (Chapter 12), Zimmermann explains how her differentiated and complex approach to the IFTU's Women's International serves as a case study for a different perspective on women's trade unionism. It illustrates how the agency of a specific women's group can be shifted from the margins to the center, in this case focusing on both class and gender. She develops a conceptual framework for a reflective study of women's activities for women's issues, especially those that do not fit into the rebellious image of protest that earlier feminist historiography, rooted in the new women's movement, wished to unearth (661–662). For this historiographical tradition the subordinate position of the women's committee within the male-dominated IFTU appeared to be flawed. Zimmermann, however, wants to show readers how this approach can be deceptive. She emphasizes the need to employ a conceptual distance to the object of one's study, a framework she also views as useful for studying women's activism in state socialism. Employing extensive tables, for example on the determinant structures on which agency can be based, she meticulously devises methods to avoid biases, in the case of the IFTU's women's committee either toward autonomous women's or inclusive labor movements. Zimmermann's advocacy of the necessity of a detached and reflective perspective on the agency of women's activists and its forms is certainly advice well taken for historical analysis, and she has demonstrated its merits in a most convincing way through her own study.

Notes

1. Susan Zimmermann, "Framing Working Women's Rights Internationally: Contributions of the IFTU Women's International," in *The Internationalisation of the Labour Question: Ideological Antagonism, Workers' Movements and the ILO since 1919*, ed. Stefano Bellucci and Holger Weiss (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 95–117.

2. See also Susan Zimmermann, "Equality of Women's Economic Status? A Major Bone of Contention in the International Gender Politics Emerging during the Interwar Period," *International History Review* 41, no. 1 (2019), 200–227.