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Voices of Women on the Two Sides of the Iron Curtain: Agents, Agency, Sources

Luciana M. Jinga[1]

University of Angers
The Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes and
the Memory of the Romanian Exile

One hundred years after the October Revolution, the questioning concerning the relationship between women and the communist parties, especially the European communist parties, is more animated than ever. Revitalizing Western research that could be traced back to the 1970s and 1980s[1], and benefitting from the scholarship that emerged in the last two decades – including the productions of a new generation of Central and Eastern European scholars – several European historical journals have dedicated special issues to the subject, with a particular focus on the association between communism and feminism on one hand, and gender regimes encountered in socialist states, on the other: C*lio: Femmes, Genre, Histoire* - "Le 'socialisme reél' à l' èpreuve de genre"(2015)[2], *Vingtième Siècle: Revue d'Histoire* –"Femmes, genres et communismes"(2015)[3], *Jahrbuch für Historische Kommunismusforschung* - "Frauen im Kommunismus."[4] and *Aspasia* that dedicated its tenth volume (2016)[5] to a thorough discussion on the advancements and, inevitably, the academic polemics surrounding the research on communism and feminism in the context of new and more nuanced perspectives on the countries of the former Eastern Bloc.

History of Communism in Europe, with its thematic issue dedicated to gendered histories of European communisms, continues these efforts and brings together papers that not only interrogate the gender politics of different communist regimes, but look beyond the Cold War narratives on the subject, including topics on the impenetrability of the Iron Curtain and the use of rigid historical periodization that disregard completely long-term societal and

[1] The Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes and the Memory of the Romanian Exile, Alecu Russo no. 13-19, Bucharest, Romania; Universités d'Angers, Bretagne Sud, Le Mans, Maison de la Recherche Germaine Tillion-Bureau 201, 5bis boulevard Lavoisier, 49045 Angers cedex 01; e-mail: mia.jinga@gmail.com. IICCMER, str. Alecu Russo nr. 13-19, Sector 2, București, Romania.

cultural phenomena. While looking at all communist parties in Europe, before and after the Second World War, in both socialist and democratic countries, the purpose of this issue is not to compare the incomparable, but rather to retrace junction/rupture moments, common projects, but also national particularities.

Another important objective of this project is a change of focus from the top-down research on women's history in communist parties and state socialism to the invisible women that either served the communist cause or resisted it through their work, commitment, and strong will. The top-down research encompasses ground-breaking contributions that cover basic, sometimes bulky, yet necessary information about gender representation and gender policies in socialist states: the results of egalitarian policies regarding employment, wages, the promotion of women in leadership positions, the functioning and organisation of women mass organisations, as well as family and demographic policies. With this general framework in place, the research can look further into different generations of women whose lives were transformed by their involvement in the communist movement and/or reconfigured in the context of state socialist policies.

In pursuing these objectives, the fourteen papers included in this issue cover a diversity of topics that cover different temporal, political and geographical spaces. The epistemological and methodological effort is supported by a multitude of sources that readily associate oral histories with the newest archival research available on the subject. The heterogeneity of the research does not exclude a common element that can be identified in all contributions: the different forms of women's agency that can be traced back to European communist parties and/or state socialism.

In an article published in 2014, philosopher Nanette Funk asserts that recent, "revisionist"[6], scholarship on state-socialist women's organizations from former Eastern Bloc countries wrongly attributes "agency" to women, proactive agency being defined as "one's actions because of its own will, policies and commitments" (349), which she deems to have been absent from communist mass organizations. In response[7] to this, Kristen Ghodsee questions Funk's limited definition of "proactive agency". Basically, Funk defends the only paradigm until recently, and inevitably a correct one, for understanding women's experience in socialist countries and their relationship with male comrades inside communist parties, namely one that emphasises women's eternal role as objects at the mercy of the mighty Party that coerced, misled and used them. Even when involved in the communist political project, women still supposedly served as merely "foot soldiers in this struggle between male elites for political order, despite the fact that many communist women shared and cherished the same ideals as communist males". (Ghodsee 2016, 114)

To this general picture, I must add the national, mainstream narratives that not only failed to explore the various forms of women's agency during

communism, but systematically undermined women's political involvement depicted as the representation of evil/incompetence in communist regimes. I find this idea even more mischievous than the "victim" approach, as the general perception conveyed both to the general public and researchers is that the *banality of evil*, Hannah Arendt's concept, explains exhaustively all forms of women's political engagement, and there is subsequently no scientific interest for investigating or revisiting the subject. It is the case of all the important women in the Romanian Communist Party: Ana Pauker, Elena Ceausescu, Lina Ciobanu or Tamara Dobrin. Unlike their male peers, who, after the fall of communism, had the possibility to present their side of the story and explain their personal commitment to the communist cause, all women in high-ranking positions became invisible to the public, or, in the best-case scenario, victims of public shaming. More than that, the general discourse about their political involvement was forged by the very same male comrades who used every occasion to point the finger to the *red witches* and their evilness. A similar scenario is discussed by Agnieszka Mrozik, whose paper deconstructs the male generational founding myth of the communist power in Poland and its post-communist effects, namely the complete absence of communist women from the history of women and women's movement in Poland. The Polish Communist Party constructed the prototype of the party member as Polish and male, thus excluding women and Jews, despite the numerous autobiographies Polish communist women managed to publish. Similar to the Romanian case, the patterns of exclusion mixed the appraisal of nationalism and traditional gender roles during communism with the anti-communist discourse that constantly mocked the women in the so-called traditionally male professions.

In her paper on the archetype of the partisan mother as part of the Yugoslav Partisan Myth, Iva Jalusik also invites a revaluation of the discourse concerning the presumably scarce women's involvement in the partisan movement during the Second World War, by paying more attention to the literary productions of those women who experienced the war from various perspectives, and to the revised, heroic image of the partisan mother presented in those works.

Iemima's analysis focuses on an unexpected type of women's agency within the Romanian Neo-Protestant community. Often victims of social marginalization and harassment, they nevertheless fully internalized the communist gender rhetoric and subsequently engaged in their secular and religious communities, despite the hostility of both the government and religious authorities. Romanian Neo-Protestant women did not hesitate to confront what they perceived to be man-made or imposed traditions and managed to give their testimony of faith, all proof of their agency and confidence in their identity as women.

Rachele Ledda in her study on the Italian Women's Union shows that the attempt of the fellow men in the communist party to overshadow women's achievements after the Second World War is not specific just to the communist countries in the Eastern Bloc. The Italian Communist Party did the same, while

upholding traditional patriarchal beliefs and actively trying to steer the Italian Women's Union from their emancipatory mission.

And again, what is the most appropriate definition of agency and how it could accommodate the much-needed bottom-up approach on women's history? Can the actions of a peasant woman that teaches literacy classes to her fellow villagers as part of the communist mass organization activities be considered agency? If we were to use Frank's definition, the answer would be no, because the initiative was not hers. By reading her correspondence closely, one could see that not only she was not tricked or intimidated into doing that, but it was her who approached the party officials offering her help, because she believed in the right to education for everybody. What about the army of housewives who served the communist cause before and during the Second World War, their work being decisive for the survival of many members of national communist parties, but whose presence was wiped out from those parties' official history?

In his text, Ștefan Bosomitu retraces the short, but tormented political activity of the Romanian women who joined the communist movement in the complicated context of World War II. Arrested, beaten, death sentenced, these women never made it to the Romanian Communist Party hall of fame. One way of looking at these destinies is by stressing out the misogyny and the sexism inside the Romanian Communist Party, a well-known and previously documented situation. The novelty of Stefan Bosomitu's contribution is the detailed, rigorous analysis that uncloaks the empowerment intrinsic to the activist commitment.

The Polish case benefits from three, well-documented case studies that retrace women's activity in the communist party starting in the aftermath of the First World War until the Stalinist period. Natalia Jarska's paper is tracing the trajectories of a substantial group of women, active in the communist movement from 1918 until the 1970s. The *longue durée* perspective allows the researcher to trace the evolution of gender specificities in the party's work. Unlike the situation of the Romanian interwar period when communist activists were imprisoned, many Polish women managed to remain in the party ranks, securing positions among central elites, from where they could extend their influence using informal networks. This particular form of agency made them less visible, but not less committed to the "true" revolution, preferring to leave the party, after a lifetime of communist activism, rather than accept the abuses of the ruling communist party. Jan Burek constructs his case study around the communist political activity of Polish women during the very first years after the end of the Second World War. The "bottom-up" approach he uses in the article emphasises women's representation in the high ranks of the Polish Communist Party, a conclusion that supports Jarska's findings on how interwar activists managed to maintain their status as party members and reliable activists. Similar to Stefan Bosomitu's approach, Łukasz Bertram looks at the identity referential of a group of women holding high rank positions in the Polish Party during the Stalinist

era and at their political evolution. Most of them were daughters of Polish workers or Jewish petty bourgeois and office workers. Being socialized in a communist or socialist environment, the communist party was for many the only solution, and their activism started long before the Second World War. Unlike the Romanian case, where the experienced women activists either disappeared, or were purged from the party in the postwar years, the interwar Polish communist women used their political capital and remained politically visible. The question surrounding the real influence of these characters is still open, since the party placed them in traditionally feminine fields, such as education or social work. Another important difference from the Romanian case is the integrity of the women who chose to leave the party when its politics strayed away from the revolutionary, emancipatory, pre-war message.

The feminist post-communist discourse insisted on the falsity of communist propaganda regarding certain stereotypes about women in professional activities. One of the incriminated profiles was that of a peasant woman elected to the high ranks of the party. In her study, Ágota Lídia Ispán retraces the political career of Mihály Berki Magdolna Szakács, the first peasant woman to be appointed "főispán" [honorary prefect], and, by doing that, the author underlines the series of actions that allowed women to enter not only the workforce in traditionally male jobs, but also to become political actors. Similarily to Romanian and Polish women activists, Berki had started her political career long before 1945, activity that she continued in the postwar years, when she established the first communist party structure in her village. Characters like Berki have long been considered products of communist propaganda: unskilled, untrained, docile puppets used by the communist regime to fill the gender quotas. Ispan's article describes instead the rise and fall of a true political character, no better or worse than fellow men comrades.

A first requirement in order to recuperate the history of women's activism is to find all available sources. As the previous examples show, institutional and or secret police archives, as well as party or official autobiographies can be helpful when used without prejudice and *parti pris,* although significant caution must be employed while working with any documents that emanate from the party's control machinery. Undoubtedly, the major inconvenient of this type of resources is the fragmentary image obtained by the researcher of a more complex relation between European communist parties and the general women population. The present issue of *History of Communism in Europe* includes bottom-up approaches made possible by other sources essential for bringing to light the voices of anonymous, ordinary women, whose beliefs, hopes, aspirations, desires, unhappiness cannot be retraced in official documents. Three of the texts included in this issue focus on women's communist press, each emphasising different aspects and covering different geographical and temporal spaces.

Alexander Fokin focuses on women's reaction regarding the adoption of the third Program of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1961. 29,070

letters were sent to 6 magazines and 20 newspapers. Far from being a propaganda exercise, the Soviet women used this opportunity to demand higher incomes, family benefits, better pre-natal and maternal care, and a better educational system. Besides the raw information contained in these letters, Fokin insists, while studying the gender transformations inside the Soviet Union, on the importance of language characteristics women use. In this respect, women's letters to the government shed light on the underlying logic and mechanisms of interaction between the government and various groups in the Soviet society and give voice to Soviet women, thereby problematising their historical position as representatives of the silent majority.

Kristen Ghodsee and Julia Mead use in their study two feminine magazines, *Vlast* (Czechoslovakia) and *Zhenata Dnes* (Bulgaria), to interrogate the categories of "man" and "woman" and how these categories were negotiated during the communist era in the pages of official state magazines. The two researchers have challenged the general accepted assumption that European socialist countries formally emancipated women but did not challenge patriarchy or sexism, and demonstrated that challenges to traditional masculinity and femininity emerged in both countries in the late 1960s, but evolved differently in accordance with national political specificities.

I also use one of the women's state official magazine, *Femeia,* for my research on the state violence against women in communist Romania. The dual nature of this source, giving voice to both the party and the anonymous women who had their letters published in the magazine, helped me deconstruct the state discourse regarding spousal violence and to explain the different policies and practices in communist Romania. The fine line between state propaganda and genuine women's agency to be found in a state official magazine determined me to add an oral history approach to test the effects of both structural and symbolic violence on women, but also to better discriminate between the official, propagandist discourse in *Femeia* and the women's voices (including the misrecognition and internalization of abuse) about spousal violence.

Graziano Mamone authors the third study that uses an official magazine, namely "Lotta Continua", the official publication of the homonymous Italian extra-parliamentary group. In his article, Mamone discusses the complex relationship between feminism and communism within Lotta Continua, one of the most important political organisation of the Italian Left in 1960s and 1970s, by stressing out the methodological benefits of the official political press as the main source, using a bottom-up approach to understand the militants' *modus operandi*.

Last but definitely not least, Anna Carr chose to work exclusively on literary sources. Through the concept of body economy inspired by Deleuze and Guattari's schizoanalysis, Carr investigates the case of the hidden female corporeality in the novel *Haidamaky* by Yurii Mushketyk.

The 14 articles included in this special issue contribute to the general discussion on gender and communism/state socialism in the context of the Cold War. Firstly, the contributions denounce the research paradigm imposed by the Cold War, the inexorable us/they delimitation, with the villain always on the other side of the Iron Curtain. Bringing together research offering an overall picture of European countries, Western democracies or those belonging to the communist bloc, reveals unexpected similarities and differences that otherwise would be difficult to grasp. Secondly, the articles reflect the present-day scholarship on the recent communist and post-communist European past, an advancement made possible by the resurgence of a new generation of researchers interested to reevaluate the dynamic of communist parties and their relation to women. Lastly, all the papers are important contributions to women's history, paving the way towards new research that would help uncover the lost voices of women in our history.

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Notes

1 Barbara, Wolfe Jancar, *Women under communism*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1978; Alena, Heitlinger, *Women and State Socialism. Sex inequality in the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia*, Macmillan Press, London, 1979; Mary Ellen, Fisher, „Women in Romanian Politics: Elena Ceaușescu, Pronatalism, and the Promotion of women", in Sharon L. Wolchik, Alfred G. Meyer (eds.), *Women, State, and Party in Eastern Europe,* Duke University Press, Durham, 1985, p. 125-127; Chris, Corrin, *Magyar Women. Hungarian Women's Lives, 1960s-1990s*, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1994; Maxine Molyneux, *Women's Movements in International Perspective: Latin American and Beyond*, New York, Palgrave, 2001.

2 *Clio: Femmes, Genre, Histoire* "Le 'socialisme reél' à l' èpreuve de genre" [Clio: Women, gender, history ("Real socialism" and the challenge of gender)], no. 41 (2015).

3 *Vingtième Siècle*: Revue d'Histoire (Theme: "Femmes, genres et communismes") [The twentieth century: Historical review (Theme: Women, gender and communisms)], no. 126 (April– June 2015).

4 *Jahrbuch für Historische Kommunismusforschung* [Yearbook for historical research of Communism] vol. 12 (2015).

5 *Aspasia*, The International Yearbook of Central, Eastern, and Southeastern European Women's and Gender History, Founding Editor: Francisca de Haan, Central European University, Volume 10, issue 10 (Mar 2016, pp. vii – 226).

6 Nanette Funk, "A Very Tangled Knot: Official State Socialist Women's Organizations, Women's Agency and Feminism in Eastern European State Socialism," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 21, no. 4 (2014): 344–360.

7 Kristen Ghodsee, "Untangling the Knot: A Response to Nanette Funk," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 22, no. 2 (2015): 248–252.