

Intimate Internationalism: Women Transforming the Political in Postwar Europe

Veranstalter: Celia Donert, Potsdam; Janou Glencross, Hannover

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Most existing studies of postwar European women's or gender history are based on local or national case studies and focus disproportionately on the western half of the continent. This history workshop was funded by the Gerda Henkel Stiftung and the Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung. It aimed at breaking new ground by exploring the gendered dimensions of international politics, norms and institutions in both eastern and western Europe, as well as the ways in which transnational women's movements responded to changes in international politics from 1945 to the mid-1960s, a period that studies of transnational women's activity have tended to ignore as an era of alleged female political apathy. Particular attention during the two-day workshop was paid to entanglements and transfers across ideological and geographical divides – above all, between East and West Europe during the cold war.

In his opening speech, STEFAN-LUDWIG HOFFMANN (Potsdam / Freiburg) argued that the Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung, due to its institutional history, was the ideal place to bring Western European history into dialogue with the rich scholarship now emerging on gender, women's organizing and histories of international institutions in Eastern Europe. The desire to establish a network of researchers with common interests, who have not yet shared their work in a systematic way, was also underlined by the workshop organizers, CELIA DONERT (Potsdam) and JANOU GLENCROSS (Hannover). In their introduction, the organizers reminded the audience that the end of the Second World War ushered in a new era of women's legal rights, not only in national constitutions, but also in international law: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was the first international instrument to

proclaim gender equality as a human right. Donert and Glencross emphasized that the idea of a 'civilised internationalism', based on European values, was replaced after 1945 by the rhetoric of universalism, with the competing political and economic orders of liberal democracy and state socialism each claiming to speak for all humankind. This workshop primarily probed the gender representations that circulated in the new international institutions that arose from faltering empires and the emerging cold war.

The workshop featured three panels in total. Firstly, 'Women and Internationalism: The Impact of a New World Order' focused on the gendered dimension of norms and institutions in post-war Europe. In her illuminating paper, JESSICA REINISCH (London) started with UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration) and elaborated on the gender politics of international reconstruction and relief after WWII. She revealed that female relief workers often acted as untrained anthropologists, as 'witness-participants' who challenged some of the priorities and policies formulated by Anglo-American diplomats. Reinisch concluded that UNRRA's women not only contributed to the debates that shaped post-war international legislation, but also occupied a pivotal role in implementing and changing policies. The second speaker, MEGAN DOHERTY (New York), attended to the writers' organization PEN International between its founding in 1921 and its establishment, as Doherty argued, as a more representatively 'international' NGO by the mid-1970s. Doherty addressed what she labeled as the 'paradox of PEN's' existence: although it was founded by a woman, only men were elected as its International Presidents. What renders this condition even more contradictory is the fact that reading was a core component of feminist identities, as Lucy Delap has demonstrated.¹ Doherty suggested that the difficulty of women to progress towards the higher ranks of PEN was connected with the way in which this organization conceptualized 'humanity' and 'literature': in both cases, male

¹ Lucy Delap, *The Feminist Avant-Garde. Transatlantic Encounters of the Early Twentieth Century*, Cambridge 2007.

experience was privileged. In her comment, SANDRINE KOTT (Geneva) urged the speakers to problematize the opportunities that international organizations provided women at different times during the 19th and 20th century. The factors which pushed women to externalize their claims outside frustrating national contexts have, for example, been well-demonstrated for feminism's first wave, but they have been neglected for the postwar reconstruction period.

The following panel dealt with gender in state socialism, its (inter)national agendas, multiple agencies and transnational organizing. In the first presentation, ADÉLA GJURIČOVÁ (Prague), showed how Czechoslovak women activists across the political spectrum established surprisingly successful methods of cooperation within the National Front, transcending party cleavages during the crucial years of 1945-1948, namely prior to the consolidation of the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia. RALUCA POPA (Budapest) argued in her paper about the international activism of state socialist women's organizations that during International Women's Year (1975) the two state-sponsored women's organizations in Hungary and Romania actively shaped international commitments to gender equality, women and development, and women's role in the promotion of peace. Contrary to the conventional historiography of IWY and the UN Decade for Women (1975-1985), which relegated state socialist representatives to an involvement in only one of the three themes (peace), Popa demonstrated that 'equality' had long been a concern of East European women's organizations. She underlined, moreover, in her well-argued presentation that representatives of the two organizations embraced these goals as their own, and not as party directives. HANA HAVELKOVÁ (Prague) complicated the picture by stressing the restrictions posed by Eastern European regimes on women's activism. She outlined a process comprising a number of stages, which unfolded in 'really existing socialism': the 'expropriation' of feminist agenda by the Communist regime, its 'replacement' by State organized acts and activities and its 'alienation' from women themselves. She

maintained that the state adopted many of the goals that had been set by the women's movement in Czechoslovakia, while restricting its activity from 1948 onwards, especially of those organizations that were critical of the Communist power. Of particular interest in this panel, as testified by the discussion, was thus the issue also addressed by CHIARA BONFIGLIOLI (Utrecht): the historicization of the concept of women's organizational 'autonomy'. Bonfiglioli's challenging paper examined the activity of Italian and Yugoslav women in antifascist, feminist and left wing politics in the early cold war, through a study of two internationalist women's organizations that were affiliated to Communist parties, the UDI (Unione Donne Italiane, Union of Italian Women) and the Anti-Fascist Women's Front of Yugoslavia. She turned against what she called 'a prescriptive category of women's organizational „autonomy“ or an ideal primacy of gender-based goals'. She stressed the 'multiple and complex' forms of agency that women developed in the environment of widespread poverty and violent class conflict in post-war Italy and Yugoslavia.

The final panel paid special attention to the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF). All contributions called for a re-appraisal of the Federation, founded in Paris in 1945, which, in line with the 'East-West' dichotomy of cold war historiography has long been evaluated as a propaganda machine controlled by Moscow. In the first paper, MARGARITE POULOS (Sydney) focused on the activities of its Greek affiliate, the Panhellenic Federation of Women (POG) 1946-1948, and its post-1948 incarnation, the Panhellenic Democratic Federation of Women (PDEG). She argued that in view of 'the first geopolitical conflict of the cold war' – the years of the Greek Civil War (1946-1949) - the international dimensions of PDEG activity serve to complicate cold war dismissals of the WIDF as a genuine and stable 'communist front' organization. MELANIE ILIC (Gloucestershire), meanwhile, focused on Soviet women and argued that the study of the WIDF provides an interesting example of the processes of cultural exchange across the Iron Curtain during the cold war. She showed that individ-

ual women from both sides of the emerging cold war regularly came together within the framework of the WIDF; besides that, ideological divisions also transcended the iron curtain. Ilic referred to sexual equality, children's rights, disarmament and national independence as ideas that united WIDF members across Europe. The two case-studies were complemented by FRANCISCA DE HAAN's (Budapest) approach to the WIDF. De Haan argued that a closer and more intimate look at the personal histories of its individual members helps to complicate the stereotypical understanding of WIDF women as 'Stalin's puppets'. De Haan demonstrated that a study of friendship between WIDF members can help frame its policies and commitments, i.e. to anti-colonialism and anti-racism, more thoroughly. The personal archives of WIDF members, as De Haan's wide-ranging research shows, throw a subtle new light on the interplay between individual biographies and the history of an organization. In her thoughtful comment, HELEN LAVILLE (Birmingham) underlined that this new research on the WIDF is a welcome corrective to established 'western' accounts on the role of American women's groups during the cold war. She reminded the audience that investigating the relationship between the state and private organisations remains of central significance for historians of the cold war period. However, understanding this relationship within a dichotomous framework of control and autonomy does not do justice to the complex agendas of the actors involved.

The workshop concluded with the keynote lecture delivered by VICTORIA DE GRAZIA (New York). De Grazia challenged the audience to rethink central fields of internationalism through the category of gender. Instead of focusing too much on women's transnational organizing, historians should rather attend to themes like development and the military, which have been neglected by gender-conscious scholars for too long. By elaborating on the case of Rotary International, she sketched some of the questions and implications of such a research perspective.

In general, most papers tended to lend support to the argument put forth by Melvyn Lefler, namely that if parameters, such as gender

(but also race and culture), are inserted in the examination of cold war, its historiography will no longer be possible to rest upon a single master narrative. Gender serves as a very important category, not simply to add knowledge, but to complicate well-entrenched historiographical arguments. A slightly critical remark is that the majority, though not the entirety, of the presentations concentrated on 'women' and not on 'gender'; therefore, as some conference participants also noted, a number of issues were omitted. How was, for instance, the dominant masculinity forged, especially as opposed to subordinated masculinities, homosexual and heterosexual, in diverse international institutions? In addition, how did gender intersect with other categories, such as social class and race in the operation of these organisations? Should, for example, the potential exclusion of women be imputed solely to their gender or to other aspects of their background as well? Finally, apparently more research may be done not only about gender divisions within international organisations, but also gender representations that affected their contact with other actors. For instance, it would perhaps be worthwhile to probe whether UNRRA, when dealing with the recipients of its aid, promoted the windows of opportunity that had appeared for women during World War II and in the immediate post-war years or reinforced women's return to 'home' and the 'family'. However, the workshop can certainly be seen as a success. It offered important new perspectives on issues of interest to all historians of contemporary Europe: above all, it brought together a vibrant mix of young and established historians, who shed new light on the relationship between women's organizations and their respective state authorities and who also demonstrated clearly how individuals and organizations, institutions and ideas transcended, but also shaped the emerging and changing cold war camps in post-war Europe.

Conference overview:

Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann (ZZF Potsdam):
Welcome

Celia Donert (ZZF) / Janou Glencross (Leibniz University Hannover): Introduction

Panel: Women and Internationalism: The Impact of a New World Order

Jessica Reinisch (Birkbeck College, London): 'Flutter-brained women' or 'Queens of distressed Ruritarians'? UNRRA's army of women and the international relief project

Megan Doherty (Columbia University, New York): Woman and the PEN

Comment: Sandrine Kott (University of Geneva)

Nora Natchkova / Céline Schoeni (University of Lausanne): ILO politics and feminist organizations during the Cold War: Organizing or disorganizing equality model?

Kristin Reichel (University of Erfurt): Bringing gender in – the gendered dimension of the social policy of the EEC in the 1960s (had to be cancelled due to illness)

Comment: Theresa Wobbe

Panel: Gender in State Socialism: (Inter)national Agendas, Multiple Agencies and Transnational Organizing

Adéla Gjuričová (Institute for Contemporary History, Prague): Intimate „inter-partyism“: Czechoslovak women's organizations 1945-1948

Chiara Bonfiglioli (University of Utrecht): Cold War internationalisms, nationalisms and the Tito-Stalin split: the Union of Italian Women and the Antifascist Women's Front of Yugoslavia before and after 1948

Hana Havelková (Charles University, Prague): Gender contract in state socialism: Multiple agencies

Raluca Popa (Central European University, Budapest): International activism of state socialist women's organizations: Shaping the UN women's agenda

Comment: Claudia Kraft (University of Erfurt)

Panel: Women and the early Cold War: New Perspectives on the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF)

Margarite Poulos (University of Sydney): International activism during the Greek Civil

War: The Greek Communist Party and the WIDF

Francisca De Haan (Central European University, Budapest): Politics and friendship in the early decades of the WIDF – an exploration based on letters and other personal documents

Melanie Ilic (University of Gloucestershire): Soviet women, cultural exchange and the Women's International Democratic Federation

Comment: Helen Laville (University of Birmingham)

Concluding Remarks

Katja Naumann (University of Leipzig)

Lecture and Discussion

Victoria de Grazia (Columbia University, New York)

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