

A very tangled knot: Official state socialist women's organizations, women's agency and feminism in Eastern European state socialism

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Abstract

This article discusses some current research claims on gender and state socialism in Eastern Europe from 1945 to 1989. It raises questions about claims by Revisionist Feminist Scholars that official state socialist women's organizations were 'agents' on behalf of women, or women's movements, perhaps feminist, and not 'transmission belts' of communist parties. State socialist policies are described as 'friendly towards women' and 'pro-women'. In contrast, the author claims that these organizations both were and were not agents on behalf of women, and also prevented women's agency. Meaningful women's agency is not actually shown to occur intermittently throughout their history, but in two contexts – before 1955 or in moments of political rupture. Scholars do not distinguish the who, when, and what – Who could be agents? When could they be agents? And what kind of agents could they be? State policies, the author claims, were also at one and the same time 'friendly' and 'unfriendly' towards women, sometimes harming women. The author explores why this research is happening now, discussing research on Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, the Democratic Women's Organization of Germany (DFD), the Democratic Association of Hungarian Women (MNDSZ), later renamed MNOT, the Romanian National Council of Women (CNF) and the Yugoslav Anti-Fascist Women's Organization (AFZ).

Keywords

Feminism in official state socialist women's organizations, former Yugoslavia, GDR, gender and Eastern Europe, state socialist women's organizations, women's agency in state socialism

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It was inevitable that women's studies and feminist scholars would move from research on women's organizations in former state socialist European countries before and after state socialism to those under state socialism itself. In the last decade a handful of feminist researchers, using strikingly similar language, have made strong claims for a more positive interpretation not only of state socialism's accomplishments for women but also of official state socialist women's organizations in the region. Many, though not all, have been associated with the Central European University (CEU) in Budapest, whose Gender Studies Programme focuses on the region. These authors include Francisca de Haan on the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF), Alexandra Ghit on Transylvania, Raluca Popa on Romania and Hungary, and Krassimira Daskalova, partially associated with the CEU. Claims include that state socialist women's organizations, contrary to common beliefs, were not 'transmission belts' of state socialist communist parties. Some claim that perhaps they were feminist (de Haan, 2007; Ghodsee, 2012a; Grabowska, 2013; Popa, 2009) and that there may have been a 'communist feminism' (de Haan, 2010: 557). Daskalova and Popa adopted Wang Zheng's argument that there was 'space for women's intervention' in Chinese women's policies, and women had a 'role in the policy making process'; there were 'possibilities of women's subversive action in state processes' and 'sites and effects of feminist negotiation and intervention' (Zheng, 2005: 520). Natalia Novikova (2007), Natalja Herbst (2012) and Chiara Bonfiglioli (2012, 2014) have made related claims. I refer to the above-mentioned nine authors jointly as Feminist Revisionist Scholars and it is aspects of their work that I examine in this article.

New historical research on official state women's organizations is to be applauded, but it is important to examine the claims based on this research. I offer a conceptual-philosophical analysis of the concept of 'women's agency' and a concomitant reinterpretation of the historical evidence on official state socialist women's organizations' agency and feminism. I argue for a more nuanced account of that agency, claiming that organizations and their members both were and were not agents on behalf of women, at times even actively preventing women's agency. Analogously, state policies and official organizations were both 'friendly' and 'unfriendly' to women. I also explore why this research is occurring now. Authors make claims about official state socialist women's organizations' international and domestic activity, but here I address only the latter. I argue that Feminist Revisionist Scholars have overlooked important distinctions in the concept of 'women's agency' that cast doubt on the extent of women's agency in official women's organizations.

I

One desire behind some revisionist research on state socialist women's organizations is to show women as 'active', not 'passive', simply following Communist Party orders. Chiara Bonfiglioli expresses this clearly, writing of wanting to '[construct] an historical narrative about women's thriving political and social activism' (Bonfiglioli, 2012: 255). Others claim that official state socialist women's organizations were 'active' agents with 'their own institutional agency' (Popa, 2009: 61–62, 73–74), or 'feminist agency' (Novikova, 2007), 'important actors in the socialist project' in Poland (Nowak,

2005: 492–493, 510), ‘crucial in promoting women’s political, economic and social rights’ and emancipation and that ‘their leaders designed an original, progressive agenda on the “woman’s question”’, ‘fighting ... for women’s emancipation and women’s rights’ in Yugoslavia (Bonfiglioli, 2012: 15, 32, 254, 259) and their interests (as they understood them) (Daskalova, 2007: 216). Such claims reflect Joan Wallach Scott’s claim that many women’s history researchers are ‘producing’, ‘an increasing number of ... continuous histories of women’s activism’ (Scott, 2012: 47). It may be such desires to find women’s agency that lead some Feminist Revisionist Scholars to overlook some problems in claims of state socialist women’s organizations’ agency. In particular they do not distinguish the *who*, *when and what* – *Who* could be agents? *When* could they be agents? *What* kind of agents could they be?

Who had agency?

The founding of official state socialist women’s organizations immediately following the Second World War in Europe was in fact built on denying many women chances to act. Non-communist women’s organizations active prior to the war and anti-fascist women’s organizations created during the war or immediately after 1945 in Germany were all shut down, repressed and absorbed into communist-dominated women’s organizations in every country in the region. Later structural changes in the official women’s organizations by the mid-1950s further denied the former non-communist activists the chance to act within the official women’s organizations as they would have chosen. This occurred in Czechoslovakia (Donert, 2013: 188; Feinberg, 2006; Heitlinger, 1979: 71; Scott, 1974: 100), Poland (Fidelis, 2010), Bulgaria (Nazarska, 2007), Hungary (Peto, 2003), Romania, Yugoslavia (Sklevicky, 1989) and the Soviet Occupied Zones (SBZ) in Germany.

In the SBZ in Germany in 1946 all the anti-fascist women’s committees were merged. The merged committee was then incorporated, without all members’ willing agreement, into the communist-dominated Democratic Women’s Organization of Germany (DFD) in 1947. This was done to avoid competition from non-communist women’s committees (Mocker, 1991: C6; Nave-Herz, 1997: 87).¹ By 1947–1948 only two non-Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) party members, with no assignments, were left in its decision-making body. They were removed by the early 1950s although some non-SED members still had lower level positions (Mocker, 1991: C19, C16). In the Polish Women’s League the top leadership position after 1950 and lower leadership positions by 1953 were all held by Polish United Workers’ Party (PUWP) members; those not in PUWP were ‘ostracized’ (Nowak, 2005: 489, 491, 507). The Polish Trade Union women’s sections and Women’s Councils were brought under greater Party control; women’s sections of the PUWP were dissolved between 1949 and 1953 (Fidelis, 2010: 95–97; Nowak, 2005: 506). A similar process happened with the Union of Czechoslovak Women in 1952 (Scott, 1974: 100). In Czechoslovakia activists from non-communist women’s organizations were excluded from the Council of Czechoslovak Women (CCW) in 1948, including National Socialist Milada Horáková, CCW president until she was deposed. Horáková became the object of a show trial in 1950 and was then executed. The Czechoslovak Association of University Women and the National Women’s Front were shut down and the Housewives’ Union and the CCW ‘cleansed’ (Feinberg, 2006: 207–214).

In Hungary perhaps well over 50 women's organizations, jointly having several thousand members, were shut down, made unviable or absorbed into the Democratic Association of Hungarian Women (MNDSZ) between 1945 and 1951. This included seven women's organizations with 400 members or more, some with several branches and at least 10 with over 100 members. (Peto, 2003: 167–172). Among them were the important Feminist Association, the Jewish, Lutheran and Catholic Women's Organizations, professional women's organizations and the Social Democratic Party women's organization (SZDP). The SZDP was undermined through infiltration. These organizations' property was transferred to the official state socialist women's organization – MNDSZ – or to the government (Peto, 2003: 9–28, 35, 107). Women from these organizations, including those with international recognition, who then joined the MNDSZ, were excluded from leadership positions, as were older, experienced MNDSZ activists themselves (Peto, 2003: 58–59). More malleable peasant women and younger, Party-trained women were brought in (Peto, 2003: 40). The MNDSZ prevented many SZDP women's active participation in the MNDSZ, as it did many who did not adopt communist 'revolutionary- equality' claims (Peto, 2003: 76). Thus the MNDSZ prevented many women and organizations from being agents on behalf of women as they would have wanted. The MNDSZ, renamed MNOT after 1956, was silent or collaborated with restrictions or repression of other women's organizations and women's initiatives (Peto, 2003: 8–9, 29–58, 76).

In Bulgaria by 1948 the Association of University Women (BAUW), the Bulgarian Women's Union and several other women's organizations were placed under the control of the Party. Almost all their non-communist leaders and members were replaced with communist women. Organizations were closed in 1950, their property seized and the secret police kept 'compromising' information on members. A transformed Bulgarian Women's Union took over all women's organizations (Nazarska, 2007: 166–168). In Romania the Union of Anti-fascist Women undermined earlier women's organizations (Ghit, 2011: 32). In Yugoslavia the non-communist women's organizations were abolished (Jeraj, 2006: 578). The Anti-Fascist Women's Organization (AFZ) was replaced by the Union of Women's Societies (SDZ) under Communist Party (CP) control in 1953 (Bonfiglioli, 2012: 197–233). The CP restructured the AFZ in 1948, the year of the Stalin–Tito split, and in 1950, subordinated the AFZ to Party control. Central Committee member Vida Tomšič, CP member since 1934, became president. The AFZ's autonomy and coherence were severely weakened, many members left, and it ceased to exist in 1953 (Sklevicky, 1989).

Bonfiglioli claims that in Yugoslavia the AFZ was not abolished, but that its leaders and 'many others' chose to dissolve and replace it with the SDZ under the Communist Party within the Socialist Alliance of the Working People. But this 'choice' does not establish the AFZ as an agent of its own demise. AFZ leaders, committed to women's emancipation, as Bonfiglioli states (Bonfiglioli, 2014), were also dedicated Party members. Whatever their stated reasons, faced with a possible conflict between the Party and women's emancipation, they may have opted for the former. Some stated rationales for the AFZ dissolution, such as the need for a mixed organization in which men would also fight gender discrimination, were implausible, given male Party members' strong patriarchal attitudes (Bonfiglioli, 2012: 200–204). There is also no evidence that if the AFZ

had chosen to remain independent, its decision would have been respected. Bonfiglioli presents evidence of some leaders' stated position, however many members strongly opposed it, yet had no choice. No evidence is provided of how many were opposed, their arguments, or the procedure for reaching a final decision (Bonfiglioli, 2012: 200–201, 204, footnote 31). Bonfiglioli claims the AFZ had to especially cope with Yugoslav reorganization into local 'self-management' organizations (2012: 199–205). However, arguments similar to those made by AFZ leaders were given in Poland where there was no self-management (Fidelis, 2010: 95–96; Nowak, 2005: 506). In addition, Party pressure to dissolve the AFZ and substantial cutbacks in AFZ funding already limited their options.

Thus because of official women's organizations, many women throughout the region from 1945 to 1989 who 'thought differently', some in official state socialist women's organizations, could not act as they would have liked.

Some researchers claim that the women's organizations can be characterized as agents and not 'transmission belts' of the Party (Popa, 2009: 74). These claims trade on an ambiguity between organizations and their members. As institutions they are defined by their rules, structures, offices and policies. These can be committed to carrying out Party policy, even when some members resist. Many documented cases are of individual women's resistance at the most local level within the women's organizations in the GDR (Mocker, 1991: C92), Yugoslavia (Bonfiglioli, 2012), or the Polish League of Women in 1949–1953 (Nowak, 2005). Women in the Polish League and in the DFD in the GDR resisted doing political education work of women, but the organizations themselves did not. One might claim that in these cases the organizations could not carry out Party policy and thus were not 'transmission belts' of Party policy. However the latter claim is intended as more than a claim that women's organizations sometimes could not successfully implement Party policy, but that sometimes they decided to not do so. In the above cases the organizations, as organizations, intended to obey, yet could not, because of some members' actions. An inability to obey, even because of its own local members' decisions, is not itself an organizational decision to not implement Party orders. In such cases independent organizational agency is not established.

When were they agents?

Researchers characterize instances where women in official women's organizations offered some resistance or acted somewhat autonomously within state socialist women's organizations as occurring 'during the Cold War'. Excellent historical work has been done to find women's agency, but authors do not periodize and conceptualize the significance of the dates of women's agency. It did not occur periodically throughout the entire period of the Cold War, 1945–1989, but primarily in two contexts, with possibly some rare exceptions. This makes claims of organizational and individual agency *simpliciter* misleading. The first context includes the earliest postwar period from 1945 to 1948, and the early Cold War period of 1948–1953 or 1955, in some countries. Communist women in the organizations in these years were energetic, optimistic that they could be effective on behalf of women. But communist power within official women's organizations was also still in the process of being fully consolidated. Organizations still had many

non-communist members from Second World War communist women's organizations, or from other pre-war women's organizations. The GDR had no communist women's organizations until 1945. Other members were non-political, including peasant women brought in after the war, e.g. in the AFZ in Yugoslavia (Sklevicky, 1989: 93–94, 99). Many resented the harsh Stalinist collectivization policies they were to implement. Jointly these conditions account for some genuine agency by members themselves. In contrast later members were trained or educated by communist parties in each country.

The second period was during extraordinary moments of rupture, including the Prague Spring in 1968 and the time leading up to it (Heitlinger, 1979: 72–73) and the conflict with Solidarity in Poland in the early 1980s (Fidelis, 2010: 247; Grabowska, 2013). Research warrants claims of some organizational and individual agency, but the claims are compatible with there being little agency over the entire life of each official women's organization. Women members of the Romanian National Council of Women (CNF) demanded kindergartens and maternity houses in workplaces in Transylvania in Romania, but between 1945 and 1948 (Ghit, 2011: 49, 51). One Polish Communist Party Women's Section director demanded daycare in her factory and other improvements, while another demanded woman's bathrooms, but in 1946–1947 (Fidelis, 2010: 47–50, 68–69). Members of the Polish League of Women resisted political indoctrination work, the Women's Section of the Polish Workers' Party helped organize strikes in factories and the Women's Section of the PUWP fought workplace discrimination, but all between 1947 and 1953 (Fidelis, 2010: 71, 150; Nowak, 2005). The DFD demanded equal pay for women in workplaces in the GDR in 1947–1950. In Yugoslavia women demanded elimination of oppressive agricultural work and negative attitudes towards women, and urged opportunities for women in 1953 (Bonfiglioli, 2012: 190–192). But this was all no later than 1953. Thus, women's agency was not shown to occur throughout the whole period 1945–1989.

What kinds of agency?

Official women's organizations, though active, were not necessarily agents for women. One needs to distinguish between the two, between reactive and proactive agency, and active and passive agency. Passive agency is *not doing* something, an act of omission, in contrast to actively *doing* something, an act of commission. Proactive agency is acting because of one's own will, policies, commitments or initiatives, in contrast to reactive agency, acting because of the will of another, including authorities' directives. Being *active* is not necessarily being *proactive*. It is only proactive agency, not just being active, that realizes the goal of a search for women as subjects and not just objects of emancipation. Actively implementing authorities' proposals and policies, such as finding volunteers to organize housewives, creating courses for women and women's centres in Poland (Nowak, 2009), or advocating and staffing daycare in agricultural communities through members' volunteer work in the absence of adequate funding in 1952 in Hungary (Bicskei, 2006: 171–173), were all cases of reactive agency. Promoting women's employment, if done only because of Party directives, makes one an instrument, not an agent or feminist. When women's organizations acted as the state wanted, one needs further evidence that they did not act *only because of* the will of the state. If so, they were not agents

of their own actions, proactive, but instruments. They do not establish women as subjects. Thus, some have strongly criticized women's NGOs in post-communism for not being subjects. Even though active, proposing many projects, they were not considered agents. They purportedly acted as they did only because of, in reaction to, donors' agendas, not proactively, and thus were not agents. Feminist Revisionist Scholars show state socialist women's organizations and their members were certainly active at times on behalf of women, as Bonfiglioli shows even for post-1953 official Yugoslav women's organizations. But that neither establishes they were agents and proactive nor shows whether they were proactive periodically throughout their histories. Though this is not to deny that they did indeed *do* things for women.

Many examples of women's agency in official women's organizations are actually forms of *passive* agency, or passive resistance, to Party or organizational leaders' proposals. The research does not usually establish doing something else, acts of commission, that is, active resistance. Nowak shows that some members of the League of Women Workers in Poland *did not do* the required political education work of women (Nowak, 2005: 495–496). The same occurred in the DFD in the GDR, and in Transylvania in Romania (Ghit, 2011: 99) when women members or even local leaders did not do required political education work of housewives and peasants or work to get peasants to collectivize. They did *not* attend training meetings to carry out political education, or 'did not report back to the league' (Nowak, 2005: 496–497). Local level leaders in the DFD did not schedule quite as many meetings as required (Mocker, 1991: C58). These are all cases of passive agency, acts of omission.

Some cases of purported passive resistance are in fact not even that. Rather than showing women choosing to not carry out Party policy, sometimes what is shown is their *inability* to do so because of targeted women's resistance, such as peasants who cleverly resisted efforts to collectivize in Transylvania in Romania from 1949 to 1953, or peasants, women workers and neighbourhood women who walked away from discussions in Poland (Ghit, 2011: 82–85; Nowak, 2005: 498, 503–504). Evidence of active proactive agency in state socialist women's organizations existed, but before 1953 or at/in moments of rupture noted above.

Some passive agency uncovered was also not particularly beneficial or more 'friendly' to women than the policies they resisted. Yet it is women's agency benefiting women that feminists and women's and gender studies researchers should be particularly interested in. Not politically educating housewives was either neutral or sometimes hurt women in that political education included explaining benefits available to women. There is no evidence in the case studies to show that after 1953, or 1955 in some countries, or at/in moments of political rupture, important gender policies or state socialist benefits for women, such as daycare, equal pay or abortion rights, arose from members' proactive agency or passive resistance. Official state socialist women's organizations did actively benefit women later (Nowak, 2009) but it was reactive, implementing Party policies. If claims that state socialist benefits to women were only a 'gift' from the state are meant to deny official women's organizations' reactive beneficial activity, they are indeed mistaken. Claims by members of women's organizations that they 'did a lot' (Grabowska, 2013) may be true, but are ambiguous as to whether they were reactive or proactive. Thus this body of research does not establish official women's organizations or their members

as proactive agents who benefited women, except in restricted moments and as infrequent exceptions. That this could occur primarily in special periods is not surprising, given all the well-known extensive structural mechanisms to prevent such agency. Some possible cases of proactive beneficial agency after 1955 are actions that in fact accorded with existing state policies, making it hard to ascertain if they were indeed proactive.

Many rank and file members in official state socialist women's organizations certainly did possess genuine good will and should not be demonized. They joined state socialist women's organizations partly through a desire to assist women, which members could sometimes do. But others also left or became inactive out of frustration at not being able to help women or out of irritation at heavy handed top-down control. Anecdotal accounts attest to such frustration in the cases of the Polish League and the East German DFD (Nowak, 2005: 497–498; T.B and G.S., personal communication 2013). Subjective reports of 'doing what they wanted' and not feeling constrained (Schimkat, 2012) suggest agency, but are misleading. Because rank and file women acted very locally their sphere of activity was very circumscribed. Consequently, what they freely chose was only *how* to fulfil their assigned role to draw women into official women's organizations, not proactive agency.

Some make claims that official women's organizations sometimes effectively moulded domestic state gender policy in a positive direction (Ghodsee, 2012a: 54). But in the desire to find women's agency the fact is ignored that proven cases of genuine proactivity were often ineffective or curtailed. Czechoslovak women in the Central Committee of the Communist Party and the Central Committee of the Union of Women argued for a separate women's association, set up in 1967, but it was closed after the crushing of the Prague Spring (Heitlinger, 1979: 202). In the GDR the DFD was extremely proactive from 1945 to 1955, as Barbara Einhorn discussed in 1981. It drafted the GDR Constitutional clauses on women's rights and the major progressive GDR law on women. But it took almost 20 years for the Family Law Book to be enacted. The Polish Women's League, the MNOT in Hungary and the DFD in the GDR were proactive in the workplace and in neighbourhoods to reach non-working housewives. But these organizations were all moved out of the workplace within a year of one another in the 1950s and could work only in the neighbourhoods – in Poland in September 1952 (Nowak, 2005: 489, 506–507), in Hungary in 1951 (Nowak, 2005: 507, footnote 72). The DFD was first moved out of the workplace in 1949, then back in and out again by 1952 (Mocker, 1991: C8, C16), often against the will of its members. The DFD initiated and created 1470 workplace women's groups from 1948 to 1949 to address gender inequality issues in the workplace, especially in the textile industry, 'a burning issue' for its members (Schröter, 2009: 49). But DFD criticisms of workplace inequality angered state unions, leading the SED to remove the DFD within a year, sidelining them to the neighbourhoods in 1949 (Schröter, 2009: 23). They were then moved in and out of the workplace for the next three years, finally permanently removed in May 1952 (Mocker, 1991: C91, E1-2). In the 20 years leading up to 1989 official women's organizations were often reduced to offering homemaker classes. They did provide opportunities for women's mutual support (Nowak, 2009), but through reactive agency carrying out Party directives. In Lithuania the official women's organization could do little to redress women's concerns not officially recognized (Praspaliauskiene, 2006: 316), as was also the case in Hungary

(Zimmerman, 2010). In other cases they could have done something, but did not. In Hungary in 1953 some individual members of the MNDSZ who needed daycare joined in demands to overturn the 1952 prohibition of private kindergartens, but the MNDSZ did not speak out. The action failed, as did the request for informal daycare published in 1957 in the official Hungarian women's magazine *Nők Lapja*. The journal did not actively pursue this request, which they could have done (Bicskei, 2006: 166, 170).

Researchers' desires to show official women's organizations' agency also ignores how they sometimes harmed women's interests. The DFD and MSNDZ abandoned defence of liberal abortion laws in the 1950s in the GDR and Hungary respectively, and did not protest strongly against abortion restrictions. The DFD abandoned its earlier popular support for a 'household' day off for women (Mocker, 1991: C75), which some members had demanded. In Romania the CNF manipulated women peasants to collectivize (Ghit, 2011). In Poland the League sometimes reinforced traditional women's roles, tried to dissuade women protesting for their interests, and in the mid-1950s helped displace women from the workforce (Fidelis, 2010: 56–59, 76–77, 146–147, 212–214, 218–219). In Hungary the MNDSZ even proposed to the Politburo in 1949 that an award be given to '100 mothers who have more than 8 children' (Gregor, 2011: 37). Between 1972 and 1975 the MNOT participated in preparations for the International Women's Year while doing nothing in Hungary as the Hungarian state expelled three members of a small independent group from the university in 1974 for protesting abortion restrictions and pressured them to emigrate (Fabian, 2007: 113; Körösi, 1984). Researchers' desire to find women's agency helps explain why they make such a wide array of positive, but shifting and ambiguous assessments of official state socialist women's organizations.

II

Were state socialist women's organizations feminist?

Claims made on the basis of this research reflect the tendency in women's and gender studies to look for feminism in the past. Roxanna Cheşchebec (2007), Krassimira Daskalova (2007), Francesca de Haan (2007), Elena Gapova (2007) and Natalia Novikova (2007) all challenged the Romanian feminist Mihaela Miroiu's passionate denial that there was any state socialist 'communist feminism' (Miroiu, 2007). Miroiu's critics sought feminism in official women's organizations. Popa (2009) speaks of 'women activists [in state socialism] and their versions of feminism' (Popa, 2009: 74). Elsewhere Natalja Herbst intimates that Yugoslav activist Rada Borojević was feminist (Herbst, 2012: 214, footnote 183). De Haan suggests that these women's organizations and members may have been feminist and what is feminist must 'always be contextualized' (de Haan, 2007: vii; 2010: 557; de Haan et al., 2006: 4; Novikova, 2007: 202). The latter claim appears to presume one 'context' in each country or official women's organization thereby homogenizing different views, including those of some self-identified feminists in the former Yugoslavia, the GDR, or Hungary.

Some researchers make weaker, vague, undefined claims that official state socialist women's organizations should be understood as part of 'the history of women's movements' (Grabowska, 2013; Novikova, 2007). Such a claim does not make clear whether

this is a normative or descriptive concept, and certainly does not fit a common model of social movements as those without official power, including Solidarity, during state socialism.

Scholars sometimes switch in midstream from arguing that women's organizations were feminist to arguing state policies were feminist, and then again to the weaker claim that they 'were pro-women and friendly to women', which these scholars never define (Daskalova, 2007). But policies were complex, Janus-faced, friendly and unfriendly at one and the same time, 'pro-women' and not, as Einhorn and Zimmerman have shown in detail for the GDR and Hungary respectively (Einhorn, 1981, 1989, 1991; Zimmerman, 2010). Claims that women in state socialism may have been better off than in western capitalism are also problematic (Daskalova, 2007: 217; de Haan, 2007, vii; Ghodsee, 2012a; Novikova, 2007: 203). State socialism was certainly more progressive and beneficial for some women in some ways than western liberalism prior to the second wave women's movement. But state policies and official women's organizations' practices were deeply conflicted, sometimes beneficial to some 'white' women, and those who did not 'think differently', but also neglectful and harmful. In Hungary policies were not nearly as beneficial for Roma and rural women (Zimmerman, 2010: 3–4, 9). Policies and organizations often treated women with a harsh neo-Fordist logic as a means, instrumentalizing women as resources for population and economic growth, akin to practices feminists criticize today in neoliberalism. The state enabled women's paid employment, opening up some traditionally male jobs for women while sex-typing many others, and sometimes required women to work under 'horrid' and coercive conditions, or removed them from their jobs, as in Poland (Fidelis, 2010: 113, 141, 150, 171, 222). Policies were also discriminatory and reinforced traditional gender roles and hierarchies throughout the region. In Hungary welfare policies sometimes involved extensive scrutiny of the family and gave the family 'primary responsibility' for social problems (Zimmerman, 2010: 3–4, 7). Reliable contraception was often unavailable. Women alone were taught better use of household technology throughout the region (Herbst, 2012; Zimmerman, 2010: 10) and how to be good homemakers, akin to US policies in the 1950s. Claims of 'pro-women' policies also ignore the gendered burden of an economy of scarcity with poor or inadequate consumer products and food shortages.

Several authors claim that Cold War 'preferences of the researcher' (Novikova, 2007: 204) 'make it difficult' for them to recognize 'any positive aspects' of state socialism regarding women and 'their versions of feminism' (Daskalova, 2007: 218; de Haan, 2010; Ghodsee, 2012a: 67–68; Popa, 2009: 74), and that state socialism 'significantly reduced gender inequality' (de Haan, 2007: vii). The implication is that current researchers' work is less distorted by political biases.

But the latter assumption ignores the role of researchers' own desires and that of others in women's and gender studies, who, as Scott argues, are sometimes thereby led to overreach (Scott, 2012). Such, I claim, happens in this case. Claims of feminism in official women's organizations and the concepts of 'feminist practices' (Daskalova, 2007; Novikova, 2007) serve as terms of political praise, ignoring the contradictory nature of the practices.

Problems also arise in the claim that women's equality was 'intrinsic' to the Hungarian official women's organization MNOT, the Romanian National Council of Women (CNF)

(Popa, 2009: 64) and their respective states' policies. Such an argument ignores that discourse is one thing and practice another. Non-egalitarian cultural and labour practices were sometimes not strongly addressed and even further entrenched by the state and women's organizations. 'Equality' was often interpreted to best serve state goals, not women, and when women's equality conflicted with other state interests it was frequently abandoned. The contradictory nature of policies with largely undefined, workerist, productivist interpretations of equality subordinating gender to class, are thereby ignored. In important instances this resulted in subordinating women's organizations to male interests, the Party and state unions and their interpretations of equality. It forced women's organizations out of the workplace and women to be employed predominantly in traditional feminized work (Fidelis, 2010: 77). With such programmatic limits it is mistaken to identify this commitment to equality as grounds for claiming a 'communist feminism'. Conjoined with a lack of periodic proactive agency it is difficult to call women's organizations acting on such principles feminist.

Though not a bad idea to reflect on Cold War influence, such a focus risks a presumption that any criticism of state socialism written during or after the Cold War was written *because of* the Cold War, and hence suspect. Charges that the Cold War influenced scholars (de Haan, 2010; Ghodsee, 2012a: 50, 67–68) and western historiographies unfairly 'stigmatized' and underappreciated official state socialism and socialist women's organizations (Daskalova, 2007: 218; Popa, 2009: 74), reflecting 'a negative bias' (Novikova, 2007: 204), are overgeneralizations. Many scholars and 'western' feminists did not ignore 'any positive aspects' of state socialism, its accomplishments and women's activism in state socialism on behalf of women (Ghodsee, 2012a: 68). Western socialist feminists from the 1970s onwards adopted socialist and Marxist claims that women's autonomy required women's paid employment (Jaggard, 1983). Reading Alexandra Kollontai was *de rigueur* for socialist feminists, even if liberal feminists 'defined "proper feminism" exclusively in terms of women's political and civil freedom' (Bonfiglioli, 2012: 33). In the 1970s and 1980s intellectual, academic and activist women, myself included, identified as Marxist-Feminist in 'MF' (Marxist-Feminist) groups (English et al., 1990: 307). Many acknowledged accomplishments for women in state socialism, including daycare, women's greater employment and education in comparison to many capitalist countries, and earlier possibilities for divorce, abortion and maternity benefits, such as Sheila Rowbotham's *Women, Resistance and Revolution* (1972: 163–164), widely read by US and British socialist feminists of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as Angela Davis. Einhorn strongly praised the DFD (Einhorn, 1981, 1989, 1991) as responsible for the status of women in the GDR, 'undeniably far in advance' of West German women (Einhorn, 1981, 1989: 282–284). West German awareness of GDR achievements on behalf of women spurred West German abortion reform and women's demands for maternity leave (Einhorn, 1989: 283). Some western socialist women even romanticized women's lives in state socialism, a bone of contention in East/West German women's contacts post-1989. From 1965 to 2010 authors wrote on almost every state socialist country in the region recognizing accomplishments – and problems – for women, including Genia Browning (1987, 1992), Barbara Evans Clements (1992), W Commandeur (Commandeur and Sterzel, 1965), Barbara Einhorn (1981, 1989, 1991, 1992; Einhorn and Sever, 2003: 168–169), John Kolsti (1985), Martha Lampland (1989), Barbara

Łobodzińska (1978), Elke Mocker (1991), Virginia Penrose (1990), Dorothy Rosenberg (1985), Hilda Scott (1974, 1982), Richard Stites (1978) and former GDR authors Birgit Bütow (1994), Karin Hildebrandt (1994) and Helga Hörz (2010), and also Alena Heitlinger (1979: 98, 109, 149–151, 203) and Susan Woodward (1985). Browning (1987, 1992), Heitlinger (1979), Gail Lapidus (1978) and Elizabeth Wood (1997) acknowledge the importance of the Zhenotdel in Russia, ‘an active women’s movement’ until the entrenchment of Stalinism. Lapidus praises legal developments of the 1920s, the positive ‘influence of the Zhenotdel’, and that ‘the entire first decade of Soviet rule brought with it important progress toward sexual equality’ (Lapidus, 1978: 57–58, 68–69, 71, 83–85, 93, 96). Heitlinger acknowledges that between 1967 and 1968 some Czechoslovak women in the Central Committee of the Party and in the Czechoslovak Union of Women of the Party Central Committee criticized state policies on women. She states that they set up a separate women’s committee in 1967, though it was controlled by the Party except during the Prague Spring (Heitlinger, 1979: 64, 69–70, 202).

One researcher conceptualized interviews as Truth, not Performance. She did not adequately contextualize claims made in interviews within objective historical events. The complex nature of remembering and not remembering, and its distortions, were not always adequately considered, perhaps due to sympathies with those interviewed. Kristen Ghodsee (2012a) reports an interview in which a Bulgarian Politburo member claimed she had objected to strict abortion control at a Central Committee meeting. But Ghodsee does not note whether that member then implemented the Politburo decision, as happened in an analogous instance in the DFD in Germany. Ghodsee conjectures that after 1990 local researchers did not discuss state socialist women’s organizations’ activities because of Cold War legacies and their fears of not being published (Ghodsee, 2012a: 50; 2012b). This is an unwarranted inference from some young Bulgarian researchers’ expressions of such fears in 2012 and one older woman’s response. It ignores that in the 1990s many women scholars in Bulgaria did not discuss socialist women’s organizations because they were bored by them and their lack of a public presence, suspicious of their closed, privileged, elitist status and reputed substantial hidden resources. In some countries official women’s organizations were also considered to have become no more than providers of cooking and sewing classes. Conjectures that Bulgarian representatives at international women’s meetings pre-1989 unwillingly used socialist rhetoric because, like ‘western women’, they were ‘constrained by cold war geopolitical rhetoric’ (Ghodsee, 2012a: 63) ignores the fact that only the most loyal Party members, usually the president of the official women’s organizations and Politburo members, like Lagadinova in the Bulgarian CBWM, could participate.

III

The explanation for recent revisionist research into state socialist women is complex. After having rediscovered pre-Second World War feminism in Eastern Europe, feminist scholars may have hoped to do the same in official state socialist women’s organizations. Feminist Revisionist Research should also be situated in the context of years of neoliberalism since 1989 with its ensuing economic and employment crises, corruption and austerity programmes. This brought with it a sense of powerlessness, despair, anger,

frustration and disappointment for those affected and a general climate of rethinking state socialism that may have affected western scholars working in the region. Criticism of capitalism and its solutions rings loud and clear, and rightly so, sometimes leading to a 'reaction formation', a desire to find what was good in state socialism. What is surprising, given widespread past resentment of Marxism in post-socialist countries, is that some in the region are even turning to Marxism, Marxist study groups, the reading of *Das Kapital* and Marxist-inspired activism. In Zagreb, Croatia in 2012–2013 some young self-identified Marxist feminists are resurrecting Marxist feminism and have made vague Marxist critiques of 1990s feminist women's groups as too 'liberal'. Young feminist women at a Zagreb counterculture conference responded enthusiastically to a US-Italian Marxist feminist, a headline speaker, talking yet one more time of 'wages for housework'. Vida Tomšič, the Slovenian communist women's activist, is widely touted in Slovenia and Croatia. In Romania young feminists at a scholarly feminist conference in 2013 argued for state ownership. Such responses by some are also due to a generational change, the coming of age of a generation that hardly experienced state socialism and its problems, but lived in its aftermath and with its stories. Feminist frustrations at the difficulties of being effective under neoliberalism heightens the desire to find women's agency in an anti-capitalist Marxist past. The wish to do oral histories of women from official women's organizations before it is too late, but without adequate caution, leads to distortions. A temptation to speak for those who cannot speak, and knowledge production in academia in which reputations are made by creating a school of thought and finding something 'new', all lead to making overly bold claims. Research may be reinforced by the purported availability of EU funding for research on women in state socialism referred to by Ghodsee (2012b).

Conclusion

Wang Zheng has noted Wendy Brown's caution against state-centred feminists' possible production of 'regulated, subordinated, and disciplined state subjects' (Zheng, 2005: 543). State socialist women's organizations, whatever else they did, did just that. State socialism may offer one of the best examples of biopolitics and some historians may be celebrating this. But scholarly attention to official state socialist women's organizations should not lead to an incomplete 'revisionist' assessment. Women in post-socialism do not need to claim state socialist women's organizations were feminist to claim a feminist past in their own countries, though usually pre-1945. They can also build on what was positive in state socialism for women without labelling it feminist. Those in women's and gender studies need to be aware, as Scott says, that accounts of women's continuous progress, agency and feminism are not useful to women's and gender studies in the region. The more complex, contradictory and volatile path of women's history and its discontinuities are lost, replaced by linear progress (Scott, 2012: 47, 51). Women's studies research should also enable us to uncover what precludes women from being agents. If the new gender and women's studies in post-communist Eastern Europe builds on the legacy of an oversimplified past it risks tarnishing the reputation of women's and gender studies in the region. It also risks contributing to the dangers that anti-democratic elements will be forgotten and that women in the region will misunderstand their

own histories. It prevents all of us from achieving a fuller understanding of the difficult process of women's organizations' affiliation with the state and provides fodder for today's critics of women's and gender studies. If women's and gender studies in the region is to thrive it has to be nuanced, true to the complex, often contradictory stories about official women's organizations and gender policy in state socialism.

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Note

1. Christian Democratic Union women had not wanted to join the DFD (Bouillot and Schüller, 1995: 49–51; Mocker, 1991: C6, C16). As a result of both mergers and the inclusion of 'non-political' housewives in order to politicize them, only 21–25% of the DFD were SED members. By 1950 those in other parties decreased from 15% to 2% (Mocker, 1991: C21).

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