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THE WOMAN QUESTION AND NATIONAL PROJECTS IN SOVIET BYELORUSSIA AND WESTERN BELARUS, 1921-1939

This paper considers the ways in which collective constructions of womanhood were shaped by nation-building projects in Soviet Byelorussia (in the Soviet Union) and in Western Belarus (then a part of Poland), in the interwar period (1921-1939). Such a comparison of two very different countries – the one bourgeois, the other building socialism and challenging the traditional gender order – may require justification. One possible rationale would be that women in both countries belonged to some otherwise distinguishable group, and it would be possible simply to declare that they were indeed all part of one and the same Belarusian nation, divided politically by a historical calamity. But such a straightforward approach, analysing the woman question in terms of a national project that is seen as a given, raises other questions in turn. Did those people at that time consider themselves one nation? Do we see them as such from today's perspective? When did they begin to be considered a nation? Whose project was it? What was its purpose? Keeping these questions in mind, the following analysis focuses on the nation-building project as a political act and a cultural process. It will argue that the woman question (or questions) came to be regarded as an integral part of nation-building endeavours, but acquired different meanings within different national projects.

Between Geography and History

Around a hundred years ago, politicized intellectuals set about developing discursive strategies to legitimize Belarusian nationhood and its inclusion in European modernity. They presented the Belarusian ethnic lands, i.e. those where the peasantry spoke Belarusian, as “for several centuries an arena of

political, national, religious and cultural struggle”¹ between Russia and Poland. The “root of the problem” with the country lay supposedly in its geography and history.² First, in its borderline location: between empires, as well as between the cultural worlds of Eastern and Western Christianity. Second, in the lack of national statehood over a period of several centuries: at the end of the eighteenth century the Belarusian lands had been incorporated into the Russian Empire, and even before that there had been no point in history when a state had existed which Belarusians could unproblematically claim as “totally” their own.

The same ambiguity still persists today. The view that Belarusians are a “nation” is still controversial to many at the turn of the present century: post-1991 independence discourse has revolved around questions such as whether Belarusian is a language (and whether this “peasant speak” is capable of expressing contemporary notions), whether Belarusians had a history prior to the Soviet era, whether the role of the Soviets was that of building or ruining the country, and so on. When over eighty years ago the Belarusian nation-state was negotiated for the first time in the modern era, the issues were broadly the same. Newspapers from that era provide rich cultural evidence of the public debates at the time. Those seeking independence were concerned with providing proof of the “material existence” of what could be identified as Belarus.

Intellectuals and advocates of political independence at the turn of both this and previous centuries assert that Belarus as a “thing” existed throughout recorded history, though under different names. In 1517 Francisk Skarina, a medical doctor and a writer, translated the Bible into the Belarusian language. In 1588 chancellor Leu Sapega (Lew Sapieha) published in Belarusian the Statute (Law Code) of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Both these facts are interpreted as evidence that Belarus belonged to Europe. Historians looking for a starting point for contemporary independence claims view the Grand Duchy, the largest country in medieval Europe, as the golden age of Belarusian statehood (though Poles and Lithuanians have their own claims for that land and time). Distinguished literati assert the “Belarusian-ness” of the creator of the Polish literary canon, Adam Mickiewicz. The introductory exclamation of his poem *Pan Tadeusz* (“Litwo! Ojczyzna moja” – Lithuania, my fatherland) written in Polish, addressed the lands he was born in, known as *Litwa*. Peasants there spoke Belarusian and for centuries were called

¹ IVAN S. LUBACHKO, *Belorussia Under Soviet Rule, 1917-1957*, Lexington 1972, p. 31. Recent works on Belarusian history include JAN ZAPRUDNI, *Historical Dictionary of Belarus*, Lanham 1998, and DAVID R. MARPLES, *Belarus: A Denationalized Nation*, Amsterdam 1999.

² See for example the comment in the “New York Times” that “Belarus is a land cursed by geography and history.” *New York Times*, August 31, 1996, p. A19.

Litsviny. Radical literati insist that Mickiewicz is, basically, “our” poet and that he (among many others) was aware of his Belarusian (Lithuanian) cultural roots.

Since 1939 the Mickiewicz lands have been part of Belarus, while the city of Vilnius (Wilno) is now the capital of Lithuania. Belarusian intellectuals have considered the town their spiritual capital (the first Belarusian books were published there more than 400 years ago, and the first newspaper at the turn of the century). This is also the place where one of the oldest Polish universities was founded by Jesuits. Shlomo Avineri is therefore right in saying that the borders of the former republics of the USSR that became independent states after 1991 reflect “the whims and fiascos of old rulers and have little to do with either history or linguistic delineations”.³ The bigger problem, though, would be to draw such lines “correctly”, when nations, ethnic groups and states change their shape and develop their mythology of origin and historical continuity over time.

Evidently, the search for the historically true and “uncontested” Belarus is too problematic (if it is ever possible to regard such a quest in relation to any nation-state as unproblematic). By contrast, the theories that view nation-building as part of the processes of modernization make more sense of the Belarusian case. Certainly during the belated national revival there seems to have been “something” going on, rather on the lines of Ernest Gellner’s “Ruritania”:

“The Ruritaniacs were a peasant population speaking a group of related and more or less mutually intelligible dialects and inhabiting [...] pockets within the land of the Empire of Megalomania. The Ruritanian language, or rather the dialects which could be held to compose it, was not really spoken by anyone other than these peasants. The aristocracy and officialdom spoke the language of the Megalomanian court, which happened to belong to a language group different from the one of which the Ruritanian dialects were an offshoot.

Most, but not all Ruritanian peasants belonged to a church whose liturgy was taken from another linguistic group again. [...] The petty traders of the small towns serving the Ruritanian countryside were drawn from a different ethnic group and religion still, and one heartily detested by the Ruritanian peasantry.”⁴

This description (probably not wholly applicable to any particular people in Eastern Europe but amazingly reverberating with so many of them) suggests, firstly, the existence of some stocks of culture as a kind of “raw material” for future nation-building and, secondly, a clear-cut class issue (inequality)

³ SHLOMO AVINERI, Comments on Nationalism and Democracy, in: *Nationalism, Ethnic Conflict and Democracy*, ed. by LARRY DIAMOND/MARC F. PLATTNER, Baltimore 1994, p. 31.

⁴ ERNEST GELLNER, *Nations and Nationalism*, Oxford 1983, p. 58.

as another resource. What is needed next for the nation as an imagined community (using the classic phrase of Benedict Anderson) to “happen” is the work of certain (elite) groups within the modernization process. How the cultural and the political projects interweave and affect each other remains, of course, a matter for discussion.

In 1897 the government of the Russian Empire, in its pursuit of enlightened modernity and effective administration, organized the First General Census. The aim was to classify the imperial subjects scientifically, using the mother tongue as the basis for their categorization. The choice of this criterion resulted from the idea, German in origin, of identifying the nation with the language. The Census in the North-West Province (of the Empire) revealed that between 70% and 95% of those who named Belarusian as their native language lived in the countryside, while city dwellers were mostly Jews (up to 60% in some towns), Russians or Poles. This pattern of self-identification resulted, to an extent, from imperial education and religious policies: the ban, after the anti-Russian uprisings of 1830 and 1863, on national education, and the re-baptizing of Uniate church members as Russian Orthodox.

As with other peasant and subordinate communities, the national cultural idea emerged as a means of political empowerment, and the goals were defined as the freedom to use one’s mother tongue in institutions and be educated in it, to gain recognition for national culture, to get rid of backwardness, illiteracy, poverty and to join the project of modernity that other European nations had been enjoying. The national movement that was formed at the turn of the century sought to awaken the people and to involve them in the struggle for egalitarian social goals and a Belarusian nation-state.

In sketching how and what kind of Belarusian statehood was finally achieved, I am omitting most of the story of the power play during the years 1917-1921 between the Russian Provisional Government, Communists (Bolsheviks), nationalists, Germans who were occupying the country, Poles who were advancing and retreating, and the Western powers that had a say in negotiations and peace conferences in an effort to establish “true” ethnographic frontiers in the region after the First World War. I will merely refer to some basic facts that are necessary to provide historical context.

In March 1918, during the German occupation, the Belarusian National Republic was proclaimed by nationalists; then in 1919 the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic was formed. In its constitution Russia was not mentioned at all, and on orders from Moscow it was united with Lithuania into a state known as Litbel, with a lot of territory reabsorbed by the Russian Republic. When the Polish armies started their advance into Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine in March 1919, they declared that the future would be decided “by the free will of the people whose rights to self-determination

shall in no way be restricted”.⁵ In fact, the project developed into Polish claims on Belarus (based on the common statehood in the Middle Ages) and into declaring the Polish language the only official language in the occupied territory. Poland saw its mission “as an apostle of liberty and an outpost of Western Civilization against [...] the barbarism of the East”,⁶ while Moscow regarded the Belarusian lands as a buffer territory between them and hostile Poland. At some point in 1921, when the Poles felt they could not move any further, while Russians did not want to endanger their revolution by more fighting against Poland⁷, the peace treaty partitioning the territory was signed in Riga. Belarusian representatives were not invited. Under the treaty, the western Belarusian lands were allocated to Poland, the eastern lands to the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic, while the territory in the centre was left to comprise the Byelorussian SSR. In what follows, I consider how the woman question and notions of womanhood became essential components of Belarusian nation-building on both sides of the Soviet-Polish frontier.

Heroic Women Workers of Soviet Byelorussia

In 1921, the territory that came to be designated as Soviet Byelorussia lay in extreme devastation after all the fighting, transitions of power and changes of government that had been under way there for seven years. The goal that the new power was seeking to achieve was nothing less than creating a new, hitherto unknown type of society while raising the country out of ruins, and both the woman question and the national question (or, rather, questions inherited from the Russian empire) were incorporated into the “bigger” issue of the liberation of the working class. Ironically, as David Marples observes, it was the Bolsheviks who solidified and expanded the Byelorussian SSR (having added some Eastern lands), deliberately nurtured and encouraged the development of national culture in the 1920s and thus helped to establish and promote a feeling of distinctiveness among Belarusians.⁸ The 1930s saw further industrialization, the increased mechanization of agriculture, the expansion of education, literacy and book publishing in the national

⁵ NICHOLAS VAKAR, *Belorussia. The Making of a Nation. A Case Study*. Cambridge 1956, p. 109.

⁶ Proceedings of the Paris Peace Conference, quoted in LUBACHKO, *Belorussia* (see note 1), p. 42.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁸ DAVID R. MARPLES, *Belarus. From Soviet Rule to Nuclear Catastrophe*, New York 1996, pp. 1-23.

language – and the brutal and total liquidation of the national intelligentsia that had been nurtured on the turn-of-the-century revival ideas. That which remained (with rare exceptions) did not have a Belarusian identity outside the Soviet context.

The irony (or the tragedy) was the contradiction between the undeniable modernization achievements and the curtailment of any attempts at non-Soviet or unsanctioned national self-reflection. The Belarusian nation was being shaped symbolically as a Soviet nation, one among others, of complete literacy, a developed economy and modernized agriculture. Within this Soviet vision of Belarusian nationhood, women were simultaneously an important resource and a specific problem. As a resource, they were supposed to become builders of a new society. The First Congress of Women Workers and Women Peasants of Belarus (1924), initiated by the Party, identified this as one of the tasks. Its agenda, starting with general political issues like “The domestic and foreign situation of the USSR” or “Educational problems in the countryside”, included those targeting women under the heading of “About the role of women in the Soviet development”. The hope was expressed that they would “promote Lenin’s biddings”⁹ and a new, socialist way of life. To ensure that they would do exactly that, a special category of Party functionaries was introduced, that of area (*volostnye*) organizers. Special “Guidelines for the work with women”¹⁰ were issued to help them with their task.

On the other hand, as a target for social engineering, women posed a greater problem than men. There had been a general belief among the revolutionaries of the Russian Empire that women were generally more backward:

“[...] a man [...] might have served in the army; he might have travelled on the railway; he might have been to the city. But [...] a woman remained more closely tied to traditional village life even if she was in the city – hence more likely to be illiterate, superstitious, religious, and attached to older ways of doing things[...]”.¹¹

Communists saw women’s emancipation as just “one dimension of a broader transformation of all economic, social and political institutions”.¹² One can hardly contest this view, though we might have different reasons today for

⁹ National Archive of the Republic of Belarus (Natsyjanal’ny Arhiu Respubliki Belarus) Fond 4, opis 9, sprava 7.

¹⁰ National Archive of the Republic of Belarus. Fond 4, opis 9, sprava 4.

¹¹ ELIZABETH A. WOOD, *The Baba and the Comrade. Gender and Politics in Revolutionary Russia*, Bloomington 1997, p. 15.

¹² GAIL LAPIDUS, *Women in Soviet Society. Equality, Development and Social Change*, Berkeley 1979, p. 18.

seeing women's emancipation as a "broader" project than those living in the 1920s could ever think. After all, contemporary social theory views gender stratification as related to the very inception of human culture and social organization, and we do not know how a society of complete gender equality can be organized and whether this goal can be ever achieved: it would demand too profound a transformation. Marxists had not thought that far (and this is one reason why they were more optimistic than many of today's social theorists); nevertheless, the gender transformation they suggested was big enough. Equality having been declared a political goal necessary to create a new society, the decision-makers of the time embarked on dealing with a number of seemingly "non-political" issues of resource allocation and the regulation of sexuality. They set out to rethink issues such as women's employment versus the demands of family life, state-supported childcare (without which women's participation in the labour force would be impossible), communal dining and communal housing (features that are typical of projects to ameliorate the world, as the examples of Israeli kibbutzim or some religious or hippie communities remind us), sexuality (in relation to marriage, divorce and pregnancy) and the body (questions of beauty, fashion and femininity).

All these issues, with which any contemporary society has to engage, were tied to the necessity of including women in the workforce: economic equality through wage labour was seen as the key to emancipation. A starting point for Soviet policies in the highly-charged area of gender was Marxist theorizing on the family, sexuality and the "new woman". The whole project of turning people into "active builders of socialism" was based on the assumption that there was nothing "biological" about human nature, and that all vice resulted from economic injustice, capitalist exploitation and oppression. Through changing the cultural environment and providing education and social justice, people could be changed into new men and women. It was believed that if women stayed in the family, i.e. if the traditional arrangement was preserved, it would not be possible to impose Marxist ideology on them so effectively. In other words, "economic and cultural goals continued to be inextricably combined in this period"¹³.

In exploring how the cultural goals of the woman question were shaped in accordance with the priorities of the political moment, I rely on the only Byelorussian women's magazine *Belaruskaya rabotnitsa i syalyanka* (Belarusian woman worker and woman peasant). It was launched in 1924, renamed *Rabotnitsa i kalgasnitza Belarusi* (Woman worker and collective

¹³ MATT OJA, From Krestianka to Udarnitsa. Rural Women and the Vydvizhenie Campaign, 1933-41. The Carl Beck Papers in Russian and East European Studies, no. 1203, 1996, p. 2.

farmer of Belarus) in 1931. It continued to be published till 1941, and was then revived after the Second World War in 1946. The magazine was the major vehicle for publicizing the party line among women. Two ideas were made clear from the very beginning: firstly, that women's emancipation was a part of the class issue, and secondly, that the Communist Party knew how to emancipate women "correctly". The editorial in one of the very first issues of the magazine read (emphasis as in the original):

"The Woman is Free Only in the Soviet Country.[...] Our Communist party in the Soviet country has already shown in many ways through its deeds that it really is leading women workers and peasant women to a better life. Our way is correct because we, the communists, appeal to the peasant women *themselves* to start organizing their life in a new way by acting together. We do not come as masters from above and do not start liberating the peasant woman by our acts of good will. Instead, we say 'The working class, under the leadership of the Communist party, and followed by the peasants, has eliminated landlords, bourgeoisie and all masters. Peasant woman, *start the work with your own hands, only you yourself can build a better life*, get involved in community work, become literate, blow away all the smoke from your head which priests and other deceivers put there. Workers, women workers, communists who are more advanced than you *will help you, so follow them*'. In this way the Communist party and the government of workers and peasants lead the woman to a true liberation and to a better life. The Soviet country is the only country in the world where thousands of peasants are going to discuss and to master the work of liberating the toiling masses from poverty, backwardness and illiteracy. The peasant woman has also found her way to this road, but she has only just started treading it."¹⁴

The clumsiness of this text and of many others of that period is striking (it will be discussed further below). Another thing that struck me, so strongly and unexpectedly that I mention it here as a piece of cultural evidence, was the sense of *déjà vu*: the feeling of having read this text before or, rather, having been reading this all my life. Since 1991, however, I had not seen texts of this sort any more. The fact that I "responded" to them meant that their teachings were a part of me that I thought no longer existed. Those teachings were important, both positively and negatively, for the formation of my feminist identity. On the one hand, I never gave a second thought to the fact that I have an education and get the same pay as my male colleagues for the work I do. On the other, it was the teachings of "primitive" equality that I tried to reject as "communist indoctrination" when feminism was just becoming my identity politics and when I was looking for the ideas that could be relevant for me as a professional and "liberated" woman. But it is through the memory of that "communist indoctrination" that bell hooks and

¹⁴ Belaruskaya rabotnitsa i syalyanka, 1924, no. 2, p. 2.

postcolonial feminist writings were reaching me, with their ideas of the interrelation between capitalism and oppression of women in the family, economic equality through wage work and the necessity of literacy and reading. Addressing women of colour and poor women of America and beyond, bell hooks wrote in the 1980s on the importance of reading for the liberation cause.¹⁵ Such texts might, if written earlier, have been meaningful for Belarusian women as well, many of whom could not read at the time the Byelorussian women's magazine was first launched: if one accepts Soviet accounts of pre-revolution education, there were 215 literate men per thousand of the male population in rural areas, while only 70 in a thousand rural women were literate.¹⁶

As the government declared the battle for literacy a strategic task, adult education classes or centres for the liquidation of illiteracy (*liqpunkt*) were set up in towns and in the countryside. Their number in 1924 was reported as 1373, and rural women were especially urged to attend:

"A liqpunkt has been opened in the kolhoz *Rassvet novaga zhittsya* (Dawn of New Life). All the women attend classes [...] All the women pledged to liquidate their illiteracy by May 1. Local teacher comrade Novik has in exemplary fashion involved women in cultural work."¹⁷

However, not all women were reported to be embracing the new educational opportunities:

"In the village of Podrech'je a reading room (*izba-chital'nya*) for peasants has been opened ... There are study groups in natural history, agriculture, politics, drama; doctors come to lecture; veterinarians give talks. Men have become more advanced; they attend studies and are active in community work. But women are still lagging behind, are not active in attending classes and talks and in community work. They have not been involved in any cultural activities. It is high time for the women to get involved as well!"¹⁸

Although the author of these lines may not have appreciated the complexity of the reasons for women's "passivity" and apparent reluctance to embark on a new life, it is clear from a contemporary feminist perspective that mastering reading goes beyond the mere technicality of putting together the letters. Reading, like "mastering the language" or "finding a voice", means

¹⁵ BELL HOOKS, *Feminist Theory. From Margin to Center*, Boston 1984.

¹⁶ *Narodnoe obrazovanie v BSSR. Sbornik dokumentov i materialov* (National Education in the BSSR. Collection of documents and materials), Minsk 1979, vol. 1, p. 394; some other sources present higher levels of literacy.

¹⁷ *Rabotnitsa i kalgasnitsa Belarusi*, 1924, no. 3.

¹⁸ *Belaruskaya rabotnitsa i syalyanka*, 1925, no. 2.

breaking norms by creating a new practice previously closed to women. As the French feminist philosopher Hélène Cixous argues:

“Reading [...] is not as insignificant as we claim. First we must steal the key to the library. Reading is a provocation, a rebellion [...] Reading is eating the forbidden fruit, making forbidden love, changing eras, changing families, changing destinies[...].”¹⁹

To read, a woman needs a place to read, that “room of one’s own” (equivalent to Hélène Cixous’s “stealing the key to the library”) about which Virginia Woolf wrote in her groundbreaking essay of 1929, or somehow become legitimate in someone else’s room. In the Byelorussian case, women were entering the new social space of the village reading room or clubhouse, i.e. the male world of public life, where a new language was spoken and simultaneously formed through every speech act. Since the emancipation project primarily focused on issues of class, it was as workers and as peasants seeking liberation that women gained legitimacy to occupy that space.

Initially, as already mentioned, the language of the project was noticeably clumsy. Those deprived of a voice were learning how to speak, looking for words and grammar patterns to describe the things that came to be considered as worthy of reporting, or as “news”. By this, they were legitimizing their social world, their vernacular language and, finally, themselves as agents of speech and action. They were constructing themselves as subjects with a name, and the name they gave themselves was that of Soviet Byelorussians. The transformation of a “peasant dialect” into the language of school and media was an important political change, and also part of the way “technologies of power” work.

Among those writing for the women’s magazine were professionals, party activists and also “worker and peasant correspondents” (*sel'kory* and *rabkory*) – a new phenomenon that entailed local activists regularly contributing to newspapers in order to inform readers about the socialist transformation of the economy and everyday life. They broadcast the party line by reporting on the emerging practices of adult education classes and party meetings, or on leisure activities such as attending talks or participating in interest groups. Probably, these correspondents saw themselves as enlightened activists whose mission was to educate women and to free them from political backwardness and ignorance.

The transformation under way was truly enormous. In 1914 there had been 88 high schools in Belarus: by 1941, there were 894 high schools and 2848 middle schools.²⁰ In 1925 there had been 20 newspapers and 15 ma-

¹⁹ HÉLÈNE CIXOUS, *Three Steps of the Ladder of Writing*, New York 1993, p. 2.

²⁰ *Narodnoe obrazovanie v BSSR* (see note 16), p. 394.

gazines; by 1938 there were 199 newspapers, 149 of them in Belarusian (others appeared in Russian, Polish and Yiddish), with a general circulation of 976,000, or one newspaper copy for every six people²¹, plus the Russian Soviet press. The literacy rate in Soviet Byelorussia reached 85% by the Second World War: socialism as a form of modernity needed education as part of its technology of power. Modernization and dissemination of education and literacy went hand in hand with Party propaganda and, in the 1930s, with purges and repression. In effect, literacy meant being able to read Party newspapers.

In the 1920s, husbands and fathers quite often tried to prevent women from attending reading classes or participating in the new community activities. The general belief is that it was considered “inappropriate” behaviour, a naïve euphemism concealing a much broader conflict between the old and the new. The woman who belonged in a public space was viewed as a “public” woman, one who could “belong” to anyone; by contrast, decent women stayed where they belonged to one man only. The root of the conflict, though, lay in the disruption of the traditional social order through changes in the mode of production and female functions within it. In a traditional peasant household, women’s functions were productive as well as nurturing: as Matt Oja points out, “every peasant woman was already involved in production before collectivization”.²² Production was bound to the household: this was the only way a woman could perform both functions. With socialism, agricultural production was to be made collective. There were ideological as well as economic reasons for this major structural change, and the ideological argument was in turn influenced by perceptions of the woman question. Individual peasants were believed to lack “collectivist” identity (which proletarians supposedly had), and such accusations were levelled at women even more than at men.

A story from my own family may serve to illustrate the conflict that arose during collectivization between the private and the public, or between the individual and the collective. The first collective farm (*kolhoz*) in the village where my grandparents lived was organized by the local poor putting all their cattle into the same barn, in order to share the milk later. My grandfather told my grandmother to take their cow there as well. He was a local activist who organized the first reading room for peasants in the 1920s, a teacher and a believer in communist values (he often used to say that as a proletarian he did not need any property at all). Grandmother, who had had two classes of schooling and came from a well-to-do peasant family (her jewellery was

²¹ Narysy historyi Belarusi (Essays on Belarusian History), ed. by DIMITRY KOSTYUK/IVAN IGNATENKO, Minsk 1995, v. 2, pp. 133, 182.

²² OJA, From Krestianka to Udarnitsa (see note 13), p. 27.

changed for food during 1930s shortages), did not like the idea, but did as she was told by her educated husband. It took her three days to realize that now to get milk and feed four children and the intellectual husband, she had to be absent from home, and that this disrupted family life and the household. So, being a woman of character, she brought the cow back.

The difference between men's and women's attitudes to collectivization was noticeable everywhere in the USSR, and in 1930 the issue was discussed at the Sixteenth Communist Party Congress. As Lynne Viola notes, Stalin in his speech made a special point that women were in the vanguard of protests and disturbances over collectivization and that their *petit bourgeois* concerns revolved around the family and the domestic economy. The reasons were diagnosed as cultural: "the low cultural and political level and backwardness of the peasant women, the 'incorrect approach' of rural officials[...] and, finally, the exploitation of the women's irrational fears and potentials of mass hysteria" by richer peasants.²³ However, the party's response to women's protest, which emphasized the need to educate women and to involve them more actively in the political life of their communities through participation in activities and membership in organizations, set out (correctly) to address more fundamental social inequalities. As the level of female employment increased, especially in the 1930s, a huge campaign began to involve women in professions and skilled occupations (like that of tractor driver). The campaign also sought to make the image of woman as a qualified worker socially acceptable and to promote skilled and active women. This was often met with resistance by male administrators:

"There are 300 women working in all the shops of Palesdruk paper factory. But a very small number of them work in qualified jobs, most are in unskilled or middle positions. One will not see here a woman printer or a printer's assistant. And this is not because there is no one to be put into these positions. There are such women as (names given) who have worked here for fifteen years. Why can't they be made printers? Comrade Tsehau (the shop's manager) explains that there are no women who can work as printers, and they wouldn't want that anyway. 'I am told to, but will not put them into these positions', he says. This cannot be viewed as anything other than a lack of will to obey the Communist party's decrees regarding the qualifications of women workers."²⁴

Clearly, the notions of a glass ceiling and affirmative action are at least 70 years old. It also seems that women as a group may benefit more from a centralized system with a sustained and serious programme to promote

²³ LYNNE VIOLA, *Bab'I Bunty and Peasant Women's Protest During Collectivization*, in: *Russian Peasant Women*, ed. by BEATRICE FARNSWORTH/LYNNE VIOLA, New York 1992, pp. 191-192.

²⁴ *Rabotnitsa i kalgasnitsa Belarusi*, 1932, no. 3.

women professionally and fight occupational sex segregation than from a more liberal one with laissez-faire economic policies.

Women's work was important in the nation's development strategy. This was based on the extensive use of labour (which implied involving more and more people in production, while their productivity was rather low), as women were a reserve labour force. The magazine glorified their self-sacrifice and disregard of the private in favour of the public:

"11 women of a record-beating brigade of the Magileu railway station declared a war on snow. They went to the station's manager and expressed the will to clear the rails of snow. They worked from 11 a.m. till 4 p.m.[...] Altogether, the women worked for 55 hours."²⁵

This means, in real terms, that the women were removing the snow for no pay and worked 55 hours on top of the usual work shifts. Sometimes women worked under pressure, but quite often they (as well as men), already a new generation of Soviet people, were sincerely enthusiastic about their contribution to the building of the first communist state. They regarded this work as important and worthy of respect, while work which was home-oriented was seen as a vestige of capitalism that communism would ultimately eliminate. The media glorified women's primary role as workers as providing the greatest service to the Soviet nation. Lynne Attwood argues that the demands that Western governments have habitually placed on women when their countries are at war, when women have to take over "men's jobs" and when service to the state is prioritized above social and personal considerations, were imposed on Soviet women throughout the Stalin era.²⁶

The government and press insisted that "things were better for women now than they were before the revolution because of the laws and institutions which the Bolsheviks had introduced to help them".²⁷ The interwar period was an era of colossal ideological as well as institutional shifts: on the one hand, one can point to women's unprecedented entry into the workforce and professions, the elimination of illiteracy and the increased access to education and welfare, which removed divorce and single motherhood from the agenda of survival issues. On the other hand, there was the tremendous glorification of women workers and collective farmers, the creation of the mythology of the heroine of socialist labour and of the subordination of personal interests to those of the Soviet motherland.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ LYNNE ATTWOOD, *Creating the New Soviet Woman. Women's Magazines as Engineers of Female Identity 1922-1953*, New York 1999, p. 28.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 13.

Many of the women who were formed intellectually and emotionally in the interwar period later volunteered to fight in the Second World War. One of them was Vera Kharuzhaya, that very “new woman” who responded to the socialist ideals of her era. Having joined the revolutionary movement while still at high school, she later became a member of the Communist party and made party work her life. In 1924 she was illegally sent to Western Belarus to help organize the communist underground movement. Kharuzhaya started communist party groups, disseminated samizdat and launched a journal, “The Young Communist”. She wrote to her mother: “Dear mother, I am not alone here, I have a lot of friends and how superb they are, how energetic, and brave! Surely, you don’t think that life’s hardships can scare us, young and courageous!”²⁸ This piece is not from a novel of socialist realism, showing the life “as it is becoming”, but a woman’s personal correspondence.

Vera Kharuzhaya, arrested twice in Poland, was sentenced in 1928, with other underground activists, to eight years imprisonment. Her name became widely known, especially after her correspondence with family and friends was published as a book titled “Letters to freedom”. In 1932 she was exchanged for Polish prisoners kept in the USSR, and, after the “reunification” of Western Belarus with the Byelorussian SSR in 1939, returned there as a party activist to help organize life on socialist lines. When in 1941 the war began, Kharuzhaya, who was pregnant at that time with her second child, joined a partisan brigade headed by Vassily Korzh. It is not clear how she saw her future there, but when the commander sent her outside the war zone, to Moscow (by a special plane), she protested fiercely. A year later, she wrote a letter to Peter Panamarenka, head of the Central Committee of the Byelorussian Communist Party:

“...in these terrible days, when fascists tread and slaughter my Belarus, I, who gave 20 years to the struggle for the happiness of my people, remain in the reserve and have a peaceful life. I can’t have it any more. I have to go back. I can be of use. I have great work experience. I can speak Belarusian, Polish, Yiddish, German. I agree to do any kind of work, at the front or in the German rear. I am not scared of anything [...]”²⁹

The permission to go back to the partisans was given, and, having left her baby daughter with her sister, Vera Kharuzhaya crossed the front line. On October 13, 1942 she was captured by fascists and executed several days

²⁸ Zhizn', otdannaya bor'be (Sbornik vospominanii o Vere Choruzhey) (A Life Given in Struggle. Memories of Vera Kharuzhaya), comp. and ed. by NATALYA SELEDIEVSKAYA et al., Minsk 1975, p. 168.

²⁹ Ibid.

later. In 1960 Vera Kharuzhaya was awarded, posthumously, the title of Hero of the Soviet Union, the highest military award in the country.

What makes Vera Kharuzhaya so remarkable? It is certainly not the mere fact that she volunteered to join the military: there were thousands of Soviet women at the front during the Second World War, and they were pilots of night bombers, tank drivers, snipers, radio-operators, partisans, doctors, translators, nurses and cooks. Vera Kharuzhaya, however, stands out for not only challenging gender conventions by taking on new tasks, but also resisting gendered reproductive roles when, pregnant, she refused to leave the partisans.

Western Belarus: The Awakening of the Female Citizen

The construction of the woman question in Western Belarus is a different story in many ways. First of all, this process was taking place in a different social system, where women's emancipation was not at that time considered a primary goal. Secondly, and this is less obvious, but no less important: women in Western Belarus belonged to a national minority which was seeking political empowerment and even autonomy within someone else's long sought for nation-state project.³⁰

The sovereign Polish nation-state that emerged in the interwar period, after more than a century of partition and domination by other powers, was designed as a liberal democracy. According to Norman Davies, its aspiration to a European identity was manifest in its Constitution of 1921, modelled on that of the French Third Republic but with a greater emphasis on welfare. The constitution guaranteed equal justice to all citizens irrespective of origin, nationality, language or religion, as well as the rights of free expression, freedom of the press, and instruction in the native language to all, including minority nationalities. These made up more than 30% of the population. According to the linguistic criteria of the 1931 census, Poles constituted 68.9% of the population. Ukrainians made up a further 13.9% and Jews 8.7%, while Belarusians represented 3.1% of the population (amounting to 1.5 million people).³¹ In some eastern areas, Belarusians remained a dominant peasant majority, while the bourgeoisie and intelligentsia of Belarusian descent was weak and small in number. Or, to be more

³⁰ For this idea in relation to the Ukrainian women's movement, see MARTHA BOHACHEVSKY-CHOMIAK, *Feminists Despite Themselves. Women in Ukrainian Community Life, 1884-1939*, Edmonton 1988.

³¹ NORMAN DAVIES, *God's Playground. A History of Poland*, New York 1982, v. 2, p. 404. Other sources estimated the Belarusian population to be 2.4 million.

precise, those who reached a certain level of prosperity often did not consider themselves as Belarusians. To achieve a certain status, one had to take on the religion and culture of the titular nation and abandon the vernacular language, at least in public life: at that time, Belarusian was widely considered not a language per se, but a peasant variant of either Polish or Russian, depending on the needs of the political moment. As is often the case with semicolonial situations, national issues were simultaneously class issues.

Western Belarusians, as well as Western Ukrainians, with whom they shared a similar historical fate (though the Ukrainian population was larger, had a more powerful national bourgeoisie and developed written culture), did not have a separate political or administrative status in Poland. In the early 1920s, though, the government displayed a clear commitment (backed by the international obligations of Poland and its aspirations to be „European“) to meet the national minorities' special demands for freedom of the press, democratic elections, national education and political organizations. While such a programme reflected the genuine intent of some idealistic Poles, its realization proved to be an illusion within the complicated situation of the developing nation-state, and 1924 marked the beginning of both cultural and political reaction against Belarusians. Eventually, the language was switched from the Cyrillic to the Latin alphabet and 300 schools turned over to Polish teachers. By the 1930s, the Belarusian *Hramada* (the socialist peasant movement) was broken up by police action, its leaders imprisoned, and newspapers regularly suppressed. In 1935, a new wave of repression was accompanied by the closing down of more schools, Orthodox churches and cultural societies, and by arrests and prosecution.

For Belarusian patriots these facts were evidence of national oppression. In these very particular circumstances, Belarusian ideology developed in two directions. On the one hand, there was the ideal of socialism, which necessarily implied the unification of Eastern and Western Belarus. On the other hand, patriotic groups sought independence outside any other state.

Many of those supporting the Belarusian cause looked eastward, regarding Soviet Byelorussia as the place where the dream of a better life for the people was finally being realized. The discourse and strategy of national associations (Belarusian Revolutionary Organization, Belarusian Workers' and Peasants' Hramada, Society for the Belarusian School and others) were directly influenced by the Communist Party of Western Belarus (which Vera Kharuzhaya, among others, helped to organize). The fate of many of its members was tragic: repressed and imprisoned during the Polish period, they were arrested and sent to prison camps after the incorporation of Western Belarus into the Soviet Union in 1939.

Belarusian organizations sought to awaken and unite the population through a common idea, and the tool for its dissemination were newspapers

published in the native language (that very “printing press” whose role in nation-building has been seen as crucial by many scholars of nationalism). Because of their radical content, some of them existed only for a couple of weeks and were closed down, only to be taken over by others with similar ideas. These newspapers are my main source for recreating a picture of the woman question in relation to the liberation agenda.

The leftist Belarusian movement viewed national discrimination as originating in class oppression, and the woman question, when it was mentioned at all, was seen as part of the class issue. As early as 1923 the programmatic article “The Woman and Class Struggle” published in the newspaper *Nash Stryah* (Our Banner, September 9) argued that oppressed women workers were fellow-fighters with all other oppressed people. As the woman question gained prominence in Soviet Byelorussia, with a state programme initiated to tackle women’s issues and 8 March declared as the international day of struggle for women’s liberation, such concerns found an echo among leftists across the border: thus on 8 March some newspapers in Western Belarus published special issues celebrating international women’s day. Like many revolutionary texts of the period, they typically began with an appeal for the solidarity of working women: “Long Live 8 March – the day of struggle of all women workers and women peasants!”³² The text of several pages that followed this slogan outlined the agenda for the struggle against capitalist exploitation and oppression and named the allies with whom women could unite – or, to be more accurate, laid down how women could become allies of the proletariat:

“How can a woman worker or peasant fight? Not individually, of course, but together and in the same line with the proletariat and peasantry. Women should take part in the common working struggle, for only the government of workers and peasants can better the life of the working class and peasantry, give them land, schools and kindergartens in the native tongue, and really liberate the woman.”³³

The issue that was seen as being at the top of the agenda derived from the special situation of women who were simultaneously mothers and workers:

“Demanding an 8-hour working day Motherhood often deprives a woman of her job: pregnancy leads to her being fired from the factory, while resuming work right after the delivery affects the health of the baby and often results in the

³² Newspaper *Chyrvony styah* (The Red Banner), Wilno, February 1926 (exact date unavailable).

³³ Ibid.

woman's disability. This is why the Communist Party demands three-month fully paid maternity leaves [...] and organizing kindergartens (daycare) [...]".³⁴

This text, very similar in its ideology and general rhetoric to those published at the time in Soviet newspapers portraying women as part of the toiling and oppressed masses, was probably compiled on the basis of Soviet materials or even sent from the other side of the Soviet-Polish border. The woman question in the communist discourse of Western Belarus became politically charged, representing yet another argument in favour of unification with the Eastern lands within the USSR.

Meanwhile, women as a group within the emerging national movement were reinvented very differently by the Belarusian activists who were classified in the Soviet media and in history textbooks (if mentioned there at all) as "bourgeois nationalists". These were intellectuals descended from the peasantry or minor nobility, whom the Belarusian historian Adam Maldzis has labelled "peasant democrats". In the eyes of these „mission-oriented“ poets, historians, ethnographers, and teachers, Belarusian folklore, material culture and above all its language were proof of the historical continuity of the Belarusian people. The identity politics that urged them to question the subordinated position of their "folk" became a means of political empowerment. In 1918 they initiated the first All-Belarusian Congress in Minsk which proclaimed the Belarusian People's Republic. Though that short-lived state was crushed, the reasons for and the principles of the establishment of the independent Belarusian state enunciated in its charter and the movement for nationhood and independence forced the Bolsheviks to concede to the establishment of the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic.³⁵

Many of the founders of the "bourgeois" Belarusian Republic, as it was called by Soviet historians, found themselves "abroad" after the new borders were established. Some of them chose to leave (or felt they had to escape) in order to carry on fighting for the national cause. Many of those who remained did not survive Stalin's purges. Nationalists never recognized Soviet Byelorussia and considered the government of the Belarusian People's Republic the only legitimate one (technically, this government exists even today, though obviously composed of different people). In 1926, several years after the Byelorussian Soviet Republic was established, they defined their goal in the *Declaration of the Belarusian Government* as follows:

"... As far as the USSR is concerned, the government of the BPR will insist on the elimination of the Treaty of Riga and on the withdrawal of any Russian claims on Belarusian territories. In its struggle with Poland, it (the government)

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ JAN ZAPRUDNIK, *Historical Dictionary of Belarus*, p. 51.

will insist on the termination of the Polish occupation of Western Belarus and on establishing a state Belarusian-Polish frontier along the rivers Bug and Narev..."³⁶

This Declaration, however, lacked all power. The only authority that the Belarusian "government-in-exile" possessed was moral: hence, no doubt, its pathos.

The woman question was not part of the agenda of the Belarusian "shadow cabinet". This did not mean, however, that women were absent from Belarusian nation-building efforts. The process of nation-building and the formation of a national elite typically involves a number of educated and politically advanced "daughters of the nation". In the Belarusian case, women of the intellectual elite, often family members of male activists in the Belarusian revival, became important actors in what was a predominantly male cause. In the interwar period they created several women's associations and groups, not only in Western Belarus but also within Belarusian communities in Lithuania and Latvia. Most of them had memberships of only a few dozen. Nevertheless, the surviving (albeit sparse) archival material documenting these groups (charters, minutes of the proceedings), together with published periodicals, represent a body of non-fiction texts from which the idea of the female citizen within the Belarusian nation can be "restored".

Collective understandings of womanhood have to be socially acceptable for the community³⁷, and without a right of independent political existence as a group, women were very much confined to the ideal of womanhood assigned to them by the national idea. The Statute (Charter) of the Belarusian Women's Association in Lithuania defined its goals and strategy as noble service for the interests of the community:

"The aims of the Association are: a) uniting women of Belarusian ethnicity around the national, cultural and educational and economic issues; b) rendering assistance, both material (financial) and otherwise to Belarusian organizations and individual Belarusians as well.

To achieve these goals, the Association has the right, in accordance with the existing laws, to open dining-rooms, shops, libraries, reading rooms, to organize public lectures, family, literary and musical parties, performances, masquerades; to allocate stipends for special purposes, to render monetary assistance, to launch fund raising and to organize lotteries and charity fairs. The Women's Association in Lithuania seeks to raise money by selling flowers, organizing

³⁶ National Archive of the Republic of Belarus. Fond 325, opis 1, adzinka zahouvannya 15, list 18.

³⁷ IRINA NOVIKOVA, *Constructing National Identity in Latvia. Gender and Representation During the Period of the National Awakening*, in: *Gendered Nations. Nationalisms and gender order in the long nineteenth century*, ed. by IDA BLOM/KAREN HAGEMANN/CATHERINE HALL, Oxford 2000, p. 316.

parties and collecting money through donations[...] . It has also been decided to start theatrical performances.”³⁸

In a similar way, the Statute of the Ladies’ Committee at the Council of the Belarusian Colony in Latvia stressed women’s contribution to the common enterprise, using the same methods and even mentioning the guiding role of the fathers of the nation:

“The Women’s Committee works under the guidance and supervision of the Council of the Belarusian Colony in Latvia [...] The Committee raises money for its cultural, educational and charity activities through organizing parties, concerts, lectures and other similar events.”³⁹

Such goals and activities limited women’s scope for participating in the national movement. However, some Belarusian women nationalists had greater aspirations: they wanted to be fully involved in the common struggle, to awaken the “folk” and unite them around the cause. In 1931, the Association of Belarusian Women, named after Alaiza Pashkewich or Tsetka, a group based in Wilno (then Poland, now Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania), launched *Zhanotskaya Sprava* (Women’s Cause), a monthly magazine. It is not clear where the support for the publication, which lasted several months and then stopped, came from. The magazine was the brainchild of middle-class educated women seeking to mobilize rural and “simple” urban women, to unite them around national issues, and to mould them into citizens. The primary task was to explain to such women where they belonged ethnically. Here, intellectuals had to grapple with the problem of the borderland situation. Quite often peasants in the Belarusian-Lithuanian ethnic lands were not sure what to call themselves: they were not Russians or Poles (who could be of a different social status) nor Jews (who were of a different religion), while the medieval name of *Litsviny* (related to the medieval Grand Duchy of Lithuania) went out of use by the eighteenth century or referred to Lithuanians. For a number of historical, political and cultural reasons, the words “Belarus” and “Belarusian” are rather ambiguous (and most probably confessional) coinages, and this fact had (and still has) political repercussions. Many peasants in this region called themselves *tuteishyja*, which literally means “people from here”. They were unable to define in any other way who they were, and they were probably not interested in national labels or in political affairs generally. In the first issue of *Zhanotskaya sprava*, an article on the life and work of Tsetka (a writer of the turn-of-the-century revival who died of typhoid in 1916) focused specifically on

³⁸ National Archive of the Republic of Belarus. Fond 325, opis 1, sprava 121.

³⁹ Ibid.

national self-definition. Language was regarded as a marker of national difference and stood for nationhood, and Tsetka, as the paper had it,

“ [...] finally understood that the person who speaks as they speak here – he, in fact, speaks Belarusian and, hence, he is Belarusian. From that moment all hesitation about what nation (people) to belong to were over for her.”⁴⁰

In the absence of statehood, political options for nation-building were limited: the formation of collective subjects was based solely on a national culture which served to separate “us” from “them”. To enter a “world of nations”, to “prove” their nationhood, Belarusians had to recover (or recognize) their own history and folklore. In this process, women’s traditional crafts emerged as markers of the national heritage:

“‘Golden’ waistbands from Slutsk, woven with the hands of our Belarusian great-grandmothers, are famous all over the world [...] But now, aren’t our woven fabrics, with the same ornaments, taken abroad, where they are awarded gold medals at various exhibitions? But not, alas, as Belarusian weavings, but under different names, as fabrics of Novagrudak or the Wilno area [...], while no one knows anything about those who really made them and to what people they belong. And every nation has songs of its own, its own ornaments, its national garments and its own tongue, which must be the most beautiful for its people, because this is the treasure we inherited from our grandfathers, and no one can take it away from us.”⁴¹

Waistbands from Slutsk were regarded here as evidence of ancient history, and the leap from that to the language, the main marker of the nation, was quite logical. The essence of the national lay in the idea of belonging, which could not be asserted without a name: folklore and history “belonged” to the people under whose name they were known. Presented as a stolen national ideal, folk art turned into a political declaration, and at this point *tutejshae* (from here) was supposed to give way to Belarusian.

Women were presented as contributing to nation-building in other ways as well, not least in contributing to national improvement through daily domestic tasks. The nationalist “civilizing discourse”, as Dipesh Chakrabarty calls it (with reference to the Indian national movement), by which traditions get rediscovered in a new light⁴², always calls for an improvement of the state of the nation (given that a nation has never fully become what it should ideally be). This type of thinking produced, among other things, the

⁴⁰ Zhanotskaya sprava, 1931, no. 1, p. 3.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 8.

⁴² DIPESH CHAKRABARTY, The Difference-Deferral of Colonial Modernity. Public Debates on Domesticity in British Bengal, in: Tensions of Empire. Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World, ed. by FREDERICK COOPER/ANN LAURA STOLER, Berkeley 1997, p. 378.

figure of the uneducated housewife/mother or the mistress of the household who was seen as responsible for the physical well-being of the people. Through this connection the private sphere was reinvented as a space in which to demonstrate – for instance through exemplary housekeeping – one’s inclusion in Europe. As a site of patriotic endeavour, the home thus became a political space. Referring to courses in home economics that had been organized for rural girls in other countries (for instance in Czechoslovakia), “Women’s Cause” announced the decision to start similar three-month training courses for young Belarusian women. Meanwhile, to reach a wider audience, the magazine published domestic advice in voluminous quantities (signed by “Grandma”): how to grow vegetables, to keep the house clean, what food to cook, how to make a skirt, to feed chickens, and even how to wash linen correctly (a contemporary reader would be amazed how time and effort-consuming the process was supposed to be, with all the soaking, boiling, washing, adding starch for a crisp finish and blue powder for colour). Such an elaborate task was not for women who spent most of their time in the field or at the factory: the female audience imagined by the magazine was clearly different from that which socialist newspapers addressed with their ideas of an 8-hour working day or paid maternity leave.

The ideal of womanhood in “Women’s Cause” was shaped by the urban intelligentsia and rural bourgeoisie and their typical attitudes. As patriotic intellectuals, they insisted – as patriotic intellectuals elsewhere throughout the modern era have insisted wherever national revivals occurred or imperialist expansion took place – that women were primarily mothers: both mothers of individual children and mothers of the nation. And, since women were responsible for the biological and cultural reproduction of the community, they needed education. The magazine reflected this mentality when it declared that: “Whatever the woman will be – the mother of every People – the same will be the coming generation of these People, for educating the children is mother’s work.”⁴³

In a bourgeois nation, mothers, and not welfare programmes, as in socialist Byelorussia, were believed to be responsible for the children’s welfare: it was feared that maternal ignorance contributed to infant disease, and the magazine accordingly provided some basic nurturing advice (here, again, the recurrent motif was cleanliness). But even more important was the mother’s role in the “battle for the nursery”. Since the Polish government was turning over an increasing number of Belarusian schools to the Polish language, national schooling would have to take place at home (as the responsibility of parents) or in the community. Education and cultural

⁴³ Zhanotskaya sprava, 1931, no. 1, p. 5.

reproduction were political matters, and the magazine appealed to its readers: “Mother! Try to ensure that your children can read and write in Belarusian!”⁴⁴

The intelligentsia was eager to imagine some national public space where ordinary women with sufficient education would read books in the native language, organize cultural events, and generally contribute to maintaining national culture. Accordingly, almost every page of the magazine appealed to the readers with the ideas of enlightenment and, in general, of inclusion in European modernity through the practices of everyday life:

“Sisters! Make an effort to have a Belarusian library and reading room in your village. If you have one already, bring along your less conscious (*nesvyadomyh*) women friends!” – “Every conscious Belarusian woman should subscribe to the *Zhanotskaya sprava*, read it to her friends and contribute by writing to us.” – “Girls! Have you already started preparing a Belarusian performance to have in your village at Easter?”⁴⁵

The magazine also carried articles that were diverse in character and of general interest, ranging from political articles in praise of Belarusian independence, to pieces about the international women’s movement or items of anti-alcoholic propaganda: together, such material comprised a discourse that insisted on educating women for the national cause. Belarusian women appear in this discourse as standing at the threshold of a brave new world: all that was needed was that they should enter it, as women of other nations had already done.

“Throughout the whole world, the woman is waking up from her eternal sleep and is finally getting the place in the social world which belongs to her as of right. She has already won the right to have a voice when electing people’s representatives into parliaments all over the world. She can stand as equal to men in all the fields that were previously closed to her. The doors of all schools – elementary, secondary and higher – have been opened to her, she just has to want to enter [...]”⁴⁶

Nationalist projects normally mobilize all available resources.⁴⁷ Among the outstanding women who published and contributed to the magazine were poets and writers who set up Belarusian schools and classes, wrote children’s poetry in the native tongue and compiled the first national readers, started drama societies and choirs, organized canteens for the poor, worked in orphanages

⁴⁴ *Zhanotskaya sprava*, 1931, no. 1.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁴⁷ NIRA YUVAL-DAVIS, *Gender and Nation*, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi 1997, pp. 39-53.

and collected money for political prisoners. Through such activities, these women seemed to be transferring “maternal duties” into the public sphere. This offered them a way into formal politics, and through this they battled against “a political and social system that relegated them to a subordinate position”.⁴⁸ But however important and noble the service to the Belarusian idea seemed to women, the role to which they were relegated by “male” Belarusian groups scarcely went beyond traditional female servitude. It was in this role that women were needed and allowed into the fraternity of the nation. What was expected of women is neatly encapsulated in the following excerpt, taken from the minutes of the meeting of the Belarusian Women’s Association in Lithuania: “The Peasants’ Caucus asks for your assistance in selling tickets to the Masquerade Ball organized in support of Belarusians in Polish prisons and also asks you to organize the buffet dinner.”⁴⁹

Concluding Remarks

Two stories of women’s emancipation emerge clearly out of the interwar period: the one within the making of a socialist nation, the other within a bourgeois democratic nation-building project. In the first case, emancipation meant taking the “masses of women to a new life”, in the other it was about the individual achievements of educated women, with the masses largely remaining “in the darkness”. However different (and the difference lies in the involvement of the state), there are still similarities between the two stories. In both cases, women were seen (by others, but also by themselves) as a part of some entity (class in the first case, nation in the other) whose identity and rights were in doubt. In both cases, it was believed by both women and the community that empowering the community would also liberate the women. And in both cases, this was true – but only to some extent.

⁴⁸ BOHACHEVSKY-CHOMIAK, *Feminists Despite Themselves* (see note 30), p. xix.

⁴⁹ National Archive of the Republic of Belarus. Fond 325, opis 1, sprava 121.