

## How real were nationalism and feminism in 19th century Galicia?

Nationalism and feminism are considered ideologies, although neither movement can boast developed, accepted, and orderly tenets that delineate genuine ideologies. The different varieties of nationalisms make it more correct to speak of nationalist movements rather than of nationalism as such. Feminism is also characterized more by a realization of a lack of rights or opportunities specific to a given place, than by a sense of women's communality or clearly enunciated shared gender perceptions.

As a movement, nationalism<sup>1</sup> antedated feminism by a century. It is strongest when national rights or national pride are perceived to be slighted by a more dominant force. Repression breeds implacable varieties of nationalism, inability to reach some type of consensus leads to individual acts of heroism on behalf of the oppressed nation, and that generally is the nationalism that comes to the attention of the public. A vicious circle develops, with each side digging into more rigidly stated positions. Ideology wins over common sense, and a cult of heroism develops.

The major progenitors of articulated nationalism had been philosophers who presented their views in a non-academic style that professional philosophers faulted for lacking a system and hence an analytical approach that would make it scientific. The enunciators of nationalism have been poets exhorting the people to future greatness by recounting an idealized and often mythic past. Historians have studied the written documents of nationalist activists as the basis for understanding nationalism. The implication is that the manifestoes, programs, and exhortations

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term within this context to refer to moderate, democratic and patriotic nationalism, and not to the integral chauvinist perversion that often, especially within English-speaking countries, gives the whole movement a bad name. That is a separate issue in itself.

to action, as well as the memoirs written by the protagonists reflect the activities of the individuals or the groups involved.

Historically, whenever practitioners of nationalism wrote about it or about themselves, they stressed the selfless nature of the creed and the pristine love of the land and the people that motivated the writer to become an adherent of nationalism. Yet nationalism remains popular not because of its rhetoric, but because it offers a prospect for a better life without reducing those who seek it to purely materialist goals. The point is – and this is important for the study of contemporary Eastern Europe – that development in an economic and social science sense, or modernization in the political usage, was too dry, too abstract an idea for even its practitioners to realize that this is what they were doing. They called it nationalism. This is the nationalism of the Eastern Europeans, in large measure a precursor of the nationalism of peoples of Asia and Africa. But we are so attuned to nationalism as an outgrowth of European philosophy, as being based on Herder, Schelling, on the German idealists that we fail to perceive the genuinely practical nature of the movement.

Social scientists write about issues they can define, order, and articulate. But the attempt to explain or systematize phenomena even to only an organized scheme often obfuscates the story by its very desire for clarity. Systematization, so necessary in any coherent presentation, can shroud reality by endowing it with philosophical transcendence. That in turn makes reality more difficult to change. In the case of contemporary Eastern Europe, it has made it even more difficult to understand the changes and the alacrity with which they came. In the nineteenth century the accepted historical model was national or state history, often supplemented by intellectual history that focused on discernible thinkers and the schools they influenced. Scholars systematized knowledge and wrote order into the most chaotic events, while national ideology and the articulation of its underlying symbolism was the preserve of philosophers, poets, or other literary figures. Traditional political, hence also national history divorced the public from the personal even in areas where some degree of participatory politics was possible. Traditional approaches tended to stress the systematic rational or reasoned articulated explanation or paradigm for a series of events, not necessarily the events themselves.

The dual nature of nationalism, as an ideology and as practical activity, makes the analysis of this phenomenon particularly difficult. Scholars write of nationalism as being primarily an intellectual and emotive condition implicitly limited to subject nationalities. Judging by much of the

available literature, dominant nations, such as Germans or Russians, produce only fringe nationalist movements. Thus, for instance, the disintegration of the USSR was viewed in terms of the rise of nationalism everywhere except in Russia. Non-dominant nationalities tend to be viewed in terms of their national aspirations and hence considered nationalists. The reductionism of issues to nationalism contributes to the favoring of a generalized and potentially ideological approach.

Here women's studies, which force us to look at the so-called "small deeds" rather than grandiose explanations, can help us discover the reality behind accepted terminology. Focusing upon community work and on the history of community organizations, which often have a major women's component, enables us to see the roots of society and patterns of public activity better than written manifestos can.

It is much more difficult for individual women to have their protest actions viewed as selfless heroism in the same manner that national protest is perceived. Few acts of individual protest of women in repressive societies are able to have a major impact, or become as immediately well known and sympathetically received as protests of a national character are. Rather, feminism is able to flourish only when there is a modicum of a system that holds hope for social justice. Ideas of women's emancipation can take hold only in societies in which there is some basis for a system of potentially universal justice, or at least a realization of that possibility in the future.

As nationalism is likely to breed high sounding formulations of itself, so feminism has historically avoided specific formulations of its tenets. The pragmatic goals of feminism however, do not need a particular theoretical justification for their practitioners to see their usefulness. Thus, one can develop programs for women and development, to use modern terminology, without bringing in feminist arguments. While nationalism reinforces itself by serving as an open justification for various activities and programs, feminist-type work can proceed without any reference to women's issues. Thus, practitioners of feminist programs can, and often do, deny their feminist views. Nationalists, on the other hand, often proclaim their adherence to the ideology without engaging in any openly nationalist activities. Women, therefore, are often feminists in action while denying feminism; nationalists for their part need do nothing but say they are nationalists.

Neither feminism nor nationalism has developed a reasoned and coherent position vis a vis the other. Although both sets of views do not intrinsically contradict each other, in fact, both groups look at each other

warily, if not with outright hostility. Nevertheless, both movements have striking similarities which are especially evident when we look at the situation in countries which fell under colonial rule.

Both nationalists and feminists fought for equality of opportunity. Both battled political and social systems that relegated them to a subordinate position in relation to another clearly defined entity. Both considered their cause just for the whole group as well as for the individual; in fact both were convinced they were working for the benefit of the whole community. Even the means available to both were the same – initially limited to education, literature, and propaganda, and only gradually to some kind of open public expression. Both groups – women and a nationality struggling for recognition – had to reinvent themselves with each generation. But while the study of history validated nationalists, thus facilitating accretion of tradition, women often denied being feminists and lacked a basis for group validation beyond motherhood and service.

In agrarian societies the woman's position is subordinate, but there is no question of her usefulness to her immediate surroundings. Since peasant women did not experience the middle class identity crisis, they showed little interest in emancipatory rhetoric that served as the basis for the women's movement in industrializing societies in the nineteenth century. Thus, in agrarian, non-sovereign, colonial countries the initial goal of women activists was not as much self realization as a desire to assume an active and visible role within their communities.<sup>2</sup> As the social and political interests in the village grew, women's horizons expanded along social and not necessarily gender lines. Even as they took on visible community activities, developing programs in child care, social welfare, and education, many women throughout the world denied being feminists. While warring nationalists sensed a similarity of underlying beliefs with their foes, even while engaging in bitter conflict with each other, feminism was not validated for many women, who maintained that they were dealing with local issues that were vastly more important than just women or mere feminism in general.

The feminist argument loses when counterpoised to the ideal of service to family, children, country, even if that argument is only pro forma. This is still often the case in Eastern Europe. It prevents the realization of the underlying similarity of women's concerns worldwide. Fear of what-

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<sup>2</sup> I develop the model in *Feminists Despite Themselves: Women in Ukrainian Community Life, 1884-1939*, Edmonton 1988.

ever is construed as feminism creates barriers to women's cooperation. Educated and well read women were more likely to subordinate their aspirations to the cause of the nation or, if they shared a socialist world view, to set aside their own needs until justice was achieved for all workers. Without articulating the point, women focus on the needs of society, and not necessarily their own second-rate status.

Let me illustrate how lack of understanding of what precisely women did in women's organizations contributed to a total lack of realization of the similarities of the goals of women. Galicia, known in Ukrainian as *Halychyna* provides a telling example of how attempts by women for a better life came to be defined as a struggle for national rights. Galicia was the easternmost province of the old Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Habsburgs, in their manner, mixed nationalities when they could, or created heterogeneous territorial districts. Galicia, its western half populated mostly by the Poles and its Eastern part by Ukrainians, can serve as a good microcosm of the relations among women of different nationalities within a multi-national entity that enjoyed a modicum of legal guarantees. Austrian Galicia in the last three decades of the 19th century was characterized by a struggle for political rights of the whole population of the Empire, and at the same time by attempts of both Poles and Ukrainians to assure their own national rights.

The limited constitutionalism of the Habsburgs led political activists of all national groups to hope that with proper pressure democratic reforms could be expanded. Poles painfully experienced the loss of sovereignty of the state a century earlier, and used Galicia as a haven from the national persecution of Poles in the Russian and German Empires. Primarily, however, Galicia provided the Poles with a legal institutional base from which a political assertion of Polish rights could be made.<sup>3</sup> Polish society in Galicia, claiming if not autochthonous status, then rights of settlement, was fully developed and certain of the justice of their claims. Their upper classes had entrée into Viennese society, and the middle classes had been reinforced by the influx of refugees from the Russian Empire in the post 1863 repression.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> To all intents and purposes Poles controlled the local administration in the province, and through the local and central parliaments were able to directly influence the political configuration in the land.

<sup>4</sup> At that point the Poles in the Russian Empire, who had enjoyed limited autonomy, mounted a liberation struggle which was repressed. Some of the wives and children of the insurgents sought refuge in Galicia.

This created conditions favorable to the development of patriotic nationalism among the Polish women. The socialist wing of the political spectrum in Poland was also patriotic.

Ukrainians lived in Eastern Galician villages and smaller towns but were beginning to move into the cities. Their middle class was underdeveloped, and the upper classes for the most part Polonized. While the Poles functioned in a more traditional fashion of striving for political power, Ukrainian aspirations focused on establishing the argument for the justice of their claim to national and community rights. Polish women's movement also fit within either the emancipatory or socialist framework. Ukrainians, although they produced pioneers in a number of professions, focused on national and community affairs.

The relations between the Polish and Ukrainian women were extremely complex. Both groups were minorities in the multi-national Empire and both had a poor and exploited peasant class. Yet Poles looked at the Ukrainians as if they were a Polish underclass that stubbornly refused to recognize its true Polish identity. They could not understand why anyone who had a chance to become Polish would cling to what many considered a less developed culture. (Considerations of space prevent the inclusion of the story of the large Galician Jewish community and much smaller Armenian one).

Meanwhile, toward the end of the nineteenth century there was a quickening of international movements organized outside the structures of existing states. People hoped that international associations that bypassed governments would be able to resolve conflicts and prevent wars. Women were swept by the wave of hope that the common people would be better able to keep governments from going to war. Ukrainians, having limited contact with the outside world, put great hope in the justice and power of "European public opinion". Poles, who had experienced on their own state the weakness of that power, were dubious about the ability of women to become an international force in 1887, when the International Council of Women was formed in Washington. Nevertheless, Polish women supported the Council in principle, but argued that the cause of independence had priority over the welding of a women's international organization.

The British and American women had difficulties in understanding why the various nationalities within the Habsburg Empire could not be represented neatly by a single national council. At the meeting in 1899 in London (the previous ones had been held in the United States) Lady Aberdeen showed little sympathy when Marianne Hainisch, the represen-



tative of the Austrian half of the Habsburg Empire, explained why that country needed more than one women's council. At the same time, the right of Russians and Hungarians to represent their entire heterogeneous populations was not questioned.<sup>5</sup> Historians are only now recognizing the nationalist and even imperialist undertones of complex women's movements in imperial structures, such as British feminism.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the Council of Women continued to discuss the matter of national and ethnic representation to seek some equitable solution, although naturally it could not devise one that would satisfy all parties.<sup>7</sup>

Polish women, secure in their Polishness and deeply patriotic, did not exhibit too great an interest in the international women's movement, except in so far as it could provide an international arena to dramatize the plight of Poland. Ukrainian women were also interested in the women's movement as a means of breaking out of their national isolation. But they needed the international movement more than the Poles, since the Ukrainian claim to being a separate nationality was vigorously denied by Poles and Russians.

Natalia Kobrynska<sup>8</sup> is considered the founder of the women's movement in Ukraine. She was a highly original feminist theoretician, probably the first to argue that socialism without feminism would not ensure an automatic change for the better in the status of women. Patriarchy, she argued, would remain patriarchy, even when the woman is forced by

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<sup>5</sup> International Council of Women, Meeting in Boston (1909), S. 5-6, on the discussion of the London meeting.

<sup>6</sup> Among some of the recent works on feminism, nationalism, and colonialism are: ANTOINETTE M. BURTON, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture 1865-1915*, Chapel Hill 1994; LAURA E. DONALDSON, *Decolonizing Feminisms: Race, Gender, and Empire Building*, Chapel Hill 1992; *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, ed. by CHANDRA TALPADE MOHANTY/ANN RUSSO/LOURDES TORRES, Bloomington 1991; *Imperialism at Home: Race and Victorian Women's Fiction*, ed. by SUSAN MEYER, Ithaca 1996; PARTHA CHATTERJEE, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derviative Discourse*, London 1986; *Nationalisms and Sexualities*, ed. by ANDREW PARKER u.a., New York 1992.

<sup>7</sup> The topic goes beyond the scope of this paper and deserves further study. Suffice it to say that as far back as 1909 the ICW established a commission to study issues of representation of minorities and to investigate ways of teaching history that would not inculcate hatred of other peoples. It should be noted that it was only after the Second World War that German and French historians began discussions on how to present the histories of their countries so that children did not learn to hate each others' country.

<sup>8</sup> Another interesting topic that goes beyond the scope of this paper. Kobrynska (1855-1920) came from an activist educated family. Her father successfully combined sacerdotal and parliamentary duties. She was well read, despite being barred, as all women, from achieving a higher education, but her publications were mainly in Ukrainian and thus had limited impact outside that community.

economic conditions to work outside the home. She argued with her fellow socialists that without feminism one cannot change society. The double burden of work outside the home and at home which Kobrynska predicted exacted a tremendous price from generations of Eastern European women, especially during the period of centralized economic planning that did not take consumer needs into consideration.

Kobrynska showed great interest in German and American women, and followed their progress, writing about it in Ukrainian. She worked through the latter half of the 1880s establishing a broadly based women's organization, but her conjunction of feminism and socialism was unpalatable to Ukrainian men and rejected by most Ukrainian women. On the other hand, her arguments for the need of women to organize as an effective force found a resonance among Ukrainian women. Hence, they accepted her arguments for the need for women to organize, but rejected most of her specifically feminist thought.

Kobrynska attempted to break the barriers among the women of the Empire. She cultivated women of other nationalities, especially the Czechs with whom Ukrainians had much in common. (German treatment of the Czechs was similar in many respects to Polish treatment of Ukrainians). Ukrainian women became involved in the cooperatives in which Polish and Jewish women took an active part. They were mainly directed at the country girls who came to the city as domestics, as well as with dormitories. Kobrynska published works of Adelheid Popp, editor of the Viennese *Arbeiterinnenzeitung* and Anna Perl, a women's activist in Austria. She sought to expand the horizons of the Ukrainian women, while calling attention of what she felt to be the international women's community to Ukrainian women.

When the Czechs initiated in 1890 a petition for entry of girls into higher schools, Kobrynska's version, for which many women collected signatures, went beyond the right to education. It was an impassioned feminist plea, arguing that "The woman's question is without doubt the most important movement in our century. While other issues relate to some one part of society, this movement touches half of the whole human race."<sup>9</sup> She maintained that education of women is the essential first step for the success of any reform. Czechs and Austrians commended the petition and the speed with which Ukrainian women collected the signa-

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<sup>9</sup> Dilo, 28 May-9 June 1890. "Dilo" was the major Ukrainian daily in Galicia. For a full discussion of the whole Ukrainian women's movement see *Feminists Despite Themselves* (see note 2). A Ukrainian version of the book is available under the title *Bilym po bilomu: Zhinky v hromodas'komu zhytti Ukrayiny, 1884-1939*, Kyiv 1995.



tures. In writing about it the Poles failed to mention that it had been initiated by Ukrainian women, and Kobrynska felt that silence to be a deliberate slight.

In 1889 Kobrynska's argument for a separate women's section in the Socialist party was rejected. The men argued that Ukrainian women do not need feminism because a socialist victory would make the whole issue irrelevant. Polish women experienced the same reaction in 1892, when they tried to establish a women's organization within their socialist party. The failure led to a brief interlude in which it seemed that maybe feminism could overcome the bitter national barriers.

A joint Ukrainian-Polish socialist rally was organized in L'viv on April 10, 1892, to demonstrate the communality of women's concerns by two experienced activists: Felicja Nossig-Prochnikowa, who presided at the meeting,<sup>10</sup> and by Kobrynska. Both women were interested in changing the gender balance of power in the province, and both felt that an understanding among the nationalities was possible if the focus were upon women, education, and culture. They were proven wrong. The meeting faltered on the issue of the use of the native language in local schools. Polish women felt that their support of Ukrainian language schools would be construed within the Polish community as lack of Polish patriotism, and that would backfire against the Polish women's cause. So women's solidarity faltered on the fear of an anti-women backlash if the women failed to live up to the national-patriotic expectations. Feminism looked nationalism in the eye, and withdrew.

The lesson we can draw from this interlude – supported by the experiences of women fighting against colonialism – is that nationalism is stronger than feminism. The other lesson is less obvious: the intelligentsia in Eastern Europe did not even attempt to understand the women's movement or to study the work of the women's organizations. Men who supported women's causes did so on their own terms, using their own theoretical conceptions, and pursuing their own goals. The women, meanwhile, did not articulate their real goals, since the national slogans seemed to do it better.

In the inter-war period, Ukrainians in Poland developed a large and effective women's organization that devised effective programs of economic modernization, educational opportunities for women, and health care. All this was done with no government help, and despite active

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<sup>10</sup> Jadwiga Czajkowska served as her secretary.

attempts of the Polish government to subvert the work and to establish government sponsored women's organizations that would integrate the Ukrainians into the Polish ethnos. The effect of this move was to make the Ukrainian women realize the importance of political involvement and women's activism to gain their goals. Ukrainian women, because of political pressures from the Poles, the Soviets, and their own society, became more conscious of both their colonial status and their lack of opportunity as women. At the same time, they realized the potential strength of organized women's activity, and worked to forge the community organization into a political force.

The situation is changing today because the intelligentsia – that undefinable amorphous but still influential force in Eastern Europe – is always attracted to ideologies and systems. The existence of a spate of theoretical approaches to feminism makes it attractive – or at least interesting – to the men. Feminism is beginning to be studied, and gender is slowly penetrating into public discourse. Ideas of democracy are studied not only as theory, but in actual practice. As gender informs discourse, finally Kobrynska's hope for a feminist philosophy may be realized.

Today, the Poles no longer threaten Ukrainians, but the women of both post-totalitarian countries are faced by similar difficulties. The declining birth-rate in both countries, combined with the protracted economic crisis pressure women to again postpone the goals of women's autonomy. After years of Soviet formal if not universally real austerity, the ideal of the middle class housewife beckons many women. Nationalism justifies it, making the vision of a comfortable home an implicit component in the patriotic duty of raising children. Yet at the same time, the realities of post-totalitarian economies are such that women are also drawn into programs of development and self help. These lead to international cooperation among women, a feminism in action that in good historical tradition does not express itself in theory. The realisation of similar problems and similar expectations by Polish and Ukrainian women should facilitate cooperation by both. But for that to happen women must be able to realize what their real goals are, they must be able to see beyond the slogans, whatever the slogans happen to be.