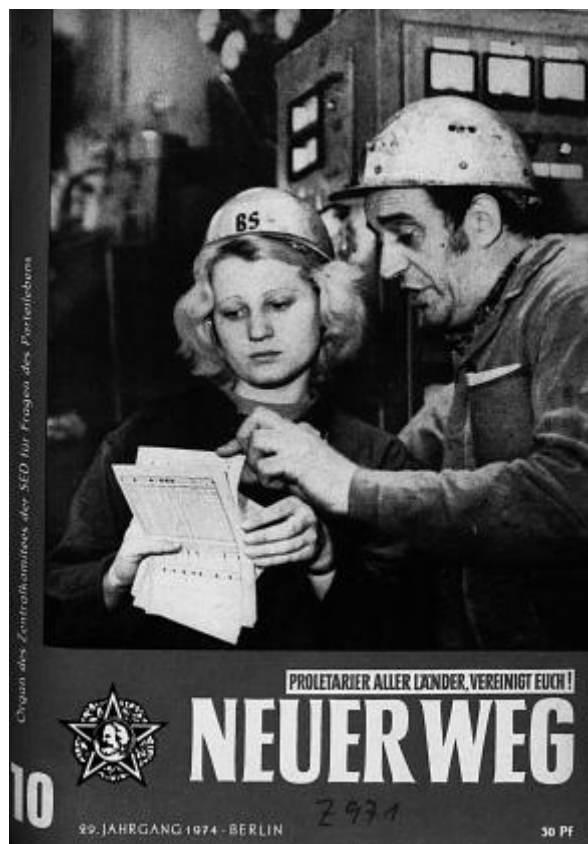


# The Gender of Communism

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## ABSTRACT

Founded on emancipatory albeit androcentric thought, the communist regimes established in Eastern Europe in fact opened women's way towards activism, political positions and paid employment. In doing so, they nevertheless also perpetuated pre-existing gender relations by limiting the role of women or by marginalizing certain sectors. They even produced their own traditionalist discourses and policies focused on the family, which nevertheless gradually began to erode during the 1970s. Still, these regimes enabled the development of a kind of "feminism without feminists," one that was less visible because more widespread, thanks to the leeway available to women to defend their occasional demands.



Communism, an ideology born in Europe in the mid-nineteenth century, supported in its various forms a project for the radical transformation of society. As a result, communist parties and regimes necessarily had an effect on gender relations, involving women and men (by bringing into play images of man and woman) in a way that challenged—and simultaneously reproduced—existing roles.

Following Karl Marx (1818-1883), Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) did not see gender as having an order, hierarchy or specific domination: men and women were considered to be neutral subjects. Masculine domination was reduced to a variant of economic domination, which was doomed to disappear in the wake of the revolution (*Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, 1884). This conviction expressed itself in the activist practices of political parties, as well as in certain policies of communist regimes, especially at the outset. These regimes offered constant support for women's suffrage, for instance the French Communist Party, which presented female candidates during the 1930s at a time when women could neither run for office nor vote. They also established or confirmed women's right to vote and run for office upon their rise to power beginning with the Russian Revolution in 1917. Communist parties were therefore among the most feminized of Europe, while some of their female activists rose to positions of responsibility, such as the German Clara Zetkin (1857-1933), the Spaniard Dolores Ibárruri (1895-1989), or the Frenchwoman Jeannette Vermeersch (1910-2001), all three of whom were elected to their respective parliaments.

Combining economic and ideological considerations, communist regimes also massively encouraged women's paid employment, and spread new representations, including those of the female labourer, tractor conductor and later engineer. With the Bolsheviks of the 1920s, and sometimes with the communists in power in Central Europe during the 1950s, women's paid employment went hand in hand with the community's management of domestic work, including childcare and education, which were ultimately supposed to lead to the end of traditional family roles and, according to Engels, "the decline of the family as an economic unit."

Communist regimes and parties nevertheless proceeded as though the roles they enabled women to assume were neutral, without exploring their androcentric dimension, hence the limits of emancipatory policies as well as the reappearance of gender differences and hierarchies in communist parties and the societies they dominated. In parties, the proportion of women in positions of responsibility fell as the level of hierarchy rose, something that was true in both the East and the West. In the GDR and Romania, the share of women in the party was 36% in the late 1980s but was lower in the Central Committee (12% in the GDR, never reaching the 25% desired in Romania). As women they were activists within mass organizations of a pacifist, charitable, cultural or local nature, more so than in the party itself. On the national level, they performed their duties in the domains of social affairs and education, which were by nature deemed to be feminine and therefore legitimate.

Moreover, women's entry into the workforce met with strong resistance within companies and took place selectively by favouring sectors that had long been feminized (light industry, sales, administration, agriculture, teaching), precisely those affected by mass unemployment after 1989.

This reproduction of traditional gender relations was joined by the failure of communist regimes to implement genuine management of domestic tasks by the community, aside from the opening of cafeterias for employees, nurseries and preschools, which were belatedly and unequally spread, with East German women being the best off. The time devoted to domestic work in the USSR remained unequally divided between the genders when both worked (27 hours per week for women, 10 hours for men in 1970). In the absence of a genuine evolution of household roles, this failure, which was never compensated for by the improbable arrival of a socialist consumer society, made the daily dysfunction of planned economies fall on women.

Communist regimes and parties not only failed to move beyond gender categories, they sometimes reaffirmed them, depending on the circumstances. This movement was first visible in the USSR, where the rise of "socialism"

in the 1930s called into question legislation from the 1920s, with the hardening of the law on divorce, the end of access to contraception and abortion, the dissolution of the *zhenodtel* (the Central Committee's "women's section" specifically tasked with women's issues), and the renewed value ascribed to the nuclear family within a pro-natalist perspective.

Official discourse, which was passed on by considerable iconography, dramatized men in roles such as labourers, soldiers (to whom partisans were added after 1945) and managers, while women personified mothers (often associated with the representation of peace after the Second World War) and peasants. This feminine figure very surprisingly replaced that of the bearded *muzhik* of the 1920s. Some activists used these representations for political purposes: during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), Dolores Ibárruri emphasized her role as a mother, while during the repression of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, Júlia Rajk (1914-1981) did the same in her role as the widow of Interior Minister Laslo Rajk (1909-1949) who was executed on the orders of the secretary of the Hungarian Communist Party, Mátyás Rákosi (1892-1971).

The conservative sexual morals of the Stalinist period gradually eroded from the 1960s (although Romania practiced a pro-natalist policy, forbidding abortion among other things), in accordance with evolutions underway in the West. This evolution took place in parallel with the rise in educational levels and the increase in women's paid employment, with Poland after 1956 being a particular case, undergoing a genuine traditionalist backlash that combined nationalism and hostility toward women's work. Nevertheless, pro-natalist preoccupations remained, as there was a tendency in Eastern countries during the 1970s maternalist policies (for instance the *Muttipolitik* in East Germany) which compensated for the lack of places in nurseries with generous parental leave.

Communist parties and regimes thus endeavoured to liberate women, but without confronting the question of gender relations. It was consequently difficult for them to politically defend specifically feminine interests, or to even propose a gendered analysis without challenging the overall communist project, hence the difficult relations during the 1970s between feminist movements and communist parties in the West, and their shared opposition to regimes in the East. Communist regimes nevertheless enabled the blossoming of a feminism that was less visible but more widespread, led by women in a variety of institutions—from works councils to the WIDF (Women's International Democratic Federation)—where they used their agencies to defend specifically feminine demands. In this respect, one could speak of feminists without feminism.

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