

INTRODUCTION: GENDER AND NATION

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This special issue seeks to investigate, in an interdisciplinary fashion, the relationship between nationalism and gender in the Polish context. Approaching the Polish nation from the theoretical framework of gender allows for unique insights into how each entity was and is continually constructed, challenged, and reinforced. From its theoretical underpinnings in the Enlightenment and Romantic periods, the idea of the modern Polish nation, and nationalism itself, was intertwined with considerations of the family and gender order, in addition to social rank and confessional identity. Elite notions of the ideal aristocratic or landowning family, with a rational, male head of household accompanied by his morally good wife who was to educate future generations of patriotic Poles, appeared in the eighteenth century and continued into the nineteenth, when it was mixed with spiritual, Romantic appeals for men to fight for independence, while women were to keep the flames of revolutionary fervor alive in the home. As more women joined the salaried labor force toward the end of the nineteenth century, and national uprisings lost their allure among most of the intelligentsia, questions about the working woman abounded: how would women's work outside the home affect families, gender relations, and the Polish national character? Indeed, what was the ideal Polish woman and man, and who decided such questions and how?

These questions, first broached in the period one scholar has dubbed "the age of questions,"¹ remain pertinent today, especially considering the strength of the far-right in Poland which promotes an inflexible, naturalized gender order where motherhood is seen as a woman's patriotic duty, one that supersedes concerns over her health and freedom. Such suppositions rely on a romanticized notion of Polish history and amount to a modern-day reincarnation of Poland's eternal battle

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1. Holly Case, *The Age of Questions: Or, A First Attempt at an Aggregate History of the Eastern, Social, Woman, American, Jewish, Polish, Bullion, Tuberculosis, and . . .* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

to stay alive in a hostile world, today's fight being a rhetorical tightrope of Poland against the decadent, atheist West *and* Eastern autocracy under Vladimir Putin.² In this narrative, a fixed, heterosexual gender order ensures women's reproductive capacity for the good of the nation, and a proper education in Polish Catholicism provides moral sustenance to future generations. One is reminded of the views of Eliza Orzeszkowa, a nineteenth-century writer who supported women's economic independence and "self-reliance" but not their political emancipation because such a radical move would threaten the survival of the Polish nation.³ Then as now, there are many people who challenge such a constricted view of the nation and gender, and this special issue seeks, in a small but significant way, to highlight the plurality of Polish thought and experience that reveals the contested nature of both concepts and how their relationship functions on both an individual and social level.

The idea for this issue is grounded in similar work conducted by an array of scholars in the past thirty years: in the realm of international, comparative perspectives, Joan Scott, Nira Yuval-Davis, and George L. Mosse warrant particular mention.⁴ These scholars and others were some of the first to draw attention to how the modern nation-state is conceived vis-à-vis gender, and how questions of citizenship or communal belonging coincide with debates on the ability and rights of disparate social groups to hold political power on a national scale. In Polish studies, scholars have investigated the relationship between gender and nationalism most forcefully in the fields of literary and cultural studies since the 1990s, when works by Maria Janion, Halina Filipowicz, and Grażyna Borkowska, among others, critiqued the canon of Polish literature from a feminist and gender studies perspective.⁵ Historians Anna Żarnowska and Andrzej Szwarz spearheaded a multi-volume effort starting in the 1990s, *Kobiety i . . .* [Women and . . .], that was the first major effort

2. For more on modern-day Polish "populist" ideology set in a wider European context, see Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk, *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment* (London: Routledge, 2021).

3. Eliza Orzeszkowa, *O Polsce—Francuzom: Fakty i teoria* (Warsaw: Bronisław Natanson, 1900), 80–81.

4. Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); Nira Yuval-Davis, "Gender and Nation," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 16, no. 4 (October 1993): 621–632; George L. Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe* (New York: H. Fertig, 1985). Also notable is *Gendered Nations: Nationalisms and Gender Order in the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. Ida Blom, Karen Hagemann, and Catherine Hall (New York: Berg, 2000).

5. Maria Janion, *Kobiety i duch inności* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Sic!, 1996); Grażyna Borkowska, *Cudzoziemki: Studia o polskiej prozie kobiecej* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Badań Literackich Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 1996), in English, Grażyna Borkowska, *Alienated Women: A Study on Polish Women's Fiction, 1845–1918*, trans. Ursula Phillips (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2001); Halina Filipowicz, "The Daughters of Emilia Plater," in *Engendering Slavic Literatures*, ed. Pamela Chester and Sibelan E. S. Forrester (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 34–58.

to systematically investigate Polish women's and gender history, with contributors from an interdisciplinary background exploring different aspects of Polish women and womanhood, at times broaching the question of national and gender identity. Historians such as Małgorzata Fidelis, Dobrochna Kałwa, and Katherine Jolluck have also furthered the study into the historical link between the nation and gender.⁶ Sociologists, philosophers, and anthropologists too have contributed valuable analysis, especially to the contemporary situation.⁷

In this issue, a few common points of entry to the discussion can be found: the role of political movements and rhetoric in defining social boundaries (Natalie Cornett, Joanna Dobkowska-Kubacka); how individual identity and community belonging impact expressions of Polishness and gender (Diana Filar, Agata Błaszczyk, Anna Müller); memorialization and the place of history within contemporary debates (Jodi Greig, Alicja Podbielska).

In the first section, the history of the Polish women's question and related emancipation movement are addressed starting with Cornett's piece on the political landscape of women's organizations at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Cornett finds striking similarities between opposing ideological camps, including consensus on motherhood as the basis for women's political rights, and relatedly, the importance of family in the programs of both socialist-leaning and national-Catholic women's groups. The independence of Poland was a watershed event in the women's rights movement, but the continual precarity of the new state, caused in part by its highly divisive political atmosphere, stifled the appearance of a more radical gender order or inclusive national body. Joanna Dobkowska-Kubacka delves into the late nineteenth-century concept of the "new Polish woman," a response to shifting economic realities and public opinion concerning gentry women's need to work, framed as supporting the family in "acceptable" professions that did not threaten supposed male domains of intellectual and heavy industrial labor. She finds that the Polish positivist press encouraged certain women's work, especially teaching, as a kind of sacrifice for the betterment of the Polish nation but was careful to graft it onto women's existing family duties rather than as a liberation from them. Thus, the emancipatory effects of women's labor at the end of the nineteenth century varied, with most elite women blending low-paying labor with unpaid

6. Małgorzata Fidelis, *Women, Communism, and Industrialization in Postwar Poland* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Dobrochna Kałwa, *Kobieta aktywna w Polsce międzywojennej: Dylematy środowisk kobiecych* (Kraków: Historia Jagellonica, 2001); Katherine R. Jolluck, *Exile and Identity: Polish Women in the Soviet Union during World War II* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002).

7. See Magdalena Grabowska, "Bringing the Second World In: Conservative Revolution(s), Socialist Legacies, and Transnational Silences in the Trajectories of Polish Feminism," *Signs* 37, no. 2 (2012): 385–411; Anna Zawadzka, "Polityka mimicry: Polityka historyczna i feminizm w Polsce," *Zadra: Pismo Feministyczne* 2, no. 1 (2017).

social work, constantly having to prove that they used their advanced knowledge and training for the public good rather than their own individual advancement.

In the second section, Diana Filar explores the meaning of Polish gender identity through her analysis of Karolina Waclawiak's novel, *How to Get into the Twin Palms* (2012), centered on a Polish-American woman who attempts to find some measure of power, security and belonging by "passing" as Russian in order to gain entry to an elite Los Angeles nightclub. Diana Filar's analysis of what "passing" means in the context of a "post-Soviet Slavic White ethnicity" shows how in some ways, there is a degree of flexibility and power available to "White" European immigrants as opposed to other racialized groups in the United States, but that the precarity of Eastern Europeanness also comes with its own baggage, as does the position of sexualized womanhood. Another view into how Polish immigrant women attempt to integrate and belong to a foreign place comes from Agata Błaszczuk's article on Polish secondary schools in-exile that functioned in the United Kingdom since the start of World War II. In her deep descriptions of the schools, replete with first-hand accounts from students and British officials, she reveals how ill-suited the schools were, especially in the early years, to facilitate the integration of young women either into the local economy or British higher education system. Polish women relied on the virtues of hard work and discipline, as observed by British officials, to survive the harsh conditions of their boarding schools and temporary camps. This attitude of self-reliance can also be found in Anna Müller's account of women soldiers in World War II who embodied *postawa* ("standing," a concept related to discipline) to sustain them in the face of resistance they endured both as women and resistance fighters, a concept that goes beyond a straightforward reliance on old Polish tropes related to martyrdom and sacrifice in the fight for Polish independence. Taken together, these three articles provide insight into how Polish women grapple with feelings of communal displacement and exclusion, and how they redefine both Polishness and their gender identity along the way.

The final section addresses memorialization as it applies to rethinking gender order and Polish nationalism. Alicja Podbielska chronicles how inflated narratives of Poles who rescued Jews during World War II, championed by both contemporary liberal and conservative forces, serve to distort Polish-Jewish relations and the complex biographies of the rescuers themselves. These laudatory narratives rely on simplistic, traditionalized images of Polish women as Catholic, caring mothers, and Polish men as strong leaders and resistance fighters, while invisibilizing non-Catholic Poles and ignoring Polish antisemitism. Podbielska shows that a different rendering of rescuers is possible and could lead to a national reckoning that would challenge stale tropes of female piety and sacrifice and of militarized male heroism. Rounding out this section is Jodi Greig's piece on present-day cabaret renditions of the nineteenth-century Polish patriot and writer Maria Konopnicka, as performed by Furja (aka "artist-activist-historian" Agnieszka Weseli) and the Barbie Girls, Poland's first "all lesbian, about-lesbian" cabaret troupe. Greig analyzes Furja's cabaret performance in light of recent attempts by Polish LGBT and feminist

groups to claim her as an icon because of her non-heteronormative lifestyle, while nationalist groups revere her for her fervent patriotism (and ignore her decision to leave her husband and six children to live with another woman in Warsaw and support herself financially). Furja reinterprets Konopnicka's life and fictional works to reclaim the Polish nation for lesbians in a stunning reworking of Konopnicka's best-known poem, "Rota" [The oath]. Greig sees possibilities for a new sort of Polish patriotism that gives space to female sexual desire and non-heteronormative practices, and that posits sexual freedom as a national duty.

When tracing the development of the Polish nation and gender order through these articles, we can observe that the conservative ethos of female sacrifice and male martyrdom, partially rooted in Catholic teaching but in the Polish case very much tied with the long struggle for independence over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, holds considerable weight both in the popular imaginary and on an individual basis. However, this does not mean that Polish men and women do not reappropriate and transform this construct according to their own desires and circumstances or reject it altogether. Thus, the model on the ground looks much more varied than either the Romantic Polish bards or current Polonocentric nationalists would have their audience believe. And of course, other ways of being Polish or expressing gender outside of this paradigm exist and existed; the last two articles most forcefully show deviations from the conservative model of gender and nation, and it is not by coincidence that I have placed these last as a hope that new ways of constructing gender and the nation, in part fueled by an honest reconciliation with the past, continue to emerge in Poland today.

Lastly, a word on the cover art of this special issue, which was chosen to encapsulate this issue's reworking of gender and history in the Polish context. The still is taken from the film essay, "Niolaam Ja Se Kochaneczke" [Once I had a lover], by London-based Polish artist Katarzyna Perlak. Perlak's film reclaims and queers traditional Polish and Lemkov folk songs, images, and places to challenge our nationalistic and heterosexual understandings of the past. Perlak also invites us to think about why queer love and alternate understandings of history have not been preserved and celebrated in folk history. More about this work and others can be found on Perlak's website: <https://katarzynaperlak.com>.