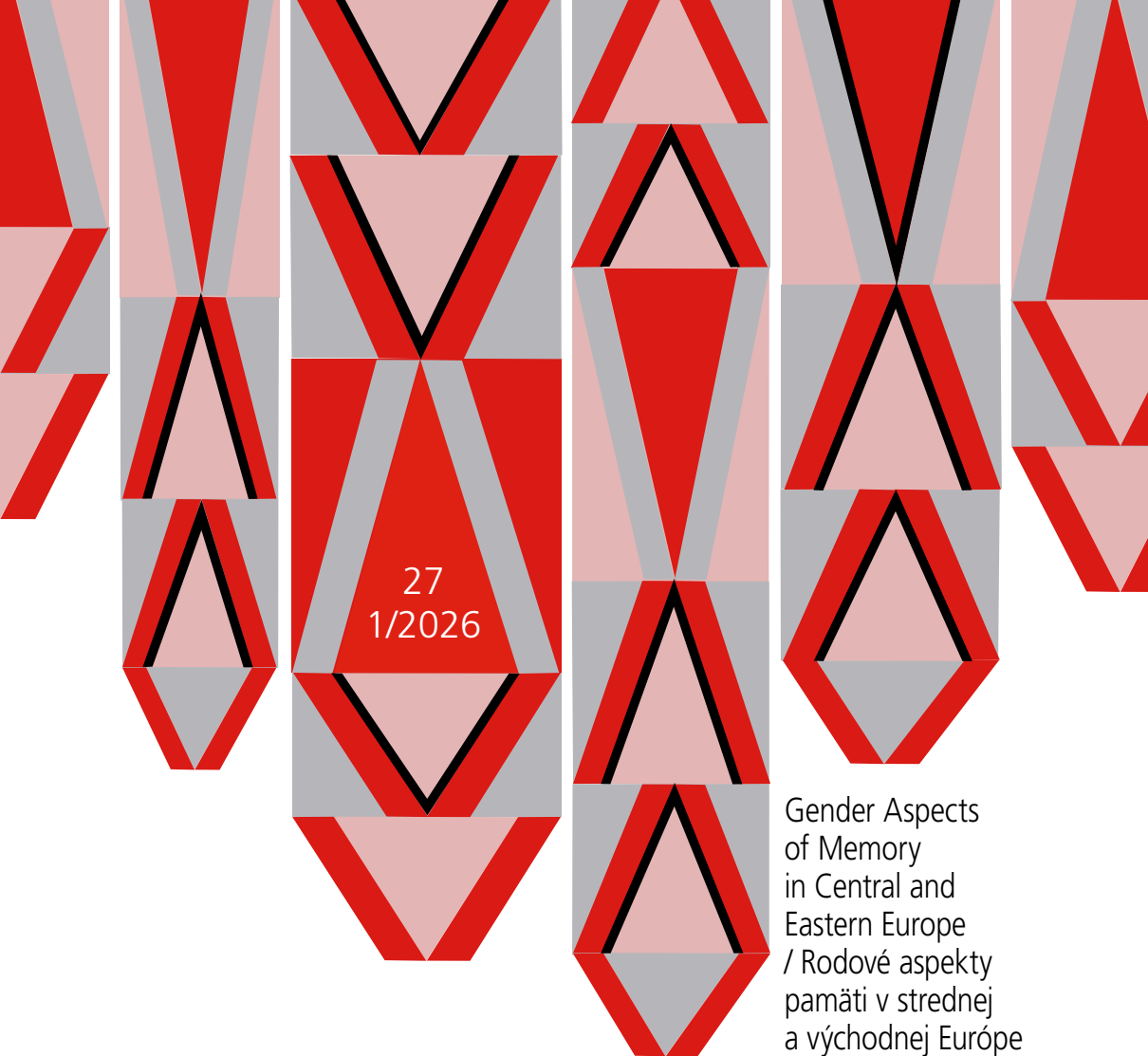




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Gender Aspects
of Memory
in Central and
Eastern Europe
/ Rodové aspekty
pamäti v strednej
a východnej Európe

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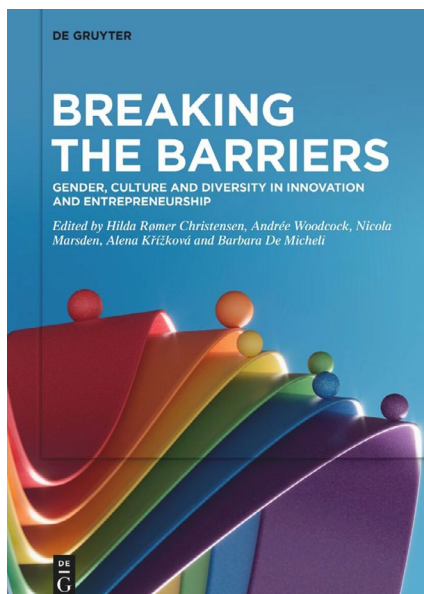
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Breaking the Barriers. Gender, Culture and Diversity in Innovation and Entrepreneurship.

**Christensen, H. R., Woodcock, A., Marsden, D.,
Křížková, A., De Micheli, B. (eds.).**

This book frames entrepreneurship and innovation through gender, cultural, and intersectional lenses. It introduces the concept of the “cultural fix” as a fourth strategy for gender-responsive smart innovation and entrepreneurship complementing the three fixes developed under the gendered innovation project. The cultural fix is a transformative approach that embeds culture into studies and practices of innovation and entrepreneurship. This involves elaborating a methodology with conceptual, strategic, and empirical dimensions. Culture influences not only how business initiatives are developed but also how norms and prejudices are practiced. Culture can be both constraining norms but also enabling, a “toolkit” for entrepreneurs and innovators. This book helps to explain why entrepreneurship remains associated with masculinity, while women are often stereotyped as outsiders and unsuited for business, and attracts attention to culture and practices in shaping possible avenues for change.



Berlin: de Gruyter, 2026

The fulltext of the book is available online free of charge:
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783112219850-202>



Revisiting the Gender Politics of Memory: Epistemic Struggles, Architectures, and Ecologies of Remembering in East Central Europe¹

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In 2025, the Czech National Museum dedicated a solo exhibition to the life and legacy of Františka Plamínková (1875–1942) – a Czech teacher, politician, women’s rights pioneer, and anti-fascist resistance fighter. Until the exhibition, the public presence (or rather absence of) her story had been emblematic of how significant historical women are treated in collective memory. Though occasionally commemorated by feminist activists, Plamínková remained largely invisible to official mnemonic institutions. The exhibition, driven by the localised ‘herstory turn’ in contemporary memory-making (Pető 2021), marked a milestone: Moving past the institution’s traditional reliance on allegorical muses and symbolic female figures, Plamínková became the first historical woman to have her portrait displayed on the museum’s facade. And yet, it becomes clear to visitors walking through the exhibition – exploring the testimonies of her pupils, the physical spaces in which the women’s rights movement operated, and Plamínková’s networks with women both at home and abroad – that the exhibition’s narrative structure continues to navigate a subtle tension. It balances the institutional

¹ Zuzana Maďarová’s editorial work on this thematic issue and article was supported by the Slovak Research and Development Agency under the Contract no. APVV-24-0426.

and cultural demand for a 'great person' narrative with a more nuanced portrayal of collective labour and identity.

Rather than merely presenting Plamínková as an isolated historical heroine or a static role model for contemporary political struggles for women's empowerment, the exhibition contextualises her life within a broader, collaborative social movement. As the exhibition text itself states: 'Františka Plamínková was not alone in her efforts! She was very aware of the importance of collective organised work, networking and women's solidarity. She was a leading figure and part of the movement.' Through this approach, curator and historian Jitka Gelnarová actively challenges the paradigm of the solitary, almost individualistic historical protagonist – a framework all too frequently applied to both male and female historical actors. Moreover, the exhibition explicitly invites visitors, particularly educators and students, to rethink the standard national narrative taught in schools and preserved in mainstream historical sources: the myth that women in Czechoslovakia were simply 'granted' suffrage in 1918, rather than having actively fought for it.

Ultimately, the exhibition serves as a powerful mnemonic site, where the story of one historical individual becomes a vehicle for retelling the history of the broader women's movement and of a specific period in the history of Czechoslovakia itself. In this regard, the project aligns closely with the theoretical frameworks outlined by Linda Zerilli (2008) for political science and Joan Wallach Scott (1986) for historiography. It does not just render women's experiences visible where they have been systemically forgotten; it actively disrupts dominant collective memories of historical events, challenges traditional norms of visibility and significance, and unpacks the very mechanisms and processes through which gendered collective memory is constructed.

This special issue is animated by a similarly multi-layered landscape that can function as an intellectual, affective, and geopolitical map of feminist memory studies in, from, and about East Central Europe. As readers 'walk through' this volume, they are invited to navigate through diverse approaches to mnemonic practices – ranging from retrieving lost memories of women to a structural critique of historical events, institutions, and methodologies. Readers will encounter an attempt to enrich and diversify the history of the Czechoslovak dissident movement by foregrounding its female participants. The path will then shift to analysing the structural mechanisms of state memory-making that render women's contributions to nation-building in Kosovo invisible, before adopting a queer perspective to demonstrate how ethnographic archives can challenge the homophobic, nationalist project in contemporary Hungary, or rethinking the late 1980s in state-socialist Poland through the lens of artistic performance. This exploration deliberately blurs the line between textual analysis and physical space. As well as visiting traditional archives, *táncház* (dance houses), and theatres, readers will be invited on a series of actual, on-the ground, walking



tours. One stop on the tour involves critically engaging with the Varna *Monument of Soviet–Bulgarian Friendship*, where a gender lens illuminates the power dynamics and affective economy of public socialist architecture. Another tour will take readers through the streets of Budapest, prompting readers to question the emancipatory potential of urban memory projects where visual visibility is treated as the sole criterion for progress.

Embedded within these physical landscapes, while simultaneously moving beyond them, is the digital sphere – a potentially democratising, yet highly volatile ecosystem. In this part of their journey readers' will encounter the digital archives documenting Ukrainian women at war, which are actively shaping both immediate and future memories of female participation in defence and nation-building. The trajectory concludes by exploring the digitised, mediated memories of restricted reproductive rights in state-socialist Romania – a historical trauma gaining urgent resonance amidst contemporary illiberal efforts to curtail sexual and reproductive justice.

Taken together, the contributions – comprising five peer-reviewed articles, three essays, and two book reviews – intentionally move beyond a simple politics of recovery. While they share an underlying commitment to uncovering marginalised or erased women's experiences, they simultaneously demonstrate that visibility alone does not dismantle the deeper, gendered structures that govern historical meaning. Instead, memory is revealed as a dynamic, contested field in which recognition, authority, and political belonging are continuously negotiated.

Developments in memory studies reflected in this Special Issue

One of the key developments to emerge in the field of memory studies in recent years is the shift in focus from recognition and recovery – as outlined above – to uncovering the processes and logic of memory-making, where gender is understood as a key structuring principle (Pető, Phoenix 2019; Dragojlovic, Quinan 2023; Gray, Martin, Reeves 2026). A related development is the shift in attention from what is remembered to the form of remembrance itself, as studies are increasingly analysing how infrastructure – in the form of space, sound, narrative sequencing, emotional identification, and affective registers – produces gendered subjects within national, social, and sexuality-tied boundaries (Li 2023; O'Mahony 2024). To understand, challenge, and overcome these boundaries, queer and trans approaches in memory studies intervene in recognition and recovery work, while offering multiple invitations to rethink and reframe temporality, archives, and relatedness (Çalışkan 2019, 2023; Dragojlovic, Quinan 2023).

There is a strong strand of scholarship that conceptualises memory work as a crucial part of changing political projects, especially far right and illiberalism (Pető 2021;

Pető, Klacsmann 2025; Rosenfeld 2021). Gender matters here both as an object of institutional attack and as the core of the broader reconstruction of the political and social order (Pető 2021). While studies mostly focus on the mnemonic work by far right and illiberal actors, gendered memory-building is also connected to political counter-publics and reparative justice (Pető, Phoenix 2019).

The theorisation of memory as labour, while far from being new, provides the field with a language for thinking about how survivors' work, activists' curation, care work, and embodied testimony are converted into durable mnemonic value and then institutionalised as mnemonic capital (Allen 2014; Reading 2016, 2019, 2021). 'Whether asserting the right to retain a name, to generate a commemoration of women's suffrage, to change the list and create a gender equal list of scientists, to amplify and reinforce memories of abuse – all these mnemonic acts, great and small, require consciously controlling the means of remembering, the investment of daily mnemonic labour and accrual of mnemonic value to create long term and enduring mnemonic capital in various states', asserts Anna Reading (2019: 2).

Building on this conceptualisation of mnemonic labour, the authors of this special issue engage in a twofold intervention: they examine the processes, circumstances, and forms of intervention of various mnemonic actors, such as performers in Poland, dissidents in Czechoslovakia, folk dancers in Hungary, and combatants in Ukraine. At the same time, besides their academic work, they also contribute their own mnemonic labour, potentially recalibrating the value these memories gain in the public and academic spheres.

In this sense, we hope that the journey this special issue provides does not end with its publication; on the contrary, we intend for it to start a new life among readers, scholars, activists, and students. We are fully aware that the issue enters an academic field structured by unequal power relations along the lines of the East and West – or the Global North, South, and 'periphery' – imperial and colonial materialities, scientometrics, and impact factors, as well as fashionable academic buzzwords. As scholars working from Slovakia, we have been acutely aware that questions of memory are inseparable from questions of epistemic authority. But we still hope that the issue will make a valuable contribution to the gendered redistribution of mnemonic capital (Reading 2019). That this distribution is in flux is evident from the recent contributions of inspiring mnemonic actors in East Central Europe working within the framework of research projects such as 'The History of Feminist Political Thought and Women's Rights Discourses in East Central Europe 1929–2001', led by Zsófia Lóránd, and 'Women Experts and Feminist Knowledge Production in Post-War East Central Europe (1945–1989)', led by Annina Gagyoiva and Natalia Jarska. These new archives, translations of resources, and the rethinking of the canon of women's thought all contribute to new forms of memory and their global institutionalisation.



At the same time, feminist activists in East Central Europe have been doing grass-roots mnemonic work for decades – for instance, by constructing women’s history projects or building, caring for, and reproducing feminist libraries and archives. This work is currently threatened by illiberal political interventions, – for example, the Jiřina řiková Library run by the Gender Studies organisation in Prague, Czech Republic, and the first and biggest feminist library in Slovakia, run by the organisation ASPEKT in Bratislava, are both at risk of demise. These political steps confirm that mnemonic work and the undoing of what is known about our society and its gender order is at the heart of illiberal political projects. In this context, it is crucial to understand and rethink different types of mnemonic initiatives.

One of many possible readings of the Special Issue

The types of intervention made in this special issue reflect the ideational dynamics within memory studies described above. They aim to deepen and broaden the understanding of gendered mnemonic work in East Central Europe and beyond, while clearly re-valuing and re-structuring public and academic mnemonic fields. As one possible approach to this special issue, we suggest reading its contributions along four thematic axes: 1) epistemic injustice and the struggle for recognition; 2) architectures and ecologies of memory; 3) nationalism and coloniality; 4) postmemory and temporality.

Epistemic injustice and the struggle for recognition

A central conceptual thread running through this issue is the problem of epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007), which is understood as the structural denial of certain groups’ credibility as knowers and historical agents. In the context of gendered memory, this injustice is not only about exclusion from archives or historical narratives, but about the devaluation of specific forms of labour, testimony, and experience.

This is particularly evident in Marta Edith Holeřková’s analysis of women’s participation in the Czechoslovak dissident movement around Charter 77. Holeřková shows that women were not marginal actors in this intellectual and political environment but were central to its operation as organisers, translators, editors, archivists, and producers of informal intellectual spaces. However, their contributions remain under-represented in the ‘canonical’ memory of dissidence, which privileges visible authorship and public leadership. The domestic ‘salons’ organised by women emerge here as alternative epistemic spaces in which political and intellectual life was sustained outside formal institutions.

A similar logic of epistemic exclusion operates in Lea Hensch’s study of Kosovo, where post-war commemorative culture elevates the figure of the militarised male

freedom fighter while confining women to symbolic roles as mothers of the nation or passive victims. Women's extensive participation in nation-building is thus not denied outright and openly but is reframed in ways that strips these women of political agency.

Mariya Shcherbyna and Tetiana Havlin extend this argument into a current war context through their analysis of women combatants in the ongoing Russian military aggression in Ukraine. The concept of epistemic repair (Fricker 2007) highlights how digital memory practices can actively reconstruct women as historical subjects in real time. However, even here, recognition and mnemonic capital are not automatic: they must be produced through a narrative struggle against entrenched androcentric and imperial memory regimes.

The academic effort towards epistemic repair is reconstructed in Mária Mokra's review of the compendium *Texts and Contexts from the History of Feminism and Women's Rights: East Central Europe, Second Half of the Twentieth Century*, edited by Zsofia Lorand, Adela Hincu, Jovana Mihajlovic Trbovc, and Katarzyna Stanczak-Wislicz. Mokra offers an intergenerational reading of this feminist intervention into the canon of political thought, reclaiming lost ideas and intellectual frameworks while offering a glimpse into the process of post-memory in the making.

Architectures and ecologies of memory: monuments, streets, archives, and digital platforms

A second key axis of the issue concerns the architectures (Bahloul 1996) and ecologies (Brown, Hoskins 2010; Hoskins 2011) through which memory is materialised and circulated. These are not neutral containers of remembrance but active systems of classification, meaning-making, and transformation.

Dafina Nedelcheva's analysis of the *Monument to Bulgarian–Soviet Friendship in Varna* shows how monuments function as pedagogical devices that shape affective relationships to history. The monument does not merely commemorate 'liberation' but authoritatively teaches visitors to feel geopolitical hierarchy as natural and desirable. Through its layered symbolic structure, imperial, state-socialist, and nationalist meanings accumulate into what she describes as a palimpsestic formation of memory. Here, memory is represented as a continuously reactivated script that organises affectivity, identity, and political subjectivity.

Rahel K. Turai's study of street-naming practices in Budapest extends this infrastructural perspective into the everyday governance of urban spaces. Street names honouring socialist women such as Anna Koltoi become sites of continual ideological negotiation. Their repeated erasure and partial restoration across different political regimes reveal how public memory is governed through administrative practices that



render certain historical subjects visible or invisible depending on the shifting political logic. The street, in this sense, becomes an archive where competing regimes of value are produced.

The ambiguous role of archives is explored in Anisha Anantpurkar's essay about folk dance in Hungary. On the one hand, ethnographic films are presented as a technology through which an imagined Hungarianness is constructed, embodied, and transmitted. At the same time, however, these films serve as tools through which the dominant notions of authenticity – tied to ethno-nationalism, heteronormativity, and cultural purity – are challenged. Approached from a queer perspective, the archival films are subjected to a creative reinterpretation, thereby supporting the construction of alternative identities, somatic freedom, and the development of a counter-memory.

Digital ecologies introduce a further transformation. In the Ukrainian case, digital platforms such as *Incredible Women* and *Her War Story* enable new forms of participatory memory-making that bypass traditional institutional gatekeepers. These initiatives not only preserve testimonies but actively construct new historical subjects through multimedia narration. Yet, as Monica Ciobanu's analysis of Romanian digital memory shows, digital visibility does not guarantee emancipatory outcomes. The *Jurnalul Decretului* project reveals how memories of reproductive violence under state-socialist pro-natalist policies become sites of ideological contestation, mobilised both for reproductive rights advocacy and for conservative, 'anti-gender' political agendas. Digital memory thus emerges as an ecology of both democratization and the dismantling of democratic principles.

Gender, nationalism, and coloniality

A third major thread that runs through this issue is the entanglement of gender with nationalism and colonial power. Several contributions demonstrate that collective memory is a key site where gendered hierarchies are naturalised through nationalist and imperial narratives.

In Kosovo, the exclusion of women from national memory is structurally linked to militarised nationalism, which foregrounds the figure of the male fighter as the primary embodiment of the nation. In Bulgaria, the narrative of 'liberation' operates through gendered and affective tropes that recast geopolitical hierarchy in the familial terms of protection and dependency. In both cases, gender functions as a symbolic mechanism through which political domination is rendered legitimate.

These dynamics are further complicated by the postcolonial and decolonial perspectives applied in several contributions, particularly in the Ukrainian and Bulgarian cases. Here, memory is framed as a site of interpretive sovereignty: the capacity to

narrate one's own history becomes central to processes of decolonisation. The figure of the 'woman at war', as proposed in the analysis of testimonies of Ukrainian female combatants, emerges as a decolonial commemorative subject who disrupts both imperial and nationalist frameworks of gendered memory.

Post-memory, intergenerational transmission, and temporal complexity

In this special issue we also foreground the temporal dimensions of memory, particularly through the concept of post-memory (Hirsch 2012). In the Romanian case, the intergenerational transmission of trauma related to reproductive policies under state socialism reveals how memory is shaped by both affective inheritance and contemporary political struggles. Similarly, the articles focused on Poland and Romania demonstrate how experiences of state socialism are reactivated and reinterpreted by subsequent generations, often in ways that are politically contested.

The issue's focus on intergenerational transmission and alternative memory practices is further enriched by Rita Müller's essay on the 1988 Mielno gathering and its later theatrical re-enactment in *Lesbian Sunset*. By examining how queer histories survive not through stable archives but through mediated recollection, performance, and affective attachment, the essay challenges the notion that invisibility necessarily implies absence. Instead, it reveals memory to be a dynamic ecology in which meanings are continuously reactivated across time. The case of Mielno demonstrates how queer engagements with the past can generate new forms of historical consciousness, while simultaneously questioning established oppositions between past and present, East and West, and identity and politics.

The temporal complexity of memory is further deepened in Roman Džambazovič's review of Olga Gyárfášová's interviews with women from the independent scene in Bratislava in late state-socialist Czechoslovakia. Here, memory becomes explicitly dialogical: the author engages in a parallel conversation with her younger self, blurring the boundary between past and present subjectivities. This reflexive structure highlights memory not as transmission alone but as ongoing self-construction across time.

Architectures and ecologies of memory as epistemic struggle

Across these diverse contexts, a shared analytical insight emerges: memory is neither a stable archive nor a simple narrative of the past. Rather, it is a form of labour conducted within material structures by both individual and collective actors. It is an ensemble of architectures and ecologies of memory that organise epistemic authority, political legitimacy, and social recognition. Within these architectures and ecologies, gender operates as a key principle of differentiation, shaping who can be recognised as a historical subject and under what conditions.



This perspective allows us to move beyond a binary framework of remembering and forgetting. The contributions show that women and queer people are not simply excluded from memory; rather, they are often included in highly constrained forms that limit their agency, such as symbolic motherhood, victimhood, or auxiliary labour. Conversely, new forms of visibility – particularly those enabled by digital technologies or grassroots archival practices – do not automatically dismantle existing hierarchies of recognition.

Instead, memory is revealed to be a field of tension between epistemic repair and epistemic regulation. On the one hand, feminist and decolonial practices seek to restore women's and queer people's subjectivity as knowledge-producing agents. On the other, nationalist, imperial, and illiberal frameworks continuously reshape the memory landscape in ways that either reassert established hierarchies or produce new forms of hierarchical social order.

Gendered memory as a site of political possibility: by way of conclusion

The contributions to this special issue demonstrate that gender and memory intersect not only at the level of representation but also at the level of epistemic and political architectures and ecologies. By bringing together feminist memory studies, postcolonial and decolonial theory, epistemologies of injustice, and analyses of digital and spatial memory, this issue offers an in-depth reflection on the politics of remembering in East Central Europe. It is also the outcome of largely invisible mnemonic labour over the course of more than a year and an invitation to further conversation.

Although this Special Issue is mostly devoted to East Central Europe, it also provides an opportunity to make global connections. As we have known for some time now, a region is not a peripheral case, but rather a particularly revealing site through which to understand the broader global transformations of how memory, gender, and power intersect.

Clearly, memory has been reasserting itself as a very present and consequential (even if volatile) arena of political life. Across the so-called global West, disputes over monuments, historical curricula, war remembrance, and the legitimacy of competing historical narratives have become central to political conflict.

Thus, memory has remained one of the most contested terrains of contemporary politics, not only in terms of what is remembered, but also in terms of how remembering itself is organised, authorised, and experienced. Feminist scholarship has long shown that collective memory is never neutral: it is shaped by gendered hierarchies of visibility, authority, and legitimacy. However, the contributions to this Special Issue on the gender aspects of memory suggest that the stakes of memory are not ex-

hausted by questions of inclusion or omission. Across diverse contexts in East-Central and Southeastern Europe, memory emerges as a field of epistemic struggle in which historical subjects are produced, regulated, and transformed.

Rather than treating memory as a repository of the past, the articles in this issue examine it as a collection of distinctive architectures and ecologies of memory – material, institutional, digital, and affective – through which gendered political and cultural orders are continuously reproduced and contested.

These architectures and ecologies determine not only who is remembered, but also who can be recognised as a knower, a political actor, or a legitimate subject of history. They also influence how experiences travel across time, from lived experience to intergenerational transmission, from private testimony to public commemoration, and from embodied memory to digital circulation.

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Nové pohľady na rodovú politiku pamäti: epistemické zápasy, rámce a priestory spomínania v stredovýchodnej Európe

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V roku 2025 venovalo české Národní muzeum samostatnú výstavu životu a odkazu učiteľky, političky, priekopníčky v zápase za práva žien a protifašistickej bojovníčky Františky Plamínkovej (1875 – 1942). Až do tejto výstavy bola prítomnosť (alebo skôr absencia) jej príbehu vo verejnom priestore symptomatická pre prístup kolektívnej pamäti k významným historickým aktérkam. Hoci ju feministické aktivistky príležitostne pripomínali, Plamínková zostávala pre oficiálne pamäťové inštitúcie z veľkej časti neviditeľná. Výstava, ktorú podnietil aj lokalizovaný „obrat k histórii žien“ (*herstory turn*) v súčasnom vytváraní pamäti (Pető 2021), predstavovala mĺnlik: múzeum siahlo mimo tradičného súboru alegorických múz a ženských symbolov a Plamínková sa stala prvou historickou aktérkou, ktorej portrét vystavili na fasáde múzea. Keď však návštevníčky a návštevníci prechádzajú výstavou a oboznamujú sa so svedectvami jej žiačok, s fyzickými priestormi, kde pôsobilo hnutie za práva žien, a s Plamínkovej spolupracovníčkami doma i v zahraničí, ukazuje sa, že naratívna štruktúra výstavy balansuje na tenkej hrane. Na hrane medzi inštitucionálnou a kultúrnou požiadavkou na príbeh o „veľkej osobnosti“ s nuansovanejším zobrazením kolektívnej práce a identity.

Výstava nezobrazuje Plamínkovú ako izolovanú historickú hrdinku či statický vzor pre súčasné politické zápasy za práva žien, jej život zasadzuje do kontextu širšieho spoločenského hnutia. Ako sa uvádza v jednom z textov výstavy: „Františka Plamínková

ve svém úsilí nebyla sama! Velmi dobře si uvědomovala význam kolektivní organizované práce, vytváření sítí a ženské solidarity. Byla vedoucí postavou a součástí hnutí.“ Týmto prístupom kurátorka a historička Jitka Gelnarová spochybňuje paradigmu osamelého, takmer individualistického historického protagonistu – rámec, v ktorom sa často prezentujú nielen historickí aktéri, ale aj aktérky. Výstava navyše pozýva verejnosť, najmä pedagogičky a študentov, aby prehodnotili prevládajúci naratív, ktorý sa reprodukuje v historických zdrojoch aj v kurikulumoch: mýtus, že v Československu v roku 1918 ženy „dostali“ volebné právo a nemuseli sa oň aktívne zasadzovať.

Výstava je silným mnemotechnickým priestorom, v ktorom sa príbeh konkrétnej historickej postavy stáva médiom na prerozprávanie dejín tak ženského hnutia, ako aj jedného obdobia Československa. V tomto zmysle nadväzuje na teoretické rámce, ktoré Linda Zerilli (2008) načrtla v kontexte politických vied a Joan Wallach Scott (1986) v kontexte historiografie. Okrem toho, že výstava zviditeľňuje skúsenosti žien tam, kde boli systematicky vytesňované, a aktívne narúša dominantné kolektívne spomienky na historické udalosti, zároveň spochybňuje tradičné normy viditeľnosti a signifikantnosti, pričom odhaľuje samotné mechanizmy a procesy, prostredníctvom ktorých sa konštruuje rodovo podmienená kolektívna pamäť.

Toto tematické číslo je inšpirované podobným prístupom – ukladá na seba rôzne vrstvy, ktoré môžu spolu slúžiť ako intelektuálna, afektívna a geopolitická mapa feministických štúdií pamäti v stredovýchodnej Európe. Pozývame vás, aby ste sa na prechádzke týmto číslom zoznámili s rôznorodými prístupmi k mnemonickým praktikám – od zviditeľňovania zabudnutých spomienok žien až po štrukturálnu kritiku historických udalostí, inštitúcií a metodológií. Stretnete sa so snahou obohatiť a rozrôzniť históriu disidentského hnutia v Československu upriamením pozornosti na špecifiká pôsobenia žien v disente. Potom cesta povedie k analýze štrukturálnych mechanizmov, ktorými štát utvára kolektívnu pamäť a pritom vytesňuje podiel žien na budovaní národa v Kosove. Ďalej sa dostávate ku kvíru perspektívy, ktorá v prvom prípade spochybňuje homofóbny, nacionalistický projekt v súčasnom Maďarsku cez aktívny prístup k etnografickým archívom a v druhom prípade prehodnocuje koniec 80. rokov v Poľsku prostredníctvom divadelného predstavenia. Toto skúmanie zámerne stiera hranicu medzi textovou analýzou a fyzickým priestorom. Okrem návštev tradičných archívov, tanečných domov (tanečných domov) a divadla vás pozývame na sériu prehliadok priamo v teréne. Jednou zo zastávok je kritické čítanie pamätníka sovietsko-bulharského priateľstva vo Varne, kde rodovo kritický pohľad osvetľuje mocenské vzťahy a afektívnu ekonomiku socialistickej architektúry. Prechádzka pokračuje ulicami Budapešti a podnecuje k premýšľaniu nad emancipačným potenciálom projektov mestskej pamäti, ktorých hlavným cieľom je zviditeľnenie žien.

Do týchto fyzických priestorov je včlenený potenciálne demokratizujúci, no zároveň veľmi nestabilný ekosystém – digitálna sféra, ktorá zároveň presahuje ich hrani-

ce. Tu sa stretnete s digitálnymi archívmi, ktoré dokumentujú skúsenosti ukrajinských bojovníčok v prebiehajúcej vojne, a tým formujú súčasné, ale aj budúce spomienky na účasť žien na obrane a budovaní národa. Prechádzka tematickým číslom vrcholí skúmaním digitálnych spomienok zdieľaných na sociálnych sieťach, ktoré prerozprávajú obdobie štátneho socializmu v Rumunsku po prijatí dekrétu kriminalizujúceho interrupcie; približujú historickú traumu, ktorá obzvlášť rezonuje v kontexte súčasných neliberálnych snáh o obmedzenie sexuálnej a reprodukčnej spravodlivosti.

Všetky príspevky – päť recenzovaných článkov, tri eseje a dve knižné recenzie – sa vymaňujú z rámca, ktorý presadzuje zjednodušujúcu politiku zviditeľňovania. Hoci ich spája úsilie odhaľovať skúsenosti marginalizovaných alebo zabudnutých aktérok, zároveň dokazujú, že samotná viditeľnosť nestačí na narúšanie a prehodnocovanie určovania historického významu v zaužívaných rodovo zaťažených štruktúrach. Pamäť sa tu ukazuje ako dynamický priestor vyjednávania, v ktorom sa neustále formuje a prehodnocuje uznanie, autorita a politická príslušnosť.

Pamäťové štúdiá z novej perspektívy

Presun ťažiska pozornosti od redistribúcie uznania a zviditeľňovania k odhaľovaniu procesov a logiky vytvárania pamäti, kde je rod chápaný ako kľúčový štruktúrujúci princíp, je jedným z hlavných vývojových trendov, ktoré sa v uplynulých rokoch objavili v oblasti pamäťových štúdií (pozri napr. Pető & Phoenix 2019; Dragojlovic, Quinan 2023; Gray et al. 2026). Ďalší súvisiaci trend presunul pozornosť od toho, na čo sa spomína, k samotnej forme spomínania: štúdie čoraz častejšie analyzujú, ako infraštruktúra – v podobe priestoru, zvuku, naratívneho sledu, emocionálnej identifikácie a afektívnych registrov – vytvára rodovo príznačné subjekty v rámci štátnych, sociálnych či sexuálne vymedzených hraníc (Li 2023; O'Mahony 2024). S cieľom pochopiť, spochybníť a prekonať tieto hranice zasahujú kvír a trans prístupy v pamäťových štúdiách do práce usilujúcej sa nanovo distribuovať uznanie a zviditeľňovať zabudnuté, pričom ponúkajú viacero podnetov na prehodnocovanie a preformulovanie archívov, temporalít aj vzájomných vzťahov (Çalışkan 2019, 2023; Dragojlovic, Quinan 2023).

Významná časť vedeckej literatúry chápe prácu s pamäťou ako kľúčovú súčasť meniacich sa politických projektov, najmä krajnej pravice a neliberalizmu (Pető 2021; Pető, Klacsmann 2025; Rosenfeld 2021). Rodová problematika sa tu stáva cieľom inštitucionálnych útokov, ako aj kľúčovou zložkou širšej rekonštrukcie politického a spoločenského poriadku (Pető 2021). Hoci prácu s pamäťou v tomto kontexte uskutočňujú predovšetkým neliberálni aktéri ako súčasť svojej stratégie a každodennej praxe, rodovo podmienená práca s pamäťou sa spája aj s politickými kontraverznosťami a restoratívnou spravodlivosťou (Pető, Phoenix 2019). Teoretické uchopenie budova-

nia pamäti ako práce – hoci nejde o nový prístup – poskytuje tejto oblasti výskumu jazyk na uvažovanie o tom, ako sa práca preživších, aktivistická kurátorská činnosť, opatrovateľská práca či stelesnené svedectvá premieňajú na trvalú mnemotechnickú hodnotu a následne sa inštitucionalizujú ako mnemotechnický kapitál (Allen 2016; Reading 2010, 2016, 2019, 2021). Ako tvrdí Anna Reading (2019: 2): „Či už ide o presadzovanie práva ponechať si vlastné meno, vytvorenie pripomienky ženského volebného práva, zmenu zoznamu vedeckých osobností tak, aby odrážal rodovú rovnosť, alebo o zviditeľňovanie a podporu výpovednosti spomienok na zneužívanie – všetky tieto akty spomínania, veľké i malé, si vyžadujú vedomú kontrolu nad prostriedkami spomínania, každodennú investíciu mnemotechnickej práce a akumuláciu mnemotechnickej hodnoty, aby sa vytvoril dlhodobý a trvácny mnemotechnický kapitál v jeho rozmanitých podobách.“ (2019: 2, vlastný preklad)

Keď nadviážeme na túto koncepciu mnemonickej práce, môžeme tvrdiť, že autorky tohto tematického čísla sa venujú dvojakej intervencii: skúmajú procesy, okolnosti a formy pôsobenia rôznych mnemonicých aktérov a aktérok, ako sú umelkyne v Poľsku, disidentky v Československu, ľudoví tanečníci v Maďarsku či bojovníčky na Ukrajine. Zároveň prispievajú k mnemonickej práci a potenciálne prehodnocujú význam, ktorý tieto spomienky nadobúdajú vo verejnej a akademickej sfére.

V tomto zmysle dúfame, že cesta nášho tematického čísla sa nekončí jeho vydaním; naopak, chceme, aby začalo nový život medzi čitateľmi, vedkyňami, aktivistami a študentkami. Uvedomujeme si, že aj toto číslo vstupuje do akademickej sféry, ktorú štruktúrujú nerovné mocenské vzťahy medzi Východom a Západom – či globálnym Severom, Juhom a „perifériou“ –, do sféry, ktorá je poznačená koloniálnymi prejavmi, scientometriou a impakt faktormi, ako aj módnymi akademickými klišé. Ako akademicčky pôsobiace na Slovensku si dobre uvedomujeme, že otázky pamäti sú neoddeliteľné od otázok epistemickej autority. Aj preto dúfame, že toto číslo bude cenným príspevkom k rodovo zaťaženému prerozdeleniu mnemonicého kapitálu (Reading 2019). Že sa takéto rozdelenie mení, je zrejme z iniciatív inšpiratívnych aktérok v oblasti histórie a pamäti v stredovýchodnej Európe, ktoré pracujú v rámci výskumných projektov ako „Dejiny feministického politického myslenia a diskurzov o právach žien v stredovýchodnej Európe v rokoch 1929–2001“ pod vedením Zsófie Lóránd či „Expertky a produkcia feministického poznania v povojnovej stredovýchodnej Európe (1945–1989),“ vedený Anninou Gagyiovou a Nataliou Jarskou. Tieto nové archívy, preklady zdrojov a prehodnocovanie akademického kánonu prispievajú k novým formám pamäti a ich globálnej inštitucionalizácii.

Zároveň feministické aktivistky v stredovýchodnej Európe už desaťročia vykonávajú mnemonicú prácu na lokálnej úrovni, napríklad pri vytváraní projektov zameraných na objavovanie histórie žien (napr. Pamäť žien) alebo pri budovaní, spravovaní

a rozširovaní feministických knižníc a archívov. Táto práca je v súčasnosti ohrozená neliberálnymi politickými zásahmi, ako je to v prípade Knižnice Jiřiny Šiklovej, ktorú prevádzkuje organizácia Gender Studies v Prahe v Českej republike, alebo v prípade prvej a najväčšej feministickej knižnice na Slovensku, ktorú prevádzkuje organizácia ASPEKT v Bratislave. Aktuálne politické kroky potvrdzujú, že mnemonická práca a prehodnocovanie toho, čo vieme o našej spoločnosti a jej rodovom poriadku, stoja v centre záujmu nedemokratických politických projektov. V tomto kontexte je kľúčové pochopiť a prehodnotiť rôzne typy mnemonických iniciatív.

Jedna z mnohých možných interpretácií tematického čísla

Typy príspevkov uverejnených v tomto špeciálnom čísle odrážajú vyššie opísanú ideovú dynamiku v rámci pamäťových štúdií. Ich cieľom je prehĺbiť a rozšíriť chápanie rodovo špecifických mnemotechnických postupov v stredovýchodnej Európe i mimo nej. Príspevky zároveň jasne prehodnocujú a reštrukturalizujú verejné a akademické mnemonické polia. Ako jeden z možných prístupov k tomuto tematickému číslu navrhujeme čítať príspevky v rámci štyroch tematických osí: 1. Epistemická nespravodlivosť a zápas o uznanie; 2. Rámce a priestory pamäti; 3. Nacionalizmus a kolonialita; 4. Postpamäť a časová dimenzia pamäti.

Epistemická nespravodlivosť a zápas o uznanie

Jedným z hlavných koncepčných prepojení celého čísla je problematika epistemickej nespravodlivosti (Fricker 2007), ktorú chápeme ako štruktúrne popieranie historickej subjektivity určitých skupín a ich schopnosti prinášať a sprostredkovať poznanie. V kontexte rodovo podmienených spomienok táto nespravodlivosť nespočíva len vo vylúčení z archívov či historických naratívov, ale aj v spochybňovaní hodnoty konkrétnych foriem práce, svedectiev a skúseností.

Analýza Marty Edith Holečkovej o účasti žien v československom disidentskom hnutí okolo Charty 77 potvrdzuje, že ženy neboli v tomto intelektuálnom a politickom prostredí okrajovými aktérkami, ale zohrávali kľúčovú úlohu v jeho fungovaní ako organizátorky, prekladateľky, redaktorky, archivárky a tvorkyne neformálnych intelektuálnych priestorov. Napriek tomu sú ich príspevky v kánonickej pamäti disentu, ktorá uprednostňuje viditeľné autorstvo a verejné vodcovstvo, naďalej nedostatočne zastúpené. Domáce „salóny“ organizované ženami sa tu javia ako alternatívne epistemicke priestory, v ktorých sa politický a intelektuálny život udržiaval mimo formálnych inštitúcií.

Podobnú logiku epistemickeho vylúčenia sledujeme aj v štúdií Ley Hensch o Koso-ve, kde povojnová kultúra spomínania vyzdvihuje postavu militarizovaného mužské-

ho bojovníka za slobodu, zatiaľ čo ženy vtlača do symbolických úloh matiek národa alebo pasívnych obetí. Rozsiahla účasť žien na budovaní národa sa tak síce nepopiera priamo a otvorene, ale je formulovaná spôsobom, ktorý historické aktérky zbavuje schopnosti politicky konať (*political agency*).

Mariya Shcherbyna a Tetiana Havlin prenášajú túto argumentačnú líniu do aktuálneho vojnového kontextu prostredníctvom analýzy naratívov bojovníčok v prebiehajúcej ruskej vojenskej agresii v Ukrajine. Využívajú koncept epistemickej nápravy (Fricke 2007), cez ktorý zdôrazňujú, ako môžu digitálne mnemonické praktiky aktívne rekonštruovať historickú subjektivitu žien v reálnom čase. Ani tu však nie sú uznanie a mnemonický kapitál automatické: musia sa vybudovať prostredníctvom naratívneho zápasu so zakorenеным androcentrickým a imperiálnym režimom pamäti.

Akademické snahy zamerané na epistemicкую nápravu sú rekonštruované v recenzii Márie Mokrej na kompendium *Texts and Contexts from the History of Feminism and Women's Rights: East Central Europe, Second Half of the Twentieth Century*, ktoré zostavili Zsófia Lóránd, Adela Hincu, Jovana Mihajlović Trbovc a Katarzyna Stańczak-Wiślicz. Mokrá ponúka medzigeneračné čítanie tejto feministickej intervencie do kánonu politického myslenia, pričom obnovuje stratené idey a intelektuálne rámce a zároveň poskytuje pohľad na proces formovania postpamäti.

Rámce a prostredia pamäti: pamätníky, ulice, archívy a digitálne platformy

Druhou kľúčovou osou tohto čísla sú podoby, rámce a architektúra pamäti (*architectures*, Bahloul 1996), ako aj rôzne prostredia (*ecologies*, Brown, Hoskins 2010, Hoskins 2011), prostredníctvom ktorých sa pamäť materializuje a šíri. Nejde o neutrálne „nosiče spomienok“, ale o aktívne systémy klasifikácie, vytvárania významu a jeho transformácie.

Esej Dafiny Nedelcheva, v ktorej analyzuje pamätník bulharsko-sovietskeho priateľstva vo Varne, ukazuje, že miesta pamäti fungujú ako pedagogické nástroje, ktoré formujú citové väzby k histórii. Pamätník nielen pripomína „oslobodenie“, ale aj autoritatívne učí vnímať geopolitickú hierarchiu ako prirodzenú a žiaducu. Prostredníctvom svojej mnohovýstavnej symbolickej štruktúry sa imperiálne, štátnosocialistické a nacionalistické významy hromadia a vytvárajú to, čo autorka opisuje ako palimpsestickú formáciu pamäti. Pamäť je tu reprezentovaná ako neustále reaktivovaný scenár, ktorý organizuje afektivitu, identitu a politickú subjektivitu.

Štúdia Ráhel Turai o po(pre)menovávaní ulíc v Budapešti rozširuje túto infraštruktúrnú perspektívu o spravovanie mestských priestorov. Názvy ulíc, ktoré pripomínajú socialistické aktérky, ako je Anna Koltói, sa stávajú miestami neustáleho ideologického vyjednávania. Ich opakované vymazávanie a čiastočné obnovovanie v rámci rôznych politických režimov odhaľujú, ako verejnú pamäť určujú administratívne postupy, ktoré

určité historické subjekt(k)y zviditeľňujú alebo zneviditeľňujú v závislosti od meniacej sa politickej logiky. Ulica sa v tomto zmysle stáva archívom, do ktorého sa ukladajú konkurenčné hodnotové režimy.

V eseji o ľudových tancoch v Maďarsku skúma Anisha Anantpurkar nejednoznačnú úlohu archívov. Na jednej strane sú etnografické filmy prezentované ako technológia, prostredníctvom ktorej sa konštruuje, stelesňuje a odovzdáva predstava o „ideálnej maďarskosti“. Zároveň však tieto filmy slúžia ako nástroje na spochybňovanie dominantných predstáv o autenticite spojenej s etnonacionalizmom, heteronormativitou a kultúrnou čistotou. Kreatívne kvírovanie archívnych filmov ponúka reinterpretáciu, ktorá podporuje konštrukciu alternatívnych identít, telesnú slobodu a rozvoj alternatívnej pamäti.

Digitálne ekosystémy prinášajú ďalšiu transformáciu. Ukrajinské digitálne platformy ako Incredible Women alebo Her War Story umožňujú nové formy participatívneho spomínania, ktoré obchádza tradičných inštitucionálnych strážcov. Tieto iniciatívy nielen uchovávajú svedectvá, ale prostredníctvom multimediálneho rozprávania tiež aktívne vytvárajú nové historické subjekty. Ako však ukazuje analýza digitálnej pamäti v Rumunsku od Monicy Ciobanu, samotná digitálna viditeľnosť nezaručuje emancipačné výsledky. Projekt Jurnalul Decretului odhaľuje, ako sa spomienky na násilie spojené s kriminalizáciou interrupcií v rámci štátnosocialistickej pronatalistickej politiky stávajú miestami ideologických sporov, ktoré sa využívajú tak na obhajobu reprodukčných práv, ako aj na konzervatívne, protirodové politické programy. Digitálna pamäť sa tak javí ako prostredie, v ktorom môže dochádzať k demokratizácii a zároveň k rozkladu demokratických princípov.

Rodová perspektíva, nacionalizmus a kolonialita

Tretia nosná línia tohto tematického čísla spája rodovú perspektívu s nacionalizmom a kolonialitou moci. Niekoľko príspevkov poukazuje na to, že kolektívna pamäť je kľúčovým priestorom, v ktorom sa rodové hierarchie naturalizujú prostredníctvom nacionalistických a imperiálnych naratívov.

V Kosove je systematické vylúčenie žien z kolektívnej pamäti prepojené s militarizovaným nacionalizmom, ktorý do popredia stavia postavu mužského bojovníka ako primárne stelesnenie národa. V Bulharsku naratív „oslobodenia“ funguje prostredníctvom rodovo príznačných afektívnych trópov, ktoré geopolitickú hierarchiu vyjadrujú v pojmoch ochrany a závislosti. V oboch prípadoch možno rod čítať ako symbolický mechanizmus, prostredníctvom ktorého sa politická dominancia legitimizuje.

Vzťah medzi rodom, nacionalizmom a imperializmom skúmajú z postkoloniálnej a dekoloniálnej perspektívy tiež viaceré príspevky tematického čísla, najmä články o Ukrajine a Bulharsku. Pamäť sa tu vníma ako priestor interpretačnej suverenity: schopnosť rozprávať vlastnú históriu sa stáva kľúčovou súčasťou procesov dekoloni-

zácie. Postava „ženy vo vojne“, ako ju načrtáva analýza naratívov ukrajinských bojovníčok, sa javí ako dekoloniálny subjekt, ktorý narúša imperiálne aj nacionalistické rámce rodovo špecifického spomínania.

Postpamäť, medzigeneračné odovzdávanie a časová komplexnosť

Zdôrazniť by sme chceli aj časový rozmer spomínania, najmä prostredníctvom konceptu postpamäti (Hirsh 2012). Medzigeneračné odovzdávanie traumy, ktoré v prípade Rumunska súvisí s prísnou reprodukčnou politikou v období štátneho socializmu, odhaľuje, ako je pamäť formovaná nielen afektívnym dedičstvom, ale aj súčasnými politickými zápasmi. Podobne príspevky z Poľska a Rumunska ukazujú, ako nasledujúce generácie oživujú a nanovo interpretujú skúsenosti z obdobia štátneho socializmu spôsobmi, ktoré sú často politicky sporné.

Medzigeneračné odovzdávanie pamäti a alternatívne praktiky spomínania nasvedčuje esej Rity Müller o stretnutí lesbických žien v Mielne v roku 1988 a jeho neskoršom divadelnom stvárnení v predstavení *Lesbian Sunset*. Autorka skúma, ako kvir dejiny prežívajú v mediovaných spomienkach, performancii a afektívnych väzbách, nie v tradičných archívoch. Spochybňuje tak predpoklad, že neviditeľnosť nutne znamená absenciu. Namiesto toho sprístupňuje pamäť ako dynamický ekosystém, v ktorom sa významy v priebehu času neustále oživujú. Esej o Mielne odhaľuje, ako môžu kvir prístupy v práci s pamäťou vytvárať nové formy historického vedomia a zároveň spochybňovať zaužívané protiklady medzi minulosťou a prítomnosťou, Východom a Západom či identitou a politikou.

Na časovú komplexnosť spomínania poukazuje aj Roman Džambazovič v recenzii knihy *Ako sme žili v rokoch normalizácie*. Sociologička Olga Gyárfášová v nej prináša rozhovory so ženami z bratislavskej nezávislej sféry v období neskorého štátneho socializmu v Československu. Pamäť sa tu stáva dialogickou, pričom autorka vedie aj paralelný rozhovor so svojím mladším ja, čím stiera hranice medzi subjektivitami minulosti a prítomnosti. Takáto reflexívna štruktúra zdôrazňuje pamäť nielen ako prenos, ale aj ako neustále sebavytváranie.

Podoby a ekosystém pamäti ako súčasť epistemického zápasu

V týchto rôznorodých kontextoch sa vynára spoločný analytický prístup: pamäť nie je ani stabilným archívom, ani jednoduchým rozprávaním o minulosti. Je skôr formou práce, ktorú vykonávajú individuálne aj kolektívne aktérky v určitých materiálnych rámcoch. Táto práca sa uskutočňuje v kontexte vnútorných štruktúr i vzájomných vzťahov a interakcií, ktoré spoluurčujú epistemickú autoritu, politickú legitimitu a spoločenské uznanie. Rod tu funguje ako kľúčový organizačný princíp, ktorý určuje, kto sa môže stať historickým subjektom a za akých podmienok.

Tento pohľad nám umožňuje prekročiť binárny rámec spomínania a zabúdania. Príspevky ukazujú, že ženy a kvír osoby nie sú z pamäti jednoducho vylúčené; často sú do nej zahrnuté vo veľmi obmedzených formách (ako symbolické materstvo, postavenie obete alebo pomocná práca), ktoré obmedzujú ich agenciu. Naopak, nové formy viditeľnosti – najmä tie, ktoré umožňujú digitálne technológie alebo archivačné praktiky zdola – automaticky nerozbijú existujúce hierarchie uznania.

Pamäť sa totiž javí ako pole napätia medzi epistemickou nápravou a epistemickou reguláciou. Na jednej strane sa feministické a dekoloniálne praktiky snažia obnoviť subjektivitu žien a kvír osôb ako aktérok produkujúcich vedomosti. Na druhej strane nacionalistické, imperiálne a neliberálne rámce neustále pretvárajú krajinu pamäti spôsobmi, ktoré buď opätovne potvrdzujú zavedené hierarchie, alebo vytvárajú nové formy hierarchického spoločenského poriadku.

Rodová pamäť ako priestor politických možností: na záver

Príspevky v tomto špeciálnom čísle dokazujú, že rod a pamäť sa prelínajú nielen na úrovni reprezentácie, ale aj na úrovni epistemických a politických štruktúr a ekosystémov. Toto číslo spája feministické štúdie o pamäti, postkoloniálnu a dekoloniálnu teóriu, epistemológie nespravodlivosti a analýzy digitálnej a priestorovej pamäti, čím ponúka komplexnú reflexiu o politike spomienok v stredovýchodnej Európe. Zároveň je výsledkom väčšinou neviditeľnej, viac ako rok trvajúcej mnemotechnickej práce a pozvánkou k ďalšej diskusii.

Hoci sa toto číslo venuje prevažne stredovýchodnej Európe, poskytuje aj príležitosť na nadviazanie globálnych súvislostí. Už nejaký čas vieme, že tento región nie je okrajovým prípadom, ale mimoriadne poučným priestorom pre pochopenie širších globálnych premien v tom, ako sa prelínajú pamäť, rod a moc.

Je zrejmé, že pamäť sa opäť presadzuje ako veľmi aktuálna a významná (hoci nestála) sféra politického života. V rámci takzvaného „globálneho Západu“ sa spory o pamätníky, učebné osnovy dejepisu, spomienky na vojnu a legitimitu konkurenčných historických naratívov stali ústrednou súčasťou politických konfliktov. Pamäť tak zostáva jednou z najspornejších oblastí súčasnej politiky, a to nielen z hľadiska toho, čo sa pamätá, ale aj z hľadiska toho, ako je samotné spomínanie organizované, autorizované a prežívané. Feministická vedecká literatúra už dlho poukazuje na to, že kolektívna pamäť nikdy nie je neutrálna: formujú ju rodové hierarchie viditeľnosti, autority a legitimacy. Príspevky zhromaždené v tomto špeciálnom čísle venovanom rodovým aspektom pamäti však naznačujú, že význam pamäti sa nevyčerpáva otázkami začlenenia či vynechania. V rôznych kontextoch stredovýchodnej a juhovýchodnej Európy sa pamäť javí ako pole epistemického zápasu, v ktorom sa vytvárajú, regulujú a transformujú historické subjekty.

Články v tomto čísle nepovažujú pamäť za úschovňu minulosti, ale skúmajú ju ako súbor charakteristických rámcov a priestorov – materiálnych, inštitucionálnych, digitálnych a afektívnych –, ktoré neustále reprodukujú a spochybňujú rodovo podmienený politický a kultúrny poriadok.

Táto architektúra a ekosystém určujú nielen to, na koho sa spomína, ale aj to, kto môže byť uznaný za nositeľku poznania, politického aktéra alebo legitímnu historickú subjektu. Formujú tiež spôsob, akým sa skúsenosti prenášajú v čase – od prežitej skúsenosti k medzigeneračnému odovzdávaniu, od súkromného svedectva k verejnému spomínaniu a od telesnej pamäti k digitálnemu šíreniu.

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Decolonised Gendered Subjects at War for Freedom and Self-Determination: Women in Combat in Real-Time and in Digitalised Memory

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Abstract: Women's history has long been marginalised in dominant narratives, with archives and institutional memory omitting or minimising women's contributions. Recognising and documenting women's roles across warfare, social movements, science, and culture is essential to shaping collective memory and challenging persistent gender bias. The digitalisation of archives and memory practices has democratising potential, expanding accessibility, diversity, and global engagement with women's histories. Online platforms transcend geographical and institutional barriers, integrating testimonies and artefacts in multimedia formats that foster inclusive, participatory representations of women's experiences. In post- and decolonial, postsocialist contexts, these tools create alternative spaces to contest state-controlled historical discourses. In Ukraine, digital public history initiatives such as *Incredible Women* (Gender Museum 2024) and *Beading the Womantory* (Gender Culture Centre 2025) recover the contributions of marginalised women, while *Invisible Battalion* (2025) and *Her War Story* (Gender Museum 2025b) document women's wartime experiences. Drawing on 25 testimonies of women in or formerly involved in combat, we examine self-representation, identity, and agency to explore how digitalised memory practices transform collective remembrance and commemoration in the context of the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war. We argue that these digital narratives function as epistemic repair, reclaiming women's subjectivity within androcentric and imperial memory regimes, and propose the figure of the 'woman at war' as a discursive and decolonial subject of commemoration.

Keywords: digitalised memory, women in combat, Russo-Ukrainian war

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'We are writing the history of our country now. I want to leave a worthy trace. Someday I will tell my grandchildren: your grandmother, Valkyriia, helped to fight the enemy.' Valentyna Zhelezko (52, 'Valkyriia') (Zhukovska 2025)

Women's history has long been marginalised in the dominant historiography, where institutional archives and memory practices have systematically excluded or underrepresented women's contributions to warfare, science, art, and culture (Bohachevsky-Chomiak 1995; Hagengruber 2020; Melman 1993; Sánchez Hernández, Martos García, López Navajas 2017; Shcherbina 2020). Ukrainian historian Martha Bogachevskaya-Khomyak (1995) compared the history of women with traditional embroidery in white on white: the metaphor is sad but accurate. Viewing human history through the lens of a supposedly universal male experience produces a profound epistemic distortion: it erases women's contributions from collective memory. Recognising and documenting women's roles – whether in warfare, social movements, science, or culture – is crucial for shaping a collective memory that is not just based on 'Great Men' history (Billson, Fluehr-Lobban 2005: 46), and for countering the gender biases that continue to influence contemporary societies.

These omissions have produced what Miranda Fricker (2007) conceptualises as epistemic injustice, a structural denial of women's status as knowers and historical agents. Feminist historiography has consistently demonstrated that such absence is not a mere oversight but the outcome of androcentric epistemologies that regulate what counts as knowledge, whose voices are recorded, and which memories are institutionalised (Hagengruber 2020). Within this framework, women become absent epistemic subjects, marginalised both symbolically and materially in processes of knowledge production and collective remembrance.

The digitalisation of historical records and memory practices has introduced what Gerben Zaagsma (2023: 844) defines as 'the democratizing potential of digitization', a transformative force that reshapes the politics of historical visibility and opens new epistemic and methodological perspectives for recovering marginalised voices. From a feminist perspective, digitisation redefines authority over historical knowledge and challenges institutional monopolies of remembrance. Digital initiatives have begun to reconfigure not only how women's experiences are documented and are remembered but also the conditions under which marginalised voices gain epistemic visibility.

The digital turn in memory practices offers an opportunity to contest traditional archival hierarchies by enabling participatory and decentralised modes of remembering. Digital archives, participatory databases, and crowdsourced storytelling platforms make it possible to address archival exclusions by making women's histories (through text, video, oral recordings, podcasts, interactive maps, etc.) more accessible, diverse, and publicly engaged across national borders (Noiret 2018; Robinson 2018). At the same

time, they contest the androcentric logic of traditional historiography by granting agency to rediscovered voices: narrators, witnesses, researchers, artists, and activists. This shift from institutionalised hierarchic commemoration to participatory digital memory practices has particular significance in post-colonial and post-socialist contexts, where state-controlled historical narratives have long subordinated or distorted women's roles (Bogachenko, Oleinikova 2023; Koobak, Tlostanova, Thapar-Björkert 2021; Tlostanova, Mignolo 2012).

For feminist and postcolonial scholarship, the digital environments represent both an epistemic and political shift: they decentralise authority and integrate oral histories and affective testimonies, while foregrounding previously silenced experiences. Digital practices perform both an epistemic and social function: decentralise the production of knowledge and create transnational networks of memory beyond institutional boundaries. In the post- and decolonial contexts of Eastern Europe in particular, digital memory projects become counter-archives, spaces where silenced or suppressed experiences can challenge official versions of the past become visible (Koobak, Tlostanova, Thapar-Björkert 2021). However, the democratising promise of digital memory and inclusion remains uneven, as the internet and digital realm are susceptible to manipulation and misrepresentation by both human actors and algorithms (Esposito 2017). Moreover, as scholars of post-colonial and post-socialist feminisms argue, digitisation does not automatically dismantle hierarchies; rather, it often reconfigures them within new sociotechnical forms (Adair, Nakamura 2017; Petkova 2025; Ponzanesi 2020).

Ukraine, long positioned within the 'internal colony' of the Russian and Soviet imperial knowledge systems (Bogachenko, Oleinikova 2023; Tlostanova 2024; Tlostanova, Mignolo 2012), provides a particularly illustrative case, where the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war has generated new forms of feminist public history and digital commemoration. The erasure of women from official historiography, especially from military and political narratives, has been both a colonial and patriarchal process. In response, digital initiatives have been developed that reconstruct women's historical presence through participatory, community-based storytelling. The Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has further intensified the urgency of these digital practices. Women's participation in the war as soldiers, medics, and volunteers has challenged traditional gendered boundaries. Simultaneously, digital platforms have become central arenas for documenting, commemorating, and archiving their experiences in real time to confront male-dominated military memory in national mythmaking. Through digital platforms, these projects transform private narratives into public memory, making visible the multiplicity of women's roles in wartime Ukraine. Initiatives such as the *Invisible Battalion* (Invisible Battalion 2025), *Sestry* (2025), *Incredible* (Gender Museum 2024), *Beading the Womantory* (Shcherbina 2020), and *Herstory of the War* (Gender Museum 2025) exemplify the emergence of digital public history in Ukraine as a feminist epistemic

practice and demonstrate how digital practices reclaim women's visibility within collective memory.

In this contribution we address the problem of women's historical marginalisation and the persistent invisibility of female experiences within national and military narratives. We focus on the Ukrainian context amid the Russo-Ukrainian war while analysing women's digital war testimonies. Drawing on 25 publicly available testimonies of Ukrainian women involved in combat in the ongoing war, we explore how digital media and feminist memory initiatives contribute to the reconfiguration of collective memory and to the emergence of new subjects of commemoration. The analysis situates these narratives within broader discussions of collective memory, post-socialism and post-coloniality, digital memory, and feminist historiography to examine how the digital turn transforms both the forms and the agents of remembrance. Accordingly, we ask: How does the digitalisation of historical memory transform the forms and gendered subjects of commemoration, particularly in decolonial wartime Ukraine? By addressing this question, we aim to show how feminist digital memory practices challenge epistemic injustice and hierarchies, while producing new, participatory spaces of remembrance that redefine what and who is considered worthy of historical record.

We begin by outlining the theoretical and epistemological framework of our study, focusing on the mechanisms of collective memory and drawing on post-socialist and post-colonial perspectives and the concepts of epistemic injustice and epistemic reflexivity. In the second section, we situate the Ukrainian case within broader debates on the digital democratisation of historical knowledge production and feminist memory practices, identifying how digital platforms transform the politics of remembrance. Building on this, we examine key feminist public history initiatives and war-related projects, such as *Invisible Battalion*, *HerStory of the War*, and *Sestry*, as case studies, which exemplify the emergence of digital counter-archives in wartime Ukraine. The dedicate the third section to our empirical study titled *Women's Testimonies in Combat*, where we analyse self-representation, belonging, agency, and memory as dimensions of epistemic repair and women's visibility. Finally, we conceptualise the figure of a 'woman at war' as a discursive and epistemic subject that reconfigures the gendered politics of commemoration, highlighting implications for feminist and postcolonial historiography in digital contexts.

Collective memory: invisibility, epistemic injustice, and postcoloniality

Collective memory and history

Julia Kristeva (2002: 3) conceived of memory as *hyperbole* – an emotional, linguistic, and psychic intensification rather than a reproduction of events from the past. From this perspective, memory is never recollection; it is always mediated through present standpoints, technological settings, and collective framing. Elena Esposito (2002) similarly understood memory as a system of mediation grounded in the communicative technologies available to each society. She argued that collective memory and its preservation depend on the material infrastructures of communication – from non-phonetic writing and the alphabet to the press and digital media – each shaping memory's outreach, form, and interpretation. As she wrote: 'Memory is simultaneously past and present, subjective and objective, personal and uncontrollable, remembering and forgetting – and in any case, one side of the distinction constitutes the condition for the existence of the other' (Esposito 2002: 12). In other words, memory exists through temporal tension: It operates in the present while negotiating the meanings of the past. As Esposito emphasised, the revision of historical narratives can only be understood from the present: 'Memory inevitably always operates only in the present' (2002: 31).

Esposito's ideas resonate with Norbert Elias's (1988) reflections of social time: The past, present, and future are relational concepts rather than fixed entities. He described the simultaneous presence of all three temporal dimensions in human consciousness (Elias 1988: 99). Like Chinese boxes, these dimensions emerge from and fold back into one another, since '[the] future of today is the present of tomorrow, and the present of today is the past of tomorrow' (Elias 1988: 98). Grasping these shifting perspectives means acknowledging the fluidity of time, which shapes generational experiences and collective memories.

From the standpoint of the present – as the authors of this article positioned within the realities we analyse – our epistemic decisions and reflexivity in memory production, our choice of research themes, and the selection of case studies shape the past (the present of today and the past of tomorrow) through the voices we choose to preserve, remember, and commemorate, thereby projecting them into the future. In the context of Ukraine's defensive war against Russia's imperial aggression and necropolitics, this relationship between past and present is particularly visible. Memory practices here are not merely commemorative but actively reconstructive – they reclaim suppressed narratives and reinterpret history and past events through postcolonial and postsocialist lenses, which we discuss below. History, as institutionalised collective memory through scholarship and systematic preservation, is shaped

by epistemic asymmetries and is selective by nature. As Janer M. Fluehr-Lobban and Carolyn Mancini Billson (2005: 46) noted, '[t]he conceptualization of change and culture were constructed by early sociologists and anthropologists, most of whom were Western males. The same is true for historians and philosophers'. According to these authors, this androcentric bias manifests as the 'Great Men'¹ theory of history, in which progress and transformation are attributed to powerful male figures, while women's contributions have remained marginal or invisible. Our article seeks to make a modest contribution towards changing this.

Women as absent epistemic subjects

The systematic omission of women from archives and canonical historiography exemplifies *epistemic injustice*, a concept articulated by Miranda Fricker (2007). She described such injustice as harmful because it 'strikes at a person's standing as a subject of knowledge – a capacity essential to human value' (Fricker 2007: 5). Within historiography, this harm occurs when women's voices are excluded, discredited, or rendered unintelligible. Fricker distinguished two interrelated forms of epistemic injustice. Testimonial injustice occurs when prejudice undermines the credibility of a speaker, causing her testimony to be undervalued (Fricker 2007: 17). In historical terms, testimonial injustice is institutionalised through selection processes, canon formation, and the systematic privileging of male-authored accounts while marginalizing women's narratives. Women are thus constituted as *absent epistemic subjects*.

Hermeneutical injustice, on the other hand, denotes a deeper structural failure – the absence of interpretive frameworks to comprehend marginalised experiences. This form of injustice occurs when 'some significant area of one's social experience is obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource' (Fricker 2007: 155). Within historical discourse, this means that even when women speak, the conceptual and institutional means to interpret their experiences as historically meaningful are lacking. Together, testimonial and hermeneutical injustices generate a recursive cycle (Fricker 2007). Discredited testimony leads to absence from archives; absence from archives limits interpretive vocabularies; limited vocabularies, in turn, disqualify future testimony. This cycle results not only in women's historical invisibility but also in collective epistemic loss. What is excluded from the archive cannot circulate as knowledge, and the very

¹ A contemporary example of this narrative condensation can be seen in the wartime myth of the 'Ghost of Kyiv'. Although this figure circulated as a legendary male fighter pilot, the Air Force later clarified that it was a collective image of several Ukrainian pilots, including Kharkiv-born fighter pilot Andrii 'Juice' Pilshchikov, defending the capital. In this sense, the narrative transformed a plural military effort into a singular heroic male symbol of resistance (Kopytko 2024).

definition of ‘history’ becomes skewed towards the dominant perspectives (Billson, Fluehr-Lobban 2005: 46).

Fricker’s ethical response to such injustice, which we instrumentalise in our contribution, lies in cultivating *reflexive critical awareness* – a practice of examining and counteracting prejudice within our epistemic institutions and in knowledge production. Applied to historiography, this entails reconstructing the credibility economy of historical knowledge, making space for marginalised voices not as supplements but as constitutive epistemic agents. In this process, women’s history becomes an act of epistemic reclamation: it restores testimony as a legitimate source of historical authority and re-inscribes women’s experiences as integral to collective memory.

Our study, dedicated to Ukrainian women in active duty and combat, helps us to exercise Fricker’s reflexive critical awareness. Current Ukrainian narratives of war and resistance to Russia’s imperial aggression are often shaped (including in Western European scholarship) through the figures of Ukrainian refugees – predominantly women with dependent children – and men of the battlefield. Our work intervenes by studying and presenting the marginalised accounts of women engaged directly in combat and active service. This allows us to reach the critical point at which the ‘other’, the marginalised other, becomes a historical, political, and epistemic subject. Who defines what is worthy of preservation? Whose experiences, voices, and testimonies achieve the status of history? These questions help us to underscore the politics of remembrance. Women’s history thus emerges not merely as an archival endeavour but as an ethical and epistemological project in the making. By dedicating our study to the testimonies of women in combat and on the battlefield, we strive to transform absence into agency and marginality into subjectivity. In analysing women’s contributions to the defence of Ukraine, we affirm their right to be remembered and engage them as active participants in memory-making rather than as its silent objects.

Postcolonial and postsocialist knowledge and memory

To fully assess our case studies, we engage postcolonial and postsocialist perspectives. The colonisation and occupation of Ukraine, both in the past and present, have concerned not only control over territories but also control over systems of knowledge and memory (Hundorova 2024). As Tlostanova and Mignolo (2012: 26) have argued, the colonality of knowledge represents a persistent structure of domination that outlives formal colonialism. It shapes how knowledge is produced, in which language it circulates, and how it is validated and transmitted, privileging hegemonic epistemic norms as universal and neutral.

Homi K. Bhabha (2007 [1994]: 245) described postcolonial critique as a response to ‘the unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation involved in the context for political and social authority within the modern world order’. Such perspectives emerge from the testimonies of colonised peoples and marginalised minorities – as in

the case of Ukrainian women in combat, whose voices are positioned at the intersections of resistance and domination. In Ukraine, an Eastern European and post-Soviet country, the postsocialist condition complicates this dynamic. The region has long existed between various (geo-)political impacts (Hrytsak 2004) and remains shaped by internalised hierarchies between Eurasian (Russian) and Western epistemic authorities. Thus, the coloniality of knowledge operates not only as what Tlostanova calls a 'modern syndrome' referring to modernity as an epistemic regime (2015: 39), but also as a historical one – the struggle for the right to one's own history, continually denied by imperial narratives. These dynamics render alternative epistemologies marginal within dominant knowledge systems.²

This coloniality persists in the post-Soviet world, where epistemic infrastructures remain shaped by imperial and socialist legacies. Epistemic modernity here developed alongside epistemic coloniality – the colonisation of thought through the absorption or rejection of non-Western knowledge. Reclaiming epistemic agency and subjectivity requires, as Fricker (2007) suggested, *reflexive critical awareness*, and in Tlostanova's (2015: 40) terms, *epistemological self-reflexivity*: the ability to look at the world 'from the position of our own origins, lived experiences, and education', while treating Eurasian and Western knowledge production not as models to follow but as objects open to critique. In this context, it is worthwhile to reflect on our positionalities as an analytical outcome of epistemological self-reflexivity. We were both born during the late socialist period in Soviet Ukraine, and our schooling and higher education took place amid the turbulent transition period in the 1990s and 2000s. These years were marked not only by Ukraine's transition to independence but also by a broader shift from totalitarianism to democracy (with authoritarian tendencies at times), from a planned to a market economy, from internationalist rhetorics to nation-state logics, and from state-controlled and censored academia to the neoliberal logic of (surviving) universities. We were professionally socialised in Odesa (TH/Tetiana Havlin) and Kharkiv (Mariya Shcherbyna/MS and TH) – regions of Ukraine deeply shaped by Russian coloniality. Russian functioned as a prestigious and dominant language in everyday communication, education, the arts, and popular culture. Although the Russian Empire and later the USSR had formally collapsed, we nonetheless internalised Russian colonial knowledge through these cultural and linguistic structures. Independently, we both entered the fields of gender and memory studies – a rapidly

² The current Russian official justification for its genocidal and ecocidal war against Ukraine relies on claims of so-called historical ties, rooted in the periods of the Russian imperial and later Soviet occupation of Ukraine. This colonial rhetoric and the instrumentalisation of historical narratives constitute a central element of contemporary Russian politics – or, more precisely, in Achille Mbembe's terms (2003), necropolitics.

developing area in Ukraine in the early 2000s – through academic work (our dissertations and publications) and activism (MS's involvement in the Gender Museum) (Havlin 2015, 2019, 2026; Shcherbina 2020; Shcherbyna 2025; Strelnyk, Shcherbyna 2023). Emerging from Western feminist epistemologies, this engagement became a path towards our feminist, postcolonial, and postsocialist reflexive awakening. Our institutional experiences within West European and American higher education (TH over a decade and MS in recent years) have compelled us to interrogate the roles of Western and Eurasian (particularly Russian) dominant epistemologies in our professional development and self-positioning (Shcherbyna, Havlin 2025). Within this framework, our present co-authored article, dedicated to the testimonies of female active-duty soldiers in Ukraine's defensive war, represents not only an effort to restore their epistemic subjectivity but also an attempt to reclaim our own.

In doing so, we aim not only to decolonise patriarchal and hegemonic knowledge but also to reimagine its purposes by transforming mechanisms of exclusion in the context of historical memory, remembrance, and commemoration. Ukraine's case exemplifies the emergence of post-Soviet and postsocialist subjectivities shaped by the long shadow of various empires – Russian, Soviet, Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, and Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth. The departure from the youngest empire (the USSR) did not simply mark political independence; it initiated a complex process of *re-subjection* within structures still permeated by Russia's imperial syndrome (Pain 2016: 69). In this context, postcolonial practices – acts of remembering, resisting, fighting against, and reclaiming – function as strategies of resilience and survival from epistemic erasure and coercion. They are ways of asserting agency, where the choice to resist colonisation becomes an act of reclaiming subjectivity long denied. As Irina Zharebkina (2006: 200) observed, subjectivity is tied to the possibility of choice: 'the era of totalitarianism is based not on others choosing for us, but rather on the fact that we are compelled to subjectivize ourselves through the structure of a coercive choice, whether we want it or not. Its most extreme form is precisely the choice we do not wish to make'. Ukrainian subjectivities today emerge from precisely this terrain – resisting Russia's attempt to impose its coercive choice on Ukraine and its people. The choice of women in combat, the focus of our analysis, is to protest and fight – against renewed imperial violence, against epistemic asymmetries, and against invisibilities. Their acts constitute both a political and existential act of survival, resilience, and recovery. On the battlefield and beyond, they transform coercive conditions into acts of agency, turning choice itself into a postcolonial practice of self-assertion, survival, and the redefinition of freedom. In this way, they shape their present, claim the right to interpret their past, and envision their future. Women on the frontlines – as soldiers, as volunteers, and as mothers bringing their children to safety – assert their right to visibility and participation in defining the present, past, and future.

As Bignall (2010: 131) suggested, '[c]entral to the creation of a postcolonial concept of agency is the need to reconsider the nature of power and desire, which together constitute the conditions and the impetus for social action'. To move beyond coloniality requires introducing a *historical discontinuity* – a break with inherited logics of mastery and reconciliation. Postcolonial agency and subjectivities, then, are not defined by the desire to dominate or appropriate the Other but by the capacity to create new forms of sociability and ethical relations. In this light, the work at intersection of memory and postcoloniality becomes a site of epistemic struggle. The *inner colonisation of memory* (Bogachenko, Oleinikova 2023) – the internalisation of imperial narratives – can be undone only by recognising alternative digital archives, oral histories, real-time testimonies and embodied practices as legitimate knowledge sources. Such recognition transforms memory from an object of study into a political act: a practice of epistemic justice that restores silenced subjects to the narrative of action, humanity, and reflexive acknowledgment. In this context, the digital sphere emerges as a crucial site for reclaiming epistemic agency and countering imperial erasures. The following section explores how the digital turn intersects with feminist memory practices, focusing on Ukrainian initiatives that preserve testimonies of the past, shape the present, and envision the future.

Ukrainian digital feminist memory initiatives

The digital initiatives discussed below can be understood as forming an evolving ecosystem of feminist digital memory in Ukraine. Within this ecosystem, platforms, activist archives, and media outlets document and circulate women's wartime experiences. Some initiatives reconstruct women's historical visibility, while others collect testimonies of women affected by the war. Together, these platforms contribute to the formation of a distributed digital memory environment in which women's experiences of war, displacement, and civic participation are recorded, mediated, and made publicly accessible. Several Ukrainian initiatives have sought to address the historical invisibility of women through feminist public history projects. For example, the international artistic memory project *Beading the Womanstory* (Gender Culture Centre 2025; Shcherbyna 2020) reinterprets beadwork as a medium of feminist historical storytelling, bringing together 35 artists from 9 countries to visualise women's historical contributions, while the project *Incredible* presents a digital collection dedicated to influential Ukrainian women from science, culture, and public life. Both initiatives contribute to restoring women's presence in historical narratives. In the following examples, we approach the figure of a woman at war as an epistemic and discursive subject in digital counter-archives, a locus where gendered memory and militarised citizenship intersect.

Launched in 2015 during the Russo-Ukrainian war, *Invisible Battalion* emerged as a digital advocacy and research initiative aimed at restoring the visibility of women serving in the Ukrainian Armed Forces in a context of institutional erasure. Combining sociological research, documentary storytelling, and digital campaigning, the project documented the structural invisibility of women soldiers, who were frequently registered in non-combat positions despite serving on the frontline. The initiative played a significant role in public debates on gender equality in the military and contributed to the legislative reform of 2018 that granted equal rights to women and men in the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Over time, *Invisible Battalion* has evolved into a broader digital platform addressing issues such as veterans' reintegration, trauma, and sexual harassment in the military, while continuing to document women's wartime experiences. In this sense, the initiative functions as a living digital archive that connects feminist knowledge production with institutional change and public memory (*Invisible Battalion* 2025).

Another important initiative within Ukraine's feminist digital memory ecosystem is *HerStory of the War* (Gender Museum 2025), a digital storytelling and archival project developed by the Centre for Gender Culture in Kharkiv and hosted by the Museum of Women's and Gender History. Launched in 2023, the project collects and curates testimonies of Ukrainian women whose lives have been transformed by Russia's full-scale invasion, including soldiers, medics, volunteers, journalists, and displaced civilians. The online platform presents these accounts through a multimedia exhibition integrating texts, images, and audio materials, thereby creating an open digital archive of women's wartime experiences. By foregrounding women as witnesses and historical agents, *HerStory of the War* challenges the traditional gendered monopoly over war memory and contributes to the preservation and dissemination of women's voices in the public sphere.

The international online magazine *Sestry* ('Sisters' in Ukrainian) was launched in 2023 in response to the mass displacement caused by Russia's full-scale invasion (*Sestry* 2025). Based in Warsaw and produced by Ukrainian and Polish women journalists, the platform provides a transnational digital space for reporting, essays, and first-person testimonies documenting women's experiences of war and exile. The section 'Stories' features narratives of women soldiers, medics, journalists, and displaced civilians, combining journalistic documentation with digital storytelling. Although women's perspectives are central, the project also features materials about male protagonists and gender-mixed contexts. In this way, *Sestry* functions both as a media outlet and as a repository of testimonies that record women's wartime experiences for a transnational audience.

Alongside feminist digital initiatives, several Ukrainian media outlets have also developed series documenting women's participation in the war. *ELLE* Ukraine launched the rubric 'Women at the Front' in 2024, featuring interviews and photo-portraits

of women officers, medics, and volunteers. Similarly, the platform *Ukrainky.com.ua* publishes biographical narratives and analytical materials highlighting Ukrainian women's contributions in the military, civic, and humanitarian fields. Together, these initiatives form a broader ecosystem of digital feminist memory documenting women's experiences of the ongoing war.

The testimonies analysed in this study were drawn from *SESTRY*, *Ukrainky.com.ua*, and a range of Ukrainian media outlets including *Suspilne*, *BBC Ukraine*, *Elle Ukraine*, and others. A full list of sources is provided in Table 1 in the appendix.

Methodological considerations

Based on grounded theory methodology and its principles of flexible research design, our study examines how women serving as active duty soldiers participate in Ukraine's defence on the battlefield against the ongoing Russian imperialist war.³ We analyse how, in the context of active service, these women construct subjectivity, agency, and practices of remembering through publicly accessible digital narratives and emerging textual testimonies. Our aim is not only to identify recurring rhetorical structures but also to explore how narrators construct agency, belonging, and memory within the constraints of media formats and socio-political expectations of heroism. Since our sample consists of women in active duty, we explicitly approach 'women at war' as a discursive figure produced at the interconnection of heroism, care, and professional competence. Rather than reproducing traditional war mythologies, we trace how these narratives challenge masculinist heroic templates by normalising women's professional soldiering and life-saving practices, echoing earlier efforts (Alexievich [1984] 2018).

Methodologically, we treat these testimonies as elements of a feminist digital counter-archive, where epistemic injustice is actively negotiated through self-representation rather than passively recorded. Following Zaagsma's notion (2023) of 'the democratizing potential of digitization' and Robinson's (2018) concept of digital

³ In this article we describe the initial analytical stage of a broader research project that applies grounded theory methodology according to Juliet Corbin and Anselm L. Strauss (1990, 2015) as well as Kathy Charmaz (2014, 2017). The analysis we present here should therefore be understood as a pilot phase focusing on open coding and the identification of preliminary analytical categories derived from a corpus of testimonies. Within the logic of grounded theory, theory construction is expected to emerge through iterative processes of data collection, theoretical sampling, and constant comparison until theoretical saturation is reached (Glaser, Strauss 2006 [1967]: 61). As we are still expanding our empirical corpus and the theoretical sampling (ibid.: 45) has not yet been completed, with the present study we do not aim to formulate a fully developed grounded theory. Rather, we identify emerging analytical categories that will inform the subsequent stages of theory building in the larger project on gender roles in wartime Ukraine between everyday practices and digital performativity.

memory as a participatory practice, we approached these narratives as both epistemic and commemorative acts – instances where women claim the right to narrate the war from within.

Sampling and selection criteria

Our study relies on an empirical corpus comprising twenty-five publicly available digital testimonies documenting women's participation in the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war. These testimonies include interviews and biographical profiles published between 2022 and 2025 across feminist digital initiatives as well as in selected Ukrainian media. These narratives portray women serving as combat-adjacent personnel, frontline medics, and paramedics engaged in military actions since 2014.

The testimonies included in this corpus originate from different mediated contexts of digital publication, including journalistic interviews in Ukrainian media and narratives curated within feminist digital memory. As narratives produced by women directly involved in military service, they also constitute war testimonies, recounting the lived experiences of the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine. While these formats differ in their editorial and curatorial practices, in both cases the narratives appear as mediated forms of first-person testimony rather than independently authored accounts. From the perspective of epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007), such testimonies can be understood as instances in which historically marginalised epistemic subjects claim authority over narrating their own wartime experiences. Many of these narratives are collected within initiatives explicitly aimed at documenting women's participation in the war, and therefore function as elements of emerging feminist counter-archives that seek to restore women's visibility in historical memory. At the same time, once these narratives enter digital platforms, they become part of what Zaagsma (2023: 9) describes as the politics of digitisation, where the selection and circulation of digital materials shape which stories about the past become visible. In this sense, the analysed testimonies function simultaneously as personal accounts of the Russian war in Ukraine and as mediated contributions to the emerging digital memory of the war.

Although women's role in the Ukrainian Armed Forces has significantly expanded during the ongoing war (Radio Svoboda 2025), their public representation remains marginalised and gendered. Women in active duty must continually negotiate visibility and legitimacy while confronting persistent stereotypes that question their competence and authority (Khromeychuk 2018; Martsenyuk 2023). Research and field testimonies repeatedly note that women in military roles face a double burden: they must demonstrate professional excellence in a masculinised institution while navigating everyday microaggressions, scepticism, and at times open discrimination.

This structural ambivalence makes their self-narration both politically and epistemically significant. In this context, digital platforms provide a space where women artic-

ulate their experiences and negotiate belonging and agency within a militarised environment. In our sampling procedures we were guided by following selection criteria:

1. Explicit self-identification and self-representation as active duty in combat or medical capacity in the form of first-person voice through direct quotation, narrated monologue, or identifiable narrator.
2. Our access to the full content of the testimony in open-access digital archives (project websites or media portals) published in the period between 24.2.2022 and 30.9.2025 (i.e., from the beginning of the full-scale war)

A composed corpus thus represents a hybrid zone between self-representation, journalism, activism, and digital heritage; a zone where women's lived experiences intersect with practices of public memory production. The analysed materials were selected according to the principles of theoretical sampling (Birks, Hoare and Mills 2019: 4). Open coding yielded four analytical categories: self-representation, identities and belonging, agency and mission, and memory and continuity. These categories informed the subsequent stages of analysis and will be further developed as the empirical corpus expands. We exclude visual artefacts and private social media posts to ensure comparability. The mentioned above selected digital initiatives such as *Invisible Battalion*, *HerStory of the War*, and *Sestry*, we recognise as central nodes in Ukraine's evolving digital memory ecosystem and exemplify curated public feminist remembrance. They frame women not as objects of reportage but as authorised narrators of war.

Open coding procedures

Prior to the open coding procedures (Corbin, Strauss 1990: 423), we asked how women in active duty are positioned themselves within dominant war discourses in relation to combat, sacrifice, authority, and competence. We also explored how their speech acts recalibrate the gendered intelligibility of soldiering while situating testimonies in the institutional and historical context of wartime Ukraine and postcolonial memory regimes. Open coding enabled us to identify recurring categories:

1. *Self-representation* includes professional and ethical self-definition and how women articulate subject positions and professional integrity while challenging stereotypical femininity in the military.
2. *Identities and belonging* address how narrators negotiate military, civic, and collective identities and express embeddedness in units and networks.
3. *Agency and mission* analyse how women frame motivation, duty, and responsibility, and justify action under constraint.

4. Finally, *memory and its continuity* examine how narrators construct remembrance and situate their experiences within the ongoing history of war.

Through these analytical lenses, we trace how women position themselves as historical agents and custodians of memory, challenging the androcentric and colonial epistemologies that shaped traditional archives and historiography. We acknowledge the limitations of curated digital testimonies, including editorial framing and potential self-censorship under wartime conditions, and address them through cross-sourcing across activist archives and media.

Analysis and findings

Self-representation: speaking from the frontline

Women's self-representation in digital war narratives constitutes a discursive practice through which speakers construct professional military identity while negotiating the marginalised position of the woman soldier within masculinised institutional spaces. Narrators present army service as professional specialisation, emphasising technical knowledge, operational competence, and deliberate vocational choice. From the perspective of testimonial injustice (Fricker 2007), these narratives challenge stereotypes that historically undermine women's credibility as military professionals. Daria 'Anakonda', a drone operator, articulates this logic of parity explicitly: 'I must show people that I work on equal terms with men, that I am not a little girl who is simply in the army, I am a fighter.'⁴ The binary opposition between дівчинка ('little girl') and боець ('fighter') indexes an epistemic struggle against the stereotypical infantilisation of a woman, the transition from symbolic presence to professional subjecthood. Veronika 'Palianytsia', a combat medic, defines her practice through procedural precision: *'The main work of a combat medic is to take him [the injured person] from point A, transport him to point B, and hand him over to the doctors.'* Similarly, Oleksandra Chorna describes evacuation under fire in procedural detail, asserting medical expertise as skilled labour. A recurrent theme across the corpus is свідомий вибір ('conscious choice'). Women frame their participation as deliberate and prepared. Olena Ryzh explains: *'There is a short and a long answer. The short one is a call of the heart. The long one – many components influenced my decision [to join Ukrainian Military Forces].'* Viktoriia Kravchenko, with fourteen years of service, similarly insists: *'I made my conscious choice back then and understood what military activity entails.'* Such utterances reposition female participation within the epistemic field of reason. Preparation further reinforces this legitimacy. Olena Totel recounts: *'I signed up for*

⁴ The full list of testimonies analysed in the study is available in the appendix.

martial arts, the gym, and shooting, and also underwent a full medical examination.' When asked about her goal, whether she was here to train her glutes, she responds: *'We're going to make me into a machine'*, redefining the body as an instrument of disciplined readiness for defence, replacing stereotypical beauty ideals.

Narrators also expose the stereotypes, double standards, and systemic barriers women face and sometimes internalised gender scripts. Externally, structural gate-keeping persists through paternalistic rationalisations. Olena Ryzh observes: *'For men everything is simple, you came, they processed you. For a woman it's mandatory; without a recommendation they don't even want to talk.'* Kateryna Halushka recalls one commander's remark: *'He said I would distract the fighters, because there are many young, single guys among them. Every second matters and can cost a life, and I had to run a mile through the trenches because I am a woman.'*

Uniform provision represents similar patterns of gendered stereotyping and epistemic invisibility. Until early 2024, women were issued only male-pattern uniforms. Another Kateryna, a servicemember in the Special Operations Forces, explains: *'Before that I wore the men's one. But the movement "Veteranka" (Female Veteran) made a women's uniform tailored to my measurements and gifted it to me.'* The inadequacy of women's uniforms and underwear was recognised in the army but not understood as an indicator of systemic exclusion. *'Imagine: a girl comes to serve, and they give her men's shorts instead of underwear. Sometimes it's uncomfortable, although they're warm and good, they cover half of you.'*

The (female) volunteers thus became both a producer of material solutions and an epistemic actor that translated women's embodied experience into institutional visibility. From the perspective of testimonial injustice (Fricker 2007), these accounts expose how gender stereotypes manifest not only in discourse but also in supplies and infrastructure. The military system implicitly assumed that the standard body was male, rendering women's bodies epistemically marginal. The lack of appropriate uniforms has become a metaphor of epistemic exclusion: women are literally not fitted into the institutional design. When women volunteer groups take the initiative to create tailored uniforms, they enact epistemic repair and transform structural neglect into collective recognition.

Moreover, the symbolic invisibility surrounding female heroism parallels this material absence. As Halushka remarks: *'When my comrade was killed, everyone wrote about him. About the female medic who evacuated the wounded under the same fire – they mentioned her in the last paragraph. Why? Because she's a woman? Because her work is "natural"?' This double standard reflects how gendered labour is normalised into invisibility: women's contributions are framed as extensions of care, not as professional sacrifice and heroism.*

Taken together, these testimonies show how self-representation functions as epistemic repair. Circulating through digital platforms, these narratives also function as elements of emerging digital war memory, where personal testimony becomes part of a distributed archive of the ongoing war. These narratives represent a postcolonial practice of claiming control over systems of knowledge and memory. By narrating competence, conscious choice, and embodied professionalism, women transform invisibility into recognition and stereotype into the structure of critique. Rather than producing a new 'Great Women' narrative, even though some of the narrators have become publicly visible figures, these accounts foreground the collective professional practices and everyday military work through which women challenge the gendered structures of military memory. In this sense, the narratives complicate personalised heroic models of war memory.

From here, the question shifts from representation to embeddedness: how do women who have gained visibility and legitimacy within masculinised structures negotiate belonging and collective identity?

Role and belonging: embeddedness and collective identity

Women's narratives of active service move beyond individualised professionalism to construct embeddedness and belonging as a constitutive dimension of military identity. In these accounts, belonging is an epistemic condition for action under constraint: competence is recognised, validated, and stabilised through relations of trust, mutual accountability, and shared memory. The first axis of embeddedness is intra-unit solidarity, which converts visibility into acceptance. Drone operator Daria 'Anakonda' foregrounds how peer recognition offsets isolation: 'I am the only female pilot in the battalion. My brothers-in-arms have supported me very much...' Here, legitimacy is conferred not by exceptionalism but by integration into a collaborative workflow, where competence is actionable and witnessed. The same logic underpins Valerii's 'Osa' formula, 'The army is like a family, only larger', which reframes the military as a warm community of practice whose cohesion is ethical (care) and operational (shared risk). Affective belonging here is articulated through kinship metaphors that transform military camaraderie into epistemic community. Kateryna Halushko conceptualises service as a shared ordeal rather than an institutional duty: 'The army is not only the frontline and combat tasks but also a community of people who go through extremely difficult trials together. It is in such conditions that a strong bond between people is formed.'

This recognition of collective endurance reframes belonging as ethical and affective infrastructure. Olena Ryzh develops this metaphor of kinship further, extending it beyond metaphorical solidarity to embodied social reality: 'I have gained many brothers.

I have a biological brother, many cousins, and now an incredible number of brothers in the literal sense of the word. That is why the words *pobratym* [побратим / brother-in-arms] and *posestra* [посестра / sister-in-arms] are perfectly true to reality.'

Belonging is also epistemic trust: the right to be believed in one's task and limits. Iryna Kleimenova notes that candid talk is possible only with those who have seen the same things: 'One can speak openly only with those who have seen what I have seen.' This is a precise description of how war experience creates interpretive communities. Such interpretive communities also contribute to postcoloniality by questioning persistent structures of domination and epistemic visibility within military institutions and public narratives of war. This formulation captures the emergence of interpretive communities bound by lived experience: testimony becomes credible only within networks that have themselves witnessed violence. War, in this sense, generates localised hermeneutical resources, allowing participants to make sense of what would otherwise remain socially unintelligible. Such relational epistemology shifts the focus from the individual experience of war to collective intelligibility. Knowing is here a distributed process grounded in mutual recognition. Through trust, shared labour, and affective endurance, women transform the abstract ideal of comradeship into a specific epistemic infrastructure sustaining military effectiveness and psychological survival alike. Taken together, these narratives demonstrate that belonging is not the aftermath of recognition but its condition of possibility. It is through belonging that women acquire the authority to speak, act, and remember. In Fricker's terms, such communities help overcome hermeneutical injustice, providing shared interpretive resources through which women's war experiences become intelligible.

Mission and agency

Across the sample, mission as epistemic agency under constraint emerges as a self-defined structure of agency grounded in conscious choice (свідомий вибір / *svidomyi vybir*), moral debt (борг / *borh*), professionalism, and love as an ethics of action. As Olena Ryzh formulates it: '*After February 24, I realised that I had lived in a vacuum, not seeing the war that had been going on since 2014. I began to feel that I owed something to the country.*' These words resonate with Kateryna Petrenko: 'I have no right to be a civilian.'

For Khrystyna 'Curly', professionalism itself becomes a moral discipline and mission: '*No one can do my job better than I can. I want to hand over Ukraine in a better condition than I received it from my parents.*' Combat medic Marta Demianchuk expresses this orientation towards practical ethics: '*I focus on saving people.*' Expertise here becomes the language of moral authority, where professional dedication transforms into moral practice, reinforcing the idea of epistemic parity through competence.

Finally, love emerges as a mode of action that bridges emotion and civic agency. *'I want to end this war with victory for the sake of my daughter and my mother... I hope that our work, the service of my brothers and sisters in arms, will make sure that she doesn't have to take up arms'*, explains Veronika 'Palyanytsia', translating this ethics into an obligation of future-oriented responsibility. Similarly, Yaryna Chornohuz asserts: *'I would not call it revenge. I would call it love. I do not hate Russians. I simply protect those I love.'* Taken together, these testimonies construct a framework of moral reasoning grounded in conscious mission, inserting individual agency, obligation, professionalism, and love as disciplined action. In Fricker's (2007) terms, this represents a form of epistemic repair, the reclamation of interpretive authority through acts that redefine women's war participation as a site of moral and cognitive agency.

Memory and continuity

Within the testimonial sample, memory and continuity operate as epistemic dimensions through which women transform participation into narration and narration into collective knowledge. Their statements situate individual experience within broader temporal and moral horizons, where acting, witnessing, and remembering converge as interdependent forms of agency. Remembrance is not perceived here as retrospective commemoration, because these narratives enact it as an ongoing epistemic practice, a means of inscribing meaning into the present (Esposito 2002) for it not to be forgotten, and transmitting it forward. In this sense, women's wartime testimonies contribute to postcoloniality by overcoming unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation in the digital realm and memory construction.

Olena Totel articulates transition from understandable fear to action: *'What pushed me was that I didn't want to be in an occupation and without a weapon. For me, being a civilian when occupiers might walk down my street – that's the greatest fear.'* Her notions redefine fear as an epistemic threshold: to act is to reclaim authorship over one's own vulnerability, to refuse the interpretive position of passive victimhood. Testimonies of this kind exemplify epistemic counteraction in Fricker's terms (2007), the production of knowledge through acts that resist both material and hermeneutical marginalisation.

Kateryna, active in Special Operations Forces, extends this logic to the contemplation of mortality: *'I don't want to die from a Shahed drone⁵ in an apartment building. If I am to die – and that's entirely possible – I want to take several enemies with me.'* Here, death is reframed as intentional agency rather than passive fate. The speaker

⁵ Shahed drones are drones based on Iranian technology and they have been used massively by Russia to attack Ukrainian military and civil objects.

transforms exposure into authorship, positioning herself as an active subject even at the limit of existence. Such utterances mark the emergence of living archives: embodied sites of knowledge where the act of speaking is inseparable from the act of living and enduring.

Continuity, in turn, unfolds as an intergenerational horizon. Valentyna Zhelezko ('Valkyriia') declares: 'We are writing the history of our country now. I want to leave a worthy trace. Someday I will tell my grandchildren: "your grandmother, Valkyriia, helped to fight the enemy".' Valentyna's voice situates women's military participation within a lineage of civic transmission, turning remembrance into a pedagogical and ethical inheritance, to remember through doing.

Taken together, these testimonies illustrate how marginalised participants of war produce knowledge that counters hermeneutical marginalisation (Fricker 2007) and delineate a feminist mode of historiography grounded in epistemic agency while gaining subjectivity: knowledge that is lived, enacted, and continuously reproduced and first-hand told through women's participation in the ongoing history of war.

Discussion and conclusions

The analysed testimonies reveal the *woman at war* not simply as a social role or biographical category, but as a discursive site where epistemic repair is actively enacted. Within the digital counter-archives, women reconstitute themselves as epistemic agents through self-representation, professional competence, and interpretive authority. Speaking from within the war, they destabilise the testimonial asymmetry embedded in military and media discourses, reclaiming credibility that has historically been denied. Their narratives perform epistemic repair by transforming absence into articulated presence, and silence into situated skilled-based and experience-based knowledge. The voice of women thus becomes both testimony and theory: a visible critique of androcentric epistemologies that have defined whose experiences are historically intelligible.

The digital testimonies analysed in this study, twenty-five publicly available narratives of Ukrainian women serving in the military forces, exemplify how self-representation in the media functions as a site of epistemic and symbolic transformation. Although most of these testimonies were not originally produced within structured feminist initiatives, they nonetheless participate in the wider ecosystem of Ukraine's digital memory, intersecting with activist, journalistic, and artistic forms of public history. In this sense, they represent spontaneous, decentralised extensions of feminist counter-archival logic rather than institutionalised archives.

Through first-person storytelling, women construct epistemic agency in a communicative field long defined by masculine authority. Their testimonies have two

functions: reclaiming credibility in militarised discourse and producing new interpretive resources for understanding women's war experience. By publicly articulating competence, decision-making, and belonging, these narrators counter testimonial injustice (Fricker 2007) and reconfigure the gendered economy of trust. Each narrative becomes an act of epistemic repair, transforming invisibility into recognition and redefining what counts as legitimate wartime knowledge. At the same time, the collective resonance of these testimonies signals the emergence of distributed memory practices. When women narrate combat, evacuation, or active duty, they generate interpretive communities grounded in shared endurance and mutual validation. The idioms of *pobratym* and *posestra* transform affective ties into epistemic infrastructure: belonging functions not as sentiment but as the condition of credibility. Through repetition, circulation, and citation across digital media, these stories form a living corpus of feminist witnessing that diffuses across journalistic and public spaces.

Importantly, the uncoordinated character of these testimonies underscores the democratising potential of the digital sphere (Zaagsma 2023). Visibility here is not granted by curators or institutions but produced through mediated self-articulation. This decentralisation of commemoration reveals how ordinary acts of speech can accumulate into a collective counter-memory. These dispersed narratives illustrate how digital media enable grassroots remembrance that operates outside institutional frameworks while still contributing to epistemic justice. From the postcolonial and postsocialist perspective, the testimonies of Ukrainian women in combat reconfigure both the geography and epistemology of feminist memory. These digital counter-archives emerge from a postsocialist terrain historically subjected to imperial epistemic hierarchies, where knowledge, legitimacy, and even grief were mediated through dominant Soviet (Russian) colonial frameworks. Within this context, speaking from the frontline becomes a decolonial act: an assertion of interpretive sovereignty and a refusal to remain an object of history written elsewhere – that is, decolonised gendered subjects at war for freedom and self-determination. In this sense, these testimonies engage with the coloniality of knowledge not only as a 'modern syndrome' (Tlostanova 2024), but also as a historical one, where gendered history is created in the moment of narration.

By narrating war from within, these women occupy a border epistemology, a standpoint situated between global modernity and local experience, where subaltern subjects reclaim their right to theorise their own condition. Their testimonies resist both the exoticisation of Ukrainian suffering and the paternalistic framing of women as humanitarian subjects rather than political actors. Through self-representation, they transform testimonial space into a locus of epistemic autonomy, producing knowledge from lived positionality. Women's wartime testimonies also contribute to rethinking gender roles in wartime Ukraine by situating women's narratives at the intersection

of memory construction, everyday military practices, and digital performativity. In this sense, Ukrainian women's voices at war challenge the epistemic coloniality that has historically confined Eastern Europe to the semi-peripheral role of the *imitator* rather than the producer of theory. Their accounts demonstrate that the decolonisation of knowledge in the region cannot rely solely on Western feminist paradigms; it must primarily emerge from within the embodied, affective, and linguistic realities of post-Soviet subjectivities. This becomes possible when women articulate fear, duty, and love as structured forms of agency and disobedience to the epistemic injustice.

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Appendix

Table 1. A study sample of women’s testimonies in combat

Nº	Source	Name, callsign	Position in the Army	Additional Information
1	https://24tv.ua/mobilizatsiya-zhinok-droni-pro-rishennya-yti-armiyu-intervyu_n2853644	Daria ‘Anaconda’	Drone operator, aerial reconnaissance specialist	21 years old, the only female pilot in the battalion of unmanned systems
2	https://suspilne.media/cherkasy/897421-divcina-v-armii-akstavlatsa-do-zinok-zahisnic-na-vijskovij-sluzbi/	Anastasii Bobkova	Lieutenant in the Ukrainian Border Guard Service	
3	https://suspilne.media/odesa/538563-ak-ce-buti-zinkou-v-armii-intervu-z-feldserkou-veronikou-palaniceu/	Veronika ‘Palianytsia’	Combat medic and psychologist, 122nd Territorial Defence Brigade	She was the youngest city council member (26 years old) and worked at a children’s rehabilitation centre. Although she had the opportunity to leave the country, she received a military summons and joined the Armed Forces of Ukraine
4	https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/articles/c8dmv934dvvo	Kateryna (name changed)	Soldier, service member of the 3rd Regiment of the Special Operations Forces	Mother
5	https://blog.eva.ua/zhinky-na-bojovyh-posadah-v-armiyi-interv-yu-e-rozmova-z-olenoyu-ryzh	Olena ‘Ryzh’	Soldier, field medic, infantrywoman, 47th Brigade	Before the full-scale invasion: a trainer in the HoReCa sector
6	https://blog.eva.ua/e-rozmova-interv-yu-zi-starshoyu-lejtenantkoyu-ngu-hrystynoyu-kudryavoyu/	Khrystyna ‘Curly’	Senior lieutenant in the National Guard of Ukraine, deputy commander of a mortar battery	Has served for 10 years
7	https://rozmova.wordpress.com/2025/03/18/kateryna-halushka-3/	Kateryna Halushka	Combat medic and strategic communications officer	In 2019, Kateryna joined the volunteer foundation Come Back Alive, where she told the stories of those defending the country
8	https://www.sestry.eu/statti/koli-povertaieshsya-dodomu-staie-vazhko	Marta Demianchuk	Combat medic, journalist	She holds a degree in journalism and joined the Armed Forces of Ukraine in 2020, after serving in a volunteer battalion since 2014
9	https://www.sestry.eu/statti/boyova-medikinya-oleksandra-chorna-kolichas-ide-na-sekundi-yane-vidchuvayu-bolyu	Oleksandra Chorna ‘Swallow’	Combat medic, member of an evacuation crew, 39th Separate Coastal Defence Brigade	52 years old, volunteer, accountant, daughter and wife of militarians; mother of three, grandmother
10	https://www.sestry.eu/statti/budu-rozpovidati-onukam-yak-yihnya-babusya-vaikiriya-boronila-nebo	Valentyna Zhelezko ‘Valkyria’	Bucha Witches — Mobile Fire Group (drone interception unit)	Before the full-scale invasion: veterinarian, 52 years old; mother of three
11	https://www.sestry.eu/statti/olena-totel-u-sportzali-trenerka-zapitala-shcho-kachaiemo-popu-ta-nikazhu-budemo-roboti-z-mene-mashinu	Olena Totel	FPV drone pilot, 13th Brigade of the National Guard of Ukraine ‘Khartia’	Before the full-scale invasion: editor-in-chief at a TV channel in Dnipro
12	https://behindthenews.ua/spetsproiekti/po-toy-bik-genderu/yarina-chornoguz-jinka-v-armiyi-zaznae-viprobuvan-chi-gotova-priynyati-svoyu-rol-u-patriarhalnomu-sensi-345/	Yaryna Chornoguz ‘Yara’	Paramedic and reconnaissance officer, 140th Marine Battalion	Poet, listed among the 100 most influential women in Ukraine. She completed training with the Hospitaliers Battalion and went on her first rotation in 2019 – one of four she served with in the medical battalion; mother of a daughter
13	https://dou.ua/lenta/interviews/military-recruiter-about-women-mobilization/14-травня, 10:00 9542	Daria Marusyk	Recruiter, 412th Unmanned Systems Regiment ‘Nemesis’	Before the full-scale invasion: PR lead at Appflame; mother of a 9-year-old son, daughter of a militarian
14	https://elle.ua/ludi/interview/zhinki-na-fronti-10-zapitan-oficerici-zsu-viktorii-kravchenko/	Viktoriia Kravchenko	Major, military psychologist.	14 years of service in the Armed Forces of Ukraine; mother
15	https://femwork.org/blog/feministky-pro-wiunu-6/	Anna Ivantsyk	Servicewoman of the 24th Separate Mechanized Brigade named after King Danylo, combat medic	Civic activist; mother
16	https://mezha.net/ua/mysli/interviu-z-zhinkoiu-viiskovosluzhbovytseiudyskryminatsiia-pohrozy-vid-viiskovykh-rf-i-arestovykh/	Karina Huseinova	Deputy Commander of the 1st Tank Company for the Moral and Psychological Support of the Tank Battalion, 72nd Separate Mechanised Brigade named after the Black Zaporizhians – Senior Lieutenant	26 years old, professional servicewoman; her father is a military officer. She received a military education and has served in the Armed Forces of Ukraine since 2018
17	https://ukrainky.com.ua/yuliya-mykytenko-ukrayinka-yaka-stvoryla-pershyj-zhinochij-vzvod/	Yuliia Mykytenko	Platoon commander of a reconnaissance company in the Armed Forces of Ukraine, serving since 2016	Has served in the Armed Forces of Ukraine since 2016. A former translator, professional soldier, and activist who advanced from a clerk to a UAV platoon commander. Contributed significantly to changing attitudes toward women in the military She founded Ukraine’s first all-women military platoon.
18	https://ukrainky.com.ua/zhinky-u-vijni-liubov-plaksiuk-persha-zhinka-yaka-ocholyla-artpidrozdil-zsu/	Liubov Plaksiuk	The first woman to head an artillery unit in the Armed Forces of Ukraine, Commander of a self-propelled artillery battery of the 26th Artillery Brigade named after General Roman Dashkevych	A former translator, professional soldier, and activist who advanced from a clerk to a UAV platoon commander. Contributed significantly to changing attitudes toward women in the military She founded Ukraine’s first all-women military platoon.
19	https://ukrainky.com.ua/znaj-nashu-yevgeniya-bakaj-persha-v-istoriyi-vms-zsu-shturmanka-flotu/	Yevheniia Bakai	The first female naval navigator in the history of the Ukrainian Navy	By profession, a history teacher; serving in the Armed Forces of Ukraine since 2016
20	https://ukrainky.com.ua/anastasii-czianid-skrypalka-shho-stalabojoyovoyu-medkyneyu/	Anastasii ‘Cyanide’	Combat medic instructor in medical training at the Educational Centre of the Territorial Defence Forces Command of the Armed Forces of Ukraine	Before the full-scale invasion: a violinist
21	https://www.pravda.com.ua/articles/2022/08/02/7361430/	Valeriia ‘Wasp’	Assault trooper of the 128th Brigade	25 years old, _ , she was awarded the Order ‘For Courage’, 3rd Class, and the state medal ‘To a Defender of the Fatherland’; mother, her husband is also a militarian
22	https://ukrainky.com.ua/ya-mala-kvytky-ufrancziyu-ale-poyihalana-spivbesidu-v-borovu-istoriya-zhurnalistky-kateryny-petrenko-yaka-dobrovilnopryyednalasya-do-zsu/	Kateryna Petrenko	Journalist serving in the Public Relations Service of the 148th Separate Artillery Brigade of the Ukrainian Air Assault Forces	Journalist
23	https://ukrainky.com.ua/zhinka-saper-yak-zhytomyryanka-ilona-kulykivska-rozminovuye-ukrayinu/	Ilona Kulykivska	Combat engineer and explosives technician	Police officer with 15 years of service, holding the rank of Captain; mother of 2 adult daughters
24	https://ukrainky.com.ua/zhinky-u-vijni-iryna-kleimenova-psyhologynya-yaka-pishla-u-zsu-i-voyuyena-peredovij/	Iryna Kleimenova	Frontline service member and combat psychologist	Volunteered since 2014, joined the military in 2022; mother of 2
25	https://ukrainky.com.ua/zhinky-u-vijni-olesya-vorotnyuk-baleryna-yaka-pishlana-vijnu/	Olesia Vorotniuk	Serving in the Territorial Defence Forces	Before the full-scale invasion: a ballerina

Source: Authors.

Digitalised Gendered Memories of Romanian Socialism: Intergenerational Trauma, Healing, and Nostalgia

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Abstract: The article examines current competing memories and gendered narratives of the state-socialist draconian pro-natalist policies in Romania in the current context of increasingly restricted reproductive rights. The focus of this analysis is the digital project Jurnalul Decretului (The Journal of the Decree) undertaken by a group of investigative journalists from 2019 to 2021. I distinguish two patterns of remembering, which illustrate two competing views regarding women's reproductive rights. First, through women's recollections on digital platforms of previously silenced memories of illegal abortions and their dire consequences for their families, such as imprisonment, physical ailments, and sometimes death, victims, their families, and activists promote women's legal right to abortion. The second illustrates how these traumatic memories are challenged and weaponised by increasingly influential religious and conservative groups, which promote far-right, anti-globalist, and anti-genderist ideologies. The analysis concludes that while the first mnemonic trend could provide some grounds for considering the transformative potential of memory-making for women's rights, the latter generated some serious scepticism about the possibility that the former may prevail.

Keywords: Romania, abortion, Decree 770, state socialism, gendered memories, women, reproductive rights, post-memory, digital platforms

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A guy's life in communism was much cooler than a girl's one. Guys used to be freer. They couldn't get pregnant. If they got married, many became some kind of masters. Girls didn't like masters. Neither did guys.
(Popescu 2008: 209)

This testimony illustrates the lived experiences of what came to be known in Romania as the 'decree generation' (*decreței*), i.e. those born in the aftermath of the draconian communist pro-natalist Decree 770 of 1966, criminalising abortion.¹ As Gail Kligman argued, 'political demography legitimated the state intervention in the internal affairs of the citizens' (Kligman 1998: 10). Instead of bringing enjoyment and personal gratification, sexuality and marriage became traumatising experiences (Miroiu 2013). But, as Popescu's recollection shows, the trauma inflicted on girls was much more severe, as it was simultaneously shaped by the political and gendered norms of social control. An unwanted pregnancy subjected the young woman to the authority of both the authoritarian communist state and the patriarchal system. Official data of the time recorded 9,452 maternal deaths between 1966 and 1989 (Tismăneanu, Dobrinu, Vasile 2007: 422).²

After the overthrow of the communist regime in December 1989, the newly set up provisional government, represented by the National Salvation Front (FSN), was quick to abrogate the abortion law.³ This decision brought much relief to many women and men whose lives were severely impacted by Decree 770, and it legitimated the new regime. The following year, the Ministry of Health reported no fewer than 992,265 abortions (Kligman 1998: 218). Despite access to legally available birth control methods and the availability of sexual education, abortion continued to be perceived as a legitimate form of contraception.

However, more than thirty years later, civil society groups, activists, and international women's rights organisations began to document, yet again, an imminent severe threat to women's reproductive rights.⁴ In response, memory activists, feminist groups, and the victims and descendants of Decree 770 of 1966 began to utilise women's memories of communism as a cautionary tale against current attempts to

¹ Decret Nr. 770 din 1 Octombrie 1966 pentru reglementarea întreruperii cursului sarcinii, published in *Buletinul Oficial* nr. 160 din 1 Octombrie 1966.

² These data, however, should be regarded with caution since they do not include the number of women who were refused medical assistance after a botched abortion.

³ See article 8 in Decret Lege nr. 1 (Journal of the Degree No. 1), 26 December, 1989, privind abrogarea unor decrete, legi și acte normative, *Monitorul Oficial*, nr. 4 (Official Gazette No. 4), 27 December 1989.

⁴ In June 2019, the feminist NGO Filia Center in collaboration with the Euroregional Centre for Public Initiatives released a report *Raport de Cecetare: Refuzul La Efectuarea Raportului la Cerere* (Cilibiu 2019), which shows the following: out of 158 public hospitals that agreed to participate in the study and

restrict women's reproductive rights. It is important to note that, in contrast to other selected political and demographic groups, including former political prisoners, deportees, or those whose properties were confiscated, women's victimisation under communism did not become part of any state-sponsored initiative of historical redress or other informal truth-telling initiatives (Stan 2013).

Thus, the article examines current competing memories of women's experiences under state socialism by focusing on the individual recollections of the regime's repressive pro-natalist policies on digital sites. A special emphasis is placed on the intergenerational transmission of this past to those generations who either matured or were born after the demise of communism. My goal is to provide some insights into how gendered narratives of state socialism either conform or depart from similar mnemonic practices that suggest the co-existence of contradictory and ambiguous historical narratives that range from outright condemnation to reflective or restorative nostalgia (Ciobanu, Șerban 2025: 1–9). The focus is on how the memory of Decree 770 is currently transmitted, used, or misused in the era of post-memory. I utilise qualitative content analysis to explore the work of mnemonic actors engaged in the transmission of gendered memories of state socialism through digitally mediated sites. The focus of the analysis is the work undertaken by a group of investigative journalists engaged in civic activism, who have participated since 2019 in the digital project *Jurnalul Decretului* (The Journal of the Decree) under the slogan 'The Past That Never Goes Away' (Trecutul care nu mai Trece). By collecting and disseminating the testimonies of individuals who experienced or witnessed first-hand the harsh realities of Decree 770 of 1966, their stated goal is to use these life stories and warn the public of the imminent dangerous consequences that restrictive reproductive policies could have on women and their communities. This team of journalists undertook the work of memory-making as whistleblowers.

The main argument of the article is that while the two patterns of remembering the communist past seem to illustrate competing recollections – condemnation versus reflective/restorative nostalgia – both reflect distinctive gendered patterns of memory-making. The first highlights women's recollections on digital platforms of long-term repressed or silenced private lived experiences regarding sexuality and reproduction as a participatory grassroots type of remembering, which brings redress, healing, and

have the necessary infrastructure to provide abortions, only 40 in 24 counties (excluding the capital Bucharest) always do; 36 hospitals in 19 counties refuse to do so during religious holidays; 51 hospitals in 21 counties refuse to provide abortions altogether; 31 hospitals declined to participate in the telephone survey. Another report issued by Human Rights Watch in April 2025 documents how doctors invoke conscientious objection to provide abortions and the significant inroads that the Orthodox Church in Romania (BOR) and transnational and foreign anti-abortion groups have made in public hospitals and government structures to undermine women's reproductive rights (Human Rights Watch 2025).

agency. Scholarship of memory-making from below engages with a variety of topics, including, but not limited to, vernacular memories and practices involving mourning rituals (Verdery 1999), private musealisation initiatives of daily life in state socialism (Stephen 2020), and national commemorations in rural areas and small towns (Bădescu 2026). However, what sets the *Journal of the Decree* apart from previous mnemonic practices is the activist angle, triggered by deeply intimate recollections. A community of memory bound by multiple individual recollections of common experiences, which could eventually coalesce into a site of resistance, seems to emerge.

At the same time, it highlights a particular type of intergenerational transmission. The so-called 'hinge generation' (primarily daughters and granddaughters) continues to have a 'sense of living connection' with the generation of decree women (Hirsch 2012: 1–2). However, as Simona Mitroiu argued, women's transmission of traumatic histories (i.e. post-World War II dislocations) remained for the most part relegated to oral family histories and did not significantly impact the officially sanctioned historical narratives of the past (Mitroiu 2018: 15). Similarly, women's private recollections of sexuality under state socialism conflict with the official ideologies of gender equality (Gore-Gorszewska, Štulhofer 2024). The absence of gendered memories from public sites of memory leads to my second point. Specifically, these traumatic memories are easily challenged (as in other post-communist countries) by the increasing influence of transnational and national religiously conservative groups, which promote far-right, anti-globalist, anti-genderist ideologies. (Desperak 2023: 84–94; Norocel, Paternotte 2023: 123–129)

To pursue this analysis, a brief overview of the legacies of communist reproductive policies in post-communist Romania is provided. This is followed by a presentation of scholarly analyses, oral histories, and artistic productions, which incorporated gendered aspects of the memory of state socialism. A third section of the article consists of an interpretive analysis of the *Journal of the Decree* and an in-depth examination of two articles that provoked contradictory comments and strong emotions among Facebook users. Some concluding remarks will address three broader questions: (1) How do gendered memories of state socialism expressed in digital contexts and on social media platforms promote and/or shape an intergenerational dialogue between the children of the decree and the next generation? (2) How relevant are such intergenerational exchanges for current and ongoing national and transnational cultural wars, which either promote the return to traditional gender roles or, on the contrary, advocate for a progressive and liberal agenda in the areas of gender and minority rights? (3) Given the current international context in which reproductive rights are being dismantled or are highly restrictive (Center for Reproductive Rights 2025), what are the lessons that can be learnt from the Romanian case?

Patriarchal state socialism and its legacies

Scholars of gender and nationalism have emphasised that nation-states represent women in stereotypical gender roles (as mothers, daughters, or wives) and in need of male protectors (Yuval-Davies 1997; Verdery 1991). Contrary to the Marxist ideology that claims equality between men and women through the abolition of private property in state socialism, this pattern persisted in state socialist Romania. In the aftermath of World War II, the Romanian Communist Party (PCR) passed several laws that seemed to emancipate women from their traditional agrarian roles (Bucur, Miroiu 2018: 118; Massino 2019: 145). But eventually, the socialist state clearly turned into a state socialist patriarchal system, which reached its peak by the 1980s.⁵ The two main pillars of patriarchy during state socialism were represented by highly restrictive reproductive legislation and a virulent nationalist masculinist rhetoric that proclaimed hybrid motherhood – mother/worker and mother/hero – as the core of communism's gender ideology (Olteanu 2004: 158–179).

After abortion was legalised in 1957 by the regime under the leadership of Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, the country had the highest number of abortions in Europe (Massino 2019: 256–271). However, alarmed by a significant decrease in natality rates, and responding to the regime's need to increase its industrial workforce, abortion was criminalised in 1966. Article 2 of Decree 770 of 1966 prohibited a woman's right to terminate a pregnancy and listed extraordinary circumstances in which an abortion could be legally allowed, including: serious risks to the woman's health, if the woman was over forty-five years old, if the pregnancy was the result of rape or incest, if the woman had already given birth to four children and had them in her care, or if one of the parents suffered from a hereditary disease. Article 3 restricted legal entitlement to abortion under the above circumstances to the first three months of pregnancy. Articles 5, 6, and 7 incorporated clear provisions that made such medical interventions subject to the authority of the office of the prosecutor.

⁵ While the concept of patriarchal socialism and socialist patriarchy may not be appropriate for describing the gender regimes implemented in other former socialist countries in the region, it is outside the scope of this article to provide an in-depth analysis of the topic. However, it is important to note that studies on sexuality differ in their assessment of women's experiences of sexuality in socialism. For example, examining the case of East German women, Ghodsee (2018) argues that socialist welfare policies granted women more freedoms and, in contrast to capitalism consumerist societies, it normalised sexuality. Lišková (2018) makes a similar argument in the context of communist Czechoslovakia. But, as Maria Bucur has argued, 'the experience people had under neighboring communist regimes was quite different, with not only communist ideology, but religious ideology and sexological research all playing varied roles' (Bucur 2022: 198).

A whole apparatus was designed to ensure compliance with the decree. Under the dictatorship of Dej's successor, Nicolae Ceaușescu, compulsory gynaecological examinations were performed in socialist factories with more than 2,500 women employees to detect unreported pregnancies (Jinga 2011: 42). The communist secret police (the infamous Securitate) relied on informers recruited among medical staff, co-workers, and neighbours to report undeclared or illegal terminations of pregnancies. Ten years after the decree was issued, more than 200 medical doctors and over 1,000 medical staff were indicted for terminating pregnancies (Soare 2011: 75). These doctors were stripped of their right to practise medicine (Stoicescu, Oncioiu 2021). Desperate women seeking to save their lives after illegal botched abortions were not given any medical assistance unless they agreed to collaborate with the Securitate.

Nonetheless, given the lack of proper childcare and adequate housing and the absence of basic commodities in the market (food, gas, electricity), which reached severe levels in the 1980s, the decree did not result in a significant increase in birth rates. As *Jurnalul Decretului* points out, while in 1967 the total number of live births reached 527,000 (almost double the figures in 1965 and 1966), a year later the number had fallen to 400,000 (*Consecințele decretului din 1966* [The consequences of the 1966 decree]). Some women used primitive and painful methods, including scissors, knitting needles, shoehorns, infusion tubes, and root worms, to provoke spontaneous abortions (Vines 2003: 42–44). Others, in exchange for considerable sums of money, found qualified personnel who clandestinely performed abortions. The preferred method was curettage, which was frequently performed on the kitchen table with rudimentary tools that were not always properly sterilised, and often without any anaesthesia. Those who did not have the resources or access to the underground medical network ended up in the hands of the so-called 'skilled women' who had taught themselves how to induce a miscarriage (Botezatu 2024). As a result, many women became physically and emotionally scarred for the rest of their lives or were unable to conceive later. Many died and left orphaned children behind.

But, given the very limited sexual education and the lack of available contraceptives in the market, illegal abortions became a profitable enterprise. For some women and doctors, an illegal abortion meant an act of resistance and opposition against the regime's coercive pro-natalism. In an oral history interview published in 2003, one forty-two-year-old woman said: 'Ceaușescu wanted slaves... but we still didn't have children' (Vines 2003: 48). Official data showed higher rates of pregnancy terminations among young urban working-class women (Jinga 2011: 171). Giving birth in unheated, overcrowded, poorly supplied medical facilities, assisted by unsympathetic and verbally abusive medical staff, became an equally traumatising experience (Miroiu, Dragomir 2010).

The ramifications of these reproductive policies extended beyond the lives of women. Under the pretence of regulating the phenomenon of child abandonment, the socialist state continued to practise the interwar inhumane eugenic conception of selective breeding (Turda 2024). Abandoned children – especially those classified as partially recoverable and irrecoverable – were doomed to either remain in a state of permanent physical and mental underdevelopment or to premature death (Neagu 2024: 19–29). Data collected by the digital museum Muzeul Abandonului (Museum of Abandonment, n.d.) show that by 1991 over 700 such childcare institutions were spread throughout the country. Investigations led by the Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes and the Memory of the Romanian Exile (IICCMER) in 2017 and 2018 revealed that, as a result of the extreme neglect and inhumane treatment of abandoned children, 769 children died in three of such facilities between 1966 and 1991 (Jinga 2025: 237). Clearly, the success of the demographic project of creating a healthy, happy, and productive socialist nation remained nothing but a lie manufactured by the regime's propaganda.

These gender traumas of state socialism continued to persist and influence women's lives during the post-communist transition. The country's consistent position at the bottom of the European Union's Gender Equality Index illustrates the ongoing inequalities and systemic discrimination that Romanian women experience in the areas of the economy, politics, education, and health (EIGE 2025). As Beatrice Scutaru and Luciana Jinga pointed out, '1989 did not signify a decisive rupture with respect to sexual and health rights, the decriminalisation of abortion notwithstanding' (Scutaru, Jinga 2024: 143). In September 2014, Article 201 of the penal code introduced more specific regulations to the right of abortion, which can be performed up to the 14th/15th week of pregnancy and only by authorised medical institutions and offices (*Noul Codul Penal* 2014). Exceptions are made up to twenty-four weeks for medical reasons in the interest of the mother or the foetus. Women are not punishable by law for illegal abortions, but medical doctors can face imprisonment, fines, and the suspension/loss of certain rights (*Noul Codul Penal* 2014, Article 201, lines 7, 3, 4). It is this latter aspect of the law that has opened the door for medical obstetricians to refuse to perform abortions. It has also become increasingly common for medical doctors to refuse prospective patients by citing conscientious objections. A 2019 survey (Cilibiu 2019) showed that out of 158 hospitals that can provide an abortion, only 40 accept such requests. Some public hospitals have made it a mandatory requirement for women seeking an abortion to appear before a committee that provides counselling and includes representatives of anti-abortion associations and the Orthodox Church (Oncioiu 2018). But the anti-abortion crusade extends far beyond the local reach of the Orthodox Church. In 2019, investigative journalist Diana

Semeşan showed that most pregnancy counselling centres in the capital Bucharest belong to NGOs set up by neo-protestant American missionaries and/or Romanian immigrants in the United States connected to ultraconservative religious groups (Semeşan 2019). Women who cannot access reproductive care are misled and told that both contraception and abortion result in severe physical ailments and lifelong depression and guilt.

The insurmountable difficulties in obtaining legal access to an abortion, together with the absence of family planning and subsidised contraception (Doboş 2024: 166–167), could easily throw women back to the infamous communist era of the ‘kitchen table’ (Şerban 2021). During the COVID-19 lockdown, some women had no choice but to perform abortions in their homes. As in the pre-1989 era, the most vulnerable women are those who are poor, reside in remote rural areas, and have little education (see, e.g., Redacţia Observator 2017). Yet medical doctors are again capitalising on the lack of easily accessible, low-cost abortions and charge large sums of money in private medical offices. In the absence of legislation that requires mandatory sexual education in schools, many parents (children of the decree) choose not to discuss sex with their children (Scutaru, Jinga 2024: 145–146). According to a 2021 UNICEF study, one in ten children in Romania is born to a teenage mother, and the birth rate for girls aged 15–19 is 3.5 times higher than the EU average (Necualu et al. 2022).

The recent rise of the far right, represented by the ultra-conservative, xenophobic, anti-globalist, nationalist Alliance for the Union of All Romanians (AUR) party brought the pro-natalist rhetoric into the mainstream public debate. Its anti-gender political message and support for the ‘traditional Christian family’ (Dragolea 2022: 90) under the slogan Faith, Liberty, Family, Nation seem to resonate with a large segment of society (AUR, n.d.). The AUR’s rhetoric combines the Christian nationalist discourse of the interwar fascist Iron Guard movement with the current far right ideology of the Make America Great Again movement (MAGA). The sharp demographic decline that the country has experienced since 1989, from a population of 24.49 million to 18.9 million in 2025, has only amplified such nationalist rhetoric (World Population Review, 2025). Moreover, the AUR found allies among the Orthodox Church and parts of the liberal and social-democratic political establishment. During the 2025 presidential elections, the AUR’s anti-genderist rhetoric became the core of its ultra-conservative message (Băluţă, Tufiş 2026). These seemingly contradictory messages propagated by the AUR and its allies, which mix nostalgia for the authoritarian past (for both communism and fascism) with transnational far-right messages, are part and parcel of a global trend that places anti-genderism at its core. As Judith Butler has persuasively argued: ‘Contradictions like these abound in the anti-gender ideology movement (...). One of the most powerful sites of anti-gender influence is in national elections’ (Butler 2024: 43).

These ultraconservative trends continue to coexist with memories of the communist-era Decree 770. Moreover, in the last decade, an increasingly militant feminist movement, which engages in public rallies and street protests, has been vigorously campaigning against domestic violence and for reproductive rights, the rights of Roma women, and the rights of LGBTQ communities (Băluță, Ignățoiu-Sora 2024; Miroiu 2024). Several questions thus arise: Given that, as Marianne Hirsch (2019: 1–2) has pointed out, ‘collective memory has, in recent years, been weaponised for conservative and even violent ends’, could the increasing influence of the far right in Romania restore the type of patriarchal nationalist regime promoted both before and during communism? Given that recent public opinion surveys show that more than half of the country’s population has a positive perception of the communist regime (INSCOP 2025), to what extent is this ultra-conservative message attuned to nostalgia for the old regime? Or, conversely, could the recent boom in state-socialist-era gendered memories potentially have a transformational effect and elicit an intergenerational dialogue between the children of the decree and their own children? How do mnemonic actors mobilise these memories to defend reproductive rights? These questions are addressed below.

Gendered memories of state socialism: between marginalisation and redress

In the aftermath of the December 1989 revolution, memory politics was heavily shaped by the anti-communist militancy of former political prisoners incarcerated during the early stage of Soviet-style communist repression (Ciobanu 2021). Stereotypical public representations of women’s experiences of political repression resulted in the reification of ‘political victimhood as masculine’ (Haliuc 2013: 120).

However, since the 2000s this hegemonic heroic-masculinist narrative of the past has coexisted with a more nostalgic view of state socialism, which shifted the focus from the elites and former political prisoners to ordinary people, and from early communist Sovietisation to late nationalism communism. This primarily retrospective nostalgia (Boym 2001) attempted to recuperate memories of a socialist childhood (Mitroiu 2020). As the last generation that grew up under state socialism – the decree generation (*decreței*) – entered adulthood, online platforms increasingly became the preferred sites of memory-making and memory preservation. In an ironic twist, this first post-socialist generation to become conversant with computer and internet technology used the latter to express their longing for a time when people enjoyed social interaction through physical proximity (Petrescu 2017). Also known as the ‘latchkey generation’ (due to a lack of adequate and sufficient childcare, many children spent some after-school time by themselves in their state-socialist dwellings), they utilise

social media platforms, particularly Facebook (FB), to assert their distinctive lived experiences. These FB communities represent the voices of ordinary working-class people who lived in state socialism (Pohrib 2019: 173–174).

Simultaneously, scholars and memory activists started to delve into the gendered aspects of lived experiences. Women's recollections of late communism highlighted a specific gender trauma shaped by forced motherhood and daily material struggles (Gheo, Lungu 2008: 10). A few middle-class intellectual women were able to maintain a sense of agency by clandestinely writing about their daily experiences (Mitroiu 2023). The majority, however, managed to cope with daily challenges through women's support networks made up of neighbours, co-workers, and family members (Bucur, Miroiu 2008: 94–97) as well as through intergenerational solidarity (Dobre 2020: 132).

But several studies seem to indicate both continuities and changes among different generations of women regarding their perceptions of state socialism. For the women who experienced girlhood or young womanhood in the 1980s, their recollections embody the experience of 'femininity under siege' (Fătu-Tutoveanu 2015: 124). Despite the liberalisation of abortion in December 1989, the inhibitions and constraints of the communist era still linger on. In fact, except for a few oral histories and interviews, the lived experiences of sexuality and motherhood did not overtly enter the vernacular practices of remembering (Anton 2009).

Instead, it was through mediated artistic representations that the experience of abortion and its intergenerational transmission was more bluntly presented to the public. A major turning point was the release of Cristian Mungiu's internationally acclaimed movie *4 Months, 3 Weeks, 2 Days* in 2007. Florin Iepan's documentary *Framing the Change: Children of the Decree* enjoyed an equally powerful reception. Contemporary women writers also portrayed in their novels the unspoken suffering of 'aborted motherhood' (Marinescu 2022) and the ongoing unresolved ambivalence of motherhood passed on to the children of the decree children and especially to their daughters (Vlada 2021: 9). But these accounts reach out to a rather limited audience confined to the urban educated middle-class segment.

However, increased internet access and engagement with social media (especially Facebook), redefined the social and political landscape. Especially after the country's accession to the European Union in 2007, social media fostered increased civic engagement and citizen mobilisation against government corruption, abuses, and social injustices (Vasilendiuc, Bardan 2022). Digital sites are increasingly facilitating a type of grassroots participation in the act of memory making, which seems to indicate that a different mnemonic pattern is emerging. The large number of Facebook accounts shapes what Andrew Hoskins describes as 'the memory of the multitude' grounded in hyperconnectivity and readily available data, diminishing the legitimacy of the 'former gatekeepers of memory' (Hoskins 2018: 85–89). Such increased participation in

the act of recasting the past creates communities of memory and empowers them to project ownership over the historical narrative (Hirsch 2012: 240–242). By sharing personal testimonies and transmitted memories, social media users transform digital sites into living archives (Gibbons 2019).

A glance at the Facebook page of the Journal of the Decree, whose first post was dated 26 June 2019 and the last one 12 July 2022, gathering 47,000 followers, seems to suggest that victims, survivors, and the descendants of Decree 770 are finally coming together to validate themselves as the agents of its transmitted memory. However, because the digital arena is prone to gross misinformation and manipulation, the past could easily be weaponised by illiberal anti-democratic actors pursuing a restorative agenda. Several Facebook pages opened in 2023 that mix religious prayers, photos of animals, and communist nostalgia. In only one year they gathered over 50 million reactions (likes, shares and comments) (Cârlugea 2024). Some of these sites openly praise the benefits of a happy childhood during the ‘Golden Age’ – as Ceaușescu’s propaganda used to call his regime.⁶ Somewhat similarly, in 2023, in an interview on the demographic decline of the economically active population, the Minister of Labour, Marius Budăi, stated that it is false to think of these children as unwanted (*decreșei*) because they were born out of the love of their parents (Radu 2022). Other sites illustrate a more complex range of conflicting attitudes towards the past, from outright condemnation to reflective and restorative nostalgia, indicating the struggles of the post-memory generation to make sense of divergent narratives (Petrescu, Petrescu 2025).

Methodology and ethical issues

To analyse the issues raised above, I chose to conduct a qualitative analysis of the posts, comments, and reactions associated with two articles posted on the Journal of the Decree Facebook page. The first, ‘Să nu țipi, Chiar dacă doare, să nu țipi’ (Don’t scream. Even if it hurts, don’t scream), was posted on 5 July 2019 and includes the testimonies of women who had clandestine abortions. From 16 July 2019 to 16 August 2019, it gathered 422 reactions, 65 comments, and 130 shares. This post clearly indicates a living ideological polarisation over reproductive rights and sharp division among those who condemn the past and those who express nostalgia for it. The second post was triggered by Diana Meseșan’s article ‘Viața noastră sexuală a fost un

⁶ The Facebook site is named *Trairi și Scîlpiri* (Feelings and Sparkles) and has 160,500 members. The post – consisting of a poem praising childhood in communism and a photo of three beautiful, healthy-looking children, taken from the famous movie of the era *Ani de liceu* (*High School Years*) – was uploaded on 16 May 2025.

calvar' (Our sex life was an ordeal) and was posted on 10 December 2021. Although it generated fewer reactions – a total of 31 comments, 404 likes, and 116 shares from 10 December 2021 to 31 December 2021), it led to a genuine transgenerational dialogue between women. It stands out as a powerful example of how traumatic recollections of personal stories create solidarity among women and increase awareness of their rights and bodily autonomy. The information was accessed, collected, and uploaded from 10 September 2025 to 28 December 2025. However, by April 2026, when I tried to access the 31 comments, I discovered that they had been deleted and replaced by 22 new posts. The language, themes, and sentiments incorporated in the new posts depart significantly from the previous ones. They mirror the type of polarisation over both the past and the present status of reproductive rights. In fact, this seems to confirm that digital memory-making is a living and ongoing process of creation, dismantling, and recreating memory archives without an end in sight. What seems to characterise grassroots memory-making is its elusiveness and volatility.

Through manual coding, I pursued an inductive analysis at three levels.⁷ The first includes the dominant themes associated with the topics of abortion and sexuality, which were identified in public comments and the replies posted on the Facebook platform. The second refers to the framing of these themes through language patterns. Finally, I consider how the emotions associated with the former are expressed through strong adjectives and exclamation marks. Ultimately, I attempt to understand how these 'new forms of remembering and forgetting' expressed on such platforms (Bartoletti 2011: 82–11) shape the legacy of Decree 770 as part of the post-communist collective memory.

Given the sensitive nature of the personal stories shared by the users of these Facebook platforms, I chose to anonymise their comments and ensure that their identity is not revealed. Thus, this article follows established ethical guidelines and concerns regarding social media research, acknowledging respect for the privacy and autonomy of individuals and communities of social media users (Centre for Data, Culture & Society 2021). I also approach ethical issues as contingent upon the specific context of reproductive rights and choices, which involve unequal power relations (Gliniecka 2023: 1–11). In the section below, the analysed comments are anonymised and attributed to one of the two articles – for example, A1 is the comment below the post 'Don't scream...!', while A2 is the comment below the post sharing Diana Mesešan's article. Given the absence of the second set of comments addressed above, exact publishing dates are not provided.

⁷ AI tools were also consulted to assist with identifying the main themes.

Journal of the Decree: between healing and nostalgia

In 2018, when the ultimately unsuccessful referendum on banning same-sex marriages was underway and its core supporters were also lobbying for abortion to be banned (Norocel, Băluță 2023), Mihai Matei, a middle-age information technology entrepreneur and civic activist, whose own mother barely survived an induced abortion, posted on his Facebook page a call for users to share their stories. After hundreds of people posted personal testimonies, the idea of the Journal of the Decree came about (Avadani 2023). Matei reached out to the Bucharest-based NGO Center for Independent Journalism and a team of reporters from the independent journalism project Dela0.ro (Diana Oncioiu and Vlad Stoicescu), freelance journalists Octavian Coman and Diana Meseșan from daily *Libertatea* were appointed.⁸ They brought the project to fruition in 2021. From October to December 2021, 14 multimedia pieces were released in Romanian, English, and Hungarian. A historical section that combines texts with images (photos and archival materials from different eras) delves into the lengthy history of reproductive rights from pre-modern times until the communist era. The latter era is presented in much detail and in a multifaceted manner. The gruesome reality of the decree is narrated by posting images of the original decree, photos of party officials, propaganda articles in the official media of the time (on divorce and health), and especially details on the grim consequences of the decree – such as statistics on convictions for illegal pregnancy interruptions, maternal mortality, and the disastrous situation in maternity hospitals. But the report also incorporates current instances of criminalisation or attempts to criminalise abortion in different countries and regions of the world. Their goal is to look into the future: ‘We want to find out and understand. About yesterday, about today, but especially about tomorrow’, states the project website. The fourteen articles mix a variety of topics that cover both the communist past – illegal abortions, orphanages, the role of the secret police, sex life – and the present, referring to official government attempts to implement pro-natalist policies, deficient natal care, women’s inability to access abortion services, the lack of sex education. Experts’ opinions are personalised by vivid, graphic, and gruesome testimonies of the decree’s victims and survivors (women and their children, abandoned children, doctors).

But how do these stories resonate with the digital public? How do different demographic groups – those who lived through the decree era and chose to transmit their memories to the next generation (mostly from mothers to daughters) – rationalise and interpret them? And to what extent could this intergenerational dialogue help women overcome the gendered traumas of state-socialist pronatalist policies? Since

⁸ Information about the project is available at: <https://jurnalul-decretului.ro/despre-proiect>.

abortion is a highly morally and politically contested topic in Romania and elsewhere, how is the ideological divide between the proponents of 'pro-life' and 'pro-choice' articulated on this digital site? How do these two segments of the audience engage with the politics of the present and the memories of the past to frame reproductive rights? By analysing reflections on the two posts discussed earlier through the lenses of a qualitative content analysis, some tentative answers will be provided.

The Facebook post 'Don't scream, even if it hurts, don't scream' is based on an interview with a 59-year-old TV producer (R). Her mother-in-law's apartment was used as a secret location where illegal abortions were performed by doctors. Recollections of the place and time bring back the pain and the fear experienced by all the parties involved (the doctor, the host/intermediary, and the woman): 'If you shout, if they found out, we all end up in jail', recollects the interviewee. Such fear was common in the apartments of the grey socialist buildings of the 'Golden Age'. 'The living room was transformed into a gynaecological office! Not to die was a privilege!' This chilling testimony speaks to historical gendered trauma, which represents the first major theme expressed through the users' comments. A total of eight testimonies recollect the tragic stories of women who died because of botched abortions or experienced severe haemorrhages after being denied medical care. One narrative belongs to a medical doctor who worked in a textile factory, who tried to save women and protect them from the authorities (I1, 14 August 2019). These stories generate powerful reactions ranging from empathy, pity for what women lived through, praise for the women's courage to defy the regime, and words of remembrance coined in religious terms: 'God have mercy on their souls' (A1, 12 August 2019). This bodily trauma is intertwined with the psychological trauma that women and their families lived through during the decree era, characterised by a fear of being under constant surveillance and the secrecy of pregnancy terminations.

The second principal theme articulates reproductive rights from a moral and religious perspective. Accordingly, abortion is a sin, and the women who underwent abortion are labelled as sinners and criminals. Unlike those who condemned the imposition of motherhood by the communist regime, they frame it as an unquestionable moral and religious duty. Thus, the actual guilt lies with women themselves and not with the state-socialist regime. In response to those who recollect the lack of access to proper childcare and basic goods under state socialism, one user replies: 'This is the most ridiculous excuse to kill children. Then you become the murderer of your own children.' (R1, 9 August 2019) For R1 and others, raising children during the difficult circumstances of the 1980s was a worthwhile sacrifice. Such comments reflect deeply polarised ideological positions. Against the feelings of empathy for the women who died and suffered, one person responds that 'a real sin is to expect others to live like you', i.e. to express solidarity with women who interrupted their

pregnancies (L1, 10 August 2019). The way these two themes are framed also indicates a dichotomy to how Facebook users reflect on the past through the lens of the present. Those who adhere to the historical trauma theme emphasise ongoing systemic gender discrimination and its legacy in post-socialism, i.e. the lack of sex education and contraception. Misogyny is internalised as a political issue: ‘then and now...women are second-class citizens’ (H1, 9 August 2019). Two comments also describe women’s dehumanisation by the communist regime by making an analogy with breeding cows and breeding stock (M1, 11 August 2019; P1, 12 August 2019). In contrast, those who condemn abortion express nostalgia for the security (real or imaginary) offered by the state-socialist system: ‘during communism everyone had a job and a place to stay’ (C1, 14 August 2019). As a counterbalance to nostalgia, a shared community of memory rooted in collective suffering evolves among those who condemn pro-natalist socialism: ‘All the women who lived in those times have something to tell us.’ (M1, 16 August 2019)

At the level of sentiment, these tense exchanges reveal negative emotions that indicate an ongoing process of reckoning with the traumatic past. Feelings of grief, anger, and solidarity clash with an ideological backlash. Against the latter, one male user, for instance, responded with crude insulting words, such as ‘idiots’, ‘fools’, and ‘stupid’ (T1, 10 July 2019). This reaction illustrates the irreconcilable antagonism between the proponents of the two themes and indicates that digital platforms are simultaneously sites of remembrance and of ideological struggles.

The article ‘Our Sex Life Was an Ordeal’ addresses the trauma of women and sex life under communism from an intergenerational perspective. Above the article’s title, an illustration attributed to Roman Gavrilă prepares readers for the extraordinary stories of pain, frustration, and injuries they are about to read. A woman with red hair in a red dress holds a bouquet of red flowers in her hand. The presence of the blood that seems to be dripping from her left hand amplifies the tension in the room. Her left hand is raised as she appears to reject her husband’s attempts to comfort or maybe seduce her. Her whole posture shows pain and loneliness. A photo on the wall shows her together with her three children dressed in pioneer uniforms worn by middle school children on special occasions. Their expressions are bleak and do not project any emotions or a particular image of a happy family. This impersonal (almost robotic) image contrasts sharply with the official propaganda of the 1980s that praised the fulfilment of women as mothers and the family as the basis of the state-socialist system. The illustration and the article are accompanied by a post summarising the author’s interviews with women and adds an explanatory layer to the image: ‘Sex was dangerous (...) If you got pregnant, it was your problem. If your husband left you, it was your fault. (...) The only advice from your parents was: don’t bring shame on us’ (Jurnalul Decretului, 2021). The interviews included in the

article are supplemented with statements from specialists on matters of family relationships and sexuality. For example, Adriana Băban's 1996 study of sex life in state socialism based on fifty interviews with women shows that forty of them had illegal abortions, only five were able to find contraceptives on the black market, and just one recalled her sexual experience as enjoyable (see also Baban, David 1994). Psychotherapist Cătălina Hetel argues that a lack of partnership and genuine intimacy in sex life under socialism is reflected today in the dysfunctional relationships between those mothers and their children (Jurnalul Decretului 2021). Most daughters lack any memories of their mothers as wives and have a hard time finding their own path after they become mothers themselves.

The prevailing themes that emerge throughout the thirty-one comments posted under this Facebook contribution are consistent with the above analysis. Two inter-related themes – the collective trauma experienced by women and its transmission to the next generation – are almost unanimously framed by the platform's users through the lens of gender inequality. The explicit expression of strong emotions such as 'collective trauma' (A2, 2021), 'the drama of women at the time' (B2, 2021), 'tormenting times' (C2, 2021), together with intimate testimonies of the lived experience of the loss of bodily control and shame, are clear indicators of a commonly shared experience of humiliation and suffering. These deeply disturbing injuries, cohesively articulated, are not relegated to the past but serve as forces actively shaping the present. The recurring theme of transgenerational trauma is described in comments as the 'lingering effects that many women still resent' (D2, 2021), as 'traumas that roll from generation to generation' (E2, 2021), or plainly as 'transgenerational traumas'.

However, although re-constructing the trauma of the past generates such powerful emotions, the counter-theme of healing further reinforces the bonds between the two generations of women. Healing is framed as both a duty to understand the past and a moral duty to move forward and to break this cycle. The following comments are significant: 'the young generation has no idea what women went through in those times' (F2, 2021); 'It's very hard to understand these things if you are not told about them' (G2, 2021); 'I was growing up like this for thirty-two years (...) the barriers are still there (...) although the cage is gone' (H2, 2021); 'It is up to us, women, to heal from our mothers' trauma and to raise our daughters as happy and fulfilled women' (I2, 2021). These comments indicate that the strong 'living connection' between mothers and daughters is characterised 'by an uneasy oscillation between continuity and rupture' (Hirsch 2012: 6). As one user puts it: 'These traumas are all inside us, and it is good to know our mothers' lives, so we can understand and heal ourselves.' (J2, 2021) But overall, there is a sense of relief and that it is only through empathy that genuine understanding can be achieved, which, in turn, could pre-empt nostalgia for communism. These feelings of relief and healing are amplified by comments that call

for awareness and collective action. One user noticed the lack of any male audience on this platform of remembering: '[It] would be interesting to know a gentleman's opinion of that era...The article should be written in red letters and distributed to those who claim, [everything] was better before' (K2, 2021). In other words, unless this past is not rejected by everyone (including those who contributed to women's individual traumas), there is no guarantee it will not be repeated.

The frequency of the concepts presented above (trauma, women, mothers, generations, healing) indicates that the memory archive built around the post 'Our sex life was an ordeal' validates women's experiences of restricted reproductive rights, resulting from Decree 770. Moreover, the critique of unequal power relations between men and women – then and now – frames and attempts to counter repressed feelings of shame, anger, and imposed silence over personal stories of death, unwanted pregnancies, and societal prejudice. One testimony stands out: A contributor lost her loving mother to a botched abortion, and her childhood was haunted by shame. To protect the family honour (because her mother's pregnancy was the result of an extramarital affair), her family persuaded the local authorities to attribute her death in the official death certificate to cardiac arrest. Only much later did she learn that her father was also physically abusive (M2, 2021).

At the level of sentiment, we can distinguish a combination of negative feelings towards the past and solidarity built through empathy among the members of the Facebook platform, who almost unanimously express gratitude and thanks to Diana Meseşan, the journalist who authored the post. As a result, a third feeling – of hope for the future – is added to the sum of such strong emotions. By remembering Decree 770 as a historical injustice, this memory community shows the potential that women's shared memories of repression can have for activist mobilisation towards progressive change (Rigney 2018; Altinay et al. 2019). However, given the country's current turn in a highly conservative and illiberal direction and the utilisation of digital sites by its advocates for spreading disinformation and promoting communist nostalgia, one should be cautious about further generalisations.

Concluding remarks

Ultimately, the analysis of the two Facebook sites indicates that there exist two principal and competing versions of remembering women's lives (and especially the reproductive aspects) under state socialism. First, remembering becomes a grassroots participatory activity that gives women the opportunity to speak without inhibitions about intimate aspects of their lives, which have been repressed for a long time. By acknowledging the unique gendered experiences, women seek both agency and recognition. However, in contrast to other groups victimised by communism, women

do not require material restitution. For them, acknowledgement means reparatory justice, which could potentially influence systemic change in the status of women. Second, sensitive issues like abortion, motherhood, and family life are easily prone to nostalgic recollections, which are partially rooted in the current dissatisfaction with the present capitalist global order. For the most part, the Facebook users (especially those commenting on the 'Don't cry...' article) who condemn abortion and the women who choose[chose] to have one are also praising the securities and benefits that state socialism provided for families.

While the first mnemonic trend could provide some grounds for considering the transformative potential of memory-making for promoting women's rights, the latter raises some scepticism about whether the former may prevail. As described earlier, the current transnational rise of anti-globalist, far-right political and cultural actors, to which Romania is not immune, is strongly advocating for a return to traditional patriarchal values. In September 2025, two former deputies of the far-right Partidul Oamenilor Tineri (Party of Young People) attempted to introduce a bill that would have imposed further legal restrictions on abortion (Mamulă 2025). However, this initiative did not gain significant support among MPs and was swiftly criticised by civil society activists, including those involved in the Journal of the Decree.

This unsuccessful attempt leads us to conclude[It can be concluded from this unsuccessful attempt] that although grassroots memory-making does not necessarily preclude restorative trends (both societal and political), it could mobilise against the further backsliding of reproductive rights. The Romanian case shows that memory activism can potentially be utilised as a tool of resistance to worldwide far-right, anti-genderist politics and their use of social media platforms for disinformation and manipulation.

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 BY-NC Monica Ciobanu, 2026.

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The Urban Memory of Socialist Women Reflected in Budapest Street Naming Practices

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Abstract: The paper examines the changes in street names honouring women who were active in the workers' movement in Hungary. It traces the urban memory of one eminent figure, Anna Koltói, across the main historical waves of street (re-)namings in Budapest between 1945 and 2022. Amidst the commemorations of socialist martyrs after the war, several streets were named after Koltói. The early 1990s saw the restoration of pre-war names, thus erasing her name from the inner districts of Budapest. In the recent memory politics after 2010, some districts continued to replace Koltói's name, while others restored it. Situating the analysis in the scholarship of post-socialist gender labour, I interrogate the ambivalent visibility and acknowledgement of socialist women. I reconstruct the arguments put forward in the proposals and debates over changing street names that took place in the Budapest City Council and the local district governments. I show that just as after the war stakeholders emphasised Koltói's participation in the workers' movement, in the early 1990s her name was associated with communism. Recent efforts to restore Koltói's memory have sought to emphasise her activism for women's rights as well as social democracy (as opposed to both conservatism and communism), doing so in order to make a political statement. The paper thus contributes to a critical analysis of women's exclusion and inclusion in the memory politics of different regimes.

Keywords: street names, memory politics, socialist women

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Naming streets after women

This paper examines the social processes of naming (and re-naming) streets commemorating socialist women in Hungary after the Second World War. I trace the use of female figures' names for street names in Budapest between 1945 and 2022 and provide insights into women's ambiguous representation. I focus on the memory politics of one central figure, Anna Koltói, as a case study and include a few others (Éva Kállai, Erika Szeles) to provide comparative context. Mapping out women's past and present urban visibility and the socio-political background of (re-)naming practices, I identify the arguments mobilised in the debates at historical turning points. The actual processes of decision-making always involved an interpretation of the women's biographies and served political purposes depending on the changing historical context.

The research is driven by the question of how socialist and feminist values have been translated into the urban landscape of post-socialist cities. Although historical, this question is more timely than ever in the current neoliberal socio-economic context (Rose-Redwood 2011; Rusu 2021a: 282), as it interrogates the dynamic relations between feminist, socialist, and neoliberal values and how they have been reinterpreted in political processes like street naming decisions. Street naming practices have continued to the present day and feature more and more women. To what extent this visibility is sending feminist messages is still an open question, as some names of non-communist, nationalist, or conservative female figures have re-appeared (see Walkowiak, Rutkiewicz-Hanczewska 2023). Embedded in a historical comparison, the research question is twofold: To what extent were socialist women acknowledged as women, not just workers, after the war and in state socialism? And to what extent are they acknowledged today for their socialism? The research can thus contribute to a nuanced understanding of the relationship between socialism and feminism, both as historical movements and as contemporary ideologies.

Socialism and feminism are contested concepts with complex histories that play a central role in this paper. Since the beginning of the 20th century, activist women have had divergent views on women's rights and their compatibility with communism and liberal democracy (Lóránd 2025). Although many of them rejected the label, they often shared the principles of their self-proclaimed feminist contemporaries (Lóránd 2024: 55). In the Hungarian discourse, the Feminists' Association was often viewed as prioritising bourgeois women over workers, especially when it came to census suffrage (see Gárdos 2024: 64). Some right-wing women also supported women's suffrage and education (Szapor 2025). Further, socialist politics, from the level of the trade union to the state, prioritised class struggle and remained masculinist (Çağatay et al. 2025: 186, 484–484; Sharp et al. 2022). Taking these into consideration, without applying the term to people distancing themselves from the label, I only use

‘feminism’ to describe the values that recognise women’s systemic oppression and advocate for women’s rights (the ‘minimal consensus’ in Lóránd et al. 2024: 5–6). I refer to union organisers like Koltói as women’s rights activists.

As for ‘socialist’ as an umbrella term, I follow Çağatay et al.’s definition (2025: 10) of it as ‘the world view informing the politics and activism of all left-wing movements and organizations other than anarchist-oriented ones, before ca. 1917, including social democratic movements and the precursors of the communist movement’. ‘Communist’ politics are specifically oriented towards instant transformation and working class–based power; the distinction from social democracy will be discussed later. I refer to the existing political regime as state socialism. Because place names express the value systems of regimes (Szívós 2021: 199), referencing ‘feminist and socialist values’ allows me to point to elements I identify as feminist and socialist in discourses and activities.

The Introduction to *Women’s Labour Activism in Eastern Europe and Beyond* opens with a discussion of Anna Koltói in the context of the legacy and memory of the women’s labour movement. It asserts that ‘the region experienced frequent political rupture, numerous shifts of borders and multiple regime changes. Even the tiny detail of the street-naming policies around Anna Koltói in the Hungarian capital symbolizes these changes’ (Çağatay et al. 2025: 60). The present article foregrounds this ‘tiny detail’ and traces street renamings in the context of gendered labour memory politics from the post-war period up until today.

Street naming practices in Hungary, 1945–2022

My analysis focuses on three main waves of street renaming practices in Hungary. As for periodisation, first I identified six main waves, flagged by major historical and administrative milestones: 1945, 1950, 1956, 1990, 2010, and 2020. Budapest has become a city with an exceptionally high rate of street name changes, occurring in waves of re- (and de-)canonisation, compared not only to Paris and London but also to other Hungarian towns (Palonen 2003). The waves of changes generated either an increase or a decrease in streets named after socialist women, and most changes were politically-ideologically driven and aimed at re-canonisation. Nevertheless, the enlargement of Budapest in 1950 with towns in the suburbs generated the need for street name changes for administrative reasons. The related regulations were finalised in the late 1970s (Takáts 1985). Below, I limit my focus to 1945, 1990, and the most recent period, under the right-wing governments of the Fidesz Party (focusing specifically on 2011 and 2021).

Across Eastern Europe, the year 1945 was marked by the proliferation of streets named after figures in the workers’ movement. Budapest was an eminent case: in

just the short democratic period before the communist takeover in 1948, more than 1,100 streets got new names (Takáts 1985: 301). As Erika Szívós (2021: 206) argues, the speed and volume of re-naming in Budapest demonstrates the symbolic power of street naming. She notes that among the first measures, after the annulment of the Jewish Laws, was the creation of a committee for street name revisions already in July 1945, when the city was still missing basic infrastructure. Political-ideological motives appeared as early as 1946 with Soviet pressure to honour the Red Army with new street names. A new canon was formed, commemorating not only political predecessors, but also specific historical, artistic, and literary figures (Palonen 2003; Szívós 2021; Takáts 1985: 300–301).

Systematic statistics are still not available on the exact number and proportion of streets named after women at specific historical moments in Budapest. However, there is no question that real women's names on street signs became more visible right after the war and throughout the state-socialist period from 1948 on, commemorating women in unprecedented numbers next to men, as they were also active in the communist and workers' movements.¹ In fact, the replacement of previous female names (such as that of clerical or royal figures like Maria Theresa) was politically motivated.

Giving official names to public places in Hungary historically lies within the authority of each town; however, in Budapest the question of jurisdiction is complicated by the capital's district system. Not only did the number and territory boundaries of districts undergo changes,² but their level of autonomy did, too. In practice, districts initiated (and debated) the proposed name change that either they or the Budapest City Council decided on. In the 1960s, Budapest had a street name committee in the City Council, with delegates from different institutions, including the Linguistic Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and the Party History Institute (Szívós 2021: 209). The districts also had their own street name committees with the right to submit a proposal and these included representatives of the Women's Council as well (Takáts 1985: 303, 314 n. 71).

The political-economic transformations of the early 1990s led to a new wave of re-naming public spaces. In Budapest alone, 650 street names were changed between 1989 and 1992 (Szívós 2021: 210); 40% of the streets renamed in Budapest at the time actually saw their name restored to what it had originally been before the name

¹ In the Romanian town Sibiu, about which we have accurate data, the highest proportion of streets with women's names ever recorded was in 1948 at 7% (which had shrunk to 1.6% by 2020; see Rusu 2022: 19).

² From 1930, Budapest had 14 districts, and after the enlargement in 1950, 22. The last administrative restructuring in 1994 resulted in the formation of 23 local district governments.

changes that occurred after 1945, and this figure rises to 73% when it comes to the city centre (Palonen 2003). Replacing communist street names with names from the Habsburg era might have been intended as de-politicisation, but it in fact worked as re-canonisation (Palonen 2003: 158). This wave affected the women connected to leftist political movements, whose names had also been erased (Gelnarová, Pető 2016: 79). However, like in the earlier state-socialist period, the post-socialist erasure of socialist women's names often replaced them with other, typically not political, female names: old ones like restored Habsburg names, or new ones, typically of actresses like Edit Domján (see Palonen 2003: 156; for very similar Polish tendencies, see Walkowiak 2018: 347).

Socialist women's names continue to re-emerge in street naming to the present day: after the Fidesz takeover in 2010, some districts in Budapest erased the names of female socialists in some places, while restored them in others. In 2010 there was also a change in the administrative practice of street naming: instead of a specific committee devoted to naming questions, the new practice was for one of the departments of the City Council to revise the district proposals and for the Budapest Mayor to bring forward suggestions for the General Assembly to vote on. As I discuss later, in the early 2020s new female names, including socialist women's, appeared in some Budapest districts led by opposition parties. My temporal scope of investigation ends in 2022, before a realistic opposition alternative to Fidesz would have emerged. According to the latest data, 11% of Budapest streets named after actual people (the so-called eponymous names) are female names (Budapest street names data visualisation 2023). In international comparison, this is not a low rate (for example, we see lower rates in Bucharest, Sibiu, Vienna, Rome, and Paris, similar rates in Warsaw, and higher ones in Hamburg; see Rusu 2022).

Feminism, critical toponymy, and post-socialism

Examining the practices of naming streets after socialist women lies at the conjunction of socialist, feminist, and urban historiography. From the reconstruction of the processes of naming streets after communist women, specific herstories unfold, which, I argue, make us interrogate not only the public memory of women in the urban landscape, but also the contested relationship between feminism and socialism.

Examining women's public in/visibility in street names shows the gender power dynamics that are reflective of the changing historical-political landscape. The social scientific examination of female street names is informed by the field of critical toponymy, which examines the names of places in the context of naming as a social process. Critical toponymy understands urban memory in general, and public naming processes in particular, as the outcome of symbolic, political, and economical power

struggles (Palonen 2003, 2006; Rose-Redwood 2011; Rusu 2021a, 2022; Szívós 2021; Walkowiak, Rutkiewicz-Hanczewska 2023). Public place names operate as 'barometers' of the values and historical narratives of political regimes. With new names, streets make the new symbols an inevitable part of everyday life, symbolically taking over and re-coding places (Szívós 2021: 199). The Eastern European scholarship of critical toponymy records how the changes of street names (hodonyms) reflect the specific histories of the region, including the fall of state socialism, ethnic-national diversity, and changing state borders (Palonen 2003, 2006; Rusu 2021a). While authors agree on the vast scale and influence of authoritarian periods, including state socialism, some, like Szívós (2021), also point to the room to manoeuvre in negotiating specific place names.

In the study of female street names, several (non-exclusive) research directions are possible. Walkowiak and Rutkiewicz-Hanczewska (2023: 213) identify three main objectives: quantitative, qualitative, and ideological ones. Studies thus aim to reconstruct the (changing) number and ratio of streets named after women (see also Rusu 2022). In Poland, for example, 14% of new individual namesakes were female, including literary characters (Walkowiak 2018: 347). Beyond numbers, literature on memory politics analyses the national pantheon by examining the very figures commemorated in street names (Palonen 2003; Walkowiak 2018). Finally, studies identify 'the agents involved in the naming wars, as well as the driving forces responsible for the inner dynamics of the debate' (Walkowiak, Rutkiewicz-Hanczewska 2023: 213).

Studies with a feminist perspective in the Eastern European context provide regional analyses of urban landscapes and of the underrepresentation of women in street names. They note that politically active women of the modern era have especially been sidelined (Palonen 2003: 156). However, in my view, these studies do not give adequate attention to the ambiguities of the post-socialist transformation in their inquiry, assuming increasing democratisation and gender equality. Although identifying the 'qualitative objective' beyond the numerical representation of women, the extensive research on female names in public places in Polish cities situates the question in the context of a contemporary conservative governance *vis-à-vis* recent global movements towards gender parity (Walkowiak 2018; Walkowiak, Rutkiewicz-Hanczewska 2023). A diachronic examination of a Romanian city's female street names is framed in identity politics, but without critically engaging with it as a viable feminist agenda (Rusu 2022). Notwithstanding their important contributions, scholarship is missing the chance to use the regional transformations as a lens through which the competing democratisation projects of socialism and neoliberal capitalism, which both claim to represent women, could be critically analysed.

In contrast, my approach explores the question of female street names in gender labour history in general, and (post-)socialist feminist historiography in particular. I ar-

que that in the Eastern European context socialist women's historically shifting urban visibility complicates the question of gender equality beyond the contemporary competition of Western-led feminist and national conservative narratives. The question of women's urban visibility feeds into the examination of the complicated relationship between socialism and feminism. It entails the fundamental questions of gender labour scholarship (Çağatay et al. 2025; Gelnarová, Fousková 2016; Lóránd et al. 2024; Pető 2005; Zimmermann 2014): how to evaluate women's rights and visibility in state socialism? Reconstructing the position of women at the time, how can we find a balance between the anti-communist versus the feminist revisionist paradigms? These two paradigms, though often lacking full historical contextualisation and reflexivity, continue to inform scholarship on women in socialism both as a movement and as a political regime (Çağatay et al. 2024: 52–54). The anti-communist approach emphasises the limited agency of women and women's movements under state-socialist rule, while often ignoring important activities and advances. Feminist revisionism, on the other hand, risking a celebratory undertone, draws attention to the unprecedented surge in women's rights and power in state socialism, followed by their serious restriction in many ways under neoliberal capitalism. I consider the debate between the two paradigms a useful framework for analysing memory politics, including the remasculinisation of the public sphere in post-socialism (Stańczak-Wiślicz 2024).

After 1945, parties, including the communists, were appealing to the new voter base of women. Despite empowering policies and structures, even activist women were marginalised by sexist-traditionalist views inside socialist party organisations, including councils. Women's contributions to political developments (including suffrage in 1918) have been sidelined in historiography, contributing to a distorted memory of socialist women in Hungary (Sharp et al. 2022: 110, 119; Zimmermann 2014). Informed by this theoretical framing, this paper addresses the complexity of socialist women's visibility under state socialism. Further, it mobilises the two paradigms in the context of these women's contemporary memory. It seeks to answer the specific question as to what extent socialism and feminism were acknowledged in the commemorative practices of naming Budapest streets after a socialist-unionist woman, Anna Koltói, in different time periods since the end of the Second World War.

Methods

The analysis is centred on the processes of the commemoration of one figure, Anna Koltói, as a case study and an eminent example of the shifts characterising the main historical waves. Streets were already named after her in 1946 and were changed in 1990 and again in 2021. Other female figures (like Éva Kállai and Erika Szeles) were often treated together with her and the same way as her, while specific contexts –

the 1956 revolution in particular – shaped the memory politics around these names differently. Owing to word limits here, these figures will only be mentioned in terms of their similarity or contrast to Koltói. I will limit my discussion to one particular area of Budapest, the inner District 8 called *Józsefváros* (literally ‘Joseph town’), where most of the (re-)namings concerning Koltói were taking place, even though Koltói Anna streets³ also existed in other, outer districts of Budapest at some points in time during the period covered.

As this paper aims to reconstruct the agents and debates in naming practices (the ‘ideological objective’ in Walkowiak and Rutkiewicz-Hanczewska 2023), I examined the official records of the proposals, debates, and resolutions. On the capital city, my main sources are the minutes and resolutions of the Budapest General Assembly between 1945 and 2022 (depending on the historical period, the exact name of the body changed a few times).⁴ On the districts, my main sources are the minutes from the discussions of proposals and debates in the general assemblies of the districts’ local governments (whose names also changed) between 1945 and 2022, especially minutes from District 8.⁵ I searched for all the debates and resolutions on street naming that concerned Koltói in the given period. Using a thematic analysis of these texts focused on the adjectives and nouns attributed to Koltói, I reconstructed how she was described as a woman, a women’s rights activist, a unionist, and a social democrat, respectively.

Further sources consulted were street name lexicons, often with biographical entries (see Figure 1 for an example; Buza et al. 1998; Gergely et al. 1973). Communist biographies (e.g. Bakó 1975), a thriving genre in state-socialist Hungary, provide a glance at how figures, including women, active in the workers’ movement were portrayed (Zimmermann 2014). I checked offline maps and their indices as well as online dynamic map visualisations to track the changes in public place names.

³ In the Hungarian order of names, the family name comes first; therefore a street named after Anna Koltói is officially Koltói Anna utca.

⁴ Budapest Fővárosi Közgyűlés törvényhatósági bizottsága 1873–1949, Budapest Fővárosi Tanács 1950–1990, Budapest Fővárosi Közgyűlés 1990-. For practical reasons, in this paper I refer to to all the versions of this government body as the Budapest General Assembly of the City Council. Minutes and resolutions before 1990 are available from the Budapest City Archive and can be accessed on two online historical databases, Arcanum and Hungaricana. For the period between 1945 and 1947, relevant for section 5, the minutes of the General Assembly have also been published in the Official Budapest Gazette (Fővárosi Közlöny). The minutes after 1990 are available through the portal Budapest.hu.

⁵ The minutes and resolutions of district local governments after 1990 are selectively available on the district websites, mostly from the early 2000s, and they are not displayed according to any consistent, unified system. For the period after 2010, I was able to access most of the minutes and resolutions of District 8 (*Józsefváros*) and District 21 (*Csepel*) on the district websites Jozsefvaros.hu and Csepel.hu, respectively.

The scope of my investigation is limited, mainly in terms of comparisons, as this is the first study from a larger research project. This paper focuses on one female figure, Anna Koltói, and discusses how she was portrayed in the debates around 1945, 1990, and 2020. Future research will systematically compare the debates about naming streets after male and female public figures.⁶ Further comparative analysis could also discuss how women not associated with socialism were portrayed in these debates. With access to comprehensive, sex-disaggregated data on public places in Budapest on a historical scale, a quantitative analysis (following Rusu 2021b) could reveal the changing number and proportion of relevant namesakes.

The new urban memory landscape after the war

Anna Koltói

Anna Koltói (1891–1944), formerly Zeller and Kristóf, was born out of wedlock to a single mother. Koltói worked from her teens, first as a domestic servant, then as a metal factory worker (Bakó 1975: 340–341; Gergely et al. 1973: 109). She took leadership positions in the social democratic women’s movement as an organiser in the union. In this role, she was a delegate to the Board of the Hungarian Social Insurance Institution (*OTI*) (Çağatay et al. 2025: 57–60). During the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic, Koltói as trade union trustee was responsible for public supply of food and clothing. After 1920, she was imprisoned for two years for her activities. Koltói became a member of the Budapest City Council in 1941, when a representative had to resign. On 17 October 1944, members of the Hungarian national socialist Arrow Cross Party shot her in the head at the door of her house in Mária-Terézia tér.

The commemoration of Anna Koltói as a *social democrat* was first embraced by the Social Democratic Party soon after the war. Demonstrating the complexity of the memory politics of socialist women, her public remembrance continued with the communist takeover in 1948 and throughout state socialism, despite political ruptures. The social democrats not only looked for a compromise with the Horthy rule, differentiating themselves from the communists, they also sidelined women’s issues even inside the party institutional framework (Lóránd 2024: 56).

One of the first commemorative events took place in June 1945. It referenced Koltói and other activists as martyr women (*Népszava* 1945). In 1946, the hospital of the Social Insurance Institution (*OTI*) in the building next to Koltói’s former workplace, was named after her. Several institutions and informal groups also took her name during state socialism (Feitl 2024). This shows not only the remarkable role her fig-

⁶ I thank the reviewers and Cristina Raț for drawing my attention to this.

Figure 1. Photo of Anna Koltói and her entry in a 1973 street name lexicon (Gergely et al. 1973: 109)



Source: Author

ure played in the memory politics of the period, but also that the democratic years before 1948 mark both a rupture and a transition (Lóránd 2025). Between 1946 and 1948, streets across the country were named after Koltói. Five small towns around Budapest (including Csepel), which became new districts of the enlarged capital in 1950, also each gave Koltói's name to one of their streets (Budapest Fővárosi Önkormányzat 2023).

Since 1945 Koltói has been commemorated in the Budapest City Council in various ways, such as the placing of a wreath on her grave. On 28 November 1945, at the inaugural sitting of the City General Assembly, Koltói was remembered by a representative of the Social Democratic Party as a former assembly member together with

Mrs Pál Knurr (née Anna Kovács), and both were recalled as ‘two fine fighters, two proletarian women, who came here from the factories and were fighting for their woman siblings’⁷. Next year, Árpád Szakasits, a respected figure, President of the Social Democratic Party, de facto interim mayor of Budapest, and soon-to-be President of the Republic, proposed commemorating the anniversary of Koltói’s ‘martyr death’ (Budapest Fővárosi Közgyűlés 1946b, no. 500).

The first proposal to honour Koltói with a public place name is documented from 6 March 1946 (Budapest Fővárosi Közgyűlés 1946a: 390). The City General Assembly discussed the proposal to rename Mária-Terézia tér (a square named after the Habsburg Maria Theresa), where Koltói lived and died. The social democratic councillor who proposed the renaming of four streets in District 8 called Koltói ‘a martyr woman of justice and freedom’, who was killed by the ‘fascist mob’ merely for the ‘sin of speaking up for love for humanity, justice, and freedom’.⁸ In five days, the proposal was accepted by the mayor and sent to the Budapest Public Works Council (*Fővárosi Közmunkák Tanácsa*), the body responsible for naming public places in the capital at that time.

At a meeting on 16 May 1947, the Budapest Public Works Council passed a resolution stating that instead of the proposed Mária-Terézia tér, Magdolna utca would be changed to Koltói Anna utca (Budapest Fővárosi Közgyűlés 1947: 594). I could not find any justification for or comment as to why this change was to be made. Magdolna utca runs from Koltói’s house through the metalworkers’ union headquarters to her OTI workplace. The street name references the common female name Magdolna for the Biblical figure Maria Magdalena, a follower of Jesus. Magdolna utca is documented in the German form Magdalenen Gasse as early as 1817, and later in the Hungarian form Magdolna utca in 1874. In 1947, it was named for Koltói Anna utca (and, as I will discuss, on 25 April 1991, it was renamed again for Magdolna utca). In 1951, Maria Theresa square was renamed after Mihály Horváth, a priest and teacher active in the 1848 revolution. Anna Koltói was not mentioned in that discussion⁹ or in any other from the 1950s through to the 1990s. As the Social Democratic Party was facing destruction by the communists, and members like President Árpád Szakasits were falling victim to the show trials of the 1950s, Koltói was easily appropriated in the cultural memory.

⁷ ‘Knurr Pálné és Koltói Anna, a két derék harcos, a két proletáraszony, akik a gyárakból jöttek ide és harcoltak az asszonytestvéreikért’ (Sándor Millok, see Budapest Fővárosi Közgyűlés 1945, no. 136.) I thank the Reviewers for their help in the precise translation. If not stated otherwise, translations are provided by the author.

⁸ Gyula Dabronaki (Budapest Fővárosi Közgyűlés 1946a: 390)

⁹ HU BFL XXIII.102.a.1, 1951: 29.

The 1956 revolution

Street name changes continued throughout the state-socialist period. The main turning points are reflected in the changes commemorating Stalin in Budapest's honyms, as Szívós observed (2021: 207–209). After months of negotiation with the Soviet Union, the central symbolic avenue named (then and today) Andrásy út became Sztálin út. One of the key symbolic acts of the 1956 revolution was the demolition of the statue of Stalin. For the days of the revolution, the avenue was also renamed Magyar Ifjúság útja (Hungarian Youth Road). After the revolution was crushed by the Soviet Union, the road was named Népköztársaság útja (People's Republic Road), as a double gesture during the Kádár era aimed at erasing the memory of the (young) revolutionaries but also keeping a distance from Stalinism.

In accordance with the political trends during state socialism, female figures' names were applied to and removed from public places, while radical changes were occurring in women's life conditions and political status, including a ban on all women's organisations by 1951 (Gelnarová, Pető 2016). The great historical turning points outlined above left their mark in street name changes. One example is Éva Kállai, the urban memory of whom became intertwined with that of Koltói at some point, even though in their biographies as socialists they took drastically different turns. Éva Kállai (1917–1957), under her official married name, Mrs Miklós Szántó, was also involved in the youth group of the metalworkers' union before the war, and she was sentenced to one year in prison. After the war, she became a party functionary and worked as a party committee member for the ruling Hungarian Workers' Party (MDP) in Budapest until her death.

Memory of Kállai is intertwined with the contested memory of the 1956 revolution, which had been silenced, labelled counter-revolution, or glorified up to the present day (Pető 2017: 42–44). Different meaning-making practices also rely on evaluations of the violence committed on both sides. In one of the most contested events, the party headquarters in District 8 were attacked by revolutionaries in October 1956. As party functionaries were already being lynched, fearful of experiencing the same, Kállai jumped out of the window. She suffered serious injuries, which led to her death in April 1957 (Bakó 1975: 299–300). The same year, a nearby street, formerly Alföldi utca, named after the Great Plain of Hungary, was renamed for Kállai Éva utca.

After 1956, during the consolidation period, party control was continuous, and the Street Name Committee had representatives from the Party History Institute, while renaming suggestions also arrived from grassroot actors like local residents (Szívós 2021: 209–210). To my knowledge, Kállai was the only example of female victims of 1956 being commemorated in a Budapest street name under Hungarian state socialism. Typically, like Koltói, the women commemorated with street names in Budapest in the 1960s and 1970s were women who were active in the workers' movement

during the interwar period and died before 1945, in line with the martyr tradition of memory politics (e.g. Eta Geisler, Kató Hámán, Flóra Martos, and Piroska Szalmás, with the notable exception of Mariska Gárdos; see Lóránd 2024).

The post-socialist wave of re-namings sweeping away female street names

The period between 1990 and 1992 saw a massive wave of public place renamings, informed by anti-communist sentiment, to which the earlier (albeit ambiguous) interest in women's rights and history also fell victim (Stańczak-Wiślicz 2024; Zimmermann 2014). Together with most of the socialist men, women's names rapidly disappeared from the streets of Budapest. The first decree related to street names came out of the Budapest City Council as early as 10 April 1989. A temporary committee dedicated to coordinating public place renamings was established inside the City Council in 1990.¹⁰ The committee revised the street renaming proposals submitted by the district local governments and then proposed their selection of new names for the City Council to vote on. In the hope that most of the changes would take place in two years, the City Council decided to work on street renaming only once a year after 31 March 1992 (and the practice remained in place until 2003) (Budapest Fővárosi Közgyűlés 1991b, Resolution 1326/1991). The council cited the frequency and number of renaming requests and administrative challenges, including for cartography and the official address registry. The early regulation, the establishment of the committee, and the volume of renamings this latter decision attest to, all show the symbolic significance of street names in Budapest in the 1990s.

In District 8, the General Assembly of the new local government held its inaugural meeting in October, and they were already discussing street naming on 4 December 1990.¹¹ The Cultural Committee proposed changing 22 street names in the district, including Koltói Anna utca and Kállai Éva utca. They proposed the former name, Alföldi utca instead of Kállai Éva, noting that it had been given by the Budapest Public Works Council. I see this as a legitimising move, referring to the predecessor in title of the freshly formed assembly, similar to the discussions in 1947.

The District 8 Cultural Committee proposal contains two alternatives for Koltói Anna utca: keeping the original or re-naming it as Magdolna utca. They briefly describe Anna

¹⁰ *Városrész-, közterület-elnevezésekkel és fővárosi szimbólumokkal foglalkozó ideiglenes bizottság* (Temporary committee for naming neighbourhoods and public places as well as symbols in the capital). The name of the committee changed slightly a few times until it ceased operating in 2010, when its tasks were taken over by the Mayor's Office. The minutes and resolutions of the committee are preserved in the Budapest Capital Archives but they are classified until 2051.

¹¹ HU BFL XXXVI. 541.a.1.1.

Koltói as ‘the leader of the women’s movement of the Vasas metal factory trade union, who represented workers’ interests in the pre-war City Council and she was executed by the *nyilasok*’ (members of the Nazi Arrow Cross Party). In this biographical summary, the elements emphasised are the ones that might support the justification to actually keep her name in the post-socialist cultural climate as well: falling victim to Nazis, being a member of the body that was the predecessor of the General Assembly. According to the assembly minutes, there was only one remark during the General Assembly: a councillor from the right argued against re-naming Magdolna utca in the district on the grounds that another district already had a street named Magdolna utca.

The amount of name proposals that the temporary street naming committee and the City Council General Assembly had to decide on explains why most of the names and the historical figures concerned were not even discussed during the meetings (Budapest Fővárosi Közgylés 1991a). According to the minutes, they discussed a few very prominent and controversial figures, such as Prime Minister Pál Teleki, responsible for the anti-Jewish laws and Hungary’s involvement in the Second World War. This is probably the reason why Anna Koltói and Éva Kállai were not mentioned individually. On 25 April 1991, the City Council General Assembly voted on the street name proposals of two districts grouped together, and the street names honouring Koltói and Kállai were voted on together with another 16 names only in District 8. Thus the former Magdolna utca in District 8 has regained its original name (while some other Anna Koltói streets in the country kept their names for longer or even till today). Kállai Éva utca has also regained its old name, Alföldi utca (Budapest Fővárosi Közgylés 1991a, Resolution no. 471).

Along with anti-authoritarianism, the new democratic capitalist regimes displayed neoliberal tendencies, characterised by the withdrawal of the state from welfare services, privatisation and marketisation, and the undermining of important socialist policies and institutions like trade unions (Pető 2017: 44; Zimmermann 2014). The de-communisation spirit of the early 1990s in public place naming (Walkowiak 2018: 346–347) erased important differences between the trade-unionist social democrats and members of repressive state institutions; it similarly erased the differences among streets that received their names any time after 1945. Given the volume of changes proposed, there was not even enough room or time to discuss the differences between periods, contexts, and figures. This is most visible in the case of the two women in question: Anna Koltói was killed by Nazis in 1944 and Éva Kállai died because she feared she would be killed by revolutionaries in 1956. Thus, the commemoration of them by the city administration in 1947 and 1957 happened in entirely different political contexts, contexts that were overlooked by the erasures in 1991. For the new regime, it was more important to get rid of the *names* associated with the state socialist period than to rethink their relationship to the actual *figures*.

The wave of renamings subsided after the 1990s, but that also meant the *status quo* of gendered memory structures was then maintained. For twenty years, Budapest had a mayor from a liberal party that championed human rights, but the specific needs or visibility of women in the urban space did not become part of the public discourse.

Symbolic struggles under right-wing capitalism

The takeover by Fidesz marked the beginning of a remarkable new wave in the ‘fight over street names’ (Szívós 2021: 210–211), one characterised by impactful renamings. After alternating governments, in 2010, the conservative right-wing Fidesz Party (in coalition with the Christian Democrats) came into power with a two-thirds majority in the Hungarian Parliament. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán remained in power for four terms. Liberal-leftist parties were splitting up, were newly established, or tried to form coalitions in vain; their popularity has been shrinking ever since. Yet, Budapest traditionally has more leftist-liberal voters than the rest of the country, electing most of the opposition¹² Members of Parliament and district mayors in the municipal elections.

This political context has framed the street naming practices of the past 15 years, which reflect the government’s preferences in memory politics (Szívós 2021). In populist and illiberal memory politics, historical events are interpreted for the identity-building purposes of anti-communism and victimhood. This era has also been marked by masculinising tendencies (Pető 2017: 47–48). The centenary commemorations of the 1918–1919 revolutions and the Treaty of Trianon paid no attention to women’s suffrage, let alone female council members (Sharp et al. 2022: 129). Similarly, under the right-wing government in Poland in the 2010s, there was a growing tendency to reevaluate the past. New street names typically honoured representatives of masculine institutions such as the army and the church or those women who strengthened the nationalist narrative (Walkowiak 2018: 347–348).

In the following, I interpret the re- and dis-appearance of socialist women among Budapest’s street names as part of the symbolic struggles in the capital’s political arena. In the spirit of the ‘ideological objective’ (Walkowiak, Rutkiewicz-Hanczewska 2023), I will show the role played, alongside party political interests, by the values of feminism, socialism, and anti-communism in the decision-making processes that affect the naming of streets after women.

¹² Extreme right-wing parties have also dissolved and been formed again, formally becoming the strongest opposition to Fidesz without ever challenging its rule. Up until 2024, no party had managed to recruit enough voter support to realistically beat Fidesz. For these reasons, by ‘opposition’ I refer here to the parties that until 2024 constituted the politically and culturally leftist alternative to Fidesz. Although they are widely called leftist or liberal in the Hungarian discourse, labels I also use for contextual unambiguity, their politics is often neoliberal.

Erasing socialist memories in the Orbán era

The early 2010s saw the establishment of the autocratic elements of the Fidesz government, with a significant wave of street renamings generating public debate. The wave was sanctioned by a decree on the use of the symbols of totalitarian regimes. The law (Act CLXVII of 2012)¹³ prohibits the use of names 'associated with totalitarian regimes of the 20th century', including the street naming practices of municipalities. In the case of disagreement, local governments, including Budapest's districts, should consult the Hungarian Academy of Sciences for a recommendation on whether the person in question 'participated in the establishment, development, or maintenance of totalitarian political regimes of the 20th century' (§ 4). For the law, the Academy of Sciences compiled (and continuously updates) a list of names with short biographies, together with their recommendation. The list includes Anna Koltói, described as someone who 'did not participate in the establishment, development, or maintenance of authoritarian political regimes of the 20th century, therefore her name can be used for naming public spaces'.¹⁴ Among the figures of the workers' movement who died before 1945, some were rejected on the basis that their name was 'often used in communist propaganda' (like Kató Hámán), while others were permitted (like Flóra Martos) (MTA 2024: 21, 31–32, 38).

The law and the list itself generated a heated political and public debate. They also contributed to a new wave of renaming in the Budapest districts with right-wing leadership. As I interpret the process, in their ambition to get rid of the remaining street names associated with communism, the right has re-created their symbolic power in a context where Budapest's politics traditionally stand in opposition to Fidesz, embedded in a country governed by a two-thirds right-wing majority. The new law gave new impetus to granting visibility to figures who strengthen the position of the right in the symbolic and cultural struggles taking place in Budapest. The Academy of Science's list continues to be used as a reference.

In 2011, there were still three streets in Budapest named after Anna Koltói, all of which were then renamed: one after an actress, another after a male writer. The third street was in District 21, on Csepel Island, where Koltói had worked during the time of the Hungarian Soviet Republic. This renaming has nationwide significance, as the mayor was Szilárd Németh, a Fidesz vice president, who himself changed the name

¹³ Act CLXVII of 2012 titled '2012. évi CLXVII. törvény egyes törvényeknek a XX. századi önkényuralmi rendszerekhez köthető elnevezések tilalmával összefüggő módosításáról' (Act on the amendment of certain laws in connection with the prohibition of names associated with the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century). This legislation interprets the Act on local municipalities from 2011 (Act CLXXXIX of 2011, § 14).

¹⁴ 'Koltói nem vett részt XX. századi önkényuralmi politikai rendszer megalapozásában, kiépítésében és fenntartásában, így neve közterület elnevezésére használható.'

of a metal street sign from Koltói to Miklós Vermes, a male physician with local roots. According to District 21's meeting minutes, his proposal was met with no comments or questions (Csepeli Képviselő-testület 2011: 50, Resolution 613/2011 (IX.29) Kt).

As it is the City Council that makes the final decision on street naming based on the districts' proposals, the Budapest General Assembly discussed and accepted the proposal from District 21, together with other proposed street name changes, including changes to women's names (*Budapest Fővárosi Közgyűlés* 2011, Resolution 3752/2011 (XII.14)). In the discussion, a representative of the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSzP, Magyar Szocialista Párt) framed the Fidesz proposals as erasing the predecessors of the socialist party (2011: 34). And they were probably right. In these symbolic struggles, all aspects of Koltói's life and person could play a part. Still, the debates between the political stakeholders suggest that it was her political-ideological commitments and activities that mainly influenced how she was characterised in the discourse. The fact that she was a woman and a women's rights activist seems to have been secondary in the debates of the 1990s. As I show in the following section, this framing has shifted since 2019, and women's visibility has become a more important element in the discourse.

The leftist agenda of honouring women

In 2019, in the 10th year of the Fidesz government in Hungary, most Budapest districts elected opposition mayors. This marked a smaller turning point in both the self-identification and the activities of the shrinking liberal-leftist parties. This is the framework in which, I propose, recent street renamings are best interpreted. On 1 September 2021, a formerly unnamed square¹⁵ in District 8 was named after Anna Koltói. In the following, I address a few aspects of this renaming: the location; the decision-making process; and the justifications.

The choice of location reflects a new approach in street naming, different from the waves in 1945 and 1989, typically not aiming to replace former names. Stakeholders rather find unnamed spots in the district, typically small squares, which can be named after historical figures without taking away existing names. Politically, this might be a strategic move to avoid social controversy. This might also mark a new memory politics approach, according to which, existing street names represent a cultural-historical value in themselves, a value worth preserving as heritage (the reference to which is also part of the legitimisation strategies of any political power; see Szívós 2021: 199).

A main figure in the process is the newly elected district mayor András Pikó, who was supported by grassroots activists of a newly forming left, carefully negotiating

¹⁵ Although officially unnamed, the square was informally called *FiDo tér* as it is located at the intersection of Fiumei út and Dobozi utca. Both the proposal and the resolution use this unofficial name.

with the neoliberal-leaning opposition parties to win against the Fidesz's candidate. The proposal of February 2021 was signed by a local representative of the Socialist Party (MSZP)¹⁶ (Józsefvárosi Képviselőtestület 2021a). It referenced the Hungarian Antifascists as initiators, although their webpage does not take credit for that; they only happily welcome the initiative of the local government (Magyar Antifasiszták és Ellenállók Szövetsége 2021). The decision-making process took place during the crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic, which granted exceptional rights to municipalities, including Budapest's district governments. With this authorisation, Pikó decided on and sent the proposal to the City Council in March 2021 (Józsefvárosi Képviselőtestület 2021a, Resolution 109/2021 (III.11)).

In the proposal's justifications and the commemorative texts on Anna Koltói in this period, women's representation and visibility appears as a legitimate purpose. This differs from the way the social democratic commemorations framed Koltói's activities after the war, but also from how in the 1990s women labour activists commemorated her as founder of the first trade union committee for female metal workers (Çağatay et al. 2025: 57). Framing Koltói's commemoration in a women's rights perspective coincides with the issue becoming a topic in party politics – which stems from the fact that street naming lies at the authority of district and city local governments.

Without mentioning 'feminism', the original proposal by the councillor (Józsefvárosi Képviselő-testület 2021a) openly declared the need to show respect for women who worked for a better society in the city by street names, 'breaking a fake memory politics' that honour women with only 5% of the street nomenclature. It also referenced the initiation of the Community Participation Office in the local government on Women's Day in 2020 to name public places after 'respectable women' as a tradition to follow. In 2020, two historical female figures from the 19th century were commemorated by new public place names in the district. After accepting the proposal, in the ceremony of naming the square for after Anna Koltói, she was commemorated, among others, as someone who 'fought for only one goal: more rights for women (...) for women's equality, thus rejected any totalitarian idea' (by a female MP from the Socialist Party¹⁷; see Pálincás 2021). The emphasis on women's representation, I argue, can also serve as showcasing the distance of social democracy from communist activism. In the Hungarian political context, the right-wing successfully mobilises against the left with charges of communism. In Koltói's case, the combination of

¹⁶ Ferenc Camara-Bereczki, currently independent.

¹⁷ This was Zita Gurmai. She only used the word 'feminist' in reference to another martyr, Mrs Meller, née Eugénia Miskolczy, who was founding member of the Feminists' Association in 1904. The avoidance of the term replicates similar concerns about the name of the Association in the first half of the century (see Lóránd 2024: 63).

Figure 2. Erika Szeles on the cover of *Billed Bladet*, published 13 November 1956



Source: Author

honouring the fight against poverty, union activism, and party politics, on the one hand, and women's rights, a contemporary liberal-progressive idea, on the other, can strengthen the legitimacy of a discredited social democracy.

Directly reacting on the decision of District 8 to name a square after Koltói, a few months later a Fidesz representative in the City Council proposed that instead, the same (still unnamed) square be named after another woman (Józsefvárosi Képviselő-testület 2021b). The female figure in question is an internationally known person, certainly recognisable by her face. Erika Szeles came from a poor background and was 16 years old when she participated in the 1956 revolution (Pető 2017). A photo of her holding a gun by Danish photographer Vagn Hansen, published on the cover of *Billed Bladet* on 13 November 1956, went worldwide (see Figure 2). Not long after the picture was taken, she was killed in the fighting.

Following Fidesz's proposal, the leftist mayor of Budapest proposed that two different public places in District 8 be named after Anna Koltói and Erika Szeles, respectively, which the District 8 Council accepted (Józsefvárosi Képviselő-testület 2021b, Resolution 473/2021 (VII.22)). Thus, the City Council finalised the decision on both Koltói Anna tér and Szeles Erika tér on 1 September 2021, and it came into effect on the very same day (Budapest Fővárosi Közgyűlés 2021, Resolution 1296/2021 (09.01)).

The dispute over naming a square after Koltói shows that the naming processes have a stark political meaning as they are part of party-political symbolic fights. The illiberal memory politics of Fidesz relies on re-writing narratives about 1956 as anti-communist and erasing its leftist legacy, and this strategy includes foregrounding female figures of the revolution (Pető 2017). Female figures, I argue, are mobilised as a tool inside the debates around communism. According to the minutes from a meeting of the District 8 General Assembly on Koltói and Szeles, a Fidesz representative said that Koltói as a functionary of the Hungarian Soviet Republic was a 'member of the same ideological community' that killed Erika Szeles, and the contemporary members of which are his leftist colleagues in the district local government (Józsefvárosi Képviselő-testület 2021b: 45–46).

Although the main debate still revolved around socialist women being communists, socialists, or anti-communists, I argue that it has become more important than ever that these figures were women. Leftist stakeholders started to emphasise not just them being women but also (in Koltói's case) being women's rights activists – in order to address a liberal-leftist voter base who care more about feminism. Leftist-liberal parties in the past 30 years have had a problematic relationship with traditional socialist institutions as these parties often support neoliberalism. As a consequence, the histories of women's labour activism remain partial and politically biased, as evidenced by Koltói being less remembered for her trade-union activism (Çağatay et al. 2025: 59). The most recent leftist street naming justifications mention her union work as a women's organiser, but mostly re-frame it as general women's rights activism, which resonates more with contemporary liberal feminist vocabulary.

Interestingly, the right plays along to some extent. Although they are far from being feminists, they nevertheless proposed an outstanding female figure as an alternative for a street name. One of the reasons may be that they need women as a voter base. In this particular case, streets were eventually named after both of the proposed women. District 8 even references Erika Szeles as part of its tradition of naming public places after women (Jozsefvaros.hu 2022), even if this specific proposal on Erika Szeles did not emerge out of their circle. With that move, the opposition in District 8 took advantage of Fidesz's tactic and managed to contain it. At the same time, Fidesz may also have accounted for some win, as they managed to symbolically (and spatially) position themselves as pro-1956, therefore nationalist and anti-communist.

Szeles Erika tér is located on the corner of a highly symbolic square¹⁸ where the bloody fights in 1956 resulted in Éva Kállai's death. The dynamics of these memory politics tactics imply that women's historiography is embedded in the specific socio-political context in which invested actors, often with opposing interests, continuously re-interpret female historical figures in reaction to one another and to fit their framing.

Conclusions

This paper traced the changes in street names in Budapest commemorating trade-unionist worker Anna Koltói, who was killed in 1944 by Hungarian Nazis. Between 1945 and 2022, public places in the city were named and re-named after her, following the different waves of memory politics generated by political turns in Budapest. I specifically focused on downtown District 8 and the changes concerning streets named after Koltói in 1947, 1990, 2011, and 2021. Given the multiplication of female street namesakes during the state-socialist period, I proposed examining street naming practices as framed in post-socialist studies, analysing to what extent feminism and socialism have been acknowledged in urban memory politics to the present day.

I examined the documents of the city and district councils, the bodies authorised to name streets, in order to reconstruct the stakeholders' justifications in favour of or against honouring Koltói in the different time periods. In 1947, a street was re-named Koltói Anna utca in the city centre, and by 1953 the administratively and territorially enlarged Budapest had 6 Koltói Anna streets in six different districts, attesting to her legacy. The sources show that decision makers' portrayal of Koltói during state socialism primarily emphasised her martyrdom and participation in the workers' movement. Her womanhood was only implicitly mobilised as an aggravating factor for victimhood.

The heavily anti-communist wave of restoring pre-war street names in the early 1990s swept away Koltói's name as that of a communist from the streets of District 8. In the 2000s, street naming became a battlefield of party politics. The first years of Fidesz rule after 2010 saw another wave of purging street names associated with communism. As a political response, the 2020s have seen efforts in some opposition-led local governments in Budapest districts to restore the memory of some early socialist women like Koltói, with District 8 naming a small, formerly unnamed square after her. These recent practices, I suggest, can be understood as conveying several messages: as a political statement against the Orbán government; as an identification with the social democratic legacy; and as an expression of progressive politics com-

¹⁸ Today this is Pope John Paul II square, but it was named the Square of the Republic (Köztársaság tér) between 1946 and 2011.

mitted to women's acknowledgement and public visibility. The arguments of the left typically emphasise Koltói's commitment to social democracy and women's rights efforts. These are mobilised for today's leftist parties to identify as progressive in terms of social democracy, featured as opposed to both conservatism *and* communism. In this sense, the contemporary discourse repeats some elements from the tensions between communists and social democrats in the first half of the 20th century.

Answering the question to what extent socialism and feminism were acknowledged in commemorative practices, I argue that a greater emphasis has been placed on the womanhood and women's rights activism of figures like Koltói in contemporary commemorations compared to earlier periods since the end of the war. The political position arguing for women's representation in urban spaces flags a contemporary progressive politics, which frames women's rights activism primarily as anti-authoritarianism, thus diverting charges of communism. However, such inclusion has limited transformative power if it remains at the level of representativity and visibility, without addressing the structural bases of women's social disadvantages, with a critique of identity politics. As studies on the multiplication of right-wing women's names in street nomenclature (Walkowiak, Rutkiewicz-Hanczewska 2023) or on the masculinist billboard visibility of female revolutionaries (Pető 2017) show, women's visibility *per se* does not necessarily generate feminist changes. In this sense, the memory politics of female street names can inform the debates between liberal and socialist/radical feminism.

The ambivalent historical dynamics I outlined above show the complexities of gender and labour beyond the revisionist and anti-communism debate. Taking into account the revisionist perspective, we can be more attentive to the efforts of right-wing memory politics today to erase socialism and its feminist legacy. It helps us be cautious about the feminist significance we attribute to female street namesakes at large. Gendered *exclusions* are important to analyse, but a similar critical rigour and local contextualisation should address *inclusion*, too. Women's mere inclusion or visibility might as well serve anti-feminist tendencies, from sexually objectifying public images in neoliberal capitalism to conservative masculinist memory politics. Similarly, the anti-communist position can remind us of the superficial elements of women's inclusion in socialist structures. I therefore argue for a feminist labour history that moves beyond contemporary Western standards of inclusivity and representation and analyses the material and ideological conditions of women's memory.

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Nation, Gender, and Memory Politics: Women's Forgotten Contribution to Kosovar Nation-Building

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Abstract: Women have long been central to independence struggles, yet their contributions are routinely erased. Kosovo is no exception. This article shows that the exclusion of Kosovo-Albanian women from the national master narrative is not incidental but a structured effect of the nexus between nation-building, militarisation, and gendered memory politics. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Prishtina and feminist theories of nationalism and memory, the following paper demonstrates how post-war commemorative culture elevates the militarised male 'freedom fighter' while confining women to two permissible positions: revered mothers of the nation or passive victims whose suffering is recast as sacrifice for the nation. These binary constructions, sustained by political elites and dominant narratives, consolidate male privilege in nation-building and reproduce patriarchal order. The study advances an interdisciplinary framework for analysing how gender regulates admission into collective memory, opening avenues for further research at the intersection of nationalism, militarism, and feminist memory studies.

Keywords: resistance movements, state-building, gendered memory politics

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Women have played active roles in independence struggles worldwide, yet their contributions are often forgotten – including in Kosovo (Enloe 2014). Before becoming a UN protectorate in 1999 and declaring independence in 2008, Kosovo was an autonomous province of the Yugoslav Republic of Serbia until 1989. With the socialist federation's unravelling and the ensuing wars (including the Kosovo War

1998–1999), memory cultures in the successor states fragmented along ethnic lines (Friedman 2013: 97; Sundhaussen 2004: 399–405). In Kosovo, commemoration is increasingly centred on the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and the ‘liberation struggle’, foregrounding Kosovo Albanian men as heroic combatants and nation-builders. By contrast, the multidimensional roles of Kosovo Albanian women – despite their centrality to the independence movement – are largely absent from the national narrative (Krasniqi 2014: 204; 2020). Without diminishing the importance of the women who fought in the KLA, this article focuses on women active in the civil resistance of the 1990s (Demiri 2018: 1, 35; Luci, Gusia 2015: 206–207, 218; Mujika Chao 2020: 855).

That movement emerged as Serbian leader Slobodan Milošević revoked Kosovo’s autonomy in 1989, claiming the region as the symbolic and ethnic heart of Serbia. To implement this ethnonationalist project, the Albanian population was to be displaced from the province. Over the following years, Kosovo Albanians were systematically excluded from public life: restrictive laws eroded Albanian-language education and media, suspended the Kosovo assembly, and brutally suppressed dissent. These measures contributed to a deteriorating political, social, and economic situation and increasing violence against the Albanian population. In response, a broad-based civil resistance movement took shape, forming a society within a society – commonly referred to as a parallel system – with state-like bodies such as Albanian-language schools, health clinics, and cultural centres operating independently of the Serbian state and actively resisting its authority (Calic 2010; Clark 2000, 2013; Krasniqi 2010: 43–47; Pula 2004). The movement encompassed much of the Kosovo Albanian population; thousands of women participated, ensuring societal survival and drawing international attention to the conflict (Luci, Gusia 2014: 203; Mujika Chao 2020: 853).

Only recently has this research gap begun to receive scholarly attention, driven almost exclusively by Kosovo Albanian academics and activists. They have challenged the tendency to overlook or forget civil resistance and its significance in the history of Southeast Europe in both national and international socio-political discourses and memories. This silencing has been particularly evident in relation to the diverse experiences of women (Berisha 2019: 9, 12; Mujika Chao 2020: 843).

Civil resistance is marginalised not only within national narratives, where it is replaced by a heroic, masculine portrayal that valorises the armed resistance of the KLA and the NATO military intervention of 1999 as precursors to statehood. International studies likewise examine Kosovo primarily in relation to the war or the NATO intervention, as if this constituted the origin of the country’s sovereignty (Berisha 2019: 9, 12). Yet women’s voices remain underrepresented and, when present, are often reduced to rape and victimhood narratives or subsumed within maternalist framings that emphasise reproduction and family (Krasniqi 2007: 2; 2014: 204; 2020).

In the context of an ethnographic examination of memory culture, nation-building, and gender, this study analyses the processes of the structural marginalisation of women's contributions within the national master narrative.¹ It interrogates the absence of collective memories surrounding women's extensive socio-political engagement in civil resistance and deconstructs the gendered representations produced through male-dominated state and power structures. Ultimately, I argue that the exclusion of women's memories is a systematic outcome of the nexus between nationalism, militarisation, and gendered memory politics.

The article presents the arguments in four sections. Section one outlines theories linking gender, nation, and memory. It situates the study within feminist debates on these concepts and scholarship on Kosovar nation-building and gender-specific memory construction. Section two details the ethnographic approach and reflexivity. Section three analyses how armed resistance dominates memory politics and how permissible masculinities and femininities are constructed. Section four concludes with the implications for feminist memory studies and nation-building scholarship, including the potential of feminist archive-making as a methodological and political practice.

The state of research and theoretical positioning

This article builds on feminist and interdisciplinary work that connects gender, nation, and memory, while noting the absence of a consolidated framework that integrates all three. I draw primarily on: (a) feminist analyses of nationalism (and militarism) (Anthias and Yuval-Davis; Enloe; Nagel); and (b) theories of collective memory (Assmann and Assmann; Gillis), complemented by feminist memory studies.

Despite decades of public and scholarly interest in memory culture, gender as a central category of collective remembering remains overlooked by mainstream mem-

¹ The silencing of women's diverse memories of civil resistance, however, cannot be reduced solely to national memory politics. This also applies to the (at least initial) practices of the international community's peacebuilding missions and interventions, including the UN-Mission (UNMIK). Their approaches contributed to the reproduction of the hegemonic national memory discourse and, in doing so, equally reinforced the erasure of women's significance in the 1990s. Although a detailed analysis of the international dimension lies beyond the scope of this article, it is important to stress that patriarchal norms should not be viewed exclusively as a cultural characteristic inherent to post-conflict societies. As dominant international peacebuilding discourse tends to imply, such norms are equally reproduced through the very interventions that claim to address them (Balbon 2023: 5; Luci, Gusia 2015: 199). Likewise, it becomes evident that gender, as a category of social and political organisation in Kosovo, cannot be explained solely by reference to a patriarchal legacy. Rather, it was also reproduced in the post-war context, both through the nationalisation of memory politics and through the interventions of international missions (Gusia et al. 2019: 2; Krasniqi 2007: 21; Krasniqi, Sokolić, Kostovicova 2020: 461; Luci, Gusia 2015: 210; Musliu, Klajiqi 2023).

ory research. For example, most discourses on public commemoration focus on the political space of the nation while neglecting to take into account the gender of the actors (Altınay, Pető 2016: 2; Jacobs 2017: 424; Schraut, Paletschek 2008: 7, 10). At the same time, the number of independent feminist publications examining memory and gender is growing. Increasingly, the suppressed stories of women who have been erased from historiography are being examined and integrated into memory culture (AFŽ Arhiv/CRVENA 2024; Altınay et al. 2019; Hirsch, Smith 2002: 4–11; Luci, Krasniqi 2006). In this article, ‘memory culture’ encompasses both the social functions of remembering as well as the subject matter and representations of historical memories. It constitutes adherence to a social obligation that poses the question: ‘*What must we not forget?*’² (Assmann 1992: 30). Simultaneously, memory culture plays a decisive role in constructing national identity, nation-building, and legitimising and negotiating contemporary power structures, politics, and gender issues (Paletschek 2009: 165; Schraut, Paletschek 2008: 8).

A gendered perspective is increasingly considered in analyses of war memories, and feminist historiographies often interrogate hegemonic war narratives (Altınay, Pető 2016; Mannergren Selimovic 2020; Lazović 2018). Such analyses not only reveal that the struggle over remembering and forgetting is gender-specific, but also ‘how much war, interpreted as the culmination of national crisis and as climax of identification with the nation, is a suitable subject of research to elucidate the differences and partial contradictions in the memories of men and women’ (Schraut, Paletschek 2008: 274).

In the context of Kosovo, a growing body of research documents stories by and about women and highlights their contributions to societal developments, as well as to nation- and state-building processes (see, e.g., Berisha 2019; Demiri 2018; Krasniqi 2014, 2021; Farnsworth 2008; Gusia et al. 2019; Luci 2002, 2014; Luci, Krasniqi 2006; Luci, Gusia 2015, 2019; Mujika Chao 2020; Musliu, Klajiqi 2023; Krasniqi 2007). Together, these works constitute part of a feminist counter-public whose research offers an alternative historical account of the 1990s, thereby challenging both the paternalistic discourse of international missions and the male-dominated master narrative in post-war Kosovo. In doing so, they contribute to what anthropologist Marie-Aude Fouéré terms a continuous ‘process of archive making’ (2016: 84) and what Kosovar sociologist Lirika Demiri describes as ‘a discursive collective space that explores the history of the 1980s and 1990s in Kosova through the multiplicity of everyday lived experiences of women activists’ (2018: 36).

Their works underscore the far-reaching roles of women in civil resistance and nation-building. They demonstrate how women’s political significance rose during the

² The original in German is ‘Was dürfen wir nicht vergessen?’, translated by the author.

1990s, so that by the end of the decade, tens of thousands were involved in shaping and sustaining the resistance process. Although Kosovo Albanian women were also pushed out of public life and back into the private sphere by Milošević's policies, their active participation in the movement created new opportunities to enter the public sphere and engage in socio-political action. In this way, their political significance increased steadily, and they emerged as a visible and significant force within the resistance movement (Krasniqi 2021: 325; Luci 2002: 73; Mujika Chao, Gusia 2022: 53). Women sustained the Albanian parallel system by providing medical care and education, as well as by supporting the distribution of aid and food in besieged areas. Women were central in documenting violence committed by Milošević's regime and in providing information to the international community. By strategically drawing on patriarchal assumptions about women's social roles – as they were perceived as less suspicious by the Serbian regime – they were able to document police and military violence in places to which their male colleagues had only limited access. Moreover, they organised public demonstrations, most notably the 'Bread for Drenica' protest in 1998, in which thousands of women participated. They were thus the first to transform the resistance from passive to active, aiming to garner international attention and thereby hasten an end to the conflict – a goal they achieved (Farnsworth 2008: 2, 338; Marí 2018; Mujika Chao 2020: 851, 855; Munn 2006: 295; Musliu, Klajiqi 2023: 550).

It is not only in Kosovo that there has been a significant expansion of the body of feminist historiography documenting women's suppressed contributions to nation- and state-building and systematically recording their experiences of war and resistance. Similarly, across post-Yugoslav successor states, women made decisive contributions during the Yugoslav wars through aid networks, war crime documentation, and peace activism, yet remain largely invisible in memory cultures (Lazović 2018; Žarkov 2007).³

Many of these works share the feature that, alongside documenting women's experiences in war and resistance, they illuminate the gender-specific dimensions of their participation in such nationalist projects. In doing so, they highlight the nexus of nation and gender – a component of nationalist projects often overlooked or dismissed as irrelevant by hegemonic theories (Mayer 1999: 13). They thereby counter

³ This dynamic is particularly evident in Bosnia and Herzegovina where official commemorative practices prioritise male martyrs, while women's roles in resistance and civil society work continue to be marginalised (Jacobs 2017; Helms 2013; Simić 2009). Comparably, in the Ukrainian context, analyses reveal how women decisively shaped Euromaidan and the Donbas War through protests, provisioning work, and military service, yet were long erased from hegemonic narratives. Feminist analyses and literary self-testimonies render this gap visible and reinscribe women as historical subjects into national memory (Khromeychuk 2017; Wallo 2020).

mainstream discussions of nationalism in post-conflict countries, where gender is not considered a critical analytical category. By contrast, feminist scholars have argued since the 1980s that nation and nationalism cannot be fully understood without accounting for gender and sexuality as integral elements of both concepts (ibid.: 13). Pioneering work in the feminist interrogation of nationalism theories was done by Cynthia Enloe (2014), followed by scholars such as Floya Anthias (1989), Nira Yuval-Davis (1993, 1997), Deniz Kandiyoti (1998), Cynthia Cockburn (1998), Jelena Batinić (2001), and Dubravka Žarkov (2007) (Einhorn 2009: 4). Social and cultural anthropology, long concerned with the aesthetics, roles, and politics of gender identity in the formation of kinship and other social groups, has also, over the past two decades, contributed to a deeper understanding of gender in the context of nation and nationalism (Luci 2014: 30–31). Early feminist research on women in nationalism, however, tended to overlook the fact that men, like women, are socially constructed categories. As gender-specific subjects and analytical as well as social categories, men received comparatively little attention, even though such research established that nations are masculinist projects. Only in the past two decades has scholarship begun to examine explicitly the roles of both women and men in nation construction (Einhorn 2009: 5; Mayer 1999: 15; Munn 2008: 441). It has thereby become evident that men and women participate in the national project in distinct ways. Central to this perspective is the insight of Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1989: 7–10), who identify five key roles of women in national and ethnic projects: biological reproduction; boundary reproduction; cultural transmission; signifiers of ethnic and national difference; and participation in national struggles.

This study builds on the outlined research and simultaneously addresses an existing theoretical gap: While many studies examine the gender-specific dimensions of women's participation in nationalist movements, they rarely analyse the mechanisms through which certain women's stories become anchored in memory culture while others are systematically excluded. Individual theoretical works do explore why only specific notions of femininity and masculinity enter national narratives, but do not apply these approaches to empirical cases such as Kosovo (Iveković 2005; Kandiyoti 1998; Mayer 1999; Yuval-Davis 1997). Against this backdrop, the study asks which memories of women's roles are admitted into the Kosovar master narrative, a central framework of memory culture and nation-building, and how this selection contributes to the systematic exclusion of other women's stories. In doing so, the research connects the concepts of nation, gender, and memory and addresses the identified gap.

Two pioneering contributions that methodologically combine these three concepts in the Kosovar context merit particular attention. The first is anthropologist Nita Luci's dissertation 'Seeking Independence: Making Nation, Memory, and Manhood in Kosovo' (2014), which investigates the mobilisation and contestation of gender ideologies

in Kosovar state- and nation-building projects during the 1980s. The second is the analysis of the gendered dimensions of nation-building through the Kosovo art installation 'Thinking of You' by Vjollca Krasniqi, Ivor Sokolić, and Denisa Kostovičová (2020). Building on these approaches, the present contribution extends the existing literature by examining women's memories of civil resistance in Kosovo in conjunction with theoretical reflections on militarism. This enables a more precise explanation of the structural mechanisms underlying the marginalisation of women's contributions. To my knowledge, no previous study has methodologically integrated all four concepts within the context of Kosovo's civil resistance.

Methodological approaches and reflections on ethnographic research

In line with its dual focus on theory and empirical data, this study draws on two phases of fieldwork conducted over five months in 2022 and 2023 in Prishtina, the capital and largest city of Kosovo. Given the marginalised position of civil resistance within Kosovo's collective memory – reflected in the absence of public memorials, exhibitions, and commemorative events – the research prioritised ethnographic interviews and informal conversations, coupled with participant observation. At the same time, public space (predominantly shaped by monuments dedicated to KLA fighters) proved equally significant, as it reflects how collective memory is publicly represented and articulated, indicating which events are commemorated and which are erased or forgotten. The scarcity of memorials to civil resistance, and the fact that among them only one, the *Heroinat* (Heroines) memorial in Prishtina, commemorates Kosovo Albanian women, underscores the selective nature of this memory culture.

On this basis and drawing on informal conversations with individuals who largely advocated for a more nuanced view of the past, 21 semi-structured interviews were conducted in English and one in German. All interviewees were born in Kosovo, hold Kosovar citizenship, and, with the exception of one, currently reside in Prishtina. To reflect the heterogeneity of the research field and enable greater comparability, Kosovo Albanian individuals from different generations were interviewed. Interviews were conducted with six men and fifteen women between the ages of 24 and 65. One group consisted primarily of women with direct memories of the civil resistance, many of whom had been active in student movements, civil society, or political organisations. These interviews explored which memories were most significant for those directly involved. The second group comprised individuals whose age limited their personal recollections; many attended the so-called parallel education system as children. These interviews examined their historical understanding of the 1990s and the current relevance of memories of civil resistance, with particular attention

to women's experiences. Additionally, three interviews were conducted with Kosovo Albanian interlocutors working in academia and civil society on this topic. They were selected because their long-standing engagement with these debates provides situated perspectives on the historical background and current discourses. The interviews offer contextual insights into how women's contributions to civil resistance are narrated, omitted, or only partially acknowledged in dominant narratives and are incorporated as supplementary material in the analysis. Across all three groups, interviews were analysed thematically across related themes rather than as consecutive narratives, accounting for both the diversity of individual accounts and the patterns common to them – including recurring motifs, self- and other-description, and the ways everyday language reflects broader gendered and political meanings.

Following this methodological overview, it is essential to reflect on the research process itself, shifting particular attention to positionality, knowledge construction, and selectivity. Reflecting on one's own perspective is particularly important, as researching memories of civil resistance inherently involves participation in the process of memory-making. By documenting and analysing these narratives, I contribute to their preservation, thereby assuming a role akin to that of my interview partners, who carry and transmit these memories. This calls for continuous awareness of the factors shaping my own perspective (Gordon 2015: 9).

One key aspect concerns the selectivity involved in listening to conversations and writing field notes. It became clear that I was already interpreting narratives during the writing process, adding details that seemed relevant based on my prior knowledge, contextual understanding, personal experience, and research aims. This selectivity began at the stage of listening, as I retained those details I considered to be particularly salient. To mitigate this bias, I engaged in numerous informal conversations with different individuals and revisited the same participants on multiple occasions to discuss the 1990s, thereby seeking to minimise misunderstandings and misinterpretations. This process also revealed which experiences were most enduring or meaningful, as certain stories or events were mentioned repeatedly. I applied a similar approach to city walking tours, participating in several and revisiting selected ones. Given the scope of this article, the differences in how various guides narrated the same sites were not pursued as a separate line of analysis. They nonetheless sensitised me to the interpretive variability through which the past is publicly made meaningful. This resonates with Nicolas Argenti and Katharina Schramm's observation that 'Memory is not a simple, unmediated reproduction of the past, but rather a selective re-creation that is dependent for its meaning on the remembering individual or community's contemporary social context, beliefs and aspirations' (2009: 2) – a reflection that applies not only to the research participants, but equally to my own practice as a researcher.

Another important consideration is the ‘echo chamber’ I inhabited within the research field, shaped by factors such as age, background, academic training, language skills, and research interests. I primarily interacted with civil society actors who speak English, mostly hold university degrees, and engage with issues of collective remembrance and civil resistance. This group tends to take a critical stance towards Kosovo’s national master narrative and advocates for a multi-perspectival view of the past. Accordingly, my research reflects only the memories of a specific segment of the Kosovo Albanian population, which is not representative of Kosovo as a whole, nor even of Prishtina. Crucially, by foregrounding certain memories, I simultaneously exclude and marginalise others – particularly those of older individuals, given my limited proficiency in Albanian (and Serbian). Moreover, any oral-history-based research is inherently constrained by language barriers, as nuances risk being lost in translation. As a German citizen born and raised in Germany, I also lack comparable life experiences and familiarity with local communication styles, limiting my ability to fully grasp or convey the context and atmosphere of the narrated events. This heightens the risk of misinterpretations, which I sought to counteract through ongoing dialogue (Farnsworth 2008: 5; Gordon 2015: 32). I am aware that ‘an inter/view is an exchange between two subjects’, and that my presence may have influenced how civil resistance and related experiences were articulated (Portelli 1991: 55). Likewise, my questions shaped the conversations, suggesting particular narrative structures, event sequences, meanings, and emotional undertones. Participants shared only those memories they chose to disclose within this specific intersubjective exchange (Lomsky-Feder 2004: 86; Luci, Krasniqi 2006: 16). Portelli aptly describes the intersubjective nature of oral narratives: ‘Oral testimony, in fact, is never the same twice. This is characteristic of all oral communication, but is especially true of relatively unstructured forms, such as autobiographical or historical statements given in an interview’ (1991: 55).

The Kosovar master narrative and the exclusion of women’s roles in civil resistance and nation-building

Building on the theoretical, conceptual, and methodological framework outlined above, the following analysis examines the processes behind the structural invisibilisation of women’s socio-political contributions to civil resistance within the national master narrative.

A key factor is the suppression of memories of the civil resistance movement itself, which forms the focus of the first analytical section. While certain activities performed by men in the resistance continue to be remembered and respected, women’s engagement has largely vanished from collective memory. The subsequent section, therefore, investigates which notions of masculinity and femininity are permitted

within the master narrative constructed by Kosovo's male political elites, and how these conceptions relate to the lack of recognition for women's diverse roles in the 1990s. Given the complexity of Kosovo's memory politics and the absence of a comprehensive theoretical framework, the analysis does not seek to provide an exhaustive account. Rather, it aims to highlight the untapped potential of combining feminist perspectives on nationalism, militarism, and collective memory and to deconstruct selected aspects of Kosovo's memory culture.

Armed resistance as the master narrative of Kosovar memory politics

In examining why women's socio-political roles within the civil resistance movement have been forgotten, the most obvious explanation is the erasure of the movement itself. Interviewees frequently pointed to the dominance of a one-sided narrative of the past, centred on the armed resistance of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), as a key factor. One interviewee working in the civil society sector emphasised the different political ideologies that emerged in the 1990s and continue to shape the present. The complexity and multiplicity of events in that decade have produced a polarised ideological landscape, leading to conflict between political discourses and positions. At the core of this conflict lies the memory of the struggle against Serbian hegemony in the 1990s and, ultimately, the contested question of who liberated Kosovo (Krasniqi 2007: 16). Political scientists Mila Fridman and Larissa Pogodda demonstrate that in situations where memories become sites of struggle and conflict, diverse actors contribute to shaping the meaning of the past (2020: 203). In the case of Kosovo, this conflict unfolds primarily between the political party *Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës* (LDK), founded and led by Ibrahim Rugova until his death in 2006 and associated with the civil resistance, and the *Partia Demokratike e Kosovës* (PDK), associated with the KLA. Both parties compete for a monopoly over the interpretation and preservation of the past, that is, for maintaining their respective mnemonic narratives and claims to 'truth'. In such a context, what sociologist Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi terms 'fragmented commemoration' emerges (2009), and the past becomes a contested sphere (Fridman, Pogodda 2020: 205; Hinton, O'Neill 2009: 5; Müller 2009: 3). In other words, an ongoing political struggle for dominance in collective memory, transforms the past into a political concept and a site of symbolic contestation. As one interviewee put it concisely: '[O]f course the campaigns for the past have been used for political campaigns and political truth' (Interviewee 18, 24.08.23). This struggle serves to advance particular interests and secure control over the political centre. Memories thus function as tools for power acquisition and legitimation, promoting a specific political order and shaping present power relations. In this process, the past is continually reinterpreted as a resource for power and identity politics (Assmann 2008: 57; Fridman, Pogodda 2020: 205; Lomsky-Feder 2004: 104).

This intra-Kosovar conflict thus revolves not only around power, but also around the legitimisation and construction of identity – specifically the formation of a hegemonic Kosovo Albanian identity. This identity is constituted through mnemonic processes, namely via ‘memorial signs such as symbols, texts, images, rites, ceremonies, places, and monuments’ (Assmann 2008: 55). Historian John R. Gillis aptly summarises that ‘the core meaning of any individual or group identity (...) is sustained by remembering, and what is remembered is defined by the assumed identity’ (1994: 3).

Moreover, memories of the struggle for independence are also employed in the project of nation-building, with Luci and Gusia noting that ‘memory, in post-war and post-independent Kosovo, both as knowledge and practice, has operated as the *sine qua non* of state and nation building’ (2019: 132). This is hardly unusual, given that since the 19th century scholars and politicians have recognised the connection between memory and the nation, and the nation has been regarded, at least from the perspective of hegemonic theories, as a constant negotiation between memory and history (Olick 1998: 377). This study builds on this understanding of the entanglement of memory and nation-building, while foregrounding the dimension of gender relations, which has all too often remained peripheral (Luci 2011: 5).

Following this insight, scholars have begun to examine the gendered dimensions of public narratives about Kosovo’s national liberation (Farquet 2018: 363). They emphasise the central role of men in these memories, distinguishing between two prominent and opposing forms of masculinity: the ‘peace-loving activist’ and the ‘freedom fighter’ (Krasniqi 2009: 162). In the post-war period, the militaristic strand occupied a stronger political position, and representatives of the armed resistance drew on the legacy of the KLA to rewrite the past and legitimise political power in the present. As a result, post-war remembrance has been dominated by the image of the armed freedom fighter, emphasising the role of KLA combatants as national saviours and constructing an ideal of the brave, heroic man. Several interviewees described this dominance in concrete terms. One, who grew up in Kosovo and now lives in Germany, acknowledged the widespread celebration of fallen KLA commanders while stressing that governing parties had actively instrumentalised this heroic imagery to secure electoral support in a post-war climate still shaped by memories of the conflict (Interviewee 1, 25.10.22). A journalist similarly reflected on what she described as a capture of history and a ‘monopolisation of narratives’ in the post-war period: ‘the soldier narrative was, kind of like, the only one that was being recorded, the only one that was kind of being told’ (Interviewee 9, 25.02.23). This is further underscored by the observation of one interviewee in her mid-sixties that ‘even historically we always were fighting’, suggesting that armed struggle is central to the master narrative while also extending beyond memories of the 1990s and drawing on a longer historical self-understanding shaped by repeated struggle (Interviewee 6,

23.11.22). In this way, the master narrative shapes processes of ‘national imagination’ and produces a Kosovo Albanian identity grounded in armed resistance, martyrdom, and self-sacrifice (Di Lellio, Schwandner-Sievers 2006; Farquet 2018: 366; Krasniqi 2009: 163; Luci, Gusia 2019: 132, 139). This insight is also illustrated by the youngest interviewee, who explains:

Whether it is mobilisation against the Ottoman invaders, whether it is mobilisation against Montenegro and Serbian invaders, whether it is mobilisation against Italian fascists, whether it is mobilisation against Serbia or anything else — we have particular bits in our whole ethnical identity that shaped us, that really recycled themselves throughout stages of our lives. (Interviewee 7, 24.11.22)

Although a growing number of diverse voices now complement the formerly one-sided portrayal and enable a more nuanced engagement with the past, the image of the male soldier of the national liberation movement continues to dominate collective memory. As a result, the voices of other groups, such as women, civilians, or relatives of missing persons, are marginalised or silenced. According to Johanna Mannergren Selimović, Professor of Peace and Development Research, this is not a phenomenon specific to Kosovo. She observes that at the societal level, particularly following violent politics, silence plays a central role in nation-building. She elaborates: ‘As remembering the past always comes with forgetting, silence engulfs that which is cut out of the story, or discursive formations, as Foucault would have it, and is thus a means to create and sustain a particular social order’ (2020: 3). This, which she terms following anthropologist Paul Connerton’s ‘hegemonic forgetting’, softens or weakens narrative aspects to construct clear subject positions that in turn produce specific power relations (ibid.: 3). This is confirmed by one interviewee, who pointed out that the contributions of women to the national past are not part of the culture of remembrance – except for the statue of Mother Teresa and the *Heroinat* monument. Why these two figures enter collective memory while women’s socio-political engagement remains marginalised is the question the following section turns to.

Heroic freedom fighters and the revered mothers of the nation

It is no accident that memories of the multiple roles of Kosovo Albanian women are absent from the national narrative; it is rather a reflection of the structural interplay of nation-building, militarisation, and gendered memory politics. This section therefore examines constructions of masculinity and femininity in relation to nation-building and militarism, thereby tracing which notions of femininity are permitted within the Kosovar master narrative and which are excluded. The Kosovar nation is itself a site of contestation between competing political narratives, most notably those that

foreground either armed or civil Albanian resistance against the Serbian regime. Since nation-building involves the continuous negotiation not only of history and memory but also of gender relations, these contests draw on 'socially constructed ideas of masculinity and femininity to shape female and male participation in nation-building as well as the manner in which the nation is embodied in the imagination of self-professed nationalists' (Banerjee 2003: 167). As McClintock observes, '[a]ll nations depend on powerful constructions of gender' (1993: 61). The competing constructions of the 'peace-loving activist' and the 'freedom fighter' have already been discussed, yet without considering the subordination of particular forms of femininity. This also applies to the question of why, in the post-war period, the militaristic strand held a stronger political position, enabling it to impose a master narrative aligned with its own interests.

This chapter now turns to Cynthia Enloe's work, which highlights the link between masculinity and nation, noting that nationalism 'typically knows its origins in masculinised memory, masculinised humiliation, and masculinised hope' (2014: 93). The nation thus builds on the idea of masculinity, and it is almost exclusively men who claim the authority to define the nation-building process and establish the requisite notions of appropriate masculinities and femininities for the nation. Defining supposedly appropriate behaviours for nation members is necessary to preserve the nation's uniqueness. Additionally, these behaviours determine who belongs to the nation and who does not, thereby turning this behavioural code into a kind of national boundary. These specific codes are equally central to the identity of collective members, and the construction of national identity is tied to entrenched notions of this gender differentiation (Einhorn 2009: 11; Mayer 1999: 18; Yuval-Davis 1997: 37, 47, 67). The task of policing these shared norms and cultural codes thus typically falls to men, who ensure that women fulfil their assigned roles in the national project. Political and cultural sociologist Joane Nagel writes that, '[T]he scripts in which these roles are embedded are written primarily by men, for men, and about men, and (...) women are, by design, supporting actors whose roles reflect masculinist notions of femininity and of women's proper "place"' (1998: 243).

In the case of Kosovo, this means that norms and values tied to a specific form of masculinity shape the processes of national imagination. This masculinised understanding of nationalism centres on the ideal of the hegemonically masculine soldier or nationalist freedom fighter, thereby subordinating other forms of masculinity and femininity (Krasniqi 2007; Munn 2008: 442). However, the fact that representatives of the armed, military resistance held the dominant position in determining which masculinities and femininities were deemed appropriate for the nation cannot be explained solely by the male construct of the nation and its patriarchal hierarchies (Enloe 2014: 335). On this basis, the LDK could just as easily have prevailed in the political

power struggle. Interviewee 17, a feminist activist and journalist, helps explain why this outcome was not coincidental. She argues that citizenship in Kosovo has been shaped largely by wartime contributions, producing a political culture in which those who fought feel entitled to govern, and generating ‘the sentiment among voters and other citizens to feel like they owe it to them’ (Interviewee 17, 15.08.23). A similar point was raised by Interviewee 1 in the preceding section. To situate these accounts theoretically, the analysis draws on Enloe’s work (1993, 2007), which underscores the importance of examining the role of masculinity and femininity in processes of militarisation. Enloe draws attention to the mutual shaping of militarism, gender ideologies, and nationalism. Enloe argues that both nationalism and militarism are often informed by patriarchal values, reinforcing the privileging of men and the idea of masculinity (2000: 144). Militarisation, as Enloe defines it, is ‘the step-by-step process by which something becomes controlled by, dependent on, or derives its value from the military as an institution or militaristic criteria’ (ibid.: 291).

The role of militarisation in post-war Kosovo is particularly evident in the elevated status of the armed resistance, which the PDK has used to legitimise its power in the present (Krasniqi 2007: 15). It is important to note in this context that ‘[m]ilitarization and the privileging of masculinity are both products not only of amorphous cultural beliefs but also of deliberate decisions’ (Enloe 2000: 33). One such deliberate decision, as in Kosovo, is to emphasise a (in most cases male) candidate’s military past during election campaigns, as this image appeals to certain constituencies (ibid.: 32). Until recently, this electorate constituted a large segment of Kosovo’s population, which is reflected in the fact that, until 2019, the office of Prime Minister was predominantly held by former KLA fighters (Perritt 2008: 152). In this context, both Interviewee 17 and Enloe employ the term ‘khaki election’ to describe elections in which the success of competing political actors depends on their ability to present themselves as the victors of the war. That is to say, in such elections voters tend to favour parties whose candidates can demonstrate achievements within a military organisation or possess military skills (Enloe 2000: 6). In light of this, it becomes clear why the LDK lost the political power struggle to the PDK and why the image of the armed freedom fighter dominates post-war memory. The freedom fighter emphasises the role of KLA fighters as national saviours and constructs an image of the brave, heroic man, highlighting values such as militarised agency and honourable national masculinity (Krasniqi 2009: 163). The resulting form of masculinity is based on gender norms cultivated within or associated with the military, encompassing qualities such as bravery, strength, and honour (Balbon 2023: 6). In this context, and following Enloe (2000), one may speak of ‘militarised masculinities’.

Bringing these considerations together, it becomes evident that former KLA fighters capitalised on their association with militarised masculinities to secure electoral

success, particularly by benefitting from the portrayal of male KLA heroes (Balbon 2023: 13).⁴ Their political advantage over other forms of masculinity and femininity, however, had an additional cause. Militarised masculinities were linked to the capacity to provide protection, an especially salient need in the post-war context. Moreover, militarised masculinities often occupy the position of hegemonic masculinity – in Kosovo, embodied by the armed freedom fighter – standing at the top of a society in which a variety of masculinities and femininities exist in hierarchical relation to one another (*ibid.*: 6–7). The present analysis not only confirms this assumption but also illustrates the interconnection and mutual influence of militarism, nationalism, and collective memory. Furthermore, militarised masculinities tend to stand in explicit opposition to subordinated femininities. While the former are attributed with the capacity to provide protection, women are associated with the need for protection. Through this binary, militarised masculinities (re)construct gendered social hierarchies (*ibid.*: 6; Enloe 2000: 6). In this context, it is noteworthy that this binary is also evident in nationalist narratives through the metaphor of ‘nation-as-woman and woman-as-nation’, through which men assume the role of protector, their identity being closely intertwined with the nation (Mayer 1999: 15; Peterson 1994: 79).

Krasniqi, Sokolić, and Kostovicova also draw a parallel with nationalism. They argue: ‘Political construction of nationalism in postwar and post-independence Kosovo goes hand in hand with the construction of gender hierarchies’ (2020: 471). According to their analysis, this overlap is no coincidence but can be explained by the fact that representatives of the armed resistance, who appropriated militarised masculinities, enforced a master narrative based on their contemporary interests. This position of dominance also enabled them to determine which forms of masculinity and femininity were deemed appropriate for the nation. It must be added here that the connection between masculinity and militarism or nationalism can only be understood by taking the significance of both femininity and masculinity into account. Applied to the present study and the Kosovar context, this means that notions of femininity

⁴ It is important to note that in today’s Kosovo, military affiliation has become more of an obstacle than an advantage for a political career and is increasingly associated with negative rather than heroic attributes, challenging the hegemony of militarised masculinities. This aligns with feminist scholarship emphasising that hegemonic masculinities are constantly renegotiated and can be contested by alternative political masculinities, particularly in times of transition. Niklas Balbon, a political scientist, observes the emergence of new political masculinities in Kosovo that privilege educational credentials over military backgrounds. However, this shift does not automatically dismantle gendered hierarchies. The earlier hegemony of militarised masculinities entrenched gender norms and produced gendered conflict capital that continues to persist, even as its dominance is increasingly contested. Thus, the effects of militarised masculinities extend beyond their hegemony and remain relevant for this study (Balbon 2023).

can only be understood through an analysis of normative constructions of masculinity. This also underlines the necessity of the preceding discussion (Enloe 2000: 289; Yuval-Davis 1997: 1). As Peterson and Runyan note: '[M]asculinity and femininity are not "independent" categories (...) but are defined in *oppositional* relation to each other"' (1999: 8).

Building on this foundation, the analysis turns to the masculinist conceptions of femininity permitted within the national master narrative. It shows that these conceptions overlap with the roles of women in the national project (still ongoing in Kosovo) outlined by Anthias and Yuval-Davis.

As Yuval-Davis (2004) notes, the construct of the male protector, symbolised by the armed freedom fighter, is frequently accompanied by the figure of the female mother. Scholars such as Elife Krasniqi (2014, 2020), Jamie Munn (2006, 2008), Romaine Farquet (2018), and Vjollca Krasniqi (2007) similarly observe in their analyses of Kosovar remembrance culture that the prevailing symbolic role assigned to women is that of the revered mother and nurturer of the nation. As mothers, women are the biological reproducers of the nation and bearers of the community's future generations (Yuval-Davis 1997: 37). In this capacity, they are considered indispensable, for, as Yuval-Davis writes, 'If the Woman does not want to be Mother, Nation is on its way to die'⁵ (ibid.: 1). Furthermore, the significance of motherhood in nation-building remains present in the current political context. Interviewee 18, a former employee of a civil society organisation documenting stories of women, explains: 'But, eh, the way that the motherhood concept is used now is from our own president. (...) That's how you get in Kosovo's society; being a mother is highly valued (...). Says a lot about how building a nation is continued by motherhood, in that sense' (Interviewee 18, 24.08.23).

The significance of motherhood as an allegedly appropriate form of femininity should not be viewed solely in the context of the nation's biological reproduction. Women also reproduce the nation culturally and socially by transmitting its values from one generation to the next and by maintaining social cohesion (Yuval-Davis 1997: 67). Although the civil resistance relied on national cohesion and solidarity – as one interviewee retrospectively recalled: '[A]nd it's interesting; the solidarity between people was amazing. Today, we don't have that. Nowhere in the world can you find that kind of solidarity' – women's contributions are acknowledged only within the framework of family and kinship (Interviewee 6, 23.11.22). Their social sphere is thus restricted to the private domain (Krasniqi 2014: 203). This is reflected in the words of one interviewee, a 26-year-old social and cultural anthropology student: 'Of course,

⁵ The original quotation is from Karaman in *Narod* (Zagreb, Croatia), no. 10, 9 September 1995, p. 14, quoted in Meznaric (1995: 12).

when you hear about women in the 90s, you hear about this private domain, you know. Women were always more involved in the private domain, which is like house-keeping, cooking (...)’ (Interviewee 16, 14.08.23). She added that there were, of course, also women ‘branching out and writing and working in the universities and everything, or then women working in political parties’ (ibid.).

Yet within the master narrative, it is not this contribution but rather the female victim figure that dominates: women whose husbands left them and their children alone during the war, or who, as mothers, mourn children lost or imprisoned during the conflict (Farquet 2018: 373; Hoxha, Andresen 2021: 277). They are also remembered as victims of sexualised violence perpetrated by Serbian forces and paramilitary groups, particularly after this issue entered public debate in 2014, which led to legislative changes recognising sexualised violence during wartime (Luci, Gusia 2019: 138–139; Pollozhani 2019: 4). This was followed by the incorporation of the previously marginalised experiences of surviving women into public remembrance, although, as Krasniqi, Sokolić, and Kostovicova note, ‘its incorporation into nation building is challenging owing to its potential to destabilize the notion of male honour central to the construction of Albanian national identity’ (2020: 469). Such destabilisation arises from the symbolic embodiment of women as the bearers of national and collective honour, while men are positioned as the defenders of the sexual purity and honour of *their* women. In this light, the public acknowledgment of sexualised wartime violence has the potential to destabilise men’s role as the protectors of the purity and honour of both ‘their’ women and their nation, as the woman’s shame becomes the shame of the nation and, ultimately, of the man (Munn 2008: 448; Yuval-Davis 1997: 47).

The fact that such memories nevertheless became part of the collective memory can be explained by the incorporation of wartime rape commemoration into the dominant patriarchal discourse and the nation-building project (Kola et al. 2022: 1416). A notable example is the *Heroinat* monument, which the interviewee mentioned in the previous chapter. *Heroinat*, the Albanian word for ‘heroines’, is located in central Prishtina and commemorates women who were raped by Serbian men during the 1990s. While representing a necessary intervention to address the absence of women from Kosovo’s commemorative practices, the monument has been met with criticism from civil society. For example, it has been criticised for homogenising the experiences of all Kosovo-Albanian women and highlighting precisely those experiences that marginalised and stigmatised them (Luci, Gusia 2019: 139). Interviewee 21 confirms: ‘[I]t’s like, it pisses me off, because it’s putting everything in one box (...). They treat us, they treat women, like a homogeneous group, which is not what they are’ (Interviewee 19, 19.09.23).

Luci and Gusia add that the exclusive focus on survivors of wartime rape, celebrated as ‘heroines’, reduces women’s recognition to ‘their sexual and cultural reproduc-

tive roles in marking the boundaries of the nation' (2019: 139). Through such commemorative politics, the female body is reaffirmed as both a protected object of the 'in-group' and a target of the 'out-group', serving as 'reminders of the possibility of sacrifice' (Billig 1995: 175). As Adem Kola et al. note, this framing suggests that 'such suffering was a "contribution and sacrifice", something to passively be undergone for the nation, akin to "national duty"' (2022: 1411). In this way, the recognition of sexualised wartime violence does not challenge dominant gender hierarchies within the nation-building process; instead, commemoration reinforces the gendered master narrative (Krasniqi, Sokolić, Kostovicova 2020: 467).

In sum, the analysis demonstrates that Kosovo's master narrative rests on binary and contrasting constructions of masculinity and femininity and on hierarchical gender identities and relations. Men are remembered as brave, heroic protectors and as the leaders and creators of the nation, while women remain in their service – commemorated as revered mothers and nurturers of the nation, as fragile victims, or as suffering maternal figures. Through the one-dimensional remembrance of women as victims and the emphasis on their maternal contributions to the nation, women are reduced to their reproductive function, reinforcing traditional roles in service of the nation. Such representations confine women to passivity and support, thereby denying them agency and subject positionality (Farquet 2018: 373; Hoxha, Andresen 2021: 270; Krasniqi 2014: 207; Krasniqi, Sokolić, Kostovicova 2020: 470). The effects of these constructions of femininity are also reflected in the words of Interviewee 18:

So, there were a lot of activists (...) and they never really received any kind of recognition, because we see all of the veterans of the war [...]. They are part of history, they are recognised as such, but what about their wives? If you are not a raped woman, what are you? You are either a raped woman and you are recognised now, after so many years, with a memorial and a piece of legislation that has been passed, or you are just not there. You don't have a status, a concept of being a veteran or a martyr or (...) I don't know how to put it. You don't have a specific title. (Interviewee 18, 24.08.23)

This study concurs with this assessment and adds that the extensive activism and socio-political engagement of women in the civil resistance are actively erased, as they fall outside the accepted frames of motherhood and sacrifice for the nation. Their central role and significant contributions to the struggle for national independence do not align with masculinist conceptions of femininity or the 'appropriate' place of women within the nation – not in the past or in the present. For, as Deborah McDowell argues, '[W]hat we call the past is merely a function and production of a continuous present and its discourses' (1989: 147). As a result, their stories are

marginalised by male-dominated state and power politics and remain absent from Kosovo's culture of remembrance. This, in turn, serves to consolidate male privilege in the current nation-building process and to maintain hierarchical gender relations and roles that play a functional role for the overarching politics of nationalism (Gusia et al. 2019: 4; Luci 2002: 72).

Conclusion

Combining ethnographic data with feminist theories of nationalism, militarism, and memory, this article demonstrates that women's erasure from Kosovo's nation- and state-building is not incidental. Rather, the suppression of their histories from collective memory stems from the nexus of nation, gender, and militarism, which simultaneously shapes gendered representations within Kosovo's memory culture. For this conclusion, it has been shown that post-war competition over mnemonic dominance favoured militarised masculinities that legitimised present power and produced a national identity centred on armed resistance, martyrdom, and self-sacrifice. The ideal of the male 'freedom fighter' is at the centre of this masculinised understanding of nationalism, with other forms of masculinity subordinated to it. Femininities, by contrast, are positioned in explicit opposition to this hegemonic masculinity, precisely because this position is occupied by militarised masculinities that (re)construct gendered social hierarchies. This hitherto under-theorised interaction of nationalism, militarism, and collective memory becomes particularly visible in the master narrative through binary and contrasting conceptions of masculinity and femininity. Rooted in hierarchical gender identities and relations, this narrative marginalises civilian voices and portrays men as the heroic protectors and creators of the nation, while reducing women to the symbolic role of mother of the nation or passive victim. Since memories of their diverse socio-political engagement in the 1990s lie outside this accepted framework, they are subjected to structural marginalisation; women are thus not remembered as agents of civil resistance.

To address this imbalance, methodologically the findings call for sustained feminist archive-making – oral histories, exhibitions, curricula – to challenge the narrow terms under which women are permitted to appear as national subjects. At the same time, the current discussion reveals a growing engagement with this topic, alongside an increasing number of interventions. These matter not only for memory activism, but also as case studies on shifts in knowledge production. Beyond reshaping Kosovo's post-war history and filling historical knowledge gaps, such initiatives problematise discussions of Albanian national history, particularly regarding women as Albanians, feminists, and collective memory. They contest the legitimisation of political power

through history and memory, disentangling it from potential instrumentalisation (Krasniqi 2020). Thus, the practice of remembering becomes a political act that breaks the silence.

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Společenství Charty 77 nahlížené z genderové perspektivy¹

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Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR, v. v. i.

Charter 77 from a Gender Perspective

Abstract: The study analyses the distinct contributions of women to the work of Charter 77 and emphasises its intellectual dimension. An important space for women to develop their own strategies was that of the apartment communities (or ‘salons’), which were primarily organised by women, combining the role of organiser and intellectual in one person. The study also examines these women’s reflections on their involvement in the work of this human rights initiative and the community that formed around it from the start. An important issue is their experience with repression and imprisonment – whether of them personally or of their partners. Using specific examples, it shows how extreme life situations often opened up space for self-fulfilment and how it was often utilised creatively. For structural reasons, women’s involvement in the work of Charter 77 took a different form from that of men. However, their intellectual contribution was equally significant, though we do not have enough sources or texts to compile a ‘Charter 77 canon’. Women played a role in the intellectual side of the Charter community and its written output as co-authors, editors, archivists, and translators, and of course also as typists, a role, however, that is frequently mentioned.

Keywords: Charter 77, gender, dissent, independent culture

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¹ Text vznikl v rámci kolektivního projektu, řešeného na Ústavu pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR, který v letech 2022–2024 podpořila Grantová agentura ČR (GA22-05450S, Dějiny Charty 77 v domácí a transnacionální perspektivě). Představuje rozšířenou verzi některých témat a motivů naznačených v mé kapitole „Solidární společenství Charty 77: podoby každodenního soužití a genderová perspektiva“, připravované knihy *Dějiny Charty 77* (Kopeček et al. v tisku).

Ačkoliv je Charta 77 jednou z nejdůležitějších kapitol v dějinách české demokracie a právem se jí dostává pozornosti i v současném historiografickém výzkumu,² hlubší genderová analýza jejího fungování stále ještě schází. Předmětem předkládané studie proto bude především vklad žen do činnosti Charty 77, jejich sebereflexe a zkušenost s represí a vězněním – jich samých nebo jejich partnera. Vklad žen do činnosti Charty bude zkoumán s ohledem na jeho intelektuální rozměr, což je zásadní motiv, který se prolíná i do zkoumání dalších témat – zkušenost s represí byla v případě některých žen kreativně uchopena, jakkoliv se jedná spíše o výjimku související se specifickým osobnostním nastavením a z něj plynoucích obranných mechanismů. Také věznění partnerů otvíralo ženám pole pro vlastní seberealizaci.

Ženy jsou prakticky vyloučeny z intelektuálních dějin Charty a všechny pokusy překonat vyprávění o „pomocné roli žen v disentu“ sice ukazují různé podoby jejich participace, a navíc zpochybňují i samotnou kategorii „pomocnosti“ jako něčeho méně hodnotného či druhotného (Linková 2017: 377), ale nevrací do hry ženy-intelektuálky, autorky či spoluautorky podstatných a vlivných textů, jakkoliv mohou být skryté či tušené. Jistě, lze to částečně vysvětlit nedostatkem pramenů (Suk 2023), ale není to vysvětlení úplné. Právě této roviny ženského vkladu do dějin Charty si studie také všimá a z jejích závěrů vyplývá, že by bylo v dalším zkoumání produktivní podrobněji se zaměřit na beletristickou tvorbu autorek a překladatelek spojených s disentem a také na jejich práci ediční a archivářskou. Disent byl vhodnou platformou, kde se mohla sociální aktivita žen rozvinout a získat svébytnou podobu, oscilující mezi tím, co pokládáme za tradiční řád, státní politikou a emancipací, která je individuálním rozhodnutím a nabízí i nečekané možnosti a modely, spojující v sobě i zdánlivě protichůdné postoje. Existovala v chartistickém prostředí, které se prezentuje jako otevřené, rovnostářské a tolerantní, genderově podmíněná nerovnost? A pokud ano, jaké strategie dotyčné vytvářely k jejímu překonávání? Zajímá mě také, zda, popřípadě jak, se zkušenost ženského aktivismu v neformálním opozičním prostředí propsala do polistopadových kariér jeho aktérek a jak ony samy zpětně svou aktivistickou minulost hodnotí.

Podle dostupných pramenů lze tvrdit, že ženy zkoumaného společenství si vytvářely specifickou strategii žité emancipace, která v sobě zároveň mnohdy obsahovala také některé prvky běžně spojované s tradičním řádem – ženy mívaly větší počet dětí, než byl dobový průměr, a využívaly legální možnosti nechodit do placeného zaměstnání jako pečující osoby, zároveň ale takto vytvořenou mentální i časovou kapacitu využívaly k péči o disidentskou societu a rozvoji řady neformálních aktivit. Rodina měla v životních příbězích žen funkci útočiště morálních hodnot a nabízela jim možnost výběru a úniku z politického vydírání a za daných podmínek sloužila jako prostředek emancipace, na rozdíl od placeného zaměstnání, jak by bylo možné bez znalosti kontextu předpokládat.

² Nicméně první ucelená vědecká monografie vychází až nyní (Kopeček et al. v tisku).

Výrazný vliv na genderovou dynamiku ve zkoumaném společenství měly zásahy represivního aparátu, které v mnoha případech vedly k proměně genderových rolí v rodinách, ale na různých úrovních ovlivňovaly také život komunity. Případy genderově podmíněného násilí z počátku osmdesátých let se často stávaly posledním a rozhodujícím impulsem pro odchod dotyčných a jejich blízkých do exilu (Lefeuve 2014), zůstávaly ale jako varovné memento také pro ty, kteří se rozhodli zůstat.

Jak lze definovat onu chartistickou societu, ve které tyto ženy působily?³ Charta 77 byla od samého počátku komunitou, která postrádala pravidla (stanovy), stálé reprezentanty, členství a legální existenci. Absence zmíněných rysů byla důsledkem strategické rozvahy a vyplývala z něj také skutečnost, že kdokoli přijal její myšlenky či participoval na její činnosti, byl v podstatě i jejím členem. Podstatným definičním rysem společenství tak byla jeho heterogenita, proměnlivost v čase a nejasné, rozmlžené okraje. Společenství totiž netvořili pouze signatáři, ale i jejich partneři, partnerky, blízcí spolupracovníci a další osoby. Někteří lidé se po podepsání nijak dál neangažovali – podpis byl jednorázovým a jasným gestem vyjadřujícím souhlas s textem Prohlášení Charty 77. Stejná logika platí i naopak – někteří lidé nebyli signatáři, a přesto se stali výraznými postavami společenství – jako výmluvný příklad poslouží případ socioložky Jiřiny Šiklové, která byla činná v disentu od začátku, ale Chartu podepsala až v roce 1989. Disent se v československém kontextu zformoval jako široké opoziční hnutí, definované nesouhlasem s konsolidací a perzekucí, které následovaly po 21. srpnu 1968. Charta 77 různé proudy sjednotila na půdorysu lidských práv, nicméně neznamená to, že reprezentovala veškerou opozici a naopak – i Charta měla své kritiky z řad disentu.⁴ V rámování mého textu tak tvoří Charta jakýsi referenční bod, k němuž se vybrané respondentky vztahují z různých pozic. Není pro mě tedy podstatné, zda konkrétní osoby byly či nebyly signatářkami, ale že byly díky svým přátelským či partnerským vzbám součástí onoho neformálního a proměnlivého společenství.

Jak lze ale tuto societu charakterizovat z genderové perspektivy? Inspirativní jsou závěry britské historičky Celie Donert (Donert 2022: 171–194), která ve svém posledním výzkumu normalizace použila právě genderovou optiku a došla k závěru, že genderové role nabízely disidentům (a nejen jim) produktivní prostor pro nové vyjednávání hranic mezi veřejným a soukromým životem. Z jejich závěrů také vyplývá, že hlavní komoditou byl volný čas, tedy doba, kterou nezabíraly povinnosti vyplývající z placeného zaměstnání a která otevírala možnosti pro jeho další, produktivní využití. Ve zkoumaném případě lze za ono produktivní využití času pokládat také specifickou péči o tuto reaktivně, tzn. na základě vnějšího tlaku, vzniklou komunitu. Vedle

³ V textu používám pojmů societa, společenství a chartistická komunita jako významových synonym.

⁴ Genezi pojmu a jeho rozšíření se podrobněji věnuje například Peter Bugge ve své esejí nazvané *Západní vynález? Objevování českého disentu v sedmdesátých letech* (Bugge, Burget 2025: 391–416).

běžného udržování sousedských vztahů, sdílení každodenních starostí, hlídání dětí a drobné materiální výpomoci sem patří také chození k soudům, psaní dopisů úřadům, sdílení informací zvláštního charakteru, shánění advokátů apod. Tento sociální a kulturní kapitál byl vytvářen a sdílen napříč komunitou.

Dosavadní stav poznání a teoretické inspirace

Téma role žen v Chartě bylo otevřeno již dříve vlivnými aktérskými texty Jiřiny Šiklové (Šiklová 2008) a Kamily Bendové (Bendová 2005), nicméně bližší odborné pozornosti se jí dostalo až u příležitosti 40. výročí této lidskoprávní iniciativy. Tehdy vyšla díky autorskému týmu Sociologického ústavu AV kolekce rozhovorů s doprovodnou analytickou studií pod názvem *Bytová revolta: Jak ženy dělaly dissent* (Linková, Straková 2017). Právě tato publikace představuje určitý průlom ve způsobu uvažování o fungování a vnitřní dynamice dissentu obecně, protože přináší genderovou analýzu, polemizuje s předchozími texty v některých závěrech a na základě zjištěného formuluje nové otázky. Připomenutí si ale zaslouží i neméně ambiciózní pokus, který *Bytové revoltě* i oběma zmíněným aktérským textům výrazně časově předcházela a z různých důvodů zůstal zapomenut: již v devadesátých letech začala pořizovat rozhovory se ženami spojenými s nezávislou kulturou v Československu americká politoložka s českými kořeny Mary Hrabik Samal/Šámalová (Hrabik Šámalová 1996), část její kolekce je uložena v knihovně Gender Studies.

Tato studie vědomě a přiznaně navazuje na *Bytovou revoltu*, nicméně zůstává ukotvena v oboru soudobých dějin, to znamená, že se snaží překročit paměťový a aktérský rámec důslednější historizací. Genderová perspektiva není ani dnes zcela běžná při formulování výzkumných otázek a hypotéz a česká historiografie, navzdory výjimkám a komunikaci s mezinárodním prostředím, zůstává v některých ohledech poněkud přezíravá – gender bývá někdy jen okrajovým doplňkem, nikoliv svébytnou analytickou kategorií, anebo je tento koncept zcela ignorován. Kupříkladu ve stejném roce jako *Bytová revolta* vyšel tiskem také sborník *Šest kapitol o dissentu* (Suk et al. 2017). V něm se pojem gender objevuje jen na dvou místech: v souvislosti s platovou nerovností (s. 31) a s genderovou vyvážeností nezávislého výzkumu veřejného mínění v Československu osmdesátých let (s. 144).

Z nejnovější knižní produkce vztahující se přímo k ženskému aktivismu ve východním bloku stojí za pozornost pohled do opozičního života v Bratislavě slovenské socioložky Oľgy Gyárfášové (2023), která na příkladu deseti žen, s nimiž vedla rozhovory, ukazuje význam pospolitosti, přátelských sítí a situovanosti konkrétních akterek v nich. Zuzana Maďarová v doprovodné studii upozorňuje na odlišnosti mezi oběma republikami federace, zasazuje svá pozorování do kontextu relevantní domácí i zahraniční literatury. Na základě analýzy rozhovorů vyzdvihuje motiv kontroly jako dominantní

ve vyprávěních – kontrola státní moci nad životem žen a jejich rodin a zároveň nedostatku kontroly nad vlastním životem.

Z toho vyplývá aj pocit neistoty, či a kedy prídu o zamestnanie ony samy alebo ich partneri, kedy u nich bude domová prehliadka, či ich sledujú alebo odpočúvajú, či a za akých okolností budú musieť alebo môcť emigrovať. Aj zo snahy aspoň na chvíľu nadobudnúť pocitu kontroly nad situáciou vyplývali mnohé akty vzdoru – od slovného odvrávania po pokus o samovraždu. (Maďarová 2023: 250)

Domnívám se, že tato potřeba mít alespoň nějakou kontrolu na svém životem vedla řadu žen k poměrně radikálnímu rozhodnutí – mít vyšší počet dětí, než byl dobový průměr. Tato skutečnost explicitně neimplikuje tíhnutí k tradičnějším rodinným modelům, ale naznačuje právě potřebu mít alespoň v nějaké rovině „život ve svých rukou“ (Kopeček et al. v tisku).

Napříč střední a východní Evropou se dále otázce žen v disentu věnovaly Shana Penn ve své analýze Solidarity a nedávno také Katarzyna Jedynakiewicz-Mróz v analýze propojení církevního hnutí s feministickým a ekologickým (Jedynakiewicz-Mróz 2018: 219–239; Penn 2005). Z perspektivy mého výzkumu je obzvláště relevantní analýza Shany Penn. Z jejího výzkumu a pozorování vyplývá, že ženy tvořily v polském masovém odborovém hnutí významnou sílu, jakkoliv tato role dosud nebyla explicitně zdůrazněna. Penn si všimla například toho, že ženská iniciativa dostala významný prostor v době stanného práva a represe v roce 1981. Podobný motiv nacházíme i v příběhu československého disentu, jak ukazují dále. Jedná se spíše o podobnost náhodnou, společnou oběma hnutím, mezi nimiž jinak nalézáme řadu podstatných rozdílů. Inspirující ovšem je, jaké otázky Penn klade a jak na ně hledá odpovědi ve své kolektivní biografii sedmi hlavních žen (a řady dalších), jejichž iniciativa zajistila Solidaritě kontinuitu. Protože právě udržení její existence bylo tím podstatným faktorem, jenž způsobil, že represe, jakkoliv byla tvrdá, hnutí nezdecimovala.

Pro mou perspektivu jsou klíčovým zdrojem právě biografické prameny, především různé publikované (a v menší míře archivní) rozhovory s aktérkami popisovaných a analyzovaných dějů. Tyto rozhovory byly pořizovány s různými záměry a v různých časech. A také různou metodologií – máme k dispozici jak volná vyprávění životních příběhů, tak polostrukturované rozhovory rámované užším tematickým vymezením. Zvýrazněním individuálního aspektu v těchto rozhovorech se do historického výzkumu dostává snaha rekonstruovat každodennost konkrétních lidí. Pamětníci, přímí aktéři popisovaných dějů, pomáhají svou reflexí minulého porozumět svým názorů, omylům a představám a takto získaný pramenný materiál napomáhá ke zkoumání vztahu dějin a každodenního života, individuálních historických zkušeností a politických názorů. Neustálé napětí mezi tehdejší a nynější otevírá prostor pro nejrůznější interpretace

a je třeba do něj vstupovat velmi obezřetně a citlivě, obzvlášť z důvodu nespolehlivosti osobní paměti. Na druhé straně však, jak zdůrazňuje Tzvetan Todorov, tyto vzpomínky dávají „lidskou tvář“ i jinak neosobním kolektivním událostem a osudům a umožňují znovu prožít onu akci a znovu procítit to, oč v ní šlo (Todorov 1998: 36–37).

Ke zkoumané problematice existuje rozsáhlý korpus biografických pramenů, který vznikl za různým účelem již od počátku devadesátých let. Z biografických rozhovorů odkazují především na dva výzkumné projekty a z nich vycházející soubory rozhovorů. Prvním je *Lidé a společenství Charty 77*, realizovaný v letech 1994–1996 Ilonou Christl a Květou Jechovou, z něhož vychází pozdější publikace Květy Jechové (Jechová 2003). Druhým pak *Politické elity a disent v období tzv. normalizace: Životopisná vyprávění* z let 2002–2004, který je z velké části publikován ve dvojdielném sborníku sestaveném Pavlem Urbáškem a Miroslavem Vaňkem (Urbášek, Vaněk 2005).

Genderové fungování chartistické komunity

V následující části se pokouším zachytit tři roviny ženského aktérství: jejich intelektuální přínos, svébytné uchopení aktivismu ke konci osmdesátých let a jejich participaci na projektech, které bývají vnímány jako dílo jejich partnerů či přátel. Význam role hostitelek v bytových společenstvích a bytů jako center opozice vyzdvihují závěry týmu vedeného Marcelou Linkovou (Linková 2017: 380–385). Byty jsou vnímány jako důležité pilíře, na nichž se buduje společenství a které pro svou otevřenost představují jakési komunikační a informační uzly, hrající podstatnou roli při komunikaci se zahraničními novináři (Linková 2017: 382). A jimi sesbírané a publikované rozhovory jen potvrzují, že bez (ženské) péče o toto zázemí by nic takového nemohlo existovat.

Pro pochopení genderové dynamiky jsou podstatné právě ty příklady, v nichž byla žena tou hlavní aktérkou, spojující ve své osobě nejen roli hostitelkou, ale také intelektuální a organizační. Vybrané ženy bývaly hlavními hybatelkami dění a také garantkami toho, že se akce koná v bezpečném prostředí (jak jen to život v socialistickém Československu dovoloval). V Praze existovalo takových „salónů“ několik. Od roku 1971 do svého odchodu do exilu v roce 1979 provozovala v Pařížské ulici v Praze svůj „salón“ Daňa Horáková (Horáková 2020: 17), která byla navíc spoluzakladatelkou a tvůrkyní Edice Expedice (od roku 1975). Další pražský „salón“ nacházíme v Tulipánové ulici na Zahradním městě, kde bydlela psychoterapeutka Jitka Vodňanská (Vodňanská 2018: 109, 180–181), a u níž se scházeli její přátelé z uměleckých a psychoterapeutických kruhů. Svůj „salón“ měla také ekonomka a překladatelka Rita Klímová, která sdílela domácnost se svým otcem, novinářem Stanislavem Budínem. Bydleli nejprve v ulici U Zeměpisného ústavu v Praze-Dejvicích, od roku 1974 ve Slancově na sídlišti Ďáblice. Díky němu a také díky svému bývalému manželovi Zdeňku Mlynářovi udržovala kontakty nejen se západním zahraničím, ale také s Polskem a Sovětským

svazem (Bartlová 2021: 181–182). Pravidelná setkání s předem připraveným programem se konala také u lékařky Mileny Černé v Trojanově ulici. Mezi pravidelné hosty jejích čtvrtečních večerů patřil Petr Rezek, Zbyněk Hejda, Jan Sokol a další (Hodačová 2021: 94–95). Specifický příklad pak představuje bytové divadlo Vlasty Chramostové (Jungmannová 2018: 55–84).

Kromě domácích „salónů“ vznikla na počátku osmdesátých let v prostředí chartistických žen stolní společnost U Šupů, která sdružovala zájemce a zájemkyně o brakovou literaturu, mj. Olgu Stankovičovou, Jarmilu Bělíkovou, Vlastimila Třešňáka, Olgu Havlovou a Petrušku Šustrovou. V tomto okruhu začala být budována „Svépomocná lidová knihovna Hrobka“, která shromažďovala a propagovala brakovou literaturu a sídlila v bytě Stankovičových v Melantrichově ulici. Schůzek se účastnili i další lidé, jako Kamila Bendová, Václav Havel a další (Čáslavová 2014: 33–39). K pravidelným aktivitám později přibýlo vydávání samizdatového občasníku *Nový brak* (Příbáň et al. 2018: 348) a pořádání recesistických akcí (Kosatík 1997). Olga Stankovičová v rozhovoru z roku 1988 hovoří o Hrobce jako o výsledku „osvobození od mužů“, o projektu, který původně vznikl jako čistě ženská iniciativa (Pokorná, Onuferová 2016: 11–32).

Výjimečný byl v tomto kontextu byt brněnské filozofky Boženy Komárkové. Komárková (1903–1997) byla totiž jednou z mála žen z chartistického okruhu, jejíž intelektuální vklad do tohoto společenství byl docenován již tehdy. Potvrzuje to mimo jiné ocenění z roku 1980, kdy za svou knihu *Vznik a původ lidských práv* obdržela cenu Edice Petlice, kterou finanční částkou a uměleckým dílem dotoval Jiří Kolář, toho času již v pařížském exilu (Hanáková 2020: 70). Za stejnou práci obdržela také v roce 1982 čestný doktorát Univerzity v Basileji (Keřkovský 2014: 84). Ačkoliv nemohla po svém absolutoriu filozofie na brněnské univerzitě v roce 1948 z ideových důvodů vyučovat, měla široký okruh žáků, který se rekrutoval z neformálních struktur, především Českobratrské církve evangelické. V její brněnské garsoniěře v Pekařské ulici se podle vzpomínky Jana Šimsy (Urbášek, Vaněk 2005: 948) „... scházelo maximálně osm lidí. Dbalo se na to, aby tam byl bývalý komunista, aby tam byl masarykovec, katolík, evangelík, aby ta společnost byla pestrá. A diskutovalo se o přečteném článku za přítomnosti paní profesorky Komárkové, která diskusi pak hodnotila (Komárková 1991).“

Výše zmíněné příklady ukazují, že se ženy aktivně podílely na intelektuálním rozměru chartovního společenství, byly to intelektuálně rovnocenné partnerky mužům-disidentům a dokázaly tvořivým způsobem využívat možností seberealizace, které se jim na velmi skromném půdorysu nabízely.

Kreativitu nacházíme také v nových formách aktivismu, které se objevují po polovině osmdesátých let a na nichž se výrazně podílí ženy dosud spojené s Chartou: z iniciativy Jarmily Johnové a Anny a Terezie Hradilkových vznikají Pražské matky (Olšáková 2024: 18–72), k Nezávislému mírovému sdružení se přidávají Ruth Šormová a v Brně Hana Holcnerová, které Chartu podepsaly v roce 1988, resp. 1989, a ve Společnosti

přátel USA působí Simona Hradílková.⁵ U ekologických a mírových aktivit je podstatným motivem, ústícím v protirežimní aktivismus, potřeba postavit se za svou rodinu, chránit své děti před vším nezdravým v podobě nejen znečištěného životního prostředí, ale také společnosti prosáklé militarismem a působící na děti již od raných let. V těchto iniciativách se spojuje genderová a generační zkušenost, reagující také na proměny geopolitické situace.

Aktivity a projekty měly nepochybně také svůj intelektuální význam, jakkoliv máme jen málo písemných dokladů o konkrétních debatách a koncipování či spoluautorství textů. Dosud nedoceněný přínos pro intelektuální dějiny Charty 77 představuje aktivita Evy Kantůrkové, která zůstává skryta za její původní autorskou tvorbou – Chartu 77 podepsala ve „druhé várce“, tedy v lednu 1977, a celé předchozí desetiletí byla spisovatelkou z povolání. Byla významnou iniciátorkou debat, které se vztahovaly k historické paměti, k národní identitě a otázce zodpovědnosti za osud (nejen) národního společenství, a této rovině její tvůrčí práce se věnuji v dalším textu (Holečková, Hermann v tisku). Uspořádala jako editorka několik sborníků, které zachycují debaty nad *IV. dílem Pamětí Václava Černého*, připomínají osobnost a dílo Josefa Pekaře, tvůrčím způsobem aktualizují odkaz Mistra Jana Husa a podobně. Její editorská práce byla skutečně rozsáhlá a její význam spočívá nejen v iniciování debat, ale především v tom, že dokázala dosáhnout jejich písemného zachycení a publikování v samizdatu. Právě tento rozměr její intelektuální a organizační práce zůstává dosud opomíjen a nedoceněn.

Důležitou skutečností také je, že ženy v mnoha případech přejímaly práci svých vězněných manželů, ukazuje to proces s Výborem na obranu nespravedlivě stíhaných (VONS), který nejen pokračoval ve své práci, ale manželky dvou uvězněných navíc převzaly vydávání samizdatového periodika a samizdatové edice (viz dále). Rok 1979 byl momentem, v němž Charta čelila svému největšímu ohrožení, a je podložena skutečností, že bez iniciativy, již představoval VONS, by byla činnost Charty 77 významně utlumena nebo by zcela zanikla. VONS vznikl 27. dubna 1978 se záměrem sledovat případy pronásledovaných za projevy svého přesvědčení a případy policejní a justiční svévole (Pažout 2007). Rozsáhlý zátah represivního aparátu z roku 1979 vyústil v odsouzení pěti členů k nepodmíněným trestům odnětí svobody – byli jimi Otta Bednářová, Václav Benda, Jiří Dienstbier, Václav Havel a Petr Uhl. Trio mluvčích v době procesu tvořil Václav Benda, Jiří Dienstbier a Zdena Tominová. Ačkoliv byli oba její spoluhlavčí vězněni, Tominová svůj mandát vykonávala celý rok a pak jej předala Rudolfu Battěkovi (Hradílek 2011: 102). Vytrvala, i když čelila bezprecedentnímu násilí.

Na místa uvězněných přišli noví lidé, kteří pokračovali v započaté činnosti. Mezi těmito asi dvanácti byla například také Petruška Šustrová. Díky Anně Šabatové po-

⁵ Dokumentární cyklus Českého rozhlasu Plus Děti Charty: „Úlet. Tak už jsem taky nebezpečná. Příběh Simony Hradílkové“ (2017).

kračovalo také vydávání samizdatového časopisu *Informace o Chartě 77* a Olga Havlová dále udržovala v chodu samizdatovou Edici Expedice, která existovala již od roku 1975 (Romanová 2014: 16–17). Havlová do tiráže uváděla své jméno namísto jména svého vězněného manžela, čímž se vystavovala riziku trestní odpovědnosti za opisování a šíření zakázané literatury. Navíc stála u zrodu reprezentativního samizdatového časopisu *O divadle*, který vycházel od roku 1986, a o rok později u samizdatového videoperiodika *Originální Videojournal*.

Samozřejmost, s níž obě ženy pokračovaly, potvrzuje jejich znalost fungování obou redakcí a lze tedy předpokládat, že se na této práci podílely i předtím, než byli jejich manželé uvězněni. Pokračování ve vydávání periodika či knižní edice nepředpokládalo tedy „jen“ odvalu, odhodlání věnovat tomu svůj čas a energii, ale také znalost práce, kontaktů a různých nepsaných pravidel, která samizdatové vydávání provázela. Dotyčné tak svou práci participovaly na produkování a reprodukování sociálního a kulturního kapitálu Charty 77.

Žitá emancipace žen Charty 77

Pro obecné označení převládajících životních strategií žen v chartistickém společenství se jako nejprůběhavější jeví *žitá emancipace*. V těchto příbězích je také reprodukována pomocná a podpůrná role žen, jejich statečnost a význam jimi tvořeného zázemí pro aktivity jejich mužů a také role hostitelská: „setkání byla spojená s pohoštěním, o které se staraly manželky“ (Bendová 2005: 64). Kamila Bendová o ženách hovoří jako o „nositelkách odvahy a naděje“ (Bendová 2005: 59) a vyslovuje domněnku, že v rámci akce Asanace odcházely do exilu především ty páry, u nichž „to nevydržely ženy. Když žena svého muže podržela a přiměla ho nevzdávat se, většinou se rodina nevystěhovala“ (Bendová 2005: 62). V tomto pohledu je role ženy vnímána jako role nositelky břemena odpovědnosti, ale již není nijak vysvětleno, proč jej nese zrovna žena a zrovna takovou měrou. Pokud žena neobstojí ve velmi široce pojaté roli „bezmezného podporovatelky“, může dojít k negativně vnímanému a hodnocenému rozhodnutí muže. Zde totiž stojí za připomenutí, že odchod do exilu byl často vnímán jako selhání jak samotnými exulanty, tak těmi, kteří v Československu zůstali (Brabenec 2010: 184; Jirous 1980: 406; Šámal et al. 2024: 103–104). Právě zde narážíme na odvrácenou tvář podpůrné role žen, která se může na první pohled jevit jako pozitivní kvalita hodná obdivu. Pokud ale není dostatečná, vina padá na ženu-parnerku.

Kamila Bendová je jednou z výrazných osobností disentu, autorkou vlivného textu o postavení a roli žen v disentu a do současnosti také častou účastnicí pamětnických debat vztahujících se k Chartě 77, disentu a souvisejícím tématům. Právě ona ve svých vystoupeních pravidelně zdůrazňuje „patriarchální uspořádání“ své rodiny, přestože byla po celou dobu sedmdesátých a osmdesátých let hlavní živitelkou a matkou po-

četné rodiny, a lze také předpokládat, že její intelektuální vklad do samizdatových a jiných aktivit jejího manžela byl nemalý. Sama ale nebyla signatářkou Charty 77, členkou VONS ani žádné další nezávislé iniciativy, které vznikaly především v druhé polovině osmdesátých let. Není ono zdůrazňování „patriarchálního uspořádání“ spíše proklamativní nežli skutečně odpovídající realitě? S běžně chápaným patriarchálním rodinným uspořádáním zde totiž koliduje skutečnost, že právě žena vykonávala placené zaměstnání mimo domácnost a že toto byl podstatný motiv, který ji limitoval v otevřeném veřejném angažmá a v signování Charty 77. Spíše než o „patriarchální uspořádání“ se zde podle mého názoru jedná o proklamativní ženskou submisivitu, která může být motivována nejrůznějšími důvody, třeba strachem z vykročení ze zažitých schémat a vzorců, strachem z odmítnutí či opuštění. Příběh Bendové patří ke „kanonickým“ příběhům (Bendová, Stehlík 2024; Němcová, Horník 2021), které jsou vyprávěny pořád stejně, téměř doslovně v průběhu desetiletí. Těžkosti a utrpení jsou v nich externalizovány: přináším obět vyššímu cíli, ale netrpím v každodenním životě pochybnostmi o smyslu utrpení, vlastní osamělosti. Tato sebezraňující strategie je nástrojem, jímž se nerovnost dále reprodukuje.

Je pozoruhodné také si všimát, jaký rodinný model byl tehdy vnímán jako tradiční či patriarchální. Například Václav Benda (Benda 1979: 274) hovoří o své vlastní rodině jako o patriarchální a svou charakteristiku rozvíjí následujícím argumentem:

Díky patriarchálnímu zřízení naší rodiny se má žena zdržuje veřejných projevů a může proto doposud vykonávat své povolání matematiky [v Matematickém ústavu Československé akademie věd, pozn. aut.]. Ostatně díky témuž zřízení jsem si naprosto jist (a mám to experimentálně ověřeno), že v případě mého uvěznění bude v můj prospěch učiněno vše, co lze učinit, a ještě něco navíc.

Není mi úplně jasné, co má na mysli tou druhou větou – snad že mu manželka sežene dobrého advokáta, který mu bude v případě zatčení k dispozici, a že se jeho rodině dostane nejen materiální podpory, pokud skončí ve vězení. A skutečně, Václav Benda byl v procesu s VONS na podzim téhož roku uvězněn na čtyři roky a celý trest si odseděl. Jeho manželka Kamila vzpomínala později na osamocení, které zažívala v průběhu těchto let, navzdory fungující a podpůrné solidární síti, která ji i její děti obklopovala (Bendová 2005: 318). Po návratu Václava Bendy z vězení se manželům narodilo šesté dítě, dcera Markéta, s níž zůstal její otec na rodičovské dovolené, protože nemohl sehnat žádnou placenou práci. Bendová na tuto dobu později vzpomínala: „Pro muže být v domácnosti v době, kdy to ještě vůbec nikde neexistovalo, mohl být velice frustrující a náročný pocit.“ (Linková, Straková 2017: 39)

Ve vyprávěních žen-aktérek navíc chybí (sebe)reflexe a používání feministických pojmů nebo se naopak objevuje výslovné odmítání „feminismu“ jako pojmu a nedů-

věra k feminismu jako politickému konceptu. Petruška Šustrová například vzpomínala, jak se takto vymezovala v diskusi se zahraničními novinářkami: „Dělám v Chartě a ve VONSu stejnou práci jako muži, jsem pronásledována stejně jako oni a to znamená, že mě i režim bere stejně. Proč bych se neměla cítit rovnoprávná?“ (Šustrová 2023: 181) Feminismus byl chápán, a tudíž odmítán jako boj proti přiznané nerovnoprávnosti. Její přístup lze rovněž klasifikovat jako „sociální aktivismus“, pro nějž je zásadní praxe, nikoliv intelektuální rámování, a je tedy sám o sobě postojem v jádru feministickým, protože otevírá prostor emancipaci či vlastní seberealizaci. Ukazuje také, že se boj vedl za svobodu jedince a důležitá byla univerzálnost lidských práv (Pehe 2025). Historička Veronika Pehe (2025: 1–16) poukázala na skutečnost, že Charta 77 se ve svých dokumentech explicitně nezabývala otázkou ženských práv jako takovou. Česko-německá spisovatelka a publicistka Alena Wagnerová (2017: 217) se domnívá, že skutečnost, že ženy a muži měli shodného utlačovatele v podobě stranického aparátu, snižovala citlivost k subtilnějším, genderově specifickým mechanismům útlaču a diskriminace.

Vedle dobře vedených rozhovorů existuje ještě jeden klíč, jenž by dokázal otevřít tušenou, ale dosud málo objevenou a popsanou krajinu ne tak idylických příběhů ženského prožívání disidentské zkušenosti. Tím klíčem je původní literární tvorba žen, jež slouží jako nástroj emancipace či způsob, jak se vyrovnat s frustrující a náročnou zkušeností života v československém disentu. Fikční vyprávění, čerpající z vlastního životního příběhu, uchopené uměleckými nástroji totiž zprostředkovává emoce a prožívání dotyčných ještě silněji a intenzivněji než rozhovory různého typu.

Dostupný korpus těchto textů lze rozdělit na dvě skupiny: autorkami té první (Boučková 1992; Jílková⁶ 2024; Landovská 2019, 2025) jsou „dcery slavných otců“, které řeší nejen komplikovaný osobní vztah, ale také skutečnost, že stigma vyplývající ze známého příjmení na ně dopadalo bez ohledu na to, zda otec s rodinou žil a zda se svými dětmi rozvíjel normální, rodičovský vztah. Druhou (Horáková 2020; Pithartová 2007⁷; Vodňanská 2018) pak reprezentují knihy založené na autopsii, jejichž autorky jsou ženy, které nemusely mít předchozí zkušenost s literární tvorbou. Nacházíme zde několik společných motivů: často bývá tematizována moc, vina, kompromis a osobní odpovědnost v prostředí a podmínkách, v nichž se dotyčná neocitá vlastním přičiněním a které jsou definovány soudobým autoritářským režimem. Každodenní život je často popisován za pomoci ironie a introspekce do vnitřního světa. Pozoruhodná je v této souvislosti recenze Libory Oates-Indruchové věnovaná *Indiánskému běhu* Terezy Boučkové (Oates-Indruchová 2003: 118–123), svým důrazem na důležitosti hledání ženské identity mimo patriarchální struktury a také postřehem, že „novela je kritikou

⁶ Dcera Ludvíka Vaculíka a Lenky Procházkové.

⁷ Jak dokládá Vaculíkův *Český snář* a jeho nové, komentované vydání, začala Pithartová pracovat na své sbírce povídek již v průběhu sedmdesátých let (Šámal et al. 2024: 63).

socialistického zřízení jako takového zřízení, které utiskovalo všechny bez ohledu na gender, ale vypravěčka zároveň odmítá přiznat statut [sic] hrdinů mužským celebritám disidentských či exilových kruhů, pokud se zpronevěřili své morální integritě na intimní úrovni.“ Otázka (ženského) hrdinství je leitmotivem i dalších zde zmíněných publikací autorek a její formulování a opakování v různých podobách nabourává předchozí „účelový kompromis“, který kromě ideologického a hodnotového rozměru měl také svou genderovou dimenzi – o patriarchátu a genderovém útlaku v jeho nejružnějších podobách se nehovořilo (nejen) z důvodu, že pro to neexistovaly v dobovém kontextu správné pojmy, ale také proto, že udržení smíru bylo podmínkou přežití disidentských struktur a jemu vlastních aktivit. K literární tvorbě žen je ale potřeba přistupovat s vědomím, že jde o literární texty, které pracují s literárními postupy, především se stylizací.

Zkušenost represe

Největším represivním zásahem do chartistického společenství byl proces s VONS. V této souvislosti je potřeba obzvláště vyzdvihnout přínos Evy Kantůrkové, kterou proces s VONS inspiroval k sestavení unikátní publikace, kolekce dvanácti rozhovorů se signatářkami Charty 77. Publikace, nejprve vydaná v roce 1980 pod názvem *Dvanáct rozhovorů* (pozdější vydání jsou známa jako *Sešly jsme se v této knize*), souběžně vyšla v exilovém nakladatelství Index v Kolíně nad Rýnem a Vaculíkově samizdatové edici Petlice. Kantůrkovou inspirovala právě skutečnost, že mezi zadrženými bylo několik žen a že i mluvčí byla žena. Proto oslovila k rozhovorům aktivní ženy, které pro svou činnost dokonce podstupují riziko věznění. Kniha tak v leccems navazovala na *České rozhovory* novináře Jiřího Lederera (Lederer 1979), který pro knižní vydání rozmlouval s Jiřím Grušou, Václavem Havlem, Karolem Sidonem, Ludvíkem Vaculíkem, Alexandrem Klimentem a dalšími. A také s Evou Kantůrkovou, která tak byla jedinou oslovenou ženou. Unikátnost rozhovorů pořizovaných Kantůrkovou spočívala v tom, že oslovila výhradně ženské respondentky a na rozdíl od kolegy-novináře také respondentky spíše neznámé, ne literárně činné. Svou motivaci později reflektovala:

Do *Dvanácti rozhovorů* jsem si ženy odsouzených disidentů vybrala, protože mi to přišlo jako dobrý způsob, jak dát režimu do zubů. Odsoudí mužského? Dobře, mužský má být statečný. Ale novinářsky účinnější mi připadalo ukázat, co v takové chvíli prožívá jeho žena. Rána do zubů to zřejmě byla, když vyšla v řadě vydání v zahraničí a byla jsem za ni zavřená. Když se Jiří Lederer vrátil z vězení [v roce 1980, pozn. aut.], řekl mi: tak tos mi vzala téma. (Kantůrková 2005: 59)⁸

⁸ Citace původně pochází z rozhovoru s Tomášem Němečkem, který vznikl v roce 1995 pro časopis Mladý svět.

Zveřejnění souboru mělo pro Kantůrkovou, spolu s kauzou tzv. francouzského kamionu, fatální následky – byla zatčena a umístěna do vyšetřovací vazby na deset měsíců. Její trestní stíhání pokračovalo dále na svobodě a ukončila ho až sametová revoluce roku 1989. Trvání trestního stíhání s otevřeným koncem bylo ovšem také specifickým represivním nástrojem, který umožňoval držet dotyčné v nejistotě a provádět řadu úkonů (domovní prohlídky, výslechy, pracovněprávní postihy), které obviněným a jejich rodinám často úmyslně znepříjemňovaly život (Pažout 2017: 33–34).

Perzekvované Evy Kantůrkové se u Evropského parlamentu ve Štrasburku zastala dopisem skupina devíti žen, jež požadovala její propuštění. Skupinu tvořily respondentky jejího knižního souboru, které byly zrovna na svobodě (*Informace o Chartě 77* 1981). Publikace *Sešly jsme se v této knize* byla v roce 1989 oceněna Cenou Jana Palacha, která byla udělována „za zvlášť vynikající dílo nebo společenskou významnou činnost jednotlivce či skupiny v Československu v oblasti literární, umělecké, vědecké, vzdělávací, ediční, humanitární a publicistické“.⁹

Jaká byla čtenářská recepcce knihy, můžeme jen odhadovat, protože pochopitelně nemáme údaje o jejím nákladu ani bližší představu o „divokých opisech“ jejího textu. Pozornost jí věnoval Ivan Martin Jirous (Jirous 2019: 929–931) ve své anotaci z ledna 1981. Nejprve přiznal, že knihu, u jejíhož vzniku díky blízkým vazbám k některým respondentkám byl, pokládal za „feministickou blbost“, a zdůraznil, že „nikdy nedělil tvůrčí nebo angažované lidi podle pohlaví“. Po jejím přečtení ale uznal, že kniha vypráví „střízlivými a cudnými prostředky vše o děsivosti a naději naší doby“ a že ji chce a musí hájit proti jejím kritikům. A dodává, že daná metoda umožnila dokonale „prokousnout svět, ve kterém žijeme“. Právě jeho postřeh dokládá intuitivní pochopení pro to, jak důležitá je genderová perspektiva, jakkoliv tento pojem nebyl v daném kontextu znám a používán. Svým čtením měl možnost nahlédnout na složitost situace z perspektivy, na niž nebyl zvyklý, a svou sebereflexí přiznává, že zachytil cosi, co mu dříve unikalo. Zároveň ale oceňuje to, co nazývá „střízlivost a cudnost“, jako kvality, které odpovídají tradičnímu pohledu na ženu a normativní ideál jejího chování a prožívání. „Daná metoda“, dnes bychom řekli genderové čtení textu, navíc díky sdílené ženské zkušenosti přesvědčivě ukazuje praxi tehdejší moci a jejího aparátu.

Kantůrková nebyla jedinou ženou, která ve stejné době čelila trestnímu stíhání. Sedm měsíců ve vyšetřovací vazbě strávila v souvislosti s VONS psycholožka Jarmila Bělíková (1948–2010), která byla po Václavu Malém druhou nejmladší zadrženou v tomto procesu. Ukázky z jejich vězeňských dopisů, v nichž si mimo jiné stěžovala na

⁹ Libri prohibiti, sbírka Charta 77, karton 9, inv. č. 5, sign. 5/3, Nicolay, France (tajemnice Comité international pour le soutien de la Charte 77 en Tchécoslovaquie – International Committee for the Support of Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia): žádost o finanční příspěvek pro Cenu Jana Palacha udělenou za rok 1988 Evě Kantůrkové, listopad 1988.

svůj „přeci jen moc svérázný“ smysl pro humor, kvůli němuž jí jsou dopisy vráceny, uveřejnil exilový časopis *Svědectví* (Bělíková 1980: 618–621). Bělíková se díky svým vysokoškolským studiím psychologie na brněnské univerzitě znala s Jaroslavem Šabatou, který zde vedl katedru psychologie, a také se zde seznámila s jeho synem Václavem Šabatou a jeho pozdější manželkou Ivankou Šimkovou (Lefeuvre 2014). Po přestěhování do Prahy v roce 1972 pracovala jako sociální kurátorka při Obvodním národním výboru pro Prahu 6, po svém podpisu Prohlášení Charty 77 byla v červnu 1977 ze zaměstnání propuštěna a pracovala v pomocných profesích (Blažek 2010: 59–62). Po propuštění z vězení pokračovala ve své práci pro VONS a zapojovala se i do dalších nezávislých aktivit, ačkoliv byla nadále sledována Státní bezpečností a mohla pracovat jen v profesích nevyžadujících vyšší kvalifikaci.

Příklad Kantůrkové i Bělíkové ukazuje tvořivý přístup, který obě ženy dokázaly uplatnit v mezní životní situaci a zúročit ho v psaném textu. Stejný přístup nacházíme také u Jiřiny Šiklové, která byla držena rok ve vyšetřovací vazbě v souvislosti s tzv. kauzou francouzského kamionu a svou zkušenost reflektovala v textu z roku 1981 nazvaném *Obranné mechanismy aneb Jak přežít vazbu* (Prečan 2015: 112–119). Tato stať kolující v samizdatu byla povzbuzením i praktickým návodem pro ostatní, kteří se ocitnou ve stejné situaci. Právě její mimořádné osobní nasazení v distribuci exilové knižní a časopisecké produkce bylo důvodem, proč se stala signatářkou Charty 77 až v roce 1989, jakkoliv byla platnou členkou disentu od samého začátku (Plzák, Čechlovská 2011).

Trestní stíhání, zadržování ve vyšetřovací vazbě či věznění (viz dále) jsou však mezními příklady represe. Ženy z chartistické society čelily také projevům genderově podmíněného násilí (Linková 2017: 385–387), mezi něž patřilo přepadení „neznámými pachateli“, jehož obětí byla Zdena Tominová, ale již dříve Riva Krieglová (Groman 2023: 438) a Gertruda Sekaninová-Čakrtová (Groman 2023: 475). U těchto ataků se obtížně dokazuje jejich genderová podmíněnost, protože podobné útoky cílily také na muže – známy jsou případy přepadení a únosů do opuštěných lokalit, jakou byla například v případě Ivana Medka Lánská obora (Blažek, Pažout, Schovánek 2008).

Naopak, u přepadení se sexuální motivem a nucených prohlídek na venerologii, nebo dokonce nucené hospitalizace tamtéž, nemůže být o genderové podmíněnosti pochyb. Poslední příklad se týkal Ziny Freundové (Holečková, Loučová 2026) a dokládá ho také podrobné dobové svědectví Zdeny Erteltové z roku 1978. Tato nejproduktivnější spolupracovnice Edice Petlice byla dva týdny bezdůvodně hospitalizovaná na venerologickém oddělení Zemské porodnice u svatého Apolináře poté, co odmítla při výslechu StB vypovídat o tom, komu ze svých přátel opisovala texty (*Dopis prezidentu...* 1978). Následně byla obviněna podle § 203 z příživnictví a prostituce, na klinice byla podrobena ponižujícímu vyšetření, po němž měla zdravotní komplikace. O svém otřesném zážitku sepsala podrobnou patnáctistránkovou zprávu. V úvodu konstatuje:

[H]rozby, které jsem byla nucena vyslechnout, mě vedou k přesvědčení, že je bezprostředně ohroženo mé zdraví, osobní svoboda i má čest. Protože jsem vyčerpala všechny mně známé prostředky na svou obranu, a pronásledování mé osoby se stupňuje, obracím se touto zprávou ke všem svým přátelům a známým – poněvadž nevím, budu-li mít v nejbližší době příležitost jim to sdělit osobně.¹⁰

Ve svém textu také obšírně líčí šikanu, jíž byla vystavena na pracovním trhu – od počátku sedmdesátých let měla, jako vyloučená z Komunistické strany Československa (KSČ), potíže sehnat kvalifikované pracovní místo, později jakékoliv místo a na jaře 1977 jí byl odebrán invalidní důchod. Na Obvodním národním výboru byla evidována jako zájemkyně o zaměstnání. Detailně navíc zachycuje otřesné hygienické podmínky ve zdravotnickém zařízení a také bezohlednost a selhávání sociálního systému – za nejpočetnější skupinu pacientek označila Ertetová věkovou skupinu od 15 do 17 let. Tyto dívky, převážně romského etnika, se sem dostaly pro drobnější přestupky (toulání, špatná školní docházka, špatné sociální zázemí).¹¹

Podobně šokující byl také útok na Zinu Freundovou, kterou na podzim roku 1981 napadl útočník v noci přímo v její bytě, ostříhal jí vlasy a vyhrožoval jí zabitím (*Sdělení VONS* č. 269 1981). Stříhání vlasů ženám jako veřejný trest za kolaboraci bylo používáno především po druhé světové válce ve Francii, Itálii a Československu (Rychlík 2018: 313–314), za připomenutí ale stojí, že tato praktika jako forma represe byla v polovině šedesátých let používána také proti dlouh vlasům mužům, tzv. máničkám (Pospíšil, Blažek 2010: 503–506), a lze to pokládat za praktiku ponižující, zasahující do osobní integrity jedince. U Ziny Freundové pokládám ještě za podstatné, že právě s ní překvapivě donedávna existoval jen jediný publikovaný rozhovor pořízený v po-revolučním období (Zina Freundová 2007). Její jméno je spojováno především s tímto bezprecedentním násilím, které ji v roce 1981 vedlo do britského exilu. V menší míře je pak zmiňována její další činnost pro disent: podílela se na práci VONSu – chodila k soudům (Blažek, Pažout 2008), koncipovala sdělení VONS, kompletovala a distribuovala *Informace o Chartě 77* (Holečková, Loučová 2026) apod. Připomenutí si ale zaslouží, že od roku 1968 studovala na pražské filozofické fakultě obory perština a hindština (po roce přestoupila na filozofii) a svá studia přerušila na počátku roku 1977, protože patřila do „první várky“ signatářů Charty 77. K úspěšnému absolutoriu jí scházela již jen obhajoba diplomové práce a složení státní zkoušky z perštiny,

¹⁰ Literární archiv Památníku národního písemnictví, fond Zdena Ertetová, kopie uložená v archivu autorky.

¹¹ Literární archiv Památníku národního písemnictví, fond Zdena Ertetová, kopie uložená v archivu autorky.

nediplomní obor filozofie ukončila v roce 1975.¹² Jeden z pedagogů katedry ji ale upozornil, že stejně nemá šanci studium zdárně uzavřít. Magisterského titulu dosáhla až v devadesátých letech, kdy absolvovala na Filozofické fakultě Univerzity Karlovy překladatelství a tlumočnictví angličtiny. V historickém povědomí však zůstává hlavně jako oběť ponižujícího násilí, nikoliv také jako intelektuálně zaměřená žena. Právě tato skutečnost nás inspirovala k vytvoření a publikování druhého rozhovoru s touto aktérkou, na který zde odkazují.

Obecně lze tvrdit, že ženy byly disciplinovány strachem specifického charakteru – hrozilo jim sexuální násilí (o obdobné hrozbě směřované k mužům nemáme žádné doklady), odebrání dětí, věznění a podobně.

Vězeňská zkušenost

Krajním projevem represe byl trest odnětí svobody, jehož hrozba visela nad každodenností chartistického společenství – každý jeden z nich byl tomuto riziku vystaven, ale zároveň zakoušel také strach z osamění, které hrozí po uvěznění partnera či partnerky. Již několikrát zmíněný proces VONS byl největším zásahem proti tomuto společenství. Kauza tzv. francouzského kamionu, k níž došlo o dva roky později, sice způsobila rozsáhlé rozkrytí sítě lidí, kteří se podíleli na pašování a distribuci zahraniční literatury, nedošlo ale k soudnímu procesu a rozsudkům k několikaletým trestům odnětí svobody. Perzekuce zadržených probíhala v jiném modu: trestní stíhání proti nim nebylo zastaveno až do amnestie prezidenta republiky v roce 1989. Všichni tak byli drženi v nejistotě a trvajícím trestním stíháním navíc umožňovalo provádět řadu úkonů, které obviněným a jejich rodinám ztrpčovaly život – domovní prohlídky, výsledky, pracovníprávní postihy (Pažout 2017: 33–34).

V rodinných soužitích docházelo po uvěznění muže k vychýlení rovnováhy: ženy musely nejen převzít jeho roli v rodině, ale zároveň udržovat kontakt dětí s jejich otcem a srozumitelně jim vysvětlovat, proč je jejich otec nepřítomen. Po propuštění z vězení nastávala další obtíž: vězněný se jen stěží znovu adaptoval na rodinný život, bylo pro něj obtížné, ne-li nemožné navázat na dobu před uvězněním. Nevracel se stejný, protože vězeňská zkušenost trvale poznamenala lidskou osobnost (Havel, Prečan 2011: 372–373). Neproměňoval se však jen vězněný, ale také jeho partnerka a blízcí, kteří se museli adaptovat na nové okolnosti. Olga Stankovičová v rozhovoru pro *Revolver Revue* z roku 1988 (Pokorná, Onuferová 2016: 11–32) hovoří o manželkách vězněných mužů s nadsázkou jako o „národních vdovách“ a mluví explicitně o jejich „uvolnění, osvobození a proměně“. Jmenovitě v této souvislosti zmiňuje Annu Šabatovou, Olgu

¹² Archiv UK, fond Filozofická fakulta UK, nedokončení studenti 1977, k. 76, Zina Kočová.

Havlovou a Kamilu Bendovou a popisuje různé situace, v nichž samotné působily svobodněji nežli dříve se svými mužskými protějšky. O síle, kterou v sobě mohla Kamila Bendová rozvinout poté, co byl její manžel uvězněn, hovoří také beletrizovaná biografie obou partnerů (Horáčková 2025: 367). Své tvrzení autorka podepírá citací z publikované vězeňské korespondence:

Občas si říkám, že jako žárlivý manžel, který mě nepouštěl ani na chvíli z dohledu, to teď opravdu nemáš lehké. A já zase pocituji svobodu: sice také nikam nechodím, starám se o děti a pracuji, ale zato to dělám o své vlastní vůli. (Horáčková 2025: 367)

V souvislosti s VONS bylo zadrženo a umístěno do vyšetřovací vazby celkem deset lidí, mezi nimi oba manželé Němcovi. Ivan Martin Jirous ve své bezprostřední reakci upozornil na paradox: rok 1979 byl OSN vyhlášen Mezinárodním dnem dítěte, a právě v tomto roce byla zadržena matka sedmi dětí Dana Němcová (Jirous 2019: 82–85). Děti Němcovy tehdy zůstaly doma samy – plnoleté se staraly o ty nezletilé (dcera Veronika *1964, syn Jakub 1967–1994). Němcová později v žertu říkala, že „si vyseděla pračku“ s odkazem na materiální pomoc ze zahraničí. Podle jejích vzpomínek se děti setkaly s nečekanou solidaritou od lidí, kteří jim nebyli nijak blízcí (sousedé, učitelé). Vzpomínání Dany Němcové na dobu, kdy byli drženi ve vazbě ona i manžel, je prezentováno poněkud idealizujícím způsobem. Zjevně traumatická situace pro matku i děti bývala vyprávěna s důrazem na solidaritu, vzájemnou péči a na nadstandardně dobré vztahy mezi matkou a dětmi i dětmi navzájem.

Jedinou ženou odsouzenou v soudním procesu s VONS byla Otta Bednářová, která dostala trest ve výši třech let odnětí svobody nepodmíněně. Novinářka Otta (Otká) Bednářová (1927–2023) kromě členství ve VONS také dlouhodobě opisovala samizdat, nejprve hlavně pro Edici Petlice, později pro Chartu 77 (Cysařová 2010: 58). Kromě toho také v letech 1977–1979 opisovala většinu textů historika Jana Tesaře, který o ní v době jejího věznění napsal biografickou esej (Tesař 2018: 376–401). Zdůraznil v ní především její statečnost a morální integritu, již prokázala během své novinářské kariéry v Československé televizi, kde byla zaměstnaná v letech 1963–1970:

Je strašné stát v konfliktu se státem, který je všechno – vládce, vlastník, zaměstnavatel, společnost, veřejné mínění, církev i bůh. Nesnižuje v mých očích Ottu Bednářovou, myslím-li si, že pravou příčinou všech jejích nemocí z války, které se obnovily, byla psychická deprese a prostý lidský strach ze štvance, kterou proti ní rozpoutali. Tím více si cením, že přes všechnu slabost těla dokázala neodvolat a zůstat věrná pravdě. I své vnitřní pravdě. (Tesař 2018: 392)

Ve zkoumaném kontextu je podstatné, že v této době otevírala z nových, emancipovaných a aktivistických perspektiv témata, jež byla dosud opomíjena – zaměřovala se především na sociální a psychologická témata, na situaci soudobé mládeže a také na situaci žen. Její reportáže měly značný ohlas a stranické orgány je opakovaně kritizovaly. Mnohem později Bednářová (Rychetský, Uhlová 2018) na svůj tehdejší přístup vzpomínala:

Vzhledem k tomu, že mi psalo hodně žen, jsem se tedy věnovala jejich problémům a jako žena jsem jim pochopitelně i lépe rozuměla. Ještě nedávno mi přišlo poděkování od několika z nich, že jsem se jich tehdy zastávala. V kursu tehdy totiž bylo nezastávat se vůbec nikoho.

Na podporu všech odsouzených se vzedmula vlna solidarity doma i v zahraničí a další pozornost veřejnosti se upřela právě na ni. Bednářová již před uvězněním trpěla závažnými chronickými zdravotními potížemi a ve vězení se její stav ještě zhoršil. Je pozoruhodné, že přes své chatrné zdraví se Otta Bednářová dožila téměř sta let – zemřela v roce 2023.

Tvůrčí přístup projevila v mezní situaci Eva Kantůrková, která svou zkušenost s držením ve vyšetřovací vazbě zpracovala v románu *Přítelkyně z domu smutku*¹³, který se v roce 1992 stal předlohou pro stejnojmenný televizní seriál, ověřený řadou ocenění. Děj příběhu se odehrává ve vazební věznici a nese silné autobiografické rysy. Jednotlivé postavy a jejich osudy přibližují různou realitu života v normalizačním období, včetně silně reflektované genderové dynamiky. Kromě osobní zkušenosti autorka přiznaně navazovala také na domácí (*Doznání* Arthura Londona, romány Karla Pecky) i zahraniční (*Jeden den Ivana Děnisoviče* Alexandra Solženicyna, *Zápisky z mrtvého domu* Fjodora M. Dostojevského) literární tradici ztvárňující tento mezní existenciální zážitek. Tvůrčí proces reflektovala jako unikátní zkušenost:

[Knihu] jsem psala v předtím dosud nepoznaném rozpoložení: jakási vnitřní vášeň, posedlost vůlí neovlivnitelná, mě nutila z paměti vysávat další a další detaily, dokud jsem si nebyla jistá, že už není nic, co bych ještě napsala. Říct všechno a říct to co nejpřesněji, ale nic nepřidat, nepřifabulovat. Sebejistota té látky byla úžasná, dovolila jen lehce ji literárně organizovat. (Kantůrková 2005: 22)

¹³ Poprvé vyšel v samizdatu v roce 1984 pod názvem *Mé přítelkyně z domu smutku* a byl oceněn Cenou Toma Stopparda, viz online Slovník české literatury po roce 1945 (<http://www.slovníkceskeliteratury.cz/>).

Závěrem

Studie analyzovala intelektuální přínos a tvořivý přístup žen, které patřily do společnosti vytvořeného na půdorysu lidskoprávní iniciativy Charta 77. Jejich intelektuální vklad je často přehlížen, ale jak dokládají konkrétní příklady, je pro pochopení fungování tohoto společenství zcela zásadní. Podstatná byla bytová společenství, „salóny“, které pořádaly ženy jako hlavní aktérky také ve své intelektuální roli. Kreativita se často objevuje jako nástroj, který pomáhal dotyčným vyrovnat se s frustrující či mezní životní zkušeností, zároveň ale svým přesahem neplnil funkci pouhého katalyzátoru osobní nepohody, ale dokázal být inspirativní i pro další, jako vězeňské psaní Bělíkové, Šiklové a Kantůrkové. Právě Eva Kantůrková si zaslouží mimořádnou pozornost nejen díky své kolekci dvanácti rozhovorů pořízených v době kulminujícího represivního zásahu proti Chartě na sklonku sedmdesátých let, ale také pro svou dosud nedostatečně prozkoumanou a doceněnou roli editorskou a pořadatelskou – domnívám se, že byla podstatnou iniciátorkou debat a jen díky ní a její editorské práci máme tyto debaty zachyceny také v písemné podobě.

Kreativita se projevila také u žen uvězněných mužů (Havlová, Šabatová), které dále pokračovaly ve vydávání samizdatové edice, respektive vlivného samizdatového periodika *Informace o Chartě 77*. Bližší pozornost pro další výzkum by mohla směřovat také k analýze beletristické tvorby žen disentu, které vycházejí z autopsie. Vznik těchto děl se ve většině případů datuje do polistopadového období a lze je chápat také jako specifickou odpověď na dominující narativ vztahující se k československému disentu. Podíl žen na činnosti Charty 77 měl ze strukturálních důvodů jinou podobu nežli podíl mužů: jejich intelektuální vklad byl ale stejně významný, jakkoliv pro to nemáme dostatek pramenů, tedy takových textů, které by tvořily „chartistický kánon“. Ženy se podílely na intelektuálním rozměru chartovního společenství a jeho písemné produkce také jako spoluautorky, editorky, archivářky a překladatelky, a samozřejmě také jako písařky, což je ale často připomínaná role.

Vedle kreativity byla funkční strategií také žitá emancipace, která v některých případech na individuální rovině dokázala do sebe integrovat také tradiční prvky, které by za jiných okolností byly s emancipací v rozporu. Emancipace tak směřuje nejen vůči dobovému patriarchálnímu řádu pozdně socialistické společnosti, ale dotýká se i vnitřních nerovností uvnitř komunity a partnerského soužití. Fúze emancipace a jistého typu konformismu, který se projevuje právě v genderové rovině, ukazují příklady porevolučních kariér některých někdejších „žen Charty 77“, které ve svém dalším směřování pracují s chartovním étosem „předpolitické obhajoby lidských práv“. Tato strategie je dobře patrná v utváření porevoluční sociální politiky a vytváření neziskového sektoru. Olga Havlová ihned na počátku roku 1990 založila nadaci Výbor dobré vůle, na jehož činnosti se od počátku podílela Otta Bednářová, Olga Stankovičová

a Václav Malý, záhy se přidala také Milena Černá (Hodačová 2021: 143–145). Neziskový sektor budují také Květa Princová, Věra Roubalová, Milena Grušová, Ruth Šormová a řada dalších. Nezávislá iniciativa Pražské matky se profesionalizovala a jejich členky se začaly postupně angažovat i v dalších projektech občanské společnosti. Volba genderově konformní strategie se mohla stát východiskem po ne úplně uspokojivé zkušenosti s praktickou parlamentní politikou (Němcová, Šormová – obě byly poslankyněmi Federálního shromáždění do roku 1992), respektive po nezvolení v dalším volebním období. Také se mohla stát východiskem pro ty, které se na počátku devadesátých let ocitly na kariérní křižovatce (Šilhánová 2005).

Existovaly ale výjimky, tedy ženy, které nevolily tuto trajektorii a snažily se zůstat veřejně činné na různých úrovních: Rita Klímová byla nejprve tiskovou mluvčí a tlumočnicí Občanského fóra a od dubna 1990 československou velvyslankyní v USA, diplomatickou kariéru zahájila také Markéta Fialková (rozená Němcová), která od března 1990 zastávala post velvyslankyně v Polsku. Helena Sosnová (rozená Abrahámová), která v roce 1980 podepsala Chartu 77 ještě jako středoškolská studentka a v osmdesátých letech byla vězněna, se začala angažovat v komunální politice – od roku 2002 je starostkou jihočeských Cerhenic a v současnosti také předsedkyní Svazku obcí Dolního Povltaví (Sosnová 2021). Eva Kantůrková byla krátce poslankyní České národní rady, poté se angažovala v profesní organizaci spisovatelů, pracovala na ministerstvu kultury a byla členkou Rady pro rozhlasové a televizní vysílání. Polistopadové kariéry žen disentu vypadají jinak než kariéry jejich mužských soupeřů, a hledání odpovědí na otázku, proč tomu tak bylo, otevírá pole pro další výzkum.

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Flowers for the Liberator: A Postcolonial Feminist Reading of *the Monument to Bulgarian–Soviet Friendship* in Varna

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Abstract: This study examines the endurance of the ‘Liberation’ narrative in Bulgaria through a postcolonial reading of the *Monument to Bulgarian–Soviet Friendship* in Varna. It foregrounds what the monument debates often overlook: not only what these sites commemorate, but how they teach subjects to feel history. It argues that the monument operates as colonial pedagogy, rendering geopolitical hierarchy affectively compelling by mobilising gendered imperial repertoires. It reveals a palimpsestic memory structure in which imperial, nationalist, and socialist meanings accumulate. Within this layered formation, the ‘Liberator’ emerges not as a fixed referent but as a mutable, travelling script. Bulgaria’s fractured post-socialist identity thus reflects not only unresolved historical debates but also colonial logics.

Keywords: post-socialism, memory, coloniality

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Eastern Europe’s post-socialist transition – once imagined as a linear path towards democracy and European integration – has instead revealed persistent fractures, with the communist past remaining contested (Holubec, Mroziak 2018). Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine intensified the ‘memory wars’, reviving disputes over Russia as ‘liberator’ or ‘occupier’, reaffirming Soviet monuments as symbolic battlegrounds. Conflicts extend beyond historical interpretations, shaping social divisions, political alignments, and geopolitical identifications.

Tensions have been especially visible in Bulgaria; an EU and NATO member divided between pro-European and pro-Russian orientations. In 2022, the Soviet Army

Figure 1: *Monument to Bulgarian–Soviet Friendship*

Source: Kafedjiiski, Goranov, Baramov, 1978.

monument in Sofia became a focal point, where disputes over military aid to Ukraine escalated into clashes over memory, culminating in its dismantling in 2023. Authorities cited ‘structural safety’, yet contestation persists. On 9 May 2024, pro-Russian actors laid red roses at the site, pledging restoration. Despite declining support for Putin, Bulgaria remains among the EU’s most Russia-sympathetic states (Nikolov 2024). What sustains these fractured identities?

Scholars often cite incomplete historiographical reckoning (Kelbecheva 2019) and uneven post-socialist transition (Dragostinova 2014). Yet debates over Soviet monuments have changed little since the early 1990s (Rikev 2022). These trace back to memories of the Russo–Turkish War (1877–1878) and the ‘Liberation’ myth. Though contested from the outset – amid divisions between Russophiles and Russophobes – it endured, binding Bulgarian nationhood to a Russian patron (Daskalov 2011). Framing the 1944 Soviet takeover a ‘second liberation’ reinforced a deeply rooted moral and emotional debt. Sustained through the metaphor of ‘brotherhood’, it underpins Bulgaria’s ‘eternal gratitude syndrome’ (Stanchev 2023). Soviet monuments are currently framed as ideological apparatus that reproduce pro-Russian narratives – often regis-

tering as socialist nostalgia – perpetuating the ‘liberation’ myth within shifting geopolitical contexts (Preitschopf 2024). This is primarily analysed at the level of discourse.

Turning the focus to representation, this study advances a postcolonial feminist reading of the *Monument to Bulgarian–Soviet Friendship* in Varna (Figure 1), providing insights into the mnemonic mechanisms that render contested memories of ‘liberation’ historically durable and emotionally compelling. It argues that Bulgaria’s fractured post-socialist identity reveals a historical trauma shaped by systemic epistemic violence embedded in sedimented structures of meaning. Approached as a material-semiotic text, the monument functions as a form of colonial pedagogy, where gendered affective regimes reproduce Bulgaria’s subalternity. An iconographic analysis reveals palimpsest memory, where imperial, nationalist, socialist, and post-socialist meanings coexist, rendering the ‘Liberator’ – Tsarist, Soviet, and now nostalgically Russian – not a fixed historical referent but a recurring position within an ongoing imperial script.

Monumentality as colonial pedagogy

The monument was initially conceived as a tribute to Soviet victory over fascism,¹ situating Bulgaria within the wider postwar narrative of Soviet-led ‘liberation’ even though the state was never under Nazi occupation. Rather than reflecting historical realities, it was meant as a colonial marker, inscribing the landscape with Soviet political authority. The monument was not merely commemorative; it was designed as spatial pedagogy.

From its earliest planning stages in the 1950s – when Soviet architect Alexander Gegello² exercised decisive authority over its location and form – the project aimed to communicate what officials described as the ‘true idea’ of liberation (Savov 2007: 197). Proposals that failed to convey ideological clarity were rejected, signalling a colonial relation of authorship: ‘liberation’ was not to be narrated locally but authorised from the centre. In Spivak’s (1988) terms, the subaltern position is marked not only by silence but by the conditions under which speech is authorised.

Monumentality was central to this operation. Rising above Varna’s skyline, the brutalist edifice asserts its presence long before one reaches it, reflecting ‘the strength, power, and fighting spirit of the Soviet Army’ (Savov 2007: 197). Its two-winged concrete form – resembling the ‘Peace Dove’³ – opens towards the Black Sea, sym-

¹ All City Council documents refer to it as the ‘Monument to the Soviet Army’, a designation retained in its 2000 Certificate of State Ownership.

² Gegello, A. I. 1949. Letter to Karlo Lukonov, SACC. National Archive – Sofia (MC f.136, op.5, a.e.7), Sofia, Bulgaria.

³ The dove, a recurrent Christian symbol in Orthodox traditions, was appropriated by secular Soviet ideology as an emblem of peace (Wolle 2017; Viereck 1953).

bolically oriented towards the Soviet Union. At night, floodlights rendered it visible from the sea, while the sounds of Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony echoed down the hill. Grandiosity is not aesthetic excess but political technology. As Verdery (1999) argues, socialist monumentality sought to objectify power and present it as timeless and inherited. Scale disciplines perception, dwarfing the individual and rendering authority protective, inevitable, and beyond contestation.

Elevation further inscribes hierarchy into embodied experience. Visitors ascend the monumental 'Staircase of Victors', which choreographs movement upwards. The 'victors' are encountered as literally above. Spatial experience becomes mnemonic instruction. It converts geopolitical hierarchy into lived sensation, teaching visitors where they stand, whom they owe, and how history should be felt. Monumentality here functions as more than representation: it is a training in gratitude and dependence, whereby the climb towards 'liberation', 'rescue', and 'peace' is rendered a form of secular pilgrimage.

At the summit, visitors historically encountered a shrine-like setting: an altar-cube crowned by an eternal flame. The brutalist austerity produced an environment of reverence and submission. Towering concrete planes and sharp geometries replaced religious transcendence with political devotion. This pedagogy mobilises what Buck-Morss (2000) calls political transcendence: the conversion of religious awe into secular reverence through scale, ritual, and form. Drawing on Orthodox and imperial repertoires, Soviet monumental aesthetics embeds socialist authority within older civilisational grammars. Ideology becomes atmosphere; power is felt rather than argued.

The monument's interior reinforces this substitution. The main ceremonial hall is conceived as a modernist cathedral, with horizontal slits of light illuminating a symbolic altar: a massive five-pointed star. This Soviet insignia materialises the communist rejection of religious authority, while simultaneously borrowing the religion's affective technologies. The Orthodox tradition – historically a major link between Tsarist Russia and the Balkan Slavs during the Russo-Ottoman struggles – was refurbished as a new object of reverence. This appropriation of older symbolic forms reflects the broader imperial practice of repurposing sacred imagery to legitimise political power. 'The people of Varna built this temple', local officials proclaimed, 'to eternalise the glory and immortality of the Soviet liberating soldiers', affirming that 'friendship with the Soviet Union is the surest path to happiness, peace, and prosperity' (*Ot vekove za vekove* 1978: 1–11).

The monument naturalises Soviet domination by embedding imperial hierarchies in familiar cultural traditions and symbolic forms, structuring both space and affect so that Bulgarian agency appears as only receptive to power. A plaque at the entrance proclaimed, 'Friendship with the Soviet Union is as essential as the sun, air,

and water for every living creature.⁴ Yet the normalisation of power is not achieved through abstraction alone; it is mediated through gendered visual forms, rendering subordination emotionally intelligible and ethically justifiable.

Gender as the emotional grammar of coloniality

Long conceived as a tribute to the liberating Soviet Army, the monument's official meaning shifted just a month before its unveiling, when it was renamed the *Monument of Bulgarian–Soviet Friendship*. This late revision reflected a broader turn in Soviet commemorative politics, in which the postwar emphasis on liberation gave way to the language of 'friendship', reconfiguring the affective grammar through which Soviet domination was legitimised. This did not erase the asymmetry of the liberator–liberated dynamic, it deepened it.

Reframed through the idioms of 'friendship' and 'brotherhood', hegemony became 'brotherly help', with the 'advanced' Soviet 'Big Brother' cast as the guardian of a dependent Other with a duty to protect, guide, and modernise (Verdery 1999; Yurchak 2006). The Soviet political rhetoric of 'fraternity' thus exemplifies what post-colonial theory describes as a *discourse of care*, whereby domination is softened into the language of protective kinship (Narayan 1995: 133), a logic that in Bulgaria was reinforced through distinctly gendered semiotic representations.

Despite the semantic shift, the monument's visual grammar remained unchanged: four Soviet soldiers towering above a feminised Bulgaria, represented by three civilian women, positioned on the lower wing of the edifice. These stark asymmetric dichotomies – male/female, military/civilian, elevated/grounded, modern/traditional – produce a rigidly hierarchical visual grammar of authority and subordination. The male Soviet soldiers occupy upper registers of agency and power, while the grounded civilian females signal receptiveness and dependence.

It embodies the familiar tropes of masculine protection and feminised nationhood. As McClintock (1995) and Yuval-Davis (1997) show, such gendered metaphors are central to imperial and nationalist imaginaries. The SSSR is portrayed as the 'elder brother', while Bulgaria is cast as a dependent, feminised homeland. Within this familial frame, asymmetry is reconfigured as the moral obligation to protect. Gender thus functions as the emotional grammar of coloniality. As Chatterjee (1993) and Stoler (2002) argue, imperial power endures through gendered regimes of affect: recast as paternal or fraternal attachment, hierarchy becomes morally legible and emotionally binding. In this framework, the 'gift' of liberation produces a debt of gratitude that entrenches dependency, rendering it acceptable – or even desirable.

⁴ A quote from G. Dimitrov, often inscribed on Soviet monuments in Bulgaria (Kosev 1998; Rikev 2022).

Figure 2: *Monument to Bulgarian–Soviet Friendship*, 9 May 2024



Source: Photo by author.

The monument materialises this affective regime most clearly through gendered gestures. The female figures offer bread and flowers. These are gestures of welcome, recoding military domination as liberation, thus transforming the scene into one of care. Choreographed hospitality translates coercion into protection, rendering domination affectively legible as benevolence. Yet care here is inherently asymmetrical: Soviet figures enact authoritative care, while Bulgarian figures embody nurturing and receptive care – one commands and secures, the other welcomes and reciprocates.

Bulgarian women perform what feminist theorists describe as the ‘emotional labour’ of nationalism (Enloe 2000), sustaining gratitude and loyalty on behalf of the nation. In this configuration, geopolitical hierarchy is reimagined as a gendered relationship of mutual – yet structurally unequal – affection. What is at stake is the production of consent. The monument teaches not only where Bulgaria stands – subordinate yet seemingly (lovingly) protected – but how this relationship should feel: intimate, necessary, and justified. Official descriptions make this logic explicit, presenting the monument as ‘a symbol of boundless love for the great Soviet Union’, invoking ‘pure and sacred gratitude’ and ‘brotherly love’, that ‘the people feel with

their hearts and souls', towards 'the great Soviet land' and its 'liberating army' (*Ot vekove za vekove* 1978: 1-11).

A single detail sharpens this affective economy, staging the limits of agency. One female figure sits with her hands resting idly, as though shackled, in her lap (see Figure 2, the first figure on the left). Her passivity foregrounds questions of silence and absence: where are the Bulgarian men? These ambiguities are not incidental but integral to the organisation of domination. Read through Spivak (1988), this silence marks the nation's subalternity: spoken for, fixed in indebtedness, and deprived of agency. Thus, the monument does not merely represent and normalise subordination – it actively (re)produces it.

This logic extends beyond a single monument and recurs across Bulgaria's commemorative culture (Nedelcheva, Levy 2022). Crucially, this configuration is neither uniquely Soviet nor historically bounded; it draws on older imperial imaginaries already embedded in memory. Soviet iconography reactivated sedimented meanings, rearticulating them within new ideological forms. This explains why Soviet narratives of liberation and friendship found particularly fertile ground in Bulgaria (Vukov 2006).

Palimpsestic memory and the hybrid 'Liberator'

Though still unfinished, the monument was ceremonially unveiled in 1978 to mark the centenary of the liberating Russo–Turkish War (1877–1878). Conceptually dedicated to the Soviet army's 'liberation' of Bulgaria in 1944, yet publicly framed through the memory of 1878 and the language of friendship, it materialises the logic of the 'double liberation'. This collapse of two distinct historical moments into a single narrative reorganised history into a coherent continuum, with the figure of the 'Liberator' as a constant unifying presence. The inscription 'Friendship for Centuries Throughout Centuries' on the façade recasts a political construct as an 'authentic' historical tradition.

This (re)construction of tradition is anchored in the monument's location. Turna Tepe⁵ was saturated with successive imperial and socialist inscriptions. Believed to have been a Russian military encampment during the Russo–Turkish War (1828–1829), it appeared on early 20th-century maps as 'Nikolaeva's Tumulus', with the surrounding area labelled as 'Russian trenches', overwriting the earlier layers of Ottoman toponymy. In 1945, the site was reconfigured as a symbolic ossuary for antifascist fighters and renamed the Brotherhood Tumulus, overlaying socialist memory onto imperial geographies. This transformation from 'tepe' to 'tumulus' sanctified the space. 'For us, this hill is sacred', the inauguration speaker proclaimed. 'We have transformed it

⁵ Turna Tepe is a Turkish toponym translated as Zheraven Hill [Жеравен връх] (Trifonov 2013; Savov 2010).

Figure 3: *Welcoming Brothers Liberators*,
Varna (Pasev, H. 1978)



Source: Photo by author (2021).

into the holiest place.’ (*Ot vekove za vekove* 1978: 11) Within this sacralised palimpsest, where earlier inscriptions remain legible beneath the new, the Soviet soldiers on the façade appear preordained. As the heirs to earlier liberators, they (re)inscribed narratives of historical destiny, sacrifice, and moral obligation within new political contexts.

These narratives were reinforced by parallel commemorative projects that were unveiled almost simultaneously, constructing a broader mnemonic field in which the logic of the ‘double liberation’ is anchored deep within local memoryscapes. *Welcoming Brothers Liberators*, a work unveiled a few months earlier, was the first sculptural representation of the city’s 1878 ‘liberation’. Placed within the grounds of

the former Church of Archangel Michael, converted in 1959 into a museum of the Bulgarian National Revival, it marked the site where representatives of the Bulgarian community welcomed Tsarist forces as liberators in 1878. Officials embedded the monument within earlier imperial and nationalist historical symbols. Drawing on entrenched Slavic and Orthodox discourses of kinship, this placement (re)inscribed imperial authority within local memory, reinforcing the civilisational arc constructed by Soviet-era historiography. The sculptural composition functions as a counterpart to the central tableau of the monument: a young girl gazing up in awe at a towering Russian general and offering him flowers in a gesture of gratitude. Read as a diptych, the two monuments trace a life-course of dependency – from rescued child to grateful woman – in which Bulgaria is placed under continuous masculine protection.

Crucially, this gendered grammar is not uniquely Soviet. Cultural production in the 19th century had already cast Bulgaria as a vulnerable female threatened by a foreign (Ottoman/Islamic) Other and rescued by a familiar (Slavic/Orthodox) masculine protector (Aretov 2010; Peleva, Spassova-Dikova 2010). Shaped by Orientalist and Pan-Slavic discourses, these hierarchies – European/Oriental, Christian/Muslim, civilised/backward, modern/traditional, masculine/feminine – positioned Bulgaria as both Europe's 'backward' periphery and Russia's semi-dependent Other (Todorova 2009). The tropes of the 'noble savage' and the imperial 'civilising mission' cast Bulgaria as a feminised, pre-modern subject awaiting redemption by a paternal 'civilised' power, and recast the Russian liberator as both moderniser and guardian of the tradition (Brower, Lazzerini 1997).

Soviet iconography reactivated these sedimented civilisational mnemonics (Nedelcheva, Levy 2022) and embedded them within the newly constructed socialist narrative. Across the two 'liberation' monuments, Bulgaria – rendered in traditional dress and performing ritualised gestures of hospitality rooted in Slavic custom – embodies a static, romanticised 'authentic culture', recalling not women liberated in 1944 but the feminised ('backward'/'traditional') subjects from 1878. Soviet soldiers, personifying a progressive force, inherit the paternal role of Tsarist 'civiliser'. While the narrative shifts – from Ottoman 'yoke' to 'monarcho-fascism' – its affective structure remains unchanged, with gender continuing to function as the affective grammar that renders the layers emotionally legible. The lesson remains civilisational: Bulgaria's future comes from elsewhere, delivered through masculine guardianship, as the 19th-century civilising mission is rearticulated as Soviet socialist modernity.

'Liberation' thus becomes the narrative bridge linking Bulgarian nationhood to Soviet loyalty, legitimising power as both natural and historical. The exclusion of any counter-narratives that might frame Russian military campaigns as anything other than liberating formed part of the broader Sovietization of Bulgarian memory (Daskalov 2011). This constitutes Gramscian cultural hegemony, whereby power is secured

by embedding itself within the foundational national narrative (Gramsci 1971). This helps explain why post-socialist attempts at historiographical reckoning have been so deeply contentious.

The Monument of Bulgarian–Soviet Friendship and the mnemonic infrastructure within which it was constructed emerge as a Derridean (1998) palimpsestic surface on which imperial, nationalist, and socialist inscriptions remain legible. Rather than replacing each other, they accumulate and produce a dense sedimentation of mutually reinforcing meanings. Bhabha's (1994) concepts of hybridity and mimicry illuminate this process, showing how colonial meaning is not fixed but is produced through repetition and rearticulation, as earlier imperial scripts are not simply repeated but are translated into new ideological contexts.

Within this framework, the 'Liberation' narrative – along with the identities it produces – appears not as a fixed historical reference but as a hybrid construct of continuously reproduced myths and a rearticulation of inherited symbols. But this process of repetition and translation renders the narratives unstable. Memory and identity thus emerge as ambivalent and continuously negotiated, yet, for this very reason, they are adaptable and movable, able to travel through the layers of this porous palimpsestic memory structure, where the past and the present continuously authorise each other (Mbembe 2001).

The 'Liberation' narrative thus constitutes a form of 'travelling memory' (Erl 2011): it circulates across regimes, media, and generations and is continually reactivated in new contexts. Crucially, this process is mediated through gender – an internalised self-perception based on gendered civilisational mnemonics. As a result, the narrative remains in circulation, readily available for rearticulation in a new geopolitical context, sustaining the afterlives of empire into the post-socialist present. Thus, the post-1989 period does not mark a rupture but new layers through which earlier meanings remain available for reactivation.

The monument was officially abandoned after 1989, yet it was never demolished, repurposed, or otherwise dealt with. Instead, it became a living archive of conflict, oscillating between reverence and defiance. Feminist and gender-challenging interventions – such as the 2012 Pussy Riot hoods placed over the female figure and the 2014 LGBT flag painted on the façade – targeted its affective, gendered core and recast submission as dissent, challenging Bulgarian conservatism, which is often aligned with pro-Russian positions. A Ukrainian flag in 2022 further re-signified the site within shifting geopolitics. Yet these acts do not displace the monument's underlying logic: on 9 May, flowers still appear (see Figure 2), quietly laid on the bare concrete where the eternal flame once burned.

For some, the monument still embodies cultural kinship and nostalgic solidarity, a tribute to liberators and protectors. For others, it stands as a symbol of subjugation,

materialising an unprocessed past that refuses to release its grip on the present. This tension reflects not only competing historical interpretations, but a deeper historical trauma shaped by systemic epistemic violence and sustained through affective attachments rooted in long-standing dependency. Efforts to reshape, remove, or critically reframe Soviet monuments have been consistently opposed by Russian diplomats and pro-Russian political actors, who frame such interventions as threats to 'national memory' and violations of bilateral treaties.

In this sense, Soviet monuments and their narratives function as what Stoler (2013: 2) terms 'imperial debris': not inert remnants, but enduring structures that continue to shape the present. Through Quijano (2000), Bulgaria's fractured memory and identity emerge as the product of coloniality – an ongoing process of ruination in which the imperial logic survives and is reproduced through affective dependencies that have outlasted the formal empire.

Conclusion

Although Bulgaria was never formally colonised or incorporated within a Russian state, postcolonial concepts remain essential for theorising the country's post-socialist memory as a semi-dependent. This explains why the 'Liberation' narrative remains emotionally charged.

Reading the *Monument to Bulgarian–Soviet Friendship* in Varna as a semiotic-material text, this essay argues: (1) The monument functions as colonial pedagogy, teaching visitors to experience domination as common sense. (2) By drawing on rooted gendered imperial repertoires, it renders authority familiar, protective, and emotionally credible. (3) As a material condensation of long-durée narratives, the monument reveals a palimpsestic memory structure in which imperial, nationalist, socialist and post-socialist inscriptions do not replace but are rather layered on top of one another. Within this structure, 'Liberation' endures not as a fixed ideology but as a mutable, hybrid script that travels, adapting to new political contexts. Sustained through the mimicry of gendered cultural forms, it persists as an epistemic violence that continues to shape post-socialist memory.

A postcolonial feminist reading makes visible what the debates about the monument often leave unaddressed: that the issue is not only what these monuments commemorate, but also how they teach history to be felt. The Varna monument demonstrates that coloniality persists not only through institutions and discourse, but also through affect. If Bulgaria's fractured post-socialist memory is to be understood more fully, it must be approached not simply as a struggle between communism and democracy, or between liberator and occupier, but as a confrontation with gendered colonial infrastructures of meaning.

This analysis reframes the post-socialist memory wars in Eastern Europe not as a struggle between past and present but as a conflict with layered colonial infrastructures. It foregrounds the affective mechanisms through which colonial memories endure, demonstrating the value of postcolonial and coloniality approaches for understanding post-Soviet spaces. The analysis also suggests that debates over whether to remove or preserve monuments cannot resolve conflict: what must be confronted is the deeper, colonial, and gendered grammar through which narratives are internalised.

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Re-Imagining Hungarianness: Re-Interpreting Archival Films in the Context of Hungarian Folk Dances

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Abstract: This essay examines the role of archival ethnographic films of Hungarian folk dance and music in the production of cultural memory. Drawing on short-term, immersive ethnographic fieldwork in Hungary, I delineate the role of these films in preserving folk culture and cultivating national identity. I argue that archival ethnographic films function as a technology through which an ‘imagined Hungarianness’ is constructed, embodied, and transmitted. Through examples of contemporary folk dancing, I demonstrate how archival media continues to enforce a fixed notion of authenticity deeply intertwined with ethno-nationalism, heteronormativity, and cultural purity. However, by engaging with these archival materials through a queer lens, dancers generate forms of counter-memory that disrupt institutional narratives. Focusing on historical footage of male intimacy, contemporary choreographic reworkings of gendered dance vocabularies, and alternative, queer readings of historical recordings, I illustrate how queer and feminist dance practices question and subvert the heteronormative interpretations that dominate the field. Ultimately, this essay argues that these creative reinterpretations disrupt the archive’s regulating power, transforming it into a site of possibility where practitioners can construct counter-memories to challenge dominant narratives of what it means to embody Hungarian identity.

Keywords: cultural memory, Táncház, Hungarian folk dance, queer studies, nationalism, authenticity

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At a *tánc ház* (Hungarian dance house), it is customary for partners to thank one another at the end of a dance. The dance partners often embrace to express their elation, the man lifting the woman up in one swift motion before placing her back on the floor. However, during my ethnographic fieldwork in Budapest in the summer of 2022, a different image was brought to my attention by a colleague and several interlocutors. This image came from an ethnographic film depicting two men dancing together, who, at the end of their piece, share a tender kiss of appreciation. Inspired by this film, as well as by an LGBTQ+ folk dance session organised by three young dancers, my research investigates how queer Hungarians – defined broadly as individuals who question the heteronormative structures of their dance practice – navigate traditional dance spaces. Specifically, I examine how the teaching and practice of Hungarian folk dance become a site for performing an ‘imagined Hungarianness’ that espouses rigid heteronorms and nationalistic values.

Drawing on Jan Assmann’s framework of cultural memory, in this essay I analyse how archives function as more than just repositories of historical dance and music and how they are active resources used to construct national identity. I explore their role in producing cultural memory through their deployment in both professional and amateur dance education, spanning formal institutions and social spaces like the *tánc ház*. Finally, I present several cases where folk dancers turn to archival ethnographic films in response to the exclusions they experience in contemporary traditional dance spaces. I argue that these dancers negotiate rigid structures by subverting and reworking archival material. Through these examples, I demonstrate how ethnographic sources can become sites where memory is reinterpreted, ultimately challenging the imagined nationhood and compulsory heterosexuality that these archives were originally used to construct.

A kiss from the past

During a day-long visit to the Institute for Musicology in Budapest, my colleagues and I were shown around the archives, where recordings largely spanning the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries are preserved. Containing everything from music recorded on X-ray films to the extensive volumes of György Martin’s foundational work,¹ the archive is undeniably a site of profound importance for research into the music and dance of the region. While I was working in one of the research rooms, a colleague came running into the room and said emphatically, ‘I need to show you something!’ Nearby, institute employees who were experts in Labanotation were analysing and notating dances from these archival films. One employee was playing a video of two shepherds, Horpácsik János and Rózsa Miklós, performing *Botoló* – a traditional dance performed with a stick. As we watched this archival footage to-

Figure 1a: An embrace, Screenshot from the ethnographic film of Horpácsik János and Rózsa Miklós dancing *Botoló*



Source: Felső-Tisza vidéki pásztorbotoló, 1968 (Upper Tisza Region Shepherds' Stick Dance, 1968) (Hagyományok Háza 2016), 01:54.

Figure 1b: A kiss, Screenshot from the ethnographic film of Horpácsik János and Rózsa Miklós dancing *Botoló*



Source: Felső-Tisza vidéki pásztorbotoló, 1968 (Upper Tisza Region Shepherds' Stick Dance, 1968) (Hagyományok Háza 2016), 03:28.

gether, the profound joy of the two men became apparent, their mutual tenderness palpable even through the aged film. At the end of their dance, they kiss.

When many of my interlocutors learned that my research focused on how queer Hungarians navigate traditional dance spaces, this film was frequently the first example they invoked due to its local popularity. For many, this kiss – a gesture of male intimacy that would be considered highly taboo in contemporary conservative Hungarian society – was an exciting piece of history to share. For others, the film's mere existence, and our shared awareness of it, served as a profound source of collective joy. While the sight of men embracing the women they have just danced is commonplace, I have never witnessed men embrace each other so tenderly – let alone kiss – during a social dance.

Communities often look to the past for historical precedent or validation. In my home country of India, for instance, scholars and activists frequently turn to ancient temple sculptures depicting non-heteronormative sexualities and genders. Similarly, for many of the interlocutors I spoke with, this archival film functioned as a vital historical resource, allowing them to subvert and question dominant state narratives about traditional gender roles and essentialised national identity.

Cultivating Hungarianness

The geopolitical aspects of the Hungarian folk-dance tradition are visible even in educational spaces. In every classroom I visited at the University of Szeged, a map of the country was displayed featuring two distinct state borders: the contemporary borders and those of so-called 'Greater Hungary'. As I began attending various *táncház*– social dance events held in culture houses or local bars – I observed how these informal spaces facilitated both the transmission of dance technique and the active performance of national identity. Dancing into the dawn, we were all immersed in the rich dances and music of the region. However, it was only later that I realised many of these dances did not originate within the nation's current borders, but rather in Romanian Transylvania and Moldova. Even within the formal historiography of Hungarian ethnography, much of the archival footage we studied had been recorded in Transylvania.

This geographical disconnect stems from Hungary's extensive history of ethnographic documentation of folk culture, which began long before the 1920 Treaty of Trianon redrew the region's borders, placing Transylvania outside the jurisdiction of the modern Hungarian state. The Hungarian Academy of Sciences began systematically collecting and publishing folk songs as early as 1832, aiming to institutionalise scientific preservation and cultivate a distinct national taste (Sárosi 1993; Taylor 2021). By the 1970s, as rapid urbanisation triggered anxieties over the loss of rural folk her-

itage, revivalists found themselves equipped with a vast wealth of material from the collections of Béla Bartók, Zoltán Kodály, and László Lajtha.

The first urban *táncház* was organised within this revival movement in Budapest in 1972 by György Martin, Ferenc Novák, and Sándor Tímár. Modelled on traditional village dance events in Szék, Transylvania, the movement rapidly grew in popularity and remains highly influential today. The archival films collected by ethnographers like György Martin serve as primary sources of authority for the transmission and pedagogy of these dances. This archival learning is accompanied by attendance at dance camps organised in rural Romania, particularly in Transylvania, which retains a significant Hungarian-speaking or ‘ethno-Hungarian’ population. As Mary Taylor observes, the *táncház* movement ‘took shape by adopting village forms as part of the aesthetic pursuit of authenticity and related ideas of function. Táncház adopted certain forms of etiquette from the village – for example as related to gender roles, even as it adapted or abandoned other things’ (in Kőszeghy 2023). It was only after studying this history that I realised how the *táncház* commemorates an idealised

Figure 2: Verbunk, originally danced by Szuromi Mariska on the left, and more recently danced by Alma Tóth on the right.



Source: Akkor és most – Tyukodi asszonyverbunk (Then and Now – asszonyverbunk (recruitment dance) from Tyukod (Hagyományok Háza n.d.), 00:17.

'Hungarianness' that inherently carries a colonial imagination, functioning to reify an ethno-linguistic state that transcends contemporary political borders.

Consequently, reproducing dances exactly as captured in ethnographic footage has become standard practice in contemporary Hungarian dance instruction, serving as the most accessible method for acquiring folk movement vocabularies. These films are routinely treated as a 'pure source' (Hooker 2008: 92). 'The goal was and is to collect documents of "authentic folk dance" into an extensive archive and to distribute the knowledge systematically in the form of academic monographs, compendia, type-catalogues and motif-indexes' (Felföldi 1999: 55). Over time, these canonical recordings have inscribed a rigid understanding of what it means to embody and perform 'authentic' folk dance within the public consciousness. The repeated social practice of this 'authentic' dancing turns cultural memory into everyday performance. These mimetic routines operate as secular rituals, allowing participants to relive and embody a romanticised 'lost past'.

Jan Assmann (2011) deploys the term 'cultural memory' to describe the externalisation and transmission of shared meaning across generations. Folk dancing in Hungary can serve as a prime case study for the construction of this cultural memory: it is formed through the systematic deployment of archival ethnographic films to forge a unified national identity. This process explicitly privileges specific historical narratives, rigid gender roles, and naturalised ethno-linguistic borders. This 'institutionally and artificially' created idea of Hungarianness – sustained by ethnographic methodologies of collection, transcription, and technological storage – extends the initial cultural practices and their intended meanings far beyond their original temporal and communicative contexts. Consequently, the application of ethnographic materials in both contemporary dance instruction and the broader *táncház* movement 'encompass[es] all such functional concepts as tradition forming, past reference, and political identity or imagination' (Assmann 2011: 8).

Challenging 'authenticity'

In a typical *táncház* one would rarely, if ever, witness two men dancing together. Equally, one would seldom see a woman perform the *legényes* – a highly virtuosic men's solo dance. When questioning these boundaries, a common response from practitioners is that such transgressions are simply not 'authentic'.

To challenge this exclusion and create safer spaces for expression through movement for the LGBTQ+ community in Budapest, three young Hungarian dancers organised an LGBTQ+ inclusive folk-dance workshop on 6 November 2021, titled *OMOH MOVES 001: LMBTQ Néptáncműhely / Turbina*. The initiative provoked immediate institutional and social anxiety, prompting prominent professional folk dancers and

conservative commentators to publish disapproving articles in online media outlets. One prominent critique argued that introducing an LGBTQ+ framework alters the essential character of the tradition to such an extent that it can no longer be considered the same language or culture of self-expression. Ironically, while this writer mislabelled the event a *táncház*, the organisers had explicitly framed it as a folk-dance workshop rather than a traditional social dance house.

Further articulating this institutional backlash, another writer asserted that ‘at the heart of things is the problem that the image of people and society in the world that creates and lives up to folk traditions is completely different from that of the LGBTQ movement. The two are incompatible’ (Szilvay 2021). Szilvay’s rhetoric highlights how deeply notions of folk authenticity are entwined with ideas of and anxiety over cultural purity. Within this conservative imaginary, if traditional gender roles are not mirrored exactly, the dance and the broader heritage it represents lose their right to the culture’s name.

Furthermore, folk culture is explicitly framed as a national ‘mother tongue’ (Taylor 2008: 10). The conflation of Hungarian identity with the embodiment of state-sanctioned culture is historically rooted and is legitimised by the often-cited assertion of Pál Teleki – Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Hungary during the interwar period – that the public must be taught ‘to speak Hungarian, to sing in Hungarian, to dance in Hungarian. Because one who does that, also thinks in Hungarian’ (in Pálfi 1970: 124). When the identity of the nation is so inextricably bound to folk culture and the Hungarian language, it poses an added challenge for queer Hungarians, particularly because terms such as queer, gay, lesbian, and transgender originate in the English language and are often framed by domestic conservative rhetoric as foreign imports. Indeed, the organisers of the LGBTQ+ folk dance session highlighted that it was the very introduction of this Western acronym into a traditional cultural practice that triggered the controversy. By introducing the LGBTQ+ label, something can be considered fundamentally simple as role-switching in partnered dances or a woman performing the traditionally male *legényes* was condemned as a direct violation of the nation’s linguistic and cultural heritage.

During my fieldwork, a *táncház* participant observed that despite former Prime Minister Viktor Orbán never having been a folk dancer or participant himself, his administration successfully constructed an exclusionary discourse of ‘we are this, and you are us’. Here, ‘this’ refers to the traditional folk dance and music culture that the revivalist movement embodies, particularly in urban environments. This deliberate construction of ‘us’ by the Fidesz government shaped the community identity within the *táncház*. The Hungarian state excelled at deploying heritage as a form of soft power to construct collectivity and systematically regulate national culture through

cultural institutions (Carbó-Catalan, Roig-Sanz 2022; Dubois 1999; Thièsse 1999). Such regulation relied heavily on framing external influences as existential threats. As Benedict Anderson (1991: 149) famously noted, '[n]ationalism thinks in terms of historical destinies, while racism dreams of eternal contamination'. In contemporary Hungary, where queerness is routinely disparaged as a corrupting Western influence – with Orbán himself characterising migration, gender, and wokeism as viruses from the West (Losonczi 2023) – Anderson's conceptualisation can be applied to view this homophobic social sphere. While racism and homophobia are distinct forms of structural oppression, I propose that within a homophobic and xenophobic nation-state, any imprint of queer desire on folk heritage is similarly treated as a form of cultural contamination that violates the imagined ethos of the nation. 'When examining the idea of culture, we find ourselves in the domain of the immaterial, the intangible, and the imaginary, but culture has material, tangible, and real effects.' (Carbó-Catalan, Roig-Sanz 2022: 34) Cultural houses, archives, and tangible responses such as those presented above are proof of the tangible effects of the power of culture and contribute to the continued cultivation of Hungarian culture and cultural memory, just as the continued popularity of dance houses does.

However, as deeply politicised as the discourse of 'authenticity' remains, it is not an entirely sealed concept. During a conversation with another interlocutor, he expressed deep scepticism towards treating ethnographic films as the sole, or even the primary, source of cultural identity. He pointed out that there could be an alternative, deeply personal definition of 'authentic' within the culture: 'if I am honest' he says, 'I think honesty means authentic ... What is in the film is still authentic because it's *hiteles* [honest/credible]'. Conceptualising authenticity as credible due to its honesty offers a radical counter-narrative; it suggests that the value of archival footage lies not in its capacity to enforce rigid choreographic discipline, but in its preservation of and access to some instances of raw expression.

It is precisely this internal honesty that renders the archival recordings of the *Botoló* performed by Horpácsik János and Rózsa Miklós so remarkable and memorable. In their movement, the severe bodily curtailment and hyper-gendered policing seen in contemporary *táncház* performances are entirely absent. Instead, the footage captures a moment of profoundly uninhibited dancing, characterised by a visceral expression of joy and shared connection. By reclaiming *hiteles* (authentic/credible) as an affective, emotional state rather than a regulatory standard, queer practitioners can look to the archive as a site where the essence of movement practice – and thus a historical precedent for bodily freedom – can still be found. The archive is transformed from a prison of tradition into a repository of the very materials necessary to subvert, invert, and reimagine traditional choreographic boundaries.

In her movement research project titled 'Leányos', professional folk dancer Szívós Kata explores the dynamics of the traditional female and male dances. This negotiation is visualised in the short documentary film *Leányos* (directed by Noémi Varga in co-production with Dominika Trapp for Trapp's solo exhibition *Don't Lay Him on Me* at Trafó Gallery). The film opens with archival ethnographic footage of a woman performing a solo dance, providing the literal, historical foundation from which Szívós draws to mount her contemporary, subversive choreography. This visual baseline is accompanied by a narration in which Szívós reflects on her relationship with both women's and men's dance traditions. Reflecting on her training, Szívós notes, 'I only felt constrained by female dances in retrospect. I just never felt entirely fulfilled by women's folk dances' (in Varga 2020). By translating this somatic dissatisfaction onto the contemporary stage, Szívós liberates her practice from traditional gatekeeping, using the vocabulary of contemporary dance to cultivate choreographic transformation. Driven by her own desires within the medium, she expands the physical possibilities of what female-read bodies can experience. Yet, even as she blurs the boundaries between masculine and feminine vocabularies, she simultaneously navigates the enduring weight of the gender binary: 'The idea was to stage male parts of folk dances, which I love to dance, in a way where it is not only a woman dancing a man's piece' (in Varga 2020).

This dialectic between archival constraint and creative subversion was further illustrated by another interlocutor, who introduced a historical dance ritual from the region of Csíkszentdomokos (located in the Székely Land of Transylvania, which is known as Sândominic in Romanian). He shared a video recording of a traditional wedding performance in which two men mimic a mother and father bear engaged in a sexual act. In the footage, the women standing in the background can be seen chuckling, indicating that this playful, animalistic mimicry operates as a form of ribald, carnivalesque satire. However, the aggressive parody with which these sexual acts are performed can also be read as fundamentally sexist and homophobic, framing same-sex intimacy purely as a grotesque punchline for a heterosexual audience. In response to this archival erasure, my interlocutor expressed a desire to choreograph a contemporary piece featuring naked, moustachioed male dancers to intentionally highlight the latent homoeroticism of these movements. His creative vision seeks to reclaim the dance's kinetic vocabulary, stripping it of its homophobic humour in order to re-interpret the choreography without the heteronormative assumption that gay intimacy is inherently ridiculous. Yet, the material consequences of state-enforced homophobia severely limit the execution of such artistic research; when asked if this performance would cause a scandal in contemporary Hungary, my interlocutor admitted that he would be forced to stage the project abroad due to a pervasive and justified fear of hostile public reactions.

Figure 3a: Still 1: Feeling constrained by female dances.



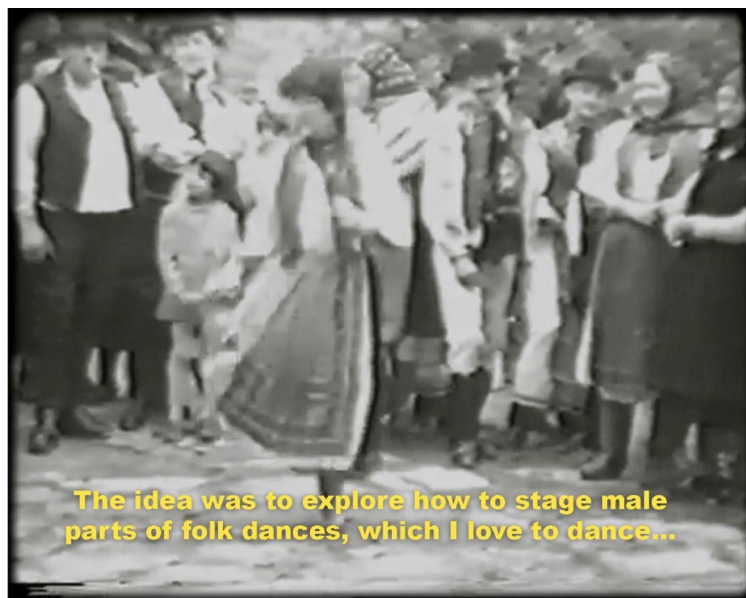
Source: *Leányos* (Varga 2020), 00:04.

Figure 3b: Still 2: An urge for fulfilment.



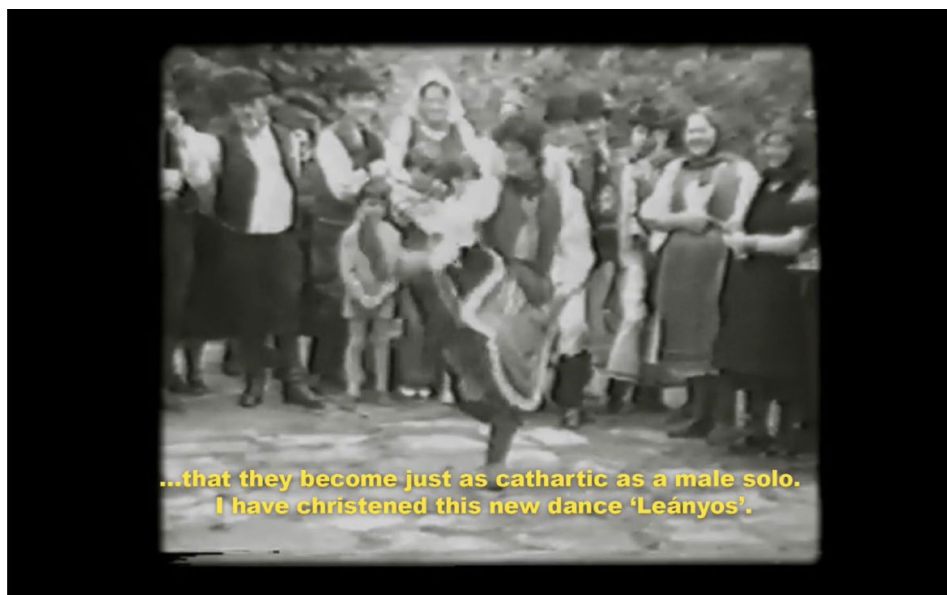
Source: *Leányos* (Varga 2020), 00:05.

Figure 3c: Still 3: Exploring male folk dances.



Source: *Leányos* (Varga 2020), 00:11.

Figure 3d: Still 4: Movement that leads to catharsis.



Source: *Leányos* (Varga 2020), 00:33.

By reinterpreting the folk archives to serve their own creative visions, these artists actively disidentify with the majoritarian public sphere. They employ a strategy of reading and embodying ethnographic films that ‘works on and against dominant ideology’ (Muñoz 1999: 11), thereby fracturing the imposed alignment of folk culture with heterosexual Hungarianness. Through this somatic subversion, they directly challenge a highly cultivated, institutionalised cultural memory. In doing so, they lay the groundwork for an alternative collective memory – one that arises because contemporary socio-political realities inevitably reshape and contest historically fossilised cultural practices (Halbwachs 1992: 101).

Concluding remarks

In one conversation, an interlocutor recounted rumours of an elusive archival film held in an unnamed private collection, which reportedly depicts a tall, slender woman performing *legényes*. An interlocutor who was aware of the film mentioned that the dancer might have been transgender. Within a heteronormative framework, such accounts are often dismissed as exceptions or heresay. However, the hope of marginalised communities, that these hidden archives might yield material proof of queerness shows how they engage with the past. By searching for historic precedents of gender and sexual fluidity within the archival record, these willing publics craft a counter-memory that disrupts the myth of an eternally ‘pure’, heteronormative national history.

Ultimately, this essay demonstrates how archival ethnographic films – and their contemporary application in dance transmission and performance – form the bedrock for a state-sanctioned, ethno-nationalist, and heteronormative cultural memory centred entirely around the romanticised figure of ‘the folk’. By tracing the historical trajectory of the *táncház* movement, this study delineates the role of archival media in the institutional governance of bodies and the policing of gendered norms within contemporary social dance spaces. It examines the interventions made by practitioners seeking to reclaim these spaces for marginalised identities excluded by dominant heteronormative structures. As this essay illustrates, these subversions manifest as a ‘queer reading’ of existing ethnographic films. Driven by the very curtailment and disciplining regulations that govern traditional archives, practitioners subversively repurpose these historical records. In doing so, they dismantle the restrictive definitions of ‘Hungarianness’ derived from these collections, transforming a heritage designed to bind them into an accessible site of choreographic liberation and counter-memory.

Furthermore, these interventions expose the strategic silences embedded within the ethnographic film archive, highlighting how ethnographers can curate and present traditional dances. Control is established not merely through preservation, but

through the subsequent interpretation of what counts as national culture. Thus, excavating archival moments that can be read beyond heteronormative ideals operates as a potent form of political dissent against institutional soft power. By reclaiming these suppressed histories from the margins of the frame, queer practitioners fundamentally rupture the dominant cultural memory.

Embodying non-heteronormative movement – whether in public spheres or private spaces – challenges the regulatory regimes of majoritarian spaces. These practices necessitate the following enquiry– what if we allow our bodies to forget their nationalist and heteronormative conditioning? What if we grant ourselves an honest form of expression? In doing so, queer practitioners dismantle the rigidity of the archive, reminding us that the ethnographic films weaponised by nationalist institutions are merely culture frozen in time – a single, static realisation of human movement masquerading as an eternal, idealised national subject.

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‘Mielno, Our Polish Lesbos’¹

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Abstract: The article examines two cases: a 1988 camping trip to the Polish seaside town of Mielno – known as ‘the first lesbian convention’ – and the 2023 play *Lesbian Sunset*, directed by Olga Ciężkowska², which re-enacts this event. Staging recent queer herstory in the theatre can be considered a form of engaged research that – as Maria Kobielska has written – can illuminate ‘a grey area’ of memory culture. The example of Mielno offers an opportunity to revisit the history of the final years of the Polish People’s Republic and the period of political transformation from the perspective of non-heteronormative women, whose experiences have remained largely absent from the dominant historical narratives. An analysis of the contemporary performance demonstrates how taking a queer position can be a starting point for reimagining a fragment of late 20th-century local history.

Keywords: recent Polish queer herstory, engaged memory studies, theatrical re-enactment, lesbian performance

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Like a familiar refrain, the ‘invisibility of lesbians’ continuously resurfaces when we examine non-heterosexual women in Polish culture, history, and politics. Scholars frequently analyse this systemic absence and imperceptibility within the public square. But let’s pause at this notion for a moment. If invisible people really existed, and one sought to learn about this group, then a difficult yet key task would be to find an appropriate research method to analyse the concrete forms of their presence. Sometimes, in the case of queer herstory, the situation can be challenging in a similar way.

¹ An excerpt from the refrain of one of the songs created and performed by Magda Dubrowska (together with performers) for the purpose of the performance.

² Ciężkowska, Olga, Magda Dubrowska, Dorota Glac, Marta Jalowska. 2025, September 22. An interview I conducted via Zoom.

Yet the unique quality of historical queer female experiences may stem from their very elusiveness, which resists the rigid frameworks of traditional historical accounts.

In what follows, I will explore two cases: first, a summer camp in Mielno, a town in northwestern Poland by the Baltic Sea, where, in summer 1988, a camping trip took place (known also as the first lesbian convention); and, second, the stage play *Lesbian Sunset*, which refers to Mielno and allows an analysis of how queer experience can illuminate new pathways in exploring memory. I argue that an engaged approach to the past – like that seen in the *Lesbian Sunset* performance – illuminates history from a fresh perspective. Instead of focusing on simplifying dichotomies like history/present, West/East, communism/democracy, progressiveness/backwardness, or identity politics/queer, a theatrical reenactment of a past trip to Mielno foregrounds a concrete – though mediated and reconstructed – experience. In this approach, representations are not systematised and consolidated, but rather, they are set in motion; meanings are activated rather than defined.

Viewing the past from the perspective of non-heteronormative women – whose experiences, generally speaking, become increasingly less disclosed the further back in time we go – can be considered analytically illuminating. Making visible these elements of the past in the present produces new circuits of feelings and meanings that exist across time, a phenomenon described by Elizabeth Freeman (2010) as ‘temporal drag’. For example, it is quite striking to learn that ‘[t]he very fact that these few women [what mattered, however, is they were without men – RM] gathered at a campsite by the sea in the height of the season was surprising for those around them’ (Kowalska, Łuczak 2005). Why exactly was it surprising? What social codes did it violate, and what does this tell us about the social norms of that time? These questions offer a useful starting point for re-examining history.

I am inspired by the theoretical perspectives of Maria Kobielska, who, in turn, follows Susannah Radstone. Radstone called for the political engagement of memory studies – not in the sense of the defence of the oppressed, but rather in the sense of engaging them to ‘understand culture – including these versions of memory culture – as ambiguous, as struggle, as a grey area’ (Radstone 2008: 36). According to Kobielska, the grey area of memory culture (‘the area of default, unquestioned, and unproblematic rules’) can be illuminated precisely through engaged research (Kobielska 2017: 404). I argue that researching queer herstory towards the end of the Polish People’s Republic and the related political transformation may be an example of such a grey area.

Turning points

Toward the end of the Polish People's Republic and later during the post-1989 political and social transformation, non-heteronormative women appeared in public discourse noticeably more often than before, yet still primarily as subjects resisting representation (Scarry 1994: 3–11). This group, which emerged as a political subject during a somewhat ambiguous period of the late 1980s, to now remains poorly recognised in Polish historiography (and beyond). Meanwhile, the authors of the *Lesbian Sunset* performance (which premiered in 2023 at the independent Warsaw theatre Potem-*o-tem*) proved that where science seems to struggle, sometimes art can succeed. By initiating work on this performance, the artistic team – featuring Olga Ciężkowska (direction), Dorota Glac, Marta Jalowska, Monika Jarosińska (performing), Magda Dubrowska (performing and music), Sylwia Chutnik (collaboration with the team on the script), Marta Szypulska, and Tosia Węglewska (set design and costumes) – made room for a new kind of story to appear (Despret 2021). The performance was directly inspired by a 2005 memoir article titled 'Morze możliwości' (A Sea of Possibilities), published on the Polish LGBTQ+ portal www.kobiety-kobietom.com. In the article, authors Alicja Kowalska³ and Agnieszka Łuczak recount their personal memories of an event from 1987:

The year is 1987. Poland. What can a girl who wants to share her life with another woman do? So far, nothing but make more or less desperate attempts to seduce a heterosexual friend. Due to the political changes in the country, censorship is loosening its iron grip, and the first social and entertainment magazine has appeared on newsstands. It's the monthly *Relaks*, A5 notebook format, mostly filled with what were, for the time, very daring personal ads. (Kowalska, Łuczak 2005)

Indeed, these personal ads published in *Relaks i Kolekcjoner Polski* magazine (which was a monthly supplement in the nationwide daily newspaper *Kurier Polski*),⁴ came to play a significant role in connecting non-heterosexual people in socialist Poland. However, queer research on the Polish People's Republic focuses mainly on homosexual men (see Fiedotow 2012: 341; Szulc 2018: 79); we know less about the customs of queer women. Nonetheless, research on non-heteronormative women's experi-

³ Kowalska, Alicja. 2025, June 3. An interview I conducted at Sady Żoliborskie in Warsaw.

⁴ The magazine had been published since 1984 (that is, earlier than Kowalska and Łuczak recall). However, 'EPOKA' publishing house suspended the personal ads column in July 1984 in response to readers' complaints and, above all, government pressure, resuming it only in mid-1987 (see EEIP Report 1985: 8–9; Fiedotow 2012: 341; Szulc 2018: 79; Morawska 2019: 61–63).

ences in neighbouring countries with a similar historical experience of transformation may be relevant to the Polish context. In Czechoslovakia, as Věra Sokolová (2014) concluded, based on numerous interviews, personal ads were one of the most common and important ways to meet other non-heterosexual women.⁵ It can be argued that in the second half of the 1980s, establishing relationships through ads became a popular practice among Polish queer women as well.⁶

One day, Alicja bought *Relaks* out of curiosity. In one of the next issues, she found the kind of ad she had been hoping for: '28-year-old woman wishes to meet a (female) life partner...' (Burzyńska 1988: 5).⁷ Despite the difficulty of revealing a secret to a stranger, she responded immediately. After two months of waiting, the reply finally arrived: Ania, who had placed the ad, wrote that she had received over fifty letters, met with a few girls, and already found the one. Not wanting to disappoint the others, she proposed a get-together for all of them. That way they could get to know each other, and romantic relationships might develop.

The plan was to gather in the seaside town of Mielno, at a campsite owned by Ania's friend. They expected a dozen, perhaps more, participants. Ultimately, six women arrived at the Koszalin railway station. Their secret sign was to wear a black bow tie. As Alicja recalls, she had to go to a store with mourning clothes to buy one. In the article, she describes how she and another women named Basia pinned on their bows at the train station and nervously glanced around: 'I wasn't aware that, thanks to the identifying mark, I was already being observed by someone' (Kowalska, Łuczak 2005). It was Dorota – who would later become Alicja's partner – observing them from a distance and deciding to approach.

A 'close reading' of each other

In the play *Lesbian Sunset*, we observe some women travelling by train. It's hot, and the atmosphere is thick; a mixture of excitement and awkwardness. Two women, who are friends, look at a third passenger. One asks the other, 'Do you think she is too?' Finally, they talk to her.

Despite the overall in-visibility of lesbians in historiography, in the 1980s they also struggled with a sense of unwanted visibility. An earnest awareness of others' gaz-

⁵ One of Sokolová's interlocutors, Ludmila (born in 1946), recalled: 'I never read much, but one exception was *Mladý svět*. (...) The personal ads section was the first thing I read, looking for something interesting. You could always tell when it was "our ad"' (Sokolová 2014: 99).

⁶ Women's ads in *Relaks* became more common in 1987, after the magazine's personal ads section was restored (Morawska 2019: 67–68).

⁷ '28-letnia, pozna współtowarzyszkę życia.' All the quotes are translated by the author unless stated otherwise.

es is a recurring theme in lesbian narratives, and it is usually accompanied by fear. The lesbian experience seems to be characterised by a constant, anxious analysis of the reactions of those around them. Evidence of this can be found in letters sent to youth magazines in the 1980s, such as the one by Alina, who wrote: 'Now I'm afraid of everything. Even a bus full of people who look at me with hostility, or so it seems to me' (*Na przełaj* 1987: 7).

In fact, ascribing excessive importance to one's appearance might well have been linked to the taboo surrounding homosexuality in the public sphere. We can draw an analogy with how Věra Sokolová interpreted the Czechoslovakian cultural context around that time: 'Since in public discourse homosexuality was not discussed and admitted as a visible presence in the society, it logically created a presumption that one would see "it" and recognize "it" when confronted with "it"' (Sokolová 2014: 95–96). I found another example of the intrusiveness of feeling observed in Grażyna Burzyńska's story 'Początek nocy, początek dnia' (The beginning of the night, the beginning of the day) from her 1987 debut collection of short stories *My dwie z naszej malutkiej wysepki* (The two of us from our tiny island). Upon returning home, the woman says to her partner: 'Yesterday, a woman from my office saw us together and started asking questions. She must have been onto something, because she was staring at me like an investigating judge' (Burzyńska 1987: 138).

Alicja Długołęcka-Lach's 1992 research sheds some light on why, during Poland's political transition, non-heterosexual women tried to avoid being visible. Based on the results of the surveys that she analysed, it can be assumed that women were influenced by observing discriminatory practices and narratives against homosexual men, who were more present in the public discourse. While few respondents (13%) experienced overt discrimination ('such as ridicule, public insults, beatings, arrests'), 80% of the surveyed women were afraid of negative reactions from their surroundings (Długołęcka-Lach 1993: 204). This situation may help account for why 'a large part of the women surveyed concealed their sexual orientation (and were therefore not placed in a situation requiring them to confront their views on social tolerance with the actual reactions of those around them)' (Długołęcka-Lach 1993: 204). Perhaps to avoid becoming the target of direct homophobia, they acted in such a way that their queerness was not noticeable to most of society. However, this doesn't mean that they were imperceptible to each other.

Later surveys by Alicja Długołęcka-Lach revealed that non-heterosexual women developed something like a subtle code of recognition – a language of secret signs. Respondents were aware of certain signs in appearance (short hair, a type of shoes and trousers, 'earrings in one ear, a wedding ring on the thumb'), and behaviour. Hallmarks could include a characteristic gait, 'less coquettish behaviour', and an "'I don't care" attitude', or even more precisely defined gestures such as 'the way they

smoke a cigarette, and that they don't let you light their cigarette or put on their coat'. One respondent answered the question concisely: 'These are women who don't care about appealing to men.' According to another one, 'sitting like a man and looking at other women' is behaviour indicating that a woman might be a lesbian (Długołęcka-Lach 2001: 263). This secret body language seems to play with the normative codes of what is considered appropriate, in a relatively safe way, allowing one to be different, without necessarily crossing the line of what is permissible.

Yet the most common signal among queer women remained eye contact. As one respondent phrased it: 'They have something in their eyes that I call a startled bird' (Długołęcka-Lach 2001: 263). Clearly, the best way to communicate, to flirt, and to make someone's acquaintance was to 'close-read' others. And it worked both ways: 'The lesbians surveyed most often make eye contact with another woman to be recognised; they do this significantly more often than talking about themselves, dressing in a specific way, reacting to someone's touch, behaving masculinely, using slang terms, or other behaviours [the author's exact calculations are omitted]', reported Długołęcka-Lach (2001: 264).

Evoking (memory of) emptiness

The resistance to presenting oneself to the world as a lesbian and the relational nature of knowing this queer identity translated into a specific 'structure of feeling' (Williams 1977) that has also come to shape collective memory and identity. This is quite visible in *Lesbian Sunset*. The earlier generation of lesbians lacked a distinct presence and this affected the context in which younger non-heteronormative girls grew up. Indeed, one could speak of a partly intergenerational dimension of the lesbian experience. The creative process of *Lesbian Sunset*, itself, is quite revealing in this respect.

Initially, the creators of *Lesbian Sunset* wanted to make a show about their shared experiences, the specific nature of which – as they soon realised – 'lies in the sense of lack, in this feeling of a total cultural void'. As the play's director, Olga Ciężkowska, described it in our interview, 'What we share is not events we can refer to but rather this very feeling of having no events at all – only fantasies and fleeting impressions. We concluded that the formation of this void in a place where other people have their own identity-shaping things (like tradition or family and other role models) – this feeling of emptiness was most constitutive for us.' Therefore, at the beginning of their creative process, they tried to fill this gap with their own fantasies about the erased past of queer women.

But then came this unexpected archival discovery: memories from the campsite in Mielno, written down almost twenty years later, when Alicja Kowalska and Agnieszka Łuczak, two former campmates, met by chance at the Academy of Tolerance in

Zakopane in 2005. However, Alicja and Agnieszka did not ascribe any great importance to it. In our recent conversation, Alicja remarked, 'Well, it's hard to attribute some great significance to it. (...) It was like something out of nowhere'.

Nonetheless, director Ciężkowska claimed that 'Mielno turned out to be so interesting because our protagonists also spoke primarily about this feeling of emptiness'. As the description on the show's website reads: 'This was our missing piece'. The discovered recollections of a short seaside holiday became a treasure for the artists. What might therefore seem like a rather insignificant event provided a point of reference that the younger generation lacked during their adolescence and helped them to articulate their own queer feelings and experiences.

This intertwining of individual biographies has broader significance. As spectators, we are asked to notice something that historical narratives have consistently overlooked. This is particularly valuable given that the late Polish People's Republic remains under-researched, which may partly be due to its being 'surrounded' by numerous temporally proximate historical moments that are considered more important, characteristic, or 'attractive'. Compared with the pivotal year of 1989, the seriousness of Martial Law, or the vibrancy of the 1990s, the late 1980s may seem somewhat unidentifiable.

Conclusion

An unexpected encounter with the past in the theatre, as presented in the play *Lesbian Sunset*, raises questions that align closely with Maria Kobielska's approach to engaged memory studies. Kobielska considers the possibilities and methods for responsibly assuming the role of a memory activist and intervening in parallel cultural phenomena within memory tensions. As the artists in *Lesbian Sunset* demonstrated: a self-analysis focused on the present can evolve into an intimate encounter with a significant past – a past significant in a historical, cultural, and social perspective. The history that they evoked demands a particular kind of attention. By closely observing the faint traces left queer women have left behind, we might realise how much we usually overlook.

The Mielno example shows the value of re-examining history by searching for what is hidden behind powerful symbols and canonical narratives. From this perspective, the second half of the 1980s seems more 'tangible' – perceived less as a period preceding a political upheaval, and more as a time of minor yet biographically significant shifts, the memory of which has since faded.

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Herstory alebo skôr *theirstory*: život v normalizácii z perspektívy aktérok spoločenstva vzdoru

Roman Džambazovič

Gyárfášová, O. 2023. *Ako sme žili v rokoch normalizácie. Rozhovory s aktérkami spoločenstva vzdoru*. Bratislava: ASPEKT.

Kniha sociologičky Olgy Gyárfášovej, pôsobiacej na Ústave európskych štúdií a medzinárodných vzťahov Fakulty sociálnych a ekonomických vied Univerzity Komenského v Bratislave, je dôležitým príspevkom do postupne sa rozrastajúcej intelektuálnej a vedeckej knižnice, ktorá zachytáva obdobie normalizácie a každodenné prežívanie žien v danom období spoločných slovensko-českých dejín. Kniha nás už prostredníctvom svojho podtitulu informuje, že pôjde o rozhovory s aktérkami spoločenstva vzdoru. Rozhovory Olgy Gyárfášovej s desiatimi aktérkami tohto alternatívneho kultúrneho spoločenstva, zasadeného do Bratislavy, sú určite tou skutočnosťou, prostredníctvom ktorej si čitateľky a čitatelia budú pamätať a charakterizovať túto „aspektáčku“ knihu.

Vydavateľstvu ASPEKT a editorke Jane Cvikovej sa však podarilo obohatiť samotné rozhovory o dve dôležité súčasti knihy. Ako prvú chcem spomenúť úvodnú kapitolu Olgy Gyárfášovej. V nej sa dozvedáme o motivácii, ktorá autorku viedla k napísaniu knihy a zasadzuje jej život do obdobia normalizácie, v ktorej prežila mladosť a znamenala pre ňu časopriestorové koordináty dospievania. Úvodná časť knihy je dôležitým východiskom pre pochopenie širších súvislostí, ktoré formovali každodennú žitú realitu unikátneho neformálneho alternatívneho spoločenstva, fungujúceho v 70. a 80. rokoch minulého storočia v Bratislave. Jeho súčasťou bola aj Olga Gyárfášová. Prvá kapitola tak ponúka zasvätenú sociologickú sondu do bratislavského kultúrneho, umeleckého a občianskeho undergroundu; predstavenie východísk a metodológie výskumného projektu, ktorý sa zameriaval na ženy z bratislavského spoločenstva vzdoru a reflexiu vlastného života v období normalizácie. V rozhovoroch s aktérkami spoločenstva vzdoru vedie autorka paralelný fiktívny rozhovor aj sama so sebou a s dobou svojej mladosti (s. 13).

Ďalšou inovatívnou a veľmi inšpiratívnou súčasťou knihy je záverečná štúdia Zuzany Maďarovej s názvom „Spoločenstvo aj ‚vlastná izba‘ ako predpoklad politického vzdoru. K spomienkam aktérok z bratislavského alternatívneho priestoru na obdobie normalizácie“. Zuzana Maďarová ponúka jednu z možných interpretácií príbehov spoločenstva vzdoru. Tá je zasadená do širšieho kontextu skúmania a poznávania histórie žien aj v súvislosti s tým, ako sa na Slovensku na obdobie vládnutia komunistickej štátotrasy spomína. Jej reflexia nadväzuje na predchádzajúce realizované výskumné zámery, v ktorých sa venovala účasti žien na nežnej revolúcii a rodovým aspektom kolektívnej

pamäti. Autorka sa usiluje o istú formu medzigeneračného dialógu so ženami, ktoré sprostredkovali svoju životnú skúsenosť z obdobia pred jej narodením. Ide o dôležitú súčasť prenosu kolektívnej pamäti, nakoľko ženské aktérky a ich osudy sú v rôznych historických obdobiach a našich geografických konšteláciách často opomínané a „postavené na druhú koľaj“ prostredníctvom prevládajúcej mužskej patriarchálnej kultúrnej optiky. Ženy boli vo verejnom priestore prítomné, videné, prenasledované, ale pritom ako keby zostali nezapamätané. Zuzana Maďarová ponúka pohľad na mechanizmy a ďalšie dôsledky takejto optiky. Jej štúdiá nasleduje po úvodnej kapitole Olgy Gyárfášovej a po desiatich rozhovoroch s aktérkami bratislavského spoločenstva vzdoru. Pri druhom čítaní knihy som jednotlivé časti čítal v inom poradí, ako sú radené v knihe. Po prečítaní úvodnej kapitoly Olgy Gyárfášovej som preskočil rozhovory, ku ktorým som sa vrátil až po dočítaní kapitoly Zuzany Maďarovej. Takto som síce prevzal jej optiku a možný scenár, ako čítať rozhovory a interpretovať životné príbehy žien bratislavského alternatívneho spoločenstva, ale umožnilo mi vidieť v nich aj súvislosti, ktoré som si pri prvom čítaní knihy nevšimol a neuvedomil, zostali skryté. Nechcem potenciálne čitateľky a čitateľov navádzať k takejto stratégii. Možno krátky editorský úvod, ktorý by ponúkol informácie o štruktúre knihy a v jemných náčrtoch nás zoznámil aj s jej obsahom, by pomohol pri rozhodovaní, akou cestou sa z hľadiska poradia kapitol pri čítaní knihy vybrať. Na druhej strane však to, že knihu otvoríte pri hociktojej jej časti a zaujme vás a vediete pri jej čítaní neustály vnútorný dialóg s jej obsahom, hovorí jasne o jej kvalite. To je moja osobná skúsenosť aj v prípade knihy *Ako sme žili v rokoch normalizácie*.

Kniha otvára mnoho zaujímavých tém. Jednou z nich je dôležitosť medzigeneračného prenosu kolektívnej pamäti vzťahujúcej sa na obdobie normalizácie na Slovensku. Ako je evidentné z výsledkov výskumu „Demokratickosť a občania na Slovensku“, realizovaného v roku 2014, vo vnímaní normalizácie a jej dôsledkoch existuje určitá miera analfabetizmu slovenskej populácie. Na otvorenú otázku „Čo si predstavíte, keď sa povie normalizácia v Československu“ takmer polovica opýtaných respondentiek a respondentov (46,9 %) uviedla odpoveď neviem/nič alebo neodpovedala vôbec. Absentuje hodnotenie normalizácie, na ktorom by sa zhodla väčšina populácie alebo aspoň konštruktívna a na objektívnych skutočnostiach postavená diskusia o základných východiskových bodoch reflexie normalizácie, ktorá by mala dosah na utváranie názorov na dané obdobie. Z tohto dôvodu neprekvapuje, že s normalizáciou sú následne spojené ambivalentné a často odporujúce reflexie zo strany slovenskej spoločnosti. Kým v roku 1992 (výskum „Trvanie a zmena na Slovensku“) 70. a 80. roky minulého storočia v histórii Slovenska vnímala veľká časť populácie nepriaznivo, tak v roku 2009 (IVO, 2010) kleslo záporné a skôr záporné hodnotenie tohto obdobia o polovicu opýtaných (Zeman, Tižik 2016). V roku 2009 iba 19 % opýtaných vnímalo 70. a 80. roky záporne alebo skôr záporne a 32 % kladne alebo skôr kladne (Bútorová 2010). Obsadenie Československa vojskami Varšavskej zmluvy v auguste 1968 je

však reflektované v mnohých výskumoch a prieskumoch verejnej mienky ako jedna z najnegatívnejších historických udalostí na Slovensku po roku 1918 (Zeman, Tížik 2016). Problematickejšia sa teda skôr ukazuje reflexia obdobia po auguste 1968. Oľga Gyárfášová obdobie normalizácie datuje práve do obdobia 70. a 80. rokov.

Aj z týchto dôvodov je dôležité otvárať túto tému a venovať sa obdobiu normalizácie, spovedať pamätníčky a pamätníkov, dať hlas a priestor rôznym sociálnym kategóriám obyvateľstva. Ako vidíme, obdobie normalizácie si dnes mnohí idealizujú. Vnímajú ho ako obdobie stability, ekonomického rozvoja a materiálnych istôt, ktorými si socialistický režim zabezpečil lojalitu väčšiny obyvateľstva Slovenska. Prostredníctvom rozhovorov v knihe sa nám odкрýva úplne odlišný pohľad na normalizáciu. Je plná obáv aktérok o možnosti pokračovať v ďalšom štúdiu, obáv zo straty zamestnania, domových prehliadok, sledovania vo verejnom priestore a odpočívania v súkromí, vypočúvania a vyhrážok zo strany komunistickej tajnej polície – Štátnej bezpečnosti (ŠtB), že ublížia im, ich deťom či partnerom. Kniha prináša jedinečný pohľad na to, ako sa žilo desiatim ženám, ktoré sa nebáli moci, neboli ochotné skloniť hlavy a ne-snažili sa konať účelovo-rationálne.

Kniha Oľgy Gyárfášovej zapadá do línie sprítomnenia pamäti občianskeho vzdoru na Slovensku, resp. v Československu. Ide o ďalší dôležitý diel skladačky, ktorá začína naberať čoraz jasnejšie kontúry, napríklad aj vďaka viacerým nedávnym vedeckým výskumným projektom a rozrastajúcemu sa počtu štúdií a knižných publikácií, ambicióznym mediálnym výstupom (napr. televízne dokumentárne filmy a cykly, internetové projekty), ako aj výskumným a osvetovým aktivitám Ústavu pamäti národa (viac informácií na s. 15–16). Kniha *Ako sme žili v rokoch normalizácie* je však špecifická z viacerých príčin. Je to najmä vďaka fokusovaniu výskumného záujmu: 1. na aktérky. V kolektívnej pamäti aj histórii, ako poznamenáva Zuzana Maďarová (s. 242), sú ženy ešte stále skôr cudzinkami v diskurze, ktorému dominujú muži; 2. na bratislavské neformálne alternatívne spoločenstvo z pohľadu žien (záujem o jeden lokálny priestor, v ktorom sa vďaka priateľským a rodinným väzbám a kontaktom utvárala komunita, znamená do určitej miery aj zachytenie skupinového portrétu doby); 3. na aktérky vo veľmi špecifickej etape svojej životnej dráhy (u väčšiny mladosť a dospievanie, partnerstvo a rodina); 4. na aktérky, ktoré sa nestihli plne nadýchnuť a zažiť chvíľkové politické a kultúrne uvoľnenie a slobodnejšiu atmosféru 60. rokov a 5. na aktérky s určitým rodinným kultúrnym a sociálnym kapitálom, ktorý „zdedili“ z rodiny pôvodu alebo získali v dospelosti. Záujem o aktérky a históriu žien taktiež zapadá do širšej palety rôznych vedeckých a odborných aktivít (ich zoznam na s. 242–244). Zoznam aktivít a výsledkov rôznych projektov venujúcich sa normalizácii a histórii žien ponúka záujemkyniam a záujemcom o sledované témy dôležitý zdroj ďalších údajov.

Normalizácia znamenala presadenie a inštitucionalizovanie mechanizmov vymáhania poslušnosti. Bolo to „znormalizovanie nenormálneho,“ teda neslobody, ako to

výstižne opísal Milan Šimečka v knihe *Obnovenie poriadku*, ktorá ako samizdat vyšla práve v 70. rokoch (1975–1977, 2022). Tento princíp spočíval v donucovaní ľudí, aby minimálne na verejnosti preukazovali poslušnosť režimu, pričom ho necharakterizovalo ideologické nadšenie či zapálenie sa pre „svetlé komunistické zajtrajšky“, ale cynický a pohodlný oportunizmus. Nebolo nutné veriť, stačilo navonok poslúchať a pretvárať sa. Životy ľudí sa podriadili komunistickej strane, ktorá mala monopol na všetko, čo sa vyskytovalo vo verejnom priestore. Štát veľmi starostlivo držal všetky páky moci vo svojich rukách. Mohol ovládať svoje občianky a svojich občanov – odmeňovať za lojalitu a trestať za neposlušnosť alebo čo i len za jej náznak. Spôsoby vymáhania poslušnosti boli postavené na tom, že ľudia boli v istom zmysle rukojemníkmi štátu: každý, kto chcel dôstojné zamestnanie, poslať deti do školy, niekedy vycestovať do zahraničia, potreboval jeho súhlas. Lojalita bola tvrdo vykúpená aj nízkou mierou interpersonálnej a inštitucionálnej dôvery a vysokou mierou pociťovanej individuálnej a spoločenskej anómie. V takomto prostredí sa formovali neformálne spoločenstvá – ostrovčeky pozitívnej deviácie¹ – „ktoré svojimi aktivitami v rôznej intenzite a v rôznych podobách vzdorovali režimu a vytvárali alternatívny priestor slobody“ (s. 14). Mnohé aktérky alternatívnych spoločenstiev, v ktorých mal vzdor primárne podobu kultúrnych, umeleckých a občianskych aktivít, hovorili o nich ako o priestore slobody. Tento priestor slobody sa rozprestieral tak vo verejnom priestore (a bol napríklad naplnený inscenovaním happeningov a performance, ktorých snahou bolo provokujúco prelomiť a parodovať zabehané spoločenské konvencie, demaskovať verejný priestor ako prázdny a impotentný; umeleckými výstavami, ktoré niekedy trvali iba niekoľko hodín a boli následne zakázané; koncertmi najmä folkovej hudby; šírením a distribúciou samizdatov a zakázanej literatúry), ako aj v súkromnej sfére (napríklad bytové vystúpenia zakázaných pesničkárov; prednášky špičkových odborníkov a odborníčok; vydávanie tzv. periodických samizdatov; preklad, prepisovanie a vydávanie zakázanej literatúry). Verejný priestor však bol obmedzený, kontrolovaný a nebezpečný a občianske a kultúrne aktivity sa prenášali do „alternatívnych priestorov“, o ktorých ešte bude neskôr reč. Vyhnanstvom z oficiálnych štruktúr a v dôsledku getoizácie kvôli nedostatočnej lojalite a protisocialistickej podvratnej činnosti sa utváral zvláštny priestor slobody zhmotnený v špecifickom spôsobe života. Anna Budajová túto situáciu opisuje slovami: „Kým vonku, mimo nášho bytu, prevládala sivá s červenými transparentmi, my sme boli oslobodení“ (s. 85). S nonkonformitou a slobodou však išla ruka v ruke aj

¹ Ostrovčeky pozitívnej deviácie sú v slovenskej sociologickej spisbe spájané s Martinom Bútorom. Ako sám hovorí v rozhovore pre denník SME (2014): „V 80. rokoch, ešte pred revolučnou zmenou, bol tento koncept spoločným majetkom časti kriticky naladenej spoločenskovednej obce. A stal sa veľmi populárnym, pred revolúciou sa postupne čoraz viac ľudí začalo považovať za takýchto pozitívnych deviantov, nezapadajúcich do normy, a tou ‚normou‘ bolo prispôbovanie sa režimu.“

neistota, ktorá bola súčasťou žitej skúsenosti členiek a členov spoločenstiev. Tí, ktorí rôzne aktivity organizovali alebo sa ich zúčastňovali, boli často objektom záujmu ŠtB a v rôznej miere aj perzekvovaní.

Ako poznamenáva Oľga Gyárfášová, sama aktívna členka spoločenstva vzdoru, takýchto spoločenstiev existovalo v Bratislave niekoľko. „Pováčšine o sebe vedeli, rôzne sa prelínali, presúvali, fungovali v tekutom medzipriestore oficiálneho a neoficiálneho, ktorého hranice neboli vždy jasne vytýčené“ (s. 19). Osemdesiate roky dokonca priniesli zintenzívnenie, pestrosť a kvetnatosť protirežimových aktivít, čoraz častejšie prepájanie so šedou zónou a ľuďmi priamo v oficiálnych štruktúrach. Ženy boli aktívnymi členkami spoločenstiev, ale častejšie boli videné v neverejnom prostredí bytov, ktoré však do veľkej miery nahradzovali absentujúci slobodný verejný priestor. Alternatívna verejná sféra sa formovala na pomedzí verejného a súkromného priestoru, predstavovali ju kaviarne, krčmy či niektoré pracoviská a najmä súkromné byty, kde sa realizovali koncerty, výstavy, prednášky, ohlásené či nekončiace nečakané návštevy (s. 255). Súkromie sa stávalo autentickým, ale aj verejným priestorom otvoreným pre ostatné členky a členov komunity a ich priateľov a známych a dokonca aj pre „počúvačov“, t.j. agentov ŠtB na druhej strane odpočúvacích zariadení, ako ich v rozhovore pomenovala Jolana Kusá. Alternatívny verejný priestor mohol fungovať iba na vzájomnej dôvere, otvorenosti a angažovanosti, čo bolo do značnej miery opakom toho, ako bol naformátovaný oficiálny verejný priestor. Neformálne paralelné spoločenstvá ako slobodné a tvorivé priestory fungovali vďaka kreativitě, vynaliezavosti, nekonformnosti a odvahe. V rozhovoroch s aktérkami sa dozvedáme nielen to, akými aktivitami sa spolupodieľali na neoficiálnych protirežimových aktivitách, čo znamenalo konfrontáciu s vtedajšou mocou, ale aj stratégie, akými sa vyrovnávali s touto konfrontáciou často vyúsťujúcou v početné obmedzenia ich slobody. Zachytené sú však aj stratégie, ktorými zabezpečovali a vytvárali po mnohých stránkach bezpečný priestor a zázemie pre svoje rodiny (deti, partnerov, rodičov). „Druhá smena“ (dvojité záťaž), vymedzená masívnym vstupom žien na trh práce a pritom nutnosťou zabezpečiť chod domácnosti a starostlivosť o členov a členky rodiny, ktorá bola vo väčšej miere na bedrách žien, v prípade aktérok spoločenstva vzdoru často prerástla aj do „tretej smeny“. Išlo o neplatenú a rizikovú prácu pre toto spoločenstvo. Aj tu sa však ukazuje výrazný rodový aspekt a rodová diferenciácia, nakoľko tretia smena neznamenalala iba prípravu a spoluprácu na aktivitách spoločenstva, ale bola naplnená napríklad aj prijímaním hostí a každodenných návštev doma v súkromí, či prípravou ich pohostenia, čo zostávalo vo väčšine prípadov „ženskou prácou“. Ako poznamenáva Zuzana Maďarová, „súkromná sféra, do ktorej sa presunuli rozmanité aktivity po roku 1968 v rámci hľadania útočiska pred vplyvom štátu, bola teda rodovo príznaková“ (s. 266). Vnímala sa ako sféra „ženskej práce“. To na jednej strane umožnilo ženám spolupodieľať sa a zapojiť sa do aktivít spoločenstva, na strane druhej sa opakovala a posilňovala rodovo ur-

čená deľba práce (Linková, Straková 2018). Reprodukčná práca v podobe vytvárania zázemia (tzv. infrapolitiky – drobných neviditeľných činností, ktoré sú nevyhnutné pre výkon viditeľnejších aktivít) opätovne prilhula ženám, a tým, že sa predtým verejne vykonávané aktivity včlenili do štruktúry súkromnej sféry, toto prilnutie sa nanovo stalo samozrejmým a pre históriu neviditeľným (s. 266–267). Samozrejme, sociálna rola aktérok v alternatívnom spoločenstve bola determinovaná ich rodinným, partnerským či zamestnaneckým statusom a zázemím. V rozhovoroch sa často objavujú spomienky na množstvo drobných a na prvý pohľad neviditeľných činností. Práve ich prítomnosť v rozhovoroch však umocňuje ich vizibilitu a spoločenské zvýraznenie. Aktérky spoločenstva vzdoru vykonávali veľký diapazón aktivít a rozhodne nešlo len o pomocné či podporné aktivity. Treba ich aktivity reflektovať v inom svetle. Je nutné „spochybniť predstavu o hlavných a pomocných aktivitách a vidieť rôzne typy činností ako navzájom súvisiace, podporujúce sa a od seba nezávislé“ (s. 269, pozri aj Linková 2018). Umožňuje to zviditeľniť rozmanité činnosti a ponúka nehodnotiaci pohľad, ktorý nie je kontaminovaný hierarchizujúcou rodovou optikou.

Olga Gyárfášová si vyberá pre svoj výskumný zámer reflexiu žien, nakoľko sa o dobe normalizácie z pohľadu aktérok verejne vzdorujúcim režimu celkovo málo vie. A ak sa aj vie, tak skôr z rozprávania mužov. Takáto rodová slepota odráža prevládajúci rodový poriadok a vyústila do všeobecnej tendencie zneviditeľňovania žien vo verejnom a politickom priestore, ale aj v rámci historickej pamäti. Hlavnú príčinu tejto skutočnosti môžeme identifikovať vo fakte, že aktivity žien sa v spojitosti s rodovo stereotypnými očakávaniami a deľbou rolí sústreďujú do sféry súkromia, rodiny a domácnosti, pričom veľká história každodennú prevádzku prehliada (s. 24). To, čo sa deje v súkromnej sfére, je často neviditeľné a zostáva zabudnuté pri rozprávaní veľkých činov. Aj preto je kniha Olgy Gyárfášovej dôležitá. Aktivity v súkromí sú totiž pomenované ako súčasť politického konania a vzdoru a ako mimoriadne dôležité formy aktérstva. Umožňuje to vidieť dejinné udalosti nielen ako „his story“, ale aj ako „her story“, alebo možno lepšie pomenované ako „their story“.

Prehliadanie žien a ich anonymizácia sú evidentné aj v prípadoch, keď sa na ich úlohu upozorňuje. Ústav pamäti národa v roku 2022 ocenil ďakovným listom a pamätnou medailou 19 žien, ktoré sa počas socializmu podieľali na tvorbe a podpore samizdatovej literatúry. V tlačovej správe k udeľovaniu pamätných medailí a v samotnom programe z podujatia udeľovania cien sa mená ocenených neobjavili. Z tohto dôvodu je dôležité spomenúť mená aktérok spoločenstva vzdoru, ktoré súhlasili s rozhovormi a takto odkryli vnútorné prežívanie represí, s ktorými boli konfrontované, a stratégie, akými sa s nimi vysporiadali. Sú nimi Tamara Archlebová, Marta Botta, Anna Budajová, Jolana Kusá, Gabriela Langošová, Ľuba Lesná, Ľudmila Pastierová, Júlia Sherwood, Marta Šimečková a Dorota Šimeková. Každý z rozhovorov zachytáva úplne jedinečný príbeh. Približujú osudy žien, ktoré mali všetky predpoklady pre naplnenie svojich am-

bícií, ale rezignovali na ne, nakoľko si uvedomovali, že by sa pri ich napĺňaní vyžadovali prejavy lojality k režimu. Všetky príbehy však spája zážitok spoločenstva, ktoré bolo späté väzbami vzájomnej hlbokkej medziľudskej dôvery a solidarity. Vzájomná pomoc sa objavuje v rôznych podobách. Ide až nad rámec bežných každodenných spôsobov zdieľanej pomoci a dokonca sa zhmotnila aj v snahe ponúknuť návod, ako sa správať v prípade výsluchov. Členky a členovia spoločenstva sa delili o svoje skúsenosti, čo im ponúkalo dôležité vedomosti a zručnosti a naplňalo pocitom, že nie sú s touto skúsenosťou osamote a majú oporu. Z desiatich rozhovorov na nás neustále dolieha posolstvo o význame vzťahov a spoločenstva. Aktérstvo, opísané formy vzdorovania a protestu boli možné iba vďaka iným ľuďom, vďaka spoločenstvu. Nabúraný je obraz samostatných, neohrozených a nezávislých mužských hrdinov. Buduje sa obraz aktérstva, ktoré je ukotvené v sieti partnerských, priateľských a rodinných vzťahov alebo vzťahov na pracovisku.

Ako je asi zrejmé z doteraz napísaného, kniha *Ako sme žili v rokoch normalizácie. Rozhovory s aktérkami spoločenstva vzdoru* ponúka dôležitý a v mnohom jedinečný pohľad na obdobie normalizácie. Kniha nepodáva len svedectvo doby prostredníctvom rozhovorov Olgy Gyárfášovej so svojimi priateľkami a súputníčkami z bratislavského alternatívneho spoločenstva. Ponúka aj dve kvalitné spoločenskovedné štúdie, zasadzujúce ženské aktérky spoločenstva vzdoru a ich konanie do širších politických, spoločenských a kultúrnych rámcov. Všetkých, ktorí si knihu zoberú do rúk, určite zaujme aj veľmi dobré grafické spracovanie, poteší glosár pojmov či menný index. Ja som sa ku knihe vrátil už druhýkrát a viem, že to nebolo naposledy.

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Dejiny feministického myslenia v strednej a východnej Európe: Ako sa menil vzťah k socialistickému feminizmu?

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Lóránd, Z., Hincu, A., Mihajlović Trbove, J., Stanczak-Wislicz, K. (eds.). 2024. *Texts and Contexts from the History of Feminism and Women's Rights: East Central Europe, Second Half of the Twentieth Century*. Budapest: CEU Press¹.

Ako ženy v strednej a východnej Európe premýšľali o politickom a spoločenskom dianí po druhej svetovej vojne a aké rôzne vízie emancipácie artikulovali? Kniha *Texts and Contexts from the History of Feminism and Women's Rights: East Central Europe, Second Half of the Twentieth Century* prezentuje bohatú zbierku diel primárne z druhej polovice 20. storočia zo strednej a východnej Európy, ktoré zachytávajú komplexný vzťah medzi socializmom a feminizmom. Stretávame sa s perspektívami rôznorodých mysliteľiek – lekárk, političiek, filozofiek, sociologičiek, sochárov, expertiek, spisovateľiek, poetiek, aktivistiek, speváčok či režisérok. Štvorčlenný editorský kolektív, ktorý tvorí Zsófia Lóránd, Adela Hincu, Jovana Mihajlović Trbove a Katarzyna Stańczak-Wislicz, má ambíciu reagovať na európsky a globálny kánon politického myslenia, ktorý vytesňuje ženské hlasy zo strednej a východnej Európy. Editorčky reflektujú, že k strednej a východnej Európe sa často pristupuje ako k zaostalému priestoru, čo vedie k nedostatočnému výskumu venovanému mysliteľkám z tohto „regiónu“ a k zneviditeľňovaniu toho, ako prispeli k feministickému mysleniu. V porovnaní so Západom sú tak ženské hnutia v strednej a východnej Európe často vykresľované ako oneskorené, dobiehajúce či priam antifeministické (Grabowska 2022). Prostredníctvom rozmanitej zbierky textov a diel preložených do anglického jazyka sa tak rozrôžňujú a prehľbujú dejiny politického a feministického myslenia. Po jej prečítaní sa nezdá, že by bol strednej a východnej Európe feminizmus cudzí, naopak, vidíme, ako sa v tomto „medzipriestore“ medzi Východom a Západom priebežne ukladali a prepisovali vrstvy emancipačných aj explicitne feministických ideí, na ktorých dnes môže kolektívna feministická pamäť stavať.

Editorčky zdôrazňujú, že špecifický kontext strednej a východnej Európy v danom období vychádza zo štátneho socializmu, ktorý formoval skúsenosti žien, hnutia za práva žien, ako aj smerovanie feministického myslenia v rámci 20. storočia. Zatiaľ čo historiografia ženského aktivizmu opisuje obdobie po roku 1945 predovšetkým ako stagnáciu (Grabowska 2022), editorčky identifikujú obdobie štátneho socializmu ako

¹ Kniha je dostupná na: <https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/98220>.

výrazný míľnik, ktorý prispel k zlepšeniu právneho postavenia žien a k rozvoju sociálnych a ekonomických práv, ako je právo na rozvod, zdravotnú starostlivosť či platené materské voľno. Kniha však neprístupuje romantizujúco k štátnemu socializmu a zároveň reflektuje, že posuny a požiadavky je nevyhnutné chápať v kontexte lokálneho diania. Aj keď sa kniha sústreďuje na aktérky z obdobia štátneho socializmu, dejiny feministického myslenia predstavuje ako nevyhnutne kontinuálne, a tak do obsahu zahŕňa diela pred roka 1945, ako aj texty spojené s transformáciou po roku 1989. „Časové ohraničenie sa odvíja od nádejí a obáv ženských a feministických hnutí, najprv keď sa prikláňajú k socializmu, a potom keď sa od neho vzdávajú,“ vysvetľujú editorky v úvode (2024: 3). Kniha tak zachytáva rôzne vízie emancipácie a ich vývoj, ktoré vychádzajú zo socialistického a liberálneho feminizmu.

Za touto knihou stoja štyri editorky, ktoré sa vo svojej práci venujú intelektuálnym dejinám feminizmu, dejinám rodových vzťahov, politike pamäti, ako aj rodovej rovnosti v akadémii. Zároveň kniha vznikala v spolupráci s viac ako 100 výskumníčkami a výskumníkmi zo strednej a východnej Európy, ktorí formovali výber textov, a 33 prekladateľkami a prekladateľmi. Publikáciu pripravovali 10 rokov (od roku 2015) na osobných stretnutiach, online workshopoch prostredníctvom mailovej aj osobnej komunikácie. Obsahuje 107 textov a 23 umeleckých diel a ukazuje, že ženy artikulovali svoje myšlienky prostredníctvom rôznorodých zdrojov, ako sú odborné články, reporty, články v magazínoch, rozhovory, literárne a výtvarné diela či filmy. V úvode editorky transparentne opisujú kritériá, ktoré zohľadňovali pri selekcii diel. Vybranými dielami chceli zachytiť rôznorodosť feministických tradícií, vplyvné lokálne diskusie, ale aj hlasy, ktoré boli na ich okraji, napríklad hlasy rómskych mysliteľiek. Keďže kniha mala za cieľ sprístupniť medzinárodnému publiku menej známe príspevky žien zo strednej a východnej Európy, do obsahu sa dostali predovšetkým texty, ktoré doteraz neboli preložené do angličtiny. Editorky tak nezahrnuli diela známych mysliteľiek, akými sú Clara Zetkin či Alexandra Kollontaj. Avšak ako upozorňuje výskumníčka Kristen Ghodsee (2024), ani tieto mená nie sú úplne etablované. Západná história zväčša prehliada socialistické mysliteľky a ich prínos v rámci dejín feministického myslenia, čo ukazuje na príklade knihy *Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory* z roku 2016, ktorá vynecháva revolucionárku, političku a teoretičku Kollontaj. Aj keď editorky reflektujú, že tvorba zbierky *Texts and Contexts from the History of Feminism and Women's Rights* v anglickom jazyku nevyhnutne prispieva k utváraniu nového kánonu, ich cieľom je skôr vytvárať priestor pre diskusiu a ďalší výskum dejín feministického myslenia.

Kniha je štruktúrovaná podľa 14 tematických okruhov, čím editorky uvádzajú rôzne texty do vzájomného dialógu a podnecujú ich čítanie aj mimo rámcov národných štátov. Pri témach sa riadili heslom Osobné je politické, čo umožňuje zachytávať politiku cez jej žitú skúsenosť a každodennosť. V knihe tak nájdeme rôznorodé témy ako vojna, násilie páchané na ženách a rodovo podmienené násilie, dvojité bremeno, sexualita,

reprodukčné práva, transformácie politických režimov, ideológie ženskej emancipácie, ženy v politike a iné. Pri každom texte či diele sa nachádza biografia autorky a kontext daného príspevku. Tým sa čitateľstvu približuje život, ako aj ideologické vymedzenie mysliteľiek a môže o predstavených ideách uvažovať aj v kontexte lokálneho diania. Štruktúra knihy vyvažuje lokálnu kontextualizáciu a nadnárodné súvislosti.

Cez príbehy, skúsenosti, myšlienky a rozmanité emancipačné vízie žien zo strednej a východnej Európy v rámci 20. storočia môžeme sledovať meniaci sa vzťah k socialistickému feminizmu. V prvej kapitole, ktorá sa venuje obdobiu pred rokom 1945 a jeho dedičstvu, mysliteľky „pripravili pôdu pre synergiu a diskusie medzi feminizmom a socializmom po druhej svetovej vojne“ (2024: 11). Vízie vychádzajúce zo socialistického feminizmu sprostredkúva práca Ecateriny Arbore (1911), rumunskej lekárky a podporovateľky bojov pracujúcich žien na celom svete, ktorá vnímala socializmus a feminizmus ako vzájomne prepletené boje. V predstavenom texte kritizovala pracovné podmienky v továrňach aj v domácnostiach a podmieňovala emancipáciu žien socialistickým usporiadaním a naopak fungovanie socializmu participáciou žien. Túto prepletenosť komunikovala aj feministická spisovateľka a antifašistická aktivistka zo Slovinska Angela Vode. Ako píše Manca G. Renko v kontextualizujúcom článku, Vode predkladá emancipačný projekt, ktorý kritizuje fašizmus aj kapitalizmus a súčasne problematizuje fungovanie demokracie v kapitalizme. Podľa Vode „ani všetky politické práva dokopy nedokážu zabrániť tomu, aby milióny ‚politicky rovnoprávných‘ ľudí zomreli od hladu“ (2024 [1934]: 106). Vo svojej tvorbe z roku 1934 tak Vode prezentuje politické práva bez ekonomických práv ako nedostatočné a zdôrazňuje ekonomickú nezávislosť žien. Tvrdila, že iba prostredníctvom ekonomickej nezávislosti sa ženy môžu stať súčasťou politiky, ktorej cieľ redefinovala ako „starostlivosť o verejné blaho a službu v mene komunity“ (2024 [1934]: 104). Na tieto vízie socialistického feminizmu ďalej nadväzovali autorky aj po roku 1945. Filozofka Nadežda Čačinovič (1976) pôsobiaca v Záhrebe argumentovala, že oslobodenie všetkých ľudí vrátane žien nevyhnutne závisí od nastolenia beztriednej spoločnosti, keďže uplatňovanie práv je závislé od triednej pozície. Z textov sa tak vynára debata o tom, ako je uplatňovanie rôznych druhov práv vzájomne prepojené. Politická a spisovateľka Mitra Mitrović (1960) z bývalej Juhoslávie (dnešného Srbska) síce uznáva, že politické práva nemajú hodnotu bez ekonomickej slobody, no zároveň dodáva, že právo voliť ako politické právo najviditeľnejšie prisudzuje ženám postavenie občianky. Relevantným aspektom v predkladaných emancipačných víziách je aj rola spoločenského vedomia. Podľa maďarskej političky a kritičky buržoázneho feminizmu Anny Kéthly (1945) na to, aby sa ženy mohli vzoprieť útlaku, nestačí len patriť do utláčanej triednej skupiny, ale je dôležité mať triedne vedomie reflektujúce ich spoločenskú pozíciu, význam práce a prekérne podmienky. Rozšírenú alternatívu pod pojmom neofeministické vedomie predstavila vo svojom texte z roku 1986 Nada Ler-Sofronić, aktivistka a univerzitná

učiteľka zo Sarajeva. Zsófia Lóránd ju v kontexte opísala ako odporkyňu autoritárstva, za súčasť ktorého považovala patriarchát s kapitalizmom. Neofeministické vedomie tak neredukuje problematiku vykorisťovania žien na triednu otázku, ale reflektuje širšie sociálne a triedne ukotvené mechanizmy, ktoré prispievajú k podriadeniu žien. Emancipačné vízie socialistického feminizmu nevyprchávajú ani s rokom 1989, aj keď sú marginalizované. Výskumníčka Ina Merkel (1989) protestovala proti spojeniu Východného Nemecka so Západným, ktoré vnímala ako zaostalé v „ženskej otázke“ a namiesto toho podporovala upravenú formu socializmu založenú na solidárnych sociálnych vzťahoch, ekologickej reorganizácii, demokracii a riešení „ženskej otázky“: „Už nechceme byť skromnými, usilovnými a nedostatočne ohodnotenými pomocníkmi a zamestnankyňami (...) Zasadujeme sa za spravodlivé rozdelenie práce a výhod“ (2024 [1989]: 597).

Ako kniha sleduje vízie socialistického feminizmu a reflexiu podmienok štátneho socializmu, poukazuje aj na neúplnosť či nedostatky socialistickej emancipácie. Viaceré autorky v knihe reagujú na rozpor medzi skutočnou a formálnou rovnosťou žien. Ako argumentuje filozofka Rada Iveković zo Zahrebu v roku 1978, subordinácia žien sa nevyrieši len ich zvýšenou zamestnanosťou. Texty tak reflektujú nerovnosti v kariérnom raste a zastúpení na vedúcich pozíciách, v delbe neplatennej domácej práce vrátane výchovy detí. Filozofka Blaženka Despot (1987) pôsobiaca v bývalej Juhoslávii (dnešnom Chorvátsku) taktiež poukazuje na problematiku násilia páchaného na ženách a ponúka koncepciu marxistického feminizmu, ktorý obnažuje aj patriarchálne formy sociálnych vzťahov. Často sa problematizuje nerovnosť cez dvojíťu či trojitú záťaž, v rámci ktorej sa ženy musia vysporiadať s povinnosťami v domácnosti, zamestnaní a vo verejnom občianskom živote. Bulharská novinárka Sonia Bakish pomenovala toto náročné zosúladovanie úloh ako „ženské ukrižovanie“ (zhensko razpiatie). V kontexte literárnej tvorby Zita Kárkla predstavuje čitateľstvu Regínu Ezeru ako spisovateľku z Lotyšska, ktorá reflektuje rodovú podmienenosť pracovných podmienok a narúša predstavu o intelektuálnej tvorbe ako procese v „nerušenom tichu“. Ako v roku 1975 trefne identifikovala rumunská novinárka a spisovateľka Ecaterina Oproiu, ženy na rozhodovacích pozíciách často dostávajú otázky o zosúladovaní pracovných a domácich povinností, zatiaľ čo muži sa s takýmito otázkami nemusia zaoberať, keďže im nie je prisudzovaná rola starostlivosti o domácnosť. Autorky tak volajú nielen po rozsiahlejšom budovaní verejných zariadení a služieb, ako sú jasle, materské školy, študovne či pracovne, ale zároveň, ako píše napríklad Aina Jurciņa, Rada Iveković či Ecaterina Oproiu, aj po rovnomernejšom prerozdelení povinností v domácnosti. „Až keď muži prevezmú svoj podiel zodpovednosti v domácnosti (...), budú môcť ženy prevziať svoj podiel zodpovednosti v spoločnosti“ (Iveković 2024 [1978]: 818). Zatiaľ čo Rada Iveković zdôrazňuje chýbajúce kolektívne „ženské vedomie“, čím sa znemožňuje skutočné oslobodenie a emancipácia žien, sociologička Mileva Filipović z Čiernej Hory

zasa argumentuje, že oslobodenie žien nevyhnutne súvisí so spoločenským uznaním reprodukčnej práce ako takej. Pre filozofku a sociologičku Ainu Jurciņa pochádzajúcu z Lotyšska je dvojité záťaž znakom prebiehajúcej, ale nedokončenej emancipácie. Z diskusií, ktoré sa odohrávali počas obdobia štátneho socializmu do začiatku 90. rokov naprieč krajinami je tak zrejmé, že starostlivosť predstavovala ústrednú tému a bola podstatnou súčasťou mnohých politických vízií.

V knižnej zbierke *Texts and Contexts from the History of Feminism and Women's Rights* zároveň sledujeme, ako vízie socialistickej emancipácie komunikujú s víziami prikláňajúcimi sa k liberálnemu feminizmu či antikomunizmu. Strety medzi týmito ideologickými prúdmi možno pozorovať už v prvej kapitole o období pred rokom 1945 a jeho dedičstve cez vzťah Rosiky Schwimmer, zakladateľky prvej feministickej organizácie požadujúcej volebné právo v Maďarsku (FE), a Marisky Gárdos, ktorá viedla Združenie maďarských pracovníčok. Ako píše v kontexte Dóra Fedeles-Czeferner, ich vzťah bol poznačený nielen kamarátstvom, ale aj konfliktmi. Mariska Gárdos spolupracovala s komunistickým hnutím a kritizovala FE za to, že sa volebné právo v roku 1912 ustanovilo pre ženy na základe vzdelania a majetku. Taktiež vyčítala FE nedostatočné zameranie na sociálno-ekonomické problémy, aj keď táto kritika je podľa Dóry Fedeles-Czeferner skôr zavádzajúca, keďže FE požadovalo napríklad rovnaké mzdy pre ženy či komplexnú zdravotnú starostlivosť. Rosika Schwimmer zase kritizovala Maďarskú komúnu za antidemokratické a antifeministické politiky. Kontext, ktorý o spisovateľke Žemaitė (1912) z Litvy napísala Dalia Leinarte, odhaľuje, ako selektívne rámcovanie autoriek môže pozmeniť ich emancipačné vízie a pamäť feministického myslenia. Aj keď komunistický režim prezentoval Žemaitė výlučne ako marxistickú feministku, ona podporovala aj západný liberálny feminizmus, ktorý vnímala ako ústredný pre boj proti násiliu páchanému na ženách. Dôležitú kritiku a rezistenciu voči komunistickému režimu po roku 1945 tvorila česká politička Milada Horáková. Jej vízia bola založená na hodnotách demokracie a rovnosti medzi mužmi a ženami a v preloženom texte sa zasadzuje za to, aby ženy boli uznané ako rovnocenné politické aktérky, ktoré by mali rovnako participovať na riadení krajiny a riešení každodenných problémov: „Spolu s mužmi chceme prevziať zodpovednosť nielen v momentoch historických národných bojov, ale aj v bežnom každodennom živote“ (2024 [1945]: 205). S transformáciou po roku 1989 vízie emancipácie viac stavali na ľudských právach a individuálnych slobodách a boli späté s liberálnym feminizmom. Viaceré autorky ako Hana Havelková a Mihaela Miroiu kritizovali obmedzovanie individuálnych slobôd v štátnom socializme. Zároveň česká sociologička Hana Havelková (1995) vo svojom texte predstavila, ako sa režim podieľal na trojitom vyvlastňovaní liberálnej emancipácie cez zneviditeľňovanie liberálneho ženského hnutia, nezáujem o „ženskú otázku“ a zneužívanie ženských práv na posilnenie svojej pozície počas studenej vojny. Tieto emancipačné vízie neboli kritické len k štátnemu socializmu, ale aj k transformačným procesom.

Podobne ako Horáková v roku 1945 aj spisovateľka Jana Juráňová v roku 1994 artikulovala prepojenosť demokracie a ľudských práv žien, keď upozorňovala na odsúvanie feministických otázok ako nepodstatných pri „demokratickom“ boji voči autoritárskym zmenám premiéra Vladimíra Mečiara na Slovensku počas 90. rokov. Vybrané texty taktiež tematizovali, ako po roku 1989 dochádzalo k návratu k tzv. tradičným hodnotám a náboženským normám, ako písala napríklad poľská expertka na ženské práva Barbara Limanowska (1993). V rámci diskusií o ľudských právach kniha zachytáva aj situáciu rómskych žien prostredníctvom textu rómskej feministky a expertky na ľudské práva z Rumunska Nicolety Bițu (1999), ktorá opisuje skúsenosti s inštitucionálnym rasizmom, domácim násilím a zvýšeným obchodovaním s rómskymi ženami chápanými ako „exotická surovina“. Toto prerámcovávanie feministických požiadaviek cez ľudskoprávny diskurz a odklon od socialistického feminizmu treba chápať aj v kontexte nového politického usporiadania liberálnej demokracie. Dôležitosť kontextualizácie feministických bojov reflektuje aj redakčná rada časopisu Žena danas: „Zmenu povahy feminizmu najlepšie pochopíme, ak sa zameriame na usporiadanie, v ktorom boli tieto požiadavky formulované“ (2024 [1936]: 119).

Táto zbierka diel z 20. storočia posilňuje kolektívnu feministickú pamäť a poskytuje veľa námetov na premýšľanie o vzťahu socializmu a feminizmu a aj o tom, ako stavať na týchto ideách v súčasnosti. Na jednej strane zbierka pomáha kontextualizovať feministické myšlienky a požiadavky ako kontinuálny boj. Na druhej strane sa môže zaradiť medzi projekty, ktoré pomáhajú dekonštruovať dejiny feministických vízií ako lineárne a zviditeľňujú dedičstvo socialistickej emancipácie strednej a východnej Európy. Ako v českom kontexte upozornila Jiřina Šiklová (2012), na socialistický model emancipácie žien, ktorý bol založený na zapojení žien do pracovného procesu, podpore ekonomickej nezávislosti od mužov a distribuovaní časti reprodukčnej práce na verejné zariadenia, sa často zabúda. „V snahe rýchlo zmeniť celú spoločnosť a odlíšiť sa od vlastnej minulosti bolo zbúrané mnohé z toho, čo bolo možné prevziať do nového spoločenského systému,“ píše Šiklová o transformácii po roku 1989 (2006: 232). S pádom štátneho socializmu mal nastať „koniec dejín“ a ultimátny triumf liberálnej demokracie s kapitalizmom. Táto predstava spoločenského usporiadania sa stala dominantnou a zúžila priestor pre alternatívne imaginácie politického a spoločenského poriadku. Vyvstáva otázka, do akej miery to podnietilo aktívne zabúdanie na feministické vízie z polovice 20. storočia a obmedzilo možnosti na ne nadväzovať. Zatiaľ, čo už mysliteľky 20. storočia poukazovali na problematiku dvojitej záťaže žien, pandémie koronavírusu naplno zviditeľnila, ako málo sa toho zlepšilo v spoločenskom uznaní a distribúcii reprodukčnej práce. Práve naopak, neoliberálne politiky, ktoré rozkladajú inštitúcie sociálnych služieb, ďalej podryvajú možnosti sprostredkovať starostlivosť (Chatzidakis et al. 2020). Zároveň, ako poukázala napríklad Zuzana Uhde (2025), politiky Európskej únie využívajú štrukturálne nerovnosti medzi Východom

a Západom na poskytovanie starostlivosti pre bohatšie krajiny. Kríza starostlivosti, ktorá charakterizuje súčasnú dobu, je preplatená aj s krízou demokracie a klimatickou krízou, pričom ich zintenzívňuje kapitalistické usporiadanie spoločnosti (Fraser, 2022). Cez obnovovanie a rozširovanie pamäti emancipačných myšlienok sa táto kniha môže prihovárať súčasným politickým zápasom a podnecovať tak formulovanie nových feministických vízií pre spravodlivú spoločnosť.

Kniha *Texts and Contexts from the History of Feminism and Women's Rights* svojou širokou zbierkou textov a ich kontextualizáciou prepisuje naratív o dejinách politického a feministického myslenia. Zameraním sa na mysliteľky 20. storočia z východnej a strednej Európy úspešne narúša predstavu o feministických myšlienkach ako o importe zo Západu. Namiesto toho predstavuje politické dianie v tomto regióne ako súčasť európskych dejín a mapuje vzťah socializmu a feminizmu cez skúsenosti, kritiky a vízie žien. Ako vyzýva srbská filozofka Adriana Zaharijević (2025), potrebujeme viac výskumnej práce, ktorá napravné vymazávanie dejín feminizmu v strednej a východnej Európe.

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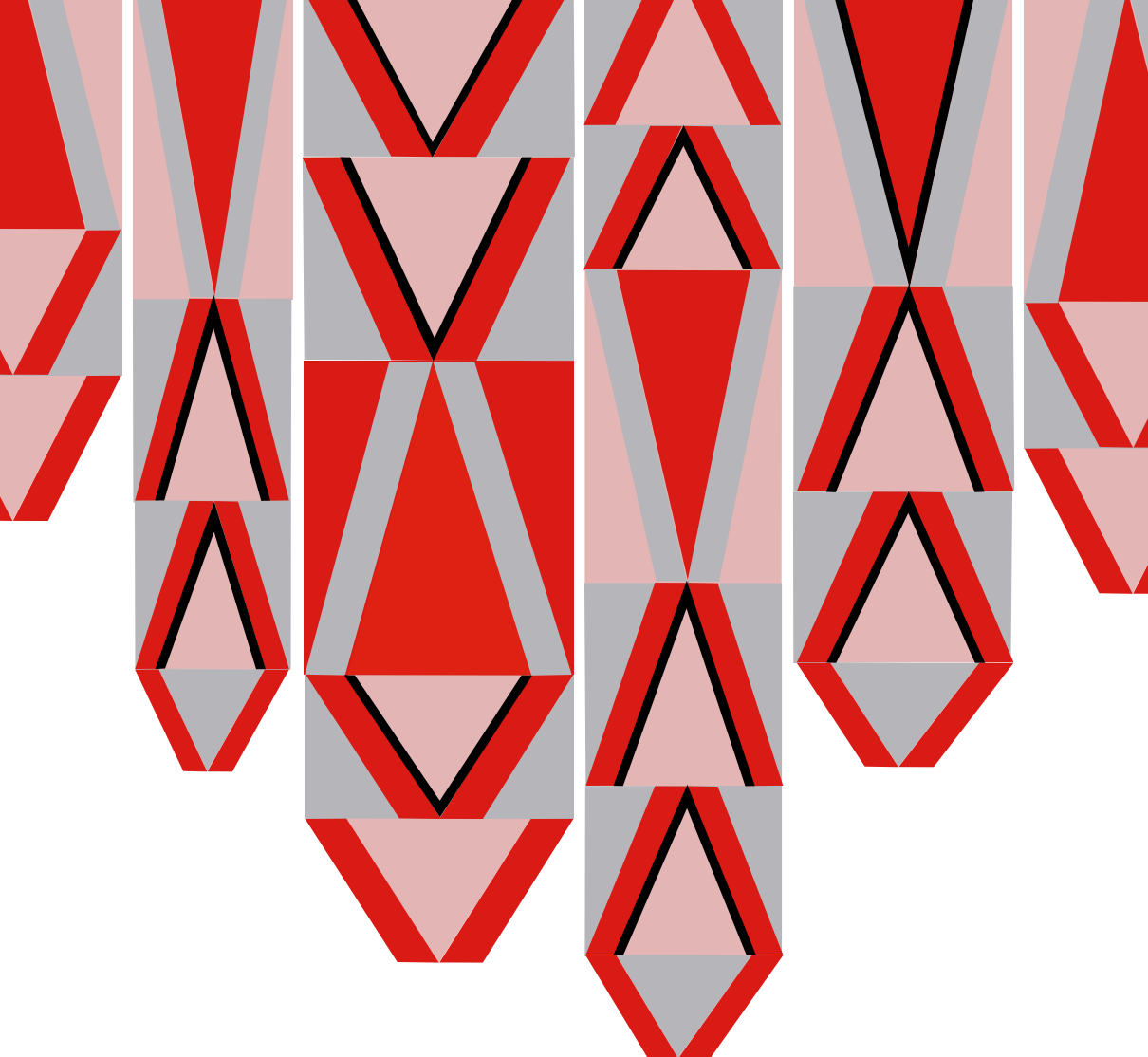
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