

POLISH FEMINISM IN AN EAST-WEST CONTEXT

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The aim of this essay is to set the subject of Polish feminism in a wider context by raising some general questions about feminisms and women's issues in society and culture, particularly as they affect Central and Eastern Europe¹ and the former Soviet Union. My standards of comparison with feminisms in Poland will be the history and contemporary situation of feminisms in the West and the Russian Federation.

The Decline of Feminism? Backlash East and West

In the first place, it is now universally acknowledged that feminism is currently experiencing a crisis in the West. Two particularly famous (or infamous) media contributions to this debate were the *Newsweek* article "The Failure of Feminism" (Ebeling 1990) and the *Time* cover story "Is Feminism Dead?" (1998).² In the twenty-first century discussions still rage on questions such as "Feminism: alive or dead?" (the subject of an interesting panel held at the Bath Literary Festival in the UK in March 2007).

¹ I have decided not to use the fashionable locution "East Central Europe" in this essay because of the significant differences between Central and Eastern Europe. For a powerful restatement of these historical and political differences, see Neumann 2002; on the literary distinctiveness of Central Europe, see Tihanov 2004.

² See also the accompanying article (Bellafante 1998), which suggests that in the 1990s feminism has been supplanted by glitz and glamour, and that young Western women are primarily interested in their bodies and themselves. Bellafante propounds the somewhat contradictory argument that modern-day feminism is "wed to the culture of celebrity and self-obsession," but at the same time is also elitist, designed for intellectuals. For an interesting discussion and refutation of this article, see Baumgardner and Richards 2000, 119-25; see also *ibid.*, 126-66 for a consideration of the new "Girlie" phenomenon (which in the UK is usually called "Girl Power" and associated particularly with the Spice Girls).

In the early 1990s Susan Faludi persuasively argued that there was a powerful anti-feminist backlash in the USA and Britain, orchestrated by the media, popular culture and conservative think-tanks, which “stands the truth boldly on its head and proclaims that the very steps that have elevated women’s positions have actually led to their downfall” (Faludi 1993, 12). She convincingly demonstrated that the alleged “man shortage” endangering women’s chances of marrying, posited by a widely-publicized Harvard-Yale study of 1986 (21-1, 27-32), and the “infertility epidemic” said to strike professional women who postpone childbearing were largely inventions organized by the male-dominated media (46-52).³

The 1990s saw the emergence in the West of the “new feminism” or “third-wave feminism” proposed by such writers as Naomi Wolf (1991; 1993) and Natasha Walter (1999; 2000), which is an attempt to reconcile the aims of second-wave feminism and the aspirations of young Western women. However, much of the negative publicity against feminism in the Western media has remained (Baumgardner and Richards 2000, 87-125), and I would argue that many young women in the West have been colluding in their own oppression, although some young feminists are now fighting back (Coppock, Haydon and Richter 1995; Berger 2006). Some of the problem may be due to the term “feminism” itself—even in the West many women regard it as associated with such stereotypes as “hairy man-hating lesbians.” In my view, it would be possible to abandon the “F-word” that has been distorted and denigrated by the media, as long as the political issues that it encompasses remain on the agenda.⁴ One of the basic demands of first-wave feminism (equal pay for equal work) has not yet been achieved in the West.

In higher education in the UK and the USA, many courses and departments of women’s studies are either disappearing or have been replaced by “gender studies”

³ The *New England Journal of Medicine*, 18 Feb. 1982 reported (erroneously) that women’s chances of conceiving dropped suddenly after the age of thirty.

⁴ However, as feminists of the new generation Amy Richards and Jessica Valenti have pointed out, “any term that we use to describe equality for women will end up being considered a bad word. There’s no escaping it” (Richards, cited in Valenti 2006, 25).

programmes which, albeit broader and interesting in themselves, dilute the attention previously given to an analysis of women. Ironically, though, this negative development for many feminists in the West may actually have helped women academics and students in Russia, Central and Eastern Europe, since the terms “gender relations” and “gender studies” have become more acceptable than “feminism” in those societies and are now generally used to describe the academic courses that are developing in the region.⁵

A second important consideration is that the decline of feminism in the West is particularly unfortunate for Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, since it is only fairly recently (and especially since the 1990s) that women in this region have been discovering the ideas of second-wave feminism that emerged in the USA, Britain, and France in the 1960s and 1970s. (One major exception was the emergence in the 1970s of feminist thought in former Yugoslavia, where women were living under a more relaxed communist regime, as well as being closer to the West and more able to travel, see Drakulić 1993; Renne 1997, 5; Hawkesworth 2001, xi). Many of the classic feminist texts, such as Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (*Le Deuxième sexe*, 1949) and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) were not translated into Russian until the 1990s (Fridan 1992; Bovuar 1999).⁶ In Poland, Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* was translated much earlier, in 1972, but Betty Friedan's liberal feminist work conveying the discontent of the suburban American housewife in the patriarchal socio-political system has not yet been translated.⁷ This suggests both that Western feminist ideas could not possibly have exerted much of an impact on Polish women until 1989 (except on those few fluent in foreign languages), and that publishers in Poland may have little sympathy for Friedan's text, since it

⁵ For the benefits, problems and challenges of engaging in “gender studies” in contemporary Russia, see “‘Doing gender’ na russkom pole” 2005.

⁶ Extracts from many other Western feminist texts have now appeared in Russian, but mainly in the feminist journal *Gendernye issledovaniia*, published since 1998 by the Kharkiv Centre for Gender Studies in Ukraine under the editorship of Irina Zhrebkina.

⁷ I am grateful to Urszula Chowaniec and Ursula Phillips for this information. Agnieszka Graff has translated some works of Virginia Woolf into Polish (1997. *Własny pokój*, Warszawa: Sic!)

contests the commonly accepted view in Poland (by the Polish Church and state) of women's primary roles as wife and mother.

Another controversial issue in post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union has been whether there is such a phenomenon as "women's literature" or "women's prose," or whether there is only "good and bad literature" (which, of course, begs the question: who decides what is "good" and "bad"?).⁸ In Poland, modern prose fiction written by women appears to have blossomed earlier in the twentieth century than in Russia, and continues to flourish today: Czermińska (2001) discusses four generations of women prose writers publishing in Poland from the inter-war period to 1995. Although she does not suggest that there is any "tradition" of Polish women's literature, the sheer number of prominent women writers in Poland must have helped to increase the confidence of successive generations, even if individual writers do not acknowledge any specific female precursors or "role models."

By contrast, some women writers in Russia, such as Svetlana Vasilenko, who compiled *The New Amazons* (*Novye amazonki*, 1991), one of the earliest collections of contemporary women's writing published after the collapse of the Soviet Union, were obliged to defend the right of "women's prose" even to exist.⁹ Vasilenko has recently admitted that she and her fellow contributors knew nothing about feminism at that time, and were surprised and delighted at the very positive response they received in the West, especially from women's groups, universities and non-governmental organizations (Vasilenko 2002, 3-6; Azhgikhina and Vasilenko 2003).

In Poland, too, there was no "second wave" of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, but feminist thought and criticism were reintroduced to the country by the literary scholar Maria Janion (b. 1926), who from 1981 to 1988 directed a group of young

⁸ For a valuable analysis of recent research and publications on Polish women writers, which also demonstrates the shortcomings of work previously published in English, see the section written by Ursula Phillips in Chowaniec, Phillips and Rytönen 2008, 16-27.

⁹ For the manifestos of the "new Amazons," see "Ot avtorov," in Vaneeva 1990, 3-6; Vasilenko 1991, 3-4.

writers in the publication of five volumes of essays and translations that included excerpts from French feminist thinkers under the general title *Transgressions* (*Transgresje*, Czerwińska 2001, 237-8). Yet the most important impetus to the development of feminism in Poland was the collapse of communism, even though, as in other post-socialist countries, feminism was not exactly welcomed after 1989 because of its negative associations with communism, which claimed to have given women equal rights to men. In practice, although Polish women were allowed into the workforce during the communist period, this ended up increasing the burdens placed on them as well as denying civil rights to both men and women.

As a result of the distrust of what was presented as “feminism” in post-socialist Poland, the vital distinction between the ideas of “sex” (*pleć*) and “gender”—the social constructions of sex (*plciowość*)—only began to be drawn in the mid-1990s. It is, however, encouraging that there is a Polish word for this concept, as in Russian there is only the foreign borrowing “gender,” which has provided a pretext for hostile commentators to reject the whole concept. The gender studies specialist Serguei Oushakine, has, somewhat unfairly, argued that the term “gender” is a Western “import” that has no historical past in Russian society, and claimed that its popularity among Russian scholars exemplifies their lack of independence and depth of thought (Ushakin 2002, 16-17). There has been some discussion in Russia of the advisability of reintroducing the Russian word “*pol*” (sex) into public discussions of gender, since some commentators claim that the term has also been used historically to refer to social and cultural, as well as purely physiological aspects of sex (“Doing gender” 2005, 192, 196, 207).

Any application of concepts from Western feminist and gender theories to help elucidate aspects of Russian culture has been criticized for allegedly imposing a “Western” model on Russian culture. Some Russian gender studies specialists have, however, persuasively countered this argument, stating that the main problem is that most Russians are not sufficiently familiar with contemporary Western concepts of

feminism, and that theories in any field automatically need to be, and indeed will be, adapted to national cultural conditions ("Doing gender" 2005, 197).

As the social scientist, publicist and women's and human rights activist Agnieszka Graff (b. 1970) has argued, feminism has had "a different chronology" in Poland from that in Western countries: "Despite not having had much of a second wave of feminism, we did experience a backlash. In fact, many of us internalized its message before discovering feminism" (Graff 2007, 144). Nevertheless, despite their avowed opposition to what they regard as "feminism," many women in Central and Eastern Europe and Russia have for a long time expressed views that can be interpreted, in the words of Sue Bridger (2000, 130) as "I am not a feminist, but..."

A third significant factor is the necessity to recognize the great impact on women of the new social and political circumstances in Central and Eastern Europe since the fall of the Berlin Wall. The general trend in post-socialist states has been to create a more conservative society for women, allied to the withdrawal of state funding and the resurgence of the Church, whether Catholic or Russian Orthodox. As Halina Filipowicz has commented, "What emerged from the Quiet Revolution of 1989 in Poland was a highly traditional culture, rooted in religious fundamentalism, nationalist ideology and patriarchal practices" (2001, 4). At the same time, the collapse of communist censorship and Poland's greater openness to the West enabled some women to become familiar with Western feminist ideas and to challenge established views on gender and sexuality in their country, although this was initially a slow process.¹⁰ In 1996, Graff claimed that there was still no feminism in Poland, admitting that her own views had been formed during her periods of study in the USA and Britain (Watson 2000, 105).

¹⁰ In Russia, independent contemporary feminist theory and practice appear to have begun a little earlier, from 1986, as a result of glasnost and as a direct response of certain women intellectuals to Gorbachev's enthusiasm for women's "natural feminine mission." This statement excludes the earlier contribution made by the group of dissident women who published the *samizdat* collection *Women in Russia* in 1979 and were subsequently forced to emigrate, but they have not generally been recognized by their successors. For further information, see Mamonova 1984; and Marsh 1996b, 286-7.

In partial contradiction of Graff's view, the situation had actually begun to change in 1993, as a result of the new Polish government's decision to reverse the legalization of abortion introduced in the Polish People's Republic in 1956. The new limitations on abortion have been the most striking example of the backlash against women's rights in Central and Eastern Europe since the collapse of communism, even though, admittedly, the free or relatively free access to abortion formerly permitted in many countries of the Soviet bloc had often been introduced as a means of compensating for an absence of contraception and adequate public sex education. There were some attempts to liberalize the laws on abortion in Poland in 1996 and subsequent years, but the ban was not overturned (Fuszara 1993; Novicka 1977a, 1977b; Kramer 2007). The only positive side of this extremely negative development for Polish women is that it united previously disparate groups of women around a common cause: "Women have become aware of the need to organize and to be more conscious about their own issues" (Nowicka 1997a, 46).

The enormous influence of the Catholic Church and Christian fundamentalism in Poland has meant that since the 1990s the unique feature of the Polish feminist movement has been its sustained focus on one issue: reproductive freedoms, and, especially, the question of abortion. One major campaign was the "Open Letter" by 100 Polish women to the European Parliament in March 2002 signed by such prominent figures as Wisława Szymborska, and in 2008 there was a new protest by Polish feminists against the attempt by the Ministry of Health to register all pregnant women in the country.

Although it has been suggested that Polish women's own real attitudes to abortion have been hidden by successive opinion polls that make no reference to gender (Kramer 2007, 67-8), the post-socialist states do not appear to be very interested in finding out women's opinions, and still less, in meeting their needs, unless they coincide with the perceived strategies of the state. Although Central and Eastern European states have been obliged to comply with legal requirements on welfare and

gender equality in order to join the European Union, there is little evidence that these provisions have been fully implemented in practice.¹¹

In Poland, as is clear from some literary texts, many women (along with their male contemporaries) continue to be believers first, and citizens second. It is thus hardly surprising that since the collapse of communism many Polish women have been reluctant to challenge the dominant nationalist and religious discourse and the less overt taboos of gender discrimination. Nevertheless, as the contemporary art historian Paweł Leskowicz has argued, if writers, artists and activists were more prepared to confront “the problem of sexual difference,” this could have a subversive and even revolutionary potential in Poland (Grimstad and Phillips 2005, 7).¹²

What kind of feminism has exerted an impact on Central and Eastern Europe? It is important to refer to “feminisms,” since there is no one interpretation of women’s issues that is universally accepted by feminists,¹³ although the Russian and Central European media have often tried to present it as a monolithic “ideology.” Western feminists have sometimes offended women in Central and Eastern Europe by implying that they know “the truth,” or by concentrating on certain issues that have not been particularly important to women in the region (such as pornography, or the cultural diversities between feminists of different generations or ethnicities), as opposed to the survival strategies and reproductive rights that are closer to the experience of women in the post-socialist countries.¹⁴

In Russia, very few women are prepared to call themselves “feminists” in a liberal, Western sense. Moreover, those few have been subjected to considerable criticism for allegedly being primarily interested in obtaining money from the West, or more concerned with self-promotion than with the problems of other women. This

¹¹ This comment is based on scholarly discussions of women’s position in contemporary Poland, the Czech Republic and Bulgaria at the conferences of BASEES and AAASS, 2007-9.

¹² On recent attempts by women artists to explore alternative gender and sexual imagery in Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, see Grigar 2007.

¹³ See, for example, my discussion of different approaches by Russian feminists in the 1990s in Bull, Diamond and Marsh 2000, 7-8.

¹⁴ For a perceptive theoretical discussion of feminism East and West after the collapse of Communism, see Watson 2000.

is often said, for example, of Mariia Arbatova, almost the only Russian author who has since the late 1990s described herself as a “feminist writer” (*“pisatel’ nitsa-feministka,”* Gessen 1998).¹⁵

The Development of Independent Feminism in Post-Socialist Poland

In contemporary Poland a considerable variety of Polish feminist thought and literature has emerged. Against significant opposition from the media and the patriarchal political and social system, several centres of gender studies have been established in Polish universities, and there are also numerous feminist discussion groups, workshops, magazines and organizations, notably the officially registered Polish Feminist Association, one of the few organizations in Central and Eastern Europe prepared to use the term “feminist” (Hauser, Heyns and Mansbridge 1993).¹⁶ However, as Ewa Gontarczyk-Wesoła has argued, in Poland “there are still many obstacles to the development of feminist scholarship” (1997, 65).

As far as literature is concerned, women writers in Poland have long been under-represented, marginalized or ignored by male critics, as they have been in Russia and other Central and Eastern European cultures. Sometimes a woman writer has to be “blessed” by a prominent male writer before she is taken seriously, as occurred with the drama and poetry of Anna Świrszczyńska (1909-84) which was praised by the 1980 Nobel Prize winner Czesław Miłosz (Grossman 2003, 88), who translated two volumes of her poetry (Świrszczyńska, 1985; 1996). It is, however, to be hoped that this is changing since the poet Wisława Szymborska (b. 1923) won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1996, although she is an intellectual, predominantly philosophical

¹⁵ For further discussion of Arbatova, see Rytönen 2004, 183-208; Marsh forthcoming. See Gapova 2004 for an interesting analysis of Arbatova’s recent autobiographical and political writings as “performance.” I am grateful to Elena Gapova for sending me this article on email attachment.

¹⁶ On the small beginnings of this group in 1990, see Drakulić 1993, 129-30.

poet (Czermińska 227-8),¹⁷ and it is a contested issue whether her work can be called “feminist” (Ostrowski forthcoming).

Some new and interesting contemporary prose writers and dramatists have also emerged in Poland (Czermińska 2001; Grossman 2005). One is the prose writer Olga Tokarczuk (b. 1962), who, unusually, is both a “serious” and popular author, a trained psychologist and devotee of Jung, who published the outstanding novels *E.E.* (1995) and *House of Day, House of Night (Dom dzienny, dom nocny, 1998)*.¹⁸ Tokarczuk has openly acknowledged the feminist stance in her fiction and even claimed that any wise woman would have to be a feminist.¹⁹ However, it depends what is meant by the term “feminist.” A chapter from her novel *E.E.* (translated in Tokarczuk 2006), set in Wrocław at the beginning of the twentieth century when Freud’s fame was spreading from Vienna, evokes the physical and emotional experiences of Erna Eltzner (hence *E.E.*), a young girl being treated for a psychiatric illness, who starts her menstrual cycle (with all the humiliation and discomfort that this entailed at that time), then discovers masturbation and orgasm. The chapter ends with the girl’s joyful union with nature, as she covers herself with leaves:

She withdrew her hands and started to tear off the overhanging leaves. Crushing them in her hands, she put them between her legs like a compress in place of those belts, loops and pads. She was overwhelmed by the suffocating scent of living plants, which touched her body both delicately and brutally, caressing her and pressing themselves against her (Tokarczuk 2006, 168).

¹⁷ Although some of Szyborska’s poems have been rendered into excellent English (e.g. Szyborska 1996; 1999), these collections are not particularly easy to obtain, and the absence of a scholarly introduction has reduced their understanding and impact in the West.

¹⁸ Olga Tokarczuk, *E.E.* (Warsaw: PIW, 1995); *Dom dzienny, Dom nocny* (Wałbrzych: Ruta, 1998). The latter is the only one of Tokarczuk’s novels that has so far been (almost) completely translated into English (Tokarczuk 2003). I am grateful to Elwira Grossman for pointing out that one chapter referring to gender has been omitted from the English translation. Antonia Lloyd-Jones’s translation of *Prawiek i inny czasy* (1996) is forthcoming in December 2009 (*Primeval and Other Times*, Prague: Twisted Spoon Press).

¹⁹ Izabela Kowalczyk, “Konferencje: IV Spotkanie Grup Feministycznych: Kobiety Między Kobietami. 11-12 marca 2000,” <http://free.art.pl/konsola/konsola.htm> (para. 9 of 15); cited in Ostrowski forthcoming.

This scene resonates with contemporary ecofeminist and ecocritical theories about women's self-discovery through the natural world (Rosenholm forthcoming). As Estella Lauter has stated, the myth of nature may be empowering for female authors who suggest that "nature remains female but becomes equal to the human" (Lauter 1984, x). Tokarczuk's chapter can be regarded as "woman-centred" (Eagleton 1990, 45)²⁰ in a similar way to Russian autobiographical or semi-autobiographical texts published in the 1990s, especially those that analyse the self and the formation of identity through the eyes of a child, such as the story by the Russian Armenian writer and feminist scholar Nina Gabrielian, "The Lilac Dressing Gown" ("Lilovyi khalat," 1996).²¹

Tokarczuk's *House of Day, House of Night*, set in a village in the extreme southwestern part of Poland, on the Polish–Czech border where the author lives, does not criticize patriarchy openly, but has been aptly characterized as "gently feminist" (Inga Iwasiów, cited in Ostrowski forthcoming). Tokarczuk is primarily interested in exploring dreams and the subconscious as a means of escaping from reality, and the search for truth in the areas of myth and magic, which may engender female archetypes. This text (like some recent women's writings in Russia) may, perhaps, be more fruitfully analysed using French feminist concepts emphasizing the specificity of women's experience and women's differences from men (Gatens 1991, 100-21), rather than through certain anglophone varieties of feminist literary theory that focus on equality and liberation from patriarchy. As Gabrielian (1996, 41-2) has said about Russia, some contemporary women writers have tried to "break away from the situation where woman sees herself through the eyes of man, not through her own eyes, to stop copying male writing, and begin to realize in her own work those

²⁰ For further discussion in English of Tokarczuk's woman-centred later texts concerned with old age and death, see Adelgeym 2008.

²¹ The original Russian text was published in the feminist journal *Preobrazhenie* (1996); and the English translation in Gabrielyan 1996. For further discussion of this story, see Rytönen forthcoming; Marsh forthcoming.

features which have been encoded in the patriarchal culture as feminine.”²² This also recalls the statement in “Women’s Time,” the famous article by Julia Kristeva (1989, 199-200) that second-wave feminists in Europe aspired to create a language for physical and emotional experiences that had been suppressed by the previous culture, and demanded the recognition of a specificity which did not go back to the “Other.”

The Feminist Legacy in Poland

Another significant feature of contemporary Polish culture is that women writers and scholars have been eagerly rediscovering their own feminine²³ or feminist traditions, referring in their works to famous female historical or literary characters or to mythological figures. One example is Olga Tokarczuk’s discovery of a medieval story from lower Silesia about the androgynous Saint Kummernis, a woman whom God saved from an unwanted marriage by giving her a male face, which she skilfully retells in *House of Day, House of Night* to explore the fluidity of gender identities.

Until very recently, the history of women’s movements in Poland and Central and Eastern Europe in general had not been extensively researched or published only in local languages, thus making it unavailable to international scholars (including myself). Important exceptions to this are Russia and Ukraine, as Western historians and literary scholars had begun to study women’s movements and feminisms in these countries since the late 1970s (Stites 1978; Edmondson 1984). However, some recent studies by Polish women scholars have shown that since the nineteenth century, in Poland, as in many other countries of the region, a small, but unprecedented number of women have protested against discrimination, campaigned for women’s education, and become active in fields previously confined entirely to men. The recently published *Biographical Dictionary* (de Haan, Daskalova and Loutfi 2005) has made a particularly significant contribution to our knowledge of women’s movements and

²² For further discussion of such “women-centred” writing in Russia, see Parnell 2000, 159-61.

²³ In this essay I adopt the established usage in feminist criticism whereby the word “female” is used to mean women’s biological sex, whereas “feminine” is used to refer to social and cultural constructs of womanhood. See Showalter 1992, 10.

feminisms in Central and Eastern Europe. Through biographical studies of more than 150 women and men who participated in women's movements and feminisms in 22 countries, it has challenged the notion that there was no feminism in this part of Europe—a widespread view espoused not only by the general public in the West, but also by prominent historians such as Eric Hobsbawm (1989, 193).

The absence of reliable information in the past may have led to another widely held misconception that feminism in the region was “imported” from the West. However, this false impression may also be the fault of some Western feminists, who have conveyed this view with a sense of their own superiority and an unshakeable belief that they had the right to impose their opinions on others in an imperialist manner.²⁴

It is also noteworthy that feminism came earlier to Poland than to Russia—the “first wave” of Polish feminism dates back to the period 1800-1830. The writer and publicist Narcyza Żmichowska (1819-1876), who was involved with a group of women known as the Enthusiasts (“Entuzjastki”) in the 1840s, has been called the first Polish feminist. By the 1870s the women's movement in Poland had grown quite strong, and from the 1890s some Polish feminists succeeded in establishing links with the international women's movement. However, as in Russia, at the turn of the century the Polish movement split into two factions, a liberal and a more radical group. The First Congress of Polish Women was held in 1905, three years before the first one in Russia—and, by contrast to Russia, subsequent congresses were held in 1907, 1917 and 1938, as the movement for women's rights continued under the Second Polish Republic (1918-1939). During the interwar period until the end of the

²⁴ For a perceptive discussion and rejection of this tendency, see Busheikin 1997; see also Cockburn 1991 on her differences of opinion with the Russian feminist Anastasiia Posadskaia, a believer in the capitalist market who was suspicious of Cockburn's socialist views. On the serious misunderstandings that can arise between Western feminists and women in Central and Eastern Europe, see the contemptuous account by the Croatian writer and feminist Slavenka Drakulić (1993, 113-32) of an invitation by Nanette Funk to contribute to an anthology on post-communist gender politics in Chapter 12, “A Letter from the United States—The Critical Theory Approach”; and the hurt and puzzled response in Funk 1993, 318-22. It is to be hoped that works such as Tanya Renne's *Ana's Land* (1997) and translations of women's writing from Central and Eastern Europe will continue to contribute to the process of East-West understanding between women.

Second World War, at a time when the “woman question” had allegedly been “resolved” in the Soviet Union under Stalin, the writer and publicist Irena Krzywicka (1899-1994) continued her active defence of women’s rights and can be seen as a radical precursor of contemporary Polish feminism.²⁵

Thus, contrary to media stereotypes, feminist and women’s movements in Poland long predate the communist period, even though, as in Russia and Ukraine (Marsh 1996a, 4-5, 14-17), women activists in Poland have sometimes been persuaded to subordinate their struggle for women’s rights to issues of independence or nationalism (perhaps mistakenly, as it subsequently turned out, as in the case of the female division of “Solidarity”).²⁶ Further investigation of the history of feminisms in Poland and Central Europe in general may help to increase tolerance of modern-day feminisms in this region, countering the misconception that feminist ideas are nothing but an alien intrusion from the West bearing no relation to the history or contemporary socio-political reality of these countries.

Conclusion: Polish Feminisms in the Twenty-First Century

Polish feminist theory and practice continue to develop in the twenty-first century. In 2007, a new feminist political party emerged, the Polish Women’s Party; and recent feminist books published in Poland include those by Agnieszka Graff, *World without Women* (*Świat bez kobiet*, 2001) and *Ricochet. On Gender, Sexuality and Nation* (*Rykoszetem. Rzecz o płci, seksualności i narodzie*, 2008), which frankly expose discrimination against women in Poland. The literary historian, critic and television personality Kazimiera Szczuka (b. 1966) has published the controversial book *Silence of the Flock* (*Milczenie owieczek*, 2004) which passionately defends the right

²⁵ Krzywicka did not publish her memoirs, *Confessions of a Scandalizer* (*Wyznania gorszycielki*, 1992) until the end of her life: see Czerwińska 2001, 224.

²⁶ See the section “The Heritage of Solidarity,” in Hauer, Heyns, and Mansbridge 1993, 261-3. On the significant, but largely unacknowledged role played by women in “Solidarity,” especially after the arrest of the male leadership during the military coup of 1981, see Penn 2005; Long 1996.

to abortion and adopts certain feminist positions that are more radical than those adopted by most Russian feminist scholars.

The presence of feminisms in contemporary Poland seems surprisingly strong both in politics and in culture, considering the anti-feminist views still prevalent in society and the media. Some commentators would even claim that Polish feminists have “the most vibrant women’s movement in the region” (Graff 2007, 142). When I began to work on this subject my initial impression was that the pre-feminist ideas prevalent in the media in Central and Eastern Europe and the former USSR bore an uncomfortable resemblance to current “post-feminist” views in the Western media. However, it now seems more important to emphasize that the feminist movement in Poland, which is concerned with countering the widespread notion of the failure of feminism and the media construct of “post-feminism,” could be very topical and relevant to other countries too, since, as Graff suggests, it presents a “peculiar mixture of second wave feminist goals and third wave feminist themes and tactics” (Graff 2007, 143).²⁷ The new wave of feminism in Poland²⁸ may thus have much to teach disillusioned feminists and “post-feminists” in the West.

Whatever types of women’s movement and feminist theory become dominant in Poland, it is most probable that they will not be a mere import from the West or a reproduction of Soviet-style equality, but will be based on Poland’s own national traditions—a kind of “third way.” Unlike many feminist scholars in the West, Polish feminists may choose to play a part in building an active women’s movement capable of opposing the patriarchal policies of Church and state, rather than merely concentrating on the theoretical, depoliticized, cultural aspects of feminism. Despite feminism’s current loss of fashion in the West and the continuing “backlash” in much of Central and Eastern Europe, it is vital to continue the struggle for women’s

²⁷ By this she means, in particular, the interest in pop culture, since American television series such as “Ally McBeal,” “Desperate Housewives,” and “Sex and the City” have been shown in Poland.

²⁸ Such “wave” terminology has been called into question by feminists in Poland and Western Europe, but it still seems a useful concept to describe the periods when feminism developed in a country’s history and the breaks between them. Since contemporary Polish feminists continue to use this term, I am happy to use it too.

rights, not only in Poland but in all parts of the world, since, at the most fundamental level, as Rebecca West sardonically commented in 1913: "I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is: I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat or a prostitute" (1983, 219).

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