

A worker, a peasant, but mainly a friend. Portraying The New (?) Soviet Woman in a Polish female periodical in the 1940s-1950s

Abstract

Departing from the notion of the “making of a socialist type of personality”, the article traces out an unparalleled, comparative analysis of the female image as it has been fashioned during the post-war period by the Soviet magazine “Krestjanka” (“Peasant”, founded in 1922) and by its Polish counterpart “Przyjaciółka” (“Friend”), established in 1948. In particular, it analyses the shift from the highly recognizable roles Soviet ideologists were pleading for by dividing women between “workers” and “peasants” (as synthesized by the very titles of the two most popular female periodicals in the USSR) to a more complex image of “friend”. In the People’s Republic of Poland (PRL) ideological propaganda went along with the attempt to give voice to women themselves. In this perspective letters addressed by the readers to the editorial board became a main feature of the magazine itself, turning it into a discussion platform which played an essential role in overcoming of the trauma of war.

Keywords

New Man, New Woman, Socialism, women, press

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1. Stalinist Woman as a New Woman?

The re-moulding of human nature into what has been labelled as *homo sovieticus*, or, in other terms, the making of a socialist type of personality, implied, quite obviously, the creation of a New Woman. Yet, if we turn our attention to the theories and declarations which are commonly associated with the project of the *novyj čelovek* ("new person")¹ in the Soviet Union, we will soon realize that the new individual who was expected to arise in the aftermath of the October revolution has been usually described in neutral terms, avoiding any gender association². Similarly to the creation of the "old man" in the *Genesis* (where Eve was believed to come from Adam's rib), the Soviet woman proceeded from her male comrade as a hardly distinguishable counterpart, equally committed to the principles of the communist ideology. With the exception of a few, although significant, contributions by Bolshevik women involved in the Department for Work Among Women or *Ženotdel*³, matters related to the individual liberation of women from patriarchal ties remained largely undiscussed, because of Lenin's refusal to separate the so-called "woman question" from the general emancipation of proletarians – both men and women. Consequently, the creation of a "new woman" never became "a major propaganda theme in the 1920s" (Glatzer Rosenthal 2002: 189), due to the assumption that "women workers do not have special demands separate from general proletarian demands"⁴. Not surprisingly, Maksim Gor'kij, who perhaps more than any other intellectual contributed to trace out the contours of the New Man under Stalin's rule, at the First Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934 lamented that neither literature nor drama have adequately portrayed the "new woman", probably because no general consensus about her image was reached (see Glatzer Rosenthal 2002: 313).

¹ In his reconstruction of the metamorphosis that this utopic project underwent in Russia and in the USSR, Thomas Tetzner (2013: 19) quite convincingly distinguishes among claims for a *spiritual* regeneration of man, attempts to change his *physical* qualities and theories aimed at a *socio-cultural* evolution of the individual.

² "Neither in Russia nor in Germany was the New Man conceived of as a gendered being, as the English translation may lead one to think. *Čelovek* and *Mensch*, the Russian and German renderings of 'man' in this context, refer to the generic features of humanity" (Fritzsche, Hellbeck, 2009: 305). The rendering of *čelovek* as *man* produced some comical effects in the English translations of scientific works by Soviet psychologists. See, for example Smirnov (1973: 30): "Man lives in a state which obliges him in one way or another to observe the laws of that state [...] He [...] acts as a parent, son, *daughter*, brother, *sister*, grandson and so on". Italics are mine (VP).

³ In this respect it is to mention the article "Novaja ženščina v revoljucionnoj literature" [The new woman in the revolutionary literature], published by the 21-year-old *Ženotdel* activist Rachil Kovnator in *Kommunistka* 5 (Kovnator 1920: 32-35). By referring to Aleksandra Kollontaj's theories (and by distancing herself from Lenin's official line on the woman question), the author proclaimed that a "new woman" was emerging in Russia, both in fiction and in reality; a woman who did not confine herself to service, but demanded "the right to a free, independent attitude in her personal life". See Barbara E. Clements, 1997: 211-214.

⁴ This was the official line of the Party, as expressed by the journal *Rabotnica* [Worker], founded in April 1914, see Elizabeth A. Wood, 1997: 216.

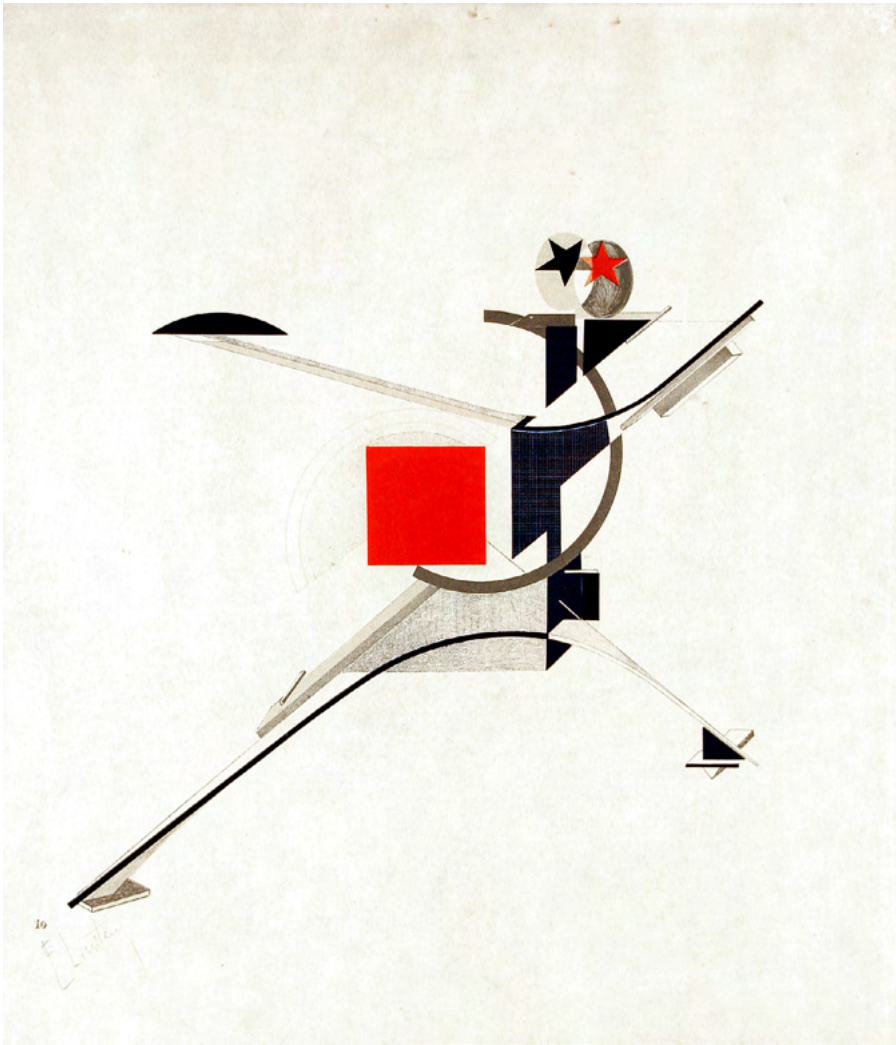
Scholars generally assume that this lack of gender traits in the image of the *novyj čelovek* entails an implicit male connotation. For instance, Thomas Lahusen, while analysing the semiotics of the New Man in socialist realism, argues that the concept of *novyj čelovek* is fundamentally male-oriented, since the expression *novyj mužčina* does not exist; if otherwise, it would be perceived as redundant (Lahusen 1998: 850). In her turn Lynne Attwood explains the general obliteration of gender differences by drawing on “the male bias inherent in the Russian language” (Attwood 1990: 63). In this respect, I would rather argue that such a gender undifferentiation has more profound reasons, which, in my opinion, are related to the original utopic character of the project itself. To introduce sex differences into the image of the *novyj čelovek* would have *ipso facto* affected the ideal of the all-round personality which was believed to be finally achievable as a consequence of the eradication of the “old”, bourgeoisie world, as well as of its remnants in the consciousness of man.⁵ Since the Socialist person had to renounce his (or her) own individuality in order to merge with the collective, faceless “I”, also gender identities should faint in order to encourage the development of new subjectivities which were often characterized by superhuman or even post-human traits⁶. It is common knowledge that the search for an idealized proletarian subject in the first decade of Soviet rule went along with visions of a machine man⁷, which, not surprisingly, excluded any trace of biological atavism. As an example of this utopic strive to overcome the confinement to one sex (or to sex in general), we can take *The New One*, an electro-mechanical puppet El Lissitzky designed in 1923 for a planned German production of *Victory over the sun*. As Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal has written, this constructivistic inhabitant of the future not only changed its natural traits into ideologic symbols (having a red square for a heart and two stars for eyes), but its gender “was not immediately obvious, if indeed it had one” (Glatzer Rosenthal 2002: 192)⁸.

⁵ On the necessary link between the revolutionary transition to a new form of society and the emergence of the New Man, see, for example, Maxim Gor’kij (1917): “New men will be created by the new life conditions – new life conditions will create new men. A man is born, who never experienced the burden of oppression; he is a man who will never be able to oppress anyone”.

⁶ I hereby refer to expectations that Socialism could produce an higher social-biologic type, as reflected in the theories of Russian eugenicists in the 1920s or in the experiments of the founder of Proletkul’t, Aleksandr Bogdanov, who made transfusions of filtered blood among workers in order to create a collective proletarian body. See Glatzer Rosenthal 2002: 195-198 and Tetzner 2013: 326-338.

⁷ See, for instance, the “perfect electric man” the filmmaker Dziga Vertov dreamed of: “We bring people into closer kinship with machines, we foster new people. The New Man, free of unwieldiness and clumsiness, will have the light, precise movements of machines”, from the 1922 manifesto “The New Man”, in *Kino-eye: the writings of Dziga Vertov*, (Vertov 1984: 7-8).

⁸ Also Tetzner (2013: 375) includes “die Aufhebung der Geschlechtergrenze” [“suppression of sex differences”] into the characterization of the New Man of the 1920s along with other factors, such as the overcoming of space and time and the withering away of individuality.



Sex differences will re-emerge later on in the 1930s, when the New Man myth will be substantially deprived of its utopic character and accommodated to *Realpolitik*, i.e. to the purposes and needs of the regime. After having haunted Bolshevik Russia, the "specter" (Wood 1997: 1) of the New Woman entered the field of Stalinist discourse and accordingly underwent over the decades a number of manipulations in order to provide support for changes in economic and demographic policy. As paradoxical as it may sound, Stalinism promoted the emergence of a more "human" (and gendered) version of New Man by "rehabilitating the individual soul as the vessel of the conscious will" (Fritzsche, Hellbeck 2009: 317) against the utopia of a machine-like man. In order to transform the myth of the New Man into a propaganda tool, the regime had to persuade the Soviet citizens that such utopia had turned into empirical reality and that, as such, it had already acquired the recognizable traits of individuals who could be described as ordinary and exemplary at the same time: ordinary "in that they are shown as an average type of person whom the reader might encounter daily in their own working life" (McAndrew 1985); exemplary to the extent they displayed the desired attributes of the New Man and the New Woman. Accordingly, "the androgynous ideal of the early Bolshevik regime gave way to distinctly gendered notions of the socialist man and woman"⁹.

⁹ Fritzsche and Hellbeck, "The New Man", 320.

Of course, we can interpret such a shift – as Tetzner for example does – as a corruption and vilification of the revolutionary ideal of the New Man, whose genealogy, according to the German scholar, dates back to ancestral myths centered on the “divinization of the man” (“Vergöttlichung des Menschen”). Nevertheless, it is indisputable that the Stalinist re-fashioning of the image of the New Woman represented a crucial step in what David L. Hoffmann (2003: 9) has defined as the revival of traditional institutions (the family, above all), which in the 1930s were re-established not in their original, pre-revolutionary form, but “rather as instruments of state intervention and mobilization”. By claiming in 1930 that the notorious “woman question” had been “solved” (even if it had not been discussed at all), Stalin took up from above the issue of women’s emancipation and, in so doing, deprived it of its potential subversiveness¹⁰. Since the party had allegedly raised them to the level of men, women could happily return to their “natural” and “favorite” roles of mother and housewife, enjoying all the advantages that the Soviet state would bring them such as maternity leaves, nurseries, milk kitchen, creches and kindergardens. Scholars have recently re-interpreted such an endorsement of conventional norms not as a retreat from socialism¹¹, but rather as an “editing of socialist ideals to make them fit with a modernized patriarchalism” (Clements 1985: 275). In respect to this, David L. Hoffmann remarks that governments all across Europe revived traditional institutions in the 1930s in order to increase the birth rate and ensure the size and health of their populations. Stalin’s Russia is no exception in this common paradigm of modernization. Nonetheless, whereas attempts to strengthen the family paralleled pro-natalist propaganda in other countries, women’s massive recruitment into the workforce (in conjunction with the emphasis on their reproductive obligations) represented a distinctive Soviet feature which resulted in an unprecedented kind of “double burden” for female workers. According to what the psychologist Georgij Smirnov defined “dialectics of the general and the personal under Socialist power” (Smirnov 1973: 38), a right of the Soviet woman (as well as her duty) was to divide herself between public and familiar sphere, between production and reproduction. Consequently, Soviet press will propagate all throughout the 1930s the dual model of a woman depicted as successful worker and mother, who finds equal fulfillment in both being a member of the workforce and performing family duties.

Sociologists generally agree that Stalinist pro-natalism promoted an essentialized view of women as mothers and substantially perpetuated gender inequality (see Hoffmann 2003; 110). Still, what is more relevant for my argument is that Stalinist discourse incorporated Bolshevik commitment to emancipate

¹⁰ As an example of the growing concern with the disruptive effects on family female emancipation could eventually result in, we can take “The Trial of the New Woman”, a “morality play” the Voronež women’s section of the Party set on 1921. Here a “new woman” is attacked by representatives of the old tsarist order (a pre-Revolutionary factory owner, a rich peasant, a priest and a mother) for her participation in public life and for her behaviour. After being initially sentenced by the court, she is rescued by workers who restored her rights. See “Sud nad novoj ženščinoj” (Unknown Author 1921: 1) and Wood 1997: 201-202.

¹¹ See in particular David L. Hoffmann’s (2003: 2-10) observations on Nicholas Timasheff’s concept of the “Great Retreat”.

women and, at the same time, created a peculiar model of "Soviet woman" that Catriona Kelly brilliantly defined as a "happy amalgam of the old and the new" (Attwood, Kelly 1998: 281)¹². And it is precisely such a controversial image of "new" woman that, reinforced by Soviet women's contribution to the Red Army victory over the Nazi invaders, will be exported to Socialist fraternal countries in the post-war period.

2. The PRL woman and her new friend

As the Stalinist appropriation of the Bolshevik emancipatory discourse demonstrates, Soviet new man (and woman) were not immutable constructions; on the contrary, they have undergone substantial changes as a consequence of the shifts of narratives in public discourse and of the different social issues which were endorsed throughout the decades. Of course, transforming the myth of the new man into a tool for both modernizing the population and establishing state control implied a peculiar concept of personality, based on the assumption that the individual "remains plastic into adulthood, and can continue to shape his fundamental character at a relatively mature age, if he is equipped with an adequate ideological picture of himself and the world" (Bauer 1952: 150). According to this model, self-training was believed (and expected) to play an essential role in the reshaping of personality through the conscious, enthusiastic adherence to one (or more) of the positive roles the Communist Party recommended. In his book *Soviet Man*, Smirnov summarized the Marxist-Leninist conception of Man as an individual, and wrote: "A person assimilates social experience and realizes his own essence by fulfilling one or another social role in the process of activity. Only by fulfilling this role does he become involved in the system of social relations and act as a bearer and creator, as a focus of the given combination of social relations" (Smirnov, 1973: 38).

As for women, the social roles to fulfill were at least two, i.e. worker and mother. Only by joining the working class as part of the vanguard of the revolution, Soviet women would emancipate themselves from the constraints of economic dependency and patriarchal mentality, as well as from backwardness – a burden, which in Russian social thought was traditionally associated with the female gender¹³. But, at the same time, they were expected to accomplish their procreational and maternal mission, since childbearing was regarded as "the social obligation of women" *par excellence*. Such a concept had been never put into discussion or criticized, not even by the most radical Bolshevik feminist, Aleksandra Kollontaj, who in her *Trud ženščin v evoljucii*

¹² See also Barbara Evans Clements (1985: 221): "The Stalinist ideal which emerged was a blend of the old and the new, as were most Stalinist values".

¹³ See Elizabeth A. Wood (1997: 5-6): "[...] both eighteenth-century monarchs and nineteenth-century members of the intelligentsia paid attention to women's roles in society in the context of trying to 'civilize' Russia. Even as they worried about the nation's backwardness, they projected that backwardness onto women".

chozjajstva (Moscow-Petrograd, 1923) pleaded for collective, state-sponsored child care as a substitute of traditional parental responsibility for children. As she pointed out, such an investment would have been crucial to the formation of new personalities, since "the narrow, closed family, with its [...] habit of thinking only about the well-being of relatives, cannot educate the New Person" (see Hoffmann 2003: 91).

Such an attitude radically changed by the mid-1930s, as Soviet officials ceased to view the family with suspicion as a possible perpetuator of petty bourgeois habits and came gradually to consider it a trustworthy instrument, apt to instill socialist values in children. Nevertheless, in spite of its official "rehabilitation", the family in Stalin's Russia by no means was conceived as a private commitment or as a means to personal fulfillment. This specific trait of Soviet discourse on family became even more evident in the first post-war decade, as the *Homo sovieticus* (as well as its female counterpart) will be transferred to a country traditionally dominated by patriarchal, Catholic values such as Poland. While serving as one of the most effective tools for the ideological mobilization of the so-called fraternal peoples in Central and Eastern Europe (Behrends 2006: 75-81), the myth of the *novyj čelovek* entered a new transnational perspective, and, as a consequence, inevitably confronted local cultural traditions and competed with (sometimes radically) different approaches to modernization. In this respect, the transfer of the image of the allegedly new Stalinist woman to Poland as reflected in the women's magazine "Przyjaciółka" [Friend] is highly instructive, since it exposes unprecedented strategies of accommodation and hybridization. To date, scholars failed in recognizing such patterns, focusing on a black-and-white approach which contrasted the dark period of Stalinization to the alleged "return to normality" after the despot passed away on March 5th, 1953. According to this dualistic schema, the image of the New Woman propagated after the first Three-Year Plan (1948-1950) was imposed by Soviet officials from above and found little correspondence in Polish society. In particular, the reshaping of the female image according to Marxist-Leninist principles and the new emphasis put on professional life outside the home have been interpreted by Zofia Sokół as attempts to emancipate women through a mere "identification with men"¹⁴.

While this ideology-driven approach does not account either for specific connotations which the New Woman was invested with, or for the deliberate commitment of a part of Polish intellectuals in enhancing its influence on readers' minds, it replicates stereotypes and simplifications about the division between Soviet "occupiers" coming to Eastern Europe and victims of the Sovietization. I think that it would be more productive to acknowledge that in the aftermath of World War II several features of the image of the new socialist woman – namely the striving for education and economic independence – became instrumental in incorporating women into workforce and, as such, were quite obviously endorsed by Polish officials. In this respect, the appeal to peasant,

¹⁴ "W latach 1945-1956 równouprawnienie kobiet pojmowano jako identyfikację z mężczyzną [...] W tym czasie obowiązywał zmaskulinizowany wzór zawodowy: murarki, ślusarki, tokarki, górniczki, ze słynną 'Helą traktorzystką' na czele" (Sokół 1998: 345).

almost illiterate women (i.e. "Przyjaciółka"'s initial target audience) is particularly significant as an evidence of the fact that in Poland promoting of female emancipation from above went along with promises of social advancement, in order to foster support to the new regime¹⁵. This kind of agitation specifically addressed to women – which represented the most numerous component of Polish population after World War II – would not have been possible without the commitment of a part of the local intelligentsia¹⁶. This is precisely the element that Sokół tends to minimize or deny. According to her, in contrast to other journals, such as "Nowa Kultura" (New Culture), for instance, Soviet ideological discourse would have never been dominant in "Przyjaciółka", or, at least, the editorial board would have reduced to what was strictly necessary, in order to avoid problems with censorship. In her article published in 2001, which is so far the most comprehensive study ever devoted to "Przyjaciółka", Sokół argued that even at the beginning of the 1950s, that is during "the worst years of Stalin's cult"¹⁷, contributions explicitly inspired by Soviet propaganda never exceeded 15–20% of the total (Sokół 2001: 106). That seems not to be always the case. If we look, for instance, at the content of vol. 249 (November 16th, 1952), we notice that on the front cover there is a portrait of "Nina, Lida and Tamara, pupils at the Music and Dance school in Čita (USSR), training before their performance", on p. 2 a review of the Soviet film *Moscow-Pacific Express* and an article on tea gardens in Georgia, on p. 4 the umpteenth installment of the novel by Galina Nikolaeva *Cornfield*, on p. 6 a short story by Maksim Gor'kij and on p. 7 a report by a Leningrad pediatrician. In the following issues we find many articles translated from Russian (mostly related to the image of the "new" working woman; take for instance the conversation with the biologist Olga Lepeshinskaya in the first issue published in 1952 or the articles on female shock workers in the spring issues of the same year), as well as countless pictures depicting life in the USSR, accompanied by captions like "Soviet young people are happy in their country" or "Iosif Stalin's name is the most important one for working people from all around the world", as the adoring gaze of the female peasant portrayed on the front cover of vol. 249 (1952) unequivocally suggested¹⁸. It looks like the presence of ideologically "neutral" articles was more an exception than a rule, notwithstanding what Sokół purported.

¹⁵ The topic of emancipation of women under the Communist rule is discussed in Fidelis 2015 and Fidelis et al. 2020.

¹⁶ On the role played by women-editors in the Polish female press after the war, see Mrozik 2022: 218-221.

¹⁷ "[...] w tym najgorszym czasie kultu Stalina" (Sokół 2001: 106).

¹⁸ For an interpretation of this very front cover of *Przyjaciółka* see Behrends 2006: 225. A peculiar mirror effect is provided by the reportages centered on the fraternal countries of Central and Eastern Europe which *Krest'janka* and "Rabotnica" published between the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s. Among reportages about Warsaw being rebuilt after the extensive damage it suffered in World War II, we find, quite obviously, the celebration of the Red Army liberating Poland from Nazi occupation. A fact that – according to the optimistic view expressed by "Rabotnica" – was thankfully acknowledged by the Polish population, as we can see from this vignette ("Friends have met again", depicting the arrival of a delegation of Soviet women in 1954).



3. The Soviet New Woman as best friend

As far as propaganda strategies are concerned, the transfer of the *novyj čelovek* to Eastern and Central Europe followed the pattern of the “great friendship” (*velikaja družba*) which in the 1930s was allegedly established among the many different nationalities of Stalin’s empire. According to the rhetoric schema of the imperishable bond among satellite countries and the Soviet Union, Polish citizens – regardless of their sex – were expected to declare their loyalty to the “Motherland of Work” (in Polish *ojczyzna pracy*), as well as their willingness to remold themselves through constant self-training. Conversely, the *novyj čelovek* called into life by Stalin would have become not only their trustworthy guide, but also their best *friend*. The complex implications of the theme of friendship in connection with the image of the New Woman will emerge at full stretch in the Polish female periodical “Przyjaciółka”. This weekly magazine, established in Warsaw in March 1948, originally targeted peasant women as the largest and, presumably, the most backward component of post-war Polish society. Hence, scholars generally defined it as a poorer counterpart of the magazine “Kobieta i Życie” (Woman and life), which in its own turn addressed qualified female workers and clerks who lived in the big cities (see Sokół 2012: 11-36). Nonetheless, thanks to its successful editorial formula, “Przyjaciółka” became extremely popular in Polish People’s Republic (PRL), reaching a print run of almost 3 million copies and an estimated readership of 5-6 million which stretched well beyond its target audience¹⁹.

Whereas the title “Przyjaciółka” immediately evoked the official theme of the eternal friendship among Polish and Soviet women, it also referred to a pre-war, local precedent, the biweekly “Moja Przyjaciółka” [My friend], edited between 1934 and 1939 by Alfred Ksycki (or Krzycki) together with his wife Anna in the quite peripheral location of Żnin, near Bydgoszcz. Before being arrested by the Nazi occupiers, Ksycki succeeded in launching for the first time in Poland the format of a female periodical largely based on letters received from readers and inspired the principles of “przyjaźń i zaufanie” (“friendship and trust”) between by the editor and his audience. This new approach made the magazine particularly successful among Polish women: in 1939 “Moja Przyjaciółka” had already reached a 250.000 copies print-run²⁰. Consequently, it is not surprising that “Przyjaciółka” founder Jerzy Borejsza took inspiration from Ksycki’s experience, while launching in 1948 his own magazine.

¹⁹ I refer here to the estimate made by the Polish sociologist Antonina Kłoskowska: “Ogólna liczba czytelników ‘Przyjaciółki’ w okresie 1950-1970 obliczana była przez wydawców na 6 milionów osób. Obliczenie to opiera się na założeniu, że każdy sprzedany egzemplarz czytany był lub przeglądany przeciętnie przez trzy osoby, co nie jest założeniem przesadnym (‘Przyjaciółka’ editors estimated that their readership between 1950 and 1970 was 6 millions. This estimate relies on the assumption that every sold copy was read by three persons, which does not seem to be an exaggeration)”. See Kłoskowska 1969: On *Przyjaciółka*’s huge popularity see also Świącicka 2012.

²⁰ On *Moja przyjaciółka* see Szmaj 2008: 73-107.

In a similar way, letters addressed to the editorial board will become a main feature of the new "Przyjaciółka", providing a discussion platform which was designed not only for disseminating the model of the New Woman among less-cultivated readers, but also for helping them in overcoming the trauma of war and the inevitable losses connected to it. "Przyjaciółka" pursued this goal from the very beginning, as the editor's note that opened the first issue made clear: "Dear Readers, giving into your hands this new female magazine, we do hope it will become the best friend for all of you [...] You will make this "friend" of yours task easier, if you write her and explain what you would like to find in the new journal. So, please let us know about anything that hurts you, afflicts you, or makes you happy" ("Przyjaciółka" 1, March 21st, 1948: 3).

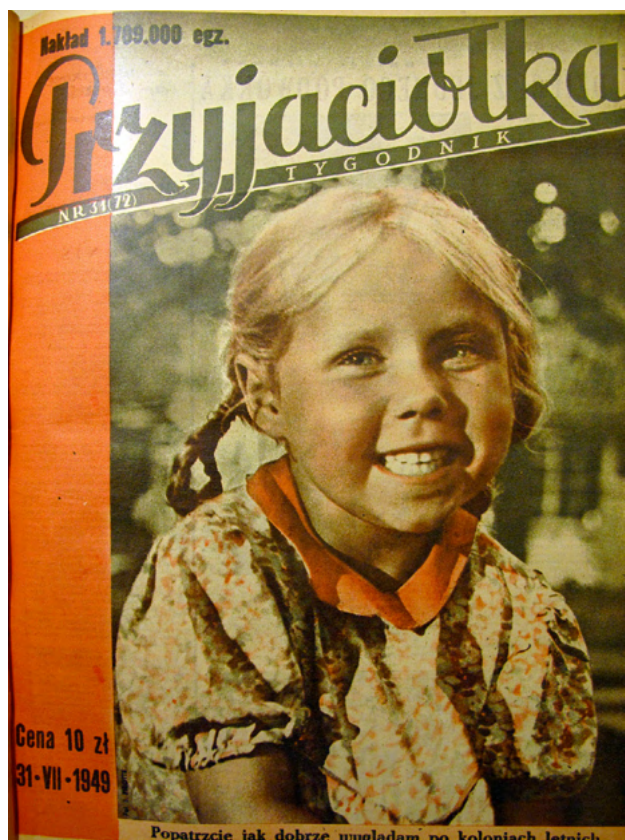
This statement is worthy of being compared with the enlightening agenda of "Rabotnica" ("Worker"), the magazine of the Women's section of the Bolshevik Party, founded in April 1914: "The journal *Rabotnica* will strive to explain to unconscious women workers their interests, to show them the commonality of their interests with the interests of the whole working class. Our journal will try to help women workers become conscious [*soznatel'nyel*] and to become organized [*sorganizovat'sjal*]" (quoted from Wood 1997: 34-35). A similar goal pursued the monthly "Krest'janka" ("Peasant", founded in 1922), which targeted the village *baby* (peasants), considered by the Bolsheviks as a reactionary element and a potential danger for the Revolution (see Clements 1985: 221-222).

According to the functions assigned by the Bolsheviks to their legal and illegal publications, both the magazines were conceived as tools of "collective agitation", i.e. were expected to reinforce the ideals which constituted the norms of the new socialist life. While Soviet women were totally identified with the role they played in socialist society (*worker/peasant*) and accordingly provided with a dedicated periodical which aimed to raise their consciousness, in the PRL the implementation of the New Woman as a pattern of modernization was essentially carried out across social classes and beyond the opposition urban versus rural. Despite the similarity, if not the identity, of the female image sponsored in the 1950s by Soviet and Polish periodicals, the comparison between "Przyjaciółka" and the postwar issues of "Rabotnica" and "Krest'janka" displays significant divergences which remained so far unexplored or underestimated²¹.

On the one hand, Soviet propaganda did not find a virgin soil in Poland, but had to superimpose its rhetoric arguments to the pre-war, *bourgeois* discourse, which from time to time significantly re-emerged. On the other hand, Polish officials knew that they had to make particular efforts in order to convince people that the new Socialist system would definitely improve their lives. This turned to be especially true in respect to children education. "Przyjaciółka"'s editors basically experienced the same difficulties faced by the Soviet propagandists in the 1930s, as "the regime needed to win over parents who were lukewarm or hostile" (Attwood, Kelly 1998: 258) towards new "programs for identity" imposed over their children. Through the 1950s "Przyjaciółka" will constantly persuade mothers to free themselves from full-time child-care and take advantage of

²¹ In her paper delivered at IWM Vienna, Zembrzuska (2000) stressed the necessity to compare the image of New Woman in Poland and its Soviet model, but did not go into details.

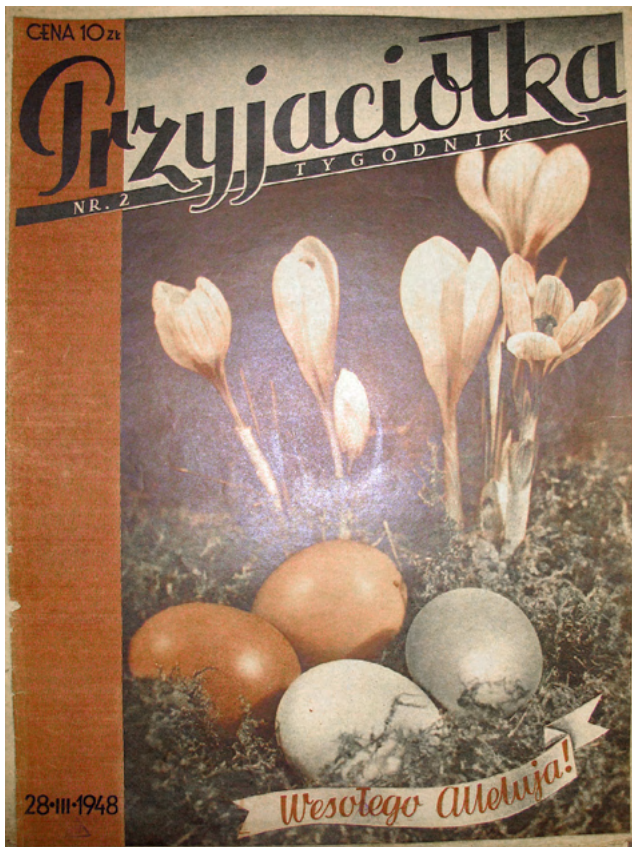
the creation of crèches in order to prioritize work and career; moreover it will try to persuade them that child-care in public institutions is more beneficial than upbringing at home. Such efforts are reflected by a number of front covers portraying children, who spent the summer at the pioneer camps, and showing them as happier, fatter and more tanned than their fellows who stayed home.



As it happened in the USSR in the 1930s, the Polish Party perceived women as a group spontaneously inclining to backwardness and to support reactionary forces such as the Church. Therefore, "Przyjaciółka" constantly urged readers not only to free themselves from patriarchal mentality and to demand complete equality with men, but also to study and to look for a job outside the home²². Only by acquiring new professional skills, as their Soviet female fellows already did, Polish women would have been able to contribute to the making of a strong Socialist society and, at the same time, improve their own economic situation. According to a popular formula widespread both in Soviet and Polish propaganda, the woman, finally relieved from home and children care, would have "become a person"²³ and, in consequence of this new, neutral status, she would have been able to reach key positions in every

²² The theme of work underwent some cardinal transformations too. Whereas in the very first issue of *Przyjaciółka* readers are still encouraged to find a job just because it will enable them to enjoy social life (and thus, hopefully, to find men who will substitute their husbands, perished during the war), starting from the "Unification Congress" onward, work becomes a tool of emancipation in itself. Compare Ratyńska (1948: 3) with Szeląg (1948: 2).

²³ This stereotype probably dates back to Aleksandr Bogdanov's idea according to whom "man" has not appeared yet and, in order to come to life, requires the intervention of an "organisa-tor", who will create him from what is not yet entirely a man. See Tetzner 2013: 331.



branch of the economy. "Work transforms woman into a person: makes her independent from man, makes her equal to him. Woman [...] has become an active member of the society"²⁴, Jan Szelaḡ proclaimed in his article "Kobieta stała się człowiekiem" (Woman has become a person), published in "Przyjaciółka" 39 in December 1948, i.e. in the same days of the Unification Congress which saw the formation of the Polish United Workers Party (PZPR). Both in Polish and in Soviet propaganda, such a "personalization" of women was the result of the emancipation carried out from above by the Party, that is a consequence of its paternal support. "The Party has raised me!", was another current stereotype, as a letter allegedly received by "Rabotnica"'s editorial board from a Chinese woman-worker demonstrates: "You asked me why I am so grateful to Lenin. My answer is simple: I owe him my life and happiness. I became a person who together with men build a new house, China"²⁵.

Such a common stress on emancipation through work could led us to interpret "Przyjaciółka" as a mere imitation of well-established Soviet models. Nevertheless, a number of differences are striking. Compared to Soviet female periodicals published in the same years, "Przyjaciółka" shows a definitely more complex interaction of "old" and "new" elements in constructing the ideological discourse. That is the

²⁴ "[...] praca czyni z kobiety człowieka: uniezależnia ją od mężczyzny, stawia na równi z mężczyzną. Kobieta [...] staje się twórczym członkiem społeczeństwa" (Szelaḡ 1948: 2).

²⁵ "Ты спрашиваешь меня, чем я обязана Ленину? Отвечу коротко: своей жизнью и счастьем. Я стала человеком, который наравне с мужчинами строит новый дом – Китай" ("Ja stała człowiekiem!", *Rabotnica* 4 [1955]: 7).

case of religious festivities, an issue that never disappeared from the most beloved Polish female magazine, as a number of covers unequivocally show. But, more interestingly, the never eradicated religious iconography have affected representations of the new Socialist family in Poland throughout the decades. As already pointed out, as soon as the party doctrine shifted toward more conservative notions of the family, Soviet propaganda placed a new emphasis on the female's ability to produce the next class of healthy workers and be the perpetuator of the Communist regime. Nevertheless, Soviet periodicals – paradoxical as it may sound – avoided traditional representations of maternity, i.e. they preferred not to show mothers and children together. As a rule, on “Rabotnica” and “Krest’janka” front pages children are portrayed alone and exclusively in public contexts, i.e. involved in a large number of creative activities together with their peers, since it was assumed that the State – and not their mothers or families – had the duty to take care of them. On the contrary, if we will turn to *Przyjaciółka* front pages of the same period, we will find heterogeneous adaptations of the traditional Nativity iconography to the revolutionary spirit which followed the triadic model (holy) mother-father-child, or highly recognisable depictions of the mother and child. Trying to conciliate “old” and “new” (rather than eradicating pre-socialist past), Polish editors even included in their family model representants of the older generation (virtually non-existent





in Soviet discourse), by assuming that even grand-mothers from the villages, although still wearing old-style peasant costumes, had already got perfectly accustomed to new rituals and spontaneously started to celebrate the anniversary of the Constitution named after Stalin together with their own grandchildren. The front page of "Przyjaciółka" 142 (1950) is also remarkable for its ambiguity: there is not any iconographic detail referring to the very occasion on which this domestic scene is taking place, only the caption explains it. Thus, if we look just at its visual content, we are unable to distinguish it from any other similar representations of the pre-Socialist past. This would have been unthinkable in the Soviet Union, given the proliferation of

revolutionary symbols, even in domestic spaces. It seems that, on the contrary, Polish editors were trying to reassure readers about the possibility to continue to celebrate private rituals at home in an undisturbed way, ignoring all the ideological pressure.



4. "What all the fuss is about?" Ideology and rhetorical strategies

Despite the model of New Woman it promoted was basically the same one elaborated by Stalinist discourse, *Przyjaciółka* accomplished the ideological task which was invested with thorough rhetorical strategies that radically distinguish it from its Soviet counterparts. In this respect, we should mention the prominent role played by contributions provided by the readership. In the PRL political mobilization and propaganda never ceased to go along with the attempt to give voice to women themselves. Even columns devoted to mobilize women and to promote the image of the new socialist society were shaped as an edifying dialogue between friends or as a letter exchange, more or less fictive, of course. This is the case of the section entitled "News from the world. A conversation between friends", which was stylized as the opinion exchange between two "characters": an anonymous, quite naive girl and a far more intelligent and experienced colleague called Marysia, who repeatedly tried to update her unsophisticated friend about the international political situation. As a rule, such dialogues were initiated by the latter's requests for explanations, for example: "Marysia, what is happening in Berlin? I have to admit that I don't understand what all the fuss is about". Or, in occasion of the imminent United States presidential elections in 1952: "Marysia, do you mean that in America there are several political parties?". In turn, Marysia patiently provided her friend with explanations that, of course, were largely inspired by the official propaganda.

Beside this section, which soon evolved into a kind of narrative of its own, many pages of the journal had been devoted to single reader's letters that soon started to overflow the editorial board. Of course, letters which appeared in print had to fit into an overall pattern and undergo a rigorous selection process. As the Paris based writer Konstanty Aleksander Jeleński suggested, the editorial board should have been involved in an extensive rewriting or even ghostwriting of what supposedly were the raw outpourings of Polish women²⁶. Nonetheless, if we turn to Soviet female journals, we realize that in the same years dialogue with readers was far less common, if not completely absent. One of the functions performed by the Soviet popular press was not only to propagandize the socialist way of life and to endow people's consciousness with desirable properties and qualities, but also to disseminate the views of selected specialists in a top-down perspective. A common format in "Rabotnica" or "Krest'janka" was to publish a single letter from a reader (in most cases a man, even in female periodicals) which addressed extremely general topics as, for example, "How can we assist our children doing homework?" (Unknown, *Kak pomoč' škol'niku chorošo učit'sja*, 1953: 25). Such questions were answered – often not without comical effects – in a deadly serious tone by scholars to whom editors usually referred as PhD.

²⁶ "Przyjaciółka zamieszcza często listy (zapewnie w znacznej mierze fikcyjnej) wskazujące na rzekomy konflikt pomiędzy starym i młodym pokoleniem" (Jeleński 1953: 9).

In its turn, "Przyjaciółka" invited rather readers (and not experts) to give their views on the subject raised by other readers and encouraged an open discussion which could eventually be concluded by an editorial comment. Here propaganda coexisted with a horizontal model of communication and opinion exchange, yet affected by censorial interventions. As an example we can mention the large debate initiated in 1952 by the letter of a young worker, Halina Bednarska, who was about to marry and complained to "Przyjaciółka" that her mother asked her to postpone the wedding until Easter in order to save money and organize a big feast in the traditional Polish style. In her turn, the young reader wondered if it would not have been more reasonable to organize a simpler party for the most intimate friends and relatives, and to invest saved money in buying some pieces of furniture for the apartment the new couple had been already assigned with by the State. Here *Przyjaciółka* contrasted "mothers and daughters" as representatives of different generations and bearers of colliding mentalities and gave the floor to the readership allowing it to embrace the former's or the latter's position. As a result, we have a lively, enjoyable discussion which illuminates modernization clashes in post-war Socialist Poland²⁷.

The radically different strategy performed by "Przyjaciółka" brought to a number of consequences. First of all, although its content was ideologically biased, "Przyjaciółka" was able to portray Polish society in a far more dynamic and realistic way than Soviet periodicals did with regard to similarly relevant issues in the USSR. Letters sent by readers, even if strictly selected or censored, reflected the ongoing conflict between the attempt to incorporate the transnational idea of a New Woman into Polish culture and the persistence of deeply-rooted bourgeois traditions. In spite of the growing ideologization of its contents, during the 1950s "Przyjaciółka" succeeded in providing Polish readers with the image of a responsive, collective "friend". As Zofia Sokół (2001: 89) stated, the emancipatory and modernising function this weekly magazine performed consisted not only in confronting readers with the model of the new socialist woman, but especially in urging them to take a pen and to put on paper their own ideas, concerns, desires. For many readers letters sent to "Przyjaciółka" editorial board had been the very first ones they wrote in their life; consequently, by consulting their favorite magazine for advice in daily life matters, they simultaneously acquired literary skills and learned how to articulate their own thoughts. On the other hand, being constantly confronted with readers' requests' and reactions, "Przyjaciółka" editors soon became aware that the model of new woman and family they proposed not only found little correspondence in Polish reality – and this would not been a problem, since the utopic character of the New Man project: it was also scarcely rooted in Polish culture, with its widespread anti-Russian sentiments and its attachment to patriarchal mentality and Catholic religion, especially among the lower class readers for whom the magazine was designed. As a consequence, the editorial board had to pursue an impossible balance between the above-mentioned model of Soviet woman and the real voice of readers who, for instance,

²⁷ See *Czy warto*, "Przyjaciółka" 13, 14, 15, 16 (1952).

repeatedly complained about the fact that *Przyjaciółka* totally ignored housewives as if they were not “working people”²⁸.

As a result, all these elements make “Przyjaciółka” definitely more multi-faceted than its Soviet counterparts. The persistence of traditional symbolic imaginary became more and more visible after 1956, when, due to the economic crisis and the growing unemployment, women will be urged to rediscover their natural “mission” of mothers and housewives²⁹. This counter-order will imply the definitive dismissing of the pleading for the new Soviet woman in Polish female press and the return to more recognizable models of behavior and thinking.

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²⁸ See for instance the letter published in “Przyjaciółka” 69 (1949): 3.

²⁹ Kłoskowska (1969: 447) defines this shift as “rehabilitation of the emotional factor in family life”.

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