



Editor's Introduction



As I prepare this volume's introduction, we are well into the third month of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The *Aspasia* editorial board joins the leaders of multiple scholarly organizations around the world in condemning Russian President Vladimir Putin's devastating attack not only on the Ukrainian people and their culture, but also on the very principles of national self-determination. As historians of and in the region, we particularly condemn the misinterpretations, distortions, and simplifications of Russian and Ukrainian history in the context of the current conflict. Such misinformation actively undermines open dialogue, democracy, and democratic regimes everywhere. In addition, we are deeply troubled by the growing militarization of our region that this war has legitimized. As women's and gender historians, we understand the consequences that ensue when military values and practices overshadow civilian ones, and the implications that result from propaganda, censorship, and the militarizing of society, particularly regarding violence toward women. We are also only just beginning to conceive of the long-term implications of the war in Ukraine for scholars and scholarship in our region. Beyond concerns for the immediate personal safety of individual scholars and colleagues, we are facing the probable destruction and loss of significant Ukrainian archival and other sources on all aspects of Ukrainian history. The probable impact on future research in our field is catastrophic and will require us to reconsider our research priorities, goals, and methods. At the same time, the war has added urgency to a growing recognition of the need to "decolonize" scholarship and to confront ethnocentrism—to move away from a traditionally Russocentric focus, to better recognize the complexities of the historical experiences in the region, and to place such experiences in their broader historical contexts, offering a more complete, nuanced, and holistic analysis to undermine simplistic, nationalistic, and distorted narratives. As the war in Ukraine amplifies calls for such a reorientation for the field, these shifts reinforce and complement the mission of *Aspasia* as a forum for the multiplicity of voices that speak in and about the region, on all topics related to women's and gender history.

This issue of *Aspasia* highlights themes of international feminisms, politics, and gender, engaging in precisely the sort of transnational scholarly dialogue mentioned above. It opens with a Special Forum devoted to the Little Entente of Women (LEW), an umbrella multinational feminist organization that sought to bring together feminist groups from Central and Eastern European countries in the years after World War I to advocate for peace and improved international relations, and to challenge the



hegemony of Western international feminism. The four articles in the Special Forum, by authors working in four different national contexts, explore the development and role of the LEW and its relationship with nationalist foreign policy priorities in four case studies. Krassimira Daskalova begins by highlighting the LEW activities in the Balkans, stressing the limits that interwar nationalism imposed on feminists' collective actions. Focusing on the Greek participants, Katerina Dalakoura finds that Greek feminists' priorities often paralleled, and were constrained by, their nation's foreign policy interests. The Czechoslovak case, explored by Gabriela Dudeková Kováčová, reveals significant ideological differences within the national feminist movement that hindered unified international action. Finally, Maria Bucur examines the rhetoric used by Romanian feminists that served to exclude ethnic and racial minorities while claiming to speak for Romanian women as a whole. Collectively, these scholars show that interwar international feminist organizations depended on support from their respective national governments and actively promoted national priorities, undermining their ability to pursue effective transnational cooperation toward achieving feminist goals and advancing women's rights in Eastern and Southeastern Europe. The introduction to the Special Forum, coauthored by its participants, provides the overall context for the specific national examples discussed in the articles that follow. The selection included in the Source, a translation by Isidora Grubački of a speech by one such feminist from Yugoslavia, reinforces the arguments in the Special Forum by providing textual evidence for yet another national perspective connected with the LEW.

In addition to the Special Forum and the Source, this issue includes four articles that explore women's experiences in their communities and on the world stage. The articles by Zuzanna Kołodziejska-Smagala and Natalia Pamula both examine the efforts of minority populations in Poland to present their needs and their circumstances. Kołodziejska-Smagala focuses on Polish-Jewish women writers (Jewish women who wrote and published in the Polish language) in the *fin-de-siècle* as they negotiated the meaning of women's emancipation and acculturation for their community. Emphasizing discussions of girls' education in Polish-Jewish women's literary publications, Kołodziejska-Smagala complicates narratives about the Polish women's emancipation movement by recognizing the historical and cultural circumstances surrounding Polish-Jewish women's participation. She finds that acculturating Jewish women had to balance their desires to integrate into the dominant Polish culture with the need to preserve their community's traditions and practices. In the process, she reveals that Polish-Jewish women writers helped to shift debates over the woman question from suffrage rights to women's self-determination as they sought a new role for Polish-Jewish women in their communities and in Polish culture overall. Shifting our attention to the final decades of the twentieth century, Natalia Pamula's contribution examines the community of disabled Polish women through a collection of memoirs written and published after the collapse of state socialism. Analyzing disabled women's self-representations, Pamula finds that the end of state socialism did not bring major changes or improvements for disabled women. Rather, they experienced "crisis ordinariness," a continuation of their struggles to survive and live meaningful and productive lives within the broader context of major social changes. Pamula argues that neither state socialism nor the postsocialist state fulfilled its promises of citizenship,

relegating disabled women to the margins and silencing their voices. She emphasizes the intersections among gender, domesticity, violence, and disability, highlighting practices of exclusion and complicating the narrative of the post-1989 transformation.

The articles by Marina Soroka and Iva Jelušić, in contrast, examine the roles that individual women played in the international arena, suggesting that domestic representations predominated in relation to women even in visible public roles. Taking the examples of four Russian diplomats' wives, Soroka explores the domestic side of the world of high diplomacy before World War I. She describes the status, background, expectations, functions, and behavior required of diplomats' wives, and the ways that some women challenged those expectations. Soroka finds that Russian diplomats depended on their wives on multiple levels—from financing their international lifestyles to running the embassy to hosting diplomatic events—and that while family ties might affect a diplomat's postings, a wife's behavior rarely impacted his career. Soroka concludes that patriarchal norms ensured that nineteenth-century Russian diplomats' wives were relegated to the background, valued for their role as helpmeet and excluded from politics and diplomacy. By the second half of the twentieth century, women's position in society had changed significantly, but their role on the international stage remained limited, as Jelušić shows in her study of media representations of Jovanka Broz as the first lady of Yugoslavia. Focusing on Broz as the most prominent embodiment of the Yugoslav New Woman, Jelušić argues that press depictions of Broz actually undermined the image of the socialist new woman by emphasizing her domestic functions as Tito's wife and downplaying her previous (successful) partisan military career. Jelušić concludes that representations of Broz situated her between tradition and modernization, and missed the opportunity to fully engage with the emancipatory potential embodied in the idea of the "first woman comrade."

The issue concludes, as usual, with a selection of book reviews and review essays that highlight the important work, in multiple languages, published on women's and gender history in and about the region. These reviews raise awareness of the substantial scholarship being conducted in a variety of national and international contexts and highlight—building on the discussions about the Little Entente of Women in the Special Forum—the centrality and importance of transnational scholarly dialogue in Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe (CESEE). As our Forum contributors suggest, while national case studies provide important foundations, understanding such research in its broader transnational context enhances its significance. World events continue to remind us that national experiences are fundamentally connected to a wider global web, and their histories must be examined and assessed. To conclude this introduction, I would like to take a moment to thank all the *Aspasia* editors and contributors to this volume for their hard work and dedication to this scholarly enterprise. Our transnational collaborations enrich our discussions and our scholarship, and are more important than ever in our fractured world. I hope you find the issue relevant and will consider contributing to our endeavors.

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◆ Notes

1. See statements by the Association for Women in Slavic Studies (<https://awsshome.org/advocacy/>, accessed 6 May 2022) and the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies (<https://www.aseees.org/advocacy/aseees-executive-committee-condemns-russias-military-assault-ukraine>, accessed 6 May 2022). The ASEES statement also includes a list of anti-war statements from scholarly institutions and organizations around the world.