Visual Imprints of Women’s History
Valentina Mitkova

Women’s history is women’s right—an essential, indispensable heritage from which we can draw pride, comfort, courage, and long range vision.
—Gerda Lerner, The Creation of Patriarchy, 1987

The most remarkable and unprecedented changes around the world between . . . 1900 and today can be fully grasped only by analyzing how women have been both the subject and the object of these major shifts, from an unprece- dented set of new rights to new cultural norms, and overall greater agency as a category of humans.
—Maria Bucur, The Century of Women, 2018

Since the establishment of women’s history as an academic research and educational field in the 1960s–1970s in the Western context—a field contesting traditional historical narratives (political, diplomatic, institutional) that located women on the periphery of historical processes—efforts have concentrated on the discovery and analysis of neglected facts of the past, the historical representation of gender interdependence, and the reconstruction of a credible male–female sociohistorical reality. Since the 1990s, in the context of changed political, social, and cultural realities, interest in the problems of the “second sex,”1 its experiences and representations, and its role in historical events has intensified and gained greater public visibility in the east as well. Interpreted as a significant tool for drawing a comprehensive picture of women’s past in Europe, scholarship on women’s history in Eastern and Southeastern Europe has focused on various aspects of women’s emancipation in the modern era, the relationships among power, gender, identity, modernization, nationalism, and national formation, women’s role in the processes of cultural and civilizational construction, and their place in the context of traditionally established intellectual hierarchies. Conducting a productive dialogue between history and social anthropology, filling numerous gaps in historical memory (regarding traditionally marginalized social groups such as women), feminist studies in the region have produced collections of documents and primary sources, innovative publications, and monographs, all sharing the belief that women have their own history subject to complex analysis.

A specific (powerful) approach to producing gender-sensitive history demonstrated in the contemporary Eastern European and Balkan contexts, an approach targeted at broad public resonance and more often realized in the paradigm of “entangled histories,”2 is the work on large-scale projects that include thematic exhibitions. The purpose of the latter is to visualize and articulate different trajectories of women’s
The Greek project “Women’s Press—Women of the Press: Women’s Periodicals and Women Editors in the Ottoman Space,” implemented in 2018 by the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Crete, Rethymno, in collaboration with the Hellenic Open University (Master’s program in Public History), under the guidance of Katerina Dalakoura,3 was paradigmatic in this effort. The project focused on women’s journalistic and publishing activity in the late Ottoman period (within the Ottoman millets, until the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1923), interpreted as a field for the construction and reconstruction of women’s collective identities, a space for debating the “woman question,” a tool for intercommunity communication and development of women’s networks, and a means of channeling modern (bourgeois) modes of life. The initiative, including a conference and an exhibition, articulated and popularized the most recent research and interests of Balkan feminist historians on the theme,4 shed light on the differences, entanglements, and empty spaces in the scholarship, and drew new trajectories for analysis.

Considering this context, two visual projects on women’s themes realized in the last two years in Bulgaria and Serbia—“Zhenite v istoriata” (Women in history), 2021, and “Staze, spone, spoznaje” (Paths, ties, and discoveries), 2022—demonstrate current developments in the field in Southeastern Europe (the Balkans). They also indicate the increased public sensitivity to rehabilitating women’s experience, as well as the attempts to include women in the construction of local and global cultural and historical narratives.

The Bulgarian project, “Zhenite v istoriata: Obrazovatelen modul s kulturen marshrut” (Women in history: Educational module with a cultural route), initiated and implemented by the association European Spaces 21 and the Regional Historical Museum in the town of Rousse in 2021 (under the guidance of Tsveta Nenova and Reneta Roskheva), focused on inspiring stories of women who stood up for their civil and political rights, and channeled, through personal examples and collective mobilization, substantial transformations in public attitudes toward the place and role of women in modern society. The exhibition highlighted various aspects of women’s emancipation in the national and global context, united around the belief that knowledge about the formation of modern concepts of women is an essential part of historical memory, an integral element of the local cultural heritage and its uses.

The visual narratives of the exhibition, oscillating between local and global and running through time and space, followed two thematic directions. The first traced the developments and manifestations of feminism in Bulgaria and abroad through prominent women, organizations, women’s aspirations, and struggles: the birth of the women’s movement in Bulgaria in the context of national modernization at the end of the nineteenth century, the activity of the Rousse women’s associations Stopanka (Housekeeper) and Dobrodetel (Virtue), the congresses of the Bulgarian Women’s Union through the lens of local women’s suffrage, Bulgarian and world feminist leaders’ personal paths and activism, the role of women in the first mass environmental protests in Rousse in the 1980s, and so on. The second thematic direction focused on women’s emancipation through their achievements in professional and social spaces
traditionally monopolized by men, such as medicine, literature, performing arts, and sports.

Motivated by the public necessity of accessible and attractively presented knowledge on women’s roles and contributions to the processes of national formation and in global history, the exhibition, initially intended for secondary school students in Rousse, visited several other places in the country as well: a forum at the University of Rousse, devoted to increasing voter turnout in elections for the European Parliament, and the exhibition spaces of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the capital Sofia, where it was presented in collaboration with the Embassy of the Slovak Republic in Bulgaria (with a special emphasis on Slovak women’s emancipation and their contacts with Bulgarian contemporaries).

The exhibition complemented earlier Bulgarian feminist projects (including exhibitions), initiated by the Bulgarian Association of University Women (BAUW), in which the Rousse group of researchers and feminists had played an active part. Already in 2015, the BAUW, together with the International Master’s Program in Women’s and Gender History (MATILDA) at Sofia University, presented a documentary exhibition entitled “Zheni, zhenski organizacii i kolektivna pamet” (Women, women’s organizations, and places of collective memory) in the city garden in front of the Ivan Vazov national theater in Sofia. The initiative aimed to increase public sensitivity to the long and difficult process Bulgarian women went through to gain civil rights in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in the realms of education, professional life, politics, society, and culture. The documentary exhibition was a part of a larger project to establish cultural and tourist routes to connect “female” places of memory in the space of the city. The beginning of one such route, called the “Feminist walk,” was set in Sofia in March 2015, and since 2016 it has been held in the towns of Rousse, Veliko Turnovo, Plovdiv, Bourgas, and Blagoevgrad as well.

Corresponding to the Bulgarian initiatives, particularly aimed at bringing women’s intellectual activity out of the periphery of historical and literary memory, the Serbian exhibition “Staze, spone, spoznaje” (Paths, ties, and discoveries), realized by Biljana Dojčinović and Mirjana Stanisić, opened in the National Gallery of Serbia in Belgrade in 2022. The exhibition was part of a large-scale project (the Women Writers’ Route) initiated within the framework of the Forum of Slavic Culture and aimed at representing one of the forty-eight cultural routes of the Council of Europe. The Serbian section of the route—connecting three Slavic countries and fourteen women writers—focused on the intellectual legacy of Elena Dimitrijević (1862–1945), Isidora Sekulić (1877–1958), and Desanka Maksimović (1898–1993). The authors presented were among the few women writers admitted to the literary canon in Serbia, who had paved the way for other talented women with intellectual aspirations beyond traditional gender prescriptions.

Presented through their poetry, prose, translations, and correspondence with other intellectuals, Elena Dimitrijević, Isidora Sekulić, and Desanka Maksimović represented women’s literary tradition in the local context, embedded the cosmopolitanism of modern writing women, and marked their spiritual explorations that transcended personality, genre, language, and national boundaries. The author and feminist Elena Dimitrijević, the least known of the three, was represented through a selection of
works (both published and manuscripts) inspired by her travels in America (1912–1920), wanderings around the world (1926–1927), and stay in Paris in the early 1930s (such as the travelogues Novi Svet ili Codinu Dana u Americi [The new world or a year in America] and Sedam Mora i Tri Okeana [Seven seas and three oceans], the poems “Na Okeanu i Preko Okeana” [On the ocean and above the ocean], “Prema Suncu za Sunce” [Toward the sun for the sun], and “Iz Novog Sveta” [From the new world], and her poetry collection written in French, Au Solei Couchant). The portrait of Isidora Sekulić was drawn by her collection of essays titled Saputnici (Fellow travelers), three introductory texts published in the Srpski književni glasnik (Serbian literary gazette), a travelogue dedicated to Norway, and her correspondence with Svetoslav B. Živanović and Svetoslav Petrović. The intellectual legacy of Desanka Maksimović was represented by a travelogue articulating her impressions of Australia, manuscripts of her poetic works, translated texts, and correspondence with other literary women.

The unifying theme of the passion for travel and for crossing borders—spiritual and physical, spatial and intellectual—which was indicative of the emancipatory developments in the construction of modern female identities, increasingly pushed women out of the traditional modes of existence limited to home and family. Within the literary context, women’s interest in other countries and cultures, their intellectual curiosity and erudition, made them decisively step out of the institutionalized norms of “proper” women’s literature, transcend individual experiences, and create texts of high aesthetic value, with universal humanist messages that could compete with men’s canonical works.

In summary, as these two visual feminist projects from recent years demonstrate, the pursuit of hearing women’s voices, validating women’s experience, and analyzing women’s contributions to political, social, and intellectual developments—the subject of an increasing number of initiatives and studies in the contemporary Balkan (Eastern European) context—undoubtedly opens the possibility for creating a gender-sensitive history that recognizes women as significant agents in the course of the key transformations that marked the modern era.

About the Author

Valentina Mitkova is Associate Professor in the Department of Library and Information Studies and Cultural Policy, Faculty of Philosophy, Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski. She is the author of the monograph Pol, periodichen pechat i modernizacija v Bulgaria (ot kraia na XIX do 40-te godini na XX v.) [Gender, the periodical press, and modernization in Bulgaria (from the end of the nineteenth century until the 1940s)] (Sofia: Sofia University Press, 2022), as well as of other publications related to women’s authorship and the women’s periodical press.

Notes

2. Francisca de Haan, “Writing Inter/Transnational History: The Case of Women’s Movements and Feminisms”, in Internationale Geschichte in Theorie und Praxis [International history


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**Feminism and Politics in the Interwar Balkans (1923–1939)**

*A Conference Report*

Georgios Manios

On 19–20 May 2023 the Department of History and Archaeology, University of Crete in Rethimnon, Greece, held an international workshop entitled “Entangled Histories of Feminist Advocacies in the Interwar Balkans and Central Europe (1923–1939).” This workshop was part of Feminisms and Politics in the Interwar Balkans (FEPIB),1 a research project that aims to explore the contacts, relationships, and cooperation between women’s and feminist organizations of the Balkan and Central European countries, and particularly the entanglements of their emancipatory policies with the politics in the region during the interwar period. This workshop was an opportunity for researchers to present some early results of their work. The meeting was organized by Vanessa-Vaia Geragori, an MA student at the University of Crete, Dimitra Samiou, a historian based in Athens, and Katerina Dalakoura, Associate Professor at the University of Crete and Principal Investigator of FEPIB.
The central topics of the workshop revolved around the political activities of the Little Entente of Women (LEW) within the broader Balkan context. Participants highlighted issues concerning the goals and policies of feminist movement representatives, their advocacy efforts, the political alliances developed at the Balkan and regional level, and their overall participation in the significant political developments of the interwar period. Additionally, the effort to comprehensively document the available archival material proved to be exceptionally important. The presentation of the participants’ research progress within the FEPIB project sparked a rich discussion with crucial observations regarding the archives on feminism in the Balkans during the interwar period, and their scope, limitations, and accessibility challenges. This led to an interesting session in which the project’s plan for more effective utilization of the existing material was presented, aiming to contribute to the expansion of feminist studies in the Balkans. Finally, in one of the highlights of the workshop, researchers engaged in a constructive dialogue concerning feminist theories, contemporary approaches, and methodology.

The workshop commenced with the opening speech given by the coordinator of the FEPIB project, Katerina Dalakoura. The first day of the workshop was dedicated to issues related to available archival material in the countries under examination, as well as its utilization. In the first panel, Charitomeni Giasafaki (PhD candidate, University of Crete), Eleftheria Papastefanaki (postdoctoral researcher), and Vanessa-Vaia Geragori (MA student, University of Crete) presented material from feminist magazines and newspapers of interwar Greece. Dimitra Samiou and Katerina Dalakoura proceeded with detailed presentations of the status of the official archival collections that are available for research.

The speakers of the next panel provided a comprehensive overview of the situation in the other countries under examination. Ivana Pantelic (University of Belgrade) presented the primary sources in Serbia from which she draws material for her research, while Krassimira Daskalova and Valentina Mitkova (both from St. Kliment Ohridski University of Sofia, Bulgaria) discussed the respective sources in Bulgaria. Maria Bucur (Indiana University, USA) and Gabriela Dudekova-Kovacova (Institute of History, Slovak Academy of Sciences, Bratislava) presented the sources that they utilize, respectively from Romania and the Czech Republic. Of great interest was the in-depth presentation by Pavlos Fafalios (postdoctoral researcher) of the digital platform that has been created to catalogue the material already collected by the researchers of the project. This platform, specially designed for the project, functions as a digital library, offering a significant research tool in the field of feminist studies. Additionally, it can serve as a foundation for creating a digital intellectual map of the feminist movement and its activities in the Balkans, which is an ambition of the FEPIB project. Immediately after the presentation of the digital platform, a discussion followed in which the participants reflected on the various possibilities for using and expanding the platform. Dr. Fafalios promised that the participants’ recommendations would be taken into consideration.

The final panel of the day discussed theoretical and methodological issues. Krassimira Daskalova proceeded with a concise yet comprehensive discussion of gender history, paying special attention to the relatively new paradigm of the entangled history
of women’s movements and feminism. Maria Bucur extensively discussed methodology, specifically focusing on discourse analysis and innovative approaches to utilizing methodological tools for selecting and studying the political action of the representatives of feminist organizations. Dimitra Samiou examined the similarities and differences between feminist claims within interwar women’s movements. She concluded that despite these differences, various feminisms should primarily be approached as political movements. This is because they challenged the fundamental concepts of gender relations and roles, highlighting the unequal and unjust treatment of women.

The first day of the workshop concluded with a highly informative presentation on the legacies and new challenges of transnational sisterhood during the interwar period by Gabriela Dudekova-Kovacova.

The second day included equally interesting presentations, this time focusing on issues of the LEW and its regional-level activities. Krassimira Daskalova spoke about the various (international, regional, national) networks of women activists and the entanglements of their agenda and leadership, and drew attention to the fragile alliances among them within the context of the raising nationalisms and militarization of interwar politics. Ivana Pantelic outlined the impact of feminist actions on mainstream Yugoslav politics in the interwar period, using pacifism as a case study. Gabriela Dudekova-Kovacova presented the differences in approach and action between two feminist organizations, the LEW and the Unity of Slavic Women (USW), focusing on the challenges and limitations of transnational sisterhood. The next presentations focused on the goals of feminist organizations in a national context and their involvement in national politics. Maria Bucur described the tensions and competition among Romanian feminists at a national level, while Dimitra Samiou addressed the issue of defending women’s suffrage and women’s citizenship as presented within the framework of the LEW and the Balkan Conferences. Presenting the case of Greece, Samiou raised questions about the ways in which regional initiatives contributed to women gaining the right to vote and citizenship. Vanessa-Vaia Geragori’s paper, focused on the promoting of the issues of motherhood and children’s rights within the framework of the LEW, served as an addition to the previous discussion.

The last panel of the workshop discussed the efforts of feminist organizations to achieve collaborations with other political initiatives within the broader Balkan and Central European contexts. Eleftheria Papastefanaki presented the initiatives taken by socialist women in Greece, specifically focusing on the work of the Socialist Women’s Group and the role of Athina Gaitanou-Gianniou. Her contribution provided valuable new insights into the feminist movement in Greece and its connections with other Balkan and international organizations. Valentina Mitkova concentrated on the representation of international initiatives of women’s activism in the publications of the periodicals of the Women’s Social Democratic Union, suggesting that the social democratic vision of women’s empowerment in Bulgaria could be analyzed as a manifestation of “feminist consciousness.” Eleni Fournaraki (University of Crete) presented the Club Lyceum of Greek Women—an initiative of the Greek pioneer feminist Kalliroi Parren—and its efforts to build international and inter-Balkan collaborations for the promotion of Greek women’s rights in education and employment. Last but not least, Katerina Dalakoura focused on the participation of women’s or-
ganizations in Balkan conferences and the presence of LEW representatives in these events.

The concluding discussion confirmed that the workshop was a good initiative within the framework of the FEPIB project that significantly contributed to the fields of women’s and gender history. The participants recognized the value of exchanging knowledge and ideas among researchers working within FEPIB and highlighted the experience and expertise gained from the presentations and discussions. The exchange of knowledge during the workshop facilitated the participants’ enrichment with ideas, methodologies, and best practices and generated new insights and perspectives that will—no doubt—contribute further to the study of women’s movements and feminisms in the Balkans and Central Europe.

About the Author

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Note

1. This Forum showcased research conducted as part of the project “Feminisms and Politics in the Interwar Balkans (1923–1939)” (Project Number: 3050), supported by the Hellenic Foundation for Research and Innovation (HFRI) under the “2nd Call for HFRI Research Projects to support Faculty Members and Researchers.”

Two Feminist Exhibitions in the Czech Republic

Denisa Nečasová

Fresh, complex, visually interesting, breaking stereotypes about women, femininity, and modern Czech history, and above all opening up new perspectives and questions. This is how I would simply sum up the feminist-themed exhibitions that two of the most important museums in the Czech Republic have organized in recent years: “Civilized Woman: The Ideal and Paradox of the Visual Culture of the First Czechoslovak Republic” at the Moravian Museum in Brno (2021–2022) and “In Her Own Voice at the National Museum” in Prague (2019–2020).

The theme of the first exhibition, “Civilized Woman,” is included in its title and is elaborated in its leaflet: “The exhibition traces the parallel processes of modernization

and female emancipation that accompanied the emergence and development of Czech interwar culture. One of the key pillars of these processes was the figure of the new—civilized and modern—woman.” The concept of “the new woman,” always emerging in the period of social transformation, is specified here by the attribute “civilized.” In this way, the authors emphasize the influential idea of progress at the time and also refer to the Brno exhibition from the interwar period “The Civilized Woman” (1920-1930), which reflected the forms of femininity dominant in that period.

How is such a relatively general topic materialized in a few exhibition halls? The very first objects leave no doubt that there is no simplification and glorification of the First Czechoslovak Republic (1918–1938) or of women and femininity. Upon entering, one is greeted by a long wall covered with reproductions of magazine covers from the 1920s and 1930s depicting women as film stars, mothers, athletes, workers, and even an iconic beauty with a mikado (a typical haircut for that time) and a cigarette. Humorous periodicals making jokes about female emancipation are represented as well. This is one of the ways that the exhibition points out the ambivalence of the visual culture of the time and, above all, the contemporary ideals of the new woman. It also visualizes another typical feature of the period: the fact that traditional gender ideas did not disappear with the establishment of Czechoslovakia or the constitutionally codified equality of men and women.

The following rooms continue in the same style, focusing on other areas related to the theme: the woman in the public sphere, the domesticated woman, the fashionable and consumer woman, the sporty and healthy woman, the mechanized woman. The titles of each section include aspects other than the standard perspectives. For example, the section “The Woman in the Public Sphere” highlights prominent female politicians, women’s movement activists, and general concepts of women in public spaces, including cafés and parks. And the section “The Mechanized Woman” is not only about automobiles, but also about gainful employment associated with machine operation, where the “machine” is not only a source of a certain emancipation of movement and a symbol of freedom, but also emblematic of the oppression of dehumanized factory conditions and the danger of accidents.

The variety of exhibits and their interesting installations are also worth mentioning. Alongside paintings, busts, and contemporary products of applied design or mass culture, visitors can find designs for efficient household furnishings, including a vacuum cleaner hovering above their heads, hear radio speeches, or laugh at Ferenc Futurista’s caricature of the “constructive” woman “who does no harm.”

The exhibition is accompanied by a catalog with the same title, which follows the structure of the exhibition. Above all, thanks to its scope (476 pages) and depth of coverage, it provides a more comprehensive interpretation and represents a fundamental scholarly study of the phenomenon.

The second exhibition, “A Voice of Her Own,” opened in 2019 on the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of women’s suffrage in Czechoslovakia. Its concept is different. As the title suggests, the exhibition focuses on women of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries who, throughout their lives, crossed the imaginary boundaries of the social order and pushed for women’s emancipation, as the exhibition catalog states: “The story of women’s emancipation is a story of the struggle for the right to
one’s own voice, but also a story about this voice being silenced, a story of the audacity to speak and of consequences brought about by displaying such boldness.”

The exhibition presents twenty-five more or less well-known women from different social classes, ethnicities, and currents of thought and politics, who represent a certain stage of historical development. Visitors can meet the famous writer Božena Němcová, the noblewoman Sidonie Nádherná, the car racer Eliška Junková, or the politician Františka Plamínková, as well as the almost unknown hockey player Markéta Podstatzká-Lichtenstein or the young tractor driver Zlata Medunová.

The exhibition is arranged chronologically and the visitor walks through time from the first half of the nineteenth century to the present, accompanied by banners from the present-day Prague demonstrations for women’s rights. On the walls, typical
objects characterizing individual women (for example Němcová’s inkpot or Junková’s cloth racing cap) and documents, paintings, and photographs are successfully incorporated. The exhibition “In Her Own Voice” is also conceived literally. In the middle of each room there are several textile tubes into which visitors can enter, put on headphones, and hear what each woman was thinking or dreaming about, in their own words.

The exhibition has a catalog of the same name, which briefly recapitulates the lives of all twenty-five women and the individual exhibits associated with them. Compared

to the catalogue for the “Civilized Woman” exhibition, it is not as extensive (141 pages) and is not conceived as a scholarly monograph with a series of pictures, but primarily as a visual memory of the exhibition.

Both exhibitions, which focus primarily on the past, also stimulate thinking about the present, about current forms of gendered political legitimation, the ways in which women are portrayed, their emancipation, and, more broadly, the existing gender order. In addition to a highly aesthetic and intellectual experience, the exhibitions offer a glimpse into the past, while raising a series of questions for the present.

◊ About the Author