

THE CONSERVATIVE RESPONSE TO THE POLITICAL AND MORAL EMANCIPATION OF WOMEN IN POLAND AFTER WW1 (IN THE 1920S)

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What came to be called the Second Republic of Poland was arising as a weak and internally disorganised state, torn by sharp social, political and national conflicts. Even as late as in 1921, its political form and geographical territory were still far from determined. The wobbliness of the Polish statehood was aggravated by an escalating economic crisis that hit the country in the early 1920s. The collapse of the Polish mark in 1923 triggered staggering inflation rates. The inflation stirred social unrest, which found an expression in a surge of strikes. A dearth of available jobs combined with everyday challenges, such as queues, steep prices and monetary chaos to enhance the atmosphere of temporariness. The writer Irena Jurgielewicz poignantly depicted the situation in which the Polish state found itself at the time: 'Only now do we begin to realise that Poland is barely basted together from three incompatible parts, that the basting was precipitated by the war effort, and that it should be replaced with a reliable binder as soon as possible. The problems once staved off now re-surface, exacerbated by the confusion and destruction wrought by the war. Besides the old wounds, the industry is beginning to grapple with new ones; the inflation rates are soaring; the laws are far from uniform, and the administration, still suffering from its old shortcomings, has again been thrown out of balance by the war.'¹

The mood of disaffection with post-war realities was ubiquitous in Europe at the time.² This sentiment was only enhanced by the concomitant feeling that the old norms of social life were becoming inoperative and that efforts to develop new models and principles for sustaining the peaceable existence were failing.³ In other words, as insightfully concluded by Modris Eksteins in *Rites of Spring*, everybody craved normalcy, but nobody knew how to accomplish it.⁴

1 Jurgielewiczowa, Irena: *Byłam, byliśmy... Wspomnienia*, Łódź [brw], p. 242–243.

2 See Krzywicka, Irena: *Wyznania gorszycielki*. Warszawa 2002, p. 201–202.

3 [Reicher, E.]: *Zadania pracy kobiecej*. In: *Bluszcz 1922*, no. 15, p. 116.

4 Eksteins, Modris: *Święto wiosny. Wielka Wojna i narodziny nowego wieku*. Warszawa 1996,

The atmosphere of protracted provisionality was particularly difficult to come to terms with for the generation formed by the stable realities of the 19th century.⁵ With their realm of values apparently most at risk, right-wing circles, both of conservative and of nationalist persuasion, deplored the ‘spiritual anarchy’ into which Polish society had tumbled and which was expressed, for example, in the abandonment of community-centred thinking, in moral relativism, in the primacy of material values over the immaterial ones, in the decline of the sense of duty and in hedonism identified with liberalism. This ‘moral hollowness’ was allegedly fostered by the degeneration of post-war culture, drowned in the noise of ‘foxtrot and jazz bands’ and wallowing in pornography, which spilled across cinema, theatre, literature, dance halls and women’s fashion to ravage everything that, as the phrase went, ‘had been laboriously cultivated by church and family over the ages.’⁶ For the right-wingers, the writer Julian Kaden-Bandrowski stood for a symbolic embodiment of these cultural changes and, as such, was a target of fierce attacks launched by the nationalist and church-affiliated press. Associated with Piłsudski’s moderate left-wing, Bandrowski authored a novel entitled *Łuk* [The Bow] (first published in 1919), whose plot occasioned a major scandal. The novel is set in Cracow during World War One, and its protagonist is a lonely married woman who has a series of lovers when her husband is away as a soldier. Finally, she becomes pregnant with a teenager and has an abortion shortly before Poland regains independence.⁷ Bandrowski was censured for graphic eroticism and accused of breaking up the family. Zofia Starowieyska-Morstin, herself hailing from the landed gentry, argued in the Jesuit *Przegląd Powszechny* [Popular Review] that ‘Bandrowski’s ethics seeks to make its demands a reality by fighting for women’s right to sin,’ while the Christian ethics does so ‘by taking the right to sin away from men.’⁸

For the traditionalists, the departure from the pre-war ‘normalcy’ was also exemplified in the independence women had gained during the war, which showed

p. 286–288.

- 5 Kawalec, Krzysztof: *Spadkobiercy niepokornych. Dzieje polskiej myśli politycznej 1938–1939*. Wrocław 2000, p. 55; Wapiński, Roman: *O obyczajowości Polaków przełomu epok*. Gdańsk 2006, p. 106–107.
- 6 Wasilewski, Zygmunt: *Likwidowanie obyczaju*. In: *Myśl Narodowa* 1926, no. 17, p. 258; Chościak, A.: *O zdrowie moralne młodzieży*. In: *Prąd* 1920, nos. 3–4, p. 83–84; Bitner, W.: *Dwa prądy*. In: *Bluszcz* 1922, no. 16, p. 124.
- 7 See Pawłowski, Ł.: *Obraz ziem polskich czasu Wielkiej Wojny w powieści lat 1914–1923*. In: *Metamorfozy społeczne*, vol. 20: *Studia i materiały do dziejów Polski 1914–1918*, ed. K. Sierakowska. Warszawa 2018, p. 343–345; Sprusiński, Michał: *Juliusz Kaden-Bandrowski. Życie i twórczość*. Warszawa 1971, p. 115–125.
- 8 Starowieyska-Morstinowa, Zofia: *Przegląd piśmiennictwa*. In: *Przegląd Powszechny* 1931, vol. 190, p. 120.

itself in their increased engagement with the labour market, changes in female clothing and female sexual emancipation, all of them resulting in an unsettling of gender roles and consequently of the social order.⁹ ‘For the generation that was fated to live straddling two eras separated by the Great War, old and new times formed two distinct worlds which were governed by entirely different mores. A lot of behaviour which had previously been considered immoral and disgraceful for women was everyday practice in the new times.’¹⁰ In November 1918, the re-emerging Second Republic saw women granted full civil rights by a decree issued by the Chief of the State of Poland Józef Piłsudski.

The patent disruption of the gender hierarchy in public space triggered a pronounced increase in conservative attitudes, which can easily be inferred from the right-wing press of the early 1920s. Worried as they were about the crisis of values afflicting society, the members of nationalist circles tended to attribute its genesis not only to the catastrophe of the war, which they believed was not enough to explain the ‘spiritual and material condition of the peoples of Europe,’ but also to the emancipation of women as resulting from the post-war domination of liberal and progressive movements. It was indisputable, as insisted by Stanisław Kozicki, that ‘despite the removal of the ramifications of the war, the symptoms of the shift persist[ed].’¹¹ Kozicki was a prominent politician of the nationalist bloc, which primarily clustered around the National Democracy.

The charges that right-wing journalists levelled against Polish women, who were called to account for flouting national imperatives, purportedly a result of misunderstanding their newly obtained civil rights, were nothing short of moral panic.¹² The term was first used by the British researcher Jock Young in 1971 to capture the social tension caused in the UK by the publication of statistics on drug abuse. In today’s social sciences, moral panic denotes a disproportionate social response to the conduct of a group or an individual which is viewed as violating the social order and felt to threaten the cherished values. Circumscribed temporally, spatially and in terms of its social resonance, moral panic ‘usually occurs in times of social crises, systemic transformations and other social changes which are difficult to adapt to.’¹³

9 See np. Kozicki, S.: Na przełomi. In: *Tęcza* 1928, z. 8, p. 1–2.

10 Kałwa, Dobrochna: *Kobieca seksualność w świetle teorii Michela Foucaulta. Spojrzenie na Polskę międzywojenną*. In: *Kobieta i rewolucja obyczajowa. Społeczno-kulturowe aspekty seksualności. Wiek XIX i XX*, eds. A. Żarnowska and A. Szwarc. Warszawa 2006, p. 20–21.

11 Kozicki, S.: Na przełomie, „*Tęcza*” 1928, z. 8, p. 1; see also: R[eicher], E.: *Cel pracy kobiecej*. In: *Bluszcz* 1921, no. 1, p. 2. see more: Plach, E.: *The Clash of Moral Nation. Cultural Politics in Piłsudski’s Poland*. Ohio Univeristy Press 2006, p. 17–29.

12 See more: Wargacki, Stanisław A.: *Zjawisko paniki moralnej jako wyznacznik granic moralności*. In: *Prace Naukowe Akademii im. Jana Długosza w Częstochowie XVIII*, 2009, p. 8–13.

13 Zielińska, Iwona: *Media, interes i panika moralna. Nowa kategoria socjologiczna i jej implikacje*.

Right-wing discourse cast women in the role of the ‘guardians of morality’ and, at the same time, as an allegory of the national community. A conservative female writer claimed that: ‘The low level of women’s morality is fertile ground for all the poisonous weeds to sprout in the nation; it is the ruin of its ‘godly life,’ a hotbed of conscience brokering and trafficking as the female hand fails to check debaucheries.’¹⁴ Woman was supposed to reflect the condition of the nation. Consequently, her comportment and ethics were decisive factors in whether the Polish nation would survive or sink into decline. This interdependence was made quite explicit: ‘If we are to perish, we shall perish by Polish women, and if we rise and perpetuate our being, we shall also owe this to Polish women.’¹⁵ In order to corroborate this principle, another conservative writer, signing his pieces with the initials S.T.K., evoked the experiences of the Russian state: ‘Bolshevism in Russia would not stand one moment if it were not supported by women – if a nation is on its way to a downfall, contemporary women are and will be to blame for it.’¹⁶ Associated with the Christian democrats, Waław Bitner struck similar notes, viewing women as ‘the last factor’ capable of ‘tipping the scales’ in the struggle for power over society in which Catholicism vied against political leaders in the grip of philosophical materialism.¹⁷ A comparable conclusion can also be found in the editor of the nationalist *Myśl Narodowa* [*National Thought*], who used his weekly to exhort that: ‘Men fight on physical and parliamentary battlefields, while women on the fields of the supreme ideas of our civilisation, that is, the Christian Religion and the national Family’ (capitalisation original).¹⁸

As females were made responsible for the biological, moral and cultural restitution of the nation, the perception of women’s emancipation was clearly affected. This is well illustrated by a talk delivered by a participant at a convention of the conservative Polish Women’s League: ‘It matters less to the nation how many doctors, lawyers, clerks and telephone operators the feminine world brings forth; but it is the matter of life and death to the nation and to the world, it is the matter of its spiritual and intellectual capacity, how women are prepared for practical life as mothers and housewives. If the spiritual and mental future of the nation depends on women’s mental culture and on their spirit, their practical and house-keeping

In: *Kultura i Społeczeństwo* 2004, no. 4, p. 161.

14 Przewóska, M. Cz.: Rola Polki w odbudowie Polki zjednoczonej, In: *Bluszcz* 1922, no. 21, p. 164.

15 S.T.K.: Współczesne kobiety [i] mężczyźni. In: *Bluszcz* 1921, no. 8, p. 7.

16 Ibidem.

17 Bitner, W.: Dwa prądy. In: *Bluszcz* 1922, no. 16, p. 124.

18 Grabowski, I. O.: Wybory. In: *Myśl Narodowa* 1922, no 40, p. 6.

training is one of the crucial and meaningful factors in the development of the country's economy and material culture.¹⁹

At the same time, the right-wing press tended to critically appraise the conduct of Polish women, who, dazzled with their freshly won freedom, furnished emancipation 'with all the features of revolution, with all its destructive consequences, throwing the established forms of life in disarray.'²⁰ In elucidating this process, Jędrzej Giertych, affiliated with the nationalist bloc, suggested in a typically conservative vein that women were immature and thus incapable of properly using their freedom. 'Proceeding all too abruptly, emancipation,' he argued, 'carries the risk of overindulgence in the newly gained rights [...] and of [women] pushing these rights further than those who have long enjoyed them' as well as 'losing [...] the need of any bonds and rigours whatsoever.'²¹

The detrimental impact of feminism on the lives and minds of women was also repeatedly highlighted. The Catholic journalist Czesław Lechnicki published *W walce z demoralizacją* [*Fighting Demoralisation*], in which he argued, for example, that feminism 'weakened women's psychophysical capacities for conjugal life,' whereby he listed properties that enabled women to persevere in married life, including humility, modesty, moderation and religiousness.²² The historian Jan Karol Kochanowski protested against associating the idea of women's emancipation with the idea of progress, asking: 'For will the mother of a family [...] gain anything whatsoever by scattering the virtues inherent to her sex and so venerable [...] on the human fair without a trace, blending with the man, steeped in him, de-womanised and yet incapable of adopting another sex?'

A right-wing female journalist fashioned an explicitly negative image of emancipated women. Importantly, in this image, the 'de-womanisation' evoked by Kochanowski only concerned women's efforts to imitate men, primarily in sexual behaviour, but it did not refer to women's appearance. Suffragists that were pictured in right-wing magazines of the day indispensably had to exude blatant eroticism, be young, made-up and wear garments that, as the writers emphasised, 'expose[d] more than they conceal[ed],' which was supposed to imply their lack of control in the sexual sphere. If they had jobs, they infested public offices and agencies with 'unhealthy elements of sexual hysteria.'²³ These publications and their likes were clearly informed by the principle of construing women's bodies and clothes as outer reflections of their sexuality. Consequently, a writer for *The*

19 [Reicher, E.]: Zadanie pracy.... In: *Bluszcz* 1922, no. 15, p.

20 Giertych, J.: O kierunek wychowania dziewcząt. Poznań 1929, p. 5.

21 Ibidem.

22 Lechnicki, C.: *W walce z demoralizacją*. Szkice literacko-społeczne. Warszawa 1932, p. 39.

23 S.T.K.: Współczesne kobiety.... In: *Bluszcz* 1921, no. 8, p. 7.

National Thought admonished: 'We must not ignore the manifestations of promiscuity around us, which are expressed in such seemingly innocuous things as the vogue for women to bare their bodies.' Continuing his line of reasoning, he claimed that 'loose morals pave[d] the way for an impairment of the duty toward society and the state, and the other way round.'²⁴

Besides the deficit of moral principles, young women were also accused of selfishness and individualism, which allegedly bred their reluctance to enter matrimony and fulfil their maternal function. They were blamed for the breakdown of the family and for a sudden increase in the divorce rate in the post-war period; more than that, they were even denounced for contributing to poverty in Poland, 'when the depleted country waste[d] exorbitant sums on feminine fripperies.'²⁵ Besides that, Jędrzej Giertych remonstrated with women for questioning religion, tradition and the love of the motherland, all this being in his view a testimony to 'a crisis in the life of the female part of society.' To make things worse, Giertych entertained no doubts that this crisis would have its civilisational outcomes as women nurtured children and thus determined the shape of the national community.²⁶

Emphatically, the anti-feminist and anti-emancipatory rhetoric did not frame women as the only trigger of the moral chaos into which the state and society were descending. The point is that females were at the same time envisaged as unwitting tools manipulated by the Jewish-mason-Bolshevik conspiracy plotting to overthrow the traditional social order founded on the cornerstone of Christianity. It was repeatedly underscored that all this was happening 'under the perverse guise of progress, or a ruse rather, of ethical liberation [and] equality of the sexes [...].'²⁷ Such assertions were articulated both by journalists associated with the nationalist bloc and by members of Catholic circles. Hence the image of woman in right-wing journalism was often underpinned by the principle of dichotomy. One text pitted 'a Polish woman [...] the Polish type' against 'the degenerate Polish woman type,' who was 'the heavy ball and chain [and] a barrier to development in the Polish vein.'²⁸ Another text adulated 'Wanda's white frock as a symbol of eternal light and fertile life,' which 'will overcome the black and pomaded rag of Esther wrapped in the red shawl of Bolshevism.'²⁹

24 Wasilewski, Z.: *Likwidowanie...* In: *Myśl Narodowa* 1926, no. 17, p. 258.

25 *Współczesne kobiety...* In: *Bluszcz* 1921, no. 8, p. 7.

26 Giertych, J.: *O kierunek*, p. 6–7.

27 Lechnicki, C.: *W walce*, p. 15.

28 Przewóska, M. Cz.: *Rola Polki...* In: *Bluszcz* 1922, no. 21, p. 164.

29 Grabowski, I. O.: *Wybory*. In: *Myśl Narodowa* 1922, no 40, p. 6.

Aleksander Świętochowski, Poland's leading pre-war liberal who pledged ideological allegiance to the National Democracy in the 1920s, eulogised Poland of the enslavement period as 'a heroin, a priestess and a teacher of virtues and modesty,' deploring that 'independent Poland reverted to what it had been before it fell into captivity more than one hundred years ago.'³⁰

Reiterated evocations of the 'national' – traditional – model of femininity crystallised when Poland was divided and had no independent statehood were supposed to remind Polish women of the duties they 'naturally' owed to the nation as mothers and wives. It was the absence of this model in the public sphere that the journalists cited above recognised as one of the sources of the moral crisis in Poland. This model could not come to the fore, as underscored by the conservative writer Maria C. Przewóska, when 'the ideology of women has diverged from the ideology of Polish women from before the war.'³¹ Revisiting the times of partitions also served to project a positive vision of the future, but, importantly, such visions were mainly conjured up by conservatively minded female journalists who wrote for *Bluszcz* [*The Ivy*]. In portraying the period of Poland's dependent status, they emphatically stated that, back then, women had fulfilled their traditional obligations toward their families and at the same time could seek self-realisation in patriotic pursuits, where they had some 'free space for manoeuvre' and enjoyed opportunities for exhibiting a certain self-reliance and resourcefulness, in which they differed from, for instance, French women. In this way, a positive model of women's emancipation was crafted: if Polish women wanted emancipation, they could seek it in the social sphere. Przewóska insisted that 'the women of the current generation, a generation of the builders of United Poland, have before them huge vistas of labour which is most sacred in a nation, working to enlighten souls and to awaken consciences.'³²

Conclusion

The conservative response to social changes in the aftermath of WWI was triggered by a bundle of several factors. It can be attributed both to the weakness of the state, which failed to effectively cope with the persisting political and economic crisis, and to the rapid democratisation of social relationships as well as to the involvement of the masses in political life. Another important reason is also

30 Świętochowski, A.. *Liberum veto*. In: *Mysł Narodowa* 1926, no. 6, p. 89.

31 Przewóska, M. Cz.: *Rola Polki w odbudowie...* In: *Bluszcz* 1922, no. 21, p. 164, see also: Stęślicka, H.: *Konieczność wykorzystania odrębności natury kobiecej jako współczynnika wszechstronnego rozwoju duszy narodu* (Referat wygłoszony na Zjeździe Zjedn. Ziemianek dn. 9 grudnia 1924 r. w Warszawie). In: *Bluszcz* 1925, no. 6, p. 115–117.

32 *Ibidem*.

to be found in the changing mores, with a shift of women's position in the public sphere as their most readily visible symptom. This response can also be made sense of in the context of the prolonged political struggle over visions of Poland's future, in which the advocates of civic nationalism associated with the bloc of socialists, radical liberals and moderate conservatives clashed with the champions of ethnic nationalism, who were inspired by social Darwinism and endorsed discipline, social cohesion and specific 'national egoism' as their supreme values. Additionally, anti-Semitism, focused on liberating Poland from the alleged 'Jewish domination,' was an integral component of right-wing discourse.

Jews were accused of attempting to dilute the cohesion of the nation, among other means, by inspiring women's emancipation, which male journalists devoted to traditional values linked to the moral crisis. They believed that the perniciousness of breaching the traditional gender order grounded in male domination was evinced by a sudden increase in the divorce rate, which indicated that family was in crisis and that society was falling apart. These changes purportedly resulted from the liberalisation of mores, which the conservatives associated with the weakening of ethical checks and the acceptance of sexual looseness. Hence, their criticism of women's emancipation primarily focused on the moral sphere. In their view, the social relations in the state and consequently the state as such could be repaired if the pre-war social order was restored and Polish women resumed the traditional roles of mothers and wives. This is where they differed from conservative female writers, who sometimes offered positive assessments of the emancipation processes at hand. Similarly to the nationalists, they discerned threats posed by women's misguided understanding of modernity, but at the same time, they noticed positive aspects of this modernity. In their view, emancipation fostered opportunities for increasing the influence of women on the public sphere. Female journalists who embraced conservative positions had no doubt that if women remembered about 'the distinctiveness of feminine nature' and drew on it to combat moral threats and to engage in social work in caregiving organisation, this influence could not but prove beneficial.