

ENTANGLED HISTORIES OF FEMINIST ADVOCACIES IN THE INTERWAR BALKANS AND CENTRAL EUROPE

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THE BULGARIAN WOMEN'S SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC UNION AND THE INTERNATIONAL/ BALKAN CONFERENCES REPRESENTED BY ITS PERIODICALS

The context

*Bulgarian socialists were among the first to promote the need for "women's liberation" in a national context, similar to their like-minded contemporaries in other countries. Socialist ideas reached the country as early as the 1880s and 1890s, popularized by periodicals such as *Novo Vreme* (New Time) and *Savremenen Pokazatel* (Contemporary Indicator), later articulated by the women's socialist press.*

Within the Bulgarian Women's Union, since its establishment in 1901, Bulgarian socialists persistently criticized feminists for their "bourgeoisness", arguing with the postulates of the Second International (of the workers), according to which women's solidarity, ignoring class differences was impossible. Although at the beginning the Bulgarian socialists led by Vela Blagoeva joined the largest national women's organization, they soon associated with the orthodox party line and condemned feminism, declaring it to be "separatism".

Socialist women remained in the Women's Union until its Third Congress in 1903, when, under the influence of the division of socialists into "broad" and "narrow" ones, the ideological conflict in the union escalated, leading to its split. Subsequently, Vela Blagoeva started publishing the journal *Zhenski trud* (Women's Labour) (1904-1905) which was the first step towards the establishment of women's social democratic organization.

Blagoeva founded the first educational social-democratic group of women workers in 1905, and the same year organized the first conference of socialist women. The steps and activities leading to the establishment of an autonomous left-wing women's organization (a project that at that stage was not realized) was ambiguously accepted by the influential male socialists, interpreted as a threat against the united labor movement. The orthodox/"narrow" socialists led by Dimitar Blagoev (the future Bolsheviks) opposed the idea of a neutral women's union, while the "broad" socialists (later called social democrats) declared their support. Although in 1903 Vela Blagoeva was rather in solidarity with the "narrow socialist" vision of sociopolitical women's activism, in 1905 she opposed her male associates, insisting that socialist women had the right to decide for themselves whether to remain in the ranks of the Bulgarian Women's Union. In her actions, she demonstrated solidarity with the

aspirations/activism of the German social democrats, argued by Clara Zetkin as early as 1894 as an aspiration for a "reinliche Scheidung/clean break" between women from the exploited and exploiting classes - a principle embedded in the development and establishment of the mass (international) movement of socialist working women.

In 1914, she presided over the first conference of women's socialist clubs in the country, following the directives of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Workers' Social Democratic Party (BSDP). The conference elected the Central Women's Commission, headed by Tina Kirkova. The next step in the organization of socialist women was a conference held in 1919, the participants of which belonged to circles ideologically close to the already Bolshevized Bulgarian Communist Party (the former "narrow" socialists). Communist women propagated Bolshevism from the pages of the journals *Ravenstvo* (Equality) and *Rabotnichka* (Labour Woman), actively participating in actions organized by the BCP. In the 1920s, some of them were convicted due to their involvement in anti-state activities, but managed to escape to Soviet Russia (among them are the activists of the Communist International Koika Kuneva, Tina Kirkova, Stella Blagoeva).

The Women's Social Democratic Union

Parallel to the women's communist organization, another influential left-wing women's union established in Bulgaria after the First World War was the Women's Social Democratic Union. Founded in 1921, it shared the views of the reformist (male) Social Democratic Union in the country - the former "broad" socialists led by Yanko Sakazov, and was affiliated to the international women's socialist movement. Many the leaders of this organization were wives, partners, sisters, relatives or friends of prominent men - activists of the Social Democratic Party; among them was Iordanka/Yurdana Bozvelieva, Vera Sakzova, Yulia Sultanova, Maria Djidrova, Kina Konova and others. This fact, as noted by K. Daskalova, confirms a common European tendency, namely, that women were attracted to socialist ideas by their male relatives.

The "reformist" project for women's emancipation of the WSDU was first popularized on the pages of the printed organ of the organization – the journal *Blagodenstvie*, which started its publication from April, 1921. The latter planned, through systematic education, to awaken and raise the class, civil and human consciousness of the working and suffering woman (factory worker and peasant), so that she would be prepared for direct participation in the social transformation in the spirit of socialism. At the same time, the union recognized and promoted some of the goals of liberal feminists, such as the insistence on women's equal access to education, property and political rights. Having united women who shared leftist beliefs from various professions and backgrounds (housewives, workers, clerks, teachers, artisans, doctors, midwives), the WSDU had the ambition to help liberate women from life's pettiness, giving them the opportunity to direct all their talents and commitments to the advancement of life and

"universal prosperity" in accordance with socialist ideals. The WSDU defined itself as "foreign to the bourgeois Women's Union and different from the Women's Communist Organization." The first, although claiming to be an above-class organization, associated itself with the bourgeoisie, thought of as the main enemy of working women. The methods of the second, although close in its aspirations to the WSDU was interpreted as too extreme, predicting the achievement of its goals by the destruction of the present life by the "unconscious, hungry multitudes," i.e. through an inevitable proletarian revolution. The social democrats, on the contrary, wanted a conscious part of society to transform the national reality and share the fruits of the change with all its members, proclaiming "universal human well-being". That transformation was thought as possible through the implementation of peaceful parliamentary measures and reforms.

The liberation of women in the rhetoric of the social democrats was first of all imagined as liberation through rejection of the "double economic slavery" under which they were forced to exist. On the one hand, it was inequality within the family, condemning women to the "humiliating position of domestic slaves or, in the most general case, of domestic dolls". On the other hand, it was the slavish, degraded existence of working women in factories and offices, but also in the Bulgarian villages. Hence the numerous articles in the women's social democratic press, focusing on the improvement of women's working conditions in administration, industry and commerce, equal pay for women's and men's work, calls for women workers' solidarity and their joining of cooperatives.

Gender discrimination in the field of paid work, typical of the Bulgarian context between the two World Wars, motivated one of the main insistences of social democrats (and of liberal feminists, too) in relation to women – the appeal for legislative protection of women with professions. Such insistence reflected the anti-women sentiments and actions that broke out in Bulgaria in the 1920s in the context of the post-war economic crisis. All the activists of the Bulgarian women's movement – socialists and feminists, rebelled against the manifestations of patriarchal rigidity and sexism directed to working women in the country at that time.

Parallel to social democrat's appeals to statesmen for equal treatment of men and women by the laws, full electoral rights for women, state and social strategies to improve people's health and hygiene, state support for the unemployed and the poor, educational and cultural policy, including all citizens of the country, a strong focus was put on peasant women's situation. An important resolution, adopted at the Fifth Congress of the WSDU, was related to the political and personal enlightenment of rural women, to their public engagement and inclusion in the socialist struggles for a fairer life – an emphasis relating social democratic activists to the "bourgeois feminists", who

in turn took into account the prevailing rural character of the Bulgarian state and the need to spread progressive/emancipatory/feminist ideas among rural women.

An overlap of some of the views of the WSDU and BWU was also traceable in the appeals that women social democrats rose (and published) on the occasion of the International Women's Day and repeatedly put on the pages of their printed organs: „War on war!“, „Political equality of the woman!“, „Equal work, equal pay!“, „Protection of motherhood and childhood!“, „More care for refugees, widows and orphans!“, „Against the regulation of prostitution!“, „Fight against alcoholism!“, etc. Similarly to the liberal feminists, the women social democrats declared themselves against some provisions of the Napoleonic Code, sanctioning the subordinate position of women. Both social democrats and liberal feminists opposed the discrimination based on the essentialization of women, the underestimating of women as passive and weak by nature - views advocated by the opponents of the growing women's movement worldwide (according to the beliefs of social democrats, the passivity in certain areas of life should be interpreted a result of patriarchal education and socialization, which encouraged female activity only within the sphere of home and family).

The International Women's Conferences Socialists

The choice of international conferences of women's activism to be represented in the pages of the printed organs of the WSDU in turn articulated the syncretic nature of the feminist ideas advocated and propagated by the organization.

Because of the Union's affiliation with the International Women's Socialist Movement, its press tried to trace in detail some of the key international conferences of the left women activists held between the two world wars. Women's socialist conferences took part parallel to the congresses of the Labour Socialist International, once every two or three years - such were the forums in Hamburg in 1923, Marseilles in 1925, Brussels in 1928, and Vienna in 1931. The LSI itself was a loose federation of approx. 30 European social democratic parties represented on the executive of the International according to their size and influence in their respective national contexts. Within the federation, women's labor and political activism was generally supported, but women social democrats had limited decision-making power. From 1927 to 1939, under the umbrella of the LSI operated an International Advisory Committee on Women, membership of which was related to the degree/intensity of women's organizing and mobilization in the context of the various national social democratic parties associated with the federation. Among its functions were to collect and synthesize information about the various women's social democratic organizations, to prepare reports, materials for the periodical press, questionnaires on topics of general interest to the members, as well as to organize periodic women's socialist conferences.

An international conference of women social democrats to be represented by *Blagodenstvie* - the first printed organ of the WSDU, was the one in Marseille, held on August 21, 1925. Bulgarian readers were informed that 75 delegates from almost all countries affiliated to the Labour Socialist International attended the forum, that Greece sent its delegate for the first time, and that the meeting was opened by the Austrian representative and influential activist Adelaide Pope. The newspaper published the text of the resolution adopted by the conference, which was to be read at the male LSI congress. Among its postulates was the appeal to socialist parties of all countries to assist women's organizations in the labor socialist movement, and support them in the struggle for achieving full political equality for women, especially with regard to electoral, marriage and family rights. The resolution also insisted that regarding the fact that socialist movement respected the needs of both men and women, socialist women of all countries should have the right to independently discuss and formulate their views on social problems in the interest of their gender. The idea of relative autonomy - the existence of a separate women's international - was interpreted as progress over the previous views of a large number of socialist women articulated at the Hamburg conference in 1923. The Women's International was called "The Mothers' League" by the article, and analyzed as "*necessary for the world politics of socialism, for its struggle against misery, international armaments and war*".

The Fourth International Women's Conference of the LSI held in Vienna on July 23, 1931 was presented in much more detail on the pages of the newspaper *Nedovolnata* - the successor of *Blagodenstvie*, published in the period between 1931 and 1934. The likely reason for that was the Bulgarian participation via two delegates - Iordanka Bozvebieva and R. Krastanova, both leading figures in the WSDU. Prior to the Conference date the periodical informed its readers about the forum's agenda, including reports and discussions on current topics such as peace and disarmament, women's position in labor and industry, trade and agriculture, the role and status of women in the household, their political position in relation to equality, the nationality of the married woman, the issues of motherhood, political freedom, the achievements of the social democratic movement worldwide, etc. In a second article on the topic, published after the end of the conference (in No. 3 of *Nedovolnata* from 1931) and summarizing its issues and importance, a focus was placed on the significance of the Bulgarian (and Balkan) participation in such a large-scale international women's forum, side by side with the delegates of the large industrial countries with their numerous and influential socialist movements. "*For us, the representatives of the small countries that are late in their development, where the labor movement manifests itself more in interpersonal struggles, often on a personal basis*", wrote Iordanka Bozvelieva, "*these international congresses and conferences are of great importance... The great lessons we can learn from them will give us courage and impulse for greater activity in our country. We are part of the Women's International, we have an interest and an*

opportunity to follow this movement. We should all think about this, so that we do not appear at the future conference with such a weak force behind us. We have all the objective conditions to become more numerous and more tightly organized".

In order to duplicate the message on a visual level, a photo was published in *Nedovdlnata*, presenting the Bulgarian delegates to the Conference, Iordanka Bozvelieva and R. Krastanova, alongside other women participants, among whom special attention was paid of Luisa Schröder – a social democrat, 12 years deputy in the German Reichstag, who had recently visited Bulgaria. [photo]

Most contemporary researchers interpret the 1931 Vienna Conference, which first recorded intensive exchange and cooperation between Western and Eastern European women social democrats, as a high point in social democratic women's activism in Europe and in general. In her opening speech at the forum, Adelaide Pope, the above-mentioned leading figure in the women's branch of the LSI, noted that by 1930 the number of women members of LSI-affiliated parties amounted to nearly 1,280,000 - several dozen more than in 1928. In her report to the male Congress of the Social Democrats, Marion Phillips (general secretary of the Women's Labour Union in England, publisher of the magazine *The Labor Woman*, author of several books on socialism) emphasized the fact that the women's conference in Vienna was larger, more effective and much better attended by women from newer and smaller social democratic movements than ever before. Those newly joined and newly participating delegates, as noted by Phillips, came particularly from Eastern Europe.

In fact, according to information presented at the conference, by 1931 there were large differences in the number of women's social democratic organizations in different national contexts: in Austria, for example, by 1928 women social democrats numbered more than 200,000, in Poland they were several tens of thousands, in Bulgaria, Greece, Romania - between 300 and 1400 (a number corresponding to the smaller labor movements in the respective countries).

The forum was the first of its kind to register various topical problems referring to women discussed through a non-Western lens. Thus, for example, at the center of the debates concerning the need of implementation of better social policies for women engaged in agricultural work, the experience of working women from the agrarian Eastern European countries was positioned.

A subsequent Fifth Conference of Social Democratic Women did not take place, as fascist and authoritarian regimes in a number of national contexts after 1931 banned left organizations. Later in the 1930s, the focus of the LSI (as well as the IACW, which was tasked with organizing women's conferences) shifted to the unrepressed Scandinavian and British social democratic parties, and questions previously regarded

as crucial such as those related to the position of working women in agriculture or industry had largely been pushed off the agenda.

Liberal feminists

In response to the syncretic character of the emancipatory ideas propagated by the WSDU, its printed organs represented some of the key Balkan/international women's conferences (and their leading documents) associated with liberal (bourgeois) feminism as well.

In issue no.10 of *Blagodenstvie* from 1924, for example, the Manifesto of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), issued during its Fourth Congress in Washington - the first international forum of the organization with Bulgarian participation in the person of Ekaterina Karavelova (at that time - the chairwoman of the Bulgarian branch of the WILPF and vice-chairwoman of the BWU) was published. Ekaterina Karavelova – a feminist, prominent public figure, a teacher and a talented translator, was the chairwoman of the Bulgarian branch of the WILPF and vice-chairwoman (from 1915 to 1925) of the "bourgeois" Bulgarian Women's Union. The newspaper noted that the Congress was attended by more than 100 delegates from 34 countries (including Bulgaria), and informed its readers in detail about the main topics discussed at the meeting. The latter were affirmed as postulates included in the respective Manifesto: struggle for international justice, establishment of people's control, preservation of public peace, international mobilization for peace and mutual aid, etc.

Beyond the international initiatives of women's organizations for disarmament and peace, such as the WILPF forums, the WSDU was also sensitive to local/Balkan women's activism related to peacekeeping. The Balkan Women's Conference for Peace, held in Belgrade in 1931, attended by representatives of the women's organizations of Bulgaria, Greece, Romania, Turkey and Yugoslavia, was widely covered by the social democrats' newspaper *Nedovolnata*. The periodical informed its readers that Bulgaria was represented by three delegates - Dimitrana Ivanova and Dimitrova from the Bulgarian Women's Union and Iordanka Bozvelieva from WSDU, and that in her welcome speech the chairwoman of the Serbian Women's Union - Miss Aluizia Shtebi, expressed her joy at the presence of the Bulgarian delegates. The article noted that the meeting was chaired by the Greek delegate - Mrs. Avra Theodoropoulou, and that she gave a report on the history of the common Balkan Conference from its foundation to the present. Among the questions raised at the forum was whether the women's organizations from the Balkans should work on the program of the (general - male) Balkan Conference, or have their own separate organization to work for the rapprochement of the Balkan states through women's activism; two opinions emerged on the topic: first, that women's committees should be organized at each conference with the aim of better coordination of women in the region (an idea supported by Avra Theodoropoulou); and second, that representatives from all women's organizations of

the respective country should be included in each national group (an idea supported by the Bulgarian delegation, which ultimately prevailed among the participants).

Beyond the purely organizational issues, the Conference discussed a number of possible Balkan initiatives: exchange of female students among the universities of the respective countries, exchange of women museum and library professionals, opening of special libraries aimed at bringing the Balkan peoples together by popularizing their national cultures, etc.


It was noted in the article that women delegates wished that they would be represented in greater numbers (at least 3-4) among the national representatives of the Balkan Conference in future, and would meet again in Istanbul. Iordanka Bozvelieva - the author of the publication - wrote that the first Balkan women's Conference, dedicated to peace, was rather a survey of the attitudes and relations among the representatives than strictly work oriented. *"If this initiative does not die out", Bozvelieva noted, "and if similar and more extensive meetings are arranged every year, let's hope that something will be done to help smooth out many thorny issues among us. Indeed, there are many things that separate us from each other, but there are also many things in common that connect us. We, the women of the Balkan countries, must be permeated by the consciousness of the importance of the role that we are about to play in this historic action of the Balkan people".*

Another Balkan initiative demonstrating the collaboration among women's and feminist organizations from the region and local men's political activities which fell within the optics of the social democratic press was the Second Balkan Conference, held in Istanbul, within the premises of the Yıldız Palace, in October 19-26, 1931. The Conference was part of a series of meetings aimed at the possibility, through discussions, of fulfilling the old historical dream of the Balkans - the establishment of a Balkan Union. The women's participation in the forum was not traced in detail by *Nedovolnata*, like the one in Belgrade, but was included as a highlight in a more general article by Vera Sakzova, discussing the radical changes in the status of Turkish women in the context of Republican Turkey and the broad Kemalist program of social and political reforms. The holding of the women's meeting in the Turkish capital and the key participation of the Turkish delegates was interpreted in the light of the emancipatory and modernization developments in Turkey and their influence on local women. It is known that the women participants in the forum - representatives of women's organizations from Bulgaria (Dimitrana Ivanova, the president of the BWU), Greece (Alexandra Thiacakis, M. Tanopoulos from unnamed women's organizations), Romania (Alexandrina Cantacuzino, the president of the National Council of Romanian Women; Calypso Botez, the president of the Romanian Women's Association; Catherine Cerkez Atanasiu, the General Secretary of the National Council of Romanian Women), Yugoslavia (Militza Topalovic, representative of the local branch of the WILPF) and Turkey (Latife Bekir, Lamia Refik, Efzais Suat, Seniha Rauf from the UTW) –

presented a number of reports dedicated to the "women's question" and the scope of women's rights in the respective Balkan countries, touched on current topics such as public hygiene, prostitution and trafficking of women, women and professions, working conditions, protection of mothers and children, etc. Emphasis was placed on the fact that the social reforms introduced in the Republic of Turkey and referring to the women's gender should be adopted in the other Balkan countries as well. Proposals were made for the adoption of a common Balkan currency, common labor legislation, abolition of visas among Balkan states, adoption of special laws for the protection of mothers and children, establishment of a common infrastructure to reference all types of institutions, incl. trade unions, employment agencies, insurance and social security, enabling those institutions to operate in harmony and coordination among Balkan countries.

Conclusion

The reformist project for women's emancipation of the Bulgarian WSDU, as well as its sensitivity to international initiatives and entanglements in the context of women's activism - related both to women's solidarity and work within the frames of socialist movement, and the ideas and activities of liberal feminism, were a bright illustration of the syncretism of its ideology. Being tied to class demands, opposing to the economic injustices within the society, but simultaneously articulating above-class (generally feminist) intolerance towards various forms gender discrimination, it testified to the diversity of feminisms that had existed as transformative forces in different historical and social contexts. The social democratic vision of women's empowerment could be analyzed as a possible manifestation of the "feminist consciousness" as defined by Gerda Lerner: understanding of the subordination of women, which is not natural, but socially constructed; awareness of the need for women's solidarity in the fight against social injustices; willingness to propose an alternative vision of social organization in which both women and men will be autonomous and free.



The Bulgarian Women's Social Democratic
Union and the International/Balkan
Women's Conferences Represented by its
Periodicals

The Context

- ▶ Left activists within the Bulgarian Women's Union: tensions with feminists and split (1903)
- ▶ Steps and activities in the establishment of an autonomous left-wing women's organization; the leading role of Vela Blagoeva:
 - ✓ first conference of socialist women – 1905;
 - ✓ conference of women's socialist clubs in Bulgaria – 1914; election of the Central Women's Commission;
 - ✓ communist women's conference – 1919; popularization of Bolshevist ideas and conviction of anti-state activities



Vela Blagoeva (1858-1921) – teacher, journalist, writer, translator, founder and one of the leaders of the socialist women's movements in Bulgaria

The conference of women's socialist clubs in Bulgaria – 1914



The Women's Social Democratic Union

- ▶ Establishment, affiliations and members
- ▶ The WSDU's reformist project for women's emancipation: program, position within the field of women's activism in Bulgaria (the "bourgeois Women's Union", the Women's Communist Organization), syncretism of ideas:
 - ✓ liberation thought rejection of the "double economic slavery" of women;
 - ✓ measures against gender discrimination in professions;
 - ✓ equal treatment of men and women by the laws;
 - ✓ full electoral rights for women;
 - ✓ state support for the unemployed and the poor;
 - ✓ political and personal enlightenment of rural women;
 - ✓ protection of motherhood and childhood
 - ✓ peace and disarmament, etc.

The printed organs of the WSDU – the newspapers *Blagodenstvie* (Prosperity), 1921-1924, and *Nedovolnata* (The Dissatisfied), 1931-1934



The leading figure of the WSDU – Iordanka Bozvelieva - and her family



International/ Balkan Women's Conferences Represented by the WSDU Periodicals: Socialist Conferences

- ▶ The International Conference of Women Social Democrats in Marseille - August 21, 1925:
 - ✓ participants and resolution;
 - ✓ establishment of the "The Mothers' League"

- ▶ The International Conference of Women Social Democrats in Vienna - July 23, 1931:
 - ✓ Bulgarian participants and the conference agenda;
 - ✓ exchange and cooperation between Western and Eastern European women social democrats

The Fourth International Conference of Women Social
Democrats in Vienna – July 23, 1931
(with the Bulgarian delegates in the front row, on the right)



International/ Balkan Women's Conferences Represented by the WSDU Periodicals: Feminist Conferences

- ▶ The Manifesto of the International Women's League for Peace and Freedom (IWLPF), issued during its Fourth Congress in Washington, 1924.
- ▶ The Balkan Women's Conference for Peace - Belgrade in 1931:
 - ✓ participants and Bulgarian delegates;
 - ✓ discussions and future plans
- ▶ The Second Balkan Conference - Istanbul, the Yıldız Palace, October 19 - 26, 1931: a highlight in an article by Vera Sakzova, discussing the radical changes in the status of Turkish women in the context of Republican Turkey.

Conclusion

- ▶ The reformist project for women's emancipation of the Bulgarian WSDU, and its sensitivity to ideologically various international initiatives and entanglements in the context of women's activism - a bright illustration of the syncretism of its ideology, a manifestation of the diversity of feminisms that had existed as transformative forces in different historical and social contexts.
- ▶ The social democratic vision of women's empowerment – expression of the "feminist consciousness" as defined by Gerda Lerner: understanding of the subordination of women, which is not natural, but socially constructed; awareness of the need for women's solidarity in the fight against social injustices; willingness to propose an alternative vision of social organization in which both women and men will be autonomous and free.