Introduction

Krystyna W. was twenty-two and the mother of two small children when she came to the “Ziemowit” coal mine near her hometown of Pszczyna to ask for work. It was 1952, the peak of rapid postwar industrialization in Poland, and she had heard from her female friends that the Silesian coal mines were hiring women for underground work. Krystyna had worked before at a variety of construction sites, but the work was hard and the wages low. When her husband was injured and could not work, she began looking for a stable job with a good salary to support her family. Although the communist press at the time encouraged women to enter jobs traditionally dominated by men, becoming a female coal miner was not an easy task. When Krystyna checked in with the Employment Office at the “Ziemowit” coal mine, she was told that there were no more vacancies underground. But she did not give up. Krystyna went straight to the office of the mine’s director. She recalled: “The director’s secretary asked me what I wanted, and I said I needed to talk to the director regarding a personal matter. I was admitted immediately.” Krystyna presented her plea: she wanted to work underground. After a short conversation about Krystyna’s family situation, the director handed her a handwritten note and sent her back to the Employment Office. The next day, Krystyna was hired as an underground coal miner assisting in the transportation of coal to the surface. “The director had an eye on me,” Krystyna recalled. “Later on, whenever he came underground, he would not talk to any other woman but always would stop by me and ask how I was, how my children were, and if my husband was recovering.”

Krystyna worked in the mines for two years. Her work was fully mechanized and well paid. As an underground coal miner, she received media attention, bonuses, and even a new apartment for her family. She
left her job reluctantly in late 1954 after she became pregnant with her third child, because pregnant women were not allowed to work underground. A little more than a year later, when Krystyna came back to the mine after her maternity leave, she learned that she could not go back to her underground job. The work was now deemed too dangerous and inappropriate for women. Instead, she was given a job in the sorting house on the surface. She soon found her wages significantly reduced and the new work conditions harsh and physically demanding. After a few months, Krystyna left the “Ziemowit” mine to look for a job elsewhere.

Krystyna’s story illustrates the experiences of many female industrial workers in post-1945 Poland, a time when state policies toward employment and gender equality constantly shifted. In the early 1950s, in the wake of rapid, stalinist industrialization, women were encouraged to enter jobs traditionally performed by men. But by 1956, such jobs were depicted as contradictory to women’s nature. The female reproductive capacity, communist leaders argued, made women unfit for jobs traditionally performed by men. What was the source of these ideas? Why was it important to designate jobs according to gender characteristics in a Marxist state that endorsed equality and socioeconomic conditions rather than biological traits as the primary determinants of individual and collective identities? And perhaps more importantly, why was gender difference more significant at certain political moments than others?

This book addresses these questions by examining the experiences of women in textile and coal mining communities in the context of postwar reconstruction and socialist state building in Poland. Women’s industrial labor was central to the communist effort to build a new society free of inequalities. Yet gender difference remained a primary way of demarcating and understanding social hierarchies in postwar Poland. Ideas of

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1 Krystyna W., interview by author, tape recording, Tychy, 22 November 2002.
2 Following Padraic Kenney, I use the term “stalinism” in lowercase “in an effort to separate the system from its founder.” Padraic Kenney, Rebuilding Poland: Workers and Communists, 1945–1950 (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997), 3. Throughout this book, I use the word “communism” rather than “socialism” to denote the Marxist-Leninist model of socialism first implemented in revolutionary Russia. Although the communist stage of the Marxist theoretical model was never achieved by any society, it is important to differentiate the Soviet-style systems from other brands of socialism.
biological difference and reproduction actually became central to the official concept of equality. Indeed, party-state actors aimed to detect and define male and female “natural” qualities that would correspond to their predispositions to perform a particular task in production. In so doing, they periodically reconfigured the terms of gender segregation, but rarely questioned the very concept of sex-typing of jobs or natural gender qualities.

Such reconfiguration of gender hierarchies was not purely an economic or ideological scheme imposed from above. Rather, rearranging gender hierarchies served to articulate and execute political power at specific junctures of postwar Polish history, often in response to pressures from below. Political ruptures such as the end of the Second World War, the imposition of stalinism on Poland, and eventually the reform movement and de-stalinization all generated intense public debates about female and male roles and resulted in renegotiation of the place of women at the workplace and in the communist polity. In this sense, the understanding of gender difference was not tangential to the making of a communist system but rather served as a foundation for the formulation of Polish postwar social and political order. Not only state institutions participated in this process but local communities and individuals as well.

As Krystyna’s story demonstrates, gender politics was hotly contested during the transition from stalinism to poststalinism in the mid-1950s. After Stalin’s death in March 1953, Polish communists found that one of the most effective ways to garner support for reforms of the system and establish legitimacy of the poststalinist regime was to deploy images of sexual disorder and violation of natural gender roles symbolized by working women. Thus gender politics was a powerful instrument in negotiating the political and national legitimacy of communist regimes. The notions of liberalization and what became known as “Socialism with a Human Face,” periodically endorsed in Eastern Europe by some party leaders as well as intellectuals and workers, were not gender neutral but often signaled a renewed commitment to reinventing precommunist cultural traditions and boosting men’s superiority over women.3

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key role that gender difference played in the interaction between state and society indicated that the cultural was political in fundamental ways: the viability of the communist system depended, to a large degree, on the regime’s successful enforcement of gender boundaries in many spheres of social, economic, and political life.

This book is more than an analysis of Polish party-state’s approach to women’s work. I seek to restore agency to women, who have often been depicted in popular and scholarly literature as passive objects of party-state policies. In examining how female workers experienced and made sense of state policies, I ask how they subjectively understood socially and culturally articulated meanings of womanhood. For example, I look at female migration from the countryside to the factory as a powerful vehicle of identity transformation. Young women often took this opportunity to establish their personal autonomy while breaking free from the confinements of traditional peasant communities and the state’s model of a disciplined labor force. Older female workers at the same time frequently turned their inferior status on the shop floor into a tool of power. They used the state-endorsed roles of women as producers and consumers to stage strikes and identify glaring contradictions in the communist promise of equality and social justice.

In broadly humanistic terms, this book seeks to understand how leaders and ordinary people understood equal rights as well as how they perceived and responded to the novelty of an active state’s campaign to promote women in the social hierarchy. How, if at all, did Poles reconcile new models of “gender equality” with their own precommunist experiences and beliefs? And what exactly were these notions of “gender equality?” I use the term to denote commitment to equal rights and equal access to political, social, and economic power for women

and men. But this commitment can come in different shapes and forms. Communist ideas were in many ways different from what we understand as equal rights in American and European democracies of the twenty-first century. While sharing many of the same ideas, the communist concept was shaped by an illiberal political and social context. The present-day notion of equality, in contrast, is the outcome of the powerful social and political movements of the 1960s and 1970s aimed at inclusion and civil society as a way to perfect the liberal-democratic order. Nevertheless, in both cases, the concept of equal rights was rooted in the ideas of the Enlightenment, and there are lessons to be learned from the communist experience. Indeed, as Americans and Europeans today promote civic values along with diversity in race and gender, it is critical to examine the first such experiments, however different in their execution and intent. Ultimately, my analysis seeks to illuminate profound tensions that are central to any egalitarian projects pursued by state and nonstate actors in all political contexts.5

POLISH TRADITION AND SOVIET REVOLUTION

Scholars have demonstrated the fundamental role that gender hierarchies played in modern European societies. In the words of prominent social historians Laura L. Frader and Sonya O. Rose, “gender has been a central dimension of the social practices and power relations that have had profound consequences for people’s lives.”6 Because female and male roles are so deeply embedded in all social life, they can provide a window into the interaction between a new political order and existing national and local conditions. How then did an alien system imposed from above affect local social structures? Sheer coercion and repression were not sufficient to create a communist system in Poland. Rather, the

5 Historian Joan Scott has explored tensions in feminist politics in the context of a liberal-democratic system in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century France. Many of her findings, especially the issue of unresolved dilemmas of sexual sameness and difference, can be applied to communist societies. She argues that “the apparent need to choose sameness or difference (which can never be satisfied by either alternative) is symptomatic of the difficulty that sexual difference poses for singular conceptions of the individual.” See Joan Wallach Scott, Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Men (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 174.

imposition of radically new norms involved constant negotiations between the state and society.

Polish communism differed from the Soviet model in significant ways. One obvious difference was that in Eastern Europe, except for Yugoslavia and Albania, communist governments did not come to power as native forces but as foreign impositions. Thus their national legitimacy was limited. In order to consolidate power, Eastern European leaders adjusted the system to fit different national and local conditions. Even the imposition of Soviet-style stalinism in the late 1940s failed to create the homogeneity of social and political life envisioned by Moscow. As John Connelly has argued, “behind a façade of uniformity separate national traditions continued through the stalinist period in much of the ‘northern tier’ of East Central Europe, creating different contexts for politics and for societal experience.”

These different contexts had profound consequences for gender relations and workplace experiences as well.

The case of Poland was in some ways unique. Poland’s distinct social and cultural structures combined with its history of Russian imperial domination made that country especially unreceptive toward the communist revolution inspired by its eastern neighbor. Soviet control was more than a political challenge for Poles: it constituted an existential threat to the values of Western culture that Poland stood for. In 1953, Czesław Miłosz gave voice to this concern when he reflected on the incompatibility of the Russian brand of communism with European traditions: “Their [European] population is more intelligent; most of their land is under cultivation; their system of communication and their industry are more highly developed. Measures based on absolute cruelty are unnecessary and even pointless since there exists a greater degree of social discipline.” Such attitudes were strengthened among many Poles during the Second World War. The Soviets were hardly a friend of the Poles. First, the Soviet state joined Nazi Germany in the partition of Poland in September 1939. For nearly two years, the Soviets brutalized the population of eastern Poland in an effort ostensibly to

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eradicate class inequalities and establish communism. The mitigation of such policies occurred only after the German invasion of the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941. But the destiny of millions of Poles had been sealed. The Soviets deported hundreds of thousands of Poles to the Soviet interior and massacred Polish educated elites – most famously in the execution of thousands of officers in 1940 in the Katyn forest. Although the Soviets blamed the crime on the Germans, few Poles doubted the real identity of the perpetrators. Then, in August 1944, at a time when Poles were supposedly aligned with the Soviets, Stalin deliberately remained passive during the Warsaw Uprising – leaving a lasting imprint on the Polish national psyche. As Warsaw Poles made a last-ditch effort to overthrow the Nazis – fully expecting the Red Army to assist them – the Soviet leader halted his troops on the Vistula River, allowing the Germans to decimate the Home Army, the noncommunist resistance, and then raze the city to the ground. Compounding the trauma at the war’s end, the Red Army again encroached on Polish territory, destroying property, killing, and raping. Eventually the Red Army occupied all of Poland and assisted Polish communists and socialists in setting up a new government in Warsaw.

While it is clear why ordinary Poles detested the Soviets, this resentment was not limited to general society. Polish communists also had reasons to distrust their Soviet comrades. Unlike the interwar Czechoslovak or Bulgarian communist parties, the Polish communist party was historically miniscule and politically insignificant. Stalin inflicted great damage to the Polish communist movement when he purged its leaders and disbanded the Communist Party of Poland (Komunistyczna Partia Polski, or KPP) in 1938. Most leaders were executed, and others died in prisons and labor camps. Those who survived (many of them, like Władysław Gomułka, serving sentences in

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9 Estimates of the total number of people deported by the Soviets from eastern Poland range from 315,000 to 980,000. See Katherine R. Jolluck, Exile and Identity: Polish Women in the Soviet Union during World War II (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002), 13. On the Katyn Forest massacre, see Anna M. Cienciala, Natalia S. Lebedeva, and Wojciech Materski, eds., Katyn: A Crime without Punishment (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2007).


Polish prisons at the time) did not easily forget the purge, which cast a long shadow on postwar Polish–Soviet relations. Many Polish communists welcomed every opportunity to limit their dependence on the Soviet leadership. Even during stalinism, Polish communists were less eager than their counterparts elsewhere in Eastern Europe to imitate the Soviet terror machine. They refused to have an internal party purge with show trials and executions, and they dragged their feet in implementing the collectivization of agriculture.\textsuperscript{12}

The question of gender equality posed dilemmas for Polish communists from the beginning of their rule. At the onset of the postwar era, Polish communists did not develop any precise vision of what gender equality under communism was supposed to look like, refusing to accept the Soviet models \emph{in toto}. Relying on Marx and Lenin did not solve the problem since these founding fathers of communism, while recognizing the oppression of women, were concerned primarily about class. They believed that gender equality would follow the destruction of the bourgeois order and the reign of class equality.

Furthermore, Polish communists never seemed inspired by some Bolshevik thinkers, most notably Alexandra Kollontai, who had advanced the idea of socialization of household labor as a necessary component of gender equality. This meant that individual women would not be responsible for work within the household. Instead, state communal institutions would bear that responsibility and transform domestic chores into another kind of paid labor. Socialization of domestic labor was a basic theoretical tenet of gender equality in revolutionary Russia along with a free union in place of traditional marriage and the withering away of the family.\textsuperscript{13} Postwar Polish leaders, however, never bought into such ideas and instead constructed their own models of gender equality through trial and error, often on the shop floor. In so doing, at least in the initial postwar phase, they tended to draw not on Bolshevik ideas but on interwar Polish socialist traditions.

\textsuperscript{12} For a comparative history of Eastern European communist regimes, see, for example, Joseph Rothschild and Nancy Meriwether Wingfield, \emph{Return to Diversity: A Political History of East Central Europe since World War II}, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); and Zbigniew Brzezinski, \emph{The Soviet Bloc: Unity and Conflict}, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967).

that emphasized the significance of the family and working women’s domestic identities.

A brief comparison of Soviet and Polish social practices once again underscores the diversity of communist systems and their approaches to gender ideologies. In the early 1920s, Bolshevik leaders implemented liberal family legislation, which included legal abortion and easy divorce. One decade later, Stalin reversed this legislation by outlawing abortion and putting restrictions on the right to divorce. In addition, he disbanded the Women’s Section of the communist party (Zhenotdel). But in postwar Poland, Stalin did not have to reverse a liberal abortion law, as he did in the Soviet Union in 1936, because abortion was illegal in interwar Poland. For Eastern European societies, stalinism was therefore associated primarily with rapid social and political changes that included the reconfiguration of traditional class and gender hierarchies and creating new activist roles for women. As such, it could best be described as a reaction against the interwar conservative structures and not against the socially progressive legislation of the first years of Leninism as was the case in the Soviet Union. Eastern European stalinism was a force that brought radical social changes rather than a conservative backlash.

The differences between the Soviet and Polish systems deepened in October 1956, when Moscow accepted Władysław Gomułka as the

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16 Elena Shulman has recently challenged the paradigm of Stalin’s “Great Retreat” in the realm of Soviet gender policies. In her study of women’s settlement in the Soviet Far East, she cautions against a narrow interpretation of women’s roles during stalinism as being primarily defined by the anti-abortion legislation and an official celebration of motherhood. She suggests that the industrial drive and martial culture of the Stalin era provided women with new opportunities to practice a nontraditional womanhood by engaging in revolutionary campaigns from increasing productivity to empire-building. Shulman, Stalinism on the Frontier of Empire, 12–23.
new Polish leader and officially legitimized separate national paths to communism throughout the Eastern Bloc. Gomułka envisioned the “Polish Road to Socialism” as a gradual process of social and political change compatible with Polish “national peculiarities,” including strong attachments to national sovereignty and Catholic traditions.17 Most scholars see the Polish Road to Socialism in narrow political terms, as the process leading to the removal of stalinists from party-state posts and weakening the Soviet influence on domestic policies. But cultivating national peculiarities extended beyond the strictly political sphere into matters of everyday life. Gomułka acknowledged the distinct Polish “sensitivity toward the issue of national sovereignty,” but had no plans to detach Poland from the Soviet camp or pursue an independent ideological course.18 His was an idea of “domestic autonomy without external ideological ambitions.”19 In this context, it made sense to cultivate Polishness in less confrontational ways: at homes, workplaces, schools, and churches. Family and gender relations became safe social spaces in which Poles could assert what they perceived as their cultural differences from the Soviets.

**WOMEN AND COMMUNISM**

Traditionally, historians have not integrated topics of politics and gender into the study of Eastern Europe. The dominant historical accounts of the communist system in Poland assumed politics to be limited to the workings of governmental institutions. This book is part of a growing trend to incorporate workers, women, social protest, and the media into discussions of Polish political life to redefine the totalitarian nature of stalinism and communism by emphasizing the agency of local actors.20 Earlier investigations into questions of gender have

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18 The quote comes from Gomułka’s speech at the Ninth Plenary meeting of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers’ Party (PZPR) in May 1957. See Władysław Gomułka, *O naszej partii* (Warsaw: Książka i Wiedza, 1968), 271.
20 See, for example, Kenney, “The Gender of Resistance”; Kenney, *Rebuilding Poland*; and Katherine Anne Lebow, “Nowa Huta, 1949–1957: Stalinism and the Transformation of Everyday Life in Poland’s ‘First Socialist City’” (Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 2002). Polish historians of communism, while examining such topics as everyday life, workers’ strikes, and communist organizations, have paid little