

Report Visegrad fellowship at OSA by Yulia Gradszkova

Encounters between "Eastern bloc women" and women and women's organizations in "developing countries" (Africa, Latin America and Asia) in the context of the Cold War

My project is dedicated to women's encounters as a part of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) work for development and women's rights and has a special focus on deconstructing official presentations of these encounters (in publications of the WIDF and other media connected to Eastern bloc). I am also interested in connections between women through international seminars, cultural events and delegations' exchange beyond the proper WIDF's network. The project is aimed to problematize the official "Eastern bloc" representations of East-South encounters. In order to do it, the project uses different archival and media sources and is departing from the concept of the Cold War "periphery" where the last is interpreted both geographically and ideologically. My previous research suggests that two important geographical peripheries from the perspective of East-South women's encounters are Tashkent and Havana.

Research questions for the whole project:

How much influence did women have in designing work for social progress and development in the case of "Eastern bloc" communication with "developing countries"?

What was the "Eastern bloc" vision of the results of the encounters; how the propaganda of "socialism" was used? Was the Soviet and Eastern bloc's version of (anti)colonialism and (anti)racism challenged in the process of encounters?

I spent two weeks working at the Open Society Archive in Budapest and I am very grateful for this possibility. The work in archive allowed me to learn more about different contexts where women's encounters were taking place as well as about character and content of these encounters and "Western" discourses surrounding them. In what follows I will describe the archival collections I consulted and present their relevance and importance for my work.

I started with the file directly connected to the main organization I am studying – the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF)

HU OSA 300/80/1 box 531

The documents in this box helped me to understand better conflicts inside of the WIDF, in particular, at its Moscow Congress 1963 that was organized in the context of China-Soviet split. These documents helped me to understand that the political confrontation between USSR and China had direct influence on how women from Asia, Africa and Latin America perceived the documents and speeches of the WIDF congress 1963, in particular, those about imperialism, détente and Soviet bloc's developmental aid. The materials translated from Chinese media were particularly useful.

HU OSA 300/80/1 box 256, 257

The documents from the “Red archive” under the key-word “Women” allowed me to understand better the place of “women” in the Cold War political propaganda machinery. In particular, these documents reveal that the creators of the archive saw women as secondary, less important, Cold War political actors. In spite women participated and expressed their views at different international conferences and meetings, gender dimension of these gatherings was not at the center of the attention of those who collected information for RFE/RL. But, the materials of this box indicated that specific topics – mainly connected to hard working conditions, double burden, shortages, etc – were marked as specifically “female”. Thus, analyzing materials of these boxes helped me to reorient my further search of materials in the archival catalogue – female participants of the transnational encounters could be found through different events and organizations, not through “women” as a key-word.

At the same time studying materials of these boxes was very useful in order to refresh my memory and to read several interesting articles from the Soviet press helping to uncover the everyday problems the Soviet women had. It is particularly important for deconstruction of the narrative on the “happy” and “emancipated” Soviet (and state socialist in general) women that can be found in the official publications produced by the WIDF (like journal *Women of the Whole World*).

In my further work in OSA I concentrated mainly on looking at specific transnational organizations and movements on the one hand, and on looking at the materials on Soviet relationships with particular “Third world” countries, on the other.

HU OSA 300/5/90 box 123

This box contains files about Asian-African People Solidarity Organization (AAPSO) that used to be addressed as the “Soviet front” organization. I already knew from my previous research that this organization was considered an important partner of the WIDF and many African and Asian women participating at the encounters between women from the “Second” and the “Third” world were also connected to AAPSO. These documents were interesting because they indicated a lot of conflicts inside AAPSO and in between this organization and countries of the “Second” world. Many documents discuss also limited character and unjust conditions of the Soviet aid to Asian and African countries; it was particularly discussed in the context of the China-Soviet split. These documents allow to understand the context where the discussions about usefulness of Eastern bloc expertise concerning changing women’s social status, work and education for the African and Asian women were taking place: what knowledge about the state socialist countries could women from non-European countries have before encountering women from Eastern bloc. Thus, it also helps to deconstruction of the overly positive picture on encounters presented in the official publications connected with the state socialist countries.

HU OSA 300/80/1 box 638

The information about OSPAAAL – organization of solidarity of people of Africa, Asia and Latin America, created in Havana in 1966 – was particularly difficult to find before. Thus, I am very happy to find some materials about this important three-continental organization that

was dealing with issues of women and development among others. As in the case of AAPSO, my main interest was on Western discourses about this organizations and internal conflicts and divisions inside of it.

HU OSA 300/120/3 Box 271

UNESCO supported many encounters between women organized in the name of development and women's rights. Thus, I was studying the documents concerning this organization. Similarly to other Cold War international organizations, the documents on UNESCO's work in the 1970s-1980s indicate a lot of conflicts, in this case, however, primarily developing along the Cold War main division line.

The UN population conference in Bucharest (1974) organized with support by UNESCO was an encounter between women from non-European and state socialist countries that was presented as an important event in the WIDF official publications. The collection of the press-clip in OSA allowed me to see the "other" side perspective – how Western press presented goals of this conference, Eastern bloc participants' attitudes as well as conflicts at the conference. Thus, use of this part of the OSA collection will help me to reconstruct the main discourses around this conference and to pay attention to those conflicts and disagreements that were silenced by the publications connected to or originated from the Eastern bloc.

HU OSA 300/80/1 box 783

Materials dedicated to developing countries were interesting due to possibility of understanding better the perspective of the "West" on problems of development as such and at the place of women in the development. It was particularly interesting to see evaluation of the Soviet and Eastern bloc developmental aid, in particular, the Soviet arms export. These descriptions are opposite to descriptions originating in official publications of pro-Soviet women's organizations about peace being the main focus of Eastern bloc politics in the developing countries. Indeed, "peace" was used frequently by Second world women for convincing the Third world women to join activities organized by the WIDF. Studying OSA documents in this box also further enlightened my understanding of the discussion on "neocolonialism" that was part of women's encounters.

HU OSA 300/80/1 box 541, 542

Peace was one of the central point of women's encounters and usually it was the Soviet representatives who spoke about peace and détente at the transnational conferences. The collection of OSA materials about peace shows that it was an area that was in the center of the RFE/RL interest and surveillance. The participation in peace marches (early 1980s) and conferences offered a lot of space for East-South encounters, even if it were mainly women from Eastern and Western Europe who participated. The archival materials contain a lot of information about Soviet dissident peace activists ("Trust", studied already by Irina Gordeeva) who also had women-participants. The activity of the dissident-women, fully silenced by the WIDF publications, is an important context of all the East-South encounters.

HU OSA 300/85/9 box 98

The materials of the dissident movement in the USSR were helpful through discovery of several documents when dissidents were trying to use world women's gatherings in order to bring attention to the violations of human rights in the Soviet Union. The letter by Academic Sakharov and his wife, E. Bonner, supporting possibility for their daughter-in-law to leave the USSR for family reunification is one of important documents. The letter was addressed to the UN conference of women in Copenhagen in 1980. Some other samizdat publications, like the article on Soviet woman by B. Jankauskene from 1980 (issue 32/80), is helpful for deconstructing the picture about "happy life" of Soviet women that was presented to guests from the Global South during the transnational encounters.

I also studied documents connected to Soviet relationships with several countries in Africa, Latin, America and Asia. It was advised by A. Felcher, my supervisor at OSA, as a possibility of finding women's participation and influence in the communication through official delegations and communist parties contacts.

I looked at

Cuba HU OSA 300/80/1 box 462, 463

India HU OSA 300/80/1 box 300, 301

Zanzibar HU OSA 300/80/1 box 274

These boxes contained information about women only sporadically, but I managed to find some interesting names and facts. Cuban relationships with the USSR according to the archival materials were full of conflicts due to independent position of Cuba up to 1969 and seem to be much more harmonious after that year. These findings confirm my earlier assumption about independent position of Cuban women in different East-South conferences in the 1960s and almost unanimous support of all the Soviet initiatives with respect to protection of peace and women's rights by Cuban representatives in the 1970s-early 1980s.

Documents on Zanzibar will help me to identify Western discourses surrounding East-South encounters in the 1960s, after the Cuban revolution and in the context of armed anti-colonial struggle in many African countries. One of few well-known in the 1990s Soviet Black women, Elena Hanga, was daughter of Zanzibarian father, while her mother, Lily Golden was a daughter of a Black American immigrant who moved to the USSR in the 1930s; Lily Golden was born in Tashkent. The archive materials show that these connections to the USSR were noticed by the Western press.

Finally, the box on India helps to understand splits and divisions inside of the Communist and left organizations in India in the 1960s. Indian women were prominent in all the WIDF conferences and congresses and were part of the leadership. At the same time, the information about internal conflicts will help me to understand better the different (and often critical to the USSR's position) opinions that some Indian women have expressed.

OSA 300/80/1 box 1057, 1059

I looked through documents on Uzbekistan's science and culture as well as on Uzbekistan's Communist party in hope to find information about prominent Uzbek women who were responsible for presenting Soviet "achievements" for emancipation of women to foreign guests. The files contain information that indicate that Uzbek women indeed had power for the Soviet decision-making: Rano Abdullaeva, for example, is mentioned as controlling ideological content of literature, Zulfia Israilova (poet whose poems were presented to international readership through the WIDF journal). On the other hand, I found materials suggesting that the issue of representation of indigenous (Uzbek) people in the party and Soviet organizations was the question that was discussed in the 1980s from a critical perspective.

HU OSA 300/7/10

Finally, I looked at the materials on women in China in the late 1950s-early 1960s. As in the case of other non-European countries, it was interesting to learn about Western perspective on women's emancipation in Communist China.

Together to these archival materials I also found two useful books:

Rethinking Latin America : development, hegemony, and social transformation, Munk, Ronaldo. New York : Palgrave Macmillan, 2013

The cultural Cold War and the global South : sites of contest and communitas. Kerry Bystrom, Monica Popescu, Katherine Zien. New York : Routledge, 2021