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Nadia Kaneva & Elza Ibroscheva
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HIDDEN IN PUBLIC VIEW

Visual representations of women in the Bulgarian communist press

Nadia Kaneva and Elza Ibroscheva

This study analyzes the visual representations of women in Bulgaria from the 1950s to the 1980s, as depicted in photographs in the official daily newspaper of the communist party. The study is theoretically informed by feminist theories of media representations and engages specifically with Gaye Tuchman’s idea of “symbolic annihilation,” which referred to Western media’s condemnation, trivialization, and omission of women in public discourse. However, this analysis adapts Tuchman’s theory to the specificities of socialist societies, where women’s participation in public life was ideologically mandated. The authors propose the concept of “symbolic glorification” as a correlate to Tuchman’s idea, and argue that symbolic glorification was a necessary part of ideological efforts to claim that women’s participation in the labor force and political life was a sign of true emancipation. Nevertheless, the visual data reveal that certain aspects of femininity, related to motherhood and sexuality, were symbolically annihilated as a way to make female identities conform to ideological goals. The paper concludes by raising questions about the ways in which the ideologically constructed identities of women during socialism may impact on a feminist agenda after the end of the Cold War.

KEYWORDS Bulgaria; communism; photojournalism; socialism; women’s emancipation; identity

Introduction: The Emancipation of Socialist Women

In his address to Soviet women, published in 1920 in Pravda [Truth], the official daily of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, on the occasion of International Women’s Day, Lenin wrote:

It is the chief task of the working women’s movement to fight for economic and social equality, and not only formal equality, for women. The chief thing is to get women to take part in socially productive labor, to liberate them from “domestic slavery,” to free them from their stupefying and humiliating subjugation to the eternal drudgery of the kitchen and the nursery. (Vladimir Ilyich Lenin [1920] 1965, p. 83)
This was the promise of the Bolshevik Revolution to women—a vision of emancipation that would transform women’s status and eradicate social and gender inequalities in both the public and private spheres.

Whether or how this promise was fulfilled in the actual lives of women under “really existing socialism” is a matter of debate. Western feminists have often pointed out the impressive achievements of socialist countries in terms of women’s levels of employment and representation in the structures of governance (Chris Corrin 1994; Barbara Einhorn 1993; Nanette Funk & Magda Mueller 1993; Sharon L. Wolchik 1994). By contrast, scholars from the former Eastern Bloc have argued that, while socialist societies propelled women into professional and political public life, they continued to enforce patriarchal models in the private sphere (Tatyana Mamonova 1989). As Maria Todorova summarizes,

It has been widely asserted that socialism imposed a double burden on women by throwing them, on the one hand, into the labor market which was supposed to have an emancipatory impact and, on the other hand, by not relieving them of the traditional work load of housewives. (1994, p. 129)

These seemingly conflicting views are inevitably connected to differences in the political and cultural dimensions of local feminisms, as they have evolved on both sides of the former Iron Curtain. Anikó Imre, Katarzyna Marciniak and Áine O’Healy describe similar disjunctures in other transnational contexts as well, and offer the notion of “transnational incommensurability” (2009, p. 387) as a way to theorize and account for real differences in women’s experiences, emanating from particular socio-historical circumstances. Our paper builds on this approach and emphasizes a form of historicized analysis of women’s experiences. In other words, we resist the temptation to side with either the Western or the Eastern side of the debate about socialist women’s emancipation, and focus, instead, on examining how women’s emancipation was visually presented in the official press of one specific socialist country—Bulgaria.

Our focus on Bulgaria is, in part, motivated by our desire to avoid homogenizing assumptions about the experiences of all women in the former Soviet Bloc as being the same. Rather, we insist on the need to recognize that there was much variation in the way different socialist countries engaged with the challenge of women’s emancipation. Accounting for such specificities is an important goal for historically grounded, critical scholarship of communism and socialism. We also focus on Bulgaria because it is one of the least studied former socialist countries and, at the same time, it was seen as the most reliable Soviet satellite. For the most part, it implemented Moscow’s ideological directives faithfully and did not experience any notable resistance or mass popular uprisings against the communist regime. Thus, Bulgaria represents an opportune site for examining the tensions and contradictions between the “communist ideal” of women’s emancipation, summed up in Lenin’s statement above, and its “implementation” in the realms of official state ideology and women’s lived experiences.

Finally, as Bulgarian-born scholars who grew up in that country during the socialist period, our interest in the fate of Bulgarian women’s emancipation is of a personal nature as well. The promises and visions of the communist regime about the role and status of women in society have certainly acted to constrain the lived experiences of the women in our own families, as well as our own. This has inevitably influenced our inquiry into this topic and the way in which we approach it.
Summarizing the trajectory of women’s emancipation in Bulgaria between 1960 and 1995, Bulgarian sociologist Tatyana Kotzeva writes:

There was an influx of women in production and services. [...] A break with traditional lifestyles and a move towards egalitarian and democratic family relationships was implemented. However, women’s liberation has had a series of negative impacts such as a double workload, mental stress and exhaustion, deteriorating health, low sexual and reproductive awareness and irresponsible parenthood. Men enjoy considerable advantages in the professional arena, financial remuneration and power resources. (2001, p. 107)

Rossica Panova, Raina Gavrilova and Cornelia Merdzanska give a similar diagnosis, describing the socialist Bulgarian woman’s body as “both a decorative object and a draught animal” and her consciousness as “both that of mother and wife and that of wage earner and intellectual, her free will submitted both to the family status and state chains” (1993, p. 19).

Against this backdrop, we raise the following broad questions: why was this “double burden” ideologically possible in socialist Bulgaria, despite its obvious conflict with the original vision of women’s emancipation outlined by Lenin and his followers? More specifically, how did the communist party press assist in constructing, justifying, and maintaining this regime of women’s double subjectification? To address these questions, we zoom in more narrowly on the visual construction of women’s subjectivities through photographic images in the national political press. Specifically, we analyze photographs published between 1956 and 1981 in the official daily of the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP), Rabotnichesko Delo [Workers’ Cause].

Theoretical Framework: Photography and Reality

Our interest in photographs is inspired by a broad reading of critical theories of the photographic image as having a dual valence as both reflecting and constructing reality. As Walter Benjamin pointed out, modern photography introduced a new understanding of authenticity, where “photographs become standard evidence for historical occurrences, and acquire a hidden political significance” (1936, p. VI). Thus, one can detect an enduring expectation on the part of audiences that the photographic image is a truthful reflection of reality. At the same time, as Roland Barthes observed,

[G]eneral opinion too has a vague conception of the image as an area of resistance to meaning—this in the name of a certain mythical idea of Life: the image is re-presentation, which is to say ultimately resurrection, and, as we know, the intelligible is reputed antipathetic to lived experience. ([1915] 1978, p. 32)

In other words, the polysemy of the image is always already present and its status as a reflection of reality is unstable.

The development of modern photography in the early 1900s coincided with the rise of Soviet socialism and it did not take long for communist ideologues to recognize the propaganda potential of the photographic image. The 1920s saw the emergence of a particular style of “Soviet photojournalism” which used the camera “to document and envision Soviet society” (David Shneer 2008, p. 9, emphasis in original).² Discussing the role of photography in the Soviet context, Grigorii Boltiansky, a central figure in the development of Soviet cinema, argued in 1939:
The proletariat of the Soviet country and its avant-garde—the Communist Party—places new tasks before photography. Photography should take its place in the arsenal of weapons of class struggle—it should become a means of Communist propaganda, one of the weapons of socialist construction. (Quoted in Erika Wolf 2004, p. 107)

The Soviet press as a whole was structurally bound to the communist party and to the government and performed a deliberate ideological function (Natasha Tolstikova 2000). Lenin had outlined the role of the press as that of a “collective propagandist, agitator, and organizer” (quoted in Tolstikova 2000, p. 166), and, in keeping with this goal, Soviet censors did not hesitate to manipulate photographic images when the reality “captured” did not match the reality they wished to represent (Leah Dickerman 2000).

Recognizing the ideological role of photography in the communist press provides an important starting point for our investigation. With Jordan Bear (2010), we hold that “photographic referentiality” should be understood “as both an ontological and a historical question” (p. 89, emphasis in original). Thus, a historically informed analysis of photojournalistic images in the Bulgarian communist press can help illuminate precisely the tensions in the way photographs were intended to function as both documents of and prescriptions for the reality of women’s lives under socialism. At the same time, because of the status of Rabotnichesko Delo as a voice of state-sanctioned authority and the paper’s ubiquity, it would have been nearly impossible for women to avoid seeing these photographs. Thus, regardless of variations in their reception of the photographs’ meaning, women in socialist Bulgaria had to negotiate their sense of self-identity against the images put out by the communist party press.

In our analysis of press photographs, we also engage with a Western tradition of feminist scholarship of the mass media. In this way, we seek to promote a form of “transcultural dialogue” within feminist scholarship that is particularly pressing in the contemporary context of globalization (Imre, Marciniak & O’Healy 2009, p. 386). Specifically, we appropriate the concept of “symbolic annihilation,” introduced by Gaye Tuchman in 1978 to refer to the American media’s condemnation, trivialization, and omission of women in mediated discourse. Tuchman was concerned that American media portrayals confined women to domestic roles, and argued that this trend had particularly troubling implications for working-class women. As she put it, “rigid sex-role stereotypes make the burden heavier for all working women who must still shoulder the responsibilities of home and family with limited support from their husbands” (Gaye Tuchman [1978] 2000, p. 172). In that sense, Tuchman documented the potential of the media to implicitly endorse a double burden on women. It is interesting to examine how her ideas may inform the study of socialist countries, where women constituted half of the labor force and their participation in public life was ideologically mandated.

Although Tuchman’s benchmark theory has undergone significant modifications to reflect contemporary trends in the visual representation of women in the West, it has not been used to study the socialist context. In this paper we adapt Tuchman’s concept of symbolic annihilation for the purpose of extending her theory’s application to the specificities of the socialist period. We propose the concept of “symbolic glorification”—intended as a correlate to “symbolic annihilation”—and argue that symbolic glorification was a necessary part of ideological efforts to claim that women’s participation in the labor force and in political life was the primary, and perhaps the only, legitimate sign of their emancipation during socialism. Ultimately, we are interested in exploring how symbolic annihilation and symbolic glorification were manifested in Bulgaria’s communist party.
press as it manipulated gender portrayals in the service of promoting socialist values, while allowing for a continued justification of patriarchy.

Historical Background: Women in Socialist Bulgaria

The legal equality of Bulgarian men and women was officially proclaimed in October 1944, only a month after the communist takeover of power, with the passage of a special law, which later became a constitutional principle in 1947 (Ulf Brunnbauer 2007, p. 141). In May 1945, the government also passed a Decree on Marriage, which made civil marriage the only legal form, gave spouses liberty to choose their profession, and obliged them to contribute to the family income according to their possibilities. Other laws passed in that period established men's and women's equal rights to inheritance, the rights of each spouse to file for divorce, as well as the equal rights of children born in and out of wedlock (Brunnbauer 2007). These legal guarantees were accompanied by various propaganda efforts and a push for rapid industrialization and modernization of Bulgaria, which had been a predominantly rural, agricultural country up to that point.

The model of full female employment proved effective in socialist Bulgaria, where women consistently accounted for nearly half of the labor force in the four decades between 1950 and 1990 (Kotzeva 2001, p. 107), up from 24 percent before World War II (Dobrinka Kostova 1998, p. 250). Similarly, the political representation of Bulgarian women grew during the socialist period, with the number of female Members of Parliament rising from a mere 5.7 percent in 1946 to a high of 21.7 percent in 1981 (Krassimira Daskalova & Pavlina Filipova 2004, p. 10). Significant shifts in educational achievement also suggest an increased level of social equality for women, with 29.4 percent of all university degrees going to women in 1964 and an impressive 51.4 percent in 1988 (Kotzeva 2001, p. 111).

At the same time, existing literature on Bulgarian women’s self-identity under socialism suggests the prevalence of two conflicting images: “the socialist Amazon—a woman-android, the mechanical woman, woman-heroine of a socialist modernization project—and woman as a mother and a carer of children” (Tatyana Kotzeva 1999, p. 81). Examining a variety of Bulgarian media texts from the 1960s and 1970s, including films, memoirs, and newspapers, Petar Vodenicharov also finds that “The woman—worker, social activist and mother’ was promoted by the media as a normative biographical pattern” (2005, p. 83). Existing studies, however, have focused primarily on discursive—rather than visual—constructions of the duality of women’s identities. Our study intends to build on this literature by exploring the photojournalistic dimensions of women’s identity construction more closely.

Procedures and Methods of Analysis

Our analysis is based on a sample of photographs drawn from the daily newspaper Rabotnichesko Delo. Established in 1927, the paper became the official organ of the Bulgarian Communist Party in 1948 and served as its main propaganda arm until 1990 when it ceased publication under that name. As Anelia K. Dimitrova (1998, p. 180) explains,

Professionally, the Bulgarian media was [sic] relegated to the role of a megaphone of the party ideology and collective thinking. Ubiquitous and marginal, the press toed the line of Marxism–Leninism unquestionably. The Soviet information machine was its gospel and only source of inspiration, news and directives.
Therefore, the visual representations of women in *Rabotnichesko Delo* constitute the best example of the official party vision of women’s roles and women’s emancipation in socialist Bulgaria.

For the purposes of this study, we sampled issues of *Rabotnichesko Delo* from three years—1956, 1971, and 1981—which have a particular historical and political significance. On 2–6 April, 1956, the Bulgarian Communist Party held its historic April Plenum, which outlined a major shift in policy intended to promote rapid economic and cultural progress. The so-called “April Line” of the BCP, established at the Plenum, was adopted in response to Kruschev’s de-Stalinization policies in the Soviet Union and was intended to solidify the legitimacy of communist party rule. While 1956 brought a popular uprising against the communist government in Hungary, Bulgarian party leaders were able to successfully preempt dissent by launching a program of “an accelerated drive towards ‘progress’ in all realms of socialist development” (Mary Neuburger 2000, p. 180). The April Line also included a “cultural revolution” program, complete with measures that were specifically intended to address the status of women in society. In this context, we expected coverage from 1956 to reflect a benchmark snapshot of women’s proper roles in society, as envisioned by the Bulgarian Communist Party.

The years 1971 and 1981 were selected because both were parliamentary election years and also marked significant achievements for women in political life. The 1971 elections, held on 28 June, marked the first time women were elected to the highest echelons of power, with three out of the twenty-three members of the State Council being women. In addition, two women were appointed to ministerial positions—Dora Believa as Minister of Light Industry and Svetla Daskalova as Minister of Justice. The 1981 elections took place on 7 June and resulted in women winning 21.7 percent of all seats in parliament—the highest percentage during the socialist period in Bulgaria (Daskalova & Filipova 2004).

In addition to their individual significance, these three sampling points cover a period of over twenty-five years. While the 1950s were a period of accelerated growth and modernization, the 1960s and 1970s witnessed a shift towards policies for improving living standards and the cultivation of socialist consumption and lifestyle (Mila Mineva 2010). Thus, cumulatively, our three sampling points allow us to observe the evolution of visual representations over a substantial part of communist rule in Bulgaria.

For each of the three years we reviewed all photographs published in issues from 1 to 8 March—i.e., during the week leading up to 8 March, International Women’s Day. We assumed that the press would devote greater attention to women’s issues during that period due to the approaching women’s holiday.³ Our expectations were corroborated by the fact that in all three years the issues of *Rabotnichesko Delo* published on 7 and 8 March contained specially-themed materials in celebration of the holiday. In addition, for each year we also reviewed photographs in all issues published during the two weeks leading up to the Plenum and the elections, respectively, and the one week following these events. Our assumption was that those would be periods of heightened attention to nationally important issues, giving us the opportunity to observe the programmatic discourse of the BCP more clearly.

In total, we examined the images in ninety-five issues of the newspaper.⁴ In these issues, we counted a total of 757 photographs, of which 226 or 30 percent were identified as containing images of women (see Table 1). We excluded from this count cartoons and other drawings, images of children even when they included girls, and photos of foreign
delegations containing women. In our analysis of these images, we combine quantitative and qualitative methods in order to address two separate but related goals. First, we aim to assess quantitatively the relative visual presence or absence of women in the pages of the communist party paper. We are interested in noting patterns of presence/absence within each year and over the whole period.

Second, we employ a qualitative, hermeneutic approach to analyze selected images from each of the three years. Here we focus primarily on images published in the 8 March issues from the three years as they specifically addressed the status of women in society. We look for patterns of consistency and contradiction with the quantitative data, as well as for hints in the way visuals and texts work together to justify (explicitly or implicitly) the “double burden” imposed on socialist women. Our focus in this exploratory, hermeneutic portion of the discussion is on answering the question: what did women’s emancipation look like in socialist Bulgaria?

In our hermeneutic discussion we also look at depictions of women and of gender relations in editorial cartoons published in the sampled issues. Cartoons represented a small total number of visuals in the newspaper and were not included in the quantitative portion of the analysis. However, as we will elaborate later, they offer intriguing counterpoints to the representations in the photographs and provide poignant commentary on culturally accepted ideas of women’s roles and gender relations. Ultimately, we aim to expose the symbolic annihilation and glorification of women and draw some conclusions about the political and cultural implications of mediated portrayals for Bulgarian women’s emancipation.

**Discussion: Visions of Women’s Emancipation in Bulgaria**

As noted earlier, 226 or 30 percent of the sampled photographs were identified as containing images of women. The percentage of photos that include women remained fairly consistent across the three sampled years, with 33 percent of photos in 1956, 21 percent in 1971, and 36 percent in 1981 (see Table 1).

These percentages illustrate that, despite the presumed equality of women in Bulgarian society, their visual representation in the party press accounted for roughly only a third of the photographs. This suggests an overall pattern of symbolic under-representation of women in *Rabotnichesko Delo*. On the one hand, the percentages of photographs are in
conflict with the actual presence of women in the labor force, which remained around 47 percent for the entire period (Kotzeva 2001, p. 111). On the other hand, they consistently over-represent the actual percentages of women members of parliament for each of the three years, which were 15.7 percent in 1956, 18.7 percent in 1971, and 21.7 percent in 1981 (Daskalova & Filipova 2004, p. 10). In that respect, the photographic representations of women are at odds with the realities of women’s participation in economic and political life in socialist Bulgaria (see Table 2).

An interesting example of the way the newspaper tries to emphasize women’s political participation, despite their actual under-representation, can be seen on page one of the 8 March, 1956 issue. The dominant photo on the top half of the page shows a group shot of state officials presiding over an official celebration of International Women’s Day in Sofia. The represented officials include female party functionaries, although they are clearly in the minority in the photograph. The masthead of the paper on that day also includes a quote from the official greeting by the Central Committee of the BCP to women, which states that “in all areas of economic, cultural and political life of the country, woman participates shoulder to shoulder with man” (Rabotnichesko Delo 8 March, 1956). This is the only instance of a cover-page photograph in an 8 March issue, where women are portrayed together with men and their role as workers is not emphasized through the photo or its caption.

Another interesting trend emerging from the numbers is that women are represented without men in the majority of photographs—58 percent in 1956, 54 percent in 1971, and 57 percent in 1981 (see Table 3). The significance of this pattern is ambiguous as it may be interpreted as a form of “glorification” of women or, conversely, as a form of “segregation” which makes women’s symbolic elevation more palatable because they are not directly compared to men by appearing in the same photograph. In photographs where men and women are shown together, women outnumber men in less than half of the cases—42 percent of photos in 1956, 27 percent in 1971, and 31 percent in 1981—or they are shown in equal numbers with men in 26 percent, 27 percent, and 26 percent, respectively, for the same years (see Table 3). In addition, when men and women appear together in photographs their interactions are portrayed as impersonal and strictly professional. In the majority of photos no eye-contact is shown between men and women whose eyes are, instead, focused on the particular task (usually work-related) that they are performing. The only exceptions to this pattern are to be found in a few photos of artistic performances or texts, such as dance performances and scenes from fiction films.

The photographs of women overwhelmingly show them in public roles as workers, educators, artists, political delegates, etc. However, the most notable trend is that there is a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Photos that include women (%)</th>
<th>Women in parliament (%)</th>
<th>Women in labor force (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1956</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>47.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>47.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td>46.91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Data excerpted from Daskalova and Filipova (2004, p. 10).
** Data excerpted from Kotzeva (2001, p. 111). Nearest available year was used: 1960, 1970, and 1980, respectively.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of photos that include women</th>
<th>Photos of women only (percentage of photos that include women)</th>
<th>Photos that also include men (percentage of photos that include women)</th>
<th>Photos that include more women than men (percentage of photos that also include men)</th>
<th>Photos that include more men than women (percentage of photos that also include men)</th>
<th>Photos that include women and men equally (percentage of photos that also include men)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1956</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>41 (58%)</td>
<td>30 (42%)</td>
<td>12 (40%)</td>
<td>10 (32%)</td>
<td>8 (26%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>31 (54%)</td>
<td>26 (46%)</td>
<td>7 (27%)</td>
<td>12 (46%)</td>
<td>7 (27%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>56 (57%)</td>
<td>42 (43%)</td>
<td>13 (31%)</td>
<td>18 (43%)</td>
<td>11 (26%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>128 (57%)</td>
<td>98 (43%)</td>
<td>32 (33%)</td>
<td>40 (41%)</td>
<td>26 (26%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
marked difference in the types of public roles that are presented in the photographs. In 1956, 62 percent of the photos containing women show them in the roles of industrial or agricultural laborers. This percentage drops dramatically down to 20 percent in 1971 and then to 17 percent in 1981. In the latter two years, we see an increasing number of women depicted in the roles of educators, scientists, engineers, health workers, artists/dancers, political delegates, or athletes. Interestingly, in 1981 we also see, for the first time, three photographs of women in the role of shoppers—i.e., as consumers rather than producers. These “softer” public roles gradually replace the archetypical “working class” image of the socialist woman as an industrial and agricultural laborer.

In his examination of *Rabotnichesko Delo* issues from the 1970s, Vodenicharov also notes “a clear gender dichotomy” (2005, p. 83), with women visually represented in light industry occupations while men are shown in “tougher” roles. He describes:

> [S]miling women in headscarves pick apples or gather tobacco in agriculture brigades, weave, sew fabrics and tin tomatoes in the textile and food industries, or teach children in public schools. Serious men in safety helmets build blocks of flats or temper steel, soldiers and marines guard the state borders, responsible politicians and engineers plan the future. (2005, pp. 83–84)

At the same time, Vodenicharov points out that “common for both men and women was that they only had a public life” (2005, p. 84). This trend was confirmed in our sample of images as well, suggesting that an emphasis on public over private life for both men and women was the norm in the party press throughout the entire socialist period.

Despite the softening images of women over time, however, the 8 March issues in both 1971 and 1981 chose to feature prominent photographs of industrial workers on their covers as the iconic images of the Bulgarian socialist woman. The largest photo on the cover page of the 8 March, 1971 issue shows three female workers (possibly welders, judging by their head gear), smiling broadly while looking at a distant point outside of the photo’s frame (see Figure 1). The women’s pose and the composition of the shot are reminiscent of iconic images of socialist realist art that show the socialist worker looking enthusiastically toward the bright future. The caption of the photograph does not identify the women by name, age, or location; it simply states: “Mechanical Workers.” Clearly, these workers are meant to symbolize the communist ideal of womanhood and emancipation.

The photo of the three female workers appears in the top, center part of the page, immediately under the masthead, and is not related to an article. The women’s gazes, however, lead the reader’s eye in the direction of a text titled “Woman—The Honorable Creator,” which is an editorial address to women on the occasion of International Women’s Day. The text rehearses the party line of women’s emancipation, asserting that “Today’s Bulgarian woman is an equal citizen of the republic, an enthusiastic builder of life and of her children’s tomorrow” (*Rabotnichesko Delo* 8 March, 1971, p. 1). The majority of the text focuses on women’s participation in the labor force and their increased levels of education. However, it also quotes head of state Todor Zhivkov, saying:

> We value highly the noble work of the Bulgarian woman in all spheres of our lives. […] This is extremely important and necessary for the development of our [socialist] order. But the big role of woman as educator, her big role for strengthening the family, for bearing and rearing children, is truly a heroic act before which our Party, our government, our people bow. (*Rabotnichesko Delo* 8 March, 1971)
The rest of the textual materials on the page make a number of other references to motherhood, but none of the visuals in this issue—or in any of the other sampled issues in 1971—show women in their role as mothers. In effect, the visual representation of motherhood is symbolically annihilated, even when women’s contributions to socialist society are celebrated and glorified.

Another example of the way motherhood is symbolically annihilated from the pages of Rabotnichesko Delo is found on the cover page of the 8 March, 1981 issue. The largest photo on the page shows a portrait of a smiling woman being hugged by two children, possibly her own. The title of the photo caption reads “The Tireless One.” The caption further identifies the woman as Gitza Tzvetkova, an industrial weaver with thirty-five years in the labor force, who has been chosen as a delegate to the Twelfth Congress of the BCP. Thus, despite the inclusion of children in the photograph, the caption underplays her role as a mother and emphasizes her identity as a worker and a party delegate.

Women’s roles as mothers are nearly invisible in the whole sample of photographs, although motherhood is mentioned repeatedly in the textual materials as a woman’s “duty” and key responsibility. In the few instances where women’s role as mothers is visually portrayed, mothers are visualized either alone with their children, or in groups with other women and children, but with absentee fathers. There is only one photograph in the entire
sample that is an exception to this rule. It is published in 1981 and appears without an accompanying article. The photo shows a socialist nuclear family—mother, father, and two children—with the parents identified only by name. Although the photograph features a father figure in the foreground of the composition, it places a visual emphasis on the mother as the center of the family unit—she is positioned in the precise center of the composition, holding the younger child up in the air, and lovingly looking on. At the same time, the caption deflects the visual emphasis on motherhood and redirects attention to the fact that the family has recently acquired a new home. Thus, this photograph is presented as an illustration of the housing policies of the state, rather than as a showcase of women's role as mothers.

Despite the overall visual annihilation of motherhood, women's roles as primary caregivers and educators of children are portrayed in a number of photographs that show them as nurses, teachers, and librarians. In all of these occupations, however, they continue to serve as caregivers in a public capacity. Their private lives are, in effect, invisible despite multiple references in the textual materials to the “duty” of women to instill the proper social values in their children.

The specific role of women as mothers, wives, or objects of men’s affection is directly addressed through visuals only in six cartoons, published in 1971 and 1981. Interestingly, only two of these are by a Bulgarian cartoonist—both appear in the 8 March, 1981 issue, in a single box on page 2 (see Figure 2). The other four cartoons, published in various issues in 1971, include three reprints from foreign publications (Italian, Polish, and German) and one cartoon by a Soviet artist created for Rabotnichesko Delo. Thus, it is possible to surmise that the cartoonists’ humorous jabs at gender relations were allowed in the 1971 issues only because they could be construed as “foreign” to Bulgarian reality.

For instance, on page 4 of the issue from 8 March, 1971, we find a Polish cartoon that depicts a bedraggled, apron-wearing wife, holding a baby and surrounded by three other rowdy children, while she is greeting her husband at the door. The husband, dressed in a suit and carrying a briefcase, has his back turned to his wife and children as he hangs up his

FIGURE 2
Two cartoons by Georgi Chavdarov (Rabotnichesko Delo 8 March, 1981, p. 2)
fedora with a smile. The caption reads: “How was your day?” It is possible to interpret this cartoon as a satire of the bourgeois family. At the same time, its satirical punch is greater if we imagine that—like most Bulgarian women did in reality—the cartoon wife had spent a full day at work before picking up the children from school and returning home to prepare supper. Notably, the publication of this cartoon on International Women’s Day indicates that it is intended as a commentary on women’s emancipation, although—as we have shown—the nature of the commentary remains deeply ambiguous.

A similar double entendre can be read into an Italian cartoon reprinted in a July, 1971 issue. In this case, we see a man chased by his own dog, while his wife utters, “If you spent more time at home, the dog would recognize you better.” The humor stems from the fact that the husband is clearly absent from the front of domestic responsibility, while the wife spends her time at home, caring for house chores and other family duties. This cartoon could be seen as satirizing Italian families—with the associated stereotypes of Italian men as womanizers. However, the cartoon also captures the inequities in family responsibilities in Bulgaria, or it would not have been funny to Bulgarian readers.

The only inclusion of a Bulgarian cartoonist’s take on gender relations appears in the 8 March, 1981 issue. Once again, the choice of International Women’s Day as the day of publication is significant. Right below a series of articles meant to celebrate and “glorify” the important role women play in the social and domestic sphere, we see two cartoons positioned side by side (see Figure 2).

The first cartoon shows a woman in a low-cut dress, dragging a reluctant husband into a store with a sign “Luxury Items.” The caption reads: “You know! Even before we got married you called me Dear!” The humor comes from the double meaning of “dear”—as both “beloved” and “expensive”—which is valid in Bulgarian as well as in English. The implication is that women expect special treatment for Women’s Day and men are literally forced to buy them expensive gifts. This is particularly ironic as the top half of the same page of the newspaper displays a photograph of women with flowers for the holiday.

The second cartoon in the box features a mother–housewife who is frantically working in her kitchen, while her son is shaking his finger and saying, “Mom, hurry up and finish, because dad is waiting for you to treat him for the holiday!” The irony is enhanced by the fact that the father is absent from the picture, his existence evident only from the child’s comment. For the first time, under the guise of humor, we see an unflinching critique of the uneven distribution of housework responsibilities in the “emancipated” Bulgarian household. At the same time, the fact that this was considered funny confirms the wide acceptance of patriarchal values as normative.

Parallel to the virtual absence of images in which men are shown performing any activity that can be construed as belonging to the private sphere of feminine domesticity, there is a notable lack of emphasis on the physical appearance of women in the photographs. For the most part, women appear dressed in conservative clothes, most frequently in work uniforms, buttoned up, with their hair covered or tied in a bun, looking unaware of or disengaged from their sexual essence. Their appearance, matronly and espousing a peasant aesthetic, is far from arbitrary. It is meant to promote a deliberate image of the emancipated woman, an image that serves as a powerful signifier of the annihilation of a bourgeois aesthetic. In an essay which discusses the Marxist legacy of women’s self-identity in Bulgaria, Kotzeva (1999) contends that part of the ideological project of the press in constructing the image of the emancipated socialist woman was to represent her as having defeated the “parasitic” needs of leisure, aesthetics, and the
decadent trend of self-indulgence in fashion and beauty. Instead, she was shown as narrowly—and appropriately so—focused on functional and productive activities.

A typical Bulgarian woman, as portrayed in photographs in Rabotnichesko Delo, is devoid of playfulness or coquetry, let alone sexuality. As Nadezda Azhgikhina explains in relation to Soviet media, “of all feminine manifestations, only motherly love in moderate quantities was tolerated; women actively mastered men’s skills, acquired education and took part in public life,” all the while dressed in conservative suits, lacking any fashion sense, and appearing utterly asexual (1995, p. 5). The same trend is clearly visible in the Bulgarian communist press. Even when concepts of aesthetics and female beauty are discussed on the pages of the newspaper, the ideological overtone of the narrative is extremely calculated. Doina Pasca-Harsanyi (1996, p. 44) describes a similar situation in reference to representations of women in socialist Romania:

[Women] could not dress fashionably, wear makeup, or look attractive in any way. Anyone who looks at pictures of the most prominent female nomenklatura, forced to imitate the generic asexual communist “comrade,” will understand the lack of appeal to young women.

This last comment may also suggest an explanation as to why, after communism’s collapse, the newly-emerged, private newspapers in Bulgaria were quick to go in the extreme opposite direction—publishing pictures of scantily clad, hypersexualized women on their pages on a daily basis. As we note elsewhere, Demokratzia, the main opposition newspaper in Bulgaria after 1989, sponsored a topless beauty contest and—upon publishing the photo of the winner—argued that “a new sense of liberation was being expressed through the symbolic act of stripping the clothes as well as the artificial morals of the communist past” (Nadia Kaneva & Elza Ibroscheva forthcoming).

Conclusions: Hidden in Public View

In the end, what is the overall picture of women’s emancipation that is revealed from this analysis of photographs in the Bulgarian communist press? Several clear trends emerge. First, the image of emancipation was narrowly circumscribed to show women only in the public sphere, where they appeared as members of the labor force and political functionaries. Moreover, the visual aesthetics of the images offered very limited models that women could use to construct their self-identity. The propaganda machine of the communist state disseminated images of women in hard hats, women technicians, and women doctors in white lab coats, which widely supported the illusion that women had, indeed, been liberated from domestic slavery. This was the symbolic glorification of the socialist woman-worker-activist—a model and an ideal that was admired by feminists in the West.

At the same time, this glorification amounted to a symbolic annihilation of the socialist woman’s identity as mother, wife, and sexual being. Among other things, this visual annihilation of women’s private lives successfully hid their lack of emancipation in the private sphere, allowing for the perpetuation of patriarchal family relations. In other words, the way in which the Bulgarian communist press sidestepped the problem of women’s emancipation in the private sphere was to leave it, literally, out of the picture. The unspoken implication of this omission was that socialist women had, somehow, found the perfect balance between handling a professional career and raising a family. References in the newspaper to the iconic Bulgarian woman as “the tireless one” and the “honorable creator”
reinforced the communist party line. Simultaneously, they put pressure on women to reject individualism and self-serving motives and, instead, to devote their energies to the common good, exercising their remarkable abilities to serve their families and attend to their social duties all at the same time.

This did not mean, however, that many women did not experience a profound conflict between the demands placed on them by both the state and the family. Indeed, despite the consistent visibility of women on the pages of Rabotnichesko Delo, the contradictory and problematic nature of their lived experiences remained, in an important sense, invisible—it remained hidden in public view. This is an area for future exploration, where ethnographic work and audience analyses can be particularly illuminating. What we have found here is that the official vision of emancipation did not reveal any attempts to openly address this conflict. By hiding the “duty of motherhood” and the double labor it required, this conflict was effectively relegated to the status of an internal problem that individual women had to address for themselves. Their personal inability to do so would have been an example of their failure to live up to the ideal of the socialist woman.

Our analysis has also revealed an interesting finding in relation to the applicability of Tuchman’s theory to the Eastern European context during socialism. The photographs from Rabotnichesko Delo show the exact opposite trend to the one Tuchman found in American media of the 1960s and 1970s. While the message of American media to women may have been, “marry, don’t work” (Tuchman [1978] 2000, p. 160), the message to Bulgarian women from the photographs in Rabotnichesko Delo can be summed up as “work, work, work!” Paradoxically, despite this difference, the ultimate result for working women in both countries was the same—the media perpetuated an implicit and relentless justification of a double burden. In other words, we would argue that one-sided portrayals of women’s roles—regardless of the direction they take—lead to the symbolic annihilation of important and real parts of women’s lived experiences with potentially important implications.

Other interesting comparisons between the cultural implications of media portrayals for women in the West and East are possible. It is intriguing, for example, to explore whether these different portrayals resulted in broad cultural expectations of women in the capitalist West to be weak and defenseless, while women in the socialist East were expected to be strong and self-sufficient. This question could also be pursued in relation to women’s own ideas of the proper models of behavior they envisioned for themselves, as well as the values they wished to pass on to their daughters. Further, we need to also address how all of these ideas have changed after the end of socialism and what are the models that have replaced them since. These are all questions that await future research. Nevertheless, twenty years after the end of the Cold War, it is clear that much remains to be done in order to accomplish true emancipation of women around the world. Developing a better understanding of the conflict-ridden history of women’s emancipation is only the first step in this struggle.

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NOTES

1. Throughout this essay we employ the terms “communism/communist” and “socialism/socialist” to refer to two distinct aspects of social experience during the Soviet period. We speak of communism when we are addressing the official political ideology, political structures, or the communist party and its media organs. By contrast, we use socialism to refer to the historical period and to the social and cultural dimensions of life. Our usage is consistent with distinctions made in the dominant rhetoric of the East at the time—e.g., people were said to be building a “socialist society” but they became “communists” when they joined the communist party.

2. A similar approach also guided early Soviet filmmaking. Dziga Vertov’s 1929 film Man with the Movie Camera (Chelovek s kinoapparatom) is perhaps the best known example among Western scholars.

3. International Women’s Day was officially celebrated in Bulgaria, as well as in other Eastern Bloc countries, during socialism.

4. In 1956 the newspaper had four pages per issue; in 1971 it had gone up to six pages per issue, and in 1981 to eight pages per issue.

5. All translations of materials from the newspaper are ours.

6. Again, the only exception is a German cartoon from 1971, but we will not devote more space here to discuss it.

REFERENCES


