



Women During Socialism

As you're going through the material on Socialism Realised, it might seem like women didn't play an important role in the communist regimes. Although we weren't able to find a lot of material where women played an active role, we still mustn't think that the chosen materials with dominant male actors express the universal experience of life during communism. Because our goal is to show various perspectives on the past, in this pathway we will try to erase the debt and instead focus on sources that allow us to see the past through the female perspective.

Communism can be interpreted as a specific reaction to the structural problems of modernity, and we can find many parallels to the progress in other parts of Europe in the issues such as women's rights. Europe became industrialised after the Second World War, women joined the workforce en masse, and new roles replaced old ones. The specific thing about the initial situation in the communist regimes was that emancipation was driven from the top – the state apparatus could push through far more consistent policies than the democratic governments could. On the other hand, civil society did not emerge in the communist regimes, and feminism as a social movement did not really assert itself. The tension between these two features is the main axis of our analysis.

1. „Girl on a Tractor“
2. „A Serious Conversation“
3. „Friends from Moscow“
4. „Invasion of Privacy“



Socialism Realised

Life in Communist Czechoslovakia, 1948-1989

Girl on a Tractor

<http://www.socialismrealised.eu/catalogue/girl-on-a-tractor/>

Questions:

- What role do women play in this clip, and how does it differ from the men's role?
- Do you think that the woman on the tractor is married? Does she have children?
- Do you think she spend time taking care of the household and looking after the children?

This clip from a propagandistic film from the beginning of the 1950s captures the idea of the new women's role in communist society well. Women entered the workforce, and it was expected that they would occupy the same position as men. Communism presented the role of women limited to the household as a specific form of exploitation in capitalist society, just as workers had been exploited. Now, thanks to their involvement in productive work, a new, socialist woman had to be created.

Politicians in the Soviet Union were already pushing for radical changes in societal roles by the 1920s. After the Second World War when the Central European countries were quickly industrialising and the workforce was lacking. Women started working at an even higher rate than in the pre-war era. Changes in the working world reflected changes in the family sphere, as the communist countries entered into the intimate spheres of their citizens, assuming responsibility for domestic work and childcare. All-day childcare facilities (or even all-week facilities for women working in agriculture) arose, and the nationalised industry was supposed to give out household appliances or canned goods that would save more time in the household.

This vision of radical transformations of gender roles was not, however, fulfilled in the real world.



Socialism Realised

Life in Communist Czechoslovakia, 1948-1989



“Girls, come on out to the tractors at the State Tractor Station!”

The character of a female tractor driver (or, for example, a female crane operator) became iconic in period propaganda on the role of women – it symbolised the industrialisation of the countryside, the spread of women into the space reserved for men, and women’s agency.



A Serious Conversation

<http://www.socialismrealised.eu/catalogue/a-serious-conversation/>

Questions:

- What role does the mother play in the family that we meet in the clip?
- What do you think her profession is?
- How do you think the household work is divided in this family?

The film *Identity Card* is one of many that look at the era of Late State Socialism from the perspective of family history. In filmmaking shorthand, this helps us to illustrate the fate of the emancipation efforts of the 1950s. The idea of fast and radical changes in gender roles had not been fulfilled. This was partly caused by the economic problems of the communist countries, which were not able to keep their promises about insuring childcare, and above all, most of the population didn't really accept the new role of women.

Formally, the idea of equality was fulfilled – more women were employed in comparison with Western Europe. But at the end they were concentrated in the less prestigious positions so that they would have more time to take care of the household, which remained a women's domain. Gender roles in the family were not in doubt; the mother in our clip secures the emotional links between the members of the family and smooths over potential conflicts, but she limits her opinions in support of the father. In the whole film, viewers do not find out where she works. Whereas her husband's scientific career is a major theme, we only see the mother in the home environment.

In the countries of the Eastern bloc, the ideas of second wave feminism, which developed in Western Europe and in the US starting in the 1960s, were not accepted. No civil society or feminist movement existed that would have pushed these themes into the public debate.



Socialism Realised

Life in Communist Czechoslovakia, 1948-1989

Friends from Moscow

<http://www.socialismrealised.eu/catalogue/friends-from-moscow/>

Questions:

- What are the characteristic features of the top Czechoslovak and Soviet politicians?
- Why aren't there any women among them?

The video shows a representation of the Czechoslovak Communist Party as they welcome a partner delegation from the Soviet Union. Male politicians, for whom the criteria of equality had been fulfilled by women entering the workforce and formally serving in parliament, did not support broader feminist agenda. The female politicians were also obedient to conservative communist politics and they were only represented minimally in the decision-making bodies.



Socialism Realised

Life in Communist Czechoslovakia, 1948-1989

Invasion of Privacy

<http://www.socialismrealised.eu/catalogue/invasion-of-privacy/>

Albeit in a completely different social environment, the woman plays the same role in the family as mom from the “Serious Conversation” Clip – she follows her husband, although of course now it’s more difficult. Communist governments followed dissidents even into their personal lives, to the level of interpersonal relationships. Even though it was about their political activity, the dissidents shared their fates with their whole families, who would end up with problems at work or at school. The theme of this clip is the kind of pressure on family members that this interference into the private life created. The secret police tried to use marital problems to pressure the family to emigrate. It’s also not impossible that the secret police caused the marital crisis – with fake or real data.

In the period of Late State Socialism, policies like daycare were established and accepted, but the traditional gender roles were not challenged, and the family sphere was still exploited as a space to exert pressure on citizens.



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In all social circles, women functioned as support for the rest of the family and often limited their functions in the sphere of public decision-making in favor of their role in the home, with important exceptions, like the female members of the dissident movement. The theme of female emancipation, however, never asserted itself even in the dissident movement alongside the themes of universal political rights and freedom of speech.

In post-socialist countries, this remains an unfinished process – legacies of communist politics, for example, include women participating in full-time employment and state-run preschool education. On the other hand, however, the prevailing model of a woman still takes care of all the household work, because the debate about dividing and appreciating that work takes place only nowadays.

An unreflected legacy of communism could also be that films depicting the period of communism lack strong and independent heroines.