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SOME GENDER ASPECTS OF SOCIALISM

Abstract: The article presents a brief of the results of the study of the dynamics of women's underwear at the time of socialism in Bulgaria. The choice of the research topic is inspired by the concept that the attitudes towards women, women's bodies, and women's sexuality can be revealed through the dynamics of things. Studying underwear in the context of an ideology and everyday life can help us reveal many invisible characteristics of everyday life during socialism. The author firmly believes that such a comparative study is timely and necessary to be developed in all countries of the former Soviet bloc in terms of revealing similarities and differences in ideologies, economies, and policies.

Keywords: Socialism, gender, ideology, underwear.

Framework

For 30 years, one might expect that the studies of socialism are already a fully-fledged scientific field with clearly defined temporal, spatial, and problematic boundaries. We now have a significant amount of researches, both from scientists originating from post-socialist countries and researchers from the rest of the world. However, even a simple search on the Internet shows that, with very few exceptions, researches remain Euro-centered. For many reasons beyond the scope of this study, countries such as China, Vietnam, Cuba, etc. are only incidentally involved in what scholars call post-socialism, bearing in mind the space of the former socialist countries. A new project named "Post-Socialist and Comparative Memory Studies"- (PosSoCoMes) states its mission to unite the efforts of scientists from around the world and to create a database of already existing research findings (Robbe 2019). Indeed, it is necessary to create a common database for these studies aiming to identify understudied problems and to serve as a base for comparative studies, and so, we remain hopeful.

According to academic tradition in Bulgaria, Ethnology is part of the Historical disciplines. The knowledge of the historical process gives us a solid frame and enriches our toolkit of theories. For this study, it is of importance to first look at the historical approach towards the socialists' past. Historians develop mainly two approaches to the so-called recent past: *Totalitarianism*

states that in totalitarian countries, private life does not exist. Totalitarian culture is a culture of the collectivity and not of the individual. Ergo, studies need to be directed to the impact of the state and the Party on all processes in society. Thus, aspects of everyday life stay out of scientific attention. Another approach is one of *Revisionism*. It claims that the state controls the public and the private spheres. Private and everyday lives have to be studied in their quality of spaces where people adjust ideological dogmas and/ or resist them. Thirty years after the collapse of socialism, the ethnologists had drawn a map of the main fields to be studied. Our interests are directed mainly on the impact of the communists' policies on identities, religiosity, minorities, remembrance and forgetting, structures of society, everyday life, gender. It seems that most of the ethnologists use the revisionist approach.

This article is focused on a relatively new field of gender studies – the underwear as explored in the context of the ideology and everyday life during socialism. While searching for studies on underwear, I found Olga Gurova's remarkable book on the same subject (Гурова 2008). In "Soviet underwear: from ideology to everyday life" the emphasis is placed on the context, namely on the study of the ideological context, in which people and objects existed; it states that things appear in culture and acquire characteristics not in a random way, but they are the object of ideological construction (Гурова 2008: 4). Here we borrow the idea of Althusser stating that ideology is a system of concepts, ideas, myths, and images, which help people to evaluate their picture of the world (Althusser 2000: 31-38). Thus, ideology can be taken out of the political context and can be transferred into the context of the mass discourse – the ideas and perceptions of the social(ist) reality.

In socialist cultures, official ideology dogmas and prescriptions are often not identical to people's perceptions and practices (Creed 1998; Гурова 2008). That is why studying everyday life becomes more and more important. Studying underwear in the context of ideology and everyday life can help us show many invisible characteristics of everyday life during socialism. On the one hand, underwear holds all aspects of socialist mass production. Its representation in the mass discourse reflects public attitudes towards the body, nakedness, sexuality, and hygiene. On the other hand, underwear is the most intimate belonging of a person, and it can reveal the personal emotions and attempts to make it part of private life (Гурова 2008: 6). Limitations on the volume of the article will narrow the number of problems I present.

Method

For this research, it is possible to apply a whole palette of methods for collecting empirical information. I started by collecting and analyzing available documents: state documents, regulating the industry and hygiene standards, women's magazines, photographs, posters, and brochures. Of course, the leading method was ethnography. I conducted structured interviews with 45 women at

the age of 40 to 87 of different educational, occupational, ethnic, and religious backgrounds, living in different types of settlements (big cities, small towns, and villages).

As a woman born in the second half of the 1950s, I am a witness, and I am a part of the culture of the Bulgarian socialism. It was, therefore, inevitable that I applied the method of auto-ethnography. This method sets on cultural analysis and interpretation of the researcher's behavior, thoughts, feelings, and experiences related to those of the others in society. The researcher explores his own life and perception of the world, in which he/ she, together with others (and just like them), constructs the world around him/ her as self-explanatory and unproblematic. In this sense, auto-ethnography is the interconnection between the personality of the researcher and the culture to which he or she belongs, relating the individual's experience to the social context (Chang 2007: 207-221).

A brief overview of Women's magazines

Women's magazines can be looked at as state-controlled ideological institutions, responsible for the general ideology translation. They create and offer detailed images in a given cultural context.

On the one hand, these images represent the idea of the state about the role of women in society. On the other hand, they are serving as a model for women. It is known that media shape reality more than they reflect it.



“Woman Today,” 1946

Following the Bolshevik model back in 1944, the communist government promoted the new image of rural and urban women through the newly created, actively controlled magazine „Woman Today.“ Propaganda had to promote the new values and the new image of “the socialist woman” = “builder of the communism,” equal to the Man. Her new mission did not leave any space for demonstrations of sexuality. Fashion clothes, makeup, and modern hairdo were stigmatized as oddments from the previous regime. Working-class women and peasant women, cultivating the land and deprived of private property, had to abandon their femininity. Still, the new socialist gender concept kept alive the traditional strategy concerning robust control of women’s sexuality. One can assume that this control also included control over the underwear. The general idea is that it should be practical and free of unnecessary decorations.

Nevertheless, how far-reaching this rejection? Let us look again at women’s magazines, which traditionally published models of fashion goods.



БЕЛЪО ЗА ЖЕНАТА

1. Нопница, комбинирана от два плата, гарнирана с кларички на пластрона. Кройката за 100 см. гръдна обиколка е дадена в прибавката, фигура 1.
2. Комбинезон, гарниран на ползте и корсажа с широко бие от гъстър плат.
3. Сутрен, изработен от плат и латекс. Кройката е дадена, фиг. 2.
4. Комбинезон, изработен от памучен или копринен плат. Кройката за 100 см. гръдна обиколка е дадена в прибавката, фиг. 3.
5. Кимони, изработен от копринен или памучен плат.
6. Кимони, изработен от копринен или памучен плат. Кройката е за 112 см. обиколка на ханша, е дадена в прибавката, фиг. 4.
7. Пижамы, изработена от кариран памучен или копринен плат.

ОТ СТАРО НОВО

31. Жилетка, изработена от стари ареси. Кройката за 90 см. гръдна обиколка е дадена в прибавката, фиг. 7.
32. Пала, изработена от стар мъжки панталон. Кройката за 108 см. обиколка на ханша е дадена в прибавката, фигура 8.

“Woman Today,” 1947

Surprisingly, some of the models recommended for the socialist woman follow the “bourgeois fashion” up to that date. How to interpret the proposed fashion look of hidden clothing?

We need to add some demographic and economic data here. The modernization of the Bulgarian society began relatively late - in the second half of the 19th century. Quite later, the process of urbanization began in the early 20th century. Therefore, the 1946 census found that 75.3% of the population lived in villages, and only 24.7% lived in cities. The industry, including the clothing industry, was relatively underdeveloped, and the purchasing power of a large proportion of the population was low too. Traditionally, agricultural society is characterized by a low level of reserves and strives to produce at home everything needed, including clothing. The traditional folk costume does not contain lingerie. Women’s and men’s shirts also play the role of underwear. In urban elites, lingerie appeared with the opening of the newly liberated nation-state to European markets and fashion at the end of the 19th century. In the villages, underwear began to enter massively between the two world wars, but there are places where people did not use lingerie until the 1950s (Карамихова 2010).

Here is a story related to the first underpants coming in the village:

I can tell you an exciting story told by a well-known doctor of mine. When he was a young gynecologist, doctors would be sent to the villages in the 1960s to conduct organized preventive examinations for women working in agriculture. He went to a village close to Bourgas, Kameno. Women came to the rural health center: they would each enter with brand new pink panties. The doctor said to the midwife, „Look at them, they all have bought new pants for the doctor.“ At one moment, however, the next patient was late. The doctor opened the door to invite her to hurry up and what did he see: in the hallway, one of the patients pulls off the pink pants and hands them to the next on to put them on. They were so weak (or simple) that they raised money together to buy just one pair „for the doctor.“ (F, born in 1952, village).

Home-made

Sewing machines are stepping into the cities and villages between the two world wars. The established system of girls’ schools trains young Bulgarians to sew so that they can sew and repair their family’s clothes. For many women, sewing clothes at home becomes a (second) profession. It explains the developed practice of publishing tailoring patterns in fashion magazines. In a 1948 issue of the “Woman Today” magazine, we find underwear tailoring patterns.

ЦЕНОРАЗПИС:

| ДАМСКО | | МЪЖКО | |
|-------------------------------|---------|---------------------|---------|
| Палто | 150 лв. | Престилка | 100 лв. |
| Костюм | 150 лв. | Халат | 120 лв. |
| Рокля | 140 лв. | Винтяга | 120 лв. |
| Пола | 60 лв. | Пижама | 140 лв. |
| Блуза | 70 лв. | Риза | 80 лв. |
| Престилка | 100 лв. | Гащи | 40 лв. |
| Кухненска престилка | 60 лв. | ДЕТСКО до 15 г. | |
| Винтяга | 120 лв. | Палто | 110 лв. |
| Пенюар | 120 лв. | Костюм | 110 лв. |
| Нощница | 80 лв. | Рокля | 100 лв. |
| Пижама | 140 лв. | Блуза | 50 лв. |
| Халат | 120 лв. | Пола | 30 лв. |
| Комбинезон | 60 лв. | Престилка | 80 лв. |
| Гащи | 40 лв. | Пижама | 70 лв. |
| Сутиен | 40 лв. | Нощница | 60 лв. |
| Сентюр | 40 лв. | Гащиризон | 60 лв. |
| | | Гащи | 30 лв. |

Цената на увеличените модели на ръкоделията и плетивата ще се съобщава в списанието при самия модел.

Поръчките се предплащат, като за моделите, които ще се изпращат за провинцията трябва да се доплаща и по 10 лв. за пощенски разноси. Всички поръчки се изпращат препоръчани. Исканията да се отправят до редакцията на сп. „Жената днес“ — София, ул. Раковски 157. Сумите се изплатят по чекова сметка 3084. Редакцията е отворена всеки присъствен ден преди обед от 8 до 12 часа и след обед от 1 до 4 часа. Едновременно с изпращане на сумите съобщавайте в редакцията с писмо, за какво се отнася сумата и кой модел се иска. Редакцията не изпълнява поръчки за модели с наложен платеж.

The average income in 1948 is 10 110 BGN. A pattern for panties or brassiere costs 40 BGN, and the shipping is 10 BGN. It means that any woman can afford to buy tailoring patterns and to create lingerie according to standards. I remember copying clothes patterns on a newspaper and exchanging them. I suppose they did the same with underwear patterns because the money was insufficient in post-war socialist Bulgaria. We still expect historians and economists to study the parallel economy under socialism, consisting of small-scale retail, tailors at home, etc. Small haberdashery goods like lace, elastic, buttons also reflect the state of the economy. As a kid, I had the habit of collecting buttons from outdated clothes and jealously guarded all lace and appliqués, a habit I keep even today. I have never seen home-made linen from early socialism, but I can assume that it was not nicely decorated.



1950, Female hero of socialist labor

Hidden equality

In the context of the new society, belongings (including underwear) must not differentiate people. Their utilitarian functions have to be the only vital functions in a society where “everybody is equal to the others.” On the model of Stalinist USSR, socialist “fashion” has to be simple, comfortable fit, not expensive, and useful. This concept reflects underdeveloped industry in Bulgaria as well as in the COMECON countries.¹ The esthetics of socialist underwear was not market-oriented. It was almost impossible to find an advertisement for underwear in women’s magazines or stores. It is not only because of the monopoly of the state

¹ The Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) was an economic organization from 1949 to 1991 under the leadership of the Soviet Union that comprised the countries of the Eastern Bloc along with a number of communist states elsewhere in the world (Kaser 1967).

industry, which does not need an advertisement. Good quality underwear was almost impossible to find in the stores.

We could not find advertisements in which the woman's body in underwear was drawn. Often there were only drawings of parts of the body or just the lingerie. It was characteristic of the era all over the world. Jill Fields writes about the "invisible woman" in the advertisements (Fields 2007). This state of things explains the surprise and brightness of the memories of the first encounters with unfamiliar luxury lingerie or advertising of underwear.

I first saw the panties of my dreams in the house of my neighbor, who was Russian. I was not the only one admiring her underwear, but all the men in the neighborhood, because she hung panties and bras out on the terrace in a very demonstrative way. Then for the first time, I saw a swimsuit. For the first time, I saw a fashion magazine that had half-naked women only with their pants, and my head did not fit how that was possible. (F, born in 1956, small town).

The invented socialist ethics was supporting early modernization period perception that only the ladies with low morale are wearing luxury underwear, and only they are showing it. Here is another memory:

Childhood Case 1: I come across Neckermann magazine. I was probably 3-4 grade. I see colored lingerie for the first time. I'm delighted. I take from one drawer with the remnants of fabrics a spear of flowers, cut a flower with scissors and sew it on my white pants in front under the navel. I run to brag to my grandmother, and when she sees me, she exclaims indignantly, "You look like a whore." And for the first time, I heard that word. I ask her what that means, and she doesn't answer me. (F, born in 1964, big city)

In the education of girls, control over sexuality is instilled through the idea of healthy clothing:

I bought my first modern panties by myself. It was when I went to school already. They were pink in color, and I wore them secretly until my mother found them. She complained to me that I was little for such underwear and explained to me that "this lace and this nylon" were not healthy. It made me think so much that even now, I only buy cotton underwear. They were beloved because they were modern, beautiful, and shallow, not like the others that almost reach my chest. My mother kept saying that they had to be deep in order to keep my waist. (F, born in 1965, small town.)

As we saw, even to dry underwear on the balcony was inappropriate. It kept its status of something private, hidden, shameful. Interviews had shown that to keep hidden; especially underpants is a constant imperative even for generations born in the 70ies. Paradoxically to behave for youngsters meant to wear black shorts on top of panties:

It was absolutely unacceptable to see white pants at school. If that happened, the unfortunate girl would then become the object of noisy mockery. So we used to go with black shorts for sports over white pants, whether we had or did not have sports. I can hardly describe the sense of confidence and calm that the black shorts gave. (F, born in 1956, big city).

However, there may be another explanation for the two pairs of pants:



1961

The awkward, ugly, and difficult to maintain underwear for children seemed to be the task of teaching little ones that this piece of clothing should not be given special attention. Paradoxically, modern ideas for tempering by getting the body to endure cold, in the Bulgarian case, were combined with the idea that a girl should be dressed in warm pants.

I hated the wool pants that were running over my panties. They kept stabbing me and teasing me. I have been allergic to woolen clothes ever since. (F, born in 1955, Capital).

Classification of clothing followed three parts structure: for home – for work – for official occasions. This classification also applies to underwear. For home or heavy and dirty work, socialist women used old, worn, and maybe torn underwear. New and better-looking underwear was kept in case of visiting a doctor – the only socially permitted occasion of braking privacy and (maybe) showing underwear.

There was always new lingerie at home for a doctor or a trip if one had to sleep in a shared where people can see underwear. In prep class, when the dorm was compulsory, and I did not have enough pairs of beautiful underwear, I went to the wardrobe even to put on my nightgown. I was not comfortable being looked at with the rough underwear, but I had only it. (F, born in 1960, small town).

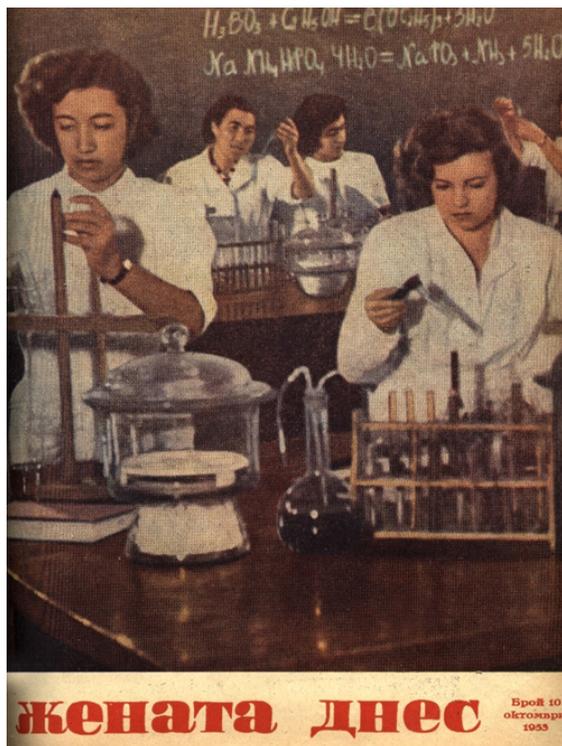
The light wind of changes

In the second half of the 1950s, it was proclaimed that socialism had won in all countries of the Soviet bloc. The time of prosperity promised by the Communists was coming slowly. In the early 60ies, new attitudes to women's beauty and belongings were invented as a result of the slow development of the tailoring industry directed to show the welfare of socialism. The ideal of the young and slim body was invented slowly in society, and the industry reacted accordingly.

Although the modernization of the closed society is slow, new professions are gradually emerging to which women are given access. The image of the new socialist woman - young, beautiful, educated, hard-working - is gradually taking shape.



Actresses, journalists and



educated lab technicians.

Unlike Yugoslavia with famous Jovanka Tito, the Bulgarian women who formed the communist elite were neither elegant nor impressively beautiful. None of them was a standard for elegance. There are no representatives of these elites among the interviewees, which is why we cannot find out whether these women also bought underwear from Bulgarian shops. We can only assume that they bought clothes when traveling abroad. However, again, underwear under socialism was hidden, secret, and the elite was by no means demonstrating it.

In the 1960s, a specific sexual revolution took place in Bulgaria. The proclaimed equality with men, the possibility for women to have their careers, and a good education, the permitted abortions, and the first contraceptives set the framework for women's sexual freedom. Of course, strict family, ideological, and police control did not allow some sub-culture like the hippie movement to be developed. As early as the 1950s, young people dressed in "bourgeois fashion," wearing beards or short skirts, were punished in labor camps. The culture of fear that the communists had built in the early days of their rule was working. However, the relatively unified appearance of young people masked the newly discovered sexual freedom. As a part of the control of leisure time and the possibility of indoctrination during gatherings, a system of work brigades for young people was established during early socialism. The brigade movement

was a widely advertised system for exploiting free labor, especially in declining agriculture. Most interviewees cite time spent working in agriculture with other young people as a time to gain sexual experience away from their parents' control too. This specific sexual revolution is also associated with the increased demand for more beautiful lingerie from young women.

Pervious Border

All interviews have shown that there was a definite limit of gender-defined circles in which the information about underwear is permitted to circulate. It was women's conversation and cared only. In practice, men should not have seen lingerie except this of their spouse. Still, the shortage of luxury underwear caused many trespasses of the border – father traveling abroad is one of the constant figures in memories related to the first “normal” underwear possessed:

I have no idea when I first wore luxurious panties, but it must have been in early puberty. My father traveled to Vienna and Regensburg regularly (with the ships along the Danube), and I wore imported lingerie as well as stockings I had never seen in Bulgaria. It was interesting that he bought us underwear from Austria or Germany - to me, my sister and my mother and always the underwear was the right size. (F, born in 1960, big city).

And:

Oh, that's a beautiful memory. I received them as a gift from a neighbor for my birthday. I was in 6th or 7th grade. I was born in the summer and went out in the yard with a box of sweets. She saw me, took a candy, and she told me to wait for a while around the fence. She went home and brought me some lovely lace panties, which were not sold anywhere in Bulgaria back then, and even if they were for sale, my parents would never buy me. They were pale yellow, transparent, gorgeous. The neighbor's son was a footballer, often going abroad, he must have bought them, and she gave them to me. I remember being so excited that I flew home and excitedly yelled, showing the panties to my parents, and my father quarreled: “How can you yell like that! People will think you haven't seen panties!” Well, I had not seen such a beautiful thing before. I only wore them in the summer when I went to the beach, for other women to see me in the dressing room. (F, born in 1964, village).

And:

Nevertheless, since I live in a seaside town, Dad had many seafarer friends who traveled behind the Iron Curtain and brought imported linen, so I had the opportunity to have nice underwear. Most often, I ordered them what they should bring me. I used to pay for my underwear, and once I got it as a gift. (F, born in 1955, big city)

The first luxury stores which brought western fashion goods had created complex networks supporting particular ties of reciprocity, dependence, and power. The new parallel economy emerged, which included illegally imported goods purchased abroad or goods produced in Bulgaria in limited quantities, which were traded outside the shops and always brought additional profit to the sellers. In this parallel economy, both refrigerators and lingerie were traded. Interviews have shown that in the late 80s, first signs of consumerism can be detected. Interviews have shown that the young generation, born in the late 60s, adapted to the parallel economy and started to invest more time and money in underwear.

To be done

The article briefly presents the first results of the study of the dynamics of the ideology of lingerie in the context of a socialist society in Bulgaria. The modernization of Bulgarian society, which is belated in comparison with the Western world, is combined with the communist ideology, which seeks to equalize the entire population in the level of the culture of poverty and fear. Changes in the communist paradigm, as well as changes in the economy and communist-controlled openness to the world, undoubtedly have an impact on the attitudes toward women's sexuality and, ultimately, attitudes toward women's underwear. I am convinced that it is essential to explore these issues in other post-socialist countries as well. The differences I expect to see in the former DDR, Yugoslavia, and Romania, as well as in China, Cuba, etc. could show us more detailed the differences in the socialist countries. After all, the socialist "Block" should no longer be regarded as a monolithic entity.

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