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Feminists Despite Themselves: A Look Back

Martha Bohachevsky-Chomiak



When I first tackled the topic of women's movements in Ukraine, my colleagues questioned the wisdom of the choice. The reaction to my explanation was the patent: "What's the point, and when will I return to real history?" The last decades have proven them wrong. *Feminists Despite Themselves: Women in Ukrainian Community Life, 1884-1939*, did make an impact on readers, especially in Ukraine. It took on a life of its own because of the tectonic political and social changes that accompanied its publication. It contributed to the implementation of the hopes presented in this and the books that followed on the subject.

I had not set out to write a book of this stature. Initially, I was asked by the Ukrainian National Women's League of America (UNWLA) to write a book on Ukrainian women that would supplement the public relations information the organization already had on women and Ukraine. Although it was not a commissioned book – there was no payment, only a small research grant – the leadership of both the UNWLA and the Federation of Ukrainian Women's Organizations (SFUZhO) wanted a scholarly, yet readable, book on Ukrainian women in a historical perspective. I tend to see the world through historical lenses, as blurred and shattered as they might be. I'll even criticize the type of modern scholasticism that makes us constantly invent new terms to understand human behavior. Although I am very interested in all "isms," – liberalism, nationalism, clericalism, existentialism, socialism, etc. etc. because of their historical significance – I do not think it is possible to define any of them definitively with the scholarly precision of 19th century physical sciences (no reputable physical scientist would today stand by the old iron-clad definitions anyway)! The terms we use – feminism, nationalism, modernity – help in explicating and presenting events and phenomena, but structured theories can, at best, reflect only a particular "road map" limited by time and space. Nevertheless, I could not avoid a stab at the "bigger questions." An invitation by the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute to inaugurate on April 24, 1994 the Petryshyn Memorial Lecture series provided an excuse to highlight the internal forces that, through the centuries, kept a sense of identity afloat in Ukraine. I focused specifically on the potential power of all community organizations as state building instruments.¹ This half-hearted attempt at dusting the venerable, albeit

1 The lecture was published in the Harvard Series in Ukrainian Studies as "Political Communities and Gendered Ideologies in Contemporary Ukraine." I had been somewhat disappointed that *Feminists...*, although well accepted in the overall academic community, was viewed by the Ukrainian (male) intellectual elite as a book written only for women about women by a woman. I thought that the lecture would help involve males in the topic.

tarnished and cracked, Hrushevskiy icon could hardly scratch the intersecting socialist and nationalist lenses of the Ukrainian past.

I wanted to highlight the mark women in Ukraine made, but I did not want to present an iconostasis of prominences of women writers, martyrs, helpers, and divas. I went through the available secondary material, taught courses on women, and actively included the women's perspective into broader academic, social, and political pursuits. As the years passed, I spent some of my time explaining to the membership (and anyone who cared to listen) what I was doing. Almost a decade elapsed before the book was finally written. I handled the topic as a regular research project, blending it into all my other activities.

I wrote *Feminists Despite Themselves: Women in Ukrainian Community Life 1884-1939*, as a study in the history of Ukraine that included women and a first attempt to present the rise of a modern women's movement in a traditional society. I saw its potential contribution both in women's studies and in the history of Ukraine. I introduced the women's dimension into international conferences about Ukraine, including some on Ukraine's relationship with the major minorities in Ukraine: Jews, Poles, Germans, and Russians. When I completed the manuscript, in the mid 1980s, a Ukrainian translation was at best only a hope. A shortened version of the book, under the title *White on White* (a riff on a type of embroidery in Ukraine using white thread on linen), was published in Kyiv in 1995. This version became a best seller. The English original is still in print.

The sources were few and scattered. I collected scraps of information and reels of microfilm that I later printed out late at night on the campus of the very elegant Manhattanville College in Purchase, NY. The long wet texts the printer spewed out reminded me of the strips of linen that Ukrainian women wove, washed, sewed, and embroidered to make the famed Ukrainian shirts and ritual towels. I went through archives, private holdings, even long conversations with elderly women with vivid memories of difficult times. The research continued as I wrote, and the writing became emotionally difficult. Unlike other studies I had done, this one relied not only on the help of archivists and librarians. It was as if I felt the voices of the past clamoring to break loose, and I heard those voices applauded after each of my preliminary presentations to eager male and female audiences in and out of American and European universities.

I undertook the research in the mid 1970s, while juggling a full time tenured position at a New York college and seeking a similar position in Washington DC, to which we had moved because of my husband's employment. The book received the Held Prize from the American Association of Slavic Studies as well as the Antonovych Award for the best book in Ukrainian studies, and that gave it added panache. Its contribution to the field of women's studies was recognized and it remains in use to this day.

The source material, which forms the backbone of the book, differed from that about women in industrialized societies. At the time of writing, not only was genuine statistical data not available, basic information on women's societies was absent. Most

of the women I wrote about did not ponder much about feminism as a movement, and precious few wrote about it either as movement or theory. Yet they worked independently in women's organizations for and among women, and when push came to shove, gingerly acknowledged feminism.

For lack of a better term, I called the manner in which consciousness of the "women's question" developed in Ukraine "PRAGMATIC FEMINISM." My arguments for the validity of pragmatic feminism were challenged within the emerging women's studies communities in America and Europe. In other parts of the world, however, scholars studying women's history developed approaches similar to mine and "pragmatic feminism" came to be more widely used.

Ukrainian women were keenly aware that their nation had much to learn. They were familiar with outlines of the British and American women's movements, and they sought an international platform. Ukrainian women, including the Russian-speaking Ukrainian women in the Russian Empire, went beyond traditional women's activities.² The establishment of a nation, or a state (the peculiarities of the Ukrainian language made the mixing of the two concepts easy!) may have been, and in some cases, actually was, the goal of individual women. As other women had done through history, they postponed their goals to work on whatever the general goal of the community was at the time, be it education or defense. And yet, despite it all, poverty, discrimination, hierarchic structures, wars, pestilence, and anxiety, they were WOMEN. They could not overlook the conditions of their lives and they, as women, sought to if not change, at least ameliorate them.

By the time the Ukrainian version of *Feminists...* was published in 1995, Ukraine had become independent, and a new generation of scholars were studying women's issues. New women's organizations appeared. The abridged translation, *White on White/Bilym po bilomu*, and its 1991 radio adaptation, broadcast in 1993 as "Chant of Ukraine/Duma Ukrainy Zhinochoho Rodu," were useful in channeling the public discussion in Ukraine on women's rights and grounding some of it in academic pursuits as well as in legislation. An unrelated Fulbright grant to Ukraine in 1993³ enabled me to establish close contacts with historians, and especially women, in Ukraine, who shared my views and some promoted the Ukrainian version of *Feminists...* A few years later, thanks to another grant, I could teach an introductory course in gender history at the newly established Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. There was hope that awareness of gender issues would grow with the understanding and practice of responsible democratic society practices.

Meanwhile, events in Ukraine and the increased presence of official and semi-official Ukrainian personnel in the United States underscored the need to increase

2 My husband, who was my main sounding board, was so taken by the image of Ukrainian women as builders of Ukraine that he kept lobbying that the book be titled *Ukrainian Women: Mortar of the Nation*.

3 I was teaching Ukrainian history classes at the National State University in Kyiv and lecturing at other institutions.

formal academic exchanges between the USA and Ukraine. There had been some exchanges in the waning years of the USSR, but Ukrainian independence created a whole new level of opportunities. Towards the end of the millennium, the United States government decided to experiment with opening a Fulbright Exchange Program office in Ukraine. My administrative experience and academic expertise made me a perfect candidate for the position. Realizing the challenges of the Fulbright job, I pushed aside any of my own scholarly plans and looked forward to spending the next decade grounding the program. I tried to expand on Senator Fulbright's vision to fill the needs of the vast expanse of Ukrainian land and its myriad of educational institutions. Family contingency forced me to cut off my work after seven years, but, after all, as one wise man said: "Individuals are temporary. Institutions endure."

Through the 1900s and the dramatic 2000s in Ukraine, as in the rest of the world, the awareness of, and even some integration of women's studies, proceeded slowly. And, almost 50 years after its publication, *Feminists Despite Themselves* is still in use, even as new works in the broad field of women's studies grow. Now more scholars in Ukraine promote women's studies in academia, many more actively work to make conditions for women better, and many others in universities and elsewhere promote causes of justice and equality. They join the rest of us in a contemporary world badly in need of both. I heartily welcome that expansion of knowledge, and sometimes even take slight credit for it.

Feminists... contributed to a more nuanced approach in the study of gender equality in traditional societies and towards expanding feminism beyond its liberal antecedents. In Ukraine, as Oksana Rybak astutely wrote, *Feminists...* grounded the Ukrainian women's movement within the Ukrainian and international contexts. I watch with gratitude and satisfaction the continued growth of Ukraine as an independent nation and of women's studies, as the discipline – unbeknownst to itself – is following the American course of "Soviet" institutes, to serve as places of study that eventually dissolve as erstwhile "marginal" topics fuse into the heart of the humanities.



Martha Bohachevsky-Chomiak, a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of the University of Pennsylvania, holds an MA, PhD, and Russian Institute Certificate from Columbia University, and has been the recipient of many grants and awards. She has published a number of books on key issues in Russian and Ukrainian history, and is best known for her trailblazing study of women in Ukraine, *Feminists Despite Themselves*. Her latest books include *Ukrainian Bishop, American Church. Constantine Bohachevsky and the Ukrainian Catholic Church* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2018), and *Society, Bishop, Church* (Ukrainian Catholic University, 2021). Dr. Bohachevsky-Chomiak has taught at Manhattanville College and Johns Hopkins, George Washington, Catholic, and Harvard universities, as well as at the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, and the Ukrainian Catholic University, from which she holds an honorary doctorate. She was married for more than 50 years to the late Ross L. Chomiak, a journalist, and has two daughters and four grandchildren.