In the words of the author, *Architektki PRL-u: Komunistki, literatura i emancypacja kobiet w powojennej Polsce* (Women Architects of the Polish People's Republic: Women Communists, literature and women's emancipation in postwar Poland) was born out of absence: the absence of the knowledge about and voice of the women—activists, intellectuals, and politicians—who contributed to the building of post-Second World War socialist Poland while believing that gender equality should become the foundation of their country. The book centers on state feminists who shaped emancipatory discourse in the areas of culture, education, and science and fought for systematic changes rather than individual empowerment. As a result, the book aims to reintroduce some largely forgotten emancipatory traditions, ones that, according to Mrozik, are contemporarily “forgotten, silenced, shamefully avoided” (p. 13). But it also challenges us to think about them as part of Polish feminist traditions, which could enrich, and even affect, the trajectory of the contemporary Polish women's movement.

This excellent book proposes a number of important interventions. It shows that the emancipation of women was a crucial element of the socialist modernization of postwar Poland. As Mrozik sees it, modernization occurred in part through the active integration of women into the workplace, including roles that were previously unavailable to them. This modernization was also driven by increased access to education, professional training, and new information regarding social, family, and sexual matters. While discussing the nature of socialist modernization, Mrozik highlights the role of culture, including journalism, self-help guides, and novels that aimed to empower women of various social classes. According to Mrozik, culture not only provided a means of social advancement but also served as “a tool for shaping the social imagination and defining the horizon of ambitions and aspirations of various social groups” (p. 17). Finally, the book shows the extent of Polish activists' involvement in various international women's organizations, such as the Women's International Democratic Federation, the World Peace Council, and the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women. In doing so, it aims to shift our focus toward some overlooked positive legacies of socialism in Poland.

The book contains six chapters. The first two chapters delve into the existing practices of writing about communist figures. The first chapter presents Wanda Wasilewska. While discussing various criticism that has been raised against her, Mrozik carefully shows Wasilewska as someone whose life choices were shaped by the values and priorities of her time. “We cannot fully under-
stand her if we constantly place her solely in the context of Polish affairs,” argues Mrozik (p. 96). The following chapter discusses the work of the social activist and politician Zofia Dembińska and her efforts for women’s rights; she, along with Jerzy Borejsza, organized Czytelnik (an important publishing house that was instrumental in popularizing reading), worked in the Ministry of Education, and played an active role in the UN Commission on the Status of Women. While highlighting Dembińska’s numerous accomplishments, Mrozik reflects on the limited attention that Dembińska has received from Polish historians and feminists. Clear parallels emerge between these two protagonists, Wasilewska and Dembińska: for example, their decision to depart from the political commitments prevalent in their families. Mrozik views this departure as one reason why they are often perceived in terms of betrayal of their families, their communities, and, in the case of Wasilewska, her nation. Mrozik’s analysis of both Wasilewska’s and Dembińska’s lives as well as the existing sources and their impact on how scholars tend to read the lives of communist activists is nuanced and rich.

The following two chapters examine the process of emancipation in the decades after the war, specifically the 1950s and ’60s. These chapters delve into new legal regulations and public discourse surrounding family, sexuality, personal life, and work. The discussion of emancipatory discourses covers, for example, works on increasing readership and levels of education among urban and rural women, attempts to motivate women to reflect on their roles in marriage, and the development of women’s movements that aimed to increase women’s interest in politics. Some of these issues are already familiar to historians through the works of Malgorzata Fidelis (for example, Women, Communism, and Industrialization in Postwar Poland [2010]) and Natalia Jarska (for example, Kobiety z Marmuru: Robotnice w Polsce w latach 1945-1960 [2015]). Mrozik contributes to our complex understanding of this time period by discussing literature and popular culture as crucial elements in shaping the consciousness of socialist women. In the summary of both chapters, she contends that although the emancipation of women in socialist Poland remained an unfinished project, it should be recognized as a vital component in understanding the genealogy of Polish feminism. What is particularly interesting is her claim that the thaw did not necessarily discourage women activists from working on furthering women’s issues and pointing out the weaknesses of socialism with regard to emancipation. The thaw is also considered as a shift to more traditionally defined gender roles. After 1956, expert culture grew dynamically with the aim of modernizing daily life, focusing on such areas as personal hygiene, sexual life, marriages, and household care. Additionally, as Mrozik argues, many of the activists, for example, Dembińska, intensified their activism on international fora.

While the two middle chapters examine how emancipatory processes developed, the two final chapters are devoted to various aspects of memory, namely, how the women Mrozik writes about remember their work and how we remember them. Chapter 5 explores what women activists, educators, and politicians wrote and how they represented their work in their memoirs. As Mrozik comments, the model of women communist activists that emerges from their work is universalized and stripped of class or ethnic differences. Some of the women, for example, silenced their Jewish origins when writing about themselves. Despite the majority of these memoirs being written by urban women from upper social classes, Mrozik observes differences in how women communists from working-class or peasant backgrounds constructed their past. The last chapter takes readers back to the late 1940s and ’50s while focusing on the generation of women who participated in the Association of the Polish Youth (Związek Młodzieży Polskiej, ZMP). Mrozik shows that the contemporary perception of the women (and men) from the ZMP is negative. As
she argues, however, the young women from the ZMP, as the first generation raised on ideas of modernization and emancipation, benefited from the new models of culture and images of an independent women. As a result, these women are the missing generational link in the Polish women’s movement. These last two chapters illustrate that none of the Polish female socialist activists and politicians made it to the pantheon of the great women of the left. Over time, they were erased from the collective memory due to their commitment to communism and the Cold War paradigm that for a long time dominated our thinking about the past.

In addition to providing a rich overview of forgotten Polish pasts, Architektki PRL-u, well written and richly researched, offers multiple conceptual frameworks that push the reader to think about certain aspects of Polish history in comparative—regional as well as global—perspective. The significant scholarly work that this volume engages with demonstrates the remarkable scope of this endeavor. In this vein, it is important to add that the array of primary sources that the book draws from is truly impressive. Furthermore, the work opens space for further research for scholars of gender, Poland, state feminism, and transnational studies.

One of the book’s most significant accomplishments is the well-founded claim that women communists did not emerge out of nowhere; they were not merely imported from outside, such as the Soviet Union. Instead, they were products of Polish social and historical conditions. Many of them carried with them the lessons they learned while growing up in interwar Poland, and some modeled their work on prewar activists. Therefore, these activists, writers, feminists, and politicians should be included in the genealogies of the Polish women’s movement. The question at stake here seems to be whether a reflection on past emancipatory practices can help us understand contemporary emancipatory models in Poland.

This book should be included in undergraduate and graduate seminars on Polish history. Unfortunately, at the moment, the book is only available in Polish, limiting its potential audience. I truly hope that it will be translated into English soon. I would also encourage the author to consider editing an anthology of some excerpts from the sources as an important primary source companion to the book.
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
https://networks.h-net.org/h-poland


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=59213

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