

*Polish and Jewish women labour activists in the Polish lands and internationally from the 1880s to the 1930s*

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Short Description

This Component Study focusses on Polish and Jewish urban women labour activists in the lands of the Polish partitions and later in independent Poland as they lived through intense social, economic, and political transformations from the late nineteenth century to the eve of the Second World War. Women took part in creating these new realities and adapted to them: they entered the industrial workforce in ever-growing numbers, initiated and joined labour-related collective action, participated in clandestine and legal political organizations and social movements, or opted for regional and transcontinental migration in order to improve their circumstances. As part of the ZARAH project, this study is built upon an inclusive perspective on women's labour activism. This perspective prompts an inclusive interpretation of activist repertoires: Although strikes and factory shop floor activism are extremely important for this study, one of its main objectives is to highlight the multiplicity of arenas of women's activism. Their repertoires of labour-related activism were not limited to work within trade unions or political organizations, but included building informal and formal networks, providing one's own home as a place for meetings, offering jobs and educational opportunities, establishing mutual aid funds, migrating and facilitating migration of others, petitioning, organizing wildcat strikes, struggling for education and childcare, and much else. After the establishment of an independent Polish state in 1918, women came to enjoy new opportunities for activism within the state. They could bring their activist experience to new positions within the state apparatus where they were now employed as labour inspectors, ministerial officials, or researchers. This wide variety of repertoires was related to the fact that women labour activists pursued multiple agendas. Another central objective of this study is, therefore, to investigate which issues women labour activists identified as particularly important, how they formulated their agendas to achieve their aims in a context riddled by political and social tensions, and how these agendas changed over time.

In order to capture this multitude of repertoires and agendas, this study puts activists, rather than organizations, center stage. Tracing the lives, politics, and struggles of selected activists through a multitude of socio-political contexts allows me to connect local manifestations of activism with the larger regional, national and global changes that took place during this period. Through the lives of activists, I am able not only to trace the agendas and repertoires of the organizations and movements they were part of, but also to see how their lives and their activism were woven into and impacted by the major political and social processes, such as industrialization, the creation of an independent Polish state, wars and revolutions, development of international organizations, and mass migration. This focus on individual trajectories of activists also provides an opportunity to investigate continuity and change between the pre- and post-1918 periods, as some activist careers spanned over several decades. Such focus also allows me to trace the involvement of activists in a multitude of organizations that pursued agendas which could overlap but also contradict each other. This multiple involvement was due to the fact that in the male-dominated world of labour activism, the agendas of female labour activists' agendas often did not fit within the program of a single organization. Women moved between different activist "camps", and this flexibility of activists' trajectories sometimes led to the transgression of existing borders between different organizations and movements. A

focus on individual trajectories also provides me with a privileged vantage point to grasp and analyze this dynamic.

In order to achieve these goals of foregrounding and exploring the multitude of women labour activists' agendas and repertoires, I will focus on two major research questions. First, I will investigate the inter-ethnic relations of ethnic Polish and Jewish women in the domain of labour activism. Scholarship on Polish socialism has highlighted connections and exchanges between the Polish Socialist Party and the Bundists, both on the levels of political and ideological production and, more recently, in everyday interactions in local politics. At the same time, when it comes to the histories of labour activism in the region, especially in the case of women workers, such focus on historical entanglements is lacking. Although Polish and Jewish women often lived and laboured side by side, their social lives are commonly described as though they were hermetically sealed from each other. Confrontations between political movements as well as the political and economic marginalization and exclusion of ethnic minorities cannot be neglected. Nevertheless, they did not entirely preclude inter-ethnic relations. The intensifying ethnic tensions and discriminating policies that targeted the Jews and limited their economic opportunities in the Russian Empire and, later, also left their mark on women's labour activism both in terms of ethnic tensions and inter-ethnic solidarity in independent Poland. These political interactions need to be explored simultaneously through the lens of ethnicity, gender, and class. Tensions surrounding the end of empires and the state-building in independent Poland impacted not only social and economic opportunities of Poles in the new-born state, opening a large field of state work and possibilities of activism within the state to white-collar workers, but also the opportunities of the Jewish minority, which throughout the 1920s and especially the 1930s saw growing limitations to its economic activity. My study seeks to trace how the widening gap in labour conditions and opportunities of Jewish and Polish women workers impacted their activism and how Jewish working women responded to this development.

Second, I intend to investigate the role of women labour activists, both Polish and Jewish, as transnational agents. I address this transnational dimension of women's labour activism in the Polish lands through the following three focuses. The first focus will be on migration as a form of labour activism. I intend to investigate how migration could be not only an attempt to improve one's economic circumstances strictly speaking, but also a way of challenging a discriminating gender regime or facing ethnicity-based marginalization. The second focus here is on the relations of labour activists with the international organizations during the interwar period. In the 1920s, Polish women labour inspectors worked for improving labour conditions of women industrial workers across the country, not only investigating local conditions but also seeking to unify and consolidate labour norms in the country that had been divided for so long. Some of them were part of wide transnational networks, took part in the conventions of the International Labour Organization, and not only worked on the implementation of international labour norms in Poland but also aspired to participate in the creation of these norms. The third focus will be on the transnational networks of marginalized activists. Jewish women activists rarely obtained positions within the governmental structures but nevertheless were part of transnational networks: the Jewish Bund was a transnational party *par excellence*, but informal networks, such as networks of émigrés, were also important. By discussing women's participation in the multitude of transnational networks, this study does not only explore what women brought to these networks, but also how transnational activism shaped women's activism in the Polish lands.

With this Component Study, I aim for a connected history of women labour activism, a history that highlights not only the role of these women in the world of male-dominated activism, but also pays attention to the most marginalized women workers and their struggles, both in the Polish and Jewish communities. My Component Study contributes to the understanding of several issues of key importance across the whole region studied in the ZARAH project. This includes the role of ethnicity and minority politics as they played out in the domain of labour-related activism, the effects of post-imperial nation-building on women's labour activism and vice versa, and the interaction between women's participation in transnational activist networks and their activism in Poland.