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## The League of Women (*Liga Kobiet*) – the conditions for functioning of the women’s organisation in the communist system of the Polish People’s Republic (in the first period of the organisation’s activity from 1945 to 1975)<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

The League of Women (*Liga Kobiet*), until 1949 operating under the name of the Socio-Civic League of Women (*Spoleczno-Obywatelska Liga Kobiet*), was a mass women’s organisation functioning in the Polish People’s Republic. Throughout the whole period, one of the priorities set by the organisation was to build up its mass character and, thus, to influence different social, professional and environmental groups of Polish women, fitting into the general agenda of implementing the communist regime in Polish society. Most League of Women’s members were also members to the Polish United Workers’ Party. The League of Women tried to play a role of a “utilitarian” organisation, supporting in a genuine and diverse way the Polish women’s environment. The period between 1945 and 1975 was the first stage of organisation’s activity; in the communist Polish People’s Republic it was a period of “isolation” of the Polish society from the Western world and of a significant influence of the Soviet Union’s policy on the social relations in the country.

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The League of Women was an example of an East European women's organisation in the communist era.

**Keywords:** *Liga Kobiet* [League of Women]; Polish women's organisation; Polish People's Republic; communism; Eastern European women's movement; 1945–1975; gender equality in Poland

### **LIGA KOBIEC – WARUNKI FUNKCJONOWANIA ORGANIZACJI KOBIECej W SYSTEMIE KOMUNISTYCZNYM PRL (W PIERWSZYM OKRESIE DZIAŁALNOŚCI ORGANIZACJI 1945–1975)**

#### **Streszczenie**

Liga Kobiet, działająca do 1949 r. pod nazwą Społeczno-Obywatelska Liga Kobiet, była masową organizacją kobiecą działającą w PRL. Przez cały okres jednym z priorytetów organizacji było budowanie jej masowego charakteru, a tym samym wpływanie na różne grupy społeczne, zawodowe i środowiskowe Polek, wpisujące się w ogólny program wdrażania reżimu komunistycznego w polskim społeczeństwie. Większość członkiń Ligi Kobiet należała również do Polskiej Zjednoczonej Partii Robotniczej. Liga Kobiet starała się odgrywać rolę organizacji „użytecznej”, wspierającej w sposób autentyczny i różnorodne środowisko Polek. Lata 1945–1975 to pierwszy etap działalności organizacji; w PRL był to okres izolacji polskiego społeczeństwa od świata zachodniego i znaczącego wpływu polityki Związku Sowieckiego na stosunki społeczne w kraju. Liga Kobiet była przykładem wschodnioeuropejskiej organizacji kobiecej w czasach komunizmu.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Liga Kobiet, polska organizacja kobieca, PRL, komunizm, wschodnioeuropejski ruch kobiecy, 1945–1975, równość płci w Polsce

The paper discusses the activity of the official women's movement in communist Poland (the Polish People's Republic), approved by the state and party authorities in the period 1945–1970, i.e. in the first period of League of Women (*Liga Kobiet*) activity. The years 1945–1970/75 in the Communist Polish People's Republic were a period of isolation of Polish society from the Western world and the significant influence of the Soviet Union's policy on the social relations in the country. It was

also a period when women from Eastern Europe, including Polish women, were isolated from the international feminist women's movement created and developing in Western countries, already active at that time in Western Europe, particularly in Great Britain. Since the late 1960s, there were social changes going on in the Polish People's Republic heralding the 1975 political crisis weakening of social support for the Polish communist authorities. In 1975, the policy of the communist authorities in Poland of introducing the social agenda of "opening the door to the West" was also transformed. In addition, in Poland, women's activation and the interest in gender equality in professional, political and social spheres, following the Western trend, appeared in 1975, as a result of the International Year of Women. For the League of Women 1975 was the time to recapitulate 30 years of its activity. The League of Women announced that, from that point, to a greater extent than ever, in connection with the International Year of Women, it would promote in its agenda activities regarding women's equal rights in public and family life, in household duties, including care over children<sup>2</sup>. Then, around 1975, a greater interest of Poles and women from Eastern Europe in the feminist movement's agenda, already actively developing in Western Europe, started. In 1975, the chairwoman of the Main Board of the League of Women Eugenia Kemparowa<sup>3</sup> took part in the Congress of Women in East Berlin, a culminating event to the International Year of Women. At the end of 1975, also Polish women pointed out that the celebrations of the passing International Year of Women, more than ever before, drew world's attention to issues faced by women in Europe and worldwide. At the same time, it was emphasised that actions regarding implementation of the women's equality policy, hitherto undertaken in many countries,

<sup>2</sup> Małgorzata Dajnowicz, "Główne kierunki działalności Ligi Kobiet w Polsce Ludowej do 1975 roku (ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem województwa białostockiego)" [The main directions of activity of the League of Women in Polish People's Republic until 1975 (with particular emphasis on the Białystok Province)], *Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego. Prace Historyczne*, nr 3, 2018, 594–595.

<sup>3</sup> Eugenia Kemparowa – lawyer and politician, member of the Polish United Workers' Party from 1949. In the years 1975–1981 Chairwoman of the Main Board of the League of Women, in 1976–1985 member of the State Council and in 1976–1985 Member of the Parliament of the Polish People's Republic.

were insufficient to introduce real changes in the women's condition worldwide<sup>4</sup>.

The paper attempts to answer the basic question – to what extent the Polish women's movement, under the name of the League of Women, retained autonomy and implemented its own individual agenda – and to what extent it was dependent on the Polish communist authorities' policy. It is also important to determine the level of state or regional independence within activities of the women's organisation in this period, that is, to show the Polish specificity, being part of the East European women's movement. Presenting the specificity of the national League of Women movement as an official Polish women's organisation approved by the authorities is crucial to learn about the history of women in Poland and Eastern Europe during the communist regime and the political domination of the Soviet Union in the Eastern European area.

Previous scientific studies on the reality of Poland after 1945 only pointed to the lack of autonomy of women's activities and their dependence on current policies of the communist authorities and the communist party at the time, and were very fragmentary. The article is being developed as part of a research project conducted in 2018–2022 which is to contribute to historiography with comprehensive elaboration on the significance and realities of functioning of the League of Women in Polish People's Republic of the period 1945–1989. Most research findings and publications about the League of Women remain contributory studies. Only Barbara Nowak<sup>5</sup> has conducted scientific research on the League of Women, included in her doctoral dissertation written in the United States. Although this work presents some important findings in the field of the League of Women's activities against the background of the reality of Polish People's Republic, it requires to be comprehensively completed. The activity of the organisation called the League of Women is

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<sup>4</sup> In 1975, numerous articles in the popular Polish women's periodical *Kobieta i Życie* [Woman and Life] were devoted to the issue of women's equality and celebrations of the International Women's Year. For example, Barbara Mroziak, „Pod znakiem planety Wenus. O równość, rozwój i pokój” [Under the sign of the planet Venus. For equality, development and peace], *Kobieta i Życie*, nr 46, 1975, 3.

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Nowak, *Serving Women and the State. The League of Women in Communist Poland*, PhD diss., (Ohio State University, 2004); eadem, “Constant Conversations: Agitators in the League of Women in Poland during the Stalinist Period”, *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 31, No 3, 2005, 488–518.

also referred to in a monograph by Małgorzata Fidelis<sup>6</sup> and in a scientific article by Natalia Jarska<sup>7</sup>. Significant research findings regarding the women's movement in Poland after 1945 were established by Magdalena Grabowska. Grabowska's book brings the most cognitive information to the current knowledge about the activity of Polish women in the Polish People's Republic<sup>8</sup>.

So far, papers have been published on the life of women in socialist or communist reality and assessments of this reality in relation to various Eastern European countries<sup>9</sup>. Works on women's lives in the socialist or communist reality in various countries of Eastern Europe have also been published<sup>10</sup>. A Dutch researcher wrote about the participation of women in Eastern European feminist movements in the feminist movement, recognizing the contribution of women from Eastern Europe, including Polish women, in the development of the feminist movement of the second wave from the 1960s and 1970s<sup>11</sup>. Francisca de Haan began important findings on the development of feminism in Eastern Europe in parallel with the development of feminism in Western Europe after 1945<sup>12</sup>. The article seeks to prove the researcher's thesis that the Polish

<sup>6</sup> Małgorzata Fidelis, *Kobiety, komunizm i industrializacja w powojennej Polsce* [Women, Communism, and Industrialization in Post-war Poland], (Warszawa : W.A.B., 2015) [Quotes from the discussed book by Małgorzata Fidelis come from the English version of this book entitled *Women, Communism, and Industrialisation in Post-war Poland*, (Cambridge, UK : Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> Natalia Jarska, "A patriarchal marriage? The women's movement and the communist party in Poland (1945–1989)", *Kwartalnik Historyczny*, nr 2, 2018, 7–37.

<sup>8</sup> Magdalena Grabowska, *Zerwana genologia. Działalność społeczna i polityczna kobiet po 1945 roku a współczesny polski ruch kobiecy* [The broken genology. Social and political activity of women after 1945 and the contemporary Polish women's movement], (Warszawa : Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> Susan Gal, Gail Kligman, *Gender after socialism. A comparative – Historical essay*, (New Jersey : Princeton University Press, 2000); *Eastern Europe: Women in Transition*, I. Grudzińska-Gross, A.W. Tymkowski (eds.), (Frankfurt am Main : Peter Lang, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> For example, work on other countries: Lynne Haney, "From Proud Worker to Good Mother: Women, the State, and Regime Change in Hungary", *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, Vol. 14, No 3, 1994, 113–150; Donna Harsch, *Revenge of the domestic: women, the family, and communism in the German Democratic Republic*, (Princeton : Princeton University Press, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> Francisca de Haan, "Continuing Cold War Paradigms in Western Historiography of Transnational Women's Organisations: The Case of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF)", *Women's History Review*, Vol. 19, No. 4, 2010, 547–573.

<sup>12</sup> Francisca de Haan, "Ten Years After: Communism and Feminism Revisited", *Aspasia: The International Yearbook of Central, Eastern, and Southeastern European Women's and Gender History*, Vol. 10, 2016, 102–168.

women's movement of the League of Women was a national movement typical to a communist regime present in Poland, as part of the Eastern European women's movement, and, at the same time, it promoted the aspirations to ensure gender equality in various spheres of social life common for the entire feminist movement.

The article aims to show, as a "study of the Polish case", the development of the women's equality movement based on the socialist and communist model of the development of the mass women's movement – where the issue of women's equality regarding the access to employment came to the fore. The article shows a case of a Central European women's movement, putting the emphasis on determining specifics of the movement animated by the League of Women – a women's organisation designed by a communist state and created according to the model imposed by the Soviet Union. The described women's movement was different from the feminist movements developing in the second half of the 20th century in Western Europe, as it was largely designed by the communist state and acting as a transmission of communist ideology "from above", from the communist authorities – "downwards" to the society, and, thus, to women's masses. On the other hand, the League of Women showed successful attempts at independence from the communist state in various actions for women, formulated demands or individual initiatives<sup>13</sup>.

The League of Women was a mass Polish women's organisation functioning in the period of the Polish People's Republic, as in the years 1945–1989, it was the official and only mass women's movement whose activities and development directions were accepted by the communist authorities of the Polish People's Republic. The League of Women conducted its activity in the years 1945–1989 under three names: from 1945 to 1949 as the Social-Civic League of Women, in the years 1949–1982 as the League of Women and since 1982 as the League of Polish Women. The Social-Civic League of Women was created with the establishment of the Polish People's Republic after World War II in 1945, and by the name it was meant to refer to the Polish patriotic and independence organisation from the period before 1918, when Poles were seeking to regain state

<sup>13</sup> Małgorzata Dajnowicz, "Liga Kobiet w okręgu łódzkim w latach 1945–1981. Główne obszary działalności organizacji" [The Women's League in the Łódź District in 1945–1981. The Main Areas of Its Activity], *Dzieje Najnowsze*, nr 4, 2019, 75–90.

independence. The reference to the activity of the League of Polish Women, an organisation operating before 1939, was strictly a propaganda procedure of the Polish communist authorities. The name of the League of Women was supposed to symbolize the continuation of the patriotic organisation – which would evoke confidence of Polish women, potential female candidates for the organisation, already launched in the Polish People's Republic, different from the one of the earlier period, called the League of Women, functioning in the new reality, in the communist system of the Polish People's Republic.

From 1945 to 1947, the League of Women operated without any clear activity agenda, chaotically, basing its activities mainly on the guidelines of the communist party<sup>14</sup>. In the League of Women's statute, formulated only in 1947, the organisation's objectives were defined very generally, stating that it would fight for world peace, women's rights and children's rights. The purpose of the League of Women activity, then called *Spółeczno-Obywatelska Liga Kobiet* (Socio-Civic League of Women), was: "raising the woman, a citizen, aware of her rights and duties in relation to the Homeland and society, and active participation in the reconstruction of the Polish state"<sup>15</sup>.

The provisions of the statute assumed the full participation of Polish women in the creation of social and political reality in post-war Poland after 1945. From the very beginning, an important field of the organisation's activity was propagation of political and propaganda objectives of the communist authorities. However, the League of Women in order to convince women to participate in the organisation referred to itself as an apolitical organisation, independent from the communist party, despite the fact that from the very beginning it was associated with the communist party [*Polska Partia Robotnicza* (Polish Workers' Party) – and, then after its transformation, with *Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza* (Polish United Workers' Party)] and operated under the influence of the party's guidelines. In the general assumptions, the League of

<sup>14</sup> At that time, however, from 1945, League Women's members organised activities concerning women's professional training – "Zawodowe kształcenie kobiet" [Vocational training for women], *Nasza Praca*, nr 2, 1947, 13–14.

<sup>15</sup> "Statut Spółeczno-Obywatelskiej Ligi Kobiet" [The Statute of the Socio-Civic League of Women], (Warszawa : b.r.w.), 4.

Women was to be a multi-purpose and mass organisation and the only representation of Polish women in the new post-war Poland after 1945<sup>16</sup>.

The founders and first leaders of the Social-Civic League of Women (i.e. the League of Women) were women with political experience from before 1939. They were involved in the communist movement before 1939. After the end of World War II, after 1945, the communist authorities of the Polish People's Republic trusted them, accepting their activity in the League of Women movement. Among the founders and the first activists of the League of Women, the following ones should be mentioned, *inter alia*, Irena Sztachelska, who headed the Main Board of the League of Women<sup>17</sup>, Izolda Kowalska, the secretary general of the League of Women<sup>18</sup>, also Eugenia Pragierowa<sup>19</sup> and Edwarda Orłowska<sup>20</sup>. The political past and ideological and political activities of the mentioned League of Women's leaders also indicated the obvious politicization of the organisation, developing under the influence of the communist ideology. The mentioned leaders of the League of Women belonged to the Women's Departments of the Central Committee Polish United Workers'

<sup>16</sup> Dariusz Jarosz, "Idee, programy i realia. Funkcje Ligi Kobiet w porządku instytucjonalnym Polski Ludowej (1945–1957)" [Ideas, programmes and realities. The functions of the League of Women in the institutional order of the Poland People's Republic (1945–1957)], in: Agnieszka Janiak-Jasińska, Katarzyna Sierakowska, Andrzej Szwarz (eds.), *Działaczki społeczne, feministki, obywatelki... Samoorganizowanie się kobiet na ziemiach polskich po 1918 roku (na tle porównawczym)* [Social activists, feminists, citizens... Self-organisation of women in the Polish lands after 1918 (comparative study)], 2 vols, (Warszawa : Wydawnictwo Neriton, 2009), 308–330.

<sup>17</sup> Irena Sztachelska – member of *Związek Lewicy Akademickiej "Front"* (Union of Left Academic "Front") and *Komunistyczny Związek Młodzieży Polskiej* (Communist Union of Polish Youth). Since 1945, she became involved in the work in the League of Women, where she headed the Main Board, serving until 1950. She was a member to the Legislative Sejm and the Sejm of the 1st term (1947–1956).

<sup>18</sup> Izolda Kowalska – member to the Communist Union of Polish Youth. She joined the Polish Workers' Party in 1942. In the League of Women from 1945 to 1950, she was the secretary general. Member to the Legislative Sejm and the Sejm of the Polish People's Republic. Vice-Chairwoman of the Main Board of the League of Women until 1964; member of the World Federation of Women.

<sup>19</sup> Eugenia Pragierowa – before World War II, a member to the Polish Socialist Party [*Polska Partia Socjalistyczna*]; from 1945 the director of the department and then the undersecretary of state in the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare; Member of the National Council from 1945 to 1948. From 1945 to the end of 1948, a member of the Polish United Workers' Party; deputy to the Legislative Sejm (1947–1949) and the Sejm of the and the Sejm of the Polish People's Republic (1952–1956).

<sup>20</sup> Edwarda Orłowska – activist of the Communist Party of Western Belarus since 1926; a communist born in Białystok; First secretary of the Central Committee of the Polish Workers' Party in Białystok, then activist of the Polish United Workers' Party.

Party (in the years 1948–1952), they were also formal members of the communist party. In 1949, the name of the organisation was changed from the Socio-Civic League of Women to the League of Women, but the change of the name did not introduce any amendments into the organisation's agenda<sup>21</sup>. The League of Women's leaders, being activists of the communist party, also tried to implement their own individual organisation's agenda, designed according to their own concept, disseminated as guidelines for the League of Women activities. The mentioned communist Edwarda Orłowska in her agenda on the development of the women's movement in the Polish People's Republic made attempts to combine party activities and the development of women's activities in the League of Women. E. Orłowska believed that in one united and mass women's movement in Poland, there should be various entities functioning at that time, such as women's party departments, trade unions, women's organisations, and women's associations. In the first post-war years, communist activists believed that the creation of a mass women's movement in Poland was possible and realistic. The key to its creation was to recruit women to the communist party and to involve of party female activists in the movement, institution representing women, i.e. in the League of Women<sup>22</sup>. One of the important aspects and main agenda objectives to which the activists referred to was activity for professional activation of Polish women, raising professional qualifications of uneducated Polish women, which was to result in the effect of professional and social advancement of Polish women. First and foremost, the League of Women activists organized vocational training for women and their employment in professions practiced by men, especially in industry. In the propaganda policy, it was to indicate the implementation of the gender equality with men policy – equal opportunities for women and men in access to work and the possibility of exercising work. After the end of World War II, since 1945, professional work of women was accepted socially also due to the fact that, after the war ended, men and, thus, hands necessary to repair war damage were missing. Therefore, the authorities encouraged women to undertake work and participation of women in the plan of the communist authorities regarding the reconstruction of the destroyed

<sup>21</sup> Under this name, the organisation functioned from September 9, 1949 to December 2, 1982. From 1982, the name was changed to the Polish League of Women.

<sup>22</sup> Magdalena Grabowska, *Zerwana geneologia*, 200.

country and creation of the communist social order. Women also wanted to work for economic reasons; however, a large number of women did not have necessary qualifications<sup>23</sup>. At that time, the authorities disseminated the model of the Polish working woman able to exercise the same activities as a man. At the same time, working women had to perform household and family duties to the same extent as non-working women. The policy of the communist authorities promoted the view that, in the propaganda message, the League of Women, organizing vocational trainings for women, child care centres, general social laundry or canteens – was to support Polish women in everyday and family life. The model of the Polish woman being a wife and mother and, at the same time, a worker in various professions, including “men” ones, promoted especially in the period 1949–1956<sup>24</sup>, was based on the model disseminated in the Soviet Union society. Promoting professional work of women in state’s policy of communist Poland was to show the society that the postulate on formist equality between women and men was implemented, in practice appearing as equal access for women and men to professional work<sup>25</sup>. At the same time, the League of Women popularised postulates specific for achieving the equality objectives, such as equal pay for equal work<sup>26</sup>.

Popularising the justification and social necessity in League of Women’s activities among women, as the only communist women’s movement accepted by the communist authorities, was to be supported by women’s periodicals published by the organisation<sup>27</sup>. The magazines were to propagate also topics related to household, motherhood and family, women’s work performed mainly at home and outside the house. Women’s magazines related to the League of Women served to convince readers that the League of Women remained an organisation important and useful to Polish women, where the reader could find practical and

<sup>23</sup> Małgorzata Fidelis, *Kobiety, komunizm*. Quotes from the discussed book by Małgorzata Fidelis come from *Women, Communism*, 235–238.

<sup>24</sup> The period of Stalinism in Poland includes the years 1945–1956. Then, after the end of activities on the fronts of World War II, the process of building a new system in Poland began, which was closely based on the rules prevailing in the Soviet Union at that time.

<sup>25</sup> Małgorzata Dajnowicz, “Liga Kobiet w okręgu łódzkim”, 83–88.

<sup>26</sup> “Ochrona pracy kobiet”, *Kobieta*, nr 8, 1948, 3.

<sup>27</sup> The continuation of *Kobieta Dzisiejsza* from 1947 was the journal *Kobieta* issued by the Main Board of the League of Women. The official publisher from mid-October 1947 to December 1949 was the Main Board of the League of Women.

helpful tips for everyday life<sup>28</sup>. In order to justify the scope of the organisational work of the League of Women, the need of its activities in various circles among Polish women, the women's magazines published on the activity of circles from various corners of the country<sup>29</sup>. The number of branches in different regions of Poland and the number of members of these circles presented in the periodicals were intended for readers, recipients of the periodicals as the model of engagement in organisation's activities in the area of their residence, activity and workplace<sup>30</sup>.

The most important goal of the League of Women's activity was to show the society that it was one mass women's organisation<sup>31</sup>. The organisation exhibited its successes, including in publicly announced reports on the extent of social impact and increasing number of circles and members; on the other hand, in reports it included information about insufficient involvement of Polish women in the movement's activity, the lack of interest in women's activism, especially among non-working women, as well as rural women and primarily young women<sup>32</sup>. At that time, the League of Women as a mass organisation had over 1.5 million members clustered in 30,000 circles in the country<sup>33</sup>. The strength and significance of the League of Women in the country was to be reflected by its mass, large and ever-increasing number of members. However, most members were passive, and membership was forced by the communist authorities, therefore, there was no involvement in the organisation's activity<sup>34</sup>. On the other hand, the League of Women leaders engaged in the League of Women treated membership as a political task and social

<sup>28</sup> Małgorzata Dajnowicz, "Zwierciadło" – platforma polityczna Ligi Kobiet w okresie PRL (1957–1961, 1982–1989) [Zwierciadło – the political platform of the League of Women in the period of the Polish People's Republic (1957–1961, 1982–1989)], *Rocznik Historii Prasy Polskiej*, z. 3 (47), 2017, 69.

<sup>29</sup> "Pracujemy w Społeczno-Obywatelskiej Lidze Kobiet" [Working with the Social-Civic League of Women], *Kobieta Dzisiejsza*, nr 8, 1946, 17.

<sup>30</sup> Małgorzata Dajnowicz, "Działalność Ligi Kobiet na obszarze kraju w świetle czasopism organizacji – »Kobiety Dzisiejszej« (1946–1947) i »Kobiety« (1947–1949)" [The activity of the League of Women in the country in the organisation's periodicals *Kobieta Dzisiejsza* (1946–1947) and *Kobieta* (1947–1949)], *Rocznik Historii Prasy Polskiej*, z. 3, 2018, 65–72.

<sup>31</sup> AAN, KC PZPR, WK, 237/XV-7, Sprawozdanie Orłowskiej Edwardy [Report by Orłowska Edwarda], fol. 9–11.

<sup>32</sup> Małgorzata Dajnowicz, "Główne kierunki", 596.

<sup>33</sup> AAN, KC PZPR, WK, 237/XV-30, Rozwój Ligi Kobiet w okresie od 1945–1951 r. [The development of the League of Women in the period from 1945–1951], fol. 4.

<sup>34</sup> APB, KW PZPR, 1124, Realizacja Instrukcji KC PZPR z 1966 r. [Implementation of the Instruction of the Central Committee of PZPR of 1966], fol. 74.

necessity within activity for Polish women and as a pragmatic activity facilitating social and professional advancement for League of Women members, especially leaders, and functioning in the difficult everyday life of the Polish People's Republic.

After removing in 1952 communists such as Edwarda Orłowska from the organisation's management by the communist party (it was related to the closing of the Women's Department of the Central Committee), the League of Women was to become an organisation with a renewed image, more massive than before, disseminating the idea that the communist system (also called socialist) was to guarantee equality between men and women. The policy of equality between women and men was to be ensured by the communist system and manifested primarily in equality in the access to professional work. At that time, in 1952, the Constitution of the Polish People's Republic was proclaimed, guaranteeing gender equality. As part of the organisation's propaganda, public opinion was persuaded that involvement in the activities of the League of Women was to symbolise adaptation of women to the new social and political reality of People's Poland. The 1952 constitution also ensured equality between men and women in various spheres of social life<sup>35</sup>.

Since 1956, the attitude of the communist authorities to the role and perception of women in Polish society changed. Housework and family activities were to take precedence in the life of a Polish woman, while professional work, previously promoted by the League of Women and the communist party, was to be in the background of a Polish woman's life. In 1956, plant circles of the League of Women, liquidated in 1953, were reactivated. They were to support women in their everyday problems, primarily helping workers reconcile the two spheres of their activity, professional and home-family<sup>36</sup>. The League of Women was to engage in running counselling for women, children and families, to cooperate with

<sup>35</sup> "Konstytucja Polskiej Rzeczypospolitej Ludowej uchwalona przez Sejm Ustawodawczy w dniu 22 lipca 1952 r.", *Dziennik Ustaw* 1952, nr 33, poz. 232 ["The Constitution of the Polish People's Republic adopted by the Legislative Sejm on July 22, 1952", *Journal of Laws* 1952, No. 33, item 232].

<sup>36</sup> Małgorzata Fidelis, *Kobiety, komunizm*. Quotes from the discussed book by Małgorzata Fidelis come from *Women, Communism*, 235–236.

juvenile courts in order to solve educational problems with children, solve family problems<sup>37</sup>.

In the second half of the 1950s, the family in the Polish People's Republic was to form the basis of social life. The women's characteristics model propagated in the second half of the 1950s did not last too long. Disseminating the idea of "women returning home" among the society was no longer possible, as the economy of the Polish People's Republic began to need additional hands to work more and more. This changed in later years and around the mid-1960s in the state policy began to propagate the model of combining by a Polish woman both roles: of mother and housekeeper and employee, combining work and family life was possible and even desirable. The change of the female model from the 1960s regarding combining the roles of a mother, housewife, wife and a professionally and socially active woman also resulted from ongoing social changes. For example, in the mid-1960s, the Polish periodical *Więź*, oppositional to the communist system, referring to the subject of the woman's role in contemporary society, presented "the model of a contemporary woman". Regarding the issue of combining women's professional work with family responsibilities, including raising children, in accordance with the model of women's life in Polish society, it was argued "that not working or abstaining from it by a mother determines effects of upbringing". It was further emphasized that the paradigm disseminated in society in the second half of the 1950s saying "When women are at home, educational difficulties disappear from the face of the earth, does not find full justification in life"<sup>38</sup>. In the summary of the considerations in *Więź*, the view on the importance of professional work for the necessity of self-fulfilment of women and their social promotion was argued. Therefore, professional work did not have to be an obstacle to the fulfilment of women's obligations resulting from bringing up children<sup>39</sup>.

The number of members and circles of the League of Women remained unsatisfactory throughout the entire period, which was emphasized in the reports on its activities. The decrease in the number of

<sup>37</sup> "Wstępna analiza pracy Ligi Kobiet w okresie 10-lecia jej istnienia" [Preliminary analysis of the work of the League of Women during the 10th anniversary of its establishment], *Nasza Praca*, nr 1, 1956, 7.

<sup>38</sup> Zofia Skórzyńska, "Praca zawodowa kobiet a wychowanie" [Women's professional work and upbringing], *Więź*, nr 6, 1965, 56.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, 61.

members took place especially since 1966, when the organisation, based on Party's decisions, had to abandon workplaces.

In the 1967 new statute of the organisation, the League of Women stipulated that the aim of the organisation in the future activity would be to "strengthen" the position of women in society and family, organize career counselling for women, promote the model reconciling women's family life with their professional work in Polish society<sup>40</sup> Facilitating work-life balance among women was to be supported by establishing day nurseries, kindergartens, and company canteens, where families of working mothers could have lunch<sup>41</sup>. The task of the League of Women was to disseminate among women a work-life balance model, propagating through counselling and help working Polish women with families in time managing.

It should be added that in the 1970s the League of Women had already had about 500,000 members, however, it had been much less in comparison to the previous period from the early 1950s<sup>42</sup>.

It is worth emphasising that the League of Women leaders were involved in international cooperation in the Women's International Democratic Federation, which was established in Paris in 1945. The main and highlighted issue was the "fight for world peace", combating fascism and ensuring security, especially with regard to children. This subject was dominant as part of the organisation's activities and popularized in Poland by the League of Women until the 1960s. The women's propaganda of the League of Women exposed the community and unity of all women in the world in pursuit of world peace, and the division between the Eastern and Western Europe was denied. In reference to the activities of the Federation, fascism was indicated as the greatest threat to the security of Europe and the world, still valid in the post-war world, especially in Europe<sup>43</sup>. Disseminating or even exposing the aspirations

<sup>40</sup> AIPN, BU 1585/19737, Statut Ligi Kobiet [The Statute of the League of Women], Warszawa 1967, fol. 2, 6–9.

<sup>41</sup> Małgorzata Fidelis, *Kobiety, komunizm*, 190–191.

<sup>42</sup> The organisation in the years 1947–1949 was to have about 700–800,000 members clustered around 4200–4500 circles. According to the official report on the activity of the League of Women in 1979, the organisation had nearly 500,000 members, affiliated in 9,600 circles – IPN, BU 01728/47, Sprawozdanie z działalności Ligi Kobiet w latach 1979–1981 [Report on the activities of the League of Women in 1979–1981], fol. 82.

<sup>43</sup> Stanisława Dłuska, "Posiedzenie Rady Naczelnej Światowej Demokratycznej Federacji Kobiet" [Meeting of the Supreme Council of the World Democratic Women's Federation],

of women gathered in the world organisation in the area of activities promoting world peace with the anti-fascist slogan pointed to the concern of the women's movement for the safety of women, families and, above all, children. The international organisation was to be a space for pursuing and realizing goals of women from nation-states and an example of women's unity in the women's movements of different countries, with transnational common interests regarding the security of world peace and unequivocal criticism to war. The mentioned leader of the League of Women, Eugenia Pragierowa, the chairperson of the Information and Propaganda Commission of the Women's International Democratic Federation was involved in the activities of the Women's International Democratic Federation<sup>44</sup>. The overriding objective of the activities of the Women's International Democratic Federation until the 1960s was to maintain "peace in the world". Presence of Polish women or women from Eastern Europe in the Women's Federation was a way to participate in a discussion on the social position of women in the world, as well as on their involvement in international or transnational women's movements. In the years 1945–1969, the Federation organised six Congresses of Women being international meetings of women's organisations. The first took place in Paris in 1945, the second in Budapest in 1948, the third in Copenhagen in 1953, the fourth in Vienna in 1958, the fifth in Moscow in 1963, and the last sixth Congress in Helsinki in 1969. At the international forum, Polish representative Eugenia Pragierowa informed about gender equality in socialist Poland and also pointed to the inseparability of various areas of equality, including economic and political rights<sup>45</sup>. The women's press also informed about the international women's movement, including the *Kobieta* [Woman] magazine, published by the Main Board of the League of Women. Accounts from proceedings of the Women's International Democratic Federation were posted on the

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*Nasza Praca*, nr 2, 1947, 3–6; J[erzy] Tomaszkiwicz, "W stolicy i w kraju" [In the capital and in the country], *Nasza Praca*, nr 2, 1947, 26–28.

<sup>44</sup> "Udział kobiet polskich w pracach Światowej Demokratycznej Federacji Kobiet" [The participation of Polish women in works of the Women's International Democratic Federation], *Nasza Praca*, nr 6, 1947, 16. On international activities of the Women's International Democratic Federation – Francisca de Haan, "Continuing Cold War Paradigms", 551.

<sup>45</sup> WIDF [Women's International Democratic Federation], *Second Women's International Congress. Account of the Work of the Congress Which Took Place in Budapest (Hungary) from the 1st to the 6th of December 1948*, (Paris : Women International Democratic Federation, 1948), 220–230.

magazine's first pages, describing the international organisation's objectives and biographies of individual leaders of the international women's movement. In 1948, for example, the *Kobieta* magazine covered a visit of Eugenie Cotton and delegates of women's organisations from the United States, England, France and Brazil to the Congress of Intellectuals in Wrocław. The magazine reported on a meeting of the Federation's representatives with League of Women's activists, highlighting the common goals of the organisations: the fight for peace and women's empowerment. Among the guests described by the *Kobieta* magazine were, among others Bella Abzug, American lawyer, later a women's rights activist, co-founder of the National Organization for Women (NOW), along with Betty Friedan, Shirley Chisholm, Paula Murray and Muriel Fox, and later the chairwoman of the National Commission on the Observance of International Women's Year. As reported in the *Kobieta* magazine informed that, during her visit to Poland in 1948, Bella Abzug was interested in League of Women's activities in the field of vocational training and employment of women, admired the achievements of Polish women in the field of gender equality, especially regarding opportunities for Polish women to perform professional work<sup>46</sup>.

The League of Women leaders have repeatedly referred to gender equality in relation, for example, to professional work, ensured by the communist (socialist) system. The Soviet woman served here as a role model. Especially in the period until the 1950s, in the politics of the communist states in the Soviet Union's influence sphere, women's movements, development of organisations bringing together women controlled by the state in these countries developed under the guidance of the Soviet Union<sup>47</sup>. The regional specificity of the countries in the influence sphere of the Soviet Union's policy on the Eastern Europe countries and, consequently, the regional, national specificity of the development of the women's movement in this area of Europe should be clearly indicated. For example, in Romania, in the communist era, women's movements developed at a slow pace; in the state policy patriarchy in families, prevailing in the period of fascism, was replaced by patriarchy promoted

<sup>46</sup> "Rosną nasze szeregi" [Our ranks grow], *Kobieta*, nr 48, 1948, 7; Małgorzata Dajnowicz, "Działalność Ligi Kobiet na obszarze kraju", 67–68.

<sup>47</sup> Kassimira Daskalova, "How Should We Name the 'Women-Friendly' Actions of State Socialism?", *Aspasia*, Vol. 1, 2007, 214–219.

by the state. The situation was to change since the 1970s, when, like in other Eastern European countries, the first feminist movements disseminating gender equality in the private sphere started to develop in Romania under the influence of the West<sup>48</sup>. In turn, in Hungary, after 1945, during the domination of the communist authorities in the state, most women cultivated traditional values and views, supporting religious institutions and organisations popularizing the traditional role of women with the main areas of their activity such as home, children and family. The official women's organisation in Hungary in 1945 was the National Alliance of Hungarian Women, accepted by the communist authorities and politically dominated by the communist party. Throughout the communist period, the postulate for women's rights in Hungary referred mainly to the women's right to work, carried on under the equal conditions with men<sup>49</sup>. The development of the women's movement in Hungary from 1945 to the late 1960s was very similar to the development of the women's movement in Poland at that time. Equality between women and men in these two countries concerned primarily the women's right to work on an equal footing with men. In Bulgaria, in turn, the communist authorities in the abovementioned period promoted the patriarchal social order and supported the dual role of women – their activeness at home and at work. It can be perceived as supporting by the communists the double burden for women – in the family space and at workplaces. The patriarchy of men was transferred from home to public life. The development of the woman's status was to take place through their professional work<sup>50</sup>. In turn, in the Lithuanian society after 1945, especially during the Stalinist period, the women's movement called the Women's

<sup>48</sup> Mihaela Miroiu, "Not the Right Movement! Women and the Politics of Endless Delay in Romania", *Women History Review*, Vol. 19, No. 4, 2010, 580–581.

<sup>49</sup> Andrea Peto, "Women's Associations in Hungary: Demobilization and Remobilization 1945–1951", in: Claire Duchon, Irene Bandhauer-Schöffmann (eds.), *When the War Was Over: Women, War and Peace in Europe, 1940–1956*, (London and New York : Leicester University Press 2000), 135–142; Raluca Maria Popa, "Translating Equality between Women and Men across Cold War Divides: Women Activists from Hungary and Romania and the Creation of International Women's Year", in: Shana Penn, Jill Massino (eds.), *Gender Politics and Everyday Life in State Socialist Eastern and Central Europe*, (New York : Palgrave Macmillan 2009), 59–73.

<sup>50</sup> Kristen Ghodsee, "Red Nostalgia? Communism, Women's Emancipation, and Economic Transformation in Bulgaria", in: Edith Saurer, Elisabeth Frysak, Margareth Lanzinger (eds.), *Women's Movements. Networks and debates in post-communist countries in the 19th and 20th centuries*, (Köln : Böhlau Verlag 2006), 38.

Councils had the task to strengthen the communist and Stalinist propaganda in Soviet Lithuania, administratively being part of the Soviet Union. After 1950, the organisation, similarly to the League of Women in Poland, was involved in activities of caring for mothers, children and families, including arranging childcare facilities for children at a time when women performed their job<sup>51</sup>. In turn, in the area of Soviet Belarus, the women's movement developed at the same time as in the Soviet Union. The main task of Belarusian and Soviet women was to strengthen the position of the communist party, to propagate socialism as a system guaranteeing equality between women and men<sup>52</sup>.

## Conclusion

The League of Women was an example of a women's organisation functioning in the communist reality of Poland in Eastern Europe. According to the assumption of the Polish communist authorities and organisation's leaders, it was supposed to be the only women's movement representing Polish women from various backgrounds in the Polish People's Republic. The organisation was controlled and accepted by the communist authorities, and at the same time it undertook attempts for independence in the area of initiating women's activity in various fields. Members of the League of Women in some cases could show independence from the communist authorities in their daily work, individual local initiatives, for example in the field of improving the household or providing legal advice to women in need. A good example of the involvement of the League of Women in daily affairs of women was the branch of the organisation in Łódź, which effectively assisted women in their daily problems. Therefore, it should be stated that in particular initiatives or individual cases the League of Women could maintain autonomy by supporting women, without communist party's involvement.

Belonging to the elite of the League of Women created opportunities for a political and professional career to female leaders. The

<sup>51</sup> Rima Praspaliauskiene, "Women's Activism in Lithuania: 1945–1985", in: Edith Saurer, Elisabeth Frysak, Margareth Lanzinger (eds.), *Women's Movements. Networks and debates*, 315, 116.

<sup>52</sup> Anna Hrabionkina, "Žanaddziely, delehackija schody i žansawiety u zachodnich ablasciach BSSR (1946—1950 hh.)", *Wiesci Akademii nauk BSSR. Sierija hramadskich nauk*, nr 6, 1973, 52–61.

social significance of the organisation, which was disseminated in the propaganda message to society by the communist authorities – was to arise from the mass, the increasing number of League of Women members, and the increasing number of organisation's circles established in workplaces employing women or in places of their residence. The League of Women was an organisation showing some kind of practical activism, manifesting itself in effectiveness in individual initiatives targeted at Polish women from various social groups. The mass nature of the organisation, which resulted from the policy of the Polish communist authorities towards the women's issue, was also a weakness of the women's movement, as in a mass organization, which included women from diverse social, professional and social groups, the interests and needs of these women clashed.

The Polish women's movement called the League of Women had its national and regional specificity, showing similarities but also differences in relation to women's movements in other geographical areas of Eastern Europe. After 1945, in Eastern Europe, in the orbit of political influence and domination of the Soviet Union, the development of women's movements was limited by the political system, politically controlled, dependent on the policy of the communist authorities. The dominant communist system in such states as Poland, Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and the Soviet republics – Lithuania and Belarus – had an inhibitory effect on free and resulting from grassroots needs of women development of the women's movement in these nation states.

Analysing the activities of the Polish women's movement under the name of the League of Women – during the 30 years of its functioning (1945–1975) – it can be concluded that a key role in visions of equality of women articulated in this period both in Poland and other communist Eastern European countries was played by the state – promoting and implementing the gender equality policy.

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