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# Antifeminist Discourses in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries: Forms, Arguments, and Political Context in East-Central Europe (An Introduction)

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## Keywords

antifeminism, feminism, 19<sup>th</sup> Century, 20<sup>th</sup> century, East-Central Europe, Habsburg and post-Habsburg Europe, gender stereotypes, women's education, women's political participation, authoritarian regimes

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## Abstract

ŠKORVANKOVÁ, Eva – DUDEKOVÁ KOVÁČOVÁ, Gabriela. Antifeminist Discourses in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries: Forms, Arguments, and Political Context in East-Central Europe (An Introduction).

This introductory study to a thematic issue traces the historical trajectories of antifeminist discourses in East-Central Europe from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, focusing on their ideological foundations, rhetorical strategies, and socio-political contexts.

While antifeminism is often perceived as a recent backlash amplified by digital platforms and far-right populism, this study underscores its long-standing presence as a reaction to feminist demands for equal citizenship, particularly in response to the women's suffrage movement and broader emancipatory efforts. Antifeminist rhetoric in this region, shaped by nationalism, conservatism, religious norms, and later authoritarian ideologies, evolved alongside modern feminist movements.

The study identifies a range of antifeminist expressions—from essentialist arguments grounded in biological determinism to their incorporation into authoritarian regimes that instrumentalized motherhood and femininity in the service of national or racial ideologies. Drawing on diverse case studies from the Habsburg monarchy and its successor states, the authors highlight the dynamic interplay between antifeminist and feminist narratives, the transnational circulation of anti-emancipatory arguments, and the socio-cultural mechanisms that influenced public debates on gender roles. They argue that antifeminist discourse functioned not only as a reactive force, but also as a constitutive element of modernity—shaping national identities and defining the parameters of political participation.

By foregrounding antifeminism as a distinct historical phenomenon, this study emphasizes the potential of its contextualized analysis to address a significant gap in gender historiography and to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of gender, modernization and citizenship in East-Central Europe.

The increase in hateful attitudes towards women in recent years—whether in public or on social media—and the inclusion of anti-feminist agenda in the political programs of predominantly far-right groups might misleadingly suggest that strong antifeminism is a recent phenomenon, primarily spread through modern digital channels. However, the misogyny in modern times has deep historical roots in literature and political thought.<sup>1</sup> Anti-feminist positions

This study is the result of research conducted at the Institute of History, Slovak Academy of Sciences within the project APVV-20-0526 “Political socialization in the territory of Slovakia during the years 1848–1993”.

- 1 The books of Jack Holland and Rosalind Miles sparked ongoing interest in this issue: HOLLAND, Jack. *A brief history of misogyny. The world's oldest prejudice*. London : Robinson, 2006; MILES, Rosalind. *Who Cooked the Last Supper? The Women's History of the World*. New York : Three Rivers Press, 2001 (first edition 1988).

gained prominence in public discourse already during the long 19<sup>th</sup> century, emerging in response to the new concept of citizenship inspired by the French Revolution and the emergence of women's movements—particularly those advocating for women's suffrage.<sup>2</sup>

## Antifeminism and antifeminist discourse

Antifeminism, as an ideological and social stance, represents opposition to feminism, feminist movements, gender equality, or broader gender-based emancipatory discourse. It is not—and has never been—a homogeneous phenomenon; its manifestations, arguments, and proponents have evolved over time in response to shifting historical contexts, cultural environments, and political ideologies. While 19<sup>th</sup>-century antifeminism primarily sought to uphold traditional gender roles within a patriarchal social order, antifeminism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century—particularly with the rise of the second wave of feminism since 1960s—assumed new forms. In democratic societies, it often manifested as a defence of “traditional values” and as a reaction against shifting norms related to sexuality, reproductive rights, and evolving family structures. During this period, anti-feminist attitudes were not limited to conservative milieus, but increasingly permeated popular culture, political discourse, and academic debate.

Since the 1990s and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, antifeminism has taken on increasingly diverse forms and agendas. These range from conservative backlash to so-called “post-feminist” or “masculinist” critiques of current egalitarian trends. In recent decades, antifeminism has also found new expressions through digital media, manifesting in formats that span from academic polemics to online hate speech.<sup>3</sup>

As a political ideology explicitly opposing feminism, antifeminism has remained a consistent counterpart to feminist movements since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, a significant catalyst for antifeminist discourse was present from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, when proposals advocating women's equal rights—rooted in the redefinition of citizenship introduced by the French Revolution—began to circulate.<sup>4</sup> The idea that civic duties and rights should extend beyond men to include women (even if only those from privileged classes) sparked the first debates about women's political participation. These debates also started in the regions of Central and Eastern Europe, particularly in the Habsburg Monarchy at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

2 GING, Debbie – SIAPERA, Eugenia. Introduction. In GING, Debbie – SIAPERA, Eugenia (eds.) *Gender Hate Online: Understanding the New Anti-Feminism*. Cham : Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, pp. 1–17; BLUM, Rebekka. *Angst um die Vormachtstellung. Zum Begriff und zur Geschichte des deutschen Antifeminismus*. Hamburg : Marta Press UG, 2019, pp. 5–16.

3 PERINI, Lorenza. *Giving Feminism a bad name: The uprising of the anti-feminism instances in times of populisms*. Milano : Ledizioni, 2021; BARD, Christine. « Antifeminism ». In *Encyclopédie d'histoire numérique de l'Europe*, <https://ehne.fr/en/encyclopedia/themes/gender-and-europe/european-man-a-hegemonic-masculinity-19th-21st-centuries/antifeminism> [last viewed on 13 April 2025]; HENNINGER, Anette et al. Einleitung: Mobilisierungen gegen Feminismus und 'Gender'. Erscheinungsformen, Erklärungsansätze und Gegenstrategien. In HENNINGER, Anette et al. (eds.) *Mobilisierungen gegen Feminismus und Gender: Erscheinungsformen, Erklärungsversuche und Gegenstrategien*. Opladen : Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2021.

4 BOCKOVÁ, Gisela. *Ženy v evropských dějinách od středověku do současnosti*. Praha : Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, 2007, pp. 61–78.

Women's rights movements and feminism can be understood both as significant manifestations of—and simultaneously as engines of—social change and modernity. Yet paradoxically, a more nuanced analysis of its counterpart—the antifeminist discourse—and its impact, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, is still lacking. Antifeminist critique not only targeted a range of women's groups and their representatives, but also sought to reverse the changes in the patriarchal structures brought about by the modernization of society during the long 19<sup>th</sup> century. At the same time, however, the emancipatory achievements in women's social and political status became a compelling argument in contemporary debates on modernity and progress, helping to advance women's rights, especially in Eastern Europe after the First World War.<sup>5</sup> The discourse on gender order was reshaped both during the war and in the newly formed post-Habsburg states. The example of Czechoslovakia illustrates how antifeminist arguments were weakened by proponents of the new states, who sought international recognition in part by showcasing their progressiveness through support for women's emancipation and the constitutional establishment of women's suffrage.<sup>6</sup>

While a substantial body of scholarly literature addresses the history of the women's emancipation movements and the development of various feminist discourses,<sup>7</sup> the historical trajectory of antifeminism has received only sporadic attention.<sup>8</sup> Its manifestations in Central and Eastern Europe, in particular, remain largely under-researched and continue to await comprehensive scholarly analysis. Considering the antifeminist discourse within specific social and political contexts, it is essential to analyse how and why antifeminist reactions arise, the discursive strategies employed by their proponents, and their impact on public debate, politics, and everyday life.

Focusing on the period of first-wave feminism in Central and Eastern Europe, this issue aims to highlight antifeminism as an ideological and institutional opposition that defines itself in contrast to the efforts towards women's emancipation, as advocated by various streams of the women's movement.

5 BUCUR, Maria. *Gendering Modernism: A Historical Reappraisal of the Canon*. Bloomsbury : Bloomsbury Academic, 2017, pp. 78–81.

6 FEINBERG, Melissa. *Elusive equality: Gender, citizenship, and the limits of democracy in Czechoslovakia, 1918/1950*. Pittsburg : University of Pittsburg Press, 2006; DUDEKOVÁ KOVÁČOVÁ, Gabriela. Between Transnational Cooperation and Nationalism: The Little Entente of Women in Czechoslovakia. In *Aspasia*, 2022, vol. 16, pp. 56–78.

7 E.g. GERHARD, Ute. *Unerhört. Die Geschichte der deutschen Frauenbewegung*. Reinbek bei Hamburg : Rowohlt, 1990; NAVE-HERZ, Rosemarie. *Die Geschichte der Frauenbewegung in Deutschland*. Bonn : Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 1993; DELAP, Lucy. *Feminisms (A Global History)*. London : Penguin Books Ltd., 2020; LÓRÁND, Zsófia et al. *Texts and Contexts from the History of Feminism and Women's Rights: East Central Europe, Second Half of the Twentieth Century*. Budapest; Wien; New York : CEU Press, 2024.

8 See mainly: EVANS, Richard J. *The Feminist movement in Germany 1894–1933*. Berlin : Sage, 1976 (Chapter “The Antifeminists”, pp. 175–206); PLANERT, Ute. *Antifeminismus im Kaiserreich. Diskurs, soziale Formation und politische Mentalität*. Göttingen : Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1998; PLANERT, Ute. Women's Suffrage and Antifeminism as a Litmus Test of Modernizing Societies. A Western European Comparison. In MÜLLER, Sven Oliver – TORP, Cornelius (eds.) *Imperial Germany Revisited: Continuing Debates and New Perspectives*. New York; Oxford : Berghahn, 2011, pp. 107–123; BUSCH, Julia. *Women against the vote: Female anti-suffragism in Britain*. Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2007; DELAP, Lucy. Feminist and anti-feminist encounters in Edwardian Britain. In *Historical Research*, 2005, vol. 78, no. 201, pp. 377–399.

The authors seek to analyse historical forms of antifeminism as a distinct component of modern history. They examine the arguments and strategies employed in different historical periods to reject women's rights, identify the social groups that supported anti-feminist positions, and explore how these reactions evolved in response to changing social, political, and cultural contexts from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The contributions explore the interconnections between antifeminist and feminist argumentation, as well as the transfer of argumentative patterns from Western to Central and Eastern Europe within public discourse—including popular fiction—particularly in the context of the Habsburg and post-Habsburg states. They identify several specific features, such as the pronounced influence of Germany<sup>9</sup> and the rivalry among national movements within the multicultural Habsburg Monarchy, which highlight the central role of nationalism and nationalist rhetoric in both feminist and antifeminist discourses. By focusing on the forms and impact of antifeminist narratives, the authors attend to their specific socio-political contexts.

Similar to developments in Western Europe, in the nineteenth century—within the framework of national movements and the formation of civil society—antifeminism emerged as a defence of the so-called natural role of women in both the family and the broader social order. This conceptualization was grounded in essentialist notions of biological determinism and reinforced by dominant religious norms. Feminist demands for access to education, professional opportunities, and suffrage were frequently dismissed as “threats to femininity,” social stability, and “national interests,” especially in the multinational states as the Habsburg Empire.<sup>10</sup> Women's participation in the emancipatory national movements of non-dominant nations within the Habsburg Monarchy granted them increasing access to public engagement. In Czech nationalist politics, for instance, male politicians not only endorsed women as a vital mobilizing force, but even supported female candidates for the Bohemian Diet.<sup>11</sup> A distinctive feature of these movements, however, was the ambivalent nature of women's public engagement: while nationalists often encouraged their participation, it was simultaneously limited by nationalist agendas and middle-class family norms.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, anti-feminist argumentation primarily responded to demands for vocational training opportunities for women, which were regarded as prerequisites for employment and economic independence—in other words, a step toward a life free from reliance on a male breadwinner. Although many

9 While Hedwig Dohm's *Die Antifeministen* (1902) is widely recognized as a foundational critique of anti-feminist discourses in the German Empire, scholarly study specifically addressing its reception within the Habsburg Monarchy would be beneficial. DOHM, Hedwig. *Die Antifeministen: Ein Buch der Verteidigung*. Berlin : Ferd. Dümmlers Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1902; MAURER, Susanne. Hedwig Dohms „Die Antifeministen“. In *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, 2018, vol. 68, no. 17, pp. 40–46.

10 ANTHIAS, Floya – YUVAL-DAVIS, Nira. Introduction. In YUVAL-DAVIS, Nira – ANTHIAS, Floya – CAMPLING, Jo (eds.) *Woman – Nation – State*. London : Macmillan Press, 1989, pp. 1–15.

11 For a comparative discourse analysis of Czech- and German-language press coverage regarding the 1912 election of Božena Viková-Kunětická—the first female-deputy within the Habsburg Empire (elected to the Bohemian Diet)—see: KRUTÍLKOVÁ, Hana. „Politická komedie“, nebo prospěšná záležitost? Volba poslankyně v roce 1912 jako téma katolického tisku. In *Studia historica Brunensia*, 2018, vol. 65, no. 2, pp. 25–45.



opponents of feminism acknowledged that such measures represented a form of forced emancipation driven by social factors affecting middle-class women, they continued to promote the private sphere as the ideal setting for women's roles and femininity.<sup>12</sup> From the late 19<sup>th</sup> into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, efforts to expand voting rights to previously marginalized populations—including women—provoked intensified anti-feminist arguments aimed at preventing women from gaining suffrage. Much of the anti-feminist stance at this time was based on the notion that women's enfranchisement constituted an “unhealthy import from the West.”

During the interwar period, anti-feminist discourses were increasingly integrated into authoritarian and totalitarian ideologies, where the pursuit of gender equality was framed as a destabilizing force threatening the integrity of the state, the nation, or the racial order.<sup>13</sup> These ideologies were accompanied by policies aimed at restoring women to the private sphere or restricting their public participation to roles defined by motherhood. The German concept of motherhood exerted particular influence on national movements within the Habsburg Empire, linking maternal roles to civic duty and national identity. The Nazi redefinition and politization of motherhood likewise found resonance within the Slovak State and other regimes during the Second World War.<sup>14</sup>

The articles in this issue examine stereotypes and discourses related to key aspects of the contemporary “women's question” within specific historical contexts. These include women's education and employment (Marie Bahenská); political mobilization and participation in women's movements and party politics (Irena Selišnik and Ana Cergol Paradiž); the intersection of women's stereotypes and religious norms (Gabriela Pošteková); intersections of gender stereotypes with ideologies of nationalism and racism, including their cultural transfers (Miloslav Szabó); and the influence of authoritarian regimes, whose ideologies and policies tightly regulated women's participation in politics and selected professions (Denisa Nešťáková).

- 12 RENDALL, Jane. Women and the Public Sphere. In *Gender & History*, 1999, vol. 11, no. 3, pp. 475–488; DUDEKOVÁ, Gabriela – MANNOVÁ, Elena. Rodové vzťahy a postavenie žien v období modernizácie: Výsledky najnovších výskumov. In *Človek a spoločnosť*, 2006, vol. 9, no. 4, <https://individualandsociety.org/storage/uploads/casopis/2006/4/rodove-vztahy-a-postavenie-zien-v-obdobi-moderniza/rodove-vztahy-a-postavenie-zien-v-obdobi-modernizacie-vysledky-najnovsich-vyskumov.pdf> [last viewed on 13 Mai 2025]; WEBNER, Pnina – YUVAL-DAVIS, Nira. *Women, Citizenship and Difference*. London : Zed Books, 1999; PETERSON, Spike V. Gendered Nationalism: Reproducing US versus Them. In LORENTZEN, Lois Ann – TURPIN, Jennifer (eds.) *The Women and War Reader*. New York : New York University Press, 1998, pp. 41–49.
- 13 DURHAM, Martin. *Women and Fascism*. London; New York : Routledge, 1998; PAYNE, Stanley. *A History of Fascism, 1914–1945*. London : Routledge, 2001, p. 13; KOONZ, Claudia. *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family and Nazi Politics*. New York : St. Martin's Press, 1987; BOCK, Gisela. Racism and Sexism in Nazi Germany: Motherhood, Compulsory Sterilization, and the State. In *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 1983, vol. 8, no. 3, pp. 400–421; PASSMORE, Kevin (ed.) *Women, Gender and Fascism in Europe 1919–45*. Manchester : Manchester University Press, 2003.
- 14 See particularly the contribution of Denisa Nešťáková in this issue. For a discourse analysis of Nazi propaganda in the Czech women's magazines during the German occupation, see: RAŠKOVÁ, Jitka. Reflexe nacistické propagandy na stránkách vybraných ženských časopisů – List paní a dívek, Hvězda českých paní a dívek a Eva. In *MEMO – časopis pro orální historii/Oral History Journal*, 2018, vol. 8, no. 2, pp. 22–38.

## Women's Education and Qualified Employment

Discussions, prejudices, and stereotypes concerning women's education in the Czech lands at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries are examined in the study by *Marie Bahenská*. In her article, she explores the role and perception of women in the field of medicine, focusing on the professional training of female physicians and nurses, the qualifications required, and the career opportunities available to them. Particular attention is paid to the limited degree of their acceptance within both professional circles and broader public discourse.

Access to education for women emerged as one of the most provocative challenges to established gender norms during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Educational reforms not only symbolized broader transformations of women's societal roles but, from the perspective of their opponents, posed a direct threat to patriarchal authorities. This perceived danger provoked considerable resistance, both within private households and throughout public discourse—even in the predominantly agrarian regions of the Habsburg Empire. In public discourse, opposition to women's higher education was especially pronounced among ecclesiastical circles and conservative political authorities. These attitudes were shaped by the dominant conception of a women's "natural" role within the family and domestic sphere.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, only a small proportion of women had access to complete secondary or higher education, and after completing their studies, even fewer were able to enter qualified employment. However, the situation shifted markedly during the First World War, as the proportion of economically active women in paid employment increased across East-Central European countries—particularly in agriculture, public administration, and industrial production. Women's access to university education had opened in the Habsburg Monarchy by the late 1890s, but the First World War significantly accelerated the process. Educational reforms introduced during the war—driven both by a shortage of skilled workers and a recognition of "new women's duties in the home front"—let to a substantial rise in the number of female students enrolled in secondary schools and universities.<sup>15</sup>

Despite demonstrably positive experiences with educated and intellectually capable women, persistent social prejudices still continued to portray women as inherently more emotional and less intellectually gifted than men. Nonetheless, access to education and participation in schooling progressively transformed young women, enabling them to develop social skills, empathy, self-confidence, and personal agency.<sup>16</sup> The stated goal of women's education was to prepare nationally conscious, physically and mentally robust women and mothers, who would be responsible for properly raising future generations.<sup>17</sup>

15 For girl's schooling in Hungarian part of the Habsburg Monarchy in 19<sup>th</sup> century, see: KIČKOVÁ, Adriana – KIŠŠOVÁ, Mária. Nineteenth century female education in the Slovak Region of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In *History of Education & Children's Literature*, 2013, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 503–522. For the university studies of women in Austria and Hungary and the issue of their professional accomplishment in the broader chronological context see: HEINDL, Waltraud – TICHY, Marina (eds.) "Durch Erkenntnis zu Freiheit und Glück..." *Frauen an der Universität Wien (ab 1897)*. Wien : WUV-Universitätsverlag, 1990; PETŐ, Andrea. A nők a tudományban/Women in Science. In *Magyar Tudomány*, 2018, vol. 179, no. 4, pp. 550–565.

16 GILL, Judith – ESSON, Katharine – YUEN, Rosalina. *A Girl's Education: Schooling and the Formation of Gender, Identities and Future Visions*. London : Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, pp. 41–42.

17 J. Č. K reforme ženského vzdelávania. In *Živena*, 1939, vol. 29, no. 1, pp. 22–23.

In general, however, higher education for girls continued to be widely portrayed as a threat to traditional family structures and domestic responsibilities. Such arguments were repeatedly invoked by conservative proponents of patriarchal gender order throughout the interwar period, often reinforced by references to the so-called “family crisis” caused by the First World War and the social consequences of the Great Depression in the 1930s. As one contemporary commentary noted, “University study rather easily estranges a young woman from family life, endangers in her a sense of strong—often exaggerated—self-confidence and cultivates an aversion to household duties.”<sup>18</sup> Conservative authorities—particularly political elites and the clergy—frequently emphasized the notion of women’s “natural” vocation, which they defined in strictly private terms, centred on motherhood and marriage. The promoted ideal of the woman as mother and homemaker was thus to be reflected in the education of girls. In Central European countries, various formal and informal barriers were still implemented to limit girls’ access to higher education and professional qualification.<sup>19</sup>

Girls’ education in Central European countries was designed to be differentiated according to individual ability, yet gender remained the dominant organizing principle. More academically gifted girls—alongside their familial upbringing—were permitted to prepare for higher education. In contrast, less intellectually inclined girls were directed toward specialized training aligned with the ideal of the “cultured woman,” capable of fulfilling roles in both the family and broader society. Educational reforms frequently privileged practical subjects such as needlework, drawing, and music, while reducing emphasis on mathematics and foreign languages. Activities like sewing, cooking, and a variety of handicrafts—including knitting, crocheting, and embroidery—were made compulsory components of girls’ secondary education. This model reflected a conservative vision of femininity that framed girls as versatile, emotional, and perceptive, in contrast to boys, who were cast as objective, productive, and intellectually oriented.<sup>20</sup>

Specialized vocational schools for women’s occupations enjoyed strong support from conservative politicians. These institutions were intended to facilitate women’s employment in practical fields such as social work, child-care, administrative roles, and nursing. In general, this type of school offered a relatively accessible pathways for girls to obtain an education. It effectively cultivated and trained them in practical skills for managing a household, including subjects such as arithmetic, accounting, and literature. However, vocational training for girls was primarily aimed at preparing them for “family life.” Education was intended to have a practical character, preparing girls for

18 KNAPO, Alexander. Analýza problému žien. In *Kultúra*, 1938, vol. 10, no. 11/12, pp. 237–238.

19 Among such instruments was undoubtedly the reduction of subsidies for girls’ secondary schools. BRANDHAUER-SCHÖFFMAN, Irene. Der „Christliche Ständestaat“ als Männerstaat? In TÁLOS, Emmerich – NEUGEBAUER, Wolfgang (eds.) *Austrofaschismus: Politik – Ökonomie – Kultur 1933–1938*. Wien : Lit Verlag, 2014, p. 277.

20 DACHS Herbert. Das Frauenbild in der Schule des „Austrofaschismus“. In ARDELT, Rudolf – HUBER Wolfgang – STAUDINGER Anton (eds.) *Unterdrückung und Emanzipation. Festschrift für Erika Weinzierl. Zum 60. Geburtstag*. Wien : Geyer-Ed., 1985, p. 87.

their future roles as mothers and educators. Accordingly, particular emphasis was placed on female-specific subjects, including home economics, pedagogy, and health education. In the 1930s, Austrian secondary schools introduced a specialized physical education curriculum aimed at preparing girls for motherhood, which included instruction in children's games and related activities.<sup>21</sup>

In contrast to the tradition of coeducation in the elementary schools within the Habsburg Monarchy, a key mechanism for restricting girls' access to secondary education and the leaving examination (*Matura*) for girls was the enforcement of gender-segregated higher schooling. Coeducation was often labelled a feature of liberal pedagogy and associated with alleged "moral corruption."<sup>22</sup> Yet, coeducation contributed to an increase in the number of girls completing secondary education and enhanced their chances of pursuing higher studies. Conservative political circles and the Catholic clergy regarded gender-segregated schooling as a foundational principle for the proper moral and intellectual development of the younger generation.<sup>23</sup> Opponents of coeducation frequently invoked the authority of Pope Pius XI, who, in his 1929 encyclical *Divini illius Magistri* (On Christian Education),<sup>24</sup> expressed strong opposition to the joint education of boys and girls, particularly during adolescence. He underscored the importance of preserving morality and virtue in relations between the sexes by maintaining clear gender distinctions.

### Under the authoritarian and totalitarian regimes

The aforementioned conservative restrictive views gained further traction in the late 1930s under the influence of authoritarian political regimes in the Central and Eastern Europe. The abolition of coeducation contributed to a marked decline in the number of girls receiving secondary education. In Austria, discriminatory interventions introduced by the conservative regime during the 1930s led to a decrease in female secondary school enrolment.<sup>25</sup> A similar pattern emerged in Slovakia between 1938 and 1945, following the prohibition of coeducational schooling.<sup>26</sup>

Despite the growing number of female university students after 1918, conservative political elites consistently argued that women's higher education was superfluous and sought to restrict or regulate their academic participation. In

21 STROHMEYER, Hannes. *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Leibesübungen in Österreich*. Wien : Wissenschaftliche Gesellschaft für Leibeserziehung und Sport, 1975, p. 256; MÜLLNER Rudolf. *Die Mobilisierung der Körper. Schul- und Hochschulsport im nationalsozialistischen Österreich*. Wien : WUV Universitätsverlag, 1993, p. 51.

22 SIVÁK, Jozef. *Nové slovenské školstvo I: Reč Jozefa Siváka, ministra školstva a národnej osvety, povedané v Kultúrnom výbore Snemu Slovenskej republiky*. Bratislava : Ministerstvo školstva a národnej osvety, 1940, pp. 25–28.

23 TÁLOS Emmerich. *Das austrofaschistische Österreich 1933–1938*. Wien : Lit Verlag, 2017, p. 108.

24 *Divini Illius Magistri* (On Christian Education), Encyclical of Pope Pius XI. (31 December 1929), [http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-xi\\_enc\\_31121929\\_divini-illius-magistri.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_31121929_divini-illius-magistri.html) [last viewed on 13 June 2025]

25 In the 1933/1934 school year, 21 453 girls attended secondary schools, whereas by 1936/1937 this number had decreased to 19 525. This represents a decline of nearly 9%. BRANDHAUER-SCHÖFFMAN 2014, p. 277.

26 KÁZMEROVÁ, Lubica. *Riadiace orgány školstva na Slovensku a vzdelávací systém v rokoch 1918–1945*. In KÁZMEROVÁ, Lubica. *Premeny v školstve a vzdelávaní na Slovensku (1918–1945)*. Bratislava : Prodama, 2012, p. 32.



many cases, they advocated for the implementation of a *numerus clausus* policy specifically aimed at limiting the admission of women. A *numerus clausus* restricting access to university education for Jewish students and women was introduced as early as 1920 in Hungary, reflecting the ultra-conservative gender and ethnic policies of the Horthy regime.<sup>27</sup>

In Nazi Germany, representatives of the regime attempted to curtail women's education and professional qualification through the introduction of quotas limiting female university enrolment. In December 1933, a restrictive decree was enacted, setting a cap of 15 000 new university entrants nationwide, with precise quotas allocated for each region. The number of new female students was limited to no more than 10% of each region's quota. However, these measures proved ineffective in practice.<sup>28</sup> Due to labour shortages—largely stemming from conscription and the armament program—discriminatory restrictions were gradually relaxed.

In Austria, a proposal to introduce a 10% quota for female university students was debated between 1934 and 1938.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, in June 1941, the Ministry of Education of the Slovak State presented a proposal limiting women's access to university education by setting quotas per faculty: 50 female students at the Faculty of Medicine, 30 at the Faculty of Arts, and 15 at the Faculty of Natural Sciences. Women were entirely excluded from studying at the Faculty of Law.<sup>30</sup> However, this proposal was never implemented, largely due to internal power struggles within the regime and particularly thanks to opposing public debates including critical responses in conservative women's periodicals.<sup>31</sup>

Proposals to restrict women's access to higher education were frequently supported in public discourse and the press by the argument that “a girl's natural place is in the family, and that neither secondary education nor, to a greater extent, higher education prepares her for this role.”<sup>32</sup> The appeal to the “natural vocation” of women—confined exclusively to the family and household—remained a dominant theme. Participants in these debates and policy proposals questioned the value of university education for women. According to their perspective, the higher intellectual and social status attained by women with university degrees offered no added benefit to society; on the contrary, it was seen as detrimental. Education was alleged to impair a woman's ability to properly manage household responsibilities and care for children. In the labour

27 SZEGVÁRI, N. Katalin. *Numerus clausus rendelkezések az ellenforradalmi Magyarországon. A zsidó és nőhallgatók felvételéről*. Budapest : Akadémiai Kiadó, 1988; PETŐ 2018, p. 557–558.

28 STEPHENSON, Jill. *Women in Nazi Society*. London : Croom Helm, 1975, pp. 95–115, 132–135; BURLEIGH, Michael – WIPPERMANN, Wolfgang. *Rasistický stát: Německo 1933–1945*. Praha : Columbus, 2010, pp. 256–258.

29 ERKER, Linda. *Die Universität Wien im Austrofaschismus*. Wien : Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2021, pp. 131–132.

30 Slovenský národný archív (SNA), fond (f.) Snem Slovenskej Republiky (Slovak Republic Assembly), box 128, sign. II – 6a/1 – 475, no. 1390.

31 ŠEMŠEJ, Matej. Univerzitné študentky počas prvej Slovenskej republiky. In DUDEKOVÁ, Gabriela et al. *Na ceste k modernej žene: Kapitoly z dejín rodových vzťahov na Slovensku*. Bratislava : VEDA, 2011, pp. 364–374; ŠKORVANKOVÁ, Eva. Snahy o obmedzenie vysokoškolského štúdia žien v období slovenského štátu. In *Historický časopis*, 2018, vol. 66, no. 4, pp. 649–670; ZAVACKÁ, Marína. Crossing sisters: patterns of protest in the journal of the Catholic Union of Slovak Women during the Second World War. In *Social History*, 2021, vol. 37, no. 4, pp. 425–451.

32 E. R. Čo je s vysokoškolským štúdiom dievčat. In *Slovenská pravda*, 1941, vol. 6, no. 224, p. 1.

market, educated women were viewed as unnecessary competitors to their male counterparts, whose employment was believed to have broader social and societal implications, including the prospective establishment of families and support for population growth.<sup>33</sup>

The implementation of discriminatory measures in girls' education in Slovakia, along with the public debates they provoked, was closely linked to interventions targeting women in qualified employment—particularly those in state and public service who possessed higher education and qualifications and were perceived as competitors to men. The employment of married women and the issue of dual incomes within families were portrayed in the press as social problems and matters of social justice. However, the policy of dismissing married women from state and public service positions (such as in education, science, and public administration) had far more complex and far-reaching consequences, contributing to a decline in the number of female students at both secondary and tertiary levels. These circumstances were undoubtedly interconnected.<sup>34</sup>

Paradoxically, the concepts of dual-income marriages, childlessness among such couples, and the perceived unhealthy nature of family life for married working women conflicted with the traditional and conservative ideal of the woman as a homemaker, whose primary role was to care for her husband, children, and the family's wellbeing.

In Austria, as early as December 1933, legislation was enacted mandating the dismissal of married women from public service if their husbands were also public employees.<sup>35</sup> This law disproportionately affected female teachers in primary and secondary schools, while scientific and administrative female staff at universities and government offices were less affected.<sup>36</sup> Essentially, this legislation reinstated the celibacy requirement for female teachers on a national scale.<sup>37</sup>

The Ustaša regime in Croatia similarly sought to relegate women to the domestic sphere and family life. Following the abolition of coeducation in secondary schools, the Ministry of Education attempted to prohibit women from pursuing university studies in the faculties of medicine and law. These efforts,

33 WALTER, Anton Julius. *Die Hochschulen im neuen Staate. Gedanken zu einer notwendigen Reform*. Wien; Leipzig, 1936, pp. 42–43.

34 ŠKORVANKOVÁ, Eva. *Strážkyne rodinných kozubov? Ženy v ideológii a politike Slovenského štátu*. Bratislava : VEDA, 2021.

35 The law stipulated a number of exceptions; however, it also applied to the daughters of high-ranking officials. BRANDHAUER-SCHÖFFMAN 2014, p. 273.

36 Women were underrepresented in scientific positions; during the 1933/1934 academic year, the University of Vienna employed a total of 32 female researchers and 110 female administrative staff members. ERKER 2021, p. 129.

37 Individual federal states approached the dismissal of married female teachers differently. In some, the celibacy requirement for female teachers had already been introduced during the 1920s (Lower Austria, Carinthia, and Styria) and in 1933 (Tyrol, Salzburg, and Vorarlberg). A further effective tool to discourage women from working in education was the reduction of their income. However, the introduction of the Law on the Elimination of Dual Incomes in December 1933 addressed the issue nationwide. Young women were forced to choose between public service (teaching) and marriage. SCHAUNING, Christine. *Frauen im Austrofaschismus – Rückschritt, Stillstand, Fortschritt? Eine Suche in der Stadt und auf dem Land* (Master Theses). Wien : Universität Wien, 2010, pp. 14–16.

however, proved unsuccessful.<sup>38</sup> Attempts to eliminate female employment were likewise undermined by a severe labour shortage, an issue particularly acute in wartime Croatia due to the ongoing armed conflict with partisans and widespread disruptions in supply chains. As a result, women were not only a welcome source of labour but often actively sought employment to support their families.

The fascist regime in Italy served as a model for numerous discriminatory policies targeting women's education and participation in the labour market. For instance, Italian women were barred from holding headmaster positions in secondary schools and from teaching subjects such as history, philosophy, economics, and various technical disciplines at lyceums and vocational institutions. A ceiling of 10% was imposed on the employment of women in public administration, which by 1938 was extended to the private sector. Additionally, in 1940, the legal minimum age for girls to enter paid employment was lowered from 14 to 12 years. Girls were encouraged to abandon paid employment as early as possible, to marry, and to bear many children in quick succession.<sup>39</sup>

Proposals to dismiss married women from employment had emerged in Czechoslovakia during the Great Depression.<sup>40</sup> At that time, it was commonly assumed that married working women were financially secure through their husbands' incomes. Nevertheless, the democratic and liberal Czechoslovak governments refrained from implementing such measures. During the period of the so-called Second Republic (1938–1939), this approach to addressing economic difficulties resurfaced. Within autonomous Slovakia, the issue of an alleged surplus of public and state employees was to be resolved in a “just” manner—by dismissing married women from employment. Consequently, the employment of married women became a major political and social issue across the state. The authoritarian clerical-fascist regime established in Slovakia in March 1939 was determined to “return Slovak women to the family.” As a result, married female teachers were dismissed in September 1939, followed by the dismissal of married women from state administration in June 1940.<sup>41</sup>

## Political Participation

Feminist movements in Central Europe during the 19<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century aimed to achieve adequate political representation, access to education and paid employment, and reproductive rights. They repeatedly had to argue for and assert these demands against conservative political and social elites who invoked Christian values, conservatism, traditional gender roles, and various stereotypical images and ideals. These views were widely adopted across Europe, rooted in a shared pre-1918 tradition. In Central and Eastern Europe, women were granted suffrage during the interwar period,

38 JELINEK, Yeshayahu A. On the Condition of women in wartime Slovakia and Croatia. In FRUCHT, Richard (ed.) *Labyrinth of Nationalism. Complexities of Diplomacy: Essays in Honor of Charles and Barbara Jelavich*. Columbus, Ohio : Slavica Publishers, 1992, pp. 193–194.

39 CALDWELL, Lesley. Reproducers of the Nations: Women and the Family in Fascist Policy. In FORGACS, David (ed.) *Rethinking Italian Fascism: Capitalism, Populism, and Culture*. London : Lawrence & Wishart, 1986, p. 126.

40 RÁKOSNÍK, Jakub – ŠUSTROVÁ, Radka. *Rodina v zájmu státu: Populační růst a instituce manželství v českých zemích 1918–1989*. Praha : Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, 2016, pp. 191–192.

41 ŠKORVANKOVÁ 2021, pp. 65–87.

though often with limitations not imposed on men.<sup>42</sup> Only Czechoslovakia and Poland extended full suffrage on the basis of gender equality shortly after the fall of the Habsburg Empire.<sup>43</sup>

In their study featured in this issue, *Irena Selišnik and Ana Cergol Paradiž*, examine the relationship between women's and feminist movements and the formation of discourse on women's suffrage in the Slovenian lands during the Austro-Hungarian period and interwar period, up to the existence of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. As in other Habsburg and post-Habsburg states, anti-feminist reactions manifested both through the public media and through structural political measures. The public discourse was shaped by two competing constructions of femininity: the emancipated "new woman" and the idealized "maternal figure tied to national and moral revival."

The right to vote was perceived—both within the organized women's movement and by female leaders themselves—as a fundamental condition and a key indicator of progress towards women's emancipation and gender equality.<sup>44</sup> However, the granting of suffrage did not necessarily reflect the actual degree of women's participation in the political, economic, and cultural spheres of the state. Rather, it constituted a necessary precondition. The very act of voting posed significant challenges even for women themselves. This is exemplified by the case of women in Slovakia, who, following the establishment of the Czechoslovak Republic and the acquisition of voting rights, became full-fledged participants in political life. Nevertheless, their ability to actively exercise these rights was constrained by inexperience, prevailing conservative attitudes, and limited societal expectations regarding women's roles in politics.<sup>45</sup> Notably, the argument that women lacked voting experience was not applied to men, despite the fact that most of men in the Hungarian part of the Habsburg monarchy had not possessed voting rights prior to 1918.

The acceptance or rejection of women's suffrage was often shaped by concerns that women would not vote independently but rather under the influence by authoritative figures in their surroundings—particularly priests or male family members such as husbands or fathers.<sup>46</sup> Women were thus not regarded as equal political actors, but as a sizable and relatively easily impressionable voting base. As a result, they became frequent targets of tailored

42 For a comparative perspective on women's suffrage, including developments in Central and Eastern Europe, see: RODRIGUEZ-RUIZ, Blanca – RUBIO-MARÍN, Ruth (eds.) *The Struggle for Female Suffrage in Europe: Voting to Become Citizens*. Leiden; Boston : Brill Academic Publ., 2012.

43 For women's movements and suffrage campaigns before 1918 in Habsburg Monarchy, see: Chapter *Frauenbewegungen in Cislethanien* by Renate Flich, Gabriella Hauch and Birgitta Bader-Zaar, and *Frauenbewegungen und Frauebestrebungen im Königreich Ungarn* by Susan Zimmermann In RUMPLER, Helmut – URBANITSCH, Peter (eds.) *Die Habsburgermonarchie 1848–1918. Band VIII: Politische Öffentlichkeit, Teilband 1: Vereine, Parteien und Interessenverbände als Träger der politischen Partizipation*. Wien : Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2006, pp. 941–1027, 1359–1491; ZIMMERMANN, Susan. *Die bessere Hälfte? Frauenbewegungen und Frauenbestrebungen im Ungarn der Habsburgermonarchie 1848 bis 1918*. Wien : Promedia Verlag; Budapest : Napvilág Kiadó, 1999.

44 KOBOVÁ, Lubica. Načo je (komu) volebné právo? In CVIKOVÁ, Jana – JURÁŇOVÁ, Jana – KOBOVÁ, Lubica (eds.) *História žien: Aspekty písania a čítania*. Bratislava : Aspekt, 2007, p. 273.

45 ŠOLTÉSOVÁ, Elena. Nové úlohy. In *Živena*, 1919, vol. 10, no. 3, p. 52.

46 HANULA, Matej. Ženy a politika na medzivojnovom Slovensku. Nezaujem či nepriazeň zo strany mužov? In KOVÁČ, Dušan – HANULA, Matej et al. *Z monarchie do republiky a z demokracie do totality: Spoločnosť na Slovensku od konca 19. storočia do roku 1945*. Bratislava : VEDA, 2022, p. 96.



political campaigns, with party programs and public speakers devoting particular attention to female voters.<sup>47</sup>

A crucial factor was the extent to which leading figures in political parties and movements—overwhelmingly male—were willing to accept and support women as members within their ranks. Equally significant was the degree to which the presence of women was taken in account when formulating party programs and selecting electoral candidates. In the case of female candidates, it was particularly important not only whether women appeared on party candidate lists at all, but also whether they were placed in electable positions. Within the organizational structures of many political parties, women remained an exception in Slovakia and were largely excluded from leadership roles. Nevertheless, women represented a significant portion of both the electorate and party membership. Mass political parties frequently engaged women as organizational workers and campaign operatives, assigning them to routine tasks such as organizing and administering congresses and conventions, managing financial and logistical operations, and handling administrative duties.<sup>48</sup>

Several conservative political leaders opposed full suffrage for women during internal parliamentary debates on electoral legislation shortly after the establishment of the Czechoslovak Republic, arguing that women lacked the necessary experience for political participation—especially in Slovakia's agrarian regions. Although the first democratic elections in 1919 were held only in the western part of the country (i.e., the Czech lands and Moravia), the 1920 parliamentary election, which included women across the entire state, proceeded without complications. Even in the satirical press surrounding the 1920 elections in Slovakia, traditional stereotypes of women as inexperienced, easily influenced, or politically apathetic were quickly complemented by exaggerated portrayals of the young, modern, educated, and economically independent woman with autonomous political judgment. In the competition for women's votes, no political party publicly opposed full women's suffrage any longer; even the conservative Slovak National Party and People's Party began accusing their rivals of having initially intended to deny women full voting rights in the new Republic. However, women's participation in party politics remained limited due to the weak feminist tradition in Slovakia, presence of a glass ceiling within party structures, and prevailing patriarchal norms.<sup>49</sup>

47 BUREŠOVÁ, Jana. Společensko-politická aktivita a veřejná činnost žen za první Československé republiky (1918–1938). In VALENTA, Jaroslav – VORÁČEK, Emil – HARNA, Josef (eds.) *Československo 1918–1938: Osudy demokracie ve střední Evropě* 2. Praha : Historický ústav, 1999, p. 394.

48 HANULA 2022.

49 DUDEKOVÁ KOVÁČOVÁ, Gabriela. Vojna ako akcelerator? Politická participácia žien v Uhorsku a v Československej republike. In BENKO, Juraj – DUDEKOVÁ KOVÁČOVÁ, Gabriela (eds.) *S ľudom a pre ľud: Cesty k demokracii na Slovensku za monarchie a prvej republiky*. Bratislava : Historický ústav SAV; VEDA, vydavateľstvo SAV, 2020, pp. 303–361; DUDEKOVÁ KOVÁČOVÁ, Gabriela. Od opatrovatelky a gazdinej k političke? Volebné právo žien v karikatúre pred prvými všeobecnými voľbami na Slovensku. In HANULA, Matej et al. *Dlhá cesta od monarchie k republike: Zmeny režimov, myslenia a životného štýlu na Slovensku a v strednej Európe od polovice 19. do polovice 20. storočia. Jubileum Dušana Kováča*. Bratislava : Historický ústav SAV; Veda, vydavateľstvo SAV, 2021, pp. 149–176.

In her study, *Gabriela Pošteková* explores the emancipation and public engagement of Catholic women, who were often subject to societal prejudices portraying them as easily influenced by priests. This perception was used to justify their exclusion from political party life in the 1920s, and —not only in Slovakia— ostensibly to protect secular politics from religious interference. Women who identified with the image of loyal, rational Catholics were actively involved in public life; however, their participation consistently conformed to the Church's prescribed gender norms. Their activism centered on protecting family values, morality, while rejecting socialist and secular feminist ideas, which they viewed as threats to both traditional gender roles and Catholic principles.

The transition from liberal and democratic constitutions toward authoritarian regimes in Central Europe further narrowed the already limited space for women's political participation, public engagement and activism within civic associations. Following the model of Nazi Germany—where women were integrated into the structures of the sole ruling party, notably through Nationalsozialistische Frauenschaft (NSF, the National Socialist Women's League) and, for younger girls, Bund deutscher Mädel (BDM, the Nazi League of German Girls)<sup>50</sup>—these regimes sought to centralize control over female civic life. This model enabled the state to dominate existing women's associations and redirect their activities. Similar strategies were subsequently adopted by other authoritarian and nondemocratic governments across Central and Eastern Europe.

In Italy, women were incorporated into the so-called Fasci Femminili (Women's Fascist Groups), particularly after 1935, when membership rose to 750 000.<sup>51</sup> Among rural women, the Sezione Massaie Rurali dei Fasci Femminili (Section for Rural Housewives of the Women's Fascist Groups), active from 1933, aimed to provide moral, technical, and social support.<sup>52</sup> In the context of Italian women's exclusion from most other forms of public activity, these organizations created a space for women's participation, effectively fostering a sense of belonging to the fascist state.

In Nezavisna Država Hrvatska (NDH, the Independent State of Croatia), established after the disintegration of Yugoslavia in 1941, the Ustaša movement encouraged active public involvement by women. However, this engagement was largely limited to voluntary and charitable organizations focused on social work, all tightly controlled by the ruling party.<sup>53</sup> Paradoxically, Croatian women also participated in auxiliary military units<sup>54</sup> and contributed to organizational

50 STEPHENSON, Jill. *The Nazi Organisation of Women*. London : Croom Helm, 1981, pp. 97–129; WAGNER, Leonie. „Hüterinnen der Rasse“ – Frauenorganisationen der NSDAP. In BECKER, Stephanie (ed.) „Und sie werden nicht mehr frei sein ihr ganzes Leben.“ *Funktion und Stellenwert der NSDAP, ihrer Gliederungen und angeschlossenen Verbände im „Dritten Reich“*. Berlin : Lit Verlag, 2012, pp. 249–267; KATER, Michael H. Frauen in der NS-Bewegung. In *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 1983, vol. 31, no. 2, pp. 202–241.

51 BOCKOVÁ 2007, p. 259.

52 WILLSON, Perry R. *Peasant Women and Politics in Fascist Italy: The Massaie Rurali*. London : Routledge, 2002, p. 3.

53 BOKOVOY, Melissa. Croatia. In PASSMORE, Kevin. *Women, gender and fascism in Europe 1919–1945*. Manchester : Manchester University Press, 2003, pp. 116–117.

54 YEOMANS, Rory. *Visions of Annihilation: The Ustasha Regime and the Cultural Politics of Fascism, 1941–1945*. Pittsburg : University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013, pp. 127, 164–165.

work within the party's women's branch, known as Ustaškinja.<sup>55</sup> As in Slovakia, the creation and operation of the Ustaša women's wing involved mainly the wives, sisters, and daughters of prominent regime officials.<sup>56</sup>

Austrian women achieved notable representation within several political parties during the First Republic (1918–1933). The Social Democratic Party, in particular, nominated a comparatively high number of female parliamentary candidates. Olga Rudel-Zeynek, originally from Olomouc, became chairwoman of the Austrian Federal Council (Bundesrat) in 1927 as a representative of the Christian Social Party.<sup>57</sup> However, with the rise of Engelbert Dollfuss's conservative authoritarian regime in 1933, opportunities for women's political organization and civic engagement were severely curtailed. Austrian women could thereafter publicly participate exclusively within the Patriotic Front, the sole legal political party, and only through its various subordinate women's organizations.<sup>58</sup>

All of these organizations shared a fundamental characteristic: their programs emphasized social work, motherhood, caregiving, charity, and self-sacrifice, promoting a return to conservative values that stood in contrast to the ideal of the modern, independent, and emancipated woman.

In her article, *Denisa Nešťáková* explores how, through mass mobilization efforts, the Fascist-Axis Slovak State positioned women both as instruments reinforcing the regime's stance and as active agents promoting its political agenda. She examines the state's attempts to provide alternatives to suppressed feminist movements and sheds light on the complex and often contradictory roles assigned to women.

Slovak politicians attempted to mobilize women on a mass scale only in the autumn of 1940, when within the General Secretariat of the monopolistic Hlinkova slovenská ľudová strana (HSL'S, Hlinka's Slovak People's Party), a separate women's division was established—the Women's Units of HSL'S—which was dedicated exclusively to social, cultural, and educational work.<sup>59</sup>

As an alternative to suffrage and free political participation, the undemocratic and authoritarian regimes offered women only the possibility to engage in organizing and carrying out social and charitable work, as well as informal educational activities, but always under the control of the ruling party and in accordance with its policies.

## The Ideal Woman

In the context of nationalist politics, women were assigned a central role in the biological reproduction of the nation, in shaping the boundaries of ethnic

55 BITUNJAC, Martina. *Verwicklung. Beteiligung. Unrecht. Frauen und die Ustaša-Bewegung*. Berlin : Duncker & Humbolt, 2018.

56 BOKOVOY 2003, p. 117.

57 BADER-ZAAR, Birgitta. Die Demokratisierung des Wahlrechts. In KRIECHBAUMER, Robert – MAIER, Michalea – MESNER, Maria – WOHNOUT, Helmut (eds.) *Die junge Republik. Österreich 1918/19*. Wien : Böhlau, 2018, pp. 101–112.

58 SCHAUNING 2010, pp. 18–34. BRANDHAUER-SCHÖFFMAN 2014, pp. 269–277.

59 SNA, f. Kancelária prezidenta republiky (The Office of the President of the Republic), box 83/101–2A–020, no. 5387/41. Organizačný poriadok Ženského odboru HSL'S (Organizational Statute of the of the HSL'S' Women's Section).

(or national) identity, and in transmitting culture and the ideological reproduction of the collective. Simultaneously, they were expected to embody and preserve ethnic (or national) traits and distinctions.<sup>60</sup> Women were framed as both bearers and teachers of the mother tongue and cultural heritage—an idealized role that resonated across both antifeminist and feminist discourses within the multicultural Habsburg Monarchy and its successor states.

The politicization of womanhood, motherhood, and the family led on one hand, to an expansion of women's opportunities to act and participate in public life through nationalist emancipatory movements, but on the other hand, it reinforced traditional gender roles and expectations. What was seemingly private became politicized in relation to the nation, compelling women in practice to constantly navigate and transgress the normative boundaries of separated spheres.<sup>61</sup>

This conception evolved into a political ideology asserting the “natural” place of women within the family and the household. The sharp separation of gendered spheres (public sphere of politics and work versus private sphere of the domestic life) and the corresponding division of labour became a dominant feature of social discourse well into the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Central to this framework was the ideal of the “angel in the house”—a notion that spread particularly among the upper and middle classes during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, encouraged by developments in natural sciences, medicine, and anthropology.<sup>62</sup> Within this ideology, the woman with her domestic sphere received a grand designation as the “guardian of the family hearth”, or “domestic angel”, precisely because the male-dominated public sphere wielded political authority, social prestige, and economic power.

All conservative and nationalist regimes and movements in East-Central Europe embraced the ideal of the woman as mother and housekeeper.<sup>63</sup> From the perspective of the promoted conservative and Christian ideal of womanhood, female emancipation and feminism were unacceptable, condemned as deviations or derailments from the natural order.<sup>64</sup> The Catholic Church strongly opposed feminism and emancipation, viewing them as “in direct conflict with established Christian principles.”<sup>65</sup> These idealized stereotypes centered on motherhood and domesticity were pervasive in literature, educational materials, awareness-raising publications, political speeches, and the press throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Under authoritarian regimes of the interwar period and Second World War, however, these ideals were further exaggerated and strategically embedded in propaganda rhetoric. The German Nazis regime openly declared that the woman's ideal place was within the family, and her most important mission was bearing children for the fatherland and nation.<sup>66</sup>

60 ANTHIAS – YUVAL-DAVIS 1989, pp. 1–15.

61 DUDEKOVÁ – MANNOVÁ 2006.

62 BOCKOVÁ 2007, pp. 114–125.

63 NEŠŤÁKOVÁ, Denisa. *Be Fruitful and Multiply. Slovakia's Family Planning Under Three Regimes 1918–1965*. Marburg : Verlag Herder-Institut, 2023.

64 O miesto ženy... In *Nová žena*, 1938, vol. 1, no. 49, pp. 4–5.

65 A. K. Zásluhy kresťanstva o povznesenie ženy. In *Kultúra*, 1939, vol. 11, no. 6/8, pp. 161–163.

66 Hitler's Speech to the National Socialist Women's League (8 September 1934). DOMARUSE,



Similarly, Italian sociologist Ferdinand Loffredo, in his 1938 programmatic work *Politica della famiglia* (Family Policy), argued that women, as subordinates to men, should devote themselves to childbirth and family care.<sup>67</sup>

Several historical analyses have highlighted the continuity of antifeminist discourse in Germany, tracing its development from Wilhelm's Kaiserreich through the interwar Weimar Republic to its radicalization and instrumentalization in the service of the Nazi mobilization. Ute Planert characterizes the organized antifeminism of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Germany—particularly expressed through antifeminist associations—as a proto-fascist movement.<sup>68</sup> As **Miloslav Szabó** notes in his contribution to this volume, antisemitism, being marginal political movement in imperial Germany, “used widespread antifeminism for legitimization.”

In fiction and popular media, gender stereotypes frequently intersected with social and ethnic prejudices. The convergence of antisemitism with antifeminism—and their mutual radicalization—is considered a distinctive feature of the German nationalist ideology. Nevertheless, antifeminist discourse was also prevalent among the Austrian middle classes and proletariat. Its intersection with anti-Jewish and misogynistic stereotypes was widely disseminated through popular works, most notably Otto Weininger's bestselling book,<sup>69</sup> first published in Vienna in 1903.<sup>70</sup> Drawing on contemporary fiction and cinema, Miloslav Szabó examines the transfer of the antisemitic and antifeminist stereotypes—particularly those of the “pretty Jewess” and the “degenerate Jew”—from the German linguistic and cultural sphere into Slovak literature in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In his discourse analysis, he explores how images of sexual differences embedded in religious semantics contributed to understanding the historical interconnectedness between antisemitism and antifeminism—two phenomena that have typically been examined separately within the region of East-Central Europe.

## Conclusion

This study shows that antifeminist discourse in East-Central Europe was not just temporary backlash—it was a long-standing part of how modern political systems and movements developed in the region. Across different historical

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Max. (ed.) *Hitler. Reden und Proklamationen 1932–1945: Kommentiert von einem deutschen Zeitgenossen. Vol. 1.* München : Pamminger & Partner Leonberg, 1965, pp. 449–452.

67 RE, Lucia. Fascist Theories of „Woman“ and the Construction of Gender. In PICKERING-IAZZI, Robin (ed.) *Mothers of Invention: Women, Italian Facism, and Culture.* London; Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 1995, pp. 86–87.

68 PLANERT, Ute. Mutter und Volk. Vom Antifeminismus zur völkischen Bewegung und zum Nationalsozialismus. In SCHÖCK-QUINTEROS, Eva – STREIBEN, Christiane (eds.) *„Ihrem Volk verantwortlich“. Frauen der politischen Rechten (1890–1933). Organisationen – Agitationen – Ideologien.* Berlin : Trafo Verlag, 2007, p. 111.

69 LE RIDDER, Jacques. *Der Fal Otto Weininger: Wurzeln des Antifeminismus und Antisemitismus.* Wien; München : Locker Verlag, 1985, pp. 164–166.

70 While it was influential in its time—particularly in early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Vienna—it is now largely regarded as a manifesto of misogyny and antisemitism, rather than a legitimate philosophical treatise. In 1915, a review in *Psychological Bulletin* described the book as “a remarkable record of a paranoiac mind dominated by two obsessions: hatred of women and hatred of Jews,” noting its lack of consistency and its spiteful tone. WOOLLEY, H. T. Review of Sex and character. In *Psychological Bulletin*, 1915, vol. 12, no. 5, pp. 192–193.

periods and political regimes, from empires to fascist governments, ideas about women's "proper" role—as mothers, homemakers, and moral guides—were used to shape national identity, gender relations, social order, and political belonging.

Antifeminist critique has historically targeted not only suffragists and feminists advocating for women's access to education and professional employment; it has also sought to reverse shifts in patriarchal structures brought about by socio-economic modernization and the democratization of society.

The forms of antifeminist discourse ranged from idealized representations of women as mothers and homemakers to biologically determined and religiously grounded stereotypes. Antifeminist narratives were not limited to formal political or religious expression, but—often laden with strong emotional charge—circulated widely through literature, journalism, educational materials, and popular culture. The arguments mobilized within these discourses consistently positioned women's emancipation as a threat to the moral, social, or national order—casting feminism as a foreign or destabilizing force.

The political contexts in which antifeminist discourse operated shaped both its intensity and purpose. Whether used to preserve conservative visions of family and society or to legitimize fascist and racial ideologies, antifeminism functioned as a tool of boundary-making; defining who counted as a legitimate political and moral subject and who did not. In this way, antifeminism was not just a marginal counter-current, but a constitutive element of modern nation-building and citizenship regimes.

Like other contributions in this issue, this study highlights the persistence, adaptation, and resurgence of antifeminist arguments and strategies in discourses across different regimes—imperial, interwar democratic, authoritarian—offering a rich terrain for further comparative analysis.