

The Women's International Democratic Federation, the Global South and the Cold War: Defending the Rights of Women of the Whole World? By Yulia Gradskova. Abingdon: Routledge, 2021. 212 pp.

In her article published in 2010, historian Francisca de Haan made an important historiographical intervention, arguing that the work of the “leftist feminist” organizations is left unknown in Western historiography due to still prevalent Cold War legacies.¹ To demonstrate her point, she referred to the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF), an international leftist organization dedicated to peace, women's rights, anti-colonialism, and anti-racism. After this, scholarship on the work of the WIDF began to flourish, gradually providing the WIDF with its rightful place in the historiography of women's history. This position is now assertively confirmed through Yulia Gradskova's new book *The Women's International Democratic Federation, the Global South, and the Cold War*.

Yulia Gradskova explores the work and development of the Women's International Democratic Federation in the period between 1955- and 1985. She focuses on the work for, and with, women from the countries of the Global South—Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Working within the frameworks of transnational history and postcolonial feminist studies, Gradskova critically reviews the internal and external dynamics of the WIDF, exploring the discussions, conflicts, and broad network of collaboration that shaped this organization.

Relying on the interplay between micro and macro history, Gradskova examines both development of the WIDF, and personal accounts of this development. She draws her arguments from a variety of primary sources, most of which are held in the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF). Following Chiara Bonfiglioli's classification, Gradskova describes sources as external—materials aimed at external readers, and internal, materials circulated among the members of the organization. To challenge the selective nature of the external sources—public speeches, periodical publications, and bulletins), Gradskova offers a close reading of the sources, often going against the grain. This is well illustrated through her analysis of the changing discourse of the organization amidst the changes emerging from the post-1945 political, economic, and social developments in the international order. The internal

1 De Haan, Francisca, “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*, 19, no. 4 (2010): 547–73. doi: 09612025.2010.502399

documents, such as protocols and minutes of congresses and meetings, and correspondence among the members, deepen her analysis, offering revealing insights into the inner life of the WIDF.

Divided into nine well-structured thematic chapters, this monograph navigates readers through the most dynamic period in the history of the WIDF. Chapter One serves a twofold purpose: it outlines the history of the WIDF, situating it in the historiography of the transnational women's movements. Building on de Haan's conclusion concerning the absence of the history of the WIDF in the historiography of women's movements, Gradskova further notes that, interestingly, the history of the WIDF was also neglected in the historiography of women's movements written in state-socialist countries. Nonetheless, she highlights a noticeable growth in scholarship related to the WIDF, with new perspectives offered by authors such as Katherine McGregor, Pieper Mooney, and Kristen Ghodsee—to name a few. Lastly, Gradskova argues that the roles of the women from the Global South are only just starting to be explored, and a special issue of the *International Review of Social History* dedicated to Women's Rights and Global Socialism (and including three articles on the work of the WIDF, one by Gradskova), proves her point.

In the second and third chapters, Gradskova takes her readers through the early development of the WIDF, its ideology, and its activities. She addresses two enduring assumptions (phrased as accusatory questions) concerning the WIDF: was WIDF a Soviet pawn used for foreign policy goals, and was WIDF a purely communist organization? Analyzing internal documents exchanged between the Committee of Soviet Women (CSW) and its representatives at the WIDF, Gradskova skillfully provides an answer to the first assumption, showing that even though the Soviet Center did try to influence the work and development of the WIDF, playing an important role for the organization, the WIDF still operated under its own steam. This was made possible through the work of individual members of the WIDF, who forthrightly challenged WIDF's methods and tactics. Gradskova also persuasively addresses the second assumption: using numerous examples, she shows that the WIDF was not a homogenous communist organization but an organization consisting of activists of different political affiliations, whose activism and ideas shaped the organization's trajectory.

While the book has a very clear structure, Chapters Three and five create a comprehensive whole, interrupted, unfortunately, by Chapter Four. While Chapter Four discusses the ideology of the WIDF, built on the idea of struggle for peace and protection of mothers and children, Chapter Five argues that

WIDF based its view on women's rights on the state-socialist and, especially, the Soviet model. As Gradskova demonstrates, the Soviet model of emancipation was most often propagated through the images of the representatives of the Soviet Central Asian Republic, which functioned as tools with which to legitimize the success of the state-socialist program for women and to attract women activists from the Global South. This goal was also achieved through organized visits of the representatives of the Global South to the Soviet Union. This led to the establishment of a broad, transnational network of contacts and friendships among the activists which, it could be argued, were among the most important achievements of the WIDF.

Chapters Four and Six are intrinsically connected. The former discusses how the problems of women from the Global South were discussed within the WIDF, and the latter focuses on the role women of the Global South played in the organization. Chapter Six deserves special consideration, as it stands out as one of the most exhilarating chapters of the book. First, it demonstrates how WIDF, as a transnational organization, reacted to the strikingly changing world during the years of independence struggles and decolonization. Second, it serves as proof of the importance of the agency of individual activists for the development of the organization. Using numerous examples, Gradskova describes how women from the Global South called for structural and organizational changes that would make the WIDF more inclusive, less white, and more prepared to struggle with the problems encountered by women from newly independent countries.

The agency of individual activists is a topic further explored in Chapter Seven, in which, through the lens of microhistory, Gradskova analyses biographies of prominent WIDF activists: Fanny Edelman, Fatima Ahmed Ibrahim, Salwa Zayadeen, and Funmilayo Ransome Kuti. By approaching the subject from this perspective, Gradskova allows her readers to see how individual activists experienced and contributed to the conversations on women's rights amidst political and social transformations of the postwar world. The following chapter extends this discussion to the human rights era of the 1970s and 1980s, showing how the rise of the radical feminist movement in the West influenced the expansion of the activities of the WIDF towards the Global South. The last chapter offers a summary of Gradskova's conclusions concerning the history and heritage of the WIDF.

Overall, what distinguishes Yulia Gradskova's book is her ability to tell a nuanced history of an organization, showing that WIDF was not a monolithic

organization existing in a vacuum but a transnational organization shaped by the changing political, economic, social, and even geographical landscapes of the postwar world, and the activist practices of its members. Although aimed at an audience with previous knowledge of the topic, this book represents a long-awaited examination of transnational left women's activism. It thus constitutes a substantial contribution to the historiography of women's history. Finally, given the wealth of information it contains, the variety of thought-provoking perspectives from which it approaches its subject, and its interdisciplinary character, this book will serve as an excellent resource in educational environments and will spark new discussions and debates on this important topic.

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