

*Solidarity with Ukraine, or:
why East-West still Matters to Feminism*

*Agnieszka Graff**

Remember March? Remember April? Even in May, it was still going on – that generosity and heartfelt solidarity with refugees. That frenzy of help. Some spoke of brotherhood, but in fact, it was mostly sisterhood. Women opening their homes to women who had had to abandon theirs. The effort was enormous, tireless, and almost entirely home-made, with very little help coming from the Polish state or international organizations. Thousands of people (most of us women) were tending to the needs of the hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians (most of them women with kids) who were crossing our border fleeing the war. People were bringing food and clothing, welcoming strangers into their homes, providing transport, healthcare, employment, psychological and legal aid. Feminist groups were an important part of this spontaneously growing network. Polish Women’s Strike, for example, transformed itself into an aid organization. I observed it with wonder, asking myself what had happened to painful history (the Wołyń massacre, Poland’s colonialism in the East). What made it possible, this sudden carnival bringing Poles and Ukrainians together?

Edit: I wasn’t just an observer, I was part of this effort, sharing in the ecstatic sense of doing something that mattered. And believe me, I had never experienced anything like it. For several weeks I believed myself to be part of a deeply transformed society – my deeply divided nation, so deeply xenophobic, racist, and sexist, so hostile to strangers, had somehow remembered that hospitality was supposed to be our core virtue. People were working together, despite their differences. Acting in unison, in a kind of prolonged state of elation. Sharing funds, goods, know-how and information, helping each other help others. Learning Ukrainian. Teaching Polish to our guests. We were all driven by profound empathy. Imagining what it felt like to be a Ukrainian woman on the

* Agnieszka Graff is a Polish scholar, feminist activist and public intellectual. She teaches at the American Studies Center, University of Warsaw, Poland. Her most recent book is *Anti-gender Politics in the Populist Moment*, co-authored by Elżbieta Korolczuk (Routledge, 2021). Her articles have appeared in *Public Culture*, *Feminist Studies*, *Signs*, *East European Politics and Societies* and *Journal of Modern European History*.

run from the war. Feeling her pain, her fear, her desperation. An image that stands out in my memory – I think it went viral for good reason – is that of strollers left by Polish mothers for Ukrainian mothers on that train platform in Przemyśl.

The phenomenon of Poland's aid to Ukrainian war refugees was observed by Western journalists and scholars with amazement, awe, but also the knowledge that it would not last forever¹. And of course, it did not. As I write these words in October 2022, it is increasingly difficult to get people to contribute money, open up their homes, or even devote some time to a Ukrainian refugee. There is plenty of hostile messaging on social media, motivated by Polish nationalism and, quite likely, produced by Russian trolls. As a state, Poland stands firmly by Ukraine's side, but the carnival is over.

Seven months into the war, I look back on the early outburst of solidarity with more skepticism. How much of it was *feminist* solidarity? How much of it was *women* helping *women*, especially *mothers* helping *mothers*? And how much of it was regional, post-soviet solidarity – *Poles* helping *Ukrainians* out of a suddenly clear and deeply terrifying realization that Russia is close, very close indeed. Yes, we are in this together. Poland may be the next target of Putin's genocidal war, while the West may not be there to help us, NATO and EU membership notwithstanding. In other words, while moral motivations were clearly there, and feminist/maternal ones could be seen here and there, there is also the hard truth of geography: the common experience of Russian imperialism. This is a sobering realization. In the face of this ruthless expansionist, colonial war waged by Putin, we, Eastern Europeans are in a situation that brings us together, while distancing us from the West. We know Russia, they do not. Some social psychologists speculated that a peculiar "cultural intimacy" exists between our nations, binds us together. This is how they explained the emotion behind the humanitarian effort. Well, yes and no. I do love the sound of Ukrainian language, I do feel a peculiar cultural kinship with Ukrainians, especially women. But the

¹ For an excellent essay on the subject, see: Caitlin Dickerson, 'YOU CANNOT HOST GUESTS FOREVER' How long will Polish solidarity with Ukrainian refugees last? <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/06/ukraine-refugees-warsaw-polish-border/629630/>. For an insightful commentary by American anthropologist who did research on the border in during the humanitarian crisis, see: Natalie Wood and Elizabeth Cullen Dunn, „Imagining Otherwise with Institutions: An Interview with Elizabeth Cullen Dunn on Ukrainian Sovereignty and the New Face of Humanitarian Aid” American Ethnologist website, 6 June 2022: <https://americanethnologist.org/features/interviews/imagining-otherwise-with-institutions>.

intimacy is at least in part a matter of shared fear, shared memory of suffering at the hands of what we know to be an Evil Empire. Westerners, for the most part, do not know this. They warn against “escalation”, they critique “Russia-phobia”, they suggest negotiations, they even claim news of genocide is exaggerated. One more thing Polish women have shared with our Ukrainian sisters is profound disappointment when trying to talk to Western feminists about their obligations in the face of this war.

“Please use your privilege to put political pressure on Western governments to provide Ukraine with more weapons to defend ourselves!”— this appeal to Western feminists was made by Iryna Zamuruieva, Ukrainian artist, geographer and feminist, during the online solidarity event organized by Judith Butler. She also suggested – and I wonder, listening to her talk again, if her tone was meant to sound ironic – that this is an opportunity to build a truly “intersectional feminism.” The response to such please has been luke-warm at best. “Intersectionality”, as Western feminists seem to understand it, does not include Eastern Europe. It’s not that they do not care about war-crimes in Ukraine. They do, for a brief moment. They are sad about the war rapes, the torture, the bombings. But that moment is short and inconsequential, as there are so many more urgent matters – and other wars, on other continents – to tend to. There is also the general feminist commitment to “peace”, the dislike of “militarism”, which makes them hesitate or outright refuse to donate money – or a statement of support – to the cause of Ukrainian self-defense. I am sure this indifference is crushing if you are Ukrainian. If you are Polish, it is infuriating, a bitter disappointment. I will let Latvians, Lithuanians, Hungarians and Czechs speak for themselves, but I suspect their responses are similar. To be from Eastern Europe is to be irrelevant.

I was part of such a clash of perspectives in the Spring of 2022 at the AtGender Conference in Milan, Italy. It is the largest academic feminist academic conference in Europe, a forum where all European feminists are supposed to feel at home. Yet, there was not a single mention of the War on the AtGender website. There were no Ukrainian feminists among the invited speakers. In fact, one of the keynotes, Jasbir Puar, suggested in her lecture that Ukraine should not be supported, because NATO is instrumentalizing LGBTQ rights in its propaganda. Eastern Europeans – notably, Tereza Hendl – were the only ones to react to this with protests. Jasbir later apologized, but the apology was not part of the conference recording. A statement of solidarity was promised, but never materialized.

The Milan conference is merely an example. We must face the pattern and understand its meaning. We must realize the dreadful, embarrassing fact: important feminist institutions in Western Europe and the US not only failed to

“use their privilege” in the way suggested by Iryna Zamuruieva, but have exerted pressure in the opposite direction, joining the left in its utter blindness to the reality of Putin’s war on Ukraine and Russian imperialism in general. Early in May, *Emma*, an important German feminist magazine, issued a public statement signed by left-wing intellectuals, which came close to blaming Ukraine and NATO for the War:

“We warn against a twofold error: Firstly, that the responsibility for the danger of an escalation to a nuclear conflict concerns only the original aggressor and not also those who, with their eyes open, provide him with a motive to act in a possibly criminal manner. And secondly, that the decision on the moral responsibility of the further “cost” in human lives among the Ukrainian civilian population falls exclusively within the competence of their government. Morally binding norms are universal in nature.”²

In Italy, feminists did not depart from the general left position on the war exemplified by the March 5, a cease-fire demonstration in Rome, where the following breathtakingly naive appeal was read:

“We must stop the war in Ukraine. We must stop all wars in the world. We condemn the aggression and war unleashed by Russia in Ukraine. We want a ceasefire; we demand the withdrawal of troops. We need UN action that with authority and legitimacy leads the negotiations between the parties. We call for a policy of disarmament and active neutrality. From Italy and Europe must come political and negotiating solutions.”³

Shaken by this, I checked the main feminist websites in the US – The Feminist Majority Foundation, Ms., Jezebel, Signs. To my dismay I found them coolly detached from the subject. This was soon after the Bucha Massacre; news of war-rapes was plentiful in mainstream media, but US feminists had their eyes focused elsewhere. They seemed interested in the fate of women in Afganistan, Syria, parts of Africa, but NOT in Ukraine. But mostly, they seemed interested in themselves.

² <https://www.emma.de/artikel/open-letter-chancellor-olaf-scholz-339499>

³ For an informative and thoughtful account of the Italian left’s response to the war, see: Piero Maestri, “The Italian Left and the War in Ukraine”, *International Viewpoint*, 14 August 2022.
<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article7776>

For complex reasons which are increasingly under scrutiny by scholars from the region, Eastern Europe is of little interest to Western feminists.⁴ As a scholar, I saw how slow they were in developing an interest in anti-gender movements, and I wondered why. It took me some time to grasp that the East-West divide was still in place. The first victories of anti-gender campaigns seemed to occur to the east of what used to be East Germany, so the entire problem was assumed to be one of Central and Eastern Europe. The fact that Russian oligarchs were clearly involved was of little interest to anyone outside a small circle of scholars. It all became urgent only when it became evident that anti-genderism is spreading in Spain, Italy, and France.

So where is Ukraine, from this perspective? It is not really part of Europe, and neither is it part of the postcolonial space, which became interesting when “intersectionality” became an obligatory part of Western feminism. This is why the simple request: “Get us weapons, help us defend ourselves” met with such a limited response. To put it bluntly, the East is not considered deserving of military aid. Russian colonialism, Russian imperialism – well, such things are not on transnational feminism’s radar screen. They are an inconvenience a worldview in which “colonial” and “imperial” are more or less synonyms of “American.” Sadly, this is the worldview which Western feminism continues to share with the Western left. Ewa Majewska stated in the online event that Russia’s genocidal war against Ukraine calls for a wholesale rethinking of the feminist position regarding war and peace. True enough. But what also needs rethinking is intersectionality, colonialism, imperialism, and the meaning of the East-West divide. Transnational feminism clearly needs to update its map of the world.

⁴ For an interesting set of articles on the topic see: *Borderlands in European Gender Studies Beyond the East–West Frontier*, edited by Teresa Kulawik and Zhanna Kravchenko (Routledge, 2020), especially “Introduction: European Borderlands and Topographies of Transnational Feminism” by *Teresa Kulawik*.