

A book made of dynamite

‘Dynamite was perfect for the corset’ – said Aleksandra Pilsudska, what became the hidden motto of this book. In fact, the notions of ‘dynamite’ and ‘corset’ should, perhaps, characterize the way we think about history and women. And about their great absence in the so-called great History. And also, about ‘herstory’, which is an attempt to restore the memory of women excluded from collective memory. Before Aleksandra Pilsudska became the wife of one of the most prominent leaders of the Polish state created in 1918 after more than a century of Poland’s non-existence, she dealt with political terrorism. And while the terrorism should be described as both, patriotic and feminist – the actions of such female activists as those women were, today, and especially today, are a great challenge for us.

Katarzyna Dworaczyk not only shows the manner in which the unfavorable to women discourse had fashioned ‘civilization delay’ throughout the centuries. Being a woman, in the historical sense, is associated with a great deal of humiliation and violence. And yet, despite this, women fought for their rights with great successes. Their voice, consistently silenced by culture, kept breaking through. Women were always part of the history but they simply had no representation. They were present behind the scenes. In the feminist anthropology, we often speak of the ‘white ink’, which is a symbol of white spots in the history. The most popular history that focused on male violence and that devoid of women. But it also represents a kind of invisible trace which demands reconstructing. The white color refers to the metaphor of ‘maternal milk’ which may symbolize the exploitation of the reproductive (or sexual) role of a woman, unpaid care or emotional work for the good of the family or community. Each era generated its own concept of an ideal woman, which was a repressive model negating the actual experiences of women. One thing, however, remains common – if there is such a thing as the ‘eternal feminine’, the theme so much adored by the era of fin de siècle, it means not so much sexual and universal essence of a woman, invented based on male needs and projections, as a set of methods of diminishing and weakening intellectual, causative and creative capacities of women.

We may no longer have corsets but we still need dynamite – and that is what this book is meant to be! Volumes have been written on the subject of female inferiority. The 20th century and the development of the feminist concept, women's liberation movement understood as social movement, as well as imagination movement, have also brought a reflection, which at an accelerated pace makes up for the shortcomings of the past. We cannot think of the modern age without mentioning the concept of emancipation, including this of women. What was this 19th century trend towards politics, spread by Polish women over the whole Europe? What did a woman have to do to study philosophy or to be able to study at all? What tricks allowed women to become soldiers? Why was it so hard, even for suffragettes, to talk about female sexuality? Who was Justyna Budzińska-Tylicka or who were Tułodzieckie sisters? They should teach us all about it at school. The book is an extremely persuasive and light attempt to face the great absence of women in the history – serious matters are narrated in a short, concise manner. It can be read like calendar cards. What's exploited here is the sense of contingency, characteristic of the traditionally understood female activities (let us recall the short forms of the 19th century psychological novel written by the great female writers in a living room, during breaks, when there was nobody there), to humorously deal with myths. Our corsets still exist. They are just invisible now. Only this explosive book can blow them up – let's never forget to actively practice herstory then!

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