

INTRODUCTION

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In 1958, the famous ‘Kitchen Debate’ between Richard Nixon and Nikita Khrushchev showcased two opposing positions on the ‘woman question’, emerging from the technological competition between the two superpowers (Bucur 2021: 10). While Americans, as argued by Nixon, aimed to simplify life for women, Khrushchev rejected ‘the capitalist attitude towards women’ (Hamilton and Phillips 2014: 47). However, despite Khrushchev’s optimism and the authorities’ promises to expand the service system, the socialist alternative to investing in the development of home appliances industry, Soviet women found themselves bearing the double burden of compulsory employment and household chores. Thus, the technology-focused ‘Kitchen Debate’ emerges as one of the central issues in the discussion of women’s conditions at the time, serving as an illustration of the intersection between material culture studies and gender history.

Material culture studies is a broad approach whose complexity is not easy to encapsulate in a single definition. In his influential work “Mind and Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method”, Jules David Prown defines material culture as “the study through artifacts of the beliefs –values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions– of a particular community or society at a given time” (Prown 1982). The singularity of the material culture approach, according to Prown, lies in “its use of objects as primary data”. Focusing on the cultural aspect of material culture research, Prown’s definition situates material culture studies within the realms of cultural history and cultural anthropology. On the other hand, the editorial of the first issue of the *Journal of Material Culture* –providing an interdisciplinary forum for theoretical discussions and empirical inquiries into material culture research– argues the following:

The study of material culture can be most broadly defined as the investigation of the relationship between people and things irrespective of time and space. The perspective adopted may be global or local, concerned with the past or the present, or the mediation between the two (Miller and Tilley 1996: 5).

In recent decades, material culture studies have become a solid forum of interdisciplinary research in which scholars from various disciplines, including anthropologists, archaeologists, geographers, sociologists, and historians, engage in the study of the relationship between people and objects as well as the social relations between people through objects. Material culture research reminds us that objects should not be taken for granted. Although material things can be peripheral to our vision, we often do not “see” them, they do “act” upon us in a variety of ways. Objects construct, maintain, reinforce, and transform people’s identities (Miller and Tilley 1996). As anthropologist Daniel Miller has put it “the things that people make, make people” (Miller 2005: 38).

For cultural and social historians, in particular, objects are valuable sources that allow us to examine people’s cultural preferences and beliefs, as well as the social world in which people interact with each other through objects. Moreover, in historical contexts where written sources are lacking, objects often serve as valuable alternative materials to study the past of people who did not leave any written evidence of their experiences. This is especially relevant for the histories of the colonized, subaltern, and other marginalized groups.

On the other hand, the material culture lens may also provide a new way of approaching otherwise well-documented historical events and producing new knowledge about them. For example, historian Brandon Schechter has recently proposed a refreshing account of the Red Army in the Second World War through soldiers’ belongings –ranging from arms to spades and spoons– thereby demonstrating how objects transformed Soviet citizens into soldiers (Schechter 2019). Some recent scholarship on Soviet and East-Central European contexts also relied on objects as significant data when studying war, mass violence, and displacement (Waligórska et al. 2023, Rindzevičiūtė 2018, Koustova 2017). However, it is primarily the study of everyday life under state socialism and communism –with its focus on consumer practices, fashion, architecture, and domestic spaces, to name but a few– that has been an object of acute interest among historians of East – Central Europe, providing new ways to explore socialist and Soviet subjectivities, identities, and experiences (Fehérváry 2013, Reid and Corwley 2000, Bren and Neuburger 2012).

The history of gender is the second theoretical and historiographical context in which this special issue is inscribed. According to Joan Scott, gender is “a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes” and can be defined as “a primary way of signifying relationships of power” (Scott 1986: 1067). Scott was the first to introduce gender as “a useful category of historical analysis” in the late 1980s (Scott 1986). This introduction was a critical response to “women’s history” or “herstory” (Morgan 1970: XXXVI), a field that had evolved in the West since the late 1960s (Lerner 2005). Gender theory subsequently underwent further expansion through the contributions of important theorists such as Judith Butler who conceptualized gender as a dynamic cultural performance (Butler 1990).

The region of Central and Eastern Europe, according to Maria Bucur, “has been the object of less interest in gender analysis than other parts of the world” (Bucur 2021). The scholarly examination of gender dynamics within the region, conducted by both domestic and international scholars, finds its origins in the post-Cold War period following the fall of the Berlin Wall in the late 1980s. This era witnessed the emergence of the first academic investigations into women’s roles and subsequent gender studies. Early scholars regarded the socialist state as a centralized and monolithic structure, attributing it with the imposition of gender roles and the perceived absence of agency for women. The establishment of *Aspasia*, the International Yearbook of Central, Eastern, and Southeastern European Women’s and Gender History, represented a notable turning point, signifying the decision to center attention on the region and delve into both its internal and external dynamics. In the last two decades, a body of scholarly literature has emerged, dedicated to the examination of “state feminism” beyond “Cold War narratives” (Krylova 2021) and the scrutiny of women’s agency within the socialist contexts (Daskalova 2007, Popa 2009, de Haan 2010, Ghodsee 2012, Grabowska 2017).

While research on gender in Central and Eastern Europe has received considerable scholarly attention in recent years, the combination of theoretical frameworks from gender studies and material culture remains largely underexplored. Scholarship on consumerism in Eastern bloc countries has studied gendered patterns of customary activities and the symbolism of material things, including fashion (Bartlett 2010, Zalewska 2017). Discussions about the relationship between war and gendered corporeality in Eastern Europe’s violent 20th century have gained substantial attention, particularly by Holocaust historians examining sexual and sexualized violence against Jewish women (Ephgrave 2016, Mühlhäuser 2017) and other gendered bodily experiences in the context of genocidal violence (Von Kellenbach 1999). Additionally, contemporary scholarship has delved into issues related to corporeality and gender,

examining topics such as birthing practices, abortion techniques, and the utilization of contraception (Randall 2011, Hrešanova and Michaels 2018, Nakachi 2016 and 2020). Finally, gender played a central role in the (re)construction of collective national identities during a series of Yugoslav wars, prompting scholars to explore the gendered bodily experiences of these conflicts (Hayden 2000, Helms 2012 and 2013, Žarkov 2007).

This special issue grew out of the International Interdisciplinary Conference ‘Gender and Materiality in Central and Eastern Europe in the 20th century’, held at Sciences Po in Paris in 2021. The aim of the conference as well as the special issue is to contribute to gender research in the Central and East European contexts from the perspective of material culture studies. Although not all contributions use objects as their “primary data”, all explore the complex interplay between materiality and gender. Some articles focus more directly on the gendered body, examining the body as a particular kind of “material object” (Sidorevich). Several articles in the issue focus on (post)socialist and Soviet objects –whether they be underwear, typewriters, or domestic appliances– as they examine gender regimes and social relations in East-Central European societies during a chosen period (Mead, Miernecka, Žimbrek and Horvat, Chmielewska). What links all the articles of this issue together is their shared gender-sensitive focus on the materiality of individual as well as collective practices and experiences of state socialism and communism in 20th century Eastern and Central Europe. While contemplating various kinds of objects, the authors make novel contributions to the histories of everyday life and gender relations under state socialism and communism.

The first article is authored by **Ivana Mihaela Žimbrek** and **Lea Horvat** who trace the evolution of Yugoslav kitchen design from the early 1950s to the early 1970s, highlighting its emergence within the context of home economies and women’s organizations before transitioning to mass production and commercialization. The authors argue that this transformation, rooted in economic, social, and artistic changes, reflects efforts in standardization and modernization driven by Yugoslav women’s professional activities in architecture, design, and home economics.

Anna Sidorevich analyzes the mistreatment of women during childbirth and abortion in the late Soviet Union. Drawing on *samizdat* and *tamizdat* publications from the Leningrad independent women’s movement, this article situates the feminists’ concerns in the political and discursive context of the late 1970s and early 1980s, offering insights into factors contributing to the persistence of women’s mistreatment within the Soviet healthcare system, despite official claims of continuous improvement in women’s and children’s conditions.

Julia Mead delves into a dedicated Czech hobbyist community preserving a collection of socialist-era domestic appliances, such as televisions, radios, refrigerators, and washing machines. The article explores the history of these objects, their acquisition by collectors, and their role in shaping the Czechoslovak socialist gender regime. Notably, being well-suited for repair and renovation and requiring regular maintenance, provided men who took care of them with intimate practical knowledge of even the most feminized machines. This article offers an additional message: in the context of growing electronic waste, the durability and repairability of socialist appliances offer valuable lessons for contemporary states.

Marta Chmielewska explores Poland's transition from socialism to capitalism by examining shifts in the production and advertising of underwear. Drawing on oral history, archival research, and press analysis, the study investigates how Poland's integration into the global capitalist system after 1989 influenced sexualization of its culture.

Martyna Miernecka investigates the interplay between socialist institutions promoting creative work and the history of typewriters in Central and Eastern Europe. Focusing on the Obory house near Warsaw, the article reflects on the complex situation of women in Poland during the 1970s, influenced by both patriarchal gender roles and the communist promise of equality. Using oral history and interviews with translators who lived in the Obory community, the study traces the institutionalization and domestication of women's work, encompassing writing and unpaid domestic duties.

As the organizers of the mentioned conference, we were proud that **Kristen Ghodsee** joined us in Paris as a keynote speaker. In the "Open Fora" section, we included her insightful lecture entitled "Revenge of the tampon: Gender and materialisms (new and old) in the 20th century Central and Eastern Europe".

This special issue also contains an **interview with researchers** gathered on the *Cartography of Resistance* project. This project focuses on the communist underground networks established in the city of Zagreb (the capital of Croatia, then Independent State of Croatia) for the purpose of resistance to the fascist Ustasha authorities during the Second World War. They shared some information about their findings, which were published in an edited volume also entitled *Cartography of Resistance* [Kartografija otpora: Zagreb 1941-1945], which is only available in Croatian language.

In the "Stop on Archives" section, **Iva Jelušić** shared some of her findings about songbooks and the importance of singing for members of the Partisan antifascist resistance on the territory of Yugoslavia during World War II.

In conclusion, this issue aims to offer a multifaceted view of the intersection between material culture studies and gender history in the region of Central and Eastern Europe during the 20th century. Whether tracing the evolution of Yugoslav kitchen designs, analyzing the role of domestic appliances in the Czechoslovak socialist gender order, or examining the transformation of women's underwear in the context of the transition from socialism to capitalism in Poland, each study sheds light on the intricate relationship between materiality and gender roles. Together, the contributions in this issue, while drawing on the analysis of materiality, strive to provide a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of gender-based experiences under state socialism and communism in Central and Eastern Europe.

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