

## WAYS OF LOOKING AT NATIONALISM: A LIMITED HISTORIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY AND DEMONSTRATIVE EXEGESIS

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### ABSTRACT

This essay is constructed of two parts: the first is a historiographical sketch of several theories concerning nationalism and gender; the second part puts some of these theories into practice in interpreting an article from a *fin-de-siècle* Polish illustrated weekly magazine.

### INTRODUCTION

How should the historian approach a historical document? Of course, she or he should know as much as possible about the context in which it was produced in order to interpret it adequately. This could probably go without saying. Yet also important in interpreting the past is a familiarity with current theoretical conceptions that, creatively and thoughtfully applied, give the past meaning and allow the historian to think about the source in more universally applicable ways.

This essay explores issues of nationalism and gender, history and historical interpretation. In particular, it illuminates the ways that theoretical constructions of nationalism, defined by critics and thinkers in a number of academic disciplines, can affect the way a historian reads a historical document. The first part of the paper is a selective historiographical essay on recent theories on nationalism, with an emphasis on theories that incorporate discursive and/or gender models. In the second part of the paper I break from the narrative to weave another intertextual dialogue, this time between

Mary Condren's theory on gender and sacrifice and a primary source document from the *Tygodnik Ilustrowany*, written during the period of the 1905 Revolution in Russia and Russian Poland. I hope this exercise will demonstrate the benefits and potential dangers of a well-stocked theoretical toolbox for interpreting documents that seem best suited to a question of nationalism. In selecting suitable models for interpreting my source, what I do here will not differ dramatically from what historians presumably do in the first place, only I will allow myself to be more self-reflective in forcing myself to demonstrate the genealogy of my ideas in interpreting the source. As such, I hope this exercise will also cast light on the process of historical interpretation and the construction of historical and theoretical narratives.

THEORIES ON NATIONALISM: FROM MODERNIZATION THEORY TO  
DISCURSIVE PRACTICE

In the past twenty years, scholarly work on nations and nationalism has proliferated exponentially in the academic community. While some of this work is largely descriptive (Seton-Watson 1977; Hobsbawm 1991), quite a few of the publications on nationalism have attempted to develop theories on the origins of nationalism or explain its role as a transnational system of identity. The proliferation of theories on nationalism is shaped by our present interest in identity politics, the resurfacing of nationalism in an era of increasing globalization, and, as Eric Hobsbawm has hopefully suggested, the propensity to see things most clearly when they are already in decline.<sup>1</sup> It is also due in part, I think, to the powerful theories of nationalism generated in the early 1980s. Benedict Anderson and Ernest Gellner — whose works were both first published in 1983 — created theories of nationalism, which, like most good theories, have given scholars a paradigm to employ,

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<sup>1</sup> E. Hobsbawm, "Nationalism in the Late Twentieth Century", in: Omar Dahbour and Micheline R. Ishay (eds.), *The Nationalism Reader*, Humanities Press: New Jersey 1995, p. 370. It may seem odd to talk of the decline of nationalism and its resurfacing in the same sentence, as I did above. Liah Greenfeld disagrees with anyone who believes that nationalism is on the wane. See L. Greenfeld, "Transcending the Nation's Worth", in: C. Velez (ed.), *The Worth of Nations*, The University Professors: Boston 1994. Even if Greenfeld is probably right, I think it is still a valid observation that the relative maturity of nationalism, at least, has made it easier to study. Lest we become too confident in our present ability to interpret nationalism, however, it is always humbling to read the brilliant "vivisection" of the nation by Ernest Renan, written in its youth (1882).

refine, and quite often, debunk.<sup>2</sup> Anderson, in particular, informed the debate on nationalism by identifying the importance of language, symbols and collective imagination in shaping modern understandings of national identity. His eminently quotable concept of the nation as an “imagined community” seems to appear in every work on nationalism since the book’s publication. Anderson took from anthropology the decision to look for the “cultural roots” of national identity in religion and other premodern forms of identity.<sup>3</sup> He suggested that the advent of new conceptions of time — manifest in novels and newspapers — enabled the creation of communities of people who could see themselves as parts of a first person plural, without ever knowing each other personally. Imagined communities of national proportion would be impossible without modern forms of communication.

Like Anderson, Ernest Gellner connected nationalism with modernity. For Gellner, nationalism results from the broadening of high culture that accompanies industrialization. Gellner defines nationalism politically, as the doctrine that a nation should rule itself. He asserts that neither the will to form a group nor shared culture alone can qualify as nationalism; it is only with industrialization and the concomitant standardization of high culture that “men will to be politically united with those (...) who share their culture.”<sup>4</sup> Anderson’s concept of “print capitalism,” in which the community is disseminated and collectively imagined through the press, likewise expresses this phenomenon. For both theorists, nationalism is a modern system of identity, defined and created from above. As Gellner put it: “nationalism is, essentially, the general imposition of high culture on society” — even if it claims to be otherwise.<sup>5</sup>

Anthony Smith and other scholars oppose the modernization theory of nationalism, stressing the premodern or ethnic bases of nations.<sup>6</sup> But recent scholarship on identity negotiation, influenced by postmodernist

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<sup>2</sup> B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso: New York 1983, 1991; E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, Basil Blackwell, London 1983. It is unusual to find an article on nationalism that does not mention either or both of these works.

<sup>3</sup> B. Anderson, *op. cit.*, pp. 8–36.

<sup>4</sup> E. Gellner, *op. cit.*, pp. 53–55. (More on Gellner’s gendered language later.)

<sup>5</sup> E. Gellner, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

<sup>6</sup> See A. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, Basil Blackwell: Oxford–New York 1986; *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, E.J. Brill: New York 1992. Smith’s newest book, *Nationalism and Modernism: a Critical Survey of Recent Theories of Nations and Nationalism*, Routledge: New York 1998, looks to be an interesting take on the issues I am addressing here.

conceptions from literary criticism and anthropology, denies this binary opposition. The debate between “primordialists,” who believe that national identity pre-existed modernity, and “instrumentalists,” who see nationalism as the product of modern elites, is according to Prasenjit Duara, a moot argument. Duara posits, not surprisingly, a postmodernist solution: nationalism is hegemonic, a “plurality of sources of identifications in society,” which constantly negotiate with each other in defining and redefining the nation. National identity may be invented, but it usually represents an adaptation of pre-existent forms of identification. Neither ethnicist nor modernist interpretations of the nation can explain its historical development.<sup>7</sup> Kathryn Manzo says essentially the same thing, though with emphasis on the creation and maintenance of boundaries:

Nationalism involves a range of dispersed practices through which boundaries are created and maintained. Nationalism is a scriptural performance, one that constitutes national identity in opposition to alien difference. The question of whether the nation creates nationalism [Smith] or vice versa [Gellner, Hobsbawm] is unanswerable, just as the question of whether ‘we’ precede ‘they’ does not permit an answer...

Manzo opposes modernization theory because it perpetuates colonial dichotomies such as “civilized/barbaric” or “advanced/primitive” by simply substituting them with the new terms modern/traditional” or “Western/ethnic.” “With such a view,” she argues, “racism in Western civilized countries, rather than being seen as part of the nation itself, is classified as something aberrant.”<sup>8</sup> For Manzo, nationalism relies on “conceptions of race, that is, the immutability of boundaries,” which attempt to construct identity against difference. Thus racism and nationalism are essentially the same

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<sup>7</sup> P. Duara, “De-Constructing the Chinese Nation”, in: J. Unger (ed.), *Chinese Nationalism*, M.E. Sharpe: Armonk (NY) 1997, pp. 31–55. The effort to negotiate a “Third Space” is very much the project of postmodernist discourse analysts like Homi Bhabha. In his Introduction to *The Location of Culture*, Routledge 1994, Bhabha calls for negotiation” rather than “negation,” suggesting that we “avoid polarity and duality” and seek hybridity. Prasenjit Duara’s postmodernist concept of negotiation in conceptions of national identity is undermined here, I think, by his own use of a binary opposition in dividing instrumentalists from primordialists. Duara neatly divides previous theories into camps, rather than allowing them to “negotiate.” As we have seen, Anderson, unlike Gellner, even if he stresses the modern origins of nations, does not suggest that they are fabricated, but rather created from existing types of identification.

<sup>8</sup> K.K. Manzo, *Creating Boundaries: The Politics of Race and Nation*, Lynne Reiner Publishers: London–Boulder 1996, p. 38.

project.<sup>9</sup> For both Duara and Manzo, nationalism is not necessarily a modern form of identity, nor is it imposed entirely from above. In fact, asserts Duara, to declare nationalism a modern form of collective consciousness is to err on two counts. First, the conception of self and other, or “we” versus “they,” certainly predates what we call modernity; it is not unique to modern history; nor is an “imagined community” unique to the nation. Second, even the idea of collective unity is itself suspect. At any given moment, putative members of a community imagine their community in dramatically different ways.<sup>10</sup>

In order to understand what nationalism means to people, one should pay attention to discourse and cultural practice. The “master narratives” of nationalism privilege some cultural practices over others in a process of “boundary hardening,” such that language, religion, ethnicity, or common historical experience come to be seen as constitutive of difference between and among communities. “In the discursive realm, the meanings of the nation are produced mainly through linguistic mechanisms,” writes Duara. “These are the narratives, the signifying chains of metaphors, metonyms and binary oppositions that give meaning to the nation and vice-versa.”<sup>11</sup> Anderson’s notion of print capitalism calls attention to the discursive meanings of the nation. Through metonymy, images and objects in the press come to stand for the nation as a whole. Through the repetition and reinterpretation of these markers of national identity, the nation is constructed, challenged and reconstituted. Intellectual historians have paid most attention to discursive representations of nationalism. Yet discursive means of national representation are significant only when embodied in cultural practices. Nations are not just imagined communities, they are lived communities.” Boundaries are constructed through discursive means, and lived and made real through cultural patterns and practices.

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<sup>9</sup> K.K. Manzo, *op. cit.*, pp. 18–23, 38. Anderson would disagree with Manzo’s conflation of nationalism and racism. Racism, he argues, is the historical product of class, not nationality. See B. Anderson, *op. cit.*, pp. 148–154.

<sup>10</sup> P. Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation*, The University of Chicago Press: Chicago 1995, 15, pp. 51–55.

<sup>11</sup> *Idem*, *De-Constructing the Chinese Nation*, pp. 45, 48.

GENDER AND NATIONALISM

Gender, like nationality, is a cultural construct that is made socially real by its utilization in daily life. And if Gellner and Anderson overstated the novelty of the construction of national identity, they certainly understated the historical and metaphorical kinship of nationality and gender. As we have seen, Gellner's definition of national identity implied that only "men" will themselves to be a nation. More than just an indication of his pre-feminism mindset, Gellner's choice of words correlates with the gendering implicit in national creation. Anderson's analysis tended toward a conception of the nation according to familial metaphors, but did not push the metaphors far enough. Indeed, as Duara reminds us, the simple fact that the most common master metaphors for the nation are Motherland or Fatherland suggests that the nation is a "linguistically gendered phenomenon."<sup>12</sup> Anne McClintock argues that familial relationships within nationalist discourse operate in at least two significant ways. First, the gendering of the nation sanctions hierarchy in the national family order. Men are expected to govern and defend the patria, while women must rear "sons of society." Second, nationalism is gendered temporally. Redeploying Anderson's attention to Walter Benjamin and conceptions of time, McClintock demonstrates how women are considered atavistic and natural in nationalist discourse, while men are "forward thrusting, potent and historic." Women's atavism is contrasted with the modern historicism of men.<sup>13</sup> In each case, gender roles are an intricate part of national identity.

Women have been seen as the symbols of difference within a nation, yet their bodies are often metonyms for the boundaries of the nation. Soldiers putatively defend women and children while the vanquished in battle are feminized in their defeat. Issues of rape and miscegenation are not unique to nationalism and may indeed be more connected to the "othering" that takes place in times of war, but they have become saddled to nationalist discourses in significant ways. In nationalist rhetoric, men must defend their national boundaries as they would protect the purity of their sisters, wives, or mothers. Much of the language that we use to talk about nations is gendered or connected to reproductive cycles. Nations are born (or stillborn),

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 45.

<sup>13</sup> A. McClintock, "Family Feuds: Gender, Nationalism and the Family", *Feminist Review*, 44, Summer 1993, p. 63. The expression "sons of society" comes from an article in the Polish *Tygodnik Ilustrowany* — though it is probably not unique to this source.

nascent, young, old, rendered impotent or emasculated, conquered, raped, and so forth. And in most of the aforementioned conditions, men are the actors and women are acted upon. Men assume the paternity of the nation; they are its founding fathers. In nationalist histories, nations have traditionally been personified, usually through the use of feminine personal pronouns. That nations are described in such intimate terms may in part be due to the limitations of language: we apply the lexicon of life experience to abstract or “imagined” versions of what we know. Yet the discursive structures of gender and nationalism are intimately connected with cultural practices that give them concrete meaning.

Nowhere is the coupling of gendered discourse and cultural practice more obvious than in the ideology of national sacrifice. Nationalist discourses have demanded (or inspired, depending on one’s point of view) a willingness to sacrifice one’s life. As such they blend religious and familial devotion. In the Christian tradition, men are to sacrifice and be sacrificed (like Jesus), while women must give up their sons (like Mary) for the good of the nation.<sup>14</sup> Sacrifice assures the patrilineal descent of the nation, usurping the reproductive power of women by establishing a patriline of great men (not unlike the lists of who begat whom in the Bible). In nations with a modern history of foreign domination (as in the case of Ireland and Poland, two national histories with which I am familiar), the ideology of national sacrifice generates a patriline of hero victims, thus seriously implicating itself into the life experience of members of the nation.<sup>15</sup> According to the master narrative, the women must mourn and glorify their dead men, while the men must be willing to die for their country.

Irish feminist Mary Condren has written about the gendered aspects of national sacrifice, arguing that the “triumph of failure” in modern Ireland is ultimately self-defeating, and particularly so for women. Drawing upon the theories of Nancy Jay, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray, Condren weaves the beginnings of a theory on national sacrifice as the repudiation of the female.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> K.K. Manzo, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

<sup>15</sup> That Ireland and Poland are both predominately Catholic countries is a connection that merits further investigation. The hagiography implicit in maintaining the cult of the fallen may also in large part coincide with the idea of the Lives of the Saints.

<sup>16</sup> M. Condren, “Work in Progress: Sacrifice and Political Legitimation: The Production of a Gendered Social Order”, *Journal of Women’s History*, Vol. 6, no. 4, Vol. 7, no. 1 Winter/Spring 1995, pp. 160–189.

Although she never mentions Mikhail Bakhtin, it is also clear that she is heavily influenced by his theory of the Festival, which she employs in explaining the reversals of traditional “others” that take place in times of conflict. Condren argues that sacrifice implicates gender roles for women and men by assuring patrilineal descent, as we have seen above. She argues that the “death drives” inherent in the ideology of sacrifice condemn people to a ruthless cycle of self-destruction. Pointing to examples from Irish history, she shows how men planned their own sacrifice so that they would generate more power for the cause as martyrs. Condren cites Padraic Pearse, a leader in the Easter Uprising, as well as a young prisoner from the time of the Troubles who both make it clear that the role of the mother is to mourn and uphold their name. She points out that women speaking in the name of their dead male kin are often the most vociferous opponents of peace negotiation.<sup>17</sup> Even if women are generally opposed to sacrifice before their men become martyrs, afterwards, they must maintain the ancestor cult by remembering their dead.

Sacrifice is like a festival in that it reverses the traditional order. Men see in sacrifice the opportunity to themselves give birth, not to children but to a new order. In contesting the role of the “(M)other,” Condren suggests, men seek to “regain intimacy with the pre-Oedipal mother without taking any of the ethical consequences pertinent to the normal rules of civilization.”<sup>18</sup> Sacrifice enables men to assume feminine powers of birth, without in turn giving women full opportunity to take male roles. Dying in the “heat of battle,” the warrior gives birth to the mother(land), rather than she to him. Women may assume mens roles during conflict, but are expected to return to their “natural” place when the war subsides. The traditional scapegoat implicit in sacrifice is always female, according to Condren, whether in the symbolic repudiation of female consciousness or in the affirmation of male power over death and the potential for rebirth.<sup>19</sup> During times of war, some women may find the courage to resist, but most will be pulled into the legitimating ethic of sacrifice for the Fatherland. Women’s needs will be subsumed in the patriarchal order. Condren thus argues that nationalism and feminism cannot be compatible, even if many women may think that the reversal of traditional order during conflict would mean that

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<sup>17</sup> M. Condren, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 168.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 174.



their roles are up for negotiation. Implicit in the reversing of traditional roles is a reaffirmation of the preexisting, patriarchal order:

By including the question of gender as a primary variable, we can see the extent to which the release of the death drives works asymmetrically for the sexes. Insofar as women function as a trope for mortality, death/abject, the primordial unity lost at birth, and for the replacement of primary unity with surrogate objects, the release of death drives (regardless of any spurious female inclusion in war/sacrifice) can only work to reinscribe gender boundaries, at women's expense.<sup>20</sup>

Times of festival/war reinforce male hegemony and exacerbate male constructions of identity while collapsing female identities, "except insofar as [they serve] the needs of war."<sup>21</sup> Condren's use of the festival model allows her to explain the fact that the roles of women often change during times of war. Even if women are able to assume male roles, this assumption is only apparent: the festival-like atmosphere of sacrifice determines that preexisting hierarchies will be reinscribed, not readjusted.

Condren makes a strong argument for the gendered aspect of national sacrifice, even if she at times essentializes the roles of men and women, or uncritically utilizes psychoanalytical terms without endeavoring to prove their validity.<sup>22</sup> By accentuating the "main variable" of gender, she points toward a new conception of the myth of national sacrifice. Indeed, Condren's "theory-in-progress" and the discursive theories of nationalism discussed above have shaped the way I interpret some historical texts I consider in my research on the definitions of national identity in *fin de siècle* Poland. Below I examine an article about women soldiers, published in the most popular Polish-language publication of the time, the *Tygodnik Ilustrowany* (Illustrated Weekly). The article was published in October 1906<sup>23</sup>, after more than a year of sporadic violence and revolution in Russian Poland associated with what we call now the 1905 (Russian) Revolution.

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 175, 177–178.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 179.

<sup>22</sup> Condren's essentialization of men and women shines best in the following statement: "Whereas men externalize their negativity in the form of sacrifice..., women internalize it in the form of self-sacrifice, depression, and female horizontal violence (178)." Certainly some men internalize "negativity" in self-sacrifice and "horizontal violence," while some women are capable of externalizing negativity.

<sup>23</sup> K., "Bohaterki polskie", *Tygodnik Ilustrowany*, 43, Oct. 1906, 947. All quotes in the text are my translations from this article.

## CONTEXT

“Polish Heroines” was published near the end of an issue dedicated to insurrectionary heroes from the past century of Russian domination. The choice to glorify Poland’s patriline of patriots, so apparently appropriate during a time of street violence and contemporaneous insurrection, was actually a break from the positivist rhetoric of the magazine of previous years which had repeatedly stressed small-scale work and improvement of the *społeczeństwo* (community, society) over revolt. Articles in the magazine reminded readers of past failures, and recommended hard work to improve the economy, peasant education, and a general pattern of modernization. The decision to venerate past insurrectionaries was due in part to the repeal of so-called “preventative censorship” in November 1905. The absence of censorship radically altered what Polish editors chose to publish after 1905 — just as its presence before may have inclined some of them to be more positivist and conciliatory than they may have liked. The tone and timbre of the journal changed dramatically because of the revolution and the repeal of censorship. In a liminal moment, amidst street violence and strikes, the potentialities of national self-definition were more open than before. Perhaps not surprisingly, the patriotic editors of a cultural-literary weekly chose to revisit the myths of Polish bravery in the past. Yet their seemingly natural choice to retell stories of heroism (and defeat) did not imply that the narratives would be constructed in the same ways as before. Besides the novelty of being in print in a respected cultural magazine, these narratives differed from their previous renderings in what was accentuated or left out. The social uncertainty of a revolution — when workers rather than the aristocratic leaders of the past were at the vanguard of the violence — assured that the national narrative could, and probably would, be interpreted differently.

In the period from 1905–1907, the definition of the Polish nation represented in the *Tygodnik Ilustrowany* underwent a number of changes, especially in its stance toward women, the working classes and Jews. There was a process of “boundary hardening,” as Jews were increasingly explicitly excluded from the nation on the grounds of language, religion and race. Jews, the working classes, and even women operated to some extent as “counternations” to the nation imagined by the male editors and publishers of the journal, even if women and workers were invited in on certain terms while Jews were increasingly pushed out. All three groups, however, could be held up as

foils to the Polish nation, usually for reasons of motivating Polish men to be more resolute in their commitment to the Fatherland. Bolesław Prus, in one of his weekly *Chronicles*, pointed to the Jews' communal cohesion in the face of difficult situations (pogroms, etc.) as an example of what the Poles should themselves be doing.<sup>24</sup> Women's assumed patience, optimism and dignity under terrible conditions also made them into a counternation for impatient and dejected men. In their own self-representations in the magazine, women tried not so much to be counternations as to join the nation as "productive members of society." Women attempted to be a part of the national dialogue in the weekly by contributing poetry and articles. Several articles by women called for increased employment opportunities.<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, images and illustrations of women as objects of sexual desire, and/or as mothers to the sons of society, continued to appear in the pages of the *Tygodnik Ilustrowany*.

#### TEXT AND INTERPRETATION

The article under consideration, "Polish Heroines," begins with the injunction that the "field of battle" is not the only place one can be heroic, yet despite its initial assertion that heroes can exist in other spheres of life, the only definition of heroism in the article is couched in the language of warfare and just defense: "battle," "attacks of the crowd," "weapons," "defense," and "tragedy." In characteristically inflated language, the article only focuses on one type of hero(ine): the fearless soldier, or more particularly, the woman who assumes the role of a man and goes into battle. The article glorifies such valiant women, by naming a few who actually took to the battlefield over the past century of failed Polish insurrections.<sup>26</sup> Aside from

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<sup>24</sup> *Tygodnik Ilustrowany* 4, 1906, pp. 63–64. "Almost every Jew can read, write and do arithmetic" — Prus wrote — "They make plans for the future... [The] Jews are one organism, dirty, poor, and often argumentative, but in times of need they work together, and they have among themselves powerful reserves of public and financial support."

<sup>25</sup> Z. Morawska, "Niec o wychowaniu naszych panien", *Tygodnik Ilustrowany*, 5, 1899, 89; K. Skrzyska, "Co robić z sobą. Praca zawodowa kobiet", *Tygodnik Ilustrowany*, 7, 1902, pp. 122–123. C. Wałęwska, "Nasze Panny", *Tygodnik Ilustrowany* 34, 1903, pp. 662–663, called for increased educational and vocational rights for women by stressing their advantage to society.

<sup>26</sup> Among them: Zofia Kossakowska, from the time of the Bar Confederation; Emilia Platerówna. Emilia Szczaniecka, Maria Przeszyska, Maria Raszanowiczówna, all from 1831 November Uprising; and H. Pustowójtówna, Krukowiecka, and Piotrowiczówna from 1863 January Uprising. The reader will note that these do not sound like the last names of commoners.

the named women-soldiers, it further claims that the ranks of anonymous women who traffic in arms are “legion.” It ends with a condemnation of the “politicking men” who have, in moments of greatest peril, neglected to fight.<sup>27</sup>

How should the historian interpret an article about women who dress up as men and bravely take to the field of battle? A discursive understanding of national identity, such as the one posited by Prasenjit Duara, enables the historian to see that a single article need not exactly correlate with other systems of identity in the same journal — a consideration validated by the fact that the *Tygodnik Ilustrowany* was not an ideologically-consistent, one-party publication like many papers of the time. Even so, the location of the article, in an issue about heroes of battle and in a journal that was currently negotiating the role of women in the nation, helps us better understand its potential meanings. At least superficially, the article glorifies of a particular kind of woman, the woman who is willing to risk her life for her nation by assuming the role of a man. While this seems a clear purpose of the article, the conclusion, which blames politicking men for their reluctance to fight, sends a signal to the reader that women acting as men can only demonstrate the emasculation of the nation, not its greatness. Are women soldiers a credit to the nation or a threat?

The article seems to permit a violation of gender roles, so long as it is clear that men should be performing their role as “defenders” of that which is “most holy: one’s freedom and ones fatherland.” As George Mosse says of such narratives from the same period in other countries, the assumption of male roles in battle was seen as a flattering endorsement of masculinity — so long as women willingly took their proper places after war.<sup>28</sup> Many of the observations on gender and nationality I presented above still seem incongruous with the idea of women performing as soldiers. If men are to be the actors, and not women, then the idea of women as soldiers seems to threaten the nationalist gender hierarchy. Mary Condren’s ingenious inclusion of the theory of the festival and its ensuing reversal of the traditional order, however, helps explain how women can be allowed to assume male roles during moments of great duress. Theirs is only a spurious “inclusion,”

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<sup>27</sup> *Tygodnik Ilustrowany*, 43, 1906, p. 947.

<sup>28</sup> G. Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe*, H. Fertig: New York 1997, p. 101.

allowed only “insofar as [it] serves the needs of war.” Consider the language of the author of “Polish Heroines” as he introduces his main topic:

Yet what position in this hierarchy do those figures take who by nature are not fit for war, of a more delicate build, less strong-nerved, less hardy organisms, women-soldiers, women going into battle not for “impressions,” not for vain glory, but rather compelled by something stronger than themselves, from that motto that disrupts their very surroundings with its holy flame: victory or death, natures which cannot indifferently and passively wait for the evolution of incidences, but would rather hasten them forward with the energy of their own spirit and actions? (Emphasis mine).

The author suggests that women do not belong in battle; they are not naturally suited for it anyway. But he seems willing to glorify their valiant attempts to fight. These women are not atavistic, passively awaiting the action of a man, but rather compelled by something stronger than themselves: the imperative of sacrifice for the nation, the “motto” symbolized by a “holy flame.”

The writer supposes sacrifice for the nation, whether by men or by women, to be the most noble emotion, the most noble motivation. It does not threaten gender roles, so much as bend them for more auspicious reasons. Those who “willingly” “[lay] down their lives” “for the fatherland” are morally superior to other human beings. Women who choose to sacrifice themselves are placed higher in the hierarchy of heroism than “politicking men” who are incapable of such selflessness and honor. Women who choose to die for the fatherland are referred to as “offerings”; acceptable only when a country “finds itself in the greatest, most exceptional danger.” Furthermore, the women who enter battle are still sexualized; their “exceptional” behavior is called “exotic,” and “ravishing in its beauty.” Women who sacrifice themselves for the nation cannot become men, however, even if they clothe themselves in the attire of a man. They are still objectified by the men who can voyeuristically admire their attempts at heroics. That the intended audience of the article is male makes the objectification of women soldiers quite clear:

But if on the one hand [women soldiers] become the object of our veneration, on the other hand again, if we speak in particular of the years 1770, 1794, 1831, we should hide our faces in shame for the men who in those times slept and were not given to even glance at such loftiness of feeling and heroic sacrifice... (My emphasis).

Women who go into battle or who smuggle arms are simply compelled by a higher moral order. If men are “not given to glance at such loftiness” it can only be because of their amorality, their cowardice, and their selfishness.

Mary Condren’s attention to gender and the role of the festival in sacrifice enables me to interpret this document more creatively — and thus more carefully. I can see how gender roles are both violated and reinscribed. Furthermore, Condren’s attention to the power of the discourse of national sacrifice allows insights on the significance of particular words and concepts in the article. It is more apparent to me now than it was before, that the emphasis of the article rests in its (hopeful) declaration that people can be compelled to make the morally superior decision to lay down their lives for their fatherland. This casts light on the reasons for condemning the men who fail to be stirred by “such loftiness of feeling”; this is the “triumph of failure” Condren addresses, the repetition and reiteration of national defeat as a motivation to attempt a revolution yet again.

The attention to negotiation of narrative meanings of the nation that Prasenjit Duara and Kathryn Manzo call for can help me avoid casting this interpretation as the only interpretation of the article. Because nations are lived communities, individually imagined in a multiplicity of ways, the article has no single interpretation. It could be read differently — and certainly was — by different people. Contemporaneously, some female readers may have welcomed an admission of women’s efforts in past insurrections, while agreeing entirely with the declaration that they are less fit for battle. Other readers may have ignored the article altogether. It is likely that the article was not read as critically then as it has been in this paper: attitudes toward gender and nationality today are considerably different than in Poland in 1906. Yet this fact does not undermine the above interpretation of the article. Thanks to a review of theories on nationalism and gender, we have been able to see how an admittedly unusual article about Polish heroines worked to both challenge and reinscribe centrally important issues of nationality and gender. Theories about nationalism and gender bring to light the central assumption of the article: the imperative of national sacrifice according to a hierarchy of gender-specific responsibilities.

## BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

Ernest Gellner was among the first wave of writers about nationalism to reject nationalist historical narratives — well before he ever composed *Nations and Nationalism*. Gellner, Hobsbawm, and many of their generation essayed to point out the ways that national identity was created, to show that nations are constructs. Eager to point out the artificiality of nations, Gellner perhaps overstated his case for their modern construction from above. The next “generation” of scholars has begun to refine the idea of national construction: even if nations are constructed, they are not artificial, uniquely modern or imposed from above. Gender theory, like cultural anthropology and literary criticism, has enabled new ways of de-constructing the nation. In charting this new territory, it is yet another tool for understanding the complex system of identity we call nationalism. Prasentjit Duara has joked that nationalism has “Shanghaied” history, by shaping almost irrevocably the way modern-day historians think about the past.<sup>29</sup> It is true that the national system shapes the way we practice history, but I do not think we should necessarily attempt to “rescue history from the nation,” as Duara suggests. This may be another attempt at a historiographical shift that ends up being too radical in its conception. Composing this paper has reinforced in my mind the power of narrative, not the nation, for shaping the way history is done. Historiography has its own imperative of progression, which can be quite difficult to deny, and writing about the past requires some sort of story. While the postmodern historian avails herself or himself of a variety of other disciplines and techniques, the effort to narrate and explain the past remains essentially the same.

Nonetheless, as my illustrative exegesis shows, general theories from a variety of disciplines can point the historian to genuinely new and equally valid interpretations of the past. The theory of national sacrifice, arrived at in a particular intellectual and political milieu, and written about twentieth-century Ireland, can be put to good use in other ways. Applied to an article from fin-de-siècle Poland, it helps us understand precisely how women soldiers could be a cause for both pride and shame.

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<sup>29</sup> P. Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation*, Chicago 1995.

Sposoby patrzenia na nacjonalizm: krótki esej historiograficzny oraz  
przykładowa egzegeza

Niniejszy artykuł składa się z dwóch części — historycznego omówienia kilku teorii nacjonalizmu i historii kobiet (gender) oraz zastosowania w praktyce owych modeli teoretycznych. W dyskusji na temat nacjonalizmu autor sięgnął do prac m.in. Hobsbawma, Andersona, Gellnera, Duary oraz Manzy. Problemy historii kobiet omawia na podstawie prac A. McClintock oraz M. Con-dren. Teoria drugiej z wymienionych autorek posłużyła mu do analizy sposobu przedstawienia kobiet (bohatek) w literaturze polskiej końca XIX i początku XX wieku. Podstawą jego analizy jest artykuł *Bohaterki polskie* pochodzący z „Tygodnika Ilustrowanego”.