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The WIDF's Work for Women's Rights in the (Post)colonial Countries and the "Soviet Agenda"*

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ABSTRACT: The primary aim of this article is to problematize the WIDF's interpretations of the rights of women from (post)colonial countries and its tactics in working for and together with these women. It shows that, in the context of rapid geopolitical changes – the growing anti-colonial struggle and Cold War competition – the WIDF had to change its ideology, ways of working, and communication strategies in order to keep its leading position in transnational work for women's rights and to maintain the sympathies of women from countries outside Europe. The main focus is on the contradictions, negotiations, and adjustments inside the WIDF with respect to the new political situation and the demands of women from Africa and Asia, in particular, during the highest period of anticolonial transformation (1950s to early 1970s). This article also pays attention to Soviet ideas on the emancipation of women and, in particular, to the influence of Soviet experiences of emancipating women from non-Slavic (Eastern and Southern) parts of the USSR on the WIDF's perception of and policies for the improvement of the situation of women in Asia and Africa. This article is based primarily on analysis of the WIDF's archival documents preserved in the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF) in Moscow, along with the WIDF's official publications.

This article deals with the history of the Women's International Democratic Federation's (WIDF) promotion of women's rights in the countries of Asia and Africa during the period of decolonization; it pays special attention to the Soviet role in this endeavour. The WIDF was created in Paris in 1945, and, as previous research has shown, was an important actor in the anti-

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imperialist struggle.¹ For example, Elisabeth Armstrong comes to the conclusion that, thanks to the WIDF's activities, "the older playbook of the Western enlightened charity model of feminist internationalism was turned upside down".² Katherine McGregor demonstrates that the WIDF facilitated contacts between women's organizations in Algeria and Vietnam during the period of their struggle for independence and that it contributed to global solidarity with these countries.³ However, neither author pays much attention to the internal process of WIDF decision-making or to the Soviet role in the organization. Yet, both authors carefully state that historical sources on the WIDF's activities are incomplete and invite further discussion of the WIDF's work advancing women's rights and opposing colonialism.

Research on the WIDF (including in connection to women's rights in the "Third World") could not, historically, avoid the question of how much the Soviet Union and countries under state socialism influenced the Federation.⁴ Indeed, Francisca de Haan, the first academic to write about this organization, argues that researchers often view it as one of the pro-Soviet organizations without evaluating the WIDF's role more seriously.⁵ According to her, this was a continuation of the Cold War in women's history.

However, during recent years, the Cold War itself has started to be explored differently. New approaches to the history of the Cold War stress its global character,⁶ while some common developments and even exchanges between the main adversarial actors have been explored.⁷ These approaches have

1. See Francisca de Haan, "The Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF): History, Main Agenda and Contributions (1945–1991)", in *Women and Social Movements (WASI) Online Archive*, edited by Thomas Dublin and Kathryn Kish Sklar, 2012. Available at: <http://alexanderstreet.com/products/women-and-social-movements-international>; last accessed 19 May 2021; Elisabeth Armstrong, "Before Bandung: The Anti-imperialist Women's Movement in Asia and the Women's International Democratic Federation", *Signs*, 41 (2016), pp. 305–331; Katherine McGregor, "Opposing Colonialism: The Women's International Democratic Federation and Decolonisation struggles in Vietnam and Algeria 1945–1965", *Women's History Review*, 25 (2016), pp. 925–944; Adriana Valobra and Mercedes Yusta (eds), *Queridas Camaradas. Historias iberoamericanas de mujeres comunistas* (Buenos Aires, 2017).

2. Armstrong, "Before Bandung", p. 328.

3. McGregor, "Opposing Colonialism", pp. 931–932.

4. See Francisca de Haan, "Continuing Cold War Paradigms in Western Historiography of Transnational Women's Organizations: The Case of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF)", *Women's History Review*, 19:4 (2010), pp. 547–573; Valobra and Yusta, *Queridas Camaradas*; Celia Donert, "From Communist Internationalism to Human Rights: Gender, Violence and International Law in the Women's International Democratic Federation Mission to North Korea, 1951", *Contemporary European History*, 25 (2016), pp. 313–333.

5. See De Haan, "Continuing Cold War Paradigms".

6. Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Time* (Cambridge, 2005); Mark Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations* (Princeton, NJ [etc.], 2008).

7. Giles Scott-Smith & Hans Krabbendam (eds), *The Cultural Cold War in Western Europe, 1945–1960* (London, 2003).

opened the possibility of questioning the WIDF's full dependence on Moscow. Nevertheless, the question of Soviet and "Eastern bloc" political interests in the Federation continues to be important, several researchers have recently indicated that countries under state socialism had a special place in the Federation.⁸ My own research also suggests that the Soviet Union attempted to control the WIDF's work.⁹ However, I show that these attempts had different modalities and degrees of success in different periods of the WIDF's history. In particular, I demonstrate that Soviet representatives in the WIDF's governing bodies had to use alliances and negotiations to realize their politics. These negotiations were important, not least in relationships with female communists from other countries, including countries of the "Eastern bloc". In this article, I return to the theme of the "Soviet agenda" in the WIDF's promotion of women's rights, with a special focus on a particular period and geographical region: the anti-colonial struggle and early post-colonial transformation of Asia and Africa (late 1940s–early 1970s).

Researchers studying the Soviet Union's relationships with newly independent countries in the postcolonial era and its developmental aid to the countries of Asia and Africa show that Soviet encounters with the postcolonial world, and with women from Asia and Africa, were full of contradictions and misunderstandings.¹⁰ On the one hand, the Soviet achievement of fast industrialization, in particular in Central Asia, as Artemy Kalinovsky shows, was an attractive example for the elites of the newly independent countries of Asia and Africa: many saw industrialization as a path towards the broader transformation of their societies.¹¹ Changes in women's roles in society were an important component of this transformation.

8. See Donert, "From Communist Internationalism to Human Rights", pp. 313–333; Celia Donert, "Whose Utopia? Gender, Ideology and Human Rights at the 1975 World Congress in East Berlin", in Jan Eckel and Samuel Moyn (eds), *The Breakthrough: Human Rights in the 1970s* (Philadelphia, PA, 2014), pp. 68–87; Mercedes Yusta, "The Strained Courtship Between Antifascism and Feminism: from the Women's World Committee (1934) to the Women's International Democratic Federation (1945)", in Hugo Garcia *et al.* (eds), *Rethinking Antifascism* (New York, 2016), pp. 167–186.

9. Yulia Gradszkova, *The Women's International Democratic Federation, the Global South and the Cold War: Defending the Rights of Women of the "Whole World"?* (London, 2021), pp. 23–62.

10. In particular, the capacity of the Soviet economy to provide assistance to postcolonial countries is questioned by Oscar Sanchez-Siboney, while James Mark, Artemy Kalinovsky, and Steffi Marung's book shows the complex political and economic reasons for the involvement of East European countries in developmental programmes in the "Third World". See Oscar Sanchez-Siboney, *Red Globalizations* (Cambridge, 2014); James Mark, Artemy Kalinovsky, and Steffi Marung, *Alternative Globalizations: Eastern Europe and the Postcolonial World* (Bloomington, IN, 2020). On women, see Elisabeth Banks, "Sewing Machines for Socialism? Gifts of Development and Disagreement between the Soviet and Mozambican Women's Committees, 1963–87", *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 41 (2021), pp. 27–40.

11. Artemy Kalinovsky *Laboratory of Socialist Development: Cold War Politics and Decolonization in Soviet Tajikistan* (Ithaca, NY, 2018), p. 74.

However, whether the Soviets and “Eastern bloc” successfully cooperated with postcolonial countries (including women) remains an open question. Some researchers show that the Soviets and “Eastern bloc” raised expectations of assistance in postcolonial countries that they did not entirely fulfil. For example, students from these countries who came to study in the USSR learned about the successes of the state socialist system, but also about its problems, including issues in the education system and racism.¹² On the other hand, Kristen Ghodsee, who analyses the cooperation between the Bulgarian women’s organization and women from Zambia in the 1980s, has a positive evaluation of mutual understanding.¹³ However, her study also shows tensions and hesitations from both parties (including in the use of finances and working habits), as well as a devaluation of and failure to remember the work of women involved in the cooperation surrounding the post-Cold War transition. However, Ghodsee avoids a specific discussion of the role of the Soviet Union in the Federation’s work with women from (post)colonial countries. Unlike Ghodsee, a recent article by Elizabeth Banks explores the cooperation between the Committee of Soviet Women and the Organization of Mozambican Woman (OMM) and insightfully shows that large-scale Soviet thinking in combination with narrow provisions did not correspond to the expectations of African women. Indeed, the results of this cooperation demonstrate different values, rather than mutual understanding.¹⁴ This scholarship makes further exploration of the WIDF’s work for women’s rights in (post)colonial countries, and the Soviet’s role in this work, particularly pertinent.

The main aim of this article is to explore how the WIDF worked to further women’s rights in (post)colonial countries with a focus on the contradictions, negotiations, and adjustments inside the WIDF at this time. This article pays special attention to Soviet attempts to influence the federation and Soviet ideas concerning the emancipation of women and, in particular, Soviet experiences of emancipating women from the non-Slavic (Eastern and Southern) parts of the USSR.

This article is based primarily on an analysis of the archival documents preserved in the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF) in Moscow, unlike many previous publications on the WIDF, which focused mainly on its official activities.¹⁵ However, I also use the WIDF’s official publications, including its journal, published from 1951 in several languages.

12. Constantin Katsakioris, “The Lumumba University in Moscow: Higher Education for a Soviet-Third World Alliance, 1960–91”, *Journal of Global History*, 14 (2019), pp. 288–289.

13. Kristen Ghodsee, *Second World, Second Sex: Socialist Women’s Activism and Global Solidarity during the Cold War* (Durham, NC, 2018).

14. Banks, “Sewing Machines for Socialism?”, p. 37.

15. The fond 7928 only partly consists of the documents of the CSW, many documents in this fond constitute the original documents (and/or their Russian translations) sent from WIDF

The archival materials of the WIDF preserved in Moscow – in the collection of the Soviet member organization of the WIDF, the Committee of Soviet Women (CSW; before 1956 the organization was called the Antifascist Committee of the Soviet Women, ACSW) – can play an important role in further research on the WIDF.¹⁶ The collection has several thousand folders containing the WIDF's documents as well as the correspondence of the CSW with other organizations that were members of the Federation. The WIDF materials in this archive include not only Russian language translations of the protocols of the Federation's meetings and congresses, but also the original letters, notes, and drafts of these documents in different languages. These less-official materials have a lot of information, not only on the Soviet role in the Federation, but also on some member organizations from other countries aimed for internal use in the Federation. Finally, the archive also includes internal Russian-language correspondence between Soviet representatives in Moscow and the WIDF's headquarters. These documents have not been analysed before and are often classified. They allow us to discover some of the internal conflicts and problems in the organization that are not visible in official WIDF publications or draft documents and notes. Using these different types of documents, it is possible to reconstruct the ways in which the Soviet Union attempted to influence the Federation.

The WIDF's periodical publication, *Women of the Whole World*, was another source in this study of the WIDF's history.¹⁷ However, while this journal and some of the WIDF's other official publications can be unproblematically used to reconstruct the WIDF and CSW's activities, their use for an evaluation of the WIDF requires knowledge of state socialist propaganda technologies as well as special tools for investigation.¹⁸ While some archival documents can be interpreted as the "historical truth" per se, the documents in the Soviet archives and the publications of the official journals produced inside or

headquarters. Before, the materials of this GARF archival fond were used mainly for research on the CSW and its international cooperation with countries in the Global South. See Christine Varga-Harris, "Between National Tradition and Western Modernization: Soviet Woman and Representations of Socialist Gender Equality as a 'Third Way' for Developing Countries, 1956–1964", *Slavic Review*, 78 (2019), pp. 758–781; Galina Galkina, *Komitet sovetskikh zhenshchin* (Moscow, 2013); Timothy Nunan, *Humanitarian Invasion: Global Development in Cold War Afghanistan* (Cambridge, 2016).

16. See Melanie Ilic, "Soviet Women, Cultural Exchange and the Women's International Democratic Federation", in S. Autio-Sarasmö and K. Miklóssy (eds), *Reassessing Cold War Europe* (London, 2011), pp. 157–174.

17. *Women of the Whole World* (hereafter WWW) was published in several languages with almost identical content. The Russian version was called *Zhenshchiny mira* (hereafter ZM).

18. On the Soviet ideological language, see Natalia Kozlova and Irina Sandomirskaja, "Ya tak khochu nazvat kino". 'Naivnoe pismo': Opyt sotsio-lingvisticheskogo chteniia (Moscow, 1996). On researching Soviet official publications and their dominant codes, see Catriona Kelly, "A Laboratory for the Manufacture of Proletarian Writers", *Europe-Asia Studies*, 54 (2002), pp. 573–574.

in cooperation with the “Eastern bloc” usually suffer from distortions, censorship, and silences.¹⁹ Soviet publications for women can seem quite convincing. For example, Christine Varga-Harris states in her study of the journal *Soviet Woman*, published by the CSW, that it is easy to believe in the truthfulness of the information it provides.²⁰ However, I think this apparent “truthfulness” needs to be thoroughly investigated. It has been established that, during its history, the WIDF and its Soviet member organization were very careful with their international image and regularly published self-written accounts of their own history in their journal and as separate publications.²¹ These were produced with the aim of celebrating the achievements of both organizations and some of their prominent leaders. One of the veteran members of the CSW, professional historian Galina Galkina, published the last of these accounts recently.²² Like those in the WIDF’s official periodicals, these accounts suffer from limitations because they present a selective and manipulated version of reality, while also containing a lot of important factual information. I suggest that official accounts of the WIDF’s history should be used in combination with the classified and non-classified “internal use” archival documents. I advocate a more critical perspective on both WIDF and official Soviet publications and I try to use this below.

This article falls into three parts. The first explores the WIDF’s views on the rights of women in colonial and dependent territories at the beginning of its work and Soviet attempts to guide and police the Federation’s collaborations with women from (post)colonial countries. Here, I analyse the promotion of the story of the Soviet emancipation of women: the narrative that the lives of women from non-Russian parts of the Soviet Union (colonial borderlands, according to Madina Tlostanova) had been transformed. I examine the ways

19. See Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Impact of the Opening of Soviet Archives on Western Scholarship on Soviet Social History”, *The Russian Review*, 3 (2015), pp. 377–400; Alexei Livshin, Oleg Khlevnyuk and Igor Orlov, *Pisma vo vlast* (Moscow, 2002); Natalia Kozlova, *Sovetskie liudi. Stseny iz istorii* (Moscow, 2005).

20. According to Christine Varga-Harris, reading the journal *Soviet Woman* and some letters from its foreign readers, it is easy to come to the conclusion that Soviet women were “agents of their own fate”. Varga-Harris, “Between National Tradition”, p. 780. However, as we know from several publications based on memories and oral history accounts, many Soviet women often felt a lack of agency and the possibility of gaining influence. See Melanie Ilic, *Soviet Women: Everyday Lives* (London, 2020); Marfua Tokhtakhodzhaeva, Dono Abdurazakova, and Almaz Kadyrova, *Sudby I vremia. Proshloe Uzbekistana v ustnykh rasskazakh zhenshin-sovietel'nits sovremennits sobytii* (Tashkent, 2002); Zamira Yusufjonova-Abman, “State Feminism in Soviet Central Asia: Anti-Religious Campaigns and Muslim Women in Tajikistan, 1953–1982”, in Melanie Ilic (ed.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Women and Gender in Twentieth Century Russia and the Soviet Union* (London, 2018), pp. 299–314.

21. For example, “Mezhdunarodnoi Demokraticeskoi Federatsii Zhenshin 20 let”, *ZM*, 9 (1965), pp. 4–7; *WIDF 40 Years* (Berlin, 1985); M.G. Gryzunova, *MDFZh 1945–1975* (Moscow, 1975). On the CSW, see Galkina, *Komitet*.

22. Galkina, *Komitet*.

this story was used in the WIDF's work on the rights of women in countries fighting against colonialism.²³ The second part explores the impact of the increasing pro-independence activism of women in Asia and Africa on the WIDF's understanding of women's rights and activism. I look closely at criticisms of the WIDF's work and the conflicts and contradictions in it that became visible. The third part analyses further transformations of the WIDF's politics with respect to women's rights in (post)colonial countries in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Here, I return to the theme of Soviet women from former colonial borderlands, but my focus is on the active involvement of these women in the work of the WIDF in a later period.

THE WIDF'S KNOWLEDGE OF WOMEN'S PROBLEMS UNDER COLONIALISM

I start my analysis with the Soviet report from the meeting of the WIDF Executive Committee in Prague, February 1947. The documents from the archives in Moscow suggest that the activities of the WIDF in this period (at least up to the death of Stalin) were closely monitored, not only by representatives of the Soviet women's organization, but also by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). The report on the meeting of the WIDF Executive Committee in Prague is among several other documents that are preserved in the file aimed for the Central Committee (CC) of the CPSU.²⁴ It is accompanied by Russian translations of some of the documents produced by the Federation. The primary aim of these documents seems to be to give information to the leaders of the CPSU about the meeting, namely its decisions, problems, and conflicts. For example, a document signed by Nina Popova, the head of the ACSW, gives an evaluation of a speech by the WIDF president Eugenie Cotton.²⁵ Popova states that Cotton gave "a correct analysis of the international situation and of the women's movement".²⁶ The word "correct" indicates that the vision of the situation presented by Cotton corresponded to the views of the CPSU and ACSW's leaders. Further on, the report on the meeting assures the CPSU's CC that "the decisions unanimously taken (by the meeting of the Executive Committee) generally corresponded to the guidelines that were received by the Soviet delegation".²⁷ This form of reporting to the CPSU indicates that the ACSW,

23. See Madina Tlostanova, *Gender Epistemologies and Eurasian Borderlands* (Basingstoke, 2010).

24. GARF, f. 7928, op. 4 d. 7 (in Russian, my translation).

25. Popova was the head of the organization from 1941, when it was founded; she worked as a secretary of the Communist Party district committee in Moscow at the beginning of the war. In the 1950s, Popova would become a candidate to the CC of the CPSU, see Ilic, "Soviet Women", p. 159.

26. GARF, f. 7928, op. 4 d. 7, p. 59.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

the Soviet member of the WIDF, did not have independent status and was expected by the leaders of the Soviet state and the Communist party to fulfil the important task of defending Soviet interests in this transnational organization.

However, while the documents from the file – addressed to the CC of the CPSU – show the Soviet intention to control the WIDF through its representative, they also suggest that these intentions were quite far from reality, even during this period of “high Stalinism”. Contrary to the theory that the WIDF was no more than an instrument of Soviet foreign policy (the “Soviet front”), the same report shows that Soviet representatives to the WIDF had limited control and could not guarantee that female WIDF leaders from different countries would behave according to Soviet expectations. The authors of the report notice several “problems”, indicating that national women’s organizations and individual women – including those from the nascent “Eastern bloc” – could not be controlled. For example, Hungarian participants at the Prague meeting insisted on the need to discuss the difficult situation facing the Hungarian minority in Czechoslovakia, while delegations from Italy and Bulgaria expected to draw attention to the injustices the peace agreement contained for their countries. In her letter to the participants of the meeting, written in the name of Bulgarian women, Tsola Dragoycheva – a well-known Bulgarian women’s activist and member of the CC of the Bulgarian Communist Party²⁸ – demanded that those parts of the peace agreement that, according to her, did not bring justice to the Bulgarian people and Bulgarian women, be changed.²⁹

A glance at the Soviet report from the WIDF meeting in Prague shows that, from the beginning, the WIDF was a place for women who, though members of the Communist Party, understood women’s problems in their own countries and the world in different ways to Moscow. As a result, discussions about the format and priorities of the WIDF’s work often led to conflicts.

The WIDF’s work promoting women’s rights in colonial and dependent countries was subject to different interpretations and conflicts. While representatives from several countries in the Global South (India, Algeria, Argentina, Uruguay, and others) took part in the WIDF’s founding conference in Paris in 1945, from the beginning the WIDF seemed to lack information about women’s experiences in some parts of the world and contact with women’s organizations in many countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. A special WIDF Commission visited the countries of Asia to evaluate women’s experiences there and establish contacts; the results of the Commission’s work were presented in 1948 and reflected in the official

28. Dragoycheva could not participate at the meeting due to her illness.

29. GARF, f. 7928, op. 4 d. 7, pp. 84–85.

report.³⁰ The meeting in Prague also discussed more general plans for organizing work in the Global South.

This meeting discussed the circumstances of women in colonial countries and racial minorities in the US. A presentation on the first issue was made by Alice Sportisse, an Algerian communist of European descent and member of the French Parliament.³¹ According to the Soviet report sent to the CC CPSU, Sportisse “totally correctly” (as in the case of Eugenie Cotton) connected the solution to the problems of women in colonies to the solution of the colonial question.³² The WIDF's Executive Commission's meeting also discussed the statute of the Secretariat Commission dedicated to working with women in colonial countries (one of three commissions established by the Prague meeting). According to this statute, the Commission considers women in colonial countries to have full citizenship rights, political rights, and labour rights. For example, the section on economic rights discusses the prevention of discrimination against women on the basis of their social and economic status, their right to work and for equal pay, and the introduction of at least two weeks of yearly leave and six weeks of leave for working women before and after giving birth.³³ These demands were highly progressive at the time they were voiced.

At the same time, the text of the document indicates that it was not written by women experiencing colonial domination themselves, but instead expresses the commitments of women outside the system. Indeed, the statute of the Commission argues that the WIDF should lead and supervise the activities of women in Africa and Asia; in other words, the Commission should help women in colonial countries to gain their political and citizenship rights.³⁴ The Commission collected material on the experiences of women in colonial countries through contacts with women's organizations and visits to those countries. Using these materials, the Commission had to prepare reports for the WIDF and, later, to present information about the problems facing women in the Global South to bodies of global governance, first of all the UN:

When the material is collected and summarized, the Commission is making reports for the WIDF's Secretariat and proposes recommendations concerning the situation of women in colonial countries and the situation of racial minorities. It will send these recommendations to the UN and to the governments of different countries, as well as to trade unions and other organizations.³⁵

30. For an analysis of this report, see Armstrong, “Before Bandung” and McGregor, “Opposing Colonialism”.

31. See Allison Drew, *We Are no Longer in France: Communists in Colonial Algeria* (Manchester, 2014).

32. GARF, f. 7928, op. 4 d. 7, p. 65.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

35. *Ibid.*, pp. 42–43, article 4, originally in Russian.

Although they firmly state that women in colonies should have citizens' rights and economic rights, some of the articles defining the work of the Commission sound quite patronizing:

The Commission helps the federation to take up the issues on the need of educational work with the women of colonial countries in discussions with progressive and democratic women, trade unions, cultural and social organizations and media. It is very important to wake up the consciousness of women [in the colonial countries] and to contribute to the elimination of their general and political illiteracy.³⁶

This combination of radical demands for the rights of women in colonial and dependent territories and the assumption that they needed the WIDF's advice and assistance to acquire them characterized the WIDF's activities during its earlier years.

The achievements of countries under state socialism were an important way of showing the possibilities of a fast and successful modernization that could bring both economic development and increased women's rights. As early as the 1950s, delegations from different countries at WIDF meetings were invited to visit the Soviet Union (officially these were visits to the ACSW, but in reality the Soviet state was responsible for financing them).³⁷ The WIDF's official publication periodically reported with pride on Soviet women's achievements in political and working life, as well as the care of the Soviet state for mothers and children. For example, an article from 1953 reports that, together with all Soviet people, women are working to fulfil the new five-year plan and are proud of their ability to work for their motherland.³⁸ Issue two from the same year published a picture by Zinaida Gagarina, a member of the ACSW who held a doctorate in economic sciences and was elected to the Moscow city council.³⁹ However, the WIDF journal never published an article that explored the hard working conditions of Soviet women or their lack of political influence while working in elected bodies.

In the late 1950s to early 1960s, the Soviet Union and other countries under state socialism were presented by the WIDF journal as models that could be used by developing countries.⁴⁰ In particular, women from the non-Russian republics of the Soviet Union, mostly those of Central Asia, started to play an important role in the WIDF's publications and in WIDF work with the growing anti-colonial movements in Asia and Africa. Previous scholarly work has shown that Central Asia played a special role in showcasing the achievements of state socialism and in maintaining good relationships with

36. *Ibid.*, p. 45, article 6, originally in Russian.

37. Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI), f. 17, op. 137 d. 818, pp. 56, 65.

38. M. Ovsianikova, "The Soviet Women and a Five-Years Plan", *ZM*, 1 (1953), p. 22.

39. *ZM*, 2 (1953), p. 11.

40. See, for example, the article on maternity care in Romania: *ZM*, 2 (1961), pp. 5–6; on female students from non-European countries in Czechoslovakia, see *ZM*, 7 (1959), pp. 23–26.

the intellectual elite and some leaders from the Global South.⁴¹ The colonial past of the Soviet republics of Central Asia, and the predominance of Islam as the traditional religion of the majority of its population, played an important role in this process. The WIDF's official publications and archive material suggest that these facts also aided the WIDF's work with women from Africa and Asia.

For example, an issue from 1958 published an article on a conference of writers from Asia and Africa taking place in Tashkent and showed on its cover three women participants in that conference from Japan, Ghana and Uzbekistan (the last presented as a poet: Zulfiiia).⁴² The article about the conference notes that it was attended by several famous personalities, including Professor Dubois and his spouse Shirley Graham Dubois, but that only a few women writers were present.⁴³ Zulfiiia is described as taking part in the organization of the conference and participating in it.⁴⁴ The same issue published a poem by Zulfiiia dedicated to Egypt and mentions her attending a conference of Asian-African solidarity in Cairo.⁴⁵ As in the publications on Soviet women I have discussed, Zulfiiia seems to have been chosen to illustrate the achievements of the Soviet system in furthering women's emancipation. Neither her poem nor any other information about her contain any criticisms of the situation facing women in Uzbekistan. In 1959, the WIDF journalist Maria Theresa Gallo published an article under the remarkable title: "Some Time Ago Uzbekistan was the Most Backward Colony of the Russian Empire, Now a Woman is the President of Uzbekistan".⁴⁶ The article starts by recounting the hard life endured by women in Uzbekistan under the Russian colonial ("tsarist") regime. It describes women fully covering their bodies, getting no education, enclosed in their homes amid economic backwardness; it continues with textual and visual representations of female students in Soviet Uzbekistan.⁴⁷ The main

41. See Rosen Djagalov and Masha Salazkina, "Tashkent '68: A Cinematic Contact Zone", *Russian Review*, 2 (2016), pp. 279–298; Masha Kirasirova, "Building Anti-Colonial Utopia: The Politics of Space in Soviet Tashkent in the Long 1960s", in Chen Jian, Martin Klimke, and Masha Kirasirova et al. (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of the Global Sixties: Between Protest and Nation-Building* (Abingdon, 2018), pp. 53–66; Akbar Rasulov, "Central Asia as an Object of Orientalist Narratives in the Age of Bandung", in Luis Eslava, Michael Fakhri, and Vasuki Nesiiah (eds), *Bandung, Global History and International Law: Critical Paths and Pending Futures* (Cambridge, 2017), pp. 215–231; Nunan, *Humanitarian Invasion*, p. 182.

42. *ZM*, 11 (1958), cover page.

43. William Edward Burghardt Dubois is known as one of the early critics of racism and a defender of the rights of African Americans.

44. "Tashkentskaia konferentsiia pisatelei stran Asii i Afriki", *ZM*, 11 (1958), pp. 15–16.

45. Zulfiiia, "Tebe Egipet", *ZM*, 11 (1958), p. 19.

46. Maria Theresa Gallo, "Neskolko let nazad Uzbekistan byl samoi otstaloi koloniei Rossiiskoi Imperii. Seichas president Uzbekistana. Zhenshchina", *ZM*, 12 (1959), pp. 19–21. The translation of the title from Russian is mine.

47. As I showed in my earlier work, this was the typical construction of texts on non-Russian Soviet women. See Yulia Gradszkova, *Soviet Politics of Emancipation of Ethnic Minority Women: Natsionalka* (Cham, 2018).

protagonist of the article is the head of the Supreme Soviet of Uzbekistan (named the President in article's title): Ms. Nasriddinova. Her life is described as typical of female political leaders of her generation – she was one of the first women in the republic to attend higher education, worked as an engineer, and, finally, was elected to her current political position. The article suggests that old customs and religious fanaticism were the main barriers to the advancement of women before the Soviet state created the favourable conditions now enjoyed by women of the former colonies. Indeed, the article implies that other postcolonial countries should learn from the Soviet experience. Another article, published in issue 2 from 1963, is dedicated to Hamroh Tahirova, a construction engineer from Tajikistan. Her life story is presented as “typical” for women of the region – thanks to the Soviets, she took off her veil and got an education, first in a special school for workers (*rabfak*) and then in a university. According to this article, these successes in professional life contributed to her political career and led her to become minister of construction as well as a member of the government of Tajikistan.⁴⁸ These articles were meant to convince the reader that the Soviet Union created new opportunities for women's careers and political and cultural participation in its territories while disregarding race, ethnicity, or the former colonial or imperial status of the territory.

Representations of women from the countries under state socialism in general and of women from the Soviet borderlands in particular had a very uncritical tone and never mentioned any problems, conflicts, or contradictions in Soviet “emancipation”.⁴⁹ The problems of the double burden, patriarchal family life, restrictions to religious freedoms, and Russification were hidden from readers of the journal, including those in (post)colonial countries.⁵⁰ Positive images of emancipated Soviet women from former colonies were intended to strengthen the WIDF's influence on women in (post)colonial countries, a tactic I will return to in the last part of this article.

CHANGES IN THE WIDF'S STRATEGIES FOR WOMEN'S (POST)COLONIAL RIGHTS

This section explores more closely the ideas surrounding the needs of women in (post)colonial countries voiced by the new organizations participating in the WIDF during the late 1950s to the early 1960s. During this period,

48. A. Chekhovskaia, “Hamroh Tahirova. Stroitel iz solnechnogo kraia”, *ZM*, 2 (1963), pp. 19–20. Ivonne Quiles's article dedicated to the first Afro-Asian Women's Conference in Cairo briefly mentions that Tahirova was the head of the Soviet delegation at the conference, see *ZM*, 4 (1961), p. 8.

49. See, for example, the evaluation of the contradictory results of the Sovietization of Central Asian and other minority women in Marianne Kamp, *The New Woman in Uzbekistan: Islam, Modernity and Unveiling under Communism* (Seattle, WA, 2006), and Gradskova, *Soviet Politics*.

50. Tokhtakhodzhaeva et al., *Sudby I vremia*.

decolonization rapidly gathered pace in Asia and Africa. Here, I explore some changes that took place in the Federation's everyday work as a response to the mass anticolonial movement and to the growing participation of women outside Europe in its structure. As early as 1955, the Bandung Conference of representatives from Asian and African countries showed not only the growing importance of the newly independent nations in global politics, but also their aspirations to modernize their societies and transform the world's legal and economic order.⁵¹ While these aspirations were not free from contradictions and had different versions, a change in the status of women constituted an important part of most of them. Furthermore, women were not only active global participants in the anti-colonial struggle and postcolonial social movements, but also organizers and ideologists in campaigns for the rights for women.⁵²

In the late 1950s, the WIDF's leaders found themselves in a new situation that required them to expand their programmes amid the changing political visions of women from the Global South and, as I wrote elsewhere, incorporate female leaders from Africa and Asia into the WIDF's leadership.⁵³

In some cases, as the documents from the Moscow archives suggest, female activists from Africa and Asia actively looked for the WIDF's support. For example, Fatima Ahmed Ibrahim – a young representative of the Sudanese women's organization created in 1953 – visited the WIDF headquarters in Berlin in 1954. According to the brief report sent to Moscow by the Soviet representative at the WIDF's Secretariat in Berlin, in her talk with members of the Secretariat, Ahmed Ibrahim described the activities and problems that the Sudanese Women's Union faced and reacted enthusiastically to the WIDF's proposal to visit the Sudan and her organization. The Soviet representative also stressed that this conversation showed that the Sudanese organization expected different types of help from the WIDF, including help financing travel to WIDF congresses and other international meetings and advice that shared its expertise on the work of women's organizations in different countries. The Sudanese women also expected that the WIDF would support some campaigns they were organizing in the Sudan, and also establish contacts with women's organizations in countries like India as well as in the Middle East and the UK.⁵⁴

51. Eslava *et al.* (eds), *Bandung, Global History, and International Law*; Christopher Lee, *Making a World After Empire: The Bandung Moment and Its Political Afterlives* (Athens, OH, 2010).

52. See, for example, Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Princeton, NJ, 1995); Laura Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood: Feminisms, Modernity and the State in Nasser's Egypt* (Berkeley, CA, 2011); Meredith Terretta, *Petitioning for our Rights, Fighting for our Nation: The History of the Democratic Union of Cameroonian Women, 1949–1960* (Bamenda, 2013).

53. Gradskova, *The Women's International*.

54. GARF, f. 7928, op. 2 d. 1482, pp. 1–2, 1954, in Russian.

In addition to fostering contact between the WIDF and women from different countries and regions, WIDF congresses played an important role in making the struggle for women's rights in (post)colonial countries in Asia and Africa visible. However, even in the late 1950s, women from Asian and African countries faced many difficulties when taking part in these international congresses. This led to a disconnect between the WIDF's self-presentation and its real presence and influence among women from (post) colonial countries at the congresses. For example, the 1958 WIDF Congress in Vienna made anti-colonialism one of its central topics and spoke in the name of women from countries fighting for and gaining independence. However, it only hosted fifteen representatives from seven African countries, including Algeria, French Sudan (Mali), Senegal, Cameroon, and Madagascar.⁵⁵ Meanwhile, the Soviet delegation alone consisted of sixteen women. Furthermore, the archival documents show that the preparation for the Congress was guided by its European leaders, while the Congress's opening speeches concerned familiar issues from the WIDF agenda, like the protection of peace.⁵⁶ The anti-colonial theme was present, however, in an opening speech by Anna Hornik – a representative of Austria's women's organization – who demanded freedom for the “Algerian heroine Djamilia Bouhired”, who was in prison facing the death penalty.⁵⁷ The heroism of Algerian women fighting against colonialism was praised by Mamia Chentouf, participant in the Algerian Independence Movement.⁵⁸ But the war in Algeria was also discussed in the WIDF's familiar language of fascism and anti-fascism.⁵⁹ Finally, the thematic workshops organized as the part of the Congress did not center the issue of independence, but were dedicated to the defence of life, the possibility for woman to combine work with motherhood, and the rights of children and young people to an education.⁶⁰

The WIDF leadership used different strategies in the following years to bring powerful women from the Global South under its influence. These included participating in conferences and other events in the region, covering the travel costs and accommodation of the region's delegates at WIDF events, expanding the Federation's solidarity work, and partially changing its leadership structures. In addition, the leadership made attempts to bring the WIDF's governing bodies geographically closer to the Global South, for example,

55. GARF, f. 7928, op. 3 d. 14, pp. 58–84.

56. “A message for the International Women's Day, 8 of March 1958”, GARF, f. 7928, op. 3 d. 8, pp. 6–7.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

58. GARF, f. 7928, op. 3 d. 11, pp. 32–37.

59. Speech by Anna Hornik, head of the Vienna organization of the Union of Democratic Women of Austria, GARF, f. 7928, op. 3 d. 11, pp. 6–7.

60. GARF, f. 7928, op. 3 d. 9, p. 2.

through holding some bureau meetings outside Europe – in Jakarta (Indonesia) in 1960 and Bamako (Mali) in 1962.

The archive documents show that, in the early 1960s, demand for public declarations of solidarity and support for women's struggles grew so great that the WIDF systematized and mechanized their delivery. A classified letter the Soviet representative in the Secretariat, Zinaida Lebedeva, sent to Moscow in February 1961 stated:

Due to the need to show solidarity with one or another group fighting for its freedom and national independence, apart from the bulletin we decided to elaborate a special template that could be used every time it would be necessary. [...] In every case [when the WIDF would show solidarity], such a letter should be sent to corresponding addresses and to the national committees.⁶¹

Lebedeva's letter suggests that solidarity was only shown to those who corresponded to the ideological definition of "friends" used by the WIDF. This definition usually excluded so-called bourgeois women's organizations and those representatives of the left (such as Trotskyists) whose interpretations of socialism were considered wrong. Nonetheless, the rapid pace of decolonization in the 1960s meant that members of the Secretariat often had no information about the women's groups or situations in the regions gaining independence. This hindered the WIDF's promotion of solidarity. According to a letter from the Soviet representative in the Secretariat, when they received a request for solidarity, the WIDF Secretariat often made no decision: "We do not know what is going on there [...] we have to wait".⁶²

In 1960, the WIDF organized its first bureau meeting outside Europe, in Jakarta, Indonesia. A classified report by the Soviet representative, Maria Skotnikova, from the WIDF's Secretariat in Berlin, dated 23 March 1960, informed the CSW in Moscow that the WIDF general secretary, Carmen Zanti, felt the meeting would mean "the members of the Bureau could understand better the problems that women in Asia and Africa have".⁶³ It seems that meeting in the physical environment of the Global South made Zanti – and other participants in the WIDF – think about the differences in working conditions between women's organizations from (Western and Eastern) Europe and the Global South. Several prominent participants in the meeting expressed critical views of the WIDF's work in Asia. In a talk delivered in Jakarta, Anasuya Gyanchand – the representative of the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) – concisely outlined the problems women from newly independent countries encountered while attempting to cooperate with the WIDF. The Executive Committee of the NFIW's report, presented by Gyanchand, included many negative comments on the WIDF's activities

61. GARF, f. 7928, op. 4 d. 149, p. 15.

62. *Ibid.*, pp. 15–16, in Russian.

63. GARF, f. 7928, op. 4 d. 142, pp. 52–54.

in the Global South. Indeed, it started by stating that the WIDF had to make more of an effort if it was interested in attracting women from Asia and Africa:

In our opinion the WIDF, [...] still was not able to find out the key slogans which would appeal to the vast masses of women of the East and was not able to work out organizations forms that would correspond to the conditions of these countries.

It was a fact that the women of Asia and Africa did not play a leading part in the WIDF, and that, with the exception of the Chinese and some other countries, either whole countries remained outside the sphere of our organization, or the women who were elected to the leading bodies of the WIDF did not represent the leadership of the broad masses of women in our countries [...].⁶⁴

The Indian women's organization saw a direct connection between the lack of representation of Asian (and other non-European) women in the WIDF's leadership and its difficulties formulating a programme that would attract women from the "Third World". However, their criticism was not limited to issues of representation; they emphasized important differences between the living conditions and political situations of women in Africa and Asia, of which the WIDF's leadership was not sufficiently aware. One such problem was the different attitudes among women in former colonial countries towards men. According to the report: "In our countries, men have themselves advocated reforms and encouraged women to break their shackles."⁶⁵

The report also indicates that class structures in countries in the Global South were more complex than the (Eastern and Western) European leaders of the WIDF were used to considering.

We feel that our friends in Europe and America are too used to looking at the different social strata of people as "industrial workers, capitalists, farmers or agriculturalists". They find it difficult to understand that different levels of social emancipation exist both in the town and country-side [...].⁶⁶

The five pages of critical remarks on the WIDF's work written by the NFIW has a friendly tone and was intended to increase the WIDF leadership's awareness of existing problems. However, the WIDF's attempts to cooperate with women's organizations from the Global South were often met with more openly negative reactions and resistance.⁶⁷ The archival materials demonstrate that, during the 1960s, the WIDF carefully followed developments in the women's movement in Africa and tried to attract women's organizations from Africa to its side. For example, the 1963 report titled "The WIDF's Connections with the Women's Organizations in Africa" shows that it was easier to maintain contacts with some organizations than with others. The

64. GARF, f. 7928, op. 3 d. 410, p. 66, in English.

65. *Ibid.*, p. 67; for more on this report, see Gradskova, *The Women's International*, pp. 122–126.

66. GARF, f. 7928, op. 3 d. 410, p. 69.

67. See Gradskova, *The Women's International*, pp. 119–120.

report notes that the state-supported Tunisian women's organization – the National Union of Tunisian Women – was not interested in cooperation with the WIDF, while the WIDF did have contacts with a small clandestine organization, the Union of Tunisian Women.⁶⁸ The report demonstrates that women's organizations from the Sudan, South Africa, and Morocco participated in the WIDF; however, the Federation did not manage to preserve contacts that were established with other countries, such as the Côte d'Ivoire.⁶⁹ The document notes that, even though a delegation from this country took part in the WIDF's external bureau meeting in Bamako in 1962, the WIDF had lost contact with its members by the time the report was written.

Maintaining contacts, forming allegiances, and attracting members from among Africa's women's organizations was increasingly important for the WIDF. This was not only due to the Federation's interests in women's rights, but also Cold War competition. This is evident in the words of the WIDF's vice-president Funmilayo Ransome Kuti, a representative from Nigeria, at the WIDF's 1962 bureau meeting. This meeting was dedicated to preparations for the 1963 WIDF Congress in Moscow, an occasion that, according to Ransome Kuti, would "be an important event". She explained that "many international and other organizations want to get African women under their influence [...] Thus, the WIDF should deal with the problems concerning the women of Africa and actively work with these problems".⁷⁰

According to the same report, in the period leading up to the meeting many "bourgeois women's organizations [were] trying to establish contacts with the African countries". The document names the International Council of Social-Democratic Women, the International Women's Alliance, and the International Council of Women.⁷¹ This confirms Ransome Kuti's comments about competition for alliances with African women and suggests that the WIDF took this competition very seriously. The same file contains another document with a short description of the activities that other transnational bodies – political, cooperative, religious, and agrarian – were organizing for women and girls in Africa. These included offering fellowships, organizing housekeeping courses, and giving healthcare lectures⁷². Among other things, this review pays attention to the activities of the UK and Israeli governments, private foundations like the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Swedish social democrats.⁷³

68. GARF, f. 7928, op. 3 d. 799, p. 7, document in Russian.

69. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

70. GARF, f. 7928, op. 3 d. 790, p. 29, in Russian.

71. GARF, f. 7928, op. 3 d. 799, p. 10.

72. Recent research on Israel's work with women in Africa suggests that the WIDF was right to be afraid of the competition. See Daniel Kupfert Heller, "Gender, Development and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: The Politics of Study Tours for Women from the Global South in the State of Israel, 1958–1973", *History Australia*, 17 (2020), pp. 678–694.

73. GARF, f. 7928, op. 3 d. 799, pp. 13–17.

The document also indicates some discrepancies between the position of the Federation and the position of some African female activists. These African women stressed that “the solution to the problems of women and children [...] depends on the solution to the problem of national independence”, and they considered that the question of détente defended by the Soviet Union occupied a “secondary place compared to independence”.⁷⁴ According to the report, African women often supported the “neutralist” position of their governments. The Soviet report therefore suggests that African female activists considered both the USSR and the US responsible for the continuing arms race. Thus, in some cases, women from the Global South doubted that the WIDF could fully understand and represent their interests on the transnational stage.

The need to keep women from (post)colonial countries interested in the WIDF together with a fear of losing the Cold War competition with the “West” led the WIDF to broaden its repertoire of activities, including organizing research trips and seminars and offering fellowships for women to study in the Eastern bloc.⁷⁵ This contributed to a further strategic development in the examples of success the WIDF presented to the women of “Soviet Asia”, that I discuss in the next section.

THE WIDF IN THE 1960S AND THE ROLE OF SOVIET “WOMEN OF COLOUR”

While most newly independent countries saw economic development and overcoming the legacy of colonialism as their most important tasks, the WIDF aimed to provide advice on how women’s legal status and practical well-being could be improved. It is likely that the readmission of the Federation as an NGO at the Economic and Social Council of the UN (ECOSOC) in 1967 contributed to its efforts to present itself as an organization concerned with scientific expertise on women’s rights rather than politics. This image of international expertise in women’s rights was meant to help wash away the Federation’s associations with the “Eastern bloc” and Moscow, making it more attractive for governments and women in (post)colonial countries. The WIDF’s journal played a leading role in this transformation. As I have written elsewhere, from 1966 onwards the federation reviewed the concepts published in its main periodical, aiming to make it more scientific by offering increased space to contributors with doctoral degrees and university positions.⁷⁶

74. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

75. See Gradskova, *The Women’s International*, p. 175.

76. *Ibid.*, pp. 171–172.

For example, an article by Dr. Marguerite Thibert (France), published in 1967, is dedicated to women's influence on political decision-making; it was related to an International Seminar in Rome co-organized by the WIDF.⁷⁷ Referring to international law, Thibert states that the Declaration of Human Rights and Convention on the Political Rights of Women adopted by the UN in 1952 were important steps on the way to women's rights. At the same time, she implies that assumptions about the advancement of women's political participation cannot be fully justified on the basis of legal information alone. According to Thibert, in some cases women could be misused. Their political participation could be used to satisfy the needs of another political party or group and women taking part in elections might lack a full understanding of their responsibility and the empowering nature of this act.⁷⁸ Another article published by the WIDF journal in 1967, authored by Prof. Anita Grandke – described as a representative of the Academy of Sciences of the GDR – is titled “Women's Equal Rights and Social Progress”. Grandke argues that women's rights and the development of society are inter-related; that more rights for women correspond to a more developed society.⁷⁹ However, similarly to Thibert, Grandke's conclusion implies that any change in the political conditions of women does not automatically lead to their increased influence in society and advocates for more serious reforms.

Reading the WIDF's journal it is possible to assume that education and family law were particularly important areas in the WIDF's work for women's rights in Asia and Africa. For example, the first issue from 1968 makes a comparative assessment of levels of literacy among women in different countries and contains an article by Lie Oumou, an activist from Mali, who claims that the development of the economy would be impossible without investment in “human capital”. According to Oumou, illiteracy makes women in many postcolonial countries an unused reserve of workers and hinders them from contributing politically to society.⁸⁰ The second issue from the same year, with a subtitle “Women and Family”, contains several articles authored by representatives of different geopolitical regions and organizations who defend the importance of equality between men and women in the family. In particular, property rights and rights preserving children's custody after divorce are advocated with references to the conventions adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1966 (The Convention on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights) and the Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against women adopted

77. Marguarete Thibert, “Imeyut li zhenshchiny golos pri priniatii reshenii?”, *ZM*, 1 (1967), pp. 18–19.

78. *Ibid.*, pp. 18–19.

79. Anita Grandke, “Ravnopravie zhenshchin i ssotsialnyi progress”, *ZM*, 3 (1967), pp. 14–15.

80. Lie Oumou, “Obrazovanie zhenshchin i ego sviaz s trudom”, *ZM*, 1 (1968), pp. 19–20.

by the UN in 1967.⁸¹ The authors of these articles show that in some cases family laws even in “developed” countries did not give equal rights to women (for example, in Austria).⁸² An article by Dr. Shahnaz Alami stresses that feudal-patriarchal customs and Muslim laws can hinder equality in the family.⁸³ Alami particularly criticizes the laws enabling polygamy and discriminating against women gaining custody of their children that were enshrined in new Family Legislation in Iran. And, finally, an article by Cristina Vrono in the same issue reports that the first Congress of Women in Guinea banned polygamy and made the elimination of female illiteracy among its most important goals.⁸⁴

It can be assumed that, by the late 1960s, the WIDF paid attention to some of the problems voiced in the NFIW’s 1960 report from Jakarta, not least through diversifying its policy. Indeed, the WIDF’s defence of women as mothers and workers focused increasingly on the importance of literacy, primary education, and the professional education of women in newly independent countries. Meanwhile, its defence of family rights started to focus on the issues of property rights and the custody of children.

However, as I have already mentioned, the WIDF’s publications continued to report on the Soviet advancement of women’s rights, particularly in non-Russian republics, as an example for women in African and Asian countries. The struggle for independence and its new connections with women’s organizations in Asia and Africa, increased the importance of non-Russian regions and women for the WIDF’s work. Gradually, Central Asian women – usually high-level Soviet party and state officials – became more responsible for greeting women from Asia and Africa, including WIDF delegations, and exhibiting to them Soviet advancements in the rights and opportunities of women from “former colonies”.

One example of this is connected to a seminar, supported by the WIDF, on education for women from Asia and Africa that took place in Tashkent on the 13–15 September 1962.⁸⁵ The seminar included lectures and discussions in Tashkent as well as study trips to other Central Asian Soviet republics. According to the archival reports, the guests were impressed by the educational facilities and number of female students they saw.⁸⁶ Hujuma Shukurova – the head of the Uzbekistan Society of Friendship with People of Africa and Asia and a member of the CSW – played an important role in

81. Edith Geumery, “International Documents for Protection of Family”, *ZM*, 2 (1968), pp. 16–17.

82. Margarete Reinelt, “Vo imia samoi elementarnoi spravedlivosti”, *ZM*, 2 (1968), p. 23.

83. Shahnaz Alami, “Iran. Chto prines zhenshchine novyi zakon o semie”, *ZM*, 2 (1968), pp. 20–22.

84. Cristina Vrono, “Guinea. Vazhnoe reshenie”, *ZM*, 2 (1968), p. 28.

85. GARE, f. 7928, op. 3 d. 776.

86. See more in Gradskova, *The Women’s International*, pp. 102–103.

organizing the seminar.⁸⁷ While official information on the seminar does not contain many details about Shukurova's place in the Soviet hierarchy, some information about this can be found in an "In memoriam" publication from 1980.⁸⁸ According to this publication, Shukurova, born in 1927, was a member of the CPSU from 1950 and held different offices in the Soviet and Communist Party apparatus; she also wrote a dissertation on the Soviet emancipation of women in Uzbekistan. Shukurova's appointment as head of the Uzbek Friendship Society in 1962 seems to have been strategically important: the Soviet leadership considered her a loyal member of the Soviet system, while guests from non-European countries could find in her an emancipated woman from a former colony, embodying the achievements of Soviet equality.

However, the most remarkable use of the image of the "emancipated woman" of Central Asia in the work of the WIDF is probably the (unique, according to my knowledge) case of the Central Asian woman sent to represent the Soviet Union at the WIDF Secretariat in Berlin in the second half of the 1960s. This was Zuhra Rahimbabaeva from Uzbekistan, a member of the Communist Party who – like Shukurova – had a doctoral degree in history and specialized in Soviet emancipation. Her appointment in Berlin was most likely made in the hope of improving communication with women from the formerly colonized countries of Africa and Asia and improving the Soviet's position in the growing competition between the Soviet Union and China in the Global South. Indeed, as Rahimbabaeva's speeches and publications show she could speak the "Soviet language";⁸⁹ in her work, Rahimbabaeva stresses the importance of the Soviet politics of emancipation in the 1920s and 1930s.⁹⁰ In her book published in 1949 – *Women of Uzbekistan on the Way to Communism* – she stated that the "happiness of the Uzbek woman is unlimited":

[...] the Great October has given her equal rights with men in all the spheres of economic, state and cultural life, it woke up her talents and her creativity that had been sleeping for centuries before that.⁹¹

87. GARF, f. 7928, op. 3 d. 776, p. 26.

88. "In Memoriam. Hujuma Samatovna Shukurova 1927–1980", *Obshchestvennye nauki v Uzbekistane*, 7 (1980), p. 56.

89. Ali Igmen, *Speaking Soviet with an Accent: Culture and Power in Kyrgyzstan* (Pittsburg, PA, 2012).

90. The story presented by Rakhimbabaeva was aimed for glorifying the Soviet politics. It did not include any critical perspective on these politics, nor did it specifically address the thousands of women who lost their lives as a result of *bujum*. On the last issue, see e.g. Kamp, *The New Woman in Uzbekistan*.

91. Zuhra Rahimbabaeva, *Zhenshchiny Uzbekistana na puti k kommunizmu* (Tashkent, 1949), p. 3.

During the approximately four years during which Rahimbabaeva worked as a Soviet representative at the Secretariat in Berlin, she participated in multiple conferences and seminars with women from Asian and African countries and visited Asian countries as an official representative of the WIDF Secretariat.⁹² The interview with her and Dina Levin – a representative of the WIDF Secretariat from a “Western” country – published in the WIDF journal in 1972, suggests that Rahimbabaeva was elected for this mission not least because of an expectation that she would bring authority to sensitive discussions with Asian women concerning women’s rights, religion, and anti-colonialism. Like the images of Central Asian women from the official WIDF publication I described at the beginning of this article, Rahimbabaeva could connect her status as a “former colonial subject” with her current position as a Soviet woman enjoying a prestigious place in the Soviet (multinational) state. This could contribute to the possibility of her forming connections with her interlocutors – women from Asia, Africa, and Latin America – in a different way to her colleagues from Moscow, East Berlin, or the “West”. This different way of creating relationships with women from former colonies was possibly furthered by Rahimbabaeva’s non-whiteness. Unlike the Russian/Slavic women who used to represent the USSR in the WIDF, Rahimbabaeva could be read as a Soviet “woman of colour” and the leadership of the CSW expected her to be particularly important in building alliances with women from Asia and Africa.

In the 1960s, the number of women from outside Europe grew both in the WIDF as a whole and in its leadership.⁹³ In 1975, the permanent members of the bureau included: one vice-president from Africa, Funmilayo Ransome Kuti (Nigeria); two from Latin America, Julia Arevalo (Uruguay) and Vilma Espín de Castro (Cuba); and two from Asia, Aruna Asaf Ali (India) and Fuki Kushida (Japan). The bureau included only three women from countries under state socialism, namely, Valentina Tereshkova (USSR), Ilse Thile (GDR), and Gusta Fučíkova (Czechoslovakia), as well as one from Australia, Frida Brown, and one from Western Europe, Marie-Claude Vaillant-Couturier (France).⁹⁴ Although about half the leaders belonged to communist parties in their respective countries, the composition of the WIDF leadership had changed, and representatives of European countries now constituted a minority. In 1975, the Federation represented 117 women’s organizations from 101 countries; representation of women’s organizations from the Global South was high.⁹⁵

92. Interview with Dina Levin and Zuhra Rahimbabaeva on their visit of women’s organizations of India, Nepal, Ceylon, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, *ZM*, 4 (1968), pp. 32–38.

93. Gradskova, *The Women’s International*.

94. *WWW*, 1(1975), p. 3.

95. *WWW*, 2 (1975), p. 1.

In practice, the relationships inside the organization continued to be more complex than a numerical account of its leadership and members implies. The classified correspondence between the CSW in Moscow and its representative in Berlin shows this. Rahimbabaeva, who continued working in Berlin as a Soviet representative to the WIDF Secretariat, in 1972 was tasked with lobbying for a leading role for the WIDF in the upcoming conference of the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization (AAPSO). Mentioning other Soviet representatives' unsuccessful attempts to gain leading roles in the preparation of previous conference (which was attributed to China – "due to separatist activities of the Maoists"), the CSW representative, Xenia Proskurnikova, suggested that Rahimbabaeva should work with the WIDF to become "one of the organizers of this conference".⁹⁶ While the archive documents do not show how successful Rahimbabaeva was in this regard, they suggest the complex role given to Soviet women of colour in the WIDF's work with (post)colonial countries. They had to represent emancipated women from former colonies, while contributing to the realization of the "Eastern bloc's" geopolitical aspirations in the Global South.

CONCLUSION

The materials connected to the WIDF in the archive of the CSW show that we cannot ignore Soviet attempts to influence the Federation and gain support from women in (post)colonial countries. These were particularly visible in the use of the Federation's official publications to advertise Soviet achievements in emancipation. Soviet representatives in the Federation also had to make their aspirations match those of women from newly independent countries. While the Federation's official publications often make its internal conflicts and tensions invisible, the archival materials partly reconstruct them.

This study shows that the WIDF's leaders (including its Soviet representatives) significantly improved their understanding of the needs and problems of women from the Global South over the history of this transnational organization. In the beginning, women from countries outside Europe were considered to have similar problems to European women, with the addition of colonial exploitation. The incorporation of significant numbers of women's organizations from newly independent countries into the WIDF contributed to an understanding that their concerns were more specific. Unlike existing scholarship focused on the WIDF's engagement with the Bandung spirit prior to 1955, I pay attention to the composition of the WIDF's leadership in that time period and its knowledge of the problems facing women in colonial and dependent countries.

96. GARF, f. 7928, op. 3 d. 2941, p. 2, 15 February 1972, document in Russian.

The materials I have explored show that acknowledging the importance of national liberation for women in Asia and Africa influenced the Federation's views on alliances between women from (Western and Eastern) Europe and the Global South. If in the late 1940s the relationships between the two was seen as a form of "assistance", from the late 1950s onwards, women of the Global South were recognized as having their own agency. In the context of the Cold War, their participation in the WIDF – an organization geopolitically linked to the Soviet Union – became a particularly important resource for cultural influence. The competition between each "side" of the Cold War adversaries to attract women from Africa and Asia led to internal conflicts in the WIDF, but it also strengthened the Federation's focus on rights, including its criticism of racism and colonialism.

Finally, the new composition of the Federation and new geopolitical demands led the WIDF and its Soviet member organization (which always held an important role) to adopt new strategies for representing women from countries under state socialism. In the late 1960s, the Soviet Union was represented in the WIDF's Secretariat – and at several international events outside Europe – by a non-Russian and non-Slavic woman from the Soviet borderlands. This "woman of colour" became an important mediator between the WIDF's ideological programme and potential participants from the Global South at a time when the world order was drastically changing.