Workers, Mothers, and Françaises: The French Communist Party and Women in the Interwar Period (1920 - 1939)

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WORKERS, MOTHERS, AND FRANÇAISES: THE FRENCH COMMUNIST PARTY AND WOMEN IN THE INTERWAR PERIOD (1920 - 1939)

by

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B.A. University of Central Florida, 2019

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of History in the College of Arts and Humanities at the University of Central Florida Orlando, Florida

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ABSTRACT

A survey of the first two decades of the French Communist Party’s propaganda reveals a wide range of female imagery, from the androgynous, Soviet-style militant of the 1920s to the fashionable, feminine figure of the 1930s. Earlier scholars noting this discrepancy argued that the Party first adopted the Soviet “new woman,” based on the Marxist principle of absolute gender equality but rejected it just over a decade later in order to broaden their appeal to the French masses. These studies, however, were restricted by the limited access to the French Communist Party’s interwar-era archives. Using recently-digitized Party meeting records, reports, letters, and propaganda material, this MA thesis takes a second look at the Party’s attitude toward gender roles and mobilizing women in the interwar period (1920 – 1939). Finding that female Party members directed the work among women according to a complex internal logic which justified dropping the Soviet new woman for a more conventional model, this thesis argues that the Party’s changing stance on gender roles reflected the strength of the French republican notions of gender and politics which shaped the Party’s response to the Soviet model of womanhood.
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Through two scholarships – the Barton Travel Research Grant and the Thomas D. Greenhaw Scholarship – the UCF History Department helped me fund a week-long research trip to consult undigitized police surveillance records at the Archives Nationales in Paris. This trip would also not have been possible without the efforts of my advisor, Dr. Lyons, and of the History Department’s Administrative Coordinator, Sira Ambrosecchia, who had to tackle a mountain of international travel-related paperwork.
Finally, I would like to thank my family for their support throughout this experience, who very kindly refrained from ever saying, “It’s just another paper, how hard can it be?” and even pretended to be interested whenever I talked about French communists and pronatalism in interwar France.
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INTRODUCTION

A casual survey of the first two decades of the French Communist Party’s propaganda reveals a wide range of female imagery. Just after its creation in 1920, the Parti communiste français (PCF) juxtaposed the image of the weeping or downtrodden mother with the androgynous, Soviet-style militant (see figure 2.1), but replaced both in the late 1930s with a fashionable, smiling, and feminine figure (see figure 3.5). The range of themes and styles over a twenty-year period beg the question: how do these representations reflect the Party’s attitude towards women and gender, and why do these representations change over time? To answer these questions, this thesis explores how the French Communist Party engaged in France’s political and cultural debates about women’s gender roles, from the party’s creation in 1920 to the end of the Popular Front in 1939.

Since the 1980s, historians have examined how French society grappled with women’s roles in the turmoil of the mid-twentieth century, demonstrating, in Joan W. Scott’s words, “the ways in which the concept of gender legitimizes and constructs social relationships…and the contextually specific ways in which politics constructs gender and gender constructs politics” in French history.¹ Studies on the French Third Republic (1870 – 1940) demonstrated that republican thinkers and lawmakers considered the patriarchal family as the foundation of society, with women restricted to the private sphere, subordinate to the head of the household, and in

charge of producing and educating children, according to the principles of “republican motherhood” developed by French republican thinkers after the 1789 Revolution.²

As Elinor Accompo emphasized, “by turning motherhood and other private family responsibilities into political and social concerns, Third Republic politicians ironically increased women’s public function.”³ Prior to World War I, this manifested in the rise of the pronatalist movement and the foundation of the welfare state. France experienced a slow but steady population decline as the country industrialized, beginning in the late eighteenth century. Equating demographic and military strength, the pronatalists blamed France’s loss in the Franco-Prussian war on underpopulation and urged the French State to take steps to reverse this trend.⁴ As industrialization brought more and more women into the paid workforce, especially the factories, Republican legislators began to pass laws which aimed to protect and ensure that working-class women could reproduce the next, healthy generation of Frenchmen.⁵

The massive casualties of the Great War gave a new urgency to the pronatalist message, which, in the interwar period, condemned the childless and promoted parenthood as a couple’s

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civic duty and a woman’s natural vocation. As Mary Louise Roberts demonstrates, the experience of the First World War seemed to threaten traditional gender roles; France’s leaders and intellectuals feared the social consequences of women’s relative autonomy during the war. 6 These fears centered around the symbol of the *femme moderne* – a single, liberated, and childless woman who not only threatened French masculinity and the family ideal, but also alarmed France’s pronatalists because, Cheryl Koos argues, she threatened France’s demographic future. 7 While the pronatalists promoted motherhood and condemned the *femme moderne*, French feminists countered with their own diverse views on gender roles, which ranged from radical egalitarianism to a more conservative, hierarchical vision of society. 8

The French Communist Party entered the political sphere during this period of social and political concern over gender roles. Officially created 1920 when the majority of the French Socialist Party voted to join the Communist International, it grew rapidly in the early 1920s until the Comintern imposed changes, known as Bolshevization, which alienated the Party from many of its own members. Its membership reached its lowest point in the early 1930s, but the Party achieved real political success later in the decade when it joined with other politically left and center parties in order to halt the rising tide of fascism in France. Known as the Popular Front, this coalition of parties achieved a major electoral victory in 1936 and formed a government headed by the Leon Blum of the Socialist Party, which had itself grown after the

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Socialist/Communist split in 1920. Once in power, the Popular Front government carried out key social reforms, such as establishing a forty-hour work week and guaranteeing workers a two-week paid vacation. In 1938, however, the Popular Front fell apart and the subsequent government banned the French Communist Party after the German-Soviet Pact of 1939 put the Soviet-influenced Party’s loyalty to the French state into question. While it remained illegal under the new Vichy government, the Party nevertheless rose again in importance during the Occupation, as it played a key role in the French Resistance.

How did the French Communist Party engage with these anxieties over gender roles in this twenty-year period? French and English-speaking scholars have addressed the question of women in the French Communist Party since the 1990s, but the studies have been limited by availability of sources. Some studies focus strictly on the role of women in the Party, such as Jacqueline Tardivel’s 1996 dissertation “Des pacifistes aux résistantes : les militantes communistes, en France, dans l’entre-deux-guerres,” and Claude Pennetier and Bernard Pudal’s 2014 chapter “La part des femmes, des femmes à part.” Tardivel’s dissertation, based on memoirs, interviews, and police records, highlighted the diversity among women communists during the interwar period, while Pennetier and Pudal took advantage of opened archives to carry out a sociological study of the same women to identify those factors they all had in common: family connections to the Party and employment as teachers or white-collar workers, which was

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11 The PCF restricted access to their archives until the 1990s, after which point the Party began to hand it over to independent archives. As discussed later in the chapter, scholars did not have easy access to this material until the mid-2000s.
a disadvantage during the Bolshevization era, when the Comintern pressured the Party to “proletarianize” itself by promoting blue-collar, industry workers who fit the narrow Soviet definition of “worker.”

Other studies explored how the PCF mobilized women in the interwar period. Michel Garbez first addressed the question in his analysis of the PCF’s engagement with French women from 1920 to the study’s present-day, 1980. His “La question féminine dans le discours du parti communiste française” highlighted how, in this sixty-year period, the Party addressed women “based on the sequence women/reproducer/producer, but without articulation between these three terms” – that is, it alternatively addressed them as mothers or workers but without making these categories mutually exclusive. Eric Weitz further explored the variety of ways in which the French Communist Party constructed femininity in his 1996 comparison of the French, German, and Italian Communist Parties’ approach to mobilizing women during the interwar period. His “The Heroic Man and Ever-Changing Woman” introduced the Party’s shift, mirrored in the other communist parties, from a Soviet-inspired militant to a much more traditionally feminine figure in the 1930s.

Christine Bard and Jean-Louis Robert’s 1998 “The French Communist Party and Women, 1920-1939: From ‘Feminism’ to Familialism” expanded on this shift in the most

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thorough study, to date, of the PCF’s strategy for mobilizing women during the interwar period. Bard and Robert demonstrated how, as part of the conditions to joining the Soviet-controlled Communist International in 1920, the Party adopted the Soviet stance on gender equality which was based on women’s liberation from gender roles, the family structure, and from the constraints of so-called “bourgeois” sexual morality. Its members adopted and promoted an image scholars named “the Soviet new woman:” a visually androgynous figure, who eschewed fashion and other symbols of traditional femininity and demonstrated “masculine” characteristics, such as strength, aggressiveness, and leadership. In the 1930s, however, the Party abandoned this transgressive figure to broaden its public appeal during the Popular Front era. Dedicated to emphasizing its commitment to France, its culture, and its future, the French Communist Party engaged in the growing pronatalist movement to reestablish itself as a Party of family values. Its propaganda celebrated a new vision of communist womanhood: a charming, fashionable wife or mother engaged in gender-specific activism, such as social aid or pacifism. Bard and Robert noted that the Soviet Union underwent a similar shift, from encouraging women to join the workforce in the 1920s to promoting maternity and domesticity in the 1930s, and while the extent of Soviet influence was unknown, they argued that this shift was also due to the fact that the “Soviet feminism,” as they called it, was “a sort of foreign transplant into French culture” that did not survive the test of the 1930s.15

Later studies supported this assessment about the end of the Soviet new woman in interwar France, such as Geoff Read’s 2014 book, Republic of Men: Gender and the Political

Parties in Interwar France, a comparison of how all political parties in interwar France perceived and used gender in their discourse, and Susan Whitney’s 2009 study of Communist youth groups during the Popular Front years. Her Mobilizing Youth: Communists and Catholics in Interwar France demonstrated how, during the Popular Front, the Communist Youth section for girls promoted traditionally feminine qualities, such as maternity, beauty, and respectability, and even took similar stances on the question of family and femininity as the Catholic girls’ organizations in France.

Using a body of recently digitized PCF-related archives, this thesis delves further into the Party’s approach to mobilizing women in the interwar period. With access to more of the Party’s records, it seeks to answer a few key questions: who directed the Party’s work among women, to what extent was the Comintern involved in its decisions, and by what internal logic did these directors justify this shift from the Soviet new woman to a much more conformist representation of femininity?

The Party’s interwar-era archives have a history of their own. In the 1920s and 1930s, the PCF sent Moscow copies of their meeting records and accounts of their activities: a body of material that expanded significantly during the Bolshevization era and diminished after 1934, as the Comintern took a step back from overseeing the Party’s activity during the Popular Front. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, French historians affiliated with the University of Burgundy travelled to the Russian State Archives for Social and Political History (RGASPI) to create

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microfilm copies of this interwar material, and began to index their acquisitions in the late 1990s. The Party maintained some of its own records, as well, and preserved them at its headquarters and the Marxist Library in Paris, but restricted access to them until the 1990s. It released them to the Departmental Archives of Seine-Saint-Denis, where they first became accessible in 2005. Thus, the key studies on women and the PCF, including those published in the late 1990s during this period of archive acquisition and release, do not engage with these internal Party records, and nor do the more recent English-language books on this topic. Beginning in 2013, the University of Burgundy undertook an extensive digitization project, known as Paprik@2F, for all these PCF archives, including those deposited at Seine-Saint-Denis, and those retrieved from Moscow, which included some long-lost records from the Office of National Security in Paris.  

Throughout the interwar period, the French police kept the communist party under surveillance as a matter of national security, confiscating propaganda material and collecting information on the prominent party members and the Party’s satellite organizations. During Paris’s occupation, the German Gestapo confiscated more than half these files on French communists and brought them to Czechoslovakia, where they changed hands once again when the Red Army liberated the country in 1944 and ended up in Moscow. In the 1990s, the former Soviet Union returned these police files, which are now housed at France’s National Archives. They are partly digitized, thanks to Paprik@2F, but I had the opportunity to access the

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undigitized files related to thesis through a research trip to the National Archives in November 2021. This thesis relies primarily on the two archive collections returned from Moscow. Taken together, these two source bases reflect the Party’s internal debates and decisions, as seen in the reports, letters, meeting minutes, and directives transmitted to Moscow, as well as the image it portrayed to the French public, as seen in the propaganda posters and pamphlets collected by the French police.

In answering these questions about the Party’s approach to gender roles in the interwar period, this thesis challenges Bard and Robert’s argument that the Party, as a whole, adopted the Soviet model of gender equality at its conception, only to reject it a decade or so later because it did not fit the Party’s changing political needs. My argument, instead, fits into a broader historiographical shift concerning the Comintern’s influence on the French Communist Party. While earlier studies of the Party either insisted on its autonomy or emphasized the overriding influence of the Comintern, recent studies based on the opened Comintern and PCF archives reconceptualized the PCF’s relationship with the Comintern, arguing that the French Communist Party’s policy decisions were the product of complex interactions between the two bodies. Serge Wolikow, summing up this new approach, wrote that the Comintern “over-determined” the PCF’s activity but that the Party also tended to “take on initiatives induced particularly by the

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19 Jean Vigreux, “Les premiers inventaires nominatifs du fichier central de la surete nationale resistue par la Russie…,” Paprik@2F, https://anrpaprika.hypotheses.org/4632, accessed February 9, 2022. This week-long research trip was possible thanks to the UCF History Department’s Barton Student Research Grant and the efforts of my advisor, Dr. Lyons.

20 The police archives contain little propaganda aimed at women produced during the Popular Front, so the third chapter which discusses that period also uses the Party’s journal Femmes, produced from 1934 to 1939, digitized and housed in the Bibliothèque nationale de France’s Gallica. One major source that I have not been able to access is the Party’s paper for women produced during the 1920s, the L’Ouvrière.
logic of French political action.”21 The Party was both French and Soviet, and the interaction between these elements created, as Wolikow put it, “a composite ideology, Bolshevik, antiparliamentary and pacifist on one side, and republican and patriotic on the other.”22

Reflecting this historiographical shift, this thesis demonstrates that the interaction between Soviet Marxism and French culture shaped the French Communist Party’s strategies for mobilizing women in a way similar to the relationship described by Wolikow: while the Comintern “overdirected” the Party’s approach to mobilizing women, the Party also took on initiatives or interpreted the Comintern’s directives in ways consistent with French political culture and traditional gender roles. Building on Wolikow’s notion of a “composite ideology,” I argue that overlapping theories of republican motherhood and pronatalism created a powerful theoretical framework regarding gender roles, family, and sexuality, which shaped how members of the French Communist Party interpreted Soviet feminism and planned to mobilize women throughout the interwar period. While tensions rose between the men and women in the Party over their respective interpretations of Soviet feminism, I argue that, rather than adopting and rejected Soviet feminism, from the very beginning both elements tried to reconcile or navigate these two systems of thought, which contributed to the changes visible in the Popular Front. Soviet feminism ended not because it did not survive the test of the 1930s, but because it did not survive the test of the 1920s.

The first chapter discusses the foundational period (1920 – 1923) during which the early Party members clashed over their interpretations of Soviet feminism and the Comintern’s instructions for mobilizing women, due to the conflicting notions of gender roles which lay at the foundation of the French culture and Soviet ideology. It demonstrates that many of the male Party leaders, concerned about public perception and unenthusiastic about including women, sought to soften the image of the Soviet new woman and the Party’s use of Soviet feminism. The women chosen to organize the Party’s work among women, in accordance with the Comintern’s instructions, opposed these efforts on ideological grounds. Even as they defended Soviet feminism, however, they also catered some of their rhetoric to French sensibilities by taking advantage of the shared elements of maternity and family which figure in both Soviet feminism and republican motherhood.

As chapter two demonstrates, this pattern continued into the Bolshevization era, from 1924 to 1932, when the Comintern took a much more active role in directing all aspects of the French Communist Party, including its work among women. This chapter argues that the changing female directors of the Party’s work among women carried out the Comintern’s guidelines in a way that expressed commitment to the Soviet model while molding the Soviet-inspired rhetoric to fit French social and political needs, with consequences for the Party’s Popular Front era activity. This pattern is best demonstrated in the way the Section discussed the ouvrière, or woman in industry: a controversial figure to pronatalists and an anxiety-provoking one for the working-class who feared that the factory rationalization, which accelerated during the First World War, would de-skill labor and create permanent positions for women in male-dominated industries, to the detriment of male factory workers.
Because of the Comintern’s emphasis on class status, the Central Women’s Section began to divide and hierarchize working-class women according to the type of labor they performed, and to prioritize the *ouvrière*. In their women’s propaganda, the Central Women’s Section directors associated the *ouvrière* with the image and qualities of the Soviet new woman. Their rhetoric, however, about working women, pronatalism, and rationalization presented a different, less controversial image of the *ouvrière* to the men inside and outside the Party. This emerged in large part to the increasing tension between the Central Women’s Section and the Party leadership over the latter’s lack of support and respect for the work among women. Recognizing that the majority of the Party resisted or, at best, ignored the importance of mobilizing women, and that the Party leadership was unlikely to take steps to address this themselves, the Central Women’s Section directors used the language of pronatalism and anti-rationalization to ease male fears about the *ouvrière* and motivate the men in the Party to participate in its work among women.

In accordance to the Comintern’s directions, the Party also tried to reach out to non-workers, especially housewives, through mass organizations with no clear ties to the Party. It did so by emphasizing the more “feminine” qualities of maternal love, family bonds, and “natural” pacifism, in the style demonstrated by the pre-Bolshevization directors. The “masculinity” of the working woman, the “femininity” of the housewife, and the clear hierarchy between the two demonstrate that class was closely intertwined with gender for the Party during this period. The Party’s success among housewives in these mass organization, however, and its failures to attract the desired *ouvrières* inspired a significant strategy shift which predated the Popular Front.
Chapter three looks at the Popular Front era but begins in 1932 when the directors of the Party’s work among women began to step away from the Soviet elements of their mobilization strategies, such as the emphasis on the ouvrière and the use of the Soviet new woman imagery. Instead, they turned to the strategies which made their mass organizations successful and, in doing so, initiated this Popular Front-era shift to a conformist representation of femininity before the Soviet Union made a similar transition. The chapter argues that, while the women communists triggered this shift, elements of Soviet feminism remained in the Party’s propaganda until 1936, when the male Party leaders exhorted communist women to “occupy yourselves with fashion, with the psychological and sentimental problems that interest your sisters” in order to improve their public image and more effectively unite French women under the Popular Front.23 In response, the women communists crafted a new image of the French communist woman, which integrated the militancy of the Soviet new woman with the maternity, duty, and respectability of the republican mother. As the epilogue discusses, this model of militant maternity stood the test of the war and occupation, when the new Vichy regime’s “national revolution” directly challenged the Soviet principle of gender equality, and heavily influenced the Party’s attitude toward women’s gender roles in the immediate postwar era.

While it discusses key women in the Party and their impact on the Party’s approach to mobilizing women, this thesis is by no means a thorough study of women in the Party, the full spectrum of the ways in which the Party mobilized women, or the many female-specific side organizations in which the Party was involved. These are all topics which require more time and

attention than this thesis can give them. Rather, this thesis focuses on the people and the reasoning behind a major evolution in the way that the Party used and discussed women’s gender roles.
CHAPTER 1: CREATING THE FRENCH COMMUNIST PARTY (1920 – 1923)

When the newly formed Soviet Union established the Third Communist International, or Comintern, in 1919, it invited national socialist parties to join and create a global movement dedicated to the proletariat revolution. Like other socialist parties across the world, the French Socialist Party held a vote: in 1920, the majority of the party chose to join the Comintern, thus creating the French Communist Party and leaving a small number of members to preserve the French Socialist Party.¹ Present at this vote were about a dozen women, seven of whom voted to join the Comintern. As Christine Bard and Jean-Louis Robert demonstrated, most of the seven were feminist activists and intellectuals attracted by the Marxist stance on gender equality, who participated in the creation of this new party with “enthusiasm but also vigilance.”²

These conflicting emotions stemmed from the unique character of the French Communist Party which was at once French and Soviet. As outlined in its “Conditions of Admission to the Communist International,” published in 1920, the Soviet leaders of the Comintern insisted that imitating the most successful of communist parties, the Bolsheviks, was the key to bringing the proletarian revolutions to other countries. To be admitted to the Comintern, communist parties pledged to follow the Soviet model and to adhere to the decisions of the Comintern’s leadership body.³ This was the key issue which divided the French Socialist Party in 1920, splitting those who wanted the autonomy to continue following the traditions of the French workers’ parties,

¹ Officially, its name became the French Section of Communist International, often abbreviated as SFIC. However, literature on the party usually uses French Communist Party/PCF.
and those who wanted to “modernize,” in a way, by following the Russian example.\textsuperscript{4} Soviet ideology required the Party to publicly adopt and promote a Marxist take on gender equality, commonly referred to as “Soviet feminism,” which centered on women’s liberation from gender roles, the family structure, and from the constraints of so-called “bourgeois” sexual morality. But how would the overwhelmingly male PCF leadership and members respond to the Soviet model? At the same time, was Soviet feminism suitable for mobilizing women in France where the question of gender roles, the family, and women’s sexuality were highly charged social and political issues?

This chapter explores how conflicting notions of gender roles lay at the foundation of French republican culture and communism, and how the members of the French Communist Party navigated these incompatible systems as they developed their earliest strategies for mobilizing women. Concerned about public perception, many male Party leaders sought to remove or soften the Party’s rhetoric concerning the crucial issues of gender roles and family. The women stood their ground on certain issues by invoking Soviet feminism as a cornerstone of communism, and, although the Comintern did not directly interfere in the PCF’s activities during this period (1920 – 1923), its influence gave force to the women’s positions. At the same time, the leading women in the Party established a pattern, reproduced by their many successors, of catering some of their rhetoric to French sensibilities. Drawing on the notion of motherhood as a natural, social function, which both Soviet feminism and republican motherhood shared, they

used the language of maternity and family to ease male fears about Soviet feminism and adopt the mobilization tactics of feminist pacifism in their early propaganda.

**Gender, Labor, and Politics in the French Third Republic**

When the French Communist Party officially accepted the tenets of Soviet feminism at its First National Congress in 1921, the question of gender roles, the family, and women’s sexuality were highly charged social and political issues in France. The roots of this phenomenon lay in the late-eighteenth century French republican thought. The early French republicans embraced the rhetoric of egalitarianism and universal rights, but, paradoxically, limited the application of these qualities according to gender, and, as the empire expanded, race. During the 1789 Revolution, the republican leaders granted universal citizenship to French nationals, while excluding women from this universal citizenship, and its rights and responsibilities, on the grounds of sexual difference. In their reconceptualization of society, they assigned women a new social role: “republican motherhood.” Women participated in the social body by producing and educating new generations of (male) citizens and future republican mothers. “Naturally” subordinate and restricted to the private sphere, their place was in the family, under the authority of the family patriarch.

Throughout the Third Republic (1870 – 1940), this the politicization of motherhood turned the private sphere into an object of public debate and state intervention, as republican

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5 Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer*; They also excluded their colonial subjects from “universal” citizenship by a similar paradoxical logic, in which “universality” only applied to a particular group of male nationals. For more on citizenship, race, and French republican universalism see Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism between the Two World Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).


legislators connected anxieties about maternity, gender roles, and the hierarchal family to the health of the French Republic and passed legislation centered around these themes to “protect” the social body. France’s demographic decline was the key social issue of the Third Republic. Like other countries in Europe, France’s fertility and mortality rates began to decline from the late eighteenth century to the first half of the twentieth century. Generally, the mortality rates declined many generations prior to the fertility rates, so a country’s population rose quickly before it began to decline. France, however, saw a decline of these rates simultaneously, which meant that its population began to decline while other European countries’ populations seemed to grow. After France’s defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1, politicians, intellectuals, and members of the medical profession – the “pronatalists” – perceived the population decline as a threat to France’s future. This was both because military might remained associated with demography, and because nationalism and the theory of social “degeneration” put a premium on French citizens to preserve the unique character of the nation; immigration and colonial expansion, both of which occurred throughout this period, did not ease these pronatalists’ fears about the future of the “French race.”

Responses to this crisis varied, from feminists who used it as an argument to grant women civil and political rights, to male defenders of the patriarchal family who ignored the role of women in reproduction and only supported state intervention if it strengthened the family. At

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the end of the eighteenth century, the leading party, the Radicals, were somewhere between these two: they acknowledged women’s role and passed paternalist legislation to “protect” maternity.\(^{11}\) The legislation centered on the working woman, or *ouvrière*, whose presence in the public sphere challenged, but did not at all dislodge, the ideal of republican motherhood.

In the late nineteenth century, France’s industrialization and the decline of the agricultural sector brought many women into the cities as paid laborers. The number of women in the workforce steadily rose through the early twentieth century, peaking in 1925. At first, these working women entered industries seen as “feminine” - clothing, textiles, and domestic service - but the demands of the armament industry in World War I propelled women into male-dominated industries just as these “feminine” industries began to decline.\(^{12}\) Although these working women participated more visibly in French economic life, their employers and the French state viewed them as apolitical, domestic beings whose potential for maternity and lack of citizenship rights justified interventions into their private life for the good of the social body.\(^{13}\)

The massive French losses of World War I deepened French fears about the demographic crisis and the nation’s future. Not only had the country lost a generation of men, but the experience seemed to destabilize gender roles and the patriarchal family. More women joined the workforce than ever, taking “male” jobs, and adopting the “male” position of head of household when necessary. The figure of the “modern woman,” *femme moderne*, which emerged at the turn of the century, became the center of public discourse in the 1920s and 1930s. Placed in

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\(^{11}\) Offen, “Depopulation, Nationalism, and Feminism in Fin-de-Siècle France,” 648-676.
\(^{13}\) Stone, “Republican Ideology, Gender, and Class,” 250.
juxtaposition with the *femme au foyer*, or housewife, who follows her “biological” role as wife and mother, the *femme moderne* was fashionable, economically independent, sexually liberated, and supposedly pursued her own desires over motherhood, and thus, by the natalists’ logic, over the good of the nation. Whether or not many Frenchwomen truly fit the definition of the *femme moderne*, the prevalence of this image in interwar France signaled public anxiety over the war’s effect on traditional gender roles and the nation’s demographic woes.\textsuperscript{14}

By the 1930s, pronatalist discourse had moved beyond the intellectual and political circles into the public sphere, largely due to the efforts of the National Alliance for the Growth of the French Population, whose leaders linked the demographic crisis and the mass unemployment of the Great Depression to the *femme moderne*, and argued that the destabilization of the patriarchal family was a symptom of a great national “moral crisis.”\textsuperscript{15} While this rhetoric resembled that of fascist and far-right European parties, pronatalism found home in parties across France’s political spectrum.

The overlapping theories of republican motherhood and pronatalism created a powerful theoretical framework regarding gender roles, family, and sexuality, while also investing these “private” affairs with social and political importance. This framework shaped how members of the French Communist Party interpreted Soviet feminism and planned to mobilize women throughout the interwar period. The war-induced anxiety over gender roles, seen in the fear of

\textsuperscript{14} Roberts, *Civilization without Sexes*; Koos, “Gender, Anti-Individualism, and Nationalism,” 699-723.

\textsuperscript{15} Koos, “Gender, Anti-Individualism, and Nationalism,” 699-723.
the *femme moderne*, especially influenced how Party members responded to the communist new woman.

**Soviet Feminism and the New Woman**

Debates regarding the “woman question” – that is, the role of women in communism – flourished in the decades before the Russian Revolution, as they did in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in other parts of Europe and beyond. The Soviet stance on the “woman question” reflected theories on women and socialism developed and popularized at the turn of the century by a handful of Marxist thinkers, including the German Social Democrats Augustus Bebel and Clara Zetkin, the future Bolshevik leader Alexandra Kollontaï, and other early Bolshevik leaders, including Lenin and Trotsky. By the time of the Tours Congress, these theories coalesced into what scholars call “Soviet feminism,” as outlined in the “Methods and Forms of Work among Communist Party Women” drawn up at the First Communist Women’s Conference.16

The Communist Women’s Conference was the heir to the earlier International Socialist Women’s Movement led by Clara Zetkin. Entering the international political sphere at the turn of the century, Zetkin clashed with conservatives in the international labor movement who wanted to keep women out of the workforce, successfully leading the 1907 Congress of the Second International to endorse women’s right to work and to vote, and to create a special organization within the International Socialist Party to mobilize women. In 1920, under Zetkin’s leadership,

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many of the women already active in the International Socialist Women’s Movement gathered in Moscow to develop the Third Communist International’s position on the role of women in communist parties.\textsuperscript{17}

The International Women’s Conference’s “Methods and Forms of Work among Communist Party Women,” officially adopted at the 1921 Comintern Congress, argued that women were doubly oppressed, both “by capitalism and by their own domestic family dependence,” and that liberation from both was only truly possible in a communist society, which would provide women with political rights, economic independence, and social support.\textsuperscript{18} A woman’s right to work and to pursue her individual interests was key to accomplishing gender equality. Soviet feminism considered maternity a natural and “social function,” but argued that the needs of childcare and housekeeping were the primary obstacles that kept women from achieving the independence and public engagement they needed to foster mutual respect between genders and become full Soviet citizens.\textsuperscript{19} Its solution to the proletariat woman’s double burden of work and childcare was though community and state support:

only Communism creates conditions whereby the conflict between the natural function of woman – maternity – and her social obligations, which hinder her creative work for the collective, will disappear and the harmonious and many-sided development of a healthy and balanced personality firmly and closely in tune with the life and goals of the labor-collective will be completed.\textsuperscript{20}

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[18]{Third Congress, “Methods and Forms.”}
\footnotetext[20]{Third Congress, “Methods and Forms.”}
\end{footnotes}
While not denying a naturalized view of women’s reproductive destiny or the value of the work that made up this “second shift,” the Marxist vision of gender equality saw State-sponsored programs and organizations take on the burden of this “second shift,” rather than a more equitable distribution of this work between men and women in the private sphere, or even the public sphere. There was no question that women, not men, would work in the State-provided daycares and perform the collectivized housekeeping tasks.\(^{21}\)

In this vision, the patriarchal family structure would become obsolete. Both Lenin and Alexandra Kollontai, an influential Soviet theorist on family and sexuality, argued that the family would eventually dissolve and be replaced by the collective.\(^{22}\) Kollontai went further to argue that part of communism’s liberation was a freedom from bourgeois restrictions on women’s sexuality, calling for a type of “proletariat” free love which made the bonds of marriage, if not meaningless, less significant. Women would choose their sexual partners as they wished, and the State would support and care for any children resulting in these unions. She, and other Soviet theorists, supported the woman’s right to abortion, although they considered it as an economic need that would disappear with the advent of fully socialized childcare.\(^{23}\)

With the view of transforming the country into a successful communist society, in the 1920s the Soviet regime fostered the images of a new communist man and woman, which they also disseminated to the national communist parties under their influence. Following the tenets of Soviet feminism, the new Soviet State sought to foster gender equality by erasing gender

\(^{21}\) On the value of women’s traditional work, i.e. childcare and housekeeping, see Waters, “In the Shadow of Comintern,” 34.
\(^{22}\) Goldman, *Women, the State, and Revolution*, 3 -7.
difference. Its vision of a gender-neutral citizenry was homogenously masculine.24 The communist new man was militant, disciplined, and revolutionary, and the new woman was androgynous, eschewing fashion and other symbols of traditional femininity, with “masculine” characteristics, such as strength, aggressiveness, and leadership.25

The “Methods and Forms of Work among Communist Women” reflected this hierarchy between masculinity and femininity in the way that it discussed the “dangers” and difficulties with working among women. It warned of “the great passivity and political backwardness of the female masses,” and urged the communist parties to help women overcome these “feminine” defects: “agitation by action means above all encouraging working women to self-activity, dispelling the doubts they have about their own abilities and drawing them into practical work.”26 This passivity and backwardness was not only disadvantageous, but threatened the success of the proletariat revolution, as women were reportedly more susceptible to “the influence of the bourgeois world-view, the church and tradition.”27 While Brigitte Studer characterized this hierarchy as “masculine symbolic violence,” the communist new woman still provided an empowering model for women traditionally excluded from politics and confined to the private sphere of society.28

26 Third Congress, “Methods and Forms.”
27 Third Congress, “Methods and Forms.”
The PCF and Soviet Feminism, 1920 - 1923

The French Communist Party prepared to adopt the Soviet new woman and corresponding tenets of Soviet feminism at a time when postwar anxieties already began to center around the femme moderne. Like the femme moderne, the Soviet new woman challenged the very basis of French republican society. Both were sexually and economically liberated, and while the communist new woman did not necessarily reject maternity the way that the femme moderne did, as the Soviets saw maternity as a natural and social function, she was not a republican mother. Her communist children were just as threatening to the Republic’s future as the femme moderne’s lack of children. Rejecting fashion and other visible signs of femininity, the communist new woman, more so than the femme moderne, represented radical equality, the destruction of the patriarchal family, and the dreadful prospect of what the French right-wing author Drieu la Rochelle described as a “civilization without sexes.”

The members of the new French Communist Party knew that adopting Soviet feminism would be controversial, but it was a fundamental element of communism. This tension immediately played out across the interactions between the communist men and women as they shaped the PCF’s future approach to mobilizing women. As their debates around this question will demonstrate, many of the male party leaders questioned the importance of organizing women and sought to soften the rhetoric around family and gender roles, while the women in the Party fought back on ideological grounds, by reminding their opponents that gender equality was a cornerstone of communism. At the same time, the same women also used the language of

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30 Roberts, Civilization Without Sexes, 2 – 3.
maternity and family to validate their arguments and soothe male fears about Soviet feminism in France.

From 1920 to 1923, the leaders of the French Communist Party worked out its approach to organizing women, with little input from the Comintern, and established a pattern of neglect and hostility to the question which would characterize its attitude for the next decade. The women’s written remarks about men in the Party, and the brief debates between the two groups at the Party’s first congress at Marseille, suggest that a doubt about the efficacy of the Soviet new woman and a fear that Soviet feminism would cost the party its more valuable, voting male members motivated what Suzanne Girault described as “stagnation, distaste, indifference, and, as a logical result, inertia” among the male Party leadership regarding the work among women. 31

The Party’s first congress in 1921 at Marseille demonstrated this indifference that Girault described. There, the women in the Party organized a National Women’s Conference to draft a response to the Comintern’s “Methods and Forms of Work among Communist Women” and submit it to the Party Congress for discussion and approval. No delegates from the Party’s leading body - the Central Committee - attended. Many former socialist women had reason to expect neglect based on their past experiences. The French Socialist Party, most of which became the French Communist Party at the Tours Congress, had a mixed legacy regarding women. Officially created in 1905, for a time it was the only French political party to allow female membership. It accepted the Marxist principle of gender equality in theory but made little


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effort to attract women to its side. While the few French women socialists worked to organize women and convince the male leadership of their importance, the majority of the Socialists ignored their efforts.33

Among the socialist women were two key figures in the French Communist Party’s work among women in the early 1920s: Marthe Bigot and Lucie Colliard. Both were teachers who joined in feminist or union organization before joining the French Socialist Party in the 1910s, and who participated at the 1920 Congress of Tours. At the PCF’s First National Congress in 1921, the congress members voted Bigot as director of the newly created Central Women’s Commission, and Colliard became the international correspondent for the Women’s Commission; two years later she also became director for the Women’s Commission of the Party’s trade union.34 In its 1921 “Methods and Forms of Work among Communist Women,” the Comintern required that every communist party created a body, like the Central Women’s Section, to focus specifically on mobilizing women.35 According to the Comintern, these commissions were supposed to focus on educating women about communism through “agitation and propaganda.”36 Their secondary role was to promote gender equality within the party by


35 The full commission at this time was Marthe Bigot, secretary, and members: Noélie Drous, Therese Gourdeaux, Louise Heuchel, Lucie Leiciague, Lucie Marais, Rosa Michel, and the delegates of the Comité Directeur, Philippe and Rappoport. Lucie Colliard was the French representative on the Internationale Women’s Secretariat. AN, Box 20010216/41, “L’Ouvrière: Organe Communiste des Travailleuses Manuelles et Intellectuelles,” dated Mars 1922.

36 Third Congress, “Methods and Forms.”
ensuring “that women are brought into the leading bodies of the Parties, unions, and co-operatives, on equal terms with men.”

A month before the PCF’s first National Congress in December 1921, Marthe Bigot publicly charged the Party with “hostility” toward organizing women in an article accusing its members of demonstrating a “petit-bourgeois spirit which continually put obstacles to [women’s] action; these prejudices more often enrooted among certain avant-garde men than among the most notorious reactionaries” in the former Socialist Party. The male comrades at the Conference proved her argument correct. At one point in the Conference sessions, another female party member, Jeanne Melin, had to remind the Conference president to make time for the discussion about their “Resolution on the Action to be Taken Regarding Women,” which occurred at the very end of the Congress with minimal participation. Lucie Colliard, who presented this resolution, reproached the Party leadership that:

I would not have felt the need to read you this motion if you would have interested yourselves in the women’s conference…I end by expressing the hope that next year, we will be more numerous and that you will have a little more regard for us.

Elsewhere, however, a debate took place over the form and content of the Party’s journal for women, as reported by Suzanne Girault in a letter to the International Women’s Section, which revealed some of the male Party members’ concerns. A French native, Girault lived in Russia for twenty years and was closely affiliated with the Bolshevik party; she returned to France in 1921

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37 Third Congress, “Methods and Forms.”
to observe the Party’s progress and became an important figure there during Bolshevization. In 1922, she wrote that “certain elements” at the Congress opposed the creation of this journal. While she not indicate if these “elements” were male or female, elsewhere in the letter she emphasized that the debate over the journal demonstrated the (mostly male) Party leadership’s “very clear will to harm” the work among women.

Girault reported that these “elements” first wanted to avoid creating such a journal altogether, then to name it “The New Woman” rather than its chosen title, L’Ouvrière, which, Girault wrote, they considered “too subversive.” Moreover, these members insisted that the paper be “a fashionable journal, with culinary recipes and advice for housewives.” Girault explained the reason behind this:

Put briefly, it must not be political, because politics scare women; it must not, as we thought, serve to raise class consciousness among the masses of proletarian women, but, on the contrary, by the advice and sewing patterns that we must give to our readers, we would have them learn how to diminish the material difficulties of daily life and how to adapt to the conditions of capitalist society.

While Marthe Bigot criticized the women’s page in the Party’s main journal, L’Humanité in a similar way:

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each week, in the *Humanité* there is a page dedicated to women on the art of nail polish, how create a beautiful hat…all things evidently charming, useful, and necessary, but which contribute to maintaining the female proletariat in thoughtlessness and ignorance.\(^{46}\)

Here, there is a tension between those who believed that the best way to attract women to the Party was through the domestic concerns, and members like Bigot and Girault who wanted to embrace Soviet feminism and help women achieve their potential as politically engaged citizens in the public sphere. Girault framed it as a question of dedication to Marxism itself. Arguing that by teaching women to merely “adapt to the conditions of capitalist society” rather than working to “raise their class consciousness,” one put the potential proletariat revolution in jeopardy, she attributed these suggestions to those who wanted to “resist all revolutionary action,” thus framing it as a battle between true communists who wanted to create new women, and reactionaries who did not.\(^{47}\)

Without the other side of this debate, it is difficult to gauge what specific rationale these Party leaders had for pushing the creation of a journal centered around domestic concerns, but there is no doubt that it emerged from a framework of thought that attributed women to the domestic sphere and doubted either women’s ability to enter politics or the advisability of such a social change. A debate between Party leader Jean Renaud and women attending the Marseille Congress demonstrated more clearly that some of the Party leadership challenged the plans for organizing women because they valued attracting male support over disseminating Soviet


feminism. The debate in question took place during a discussion of Jean Renaud’s “Theses on the Agrarian Question,” which addressed the sensitive issues of the patriarchal family structure and women’s labor. It revealed how Renaud feared that rhetoric about dissolving the family structure, by establishing state-provided childcare and empowering women to enter the workforce without the hindrance of her double burden, would alienate the French public. This debate also provided an early example of how women in the Party used French and/or Soviet notions of family and maternity to address these fears.

The debate began when women at the Congress objected to the lack of discussion about women in Renaud’s theses and suggested certain amendments. The amendments suggested were not extensive, but they raised Renaud’s objections because they alluded to women’s subordinate status in the family and society, and the burden of the double shift. Jeanne Melin wanted the theses to emphasize that rural women were double oppressed by capitalism and by “familial exploitation” as “the farmer is led, in spite of himself so to speak, to be the absolute master of his wife and daughter in our culture.” Thus, she continued, “it is necessary to clearly demonstrate that communism will be worth the improvement of the fate of women.” A crucial part of this improvement would be the collectivization of households and of childcare, which Colliard emphasized, saying:

The peasant woman, like the woman in the workforce [ouvrière], always has a double task. She works with her spouse or father in the fields. She returns home,
she must still…do the housework. We want, we demand that the regime, which will be established by the proletarian revolution, redistribute work to the women in the field.50

In response, Renaud argued that adding such elements to the theses was unnecessary because “the peasant woman will enjoy the same advantages as the man” under the capitalist system.51 He then added: “But this is something which disquiets me a little and it is not necessary, under the pretext of communism, to set up the woman against the men and achieve something unnatural.”52

Although he did not expand on this remark, Colliard, who took the floor, recognized the two main arguments that he was making. The first, “setting up the woman against the men,” alluded to the so-called “bourgeois feminism” which the Comintern condemned because it did not serve class interests. Renaud framed his reluctance to promote the idea of women’s double exploitation as a refusal to prioritize gender interests over class interest, in accordance with the Comintern’s orders. In doing so, he inadvertently admitted to the truth of Melin’s statement: there was a hierarchy in the French family which empowered the man. In response, Colliard went back to Soviet feminism, declaring:

We are not feminists, but we think that the communist party cannot grow and above all achieve its goal, if it does not include women…we, the commission of


communist work among women, are saying that you could not make a revolution and establish communism without women’s help.\(^{53}\)

Renaud’s second argument was related to the first: Colliard interpreted his talk about “achieving something unnatural” as the dissolution of the family structure. Here, however, she adopted a conciliating stance, emphasizing their goal is not to dissolve the family, only to provide support to mothers:

> It is not a question, as Jean Renaud said, of dispersing the family; that it is a means which prevents us from leading women to the Party, to public and political life….It is not a question of snatching children from women but letting them send the children to daycare when work at the sides of men draws them elsewhere.\(^{54}\)

With this assertion, Colliard broke with Soviet feminist theory, or rather took advantage of the Comintern’s own silence on the future of the family in a communist society. Its “Methods and Forms of Work among Communist Party Women,” left out any discussion of the future of the family or women’s sexuality. Elizabeth Waters argues that this was because the document reflected the “the ideas and preoccupations of the Soviet women delegated to draft it,” and while collectivization and the end of the double burden was of the first importance, the question of family and sexuality was not.\(^{55}\) Colliard used this silence on family to support her argument that the goal was not the dissolution of the family, while Melin took advantage of the Soviet emphasis on maternity as a natural function to appeal to those concerned about collectivization. Melin emphasized that the Party will find success among the rural inhabitants when it

\(^{53}\) Paprik, “Sténographie des séances 5-8 du Congrès de Marseille du PCF,” 517_1_39, 270.


\(^{55}\) Waters, “In the Shadow of Comintern,” 35 – 36.
emphasizes that collectivization will give the woman “leisure to occupy herself with her children…will they not be happy to know that they could focus on their children’s hygiene?”

She reframed the question of the double burden to argue that, when removed, it will give women more time to focus on the health and happiness of their children: an unobjectionable outcome, particularly for pronatalists.

The tensions between Soviet feminism and French social and political culture lay at the root of these two debates over the Renaud’s *Theses* and the journal *L’Ouvrière*. The arguments and responses given here reflect a pattern that, as the next chapter will demonstrate, would continue throughout the Bolshevization era. Renaud’s words about “set[ting] up the woman against the men and achiev[ing] something unnatural” summed up the two main anxieties that the directors of the work among women had to keep in mind in their rhetoric and propaganda for the rest of the interwar period.

**Early Propaganda Themes and Strategies**

How did these debates influence the Party’s earliest propaganda for women? The chaos of the PCF’s first few years limited the extent of the Central Women’s Commission’s work and the types of propaganda material they produced before the Comintern took an active leadership role in this work after Bolshevization, in mid-1924.

While frequent communication flowed between the Central Women’s Commission and the International Women’s Secretariat, the latter offered suggestions rather than orders, emphasizing that the women in the Party knew best how

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57 The journal *L’Ouvrière* first appeared in March 1922, but the Party suspended it shortly afterward in 1923, before it returned at the Comintern’s insistence: Tardivel, “Des pacifistes à résistantes,” 239.
to mobilize their own countrywomen. On the broadest level, the International indicated that the Central Women’s Commission’s goal should be to “awaken the revolutionary activity of proletarian women by grouping not only the workers, but also the spouses of workers, the housewives, around the practical and comprehensible demands,” in accordance with the Comintern’s united front strategy, in which Lenin called for the national communist parties to “go to the masses” and foster worker unity through collaboration with other leftist parties. The PCF’s Central Women’s Commission put this into practice with propaganda which highlighted key elements of Soviet feminism, but also drew on traditional notions of femininity: women as “naturally” pacifist, self-sacrificing, prioritizing the welfare of her children, and dedicated to the wellbeing of her family.

Reflecting these women’s pacifist and feminist roots, the early propaganda material centered around women’s rights and antimilitarism. The rhetoric on the former took a very Soviet stance, highlighting the women’s lack of political rights and encouraging women to join political action. “The bourgeoisie has lied to you,” one 1921 pamphlet stated:

It has left you in an inferior situation regarding your civil and political rights; it put you, by less education, by inequality of salary, in a state of economic inferiority. You are more exploited than male workers are.

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60 AN, 20010216/41, dossier 1092, folio 9, https://www.siv.archives-nationales.culture.gouv.fr/siv/rechercheconsultation/consultation?irId=FRAN_IR_050130&udId=c-2bou5v2zw-mrnjyeh06x4k&details=true&gotoArchivesNums=false&auSeinIR=true.
The same pamphlet also drew the reader’s attention to their double burden and communism’s solution, praising the Soviet Union where “they understand that the woman must have each day a few minutes to think about herself and public affairs, and they help her in her household tasks. They also help her with motherhood…” In their antiwar rhetoric, however, the Central Women’s Section relied less on Soviet feminism and more on the language of family and maternity to mobilize women into action.

The First World War traumatized the nation, and its social, political, and economic aftermath continued to darken its legacy. Framing communism as the best hope for a postwar recovery, and the only social system to end war forever, the PCF propaganda dwelt on the horrors of the war and France’s continued economic difficulties. In a move that strengthened the PCF’s argument, France again went to war, in 1924, with Abd el-Krim, leader of the Rifian Berbers, whose guerilla army defeated Spanish forces at Morocco in 1921 and threatened French interests in the area and in nearby Algeria. As France’s entry in the Rif War (1921-1926) became more likely, the Central Women’s Section called on women to protest, for the sake of their sons or spouses. “All you who have particularly suffered,” one pamphlet about “the possible war” exhorted, “who have lost a fiancé, son, or spouse, for the memory of all those who are dead, come attest, by your presence, that you are not eternal slaves, resigned to always be wounded and trampled…” Their propaganda called on mothers, in particular, asking for

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61 AN, 20010216/41, dossier 1092, folio 9.
63 AN, F/7/12893, dossier Avril 1921, https://www.siv.archives-nationales.culture.gouv.fr/siv/rechercheconsultation/consultation/ir/consultationIR.action?irId=FRAN_IR_050130&udId=c-23tj5b2m3--rb0n0eyx1x7e&details=true&goto ArchivesNums=false&auSeinIR=true.
example: “Will you watch, indifferent, as your twenty-year-old guys [gars] leave for Morocco, in Syria or elsewhere, to fill or defend the strongholds of the rich?”\textsuperscript{64}

This antiwar rhetoric reflected the connection between motherhood, womanhood, and pacifism which developed among feminist pacifist movements in France. This connection drew on the argument first proposed by French feminists during the Second Republic that women deserved full political rights on the grounds of sexual difference: motherhood, as a social labor, earned women political rights, and at the same time, her innately “feminine” qualities were necessary to balance male activities in the political sphere. Thus, pacifists argued first, that pacifism was a naturally female quality, strengthened by maternity, and second, that if women could participate in politics, their influence would temper the masculine impulse to aggression, violence, and war.\textsuperscript{65}

The Central Women’s Commission members, many of whom also participated in these pacifist movements leading up to World War I, followed this logic in their own antiwar propaganda. As a result, their rhetoric toed the line between Soviet feminism and the so-called “bourgeois” feminism which values gender solidarity over class solidarity. For example, this 1921 pamphlet regarding “A Grand Meeting on the Feminine Battle against the possible War,” addressed its reader with: “Women of the people! A meeting is organized for you, women, by


\textsuperscript{65} Mona Seigel, “‘To the Unknown Mother of the Unknown Soldier’: Pacifism, Feminism, and the Politics of Sexual Difference among French Institutrices between the Wars,” \textit{French Historical Studies} 22, no. 3 (Summer, 1999): 421-451; Sandi E. Cooper, “Pacifism, Feminism, and Fascism in Inter-War France,” \textit{The International History Review} 19, no. 1 (Feb., 1997): 103-114; Scott, \textit{Only Paradoxes to Offer}.
other women who, like you, love and suffer, and who, like you, are exploited and sacrificed.\textsuperscript{66} The pamphlet goes on to discuss the trials of working-class women and mothers, caused by capitalism and by war. The style of its address helps establish bonds of solidarity between the women in the Party and the female French public at large over gender: as women, they all “love and suffer…are exploited and sacrificed,” but this image portrayed by the author did not fit the Soviet new woman who was supposed to provide an example of a strong militant.\textsuperscript{67}

This style of addressing women by emphasizing the bonds between the communist women and the general public would end with Bolshevization, as the Party fostered the image of the Soviet new woman within its ranks, but returned during the late 1930s with the Popular Front strategy shift. Bolshevization, which began in mid-1924, pushed many of these original members, the feminists and pacifists, out of leadership positions, and out of the Party altogether. Nevertheless, their activities set the stage for the Party’s future propaganda strategies throughout the interwar period. Women’s social, political, and economic rights and antimilitarism remained key issues over which the Party mobilized women, despite the many strategy shifts about mobilizing women for the rest of the interwar period. Moreover, the Party continued to use the language and strategies of feminist pacifism to mobilize women over war-related issues.

Conclusion

In response to the Comintern-imposed Bolshevization, the Party began to push aside the so-called “intellectuals” for workers and to increasingly restrict their members’ rhetoric and

\textsuperscript{66} AN, F/7/12893, dossier April 1921, \url{https://www.siv.archives-nationales.culture.gouv.fr/siv/rechercheconsultation/consultationIr/consultationIr.action?irId=FRAN_IR_050130&udId=c-23tj5b2m3--rb0n0eyx1x7e&details=true&gotoArchivesNums=false&auSeinIR=true}.

\textsuperscript{67} AN, F/7/12893, dossier April 1921.
activities, which alienated many of the communist women from this first generation. Jeanne Melin left the Party in 1923, while Bigot and Colliard remained a bit longer in non-leadership positions.68 Both actively opposed Bolshevization, and Bigot left the Party in 1926, while Colliard was expelled in 1929.69 The leadership of these feminist activists in the French Communist Party was brief but impactful. Marthe Bigot, Lucie Colliard, and the other members of the Central Women’s Commission drew on their pacifist and feminist background to establish an antimilitarism propaganda strategy which remained fairly consistent despite all the other strategy changes of the 1920s and 1930s. They also introduced some of the main propaganda themes, in addition to antiwar rhetoric, that their successors developed in the Bolshevization period: women’s suffrage, the high cost of life, protections for working women and their children, unemployment, equal pay, and establishing an eight-hour workday.70

On a broader level, this three-year period in which the Party members worked out the Party’s approach to mobilizing women highlighted the strength of the French republican notions of motherhood, family, and society. This framework shaped how these Party members responded to this “foreign transplant” of Soviet feminism, from the men in Party leadership who challenged it to the women who defended it, by using the language of family and maternity. Although Bolshevization brought many changes to the Party’s membership and operations, the men and women in leadership continued to replicate this pattern throughout the 1920s and early 1930s.

68 On Melin’s resignation, see Cooper, “Pacifism, Feminism, and Fascism in Inter-War France,” 109.
70 These themes, which Lucie Colliard outlined in a letter to the International Women’s Secretariat in Berlin, appeared sporadically between 1921 and 1923, but figured much more prominently during the Bolshevization period, as discussed in chapter two. For the letter, see Paprik, Fonds français de l’Internationale Communiste, “Correspondance du secrétariat international féminin,” 507_3_163, 45 – 46, https://pandor.u-bourgogne.fr/archives-en-ligne/ark:/62246/r29473zqwf455k/f45.
CHAPTER 2: MOBILIZING WOMEN DURING THE BOLSHEVIZATION ERA (1924 – 1932)

For a few years after its creation, the French Communist Party worked on establishing itself in the French social and political sphere without much input from the Comintern, whose Soviet leaders had more pressing matters to attend in shape of the ongoing Russian civil war. During this somewhat experimental period for the Party, the PCF gained up to 2,600 women, who made up three to four percent of its total membership. Within the next decade, this number dropped to a mere 200, representing less than one percent of Party membership. In this period, later known as the Bolshevization era (1924 – 1934), the Comintern exerted much more control over the Party’s operations, with the goal of making the Party more “Soviet” and less “French.” Bolshevization initiated a decade of decline for the PCF, due to a combination of factors: periodic purges, the sidelining of so-called intellectuals for workers, and the adoption of Soviet political strategies that isolated the Party from the rest of the French Left. Nevertheless, as the percentages demonstrate, female membership suffered disproportionately during this period.

How did Bolshevization and this steep membership loss affect the Party’s work among women? This chapter argues that the Comintern’s heightened involvement, spurred by Bolshevization, was a double-edged sword: its presence supported the women directing the Central Women’s Section in their efforts to get the rest of the Party more involved in their work, but at the same time, its insistence that the Party adhere to its changing strategies for mobilization shaped and restricted the ways in which these women could carry out this work.

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The Comintern’s restrictions contributed to a rapid turnover of Central Women’s Section directors, each of whom introduced a new interpretation of the Comintern’s strategies to the Party’s work among women. Equally responsible, however, for this high turnover was the increasing tension between Party leadership and the Central Women’s Section directors, primarily over the lack of support that the Women’s Section received from leadership and from the Party at large.

Recognizing that even their fellow communists were hostile, or at best indifferent, to mobilizing women, the changing directors of the Central Women’s Section developed rhetoric and propaganda strategies intended to both draw women into the Party and encourage men, in and outside the Party, to support this endeavor. Thus, following the pattern established during the Party’s earliest years, the directors emphasized their commitment to the Soviet model even as they molded the Soviet-inspired rhetoric to fit French social and political needs. This pattern appeared especially in the way that the Central Women’s Section approached the question of the woman in the workforce - the ouvrière - whose image courted anxiety among pronatalists and among working-class men who feared that the wave of factory rationalization was giving male jobs to female workers – a fear that intensified with the beginning of the Great Depression.

Due to the Comintern’s emphasis on class status during the Bolshevization era, the Central Women’s Section increasingly prioritized the ouvrière over all other working-class women and depicted her in propaganda with the qualities of the Soviet new woman. Its rhetoric addressed to working-class men, however, presented a less Soviet and less controversial image of the ouvrière in order to inspire their fellow comrades to engage in the important work of mobilizing women and to assure the male public that the Party shared their concerns about
rationalization and depopulation. The Central Women’s Section adopted pronatalist rhetoric and the language of republican motherhood in its discussion of working women and rationalization, even as it supported legal abortion and valued the more “masculine” qualities of the Soviet new woman. Another important consequence of the Comintern’s emphasis on class status was the way that the Central Women’s Section hierarchized working-class women. The Section tried to bring more *ouvrières* into the Party, but, following the Comintern’s orders, it created mass organizations to attract and mobilize the broader masses of working-class women who did not fit into the definition of the *ouvrière*. In doing so, it leaned heavily on the more “feminine” qualities of maternal love, family bonds, and pacifism, a continuation of the pre-Bolshevization strategies inspired by feminist pacifism.

Thus, this chapter argues that the Central Women’s Section’s experiences during the Bolshevization era set the stage, in some ways, for the Party’s reorientation around “family values” in the Popular Front. Understanding that they needed to mobilize men as well as women, the changing directors of the Central Women’s Section adjusted their Soviet-inspired rhetoric to fit this need, setting a precedent for further alteration of the Soviet model of propaganda. Moreover, the Party’s failure to attract these *ouvrières*, and its somewhat inadvertent success drawing housewives into mass organizations by appealing to their “feminine” natures influenced the Central Women’s Section’s strategy decisions as the Party entered a new stage of development in 1932.

**The Comintern, Party Leadership, and Directing the Work among Women**

In the Party’s first few years, the female directors of the Central Women’s Commission, which was renamed the Central Women’s Section after Bolshevization, were responsible for
directing all the Party’s work among women, with little participation from PCF leadership, and some guidance from the Comintern representative. At the time, the Comintern’s representative body was the International Women’s Secretariat, based in Berlin and led by Clara Zetkin, a key figure in the early Socialist/Communist women’s movement. Bolshevization changed this balance of power between the Comintern, PCF leadership, and Central Women’s Section with consequences for the way that the Party organized its work among women.

In January 1924, Lenin died, and his coalition of successors decided that, as the global proletariat revolution they anticipated had not come, their next step was to thoroughly “Bolshevide” the communist parties so that they could recreate the success of the Bolshevik Party in their own countries. Bolshevization had several components: tighter Comintern control over the parties, a focus on mobilizing workers and putting them into leadership positions, a closer ideological adherence of party members to Marxism-Leninism, and a restructuring of the parties around the Soviet model. For the PCF, this restructuring meant creating triple leadership bodies – the Central Committee, Political Bureau, and the General Secretary – and organizing members around factory-based cells, rather than the traditional neighborhood-based membership cells. The PCF’s Central Women’s Section, which continued to direct the Party’s work among women, answered to these three leadership bodies. Reflecting the Comintern’s emphasis that women should be in all levels of the communist party, one or more members of the Central

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3 See Chapter 1.
4 Martelli et al., *Le Parti Rouge*, 36 – 37. The PCF restored its neighborhood-based cells, though, a few years into Bolshevization.
Women’s Section often also belonged to one of the Party’s leadership bodies in the Bolshevization period.

After Bolshevization, the Comintern assumed much greater control over the International Women’s Secretariat. They moved it to Moscow and assumed the power to appoint its directors, previously voted into their position by the other members of the Secretariat. Clara Zetkin withdrew from the organization shortly afterward, and the Comintern replaced her with women chosen from the Bolshevik party. By 1926 the International Women’s Secretariat lost its status as an independent organization within the Comintern and became the Women’s Section of the Comintern’s Executive Committee. This body, hereafter referred to as the Comintern Women’s Section, became more of a Comintern mouthpiece than an independent organization, and it became much more involved in the PCF’s work among women. It shaped the Party’s strategies for mobilizing women and intervened to correct perceived failures in this field. The Comintern was very attentive to its parties’ work among women. In 1925, Zinoviev, the Comintern Chairman of the time, framed a party’s dedication to this work as one of the proofs of its successful Bolshevization, announcing that parties “will be judged on the success of their organization of working women.” This Comintern support for their work empowered the women of the PCF’s Central Women’s Section to demand support and assistance from the rest of the Party, especially its leadership. As this chapter demonstrates, however, PCF leadership generally ignored these demands, so that, throughout the Bolshevization period, the Central

Women’s Section bore the burden of organizing and carrying out all the work among women themselves.

Moreover, the Comintern’s close supervision made this work more difficult. It pressured the Central Women’s Section directors to attract more members to the Party but restricted the ways that they could do this. This was not unique to the French Communist Party. The Comintern charged many of its parties with “deviation” if they carried out too many new initiatives to attract women, but with passivity and indifference if they carried out too few. This was possible because of the ambiguity surrounding the Comintern’s definition of “success” in mobilizing women, which, Brigitte Studer argued, the Comintern used “to surveille and discipline” its parties. Whatever its intentions, the Comintern’s pressure, and tension between Party leadership and the women of the Central Women’s Section, contributed to the high turnaround of Central Women’s Section directors during the Bolshevization period. The average tenure of a Central Women’s Section director was about two years; some the Party removed outright, while others resigned from leadership positions and left the Party, or were expelled, a few years later. This heavily affected the way that the Party approached mobilizing women, because, as the next section will demonstrate, almost every new director introduced some variation to the official strategy in response to the previous directors’ supposed failures.

As demonstrated at the 1921 Marseille Congress, the relationship between the Party leadership and its female members was uneasy, bordering on hostile, as the two groups clashed over how to mobilize women and the extent to which the Party leadership should involve itself in

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7 Studer, “La femme nouvelle,” 381.
this work. Far from desiring autonomy to develop and carry out their mobilization strategies, the Central Women’s Section directors requested greater attention, support, and assistance from the Party leadership, and their dissatisfaction with latter grew more pronounced as time passed and the leadership continued to ignore their demands. The pre-Bolshevization directors, Marthe Bigot and Lucie Colliard, blamed this indifference and hostility to mobilizing women on a “petit-bourgeois spirit” among certain politically right and center members within Party leadership who obstructed the work among women. Both objected to Bolshevization, so in 1924 the Party replaced them with more supportive members - Margueritte Faussecave and Marie Dubois – who also addressed the Party’s hostility to their work but considered it a problem of bourgeois influence on the Party as a whole. In her reports to Moscow, Faussecave wrote that this hostility was the legacy of the social democrats in the Party who accepted “this conception, rooted by the bourgeoisie, that the woman must not concern herself with politics, that her place is in the home.”

Bolshevization, however, was supposed to weed out these social-democratic and bourgeois elements within the Party. When faced with the Party’s continued indifference to their work, the Central Women’s Section directors began to attack the problem more directly, rather than attributing it to exterior forces. “There is a profound error that we are trying to combat,” Faussecave wrote to the Comintern representative in 1925, that “until now, there has been a

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8 See Chapter 1.
9 Paprik, « Correspondances avec les directions des sections feminines, » 10. For more on the pre-Bolshevization directors, see chapter 1.
10 Bigot left the Party in 1926 and Colliard was expelled in 1929: Tardivel, “Des pacifistes aux résistantes,” 234. On Faussecave, see Tardivel, 235 – 260. On Dubois, see Tardivel, 132.
conception among Party members that work among women mainly interests women and that they alone must work among the women.” In June 1926, the PCF held its Fifth National Congress where the Central Women’s Section echoed this concern, stating that “the entire Party has still not understood that the ‘work among women’ must be considered on the same plane as all the other tasks for which it is responsible.”

With the Comintern’s support, Faussecave’s Central Women’s Section pushed Party leadership to be more involved in directing the work among women, and to include men in the Party’s regional and local women’s section. By 1925, the Party leadership reorganized the Central Women’s Section to include two men, one of them being a representative of the Political Bureau, which was predominantly male. This measure was largely symbolic, as the Central Women’s Section’s meetings, reports, and correspondence indicated that almost all of its members continued to be women. A year later, the Party’s Fifth National Congress ended with a resolution to improve the Party’s work among women by undertaking an “ideological campaign” to clarify for its members the importance of this work. The very next year, however, the Political Bureau decided to suspend publication of their women’s journal, L’Ouvrière, for

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15 There are records for three men participating in the Central Women’s Section during this period: Marrane Routier in 1925, Le Moullec in 1928-9, and Louis Cassiot in 1931.
lack of funds; a move which the editor in charge declared “shows its prejudice for our work among women.”

Just a month after the Fifth Congress, Suzanne Girault replaced Faussecaze and Dubois as director of the Central Women’s Section. Girault, a French native who spent many years in Russia, was closely affiliated with the Comintern. In 1920, it sent her to oversee the Congress of Tours, and then in 1924, Girault returned to France with Albert Treint to insure that the Party carried out Bolshevization correctly. By 1926, however, she came into conflict with Stalin himself over Party strategy, and he accused her of political deviation – a catch-all label for anyone and anything that current leadership considered problematic. In response to her fall from grace, the PCF leadership relegated Girault to the Central Women’s Section. A year later, she publicly criticized PCF leadership for failing to properly carry out the Comintern’s strategy decisions, and they retaliated by removing her from all leadership positions and replacing her with a trio: Alice Brisset, Marie Breant, and Yvonne Robert.

These new leaders of the Central Women’s Section were even more critical of the Party’s attitude toward the work among women than the disgraced Girault was. In early 1928, Breant reported on “the passive, negative attitude of the working class, even in the ranks of the PC

19 Martelli et al, Le parti rouge, 37.
[communist party], toward whatever concerns the political activity and organization of women,”
and denounced, in particular, the Party leadership for suspending the L’Ouvrière and for its
mishandling of the Girault affair.22 “A fact which shows how the Party is not serious in its work
among women and neglects its importance,” she wrote to correspondent in Germany, “is that the
Central Committee placed Suzanne Girault as head of the Women’s Section at the same moment
that she was removed from her leadership role in the CC (Central Committee) because of her
political deviation from the Party line.”23 Not only did this contribute to the “constant changing
personnel in the Women’s Section” which put the Section in a state of constant crisis, but her
leadership also reportedly drove away valuable militants in the Party’s women’s sections.24

In July 1928, the Comintern itself intervened at its Sixth Congress at Moscow. There, the
PCF leadership acknowledged that its Central Women’s Section lacked “connection and political
direction by the responsible comrades in the Party leadership” and resolved to “take measures to
improve work in this domain.”25 It also resolved to resume publication of L’Ouvrière. This
Comintern intervention had mixed results. The Political Bureau representatives began to attend
sessions of the Central Women’s Section meetings more regularly, but, as before, the Party
leadership did not carry out its resolutions, at least in the eyes of the Central Women’s Section
and the Comintern. Throughout the next year, the Comintern Women’s Section had to formally

22 Paprik, “Correspondance de la section feminin avec le Bureau Politique du PCF,” 15, https://pandor.u-
23 Paprik, “Correspondance de la section feminin avec le Bureau Politique du PCF,” 15, https://pandor.u-
24 Paprik, “Correspondance de la section feminin avec le Bureau Politique du PCF,” 15, https://pandor.u-
25 BnF, “Résolution pour le parti communiste français sur le travail parmi les femmes,” Cahiers du
Bolchevisme, January 1928, 116, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k12670g/f90.item#.
rebuke the PCF Secretariat before it finally provided the Central Women Section the funds to republish the *L'Ouvrière*.\(^2^6\)

In the aftermath of this Sixth Congress, Brisset, Breant, and Robert resigned, and the Party replaced them with Jeanne Buland. The first female PCF member to attend the Leninist School in Moscow, Buland’s tenure as Central Women’s Section director was the longest but also the most tempestuous.\(^2^7\) She was arrested and resigned more than once during this period, and, as a result, the Central Women’s Section remained inactive for a time.\(^2^8\) Her resignations reflected her increasing animosity with the Party leadership, who, after the Sixth Congress at Moscow, began to involve themselves slightly more in the work among women in a way which only hindered its operations. The two parties clashed, for example, when Buland wanted to replace the current editor of the *L'Ouvriere* over poor performance, but the Central Committee refused, because the candidate that Buland suggested was “unsuitable” as her partner used to be a police officer.\(^2^9\) In another incident, the Central Committee prevented a Central Women’s Section trip to the Soviet Union because Buland had selected a last-minute delegate and not cleared with the Party Secretariat beforehand. This was particularly provoking for Buland, because the Section had highly advertised this trip to boost the readership of their struggling


\(^{27}\) Tardivel, “Des pacifistes aux résistantes,” 305 – 306.


\(^{29}\) For the Billat/Boisson debate, Paprik, Fonds de SFIC, “Internal Correspondence,” 517_1_963, 59 – 72.
The PCF leadership put Buland on probation for “political deviation” in 1931, and she resigned, for good, in 1932.31

Like the directors before her, Buland also reported to Moscow that the Party continued to be “too inclined to regard work among women as specific work, not completely linked to all Party work.”32 Georgette Bodineau, her successor and the last director before the Popular Front era, reiterated all her predecessor’s complaints in the strongest language. In 1933 she wrote to Moscow of the “a real incomprehension where our comrades thought that this work was reserved only for a few specialists and only specific work for women” and accused the Party leadership of a “bureaucratic attitude, an attitude of disdain for this work,” as their promises to improve the work among women “always remained on paper.”33 The general party membership, Bodineau reported, also reflected this disinterest and disdain: she related an incident at the Party’s Fifth Congress for Textile Workers at which union leaders reportedly declared that they wanted nothing to do with women who were “stupid [bêtes], they understand nothing and do not want to organize themselves.”34

Even with the Comintern’s interventions, the PCF leadership never provided the Central Women’s Section with the support, guidance, and respect it requested. As Alice Brisset put in, in

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30 See Paprik, Fonds de SFIC, “Materiaux de la section feminine,” 517_1_1325, 43-44.
34 Paprik, Fonds de SFIC, “Materiaux de la SF du PCF et materiaux de la commission…..,” 517_1_1503. 75. Bêtes was a particularly harsh word, literally meaning « farm animal” but also having more vulgar connotations.
a directors’ meeting in 1928: “Alone, isolated, we had to do all the work.”\textsuperscript{35} The Party leadership responded vigorously to what they perceived as challenges of authority, such as Girault’s public criticism of the Party leadership and Buland’s frequent objections to the Central Committee’s decisions, both of which the Party denounced as “political deviation.” Otherwise, the Party leadership ignored or dismissed the directors’ concerns. A revealing incident in 1925, for example, gives an idea of how this attitude shaped the interactions between Party leadership and the Central Women’s Section. When Marie Dubois, a Section director at the time, opposed the Central Committee’s suggestion that the Party create a certain side organization for women on ideological grounds, the ensuing discussion of Dubois’ objections centered around her personality rather than the validity of her argument, as the other male members of the Central Committee and Political Bureau complained that “she has an impossible character,” “knows how to enrage people,” and “does not apply any of the decisions taken.”\textsuperscript{36}

While in the early 1920s, the directors could attribute this attitude to certain bourgeois influences within the Party, their successors quickly came to understand that Bolshevization had not removed prejudice about women in politics within the Party as a whole. The changing directors of the Central Women’s Section were very aware that the rest of the Party either resisted organizing women or considered it minor task, comparable to the Party’s work among other special-interests groups, like peasants, students, youth, soldiers, etc. In response, the Central Women’s Section directors sought to address this issue within the Party while also

\textsuperscript{35} Paprik, “Correspondence du SFI-section féminine du CEIC,” 112, \url{https://pandor.u-bourgogne.fr/archives-en-ligne/ark:/62246/r32469zkqd74jk/f112}.

\textsuperscript{36} Paprik, Fonds de SFIC, “Procès-verbal du Bureau Politique,” 21 août 1925, PEG03_1925_053, 5 - 6.
following the Soviet model of mobilization, under the watchful eye of the Comintern’s Women’s Section.

Workers, Housewives, and the Soviet New Woman

Mobilizing women in a way which corresponded to the Comintern’s instructions, while also encouraging men in and outside the Party to support this work, was particularly challenging because on one of the core components of Bolshevization was an emphasis on attracting and promoting workers. As this section demonstrates, the Central Women’s Section affirmed its commitment to the Soviet model by increasingly focuses on the controversial figure of the ouvrière. The new emphasis on “workers” as opposed to the broader spectrum of the working class reflected the Bolshevik party’s relationship to, and definition of, the working class. It was the party’s key to power, and, as Wendy Goldman argued, they understood it in “an ideological, administrative, and symbolic political sense.”37 Until the labor shortages of the 1930s, the Bolshevik party saw “worker” as a male industrial worker.38 With Bolshevization, the Soviets urged other sections of the Comintern to foster a relationship to this key sector of society that, presumably, would become the most active leaders of the proletariat revolution. But which women fit the definition of “worker”?

The Central Women’s Section grappled with this question throughout the 1920s, reflecting the changing state of women’s paid labor in interwar France. Women participated in this workforce in two main ways. They engaged in what Sian Reynolds calls “casual work,” taking on domestic tasks such as laundry or sewing for others, or by doing at-home work for the

37 Goldman, Women at the Gates, 6.
textile industries, known as “outwork” or “piecework” [le travail à domicile]. This type of labor was “casual” only in that was informal and irregular, to the degree that census-takers considered such workers as unemployed.\footnote{Reynolds, France Between the Wars, 88 – 89.} It was equally common, however, for single and married working-class women to take on full-time employment. The war shifted many of the women in the declining “feminine” labor sectors into male-dominated industries, where employers carved out a new sexual division of labor in factories and white-collar work.\footnote{Reynolds, France Between the Wars, 92 – 105; Downs, Manufacturing Inequality, 1 – 11, 48 – 50.}

The Comintern Women’s Section made it clear that the type of work mattered when it began to keep track of the PCF’s “social composition,” asking the Central Women’s Section “what number and what percentage of the Party’s female workforce represent workers of different professions and housewives?”\footnote{Paprik, Fonds français de l’Internationale Communiste, “Correspondance du secrétariat international féminin,” 507_3_164, 42, https://pandor.u-bourgogne.fr/archives-en-ligne/ark:/62246/r29475zc0bw7sk/f42.} Between 1924 and 1927, the Party began to categorize women according to their proximity to the Soviet definition of “worker.” The female factory worker, or ouvrière, came closest to this definition, followed by the other women in paid employment – domestic workers, white-collar workers, and outworkers – whom the Central Women’s Section tended to group together as one body. Farthest from this definition were peasant women and housewives; the Party recognized their unpaid labor as valuable but did not consider them “workers.” This stemmed from the fact that they could not carry out the workplace-based activism which the Party tried to inspire in this period, but also because the Soviet idea of “worker” tied factory work to the development of class consciousness. Thus, housewives and peasants were, in theory, least likely to develop class consciousness, which
influenced how the Central Women’s Section portrayed and addressed this demographic in its propaganda.

This categorization played out in the way that the directors of the Central Women’s Section responded to the Comintern’s “united front from below” strategy, which ended in 1928. Throughout the interwar period, the Comintern provided a general framework which it required all its parties to follow when trying to organize the working class. In 1920 – 1924, this was Lenin’s “united front” strategy, in which communists tried to collaborate with other left-wing parties in their respective countries in order to incite the proletariat to revolution. After 1925, Lenin’s coalition of successors declared it would continue Lenin’s “united front” but clarified that parties should focus on organizing the working class without collaborating with the other leftist party leaders, thus renaming the strategy “united front from below.” In order to attract the masses of the proletariat, the Comintern advised its parties to mobilize workers over specific issues, such as antimilitarism, through mass organizations which would serve as “gateways” to move more people into the parties’ ranks.42

The PCF established two such organizations for women in 1925: Les Amies de L’Ouvrière (Friends of the Party’s journal, L’Ouvriere), and the Committee of Mothers and Widows Against War. In doing so, it defined who, and who did not, count as a “worker.” In a circular announcing the creation of the Amies de L’Ouvrière, Faussecave explained that the organization was for “the numerous women (housewives, domestic workers, etc…) [who] are interested in our work and assiduously follow our meetings” but whom the Party cannot organize

into factory-based cells. The creation of the Committee of Mothers and Widows Against War was a rare instance of the Party leadership’s participation in the work among women. The Party Secretariat, rather than the Central Women’s Section, announced its creation, emphasizing that the Committee “must above all touch the housewives, peasants, small shop owners.” Marie Dubois, member of the Central Women’s Section and the Political Bureau, strongly opposed the creation of this committee, arguing that “all the activity of the Party and the Women’s Section must be concentrated on the mobilization of ouvrières.”

Dubois’s objections demonstrated that, for some in the Party, the ouvrière was the higher priority. In 1926, Faussecave’s successor, Suzanne Girault, rejected this hierarchy, instructing the Party to campaign “among the different categories of working women [femmes travailleuses]: factory workers, outworkers, employees, saleswomen, housewives, peasants.” After Girault’s removal, however, the new Central Women’s Section directors took Dubois’s stance on the worker vs. housewife question. Brisset, Breant, and Robert blamed Faussecave and Girault’s removal on their misinterpretation of the Comintern’s united front policy, seen in the way they reportedly neglected drawing ouvrières into unions and focused all their attention on the Amies de L’Ouvrière organization, which was mostly non-workers. This, they argued,
contributed to the “bad social composition of our adherents…which will inevitably lead to them misunderstanding our work and failing to carry it out properly.”  

What made a “social composition” bad? At the 1927 Women’s Congress, the directors reported the composition of women in the Party as follows: mostly housewives or “other, companions of (male) militants,” then seamstresses, factory workers, office workers, and peasants. At this conference, the directors resolved to fix this by focusing on “the recruitment of the majority of ouvrières employed in the large industrial enterprises.” If there was any doubt that ouvrières outranked housewives, the Central Women’s Section’s instructions about dissolving the Amies de l’Ouvrière and creating a new mass organization, the Fraternal Union of Women Against War, (Union fratornelle des femmes contre la guerre or UFFCG) stated that the ouvrières belonging to the former organization should be invited to join the Party, to ensure “the return of the better militants of the sections of the Amies de L’Ouvrière to our cells.” On the other hand, “in the places where the sections are mostly composed of housewives or female members who have no attachment to industry, we think that it is possible to use these groups to form the first bases of a section of the UFFCG.”

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Thus, during the “united front from below” period, the Central Women’s Section pivoted over the prioritizing the *ouvrière* and extending its reach to the broadest masses of working-class women, which was made more difficult by the Comintern’s somewhat conflicting directives to create mass organizations and to prioritize workers. The Party’s propaganda and rhetoric reflected this developing categorization and hierarchization of working-class women in a way that connected class status to gender. Visually, it often juxtaposed two very different representations of women: the worker, who fit the image of the Soviet new woman, and the housewife, whose depiction associated femininity with helplessness or victimization.

In this 1926 poster for the International Women’s Week (figure 2.1), for example, which focuses on the Party’s antiwar message, the housewife figure kneels, holding her children, a torn dress exposing her literally and figuratively, and her long hair flowing across her back. By contrast, the worker stands upright, arms crossed in determination: her own hair neatly cropped short, with a much more androgynous silhouette. In a similar 1927 Fraternal Union of Women against the War poster (figure 2.2), the housewife kneels, holding her spouse or son, while the worker stands, supporting both the dead soldier and the women and children gathered around her, defiantly raising a fist. The housewife’s position here, holding a soldier in her arms, is reminiscent of Catholic imagery of the Virgin Mary as a Sorrowful Mother, particularly Michelangelo’s *Pieta* which portrays the grief of a mother losing her son.\(^{53}\) Thus, in these examples, the housewife’s pose expressed the pain, distress, and helplessness associated with

womanhood in time of war, while the worker’s pose usually reflected the “masculine” qualities of strength and militancy.

The Party mobilized workers and housewives over different themes: the former over factory-work issues, such as equal pay and labor conditions, and the latter over domestic concerns, such as the high cost of life.\footnote{See for example this 1926 tract: AN, F/7/13134, tract 864, "Aux femmes travailleuses !."} In its antimilitarism rhetoric, however, the Party addressed both categories of women, calling upon their audience’s more “feminine” qualities: maternity, selflessness, devotion to the family and the home, and strong sentimentality. This tactic was a legacy of the pre-Bolshevization period, in which the early Central Women’s Commission drew on the strategies of feminist pacifist groups to mobilize women. In 1925, Clara Zetkin of the Comintern Women’s Section advised the Party to continue this practice, in particular, because she feared that women workers might support the Rif War because it opened up positions and raised salaries for them in armament-related industries.\footnote{Paprik, “Correspondance du secrétariat féminin internationale avec le secrétariat féminin du CC du PCF, 124, \url{https://pandor.u-bourgogne.fr/archives-en-ligne/ark:/62246/r29475zc0bw7sk/f123}.} She instructed the Central Women’s Section to emphasize the “bloody sacrifices” of World War I and explicitly link them to France’s fears about its population crisis: in a word, to distract the workers from the financial benefits of the Moroccan war by focusing on the personal and social trauma created by the Great War.\footnote{Paprik, “Correspondance du secrétariat féminin internationale avec le secrétariat féminin du CC du PCF, 123, \url{https://pandor.u-bourgogne.fr/archives-en-ligne/ark:/62246/r29475zc0bw7sk/f123}.}

The Party’s antiwar propaganda used very descriptive, emotional language, again, at Zetkin’s advice.\footnote{See Paprik, “Correspondance du SFI-section féminine du CEIC,” 59, \url{https://pandor.u-bourgogne.fr/archives-en-ligne/ark:/62246/r29476z4tz6n2k/f59}.} A 1926 leaflet, for example, asked: “our children, husbands, fathers, fiancés,
shall they again know the horrible chemical war, which mutilates, which kills, which poisons?\textsuperscript{58}

Or another from the same year asked workers and housewives: “Are you by your indifference going to let your children, your spouses die in convulsions from murderous gas? Your Motherly sentiments, which all mothers have, even when they are “animals,” will they not tell you to save your little ones?”\textsuperscript{59} This antimilitarism rhetoric highlighted some of the fluidity or confusion in this period about who to mobilize and how to mobilize them. The worker’s distinctively Soviet, militant appearance seemed to contradict the maternalist, sentimental language aimed at her in the antiwar propaganda. This ambiguity about the image and language of the worker ended in 1928 when the Comintern introduced a new mobilization strategy for all areas of Party activity.

By the end of 1927, Stalin emerged as the undisputed leader of the Soviet Union. Faced with the rise of fascism in Europe, Stalin argued that fascists and the social democrats were equally dangerous agents of capitalism and, at the 6th Comintern Congress, ordered the Comintern parties to combat both in a “class against class” strategy which pitted the working class against right-wing and left-wing parties. Worker credentials, or social composition, became even more important among the communist parties.\textsuperscript{60} After this congress, the Comintern Women’s Section took a step back from directing the PCF’s work among women, leaving more of the strategy decisions to the Central Women’s Section, which, in theory, would receive more guidance from PCF leadership.

\textsuperscript{58} Paprik, Fonds de SFIC, “Materiaux de l’Union des femmes francaises contre la guerre,” 517_1_740, 1.
\textsuperscript{59} AN, F/7/13134, dossier 2, “Ouvrières ménagères.”
\textsuperscript{60} Martelli et al., \textit{Le parti rouge}, 38 – 41.
The Central Women’s Section, under the new leadership of Jeanne Buland, was more committed than ever to attracting *ouvrières* to the Party, according to its interpretation of the Comintern’s “class against class” line. It was in this period, in 1929, that female membership in the Party reached its lowest point, at about 200 card-carrying members. In her five-year tenure, Buland pursued the ideologically correct route of prioritizing workers, despite the Party’s mass organizations’ success among non-workers. The antiwar UFFCG counted about 2,000 members in just one year after its creation, most of whom, one Central Women’s Section report stated, were housewives and wives of male comrades. The UFFCG seemed a promising way to bring more women to the Party, but these women were still of the wrong “social composition.” The Central Women’s Section spoke of the need to “proletarianize” the organization and to change the UFFCG’s statutes “to define clearly in the statutes that the Union is an organization of working women.”

In the propaganda, the housewife image and even the word “housewife” almost completely disappeared in this period. Meanwhile, the worker image became even more androgynous and militant. This 1928/9 International Women’s Week poster (figure 2.3), for example, of a woman worker leading the masses portrays her with the short, covered hair and harsh facial features typical of 1920s Soviet portrayals of communist women. Her pose in this poster brings to mind the allegorical depictions of Marianne, the female representative of the

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French Republic, but her appearance emphasizes, to the viewer, that workers, not republicans, must lead the nation. A 1930 UFFCG poster (figure 2.4) best demonstrates the difference in the PCF propaganda between the two periods. While the earlier antiwar posters presented women as workers and housewives, militants and victims, this poster focuses exclusively on the militancy of the working mother: the worker clutches a child and stands in a fighting pose facing the threat of war. She even appears physically more imposing than the man next to her.

The propaganda’s vocabulary also changed. After 1928, the propaganda materials almost always addressed “Ouvrières!” rather than the earlier “workers and housewives” or “mothers, daughters, spouses, etc.” It still occasionally called on the family structure, warning working women that “the capitalists are doing nothing for you and your children” or imploring “mothers, women, sisters who are still crying over the deaths of the last war, you cannot be disinterested in our work.” Nevertheless, between 1928 and 1932, the Central Women’s Section largely ceased to address women in their familial roles and with the sentimental language seen in earlier antiwar propaganda. This transition indicates how strongly connected class and gender was for the PCF’s Central Women’s Section. To “proletarianize” their membership meant to drop the “femininity” in language and images that appealed to the housewives, and to draw in the workers who

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possessed the right, “masculine” qualities that made them, in the Central Women’s Section’s own words, the “better militants.”

The way that the Central Women’s Section reached out to women – the propaganda themes, language, and imagery – and the way that it categorized and hierarchized women according to their class status reflects the Comintern’s influence on the Party’s work among women and the Central Women’s Section’s commitment to following the Soviet model. This commitment was most pronounced during Buland’s tenure at the end of the Bolshevization period, when the Central Women’s Section ignored all but the socially desirable ouvrières, despite the declining number of women in the Party. The next section demonstrates how, within this Soviet model, the Central Women’s Section integrated French social and political concerns by addressing key issues regarding women in the workforce, such as pronatalism, rationalization, the sexual division of labor, and unemployment. In rhetoric aimed at working-class men both in and outside the Party, the directors of the Central Women’s Section tried to counter the French anxieties over the ouvrière by creating a more reassuring image of the working woman.

Rationalization, Pronatalism, and the Working Woman

What were these anxieties about the ouvrière? To pronatalists, the women in paid labor contributed to France’s population decline, while to working-class men, the ouvrière represented the postwar shift in the labor market brought on by rationalization, particularly in the male-dominated heavier industries. In France, employers began this process of introducing

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68 Roberts, Civilization without Sexes; Koos, “Gender, Anti-Individualism, and Nationalism,” 699-723.
assembly-line manufacturing and scientific management to their factories in the late nineteenth century, in order to reduce the workers’ autonomy and cut labor costs. The armament and manpower needs of the First World War accelerated this process, as many factory owners undertook large-scale “rationalization” or “Taylorization” to accommodate the loss of skilled laborers and the incoming “unskilled” female workers. As Laura Downs argued, although rationalization brought more women into these industries, the process preserved or re-made the sexual division of labor by associating lower-paid, “unskilled” work with women, and the higher-waged, “skilled” work with men. The rationalized factories re-ordered the work floor around “male work” and “female work” in a way that benefitted the employers at the expense of the employees, by taking “male” skilled work, breaking it down to an assembly-line activity, and hiring women to do it at a cheaper rate. Thus, in the late 1930s, employers resisted the popular notion that “returning the woman to the home” would solve the unemployment crisis of the Great Depression, because this female work would be too costly for them if done by men earning a male salary.\(^{69}\)

The Central Women’s Section attempted to counteract the negative view of the *ouvrière* while also demonstrating that the Party shared these concerns about rationalization and population decline. The result was a sometimes-contradictory argument which defended women’s right to work and equal pay while emphasizing that the Party would not promote working women’s needs at the expense of male workers, and occasionally exploiting these anxieties about the *ouvrière* to emphasize the importance of organizing women. In doing so, the

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\(^{69}\) Downs, *Manufacturing Inequality*, 17 – 145.
Central Women’s Section presented a different image of the ouvrière to its male audience than to it did to its female audience. Where Party propaganda directed at women often depicted the ouvrière in the style of the Soviet new woman, the Section’s rhetoric presented a less idealized and less controversial image of the ouvrière: as a working mother who engaged in paid labor as a result of the war – be it the loss of the family’s breadwinner or the rising cost of life – and who needed the Party’s help to alleviate the dangers that rationalization posed to her health, her family, and the workforce at large.

This representation of the ouvrière in some ways aimed to rehabilitate the image of the femme moderne. While male voices criticized the femme moderne for her economic independence, the Central Women’s Section emphasized that most women worked out of necessity. At the PCF’s Fifth Congress in 1926, the Central Women’s Section resolved “to fight the idea, too widespread among us, that the incorporation of women in production is only momentary.” 70 With this aim, it published pamphlet on the topic entitled “The Causes of the New Social Conditions of Women,” which explained that, in the past, only unmarried women entered the paid workforce, but now “young girls, married women, [and] mothers of families” altogether form about forty percent of the entire French workforce. 71 In a sense, this was true for the communist women who associated “worker” with factory work. The war’s redistribution of women workers created ouvrières out of domestic workers, outworkers, etc., who moved into the gender-specific factory work carved out by rationalization.

71 Paprik, “Correspondance du SFI-section du CEIC avec le secretariat feminin du CC du PCF,” 24, https://pandor.u-bourgogne.fr/archives-en-ligne/ark:/62246/r29477z3bpb9ck/f24. *I believe that the word “confudues” is a typo, and it was supposed to be “confondues.”
It is clear that the Section directors were aware that the public resisted this so-called intrusion of women into the male-dominated fields; not only did it seem to threaten male jobs, but it also threatened the breadwinner, patriarchal model of the working-class family, in which the woman’s salary, earned in a “feminine” field, supplemented the male income.72 The Central Women’s Section, however, pointed out an uncomfortable truth for many hoping for a return to the idealized pre-war “normal:” many women had to move into breadwinner roles because of the war’s toll on the male population. Its 1926 “Causes of the New Social Conditions of Women” attributed this influx of women into the workforce to the manpower needs of war, the higher cost of life, desire for a better standard of life, and the needs of “women who found themselves seeking resources capable of replacing the salary of an absent father or spouse.”73 Later, the Section’s 1929 essay on “The Working Woman in Capitalist Society” emphasized even more bluntly that many women were their family’s breadwinners, stating: “It was necessary to replace the 1,700,000 dead on the battlefield, then the thousands of disabled men who could not retake their place in production.”74

While defending women’s right to work and her presence in these formerly male-dominated industries, the Central Women’s Section also dwelt on the possible disadvantages of women in the workforce to challenge the “profound error,” as Faussecave had put it, that “work among women mainly interests women and that they alone must work among the women.”75

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1927, Suzanne Girault described the new masses of women workers as “one of the most dangerous currents for the male workforce” because of their potential to “become a powerful army between the hands of the employer against the entire proletariat.” The next year, her replacements supported their calls for greater Party participation in the work among women by warning that “female workers are more malleable, less accustomed to organization” than men.

The Central Women’s Section also linked its demand for equal pay to male labor, emphasizing in 1929 that this “can no longer be considered as a specifically feminine demand” because the working woman might, “by her passivity, represent the arm with which the employer can exercise its policy to lowering salaries at a large level.” It argued that unequal pay led to lower male salaries and, by introducing more women into the workforce, threatened the power of the unions. “Equal pay for equal work” was a demand which the directors of the pre-Bolshevization years first introduced, and which became one of the key propaganda themes after 1924, at the Comintern’s suggestion. When the Great Depression struck, the Party extended this demand to include equal unemployment benefits. While it connected women’s employment to low wages, the Central Women’s Section was careful not to suggest that women

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80 See for example, AN, F/7/13186, dossier no. 3, “Femmes chomeuses.”
in the workforce led to male unemployment, and eventually challenged this argument as it found
greater popularity in the 1930s, as seen in the next chapter.

While the Central Women’s Section used concerns about women and lowering wages to
motivate the rest of the Party, it also tapped into pronatalist fears about working women in order
to mobilize both men and women. State protection and support for working mothers was a core
element of Soviet feminism, as Marxist theorists argued that maternity was a “social function”
and called on the State to support women in all aspects of motherhood so that they could
participate more fully in the economic and political life.\footnote{81} In the Party’s earliest years, the
Central Women’s Commission celebrated the superiority of the Soviet Union’s health care and
childcare programs for working mothers. In 1925, the Party began to link its rhetoric on what it
called “protections for motherhood and infancy” to France’s depopulation crisis, at the
Comintern Women’s Section’s advice.\footnote{82} At the Party’s 1925 Congress, its representatives spoke
of the fate of the working mother [l’ouvrière-mère] for whom “no protection laws [are]
effectively applied,” and which “leads us to a ceaselessly growing peril” in the declining
birthrate.\footnote{83}

Faussecave expanded on this in a 1926 brochure in which she framed the depopulation crisis as the inevitable result of the entrance of women into production. Familiar with pronatalist
rhetoric, she wrote that this change in the workforce leads to “the destruction of the family,

\footnote{81} See chapter 1.
\footnote{82} As recorded by Marie Dubois in a letter to Moscow: Paprik, “Correspondance du sécretariat féminin internationale avec le secrétariat féminin du CC du PCF,” 93, \url{https://pandor.u-bourgogne.fr/archives-en-ligne/ark:/62246/r29475zc0bw7sk/93}.
\footnote{83} Paprik, “Correspondance du secrétariat féminin internationale avec le secrétariat féminin du CC du PCF,” 17, \url{https://pandor.u-bourgogne.fr/archives-en-ligne/ark:/62246/r29475zc0bw7sk/f17}. 

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which our bourgeoisie calls and considers, from the point of view of their class interests, the ‘social cell.’” Characteristic of the Party’s hesitance to reject the bourgeois family, Faussecave did not specify if this destruction of the “social cell” was a bad thing. Rather, she focused on the crisis of child mortality, and argued that the solution was government support and protection for working mothers and their children. During the 1926 elections, the Party published a series of proposed bills around this theme: bills for paid maternity leave, the creation of “maternal houses” which would provide care and services to the pregnant and the recent mothers, maternity assistance to non-salaried women, mandatory breastfeeding rooms in all businesses employing more than fifty women, the creation of more childcare facilities, the establishment of an office for the Protection of Maternity in every municipality, and the establishment of a national maternity fund to fund these projects.

In doing so, the Party entered the ongoing debate in the French political sphere over the shape of pronatalist legislation: should pronatalist measures be State enforced or left to private businesses? And should it reinforce paternal authority, support mothers, or bypass both to benefit the children directly? While married women’s presence in the paid workforce was well established, some pronatalist groups, especially Catholic ones, encouraged a state allowance for mothers that would permit them to stay home and raise their children. Others, recognizing the importance of married women’s participation in the French economy, proposed legislation to make the “feminine” industries mother-friendly; along these lines, the state restricted the number of hours a woman could work in 1892, enshrining their double burden in law, and in 1904 called

for the creation of a “maternity house” in every department, which provided prenatal and postnatal care to all mothers, wed or unwed. Later, in 1913, the government passed the Strauss Act, which provided for paid maternity leave for working mothers and extra money for large families.\(^{86}\)

As pronatalist fears rose in the interwar period, the State looked to incentivize large families financially, with family allowances - a system first established by private Catholic employers to pay male employees extra according to family size.\(^{87}\) The Parliament’s debate over creating state-sponsored family allowances in 1923 highlighted the tensions among pronatalists. The commission which prepared the bill proposed that the allowance go to the mother, as the children’s primary caregiver, but other deputies objected on the grounds that bypassing the father weakened his position as head of the family.\(^{88}\) The PCF’s suggestions supported a model of intense State intervention which left the father entirely out of the picture, similar to the State support for working mothers undertaken, in theory, in the Soviet Union.

The Central Women’s Section also engaged in pronatalist fears by emphasizing the harmful consequences of rationalization on women’s health. These new methods of work, it argued, compromised women’s childbearing abilities and the health of their future children. Its propaganda argued that, due to rationalization, “the number of women who cannot carry their babies to term grows each year, and the children who are born are more and more sickly.”\(^{89}\) At


the same time, however, that the Party began to focus on how work affecting women’s childbearing potential, it also made its strongest defense for legal abortion. The Party supported legal abortion since its creation, but rarely introduced the term to its propaganda aimed at women until the late 1920s, when it focused most intensely on workers. Even then, though, the Central Women’s Section’s catered its rhetoric on abortion to pronatalist arguments by distinguishing between the two types of abortion-seekers: impoverished and overburdened married worker who cannot take on the charge of caring for a child for financial or health reasons and the “worldly women who limit their families and refuse motherhood.”\textsuperscript{90} It called for the end of the “villainous laws against abortion” but make it clear that it is for the sake of the overworked mother, rather than the frivolous reasons commonly attributed to the 	extit{femme moderne}.\textsuperscript{91}

Thus, throughout the Bolshevization period, the Central Women’s Section used widespread fears about women taking male jobs, depressing wages, and hindering the population growth, as well as PCF-specific fears about working women being an anti-revolutionary force, to support its demands for working women and to argue the importance of attracting and mobilizing a section of the population which could not vote. With the Soviet feminist notion of maternity as a social function, the Central Women’s Section found common ground with the pronatalists who urged state support for working mothers, while its protests against rationalization communicated to the French working class that the Party was not, as Jean Renaud put it in 1921, trying “to set

\textsuperscript{90} Paprik, “Tracts, affiches, declarations,” 23, \url{https://pandor.u-bourgogne.fr/archives-en-ligne/ark:/62246/r32472z0hx8pk/f23}.

\textsuperscript{91} Paprik, “Tracts, affiches, declarations,” 23, \url{https://pandor.u-bourgogne.fr/archives-en-ligne/ark:/62246/r32472z0hx8pk/f23}. 
up the woman against the men” in the workforce. The Central Women’s Section subtly shaped their rhetoric to fit French political needs during Bolshevization, but this phenomenon became much more pronounced after 1932, when both the Central Women’s Section’s leadership and the PCF’s political strategies changed.

Conclusion

While the historiography characterizes the Bolshevization era as one where the PCF most embraced Soviet feminism and the new woman, this chapter demonstrates that it also set the stage, in some ways, for the Party’s rejection of the Soviet new woman and reorientation around “family values” in the Popular Front era. To mobilize women, the directors of the Central Women’s Section increasingly prioritized the ouvrière and assigned her the qualities of the Soviet new woman but used the language of family and motherhood to address the less-valuable housewives. The Party’s success, however, among the housewives in the mass organizations, such as the Fraternal Union of Women against the War, or the Friends of the Ouvrière, which most appealed to women’s “feminine” natures, and its failures among the workers, taught the Central Women’s Section a lesson about how to attract large numbers of women which its new directors would begin to apply in 1932. In addition, the Section’s attack on rationalization to preserve male jobs and fight against depopulation set a precedent for the more drastic ways in which it would adjust its propaganda strategies to accommodate male sensibilities.

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CHAPTER 3: THE POPULAR FRONT AND THE NEW COMMUNIST WOMEN (1932 – 1939)

In July 1936, Party propaganda director Jacques Duclos delivered a speech at a PCF national congress where he exhorted the audience to unite French women for the sake of a future “where the tricolor flag and the red flag of communism are reconciled.”¹ This statement describes the image of the French communist woman which the PCF developed in the 1930s: an attempt to reconcile the French republican mother with the Soviet new woman, in response the Party’s changing political goals. In the early 1930s, the Party leadership, increasingly anxious about the rise of fascism in Europe, began to pursue a Popular Front against fascism with other politically left and center parties in France. To earn and maintain the popular support which it lacked for over a decade, the Party softened its revolutionary rhetoric and stressed its dedication to France, its republican values, and its future. Historians examining the Party’s female imagery during the Popular Front argued that the connection between gender and politics in France influenced the Party to adopt what Tardivel called a “very conformist image of women,” both in the way it presented its own female members and in the way that it tried to mobilize other women.² As Bard and Robert demonstrated, the Party emphasized its members’ “femininity, maternity, and respectability,” especially after Stalin initiated a similar pivot regarding Soviet women in the mid-1930s, and organized women almost exclusively over the “feminine” concerns of antiwar activism, social aid, and the protection of the family.³

This chapter takes a closer look the new French communist woman which developed during the Popular Front. It demonstrates the complexity of the Party’s transition away from the Soviet model of mobilizing women. As demonstrated last chapter, the Central Women’s Section followed the Soviet model when reaching out to women, such as prioritizing ouvrières and using the Soviet new woman imagery, but it deviated from this model in its rhetoric addressed to men and, occasionally, working-class women who were not ouvrières. In the early 1930s, with little input from Party leadership, the Central Women’s Section began to drop these Soviet elements which shaped its propaganda in the past, but in 1936, the male Party leadership stepped in to definitively propose a new model of communist womanhood which had none of the elements of the Soviet new woman, or even of the more reassuring ouvrière image presented to the men. While Stalin’s emphasis on the Soviet woman’s maternity and domesticity doubtless influenced the PCF’s reconceptualization of the French communist woman, this chapter argues that the French model which emerged in the late 1930s had uniquely French elements and did not exactly fit the image proposed by PCF leadership. Militant but maternal, she was the Central Women’s Section’s attempt to reconcile the militancy of the Soviet new woman with the maternity, domesticity, and duty of the republican mother, in a way that drew on the legacy of the French Revolution.

Dropping “Party Etiquette:” 1932 – 1935

The PCF’s transition away from the Soviet model of mobilizing women began in 1932, a couple of years before the Soviet Union also began to move away from its new woman image, when the Georgette Bodineau became the new director of the PCF’s Central Women’s Section. Bodineau replaced Jeanne Buland, during whose tenure the Party prioritization of the worker and
use of the Soviet new woman imagery was at its height. Like her predecessors, Bodineau began her term by suggesting a new strategy for mobilizing women. Her proposal, however, was a significant departure from past strategy changes. During the Bolshevization era, incoming directors usually framed their strategy suggestions as a closer adherence to Marxist principles and the Comintern’s policies, but Bodineau proposed that the Central Women’s Section drop some of these organizational and ideological constraints – occasionally referred to as “Party etiquette” – which shaped and restricted their work in the past. Later joined by the three women, Bernadette Cattaneo, Martha Desrumeaux, and Cilly Vassart, who directed the work among women for the rest of the 1930s, Bodineau began to reverse policies which shaped the Section’s work for many years. She stopped prioritizing workers and encouraged the Central Women’s Section to mobilize the broadest masses of women, including, in her words, “workers, housewives, artisans, small business owners, [and] clerks.” In the same vein, she proposed a collaboration with other political or social groups, such as socialists and pacifists, which the Comintern deemed “bourgeois.”

What spurred this decision, at a time when the Comintern continued to affirm its “class against class” line? It was likely a response to the decade of Bolshevization policies which demanded strict adherence to Party etiquette, with very poor results. In this move toward a popular-front style strategy among women, Bodineau may have also received support from

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4 See chapter 2.
Maurice Thorez, the new Party leader. Ever since 1930, Thorez had pushed the Party to drop the class-against-class strategy and foster ties with other social groups and political parties. When he became the PCF leader in 1932, he began to move cautiously toward greater collaboration with the French socialist party, despite the Comintern’s disapproval. Although the relationship between PCF leadership and the Central Women’s Section remained fairly tense – in 1933 Bodineau delivered a very severe critique of the Party leadership – meeting reports indicated that Political Bureau occasionally weighed in on, and supported, Bodineau’s new direction for the Party’s work among women.

Her most significant accomplishment was the Central Women’s Section’s participation in the so-called Amsterdam Congress arranged by the male German communist propagandist Willi Müzenberg. Also in favor of creating stronger ties between the communists and other left-wing parties for the purpose of an antifascist coalition, Müzenberg founded the World Committee against Imperialist War, which held its first congress in 1932 in Amsterdam and to which the PCF’s Central Women’s Section sent delegates. Both it, and the European Workers’ Anti-Fascists Unions which he founded a year later, were quite successful and demonstrated the possibility of working with other parties over the key issues of the day: pacifism and antifascism. Inspired, Bodineau’s Central Women’s Section organized a meeting to set up a

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8 Martelli et al., Le parti rouge, 46 – 49.
11 Calver, « The Comité mondial des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme, » 35 – 41.
“partyless” antifascist and antiwar organization in France which, her report later emphasized, included “many women whom we did not usually reach,” such as socialists and members of the League for Peace and Liberty.12

This organization did not immediately materialize, but it reflected Bodineau’s will to expand the Party’s target audience and diversify the ways in which to do it. Her reorientation set the stage for the Central Women’s Section’s activity in 1934 and 1935, when the PCF officially received the Comintern’s support to create a popular front against fascism in France. In April 1934, Georges Dimitrov became the Comintern leader. Like Müzenberg, he operated in Germany in the early 1930s and recognized the grave threat fascism posed to communism under his influence, Stalin began to turn away from his “class against class” line and countenance the idea of collaborating with other parties. Seeing this, Thorez called for the PCF to pursue a Popular Front in June of 1934, and the Comintern ratified his decision a few weeks later, but did not order the rest of the Comintern parties to follow this strategy until 1935.13

After June 1934, the Central Women’s Section, now led by Cattaneo, Desrumeau, and Vassart, intensified its action along the lines Bodineau set out in 1932: to attract and unite women regardless of class or political affiliation. Its most successful experiment was the World Committee of Women against War and Fascism (Comité mondiale contre la guerre et le fascisme) hitherto referred to as the World Committee. It emerged at the request of the Comintern leader Dimitrov who asked Bernadette Cattaneo in 1934 to organize a women’s

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13 Martelli et al., Le parti rouge, 53 – 58.
movement in the style of Muzenberg’s antiwar and anti-fascism organizations.¹⁴ Many of the Party’s earlier organizations were also supposed to be “partyless,” and unsuccessfully so; Vassart once reported that the UFFCG was so widely known to be a communist organization that many of its members thought that joining the organization meant joining the Party.¹⁵ To avoid this, Cattaneo collaborated with Gabrielle Duchene, a party sympathizer who was active in other peace movements like the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom. Duchene was the World Committee’s president and figurehead, while Cattaneo was its secretary and took a larger role in the day-to-day operation of the Committee. From Cattaneo’s reports on the World Committee at Party congresses and meetings, it is clear that the women of the PCF directed the majority of its operations and its press. The World Committee was a source of great pride to its leaders: its first congress took place in August 1934 in Paris, with 1,100 women from twenty-eight countries, after which adherents began to create national sections in their respective countries. Within three years, the French section of the World Committee boasted 200,000 members, and when the World Committee ceased activity in late 1939, because the war it was trying to prevent had begun anyway, it had sections across Western Europe, India, China, and South America.¹⁶

The French section of the World Committee produced a monthly journal simply named *Femmes* [Women] which became the Party’s primary means of reaching women throughout the Popular Front. Although the Central Women’s Section made plans to republish the *L’Ouvrière* in

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¹⁴ Calver, « The Comité mondial des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme, » 125.
¹⁶ Calver, « The Comité mondial des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme, » 1, 72, 125-6.
the style of Femmes, it never materialized. The reason for this is unclear – it may have been because of the success of Femmes that the women felt another journal was unnecessary. The journal Femmes and the discussions surrounding the question of propaganda demonstrated that, for the Central Women’s Section, dropping Party etiquette also meant dropping elements of Soviet feminism which shaped or restricted their material in the past. During the Bolshevization era, the connection between class and gender influenced the Central Women’s Section to hierarchize the masculine qualities of the worker over the femininity of the housewife or non-worker. After 1932, when the new directors dropped this hierarchy between workers and non-workers, their propaganda addressed both using the common theme of maternity and family. In doing, so it put greater value on the maternity and femininity of their audience and retired the militant androgyny of the Soviet new woman. This shift may have been a deliberate move to improve the Party’s public image especially among the pronatalists, or it may have been the result of a more unconscious adherence to pronatalist thought among the women of the Central Women’s Section who, because Bolshevization and the Soviet new woman failed to draw women into the Party, began to adopt the rhetoric and strategies which “naturally” appealed to women.

Cilly Vassart’s plans, for example, for improving the L’Ouvrière centered around making the journal “interesting to women” by addressing “all the preoccupations of women and demands of the most diverse groups of working women (as women, mothers, spouses, workers, 

Reflecting the republican notion of women as apolitical, Vassart suggested that the journal never give more than one political article and include a page for children and literary content in order to strengthen its appeal among French women. The journal *Femmes* included these elements and more, with extracts from a novel, and a page or two sharing sewing patterns, recipes, and household advice. These were the very elements to which the earliest women communists strongly objected: as Marthe Bigot argued in 1921, the fashion, domestic, and literary content found in the mainstream women’s press of the day “contribute to maintaining the female proletariat in thoughtlessness and ignorance” while Suzanne Girault framed it as a means to teach women “how to adapt to the conditions of capitalist society.”

In discussing the Party’s press, Vassart spoke of women as mothers and spouses first, then workers or housewives. The other directors followed her example. For example, in a 1934 speech about the Party’s activity among women, Cattaneo emphasized the possibilities of addressing the factory worker through her “three exploitations:” “she is mother, she is housewife, she is factory worker.” This emphasis on maternity shaped the Party’s 1934 election material, which did not present worker-specific demands but addressed workers as mothers or housewives and urged them to support the Party for their own liberation and a better

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19 Paprik, « Rapports de la section feminine du PCF, » 16-17.
future for their children: “Women of the people, manual and intellectual workers,” one such
election pamphlet proclaimed: “For your right and eligibility to vote, for the protection of
childhood, for total emancipation, as granted in the Soviet Union …support the communist
party!” 23

The Party’s imagery of women also reflected this move toward the “everywoman.” While
the Party’s artistic renderings of women portrayed them as archetypes, the worker and the
housewife, the Femmes relied on photographs, rather than drawn images, which made the subject
seem more relatable, modern, and real. The workers represented in Femmes lost some of the
militancy and androgyny of the Soviet new woman, while the mothers lost the expression of
grief and helplessness characteristic of the victimized housewife. This telephone operator on a
1935 cover (figure 3.1), for example, has a subtle femininity and softer expression, which
distinguishes her from the Party’s past representations of workers. Another 1935 cover portrays a
mother holding her son (figure 3.2). Her maternity is heavily emphasized, as the child is the
visual center and focus of the photo, but the mother’s expression, while not quite cheerful, does
not display that distress so characteristic of the earlier imagery. With her determined expression
and subtle femininity, she could be a housewife and a worker. Many of the other images of
women in Femmes have a similar ambiguity: these 1934 covers of women trying on gas masks
(figure 3.3) or of women assembling for the first World Committee conference (figure 3.4) strike
a balance between femininity and militancy.

23 Paprik, “Materiaux du secretariat des pays romains du CEIC, » 62, https://pandor.u-
bourgogne.fr/archives-en-ligne/ark:/62246/r32991zz0n9xrk/f62.
The diversity of images in *Femmes* corresponded to a mixture of old and new material in the journal’s content. As discussed earlier, the journal devoted a page or two to the type of content found in mainstream press – fashion, household advice, etc. It did not, as Vassart suggested for *L’Ouvrière*, contain only one political article. In fact, most of its content was political, prior to 1936, and although its articles carefully avoided any mention of the French Communist Party, they discussed social and political issues which were the basis of the Party’s earlier propaganda, such as the high cost of life, evils of war, dangers of fascism, need for better protections for mothers and children, and the emancipation enjoyed by women in the USSR. While it was supposed to appeal to the broadest masses of women, industry workers featured very heavily: almost every issue had an article about working conditions for women, women-led strikes, or women workers in the Soviet Union.\(^\text{24}\)

Overall, the balance of new and old propaganda techniques suggested an uncertainty among the Central Women’s Section over the extent to which they were prepared to drop all Soviet elements and embrace the maternalism and pronatalism that characterized the propaganda for women in the later 1930s. The best example of this uncertainty is the way that it addressed the emerging fascist rhetoric on “returning” women to the home. The Party denounced this rhetoric on the Soviet feminist grounds that a woman’s right to work “is true equality, which alone leads to liberty and real fraternity,” and included it to its other demands for women: “the right to work and independence for women” and for “equal pay for equal work, civil and

political equality, and the protection of mothers and children.”25 The World Committee also adopted the issue. It hosted a public meeting on the danger posed to women’s work and Femmes published articles on the topic.26 The Party, however, introduced a maternalist bent to the topic by arguing that work does not hinder a woman’s ability to be a mother and housewife.27

Moreover, while this emphasis on maternity and family suggest a full subordination to pronatalist rhetoric, prior to June 1936, Femmes published an article praising abortion clinics in the USSR and another questioning that France suffered a population crisis.28 Written by a Dr. Alexandre Roubakine who was clearly affiliated with the communist party in some way, this article in the April 1935 edition argued that France’s population was stationary, not decreasing, but that the “dominant class” pushed rhetoric about population decline because it wanted the working class to expand. Their reasons, Roubakine argued, were as follows: a larger working-class would create more soldiers to carry out capitalist wars and a larger workforce, which would result in lower salaries across the board. Large families would also put extra pressure on their parents; the fathers, “preoccupied with making a living” would be “more docile, less revolutionary,” while the mothers, “weakened or just hampered by numerous pregnancies” would be “incapable of helping men in their fight for the liberation of the working class.”29

Continuing to praise the USSR for overcoming the types of medical or social conditions that

caused France’s higher mortality rates, this article demonstrates the type of closet-communist material available in *Femmes* as well as the uncertain state of the Party’s propaganda, even after Thorez announced the Popular Front in 1934. While Bodineau and her successors experimented with dropping the Soviet new woman and other elements of Party etiquette in their propaganda, this transition away from the Soviet model remained incomplete.

**1936: A Turning Point**

At the Party’s National Conference in July 1936, Jacques Duclos, PCF propaganda director, ended this transition when he exhorted the women of the party to set aside the elements of the Soviet feminism which once shaped their work and to embrace their femininity: “Yes, female comrades,” he declared, “it is not because you are communists that you cannot occupy yourselves with fashion, with the psychological and sentimental problems that interest your sisters.”30 His speech, which marked a turning point for the Party’s work among women, was a response to major social and political developments in France and the USSR which took place in the preceding year.

One of the most significant of these was the Soviet Union’s June 1936 abortion ban, colloquially known as the “Law of Happy Motherhood,” which marked the culmination of the transformation of the Soviet new woman in the USSR. The growing threat of war triggered greater concern over the effect that “building communism” had on the country’s population levels, which drove Stalin’s decision to ban abortion and to stress the value of maternity to the

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Soviet woman. 31 He justified this abortion ban by citing Kollontai and Lenin who argued that abortion would no longer be necessary in a socialist state which fully supported mothers and childcare. As Lynn Atwood pointed out, Stalin differed from the two in “his estimation of what level of state support was required.”32 The state had largely failed to collectivize childcare and housework to the degree that Kollontai and Lenin expected. Women could take advantage of maternity leave and state-provided daycare, but, Atwood argued, the new impediments to divorce and child support laws included in the 1936 law made it clear that the state intended to make the family take on the bulk of parenting.33 Thus, the Stalinist new woman valued domesticity as well as maternity.

Leading up to the abortion ban, Stalin also encouraged Soviet women to shed the “masculinity” of the new woman of the 1920s and embrace their “femininity” in presentation and character, as part of Stalin’s kul’turnost or “culturedness” campaign. In 1935, Stalin insisted that, having accomplished socialism, Soviet citizens should work on developing culture, which included appreciation for the arts, well-mannered behavior, and attention to one’s appearance. Women’s magazines which once condemned fashion and makeup as bourgeois began to highlight these elements, despite their lack of availability to many ordinary Soviet women. Participation in the workforce, however, remained very important to the image of the Soviet woman, as the country’s economic needs required her to perform the double shift – at work and

32 Atwood, Creating the New Soviet Woman, 117.
33 Atwood, Creating the New Soviet Woman, 117 – 118.
at home – that it once condemned. The state’s propaganda aimed at Soviet women through the mid-1930s onward emphasized a woman’s ability to balance paid and unpaid labor: to work and raise children, to perform labor traditionally associated with men and still present herself as fashionable and feminine.  

As the Soviet Union altered its stance on family and Soviet womanhood, the French Communist Party officially signaled its support for pronatalism. While women’s propaganda alluded to the topic in the 1920s, the Party’s official stance was that the state should “keep its nose out of the bedroom.”  

In October 1935, the PCF’s main journal *L’Humanité* published its first article on the dangers of depopulation, and in early 1936 Party leader Maurice Thorez dedicated a portion of his speech at the 8th National Congress to “the problem of population decline.” The Party’s engagement with pronatalism, by which it indicated its national character and concern for France’s future, was especially important in the lead-up to the May 1936 elections. In 1934 the Socialist and Communist Parties worked together with moderate success, but the Radicals, who dominated government, were hesitant to join them. In June 1935, the center-right government collapsed, and Pierre Laval set up a new right-wing cabinet with Radical participation. The next month, Radicals joined the communists and socialists in a protest over the very government that they participated in, which marked the unofficial beginning of the Popular

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Front coalition of Socialists, Radicals, and Communists. The three parties signed a Popular Front program in January 1936 and swept the May 1936 general elections.\(^{37}\)

As the party with most elected deputies, the Socialist leader Leon Blum set up the new cabinet to which he invited members of the PCF, but the Party’s Political Bureau declined to accept the offer. Communists, however, won a wide representation in parliament. In the month between the elections and the new government’s accession, a wave of strikes and factory occupations gripped the country. It began in Paris over worker dismissals and then spread across the country, virtually suspending economic activity. When the Blum government came to power, it organized the Matignon Accords between the workers’ union, employers’ association, and the French State which guaranteed workers a blanket raise, the legal right to strike, and an end to obstacles against unionizing.\(^{38}\) In the next few weeks, the Blum government rapidly passed more historic labor laws, mandating a forty-hour work week, two weeks paid vacations, and right to collective bargaining. While the Matignon Accords contributed to ending the mass strike, Julian Jackson argues that the crucial actor in ending this unprecedented workers’ movement was the PCF leader Maurice Thorez himself, when he announced three days after the Matignon Accords that it was time for the strike to end.\(^{39}\)

Thorez’s announcement ending the strikes highlighted the PCF’s unique position in mid-1936. For the first time, the Party held considerable political power, but it depended on the ability to tone down its revolutionary rhetoric in order to appeal to the broadest masses of the


\(^{38}\) Martelli et al, *Le parti rouge*, 62 - 64.

French people. The Party’s new goal was to preserve and strengthen its power along these lines. With this in mind, Duclos spoke at the National Congress in July 1936 where he attributed the Party’s past failures to attract women to the failures of the women in the Party who lost touch with their own “feminine” natures when they tried to pursue the Soviet model of womanhood in their own lives and in the way that they mobilized others. The women in the Party, Duclos argued, “are not struggling to understand the personality of the woman,” but “the women communists will have more success in their work if they will be women like the others.”

These party members also earned criticism for their education in and dedication to Marxist theory, which, Duclos argued, made them hostile to their non-communist “sisters” and intractable in their methods of organization. Duclos declared that “it does not suffice to mock, with airs of superiority, this need of the woman to idealize her life,” and denounced “the work of women imbued in superiority who indulge in a superb isolation” from the female masses rather than to engage with them over the more mundane matters of daily life and the household.

For the Central Women’s Section, however, these “mundane matters” had been their focus ever since the Party’s creation, present propaganda concerning the cost of life, support for working mothers, and so on. In this instance, Duclos appeared to be expressing frustration about the uncertain status of Soviet feminism in the more recent activity among women. To illustrate his point, he told an anecdote about a communist woman he met who violently objected to his suggestion that women in the Party form knitting circles, following the example of some women’s groups to knit for the unemployed. While the latter were “moved by a sentiment of

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41 Paprik, « Pour l’union des femmes de France, » 19, 21.
pity, by maternal sentiments” to do some good for the unfortunate, Duclos explained, this woman communist “did not conceal her contempt for these brave women” and “considered this knitting enterprise for the unemployed a simple monstrosity. It’s just if I had not been treated as a reactionary,” Duclos complained, “by this militant who accused me of wanting to rivet women to mending of socks.” It is clear that Soviet feminism underlay the tensions in this episode: the unnamed comrade who likely saw his suggestion as another way of restricting women to the private sphere and denying her full participation in politics and public life, and Duclos interpreting her refusal as the obstinate superiority and lack of “maternal sentiments” of the Soviet new woman.  

Duclos labelled these failures among communist woman with the term “sectarianism,” which provided him a way of legitimizing his attacks on Soviet feminism without having to justify them. Thorez used the term in 1932 to object to the way that the Party was isolating itself from the rest of the French society, and, later, it became a way to describe the Party’s refusal to collaborate with other leftist organizations during the class against class period. In 1934, Bernadette Cattaneo advised the women in the Party must “avoid sectarianism” when working with non-communists to create the World Committee. Duclos argued that Communist women were sectarian when they objected to forms of organization outside of the Party’s mass

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45 Paprik, « Stenographies des 7e-8e séances de la conférence nationale du PCF à Ivry, » 88.
organizations. It was also sectarian to neglect “fashion and the psychological and sentimental problems” which “naturally” interest women in their mobilization efforts.  

Duclos made it clear that he expected the women communists to drop the qualities and ideas connected to Soviet feminism, and even communism in general, in their behavior and propaganda, so that they could “be like other women.” His speech and its aftermath, however, demonstrates that this was not only about attracting more women, but it was also about improving the Party’s image. Who were the women communists’ “sisters,” these “other women”? They could be the femmes modernes, the fashionable, childless, and economically independent women whose image courted postwar anxieties about gender roles and France’s future. But, for the sake of the Party’s image among the key demographic - voting men - the true French woman was the femme moderne’s counterpart in the French imagination: the woman whose primary identity was maternity. Married or involuntarily single because to the war’s ravages on the male population, she submitted to the family and dedicated herself to children, either her own or others’, and thus restored gender roles and the nation.

The New French Communist Woman: 1936 – 1939

As Duclos hinted in his anecdote about the knitting groups, not all the women comrades embraced the new direction for the work among women. Historians found that some expressed surprise at the USSR’s pivot on abortion but did so privately due to the Party’s history of

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48 Roberts, Civilization without Sexes.
intolerance toward dissent.\textsuperscript{49} The changing structure of the Central Women’s Section during this period ended the reports and letters to the Comintern which provided insight into Party’s internal debates in the 1920s and early 1930s. Although their private opinions remain hidden, the party’s propaganda for women after 1936 indicate that the directors of the work among women followed Duclos’s instructions. In public speeches, too, the directors expressed their support for Duclos’s new guidelines, but the difference in rhetoric, tone, and priorities between the directors of the work among women and Danielle Casanova, leader of the female section of the Communist Youth, demonstrated that they were not all in agreement about the legacy of the Soviet new woman and the shape of the new French communist woman.

Danielle Casanova, who belonged to a younger generation than Cattaneo, Desrumeaux, and the other leaders of the Central Women’s Section, was active in the Communist Youth organization during the Bolshevization era. In that period, the girls in the Communist Youth fully adopted and performed the qualities of the Soviet new woman. The Communist Youth did not try to recruit women specifically, and expected all its members, regardless of gender, to participate in its events and demonstrations which occasionally turned violent.\textsuperscript{50} For a young female worker, joining a group like the Communist Youth flew against convention, and often occurred in face of strong family resistance. Even parents who were party members resisted seeing their daughters in the Communist Youth. The organization also reflected the same gender discrimination that plagued the Party’s work among women; female members of the organization complained that their male comrades distrusted women in politics and the male leadership relegated them to

\textsuperscript{49} Pennetier and Pudal, « La part des femmes, des femmes à part, » 186 – 7 ; Studer, « La femme nouvelle, » 384.
\textsuperscript{50} Whitney, \textit{Mobilizing Youth}, 76.
gender-specific positions as cell secretaries, treasurers, and even cleaners. Danielle Casanova was the first woman elected to its Central Committee, an event which did not occur until 1932.\textsuperscript{51}

When the Comintern ordered its sections to follow the PCF’s example and pursue a Popular Front policy in 1935, it instructed the Communist Youth organizations to assemble all young people, regardless of class or political background, into a broad antifascist coalition in support of the vague goals of progress, liberty, and peace. To support this mission, the Comintern ordered the creation of separate communist youth groups for women, students, and peasants. In France, the PCF chose Casanova to lead the women’s section of the communist youth, along with two other former communist youth activists: Jeannette Vermeersch, and Claudine Chomat. At the time, all three women were spouses or partners of men in the PCF leadership.\textsuperscript{52}

A few months before Duclos’s speech, Casanova announced the split of the PCF’s Communist Youth. While the male section kept the name “Communist Youth,” the female section became the Union of French Girls (\textit{Union des jeunes filles de France}). At this announcement, Casanova reported that the primary goal of the Union was to draw young women into antifascism and educate them in Marxism-Leninism “by taking into account the distinctiveness, the character, and the aspirations and needs of young women.”\textsuperscript{53} It was of utmost importance for the Union to appeal not only to young women, but to their parents as well. Its

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{51} Whitney, \textit{Mobilizing Youth}, 75 – 78.
\item \textsuperscript{52} Whitney, \textit{Mobilizing Youth}, 171, 196 – 197; Bard and Robert, “The French Communist Party and Women,” \textit{325}. Daniele Casanova was married to Laurent Casanova, and Claudine Chomat to Victor Michaut. Jeannette Vermeersch became Maurice Thorez’s partner in 1934, and they married after the war: Mischi, \textit{Le parti des communistes}, 300.
\item \textsuperscript{53} Quoted and translated by Whitney, \textit{Mobilizing Youth}, 198.
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name, totally devoid of any communist affiliation, supported Casanova’s mission to develop a respectable image of communist women to counteract that of the new woman of the earlier years. “Communist girls are fighting for a happy life,” Casanova assured the audience, “but they have nothing of the rough [rèche] and acrimonious [acariâtre] woman, nor of the tomboy [garçon manqué]. They participate in politics and stay charming, but their faces express the firm will of a youth who wants change.”

Already in accord with Duclos about dropping the Soviet new woman, Casanova responded to his speech with enthusiasm. “One year ago,” she opened a 1937 speech to the Central Committee, “Jacques Duclos, in a very important report told us, the other militant women of the Party, how we can, in our activity among women, work to know how to think and act like the women of our country think and act.” Her takeaway from the speech – how communist women can be more “feminine” – differed from Cattaneo’s, who, at the same Central Committee, concluded her piece on the work among women with:

I will report that the women communists wanted to apply Jacques Duclos’s watchwords given a year ago at the National Conference: no schematism and organizational imperialism. We must organize women by any means and without a formula, and thus we will succeed in uniting women and creating a union of French women around the topics which interest them.

Cattaneo focused on Duclos’s warning against being too rigid in their forms of organizing women, rather than his warning about women losing touch with their “femininity.” She also

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framed it as something the Central Women’s Section had already intended to apply before his speech. Indeed, in January 1936, Desrumeaux introduced a new direction to the work among women based on the astounding success of the Comité Mondiale. Desrumeaux wanted to decentralize the party’s work among women, even dissolving its leadership body, the Commission Feminine, and let the women go to the masses in whatever manner they chose. She proposed that dropping ideological correctness in the way it reached out to and organized women was for the sake of both the speaker and their audience. Where Duclos later argued that communist women failed to attract women because they were too unfeminine, Desrumeaux suggested that they failed because they were too timid to speak in public and felt inadequate to the challenge of communicating Marxist theory. Women in the Party, she argued, “believe that they must look through the dictionary and employ grand words. But women do not want great words. They want to know their situation….”57 By decentralizing the Party’s work among women and urging her comrades to speak to women about the topics that interest them, Desrumeaux began to move the Party’s work among women in the same direction that Duclos suggested half a year later, but not, it seems, for the purpose of sanitizing the popular image of the communist woman.

In the aftermath of Duclos’s speech, the women of the former Central Women’s Section acknowledged his advice to pay attention to the things which interested their “sisters.” In her 1937 speech, Cattaneo assured the Central Committee that “we have looked more and more into the true worries of the mother, of the housewife and the worker,” which have “brought us even

closer to the cares and miseries of our working sisters.” She emphasized, however, that their intention was to use these means to empower and educate women. Through activism concerning the “daily preoccupations of women,” Cattaneo argued, “we bring women to interest themselves in the questions which did not interest them until now, and bring them to engage in politics, to understand them and educate them.” She continued to emphasize that their social work, as performed through the World Committee, empowered women because through this work “one learns to know oneself, to esteem oneself.”

Cattaneo painted a portrait of a communist woman who was in touch with her maternity and “femininity,” but who was dedicated to educating and empowering women to enter the social and political sphere. In late 1937, the speaker for a re-established Feminine Commission, a “Comrade Renée,” supported and expanded on Cattaneo’s portrait at the last Party Congress to take place for the next seven years. Describing the French communist woman, Renée balanced maternity and militancy, emphasizing her communist or revolutionary character while attributing to her the femininity and domesticity of the republican mothers. “While defending her immediate demands, defending her bread,” Renée explained, “the woman does not yield to the generous sentiments of her mother’s or spouse’s heart.” According to her description, the French communist woman possessed “courage, selflessness, devotion” – qualities which the Party, in the past, attributed to the Soviet new woman but which also could be attributed to the mother or

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60 Paprik, « Proces-verbal du Comite Central, » 170.
housewife without fear of controversy. She was also determined, intelligent, and knew her worth: she had a “fierce will to live better,” she educates herself on social and political issues, and she “demands the place which is due to her.”

In constructing this new image, Renée drew on the legacy of the women who participated in the past revolutionary action in France. After 1935, the Party’s propaganda, under Duclos’s direction, increasingly framed itself as heir to France’s revolutionary tradition, thus stressing the “Frenchness” of this revolutionary party. In his 1936 speech to women, Duclos asked his audience to emulate the French heroines of the past: “There was never a revolutionary movement in France without women taking an active part,” he stated. In the 1789 Revolution the women “fought alongside their spouses” and “in 1830, in 1848, in 1871, the women of Paris, of France, were in the front row of the defenders of liberty.” Likewise, Renée concluded her speech by calling for women to “undertake protests for her political rights,” for “by renewing the traditions of French women’s generosity of heart, they will show themselves worthy daughters of the heroic women of the Commune who themselves fought for bread, liberty, and peace.”

Again, Renée tempered her revolutionary rhetoric on protesting for political rights by connecting it to women’s “generosity of heart,” while simultaneously arguing that this was the quality which motivated revolutionary women of the past.

While highlighting the Party’s French and republican character, Renée also emphasized the communist influence and goals of their activities to support the legitimacy of the new

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63 Paprik, 9th PCF Congress, « Stenographies des 6e-7e séance,” 124, 126.
64 Martelli et al., Le parti rouge, 58.
65 Paprik, « Pour l’union des femmes de France, » 32.
66 Paprik, 9th PCF Congress, « Stenographies des 6e-7e séance,” 129.
communist woman. She celebrated the 1936 strikes as a means of “awakening” women to class consciousness and declared that the ultimate goal of their mass organizations was to bring women to communism: “the first step which women have made in coming in these organizations must not be the last, but we must invite them, educate them, and awaken them to social and political life and lead them to our Party.” Casanova, on the other hand, continued to carefully avoid any reference to communism; thus her depictions of communist girls lack that bit of militancy emphasized by her peers, and her goals for the Union of French Girls very vague. Casanova celebrated the communist girls’ “frankness of sentiments, delicacy of thoughts,” and “good hearts” and emphasized their commitment to motherhood and the family by arguing that a home and family is “a dream which all young girls hold,” and which the Union of Young French Girls supported wholeheartedly. The Union’s activities revolved around social aid, like the World Committee, and organizing leisure activities for the Union’s adherents. To the Central Committee, Casanova argued that this responded to the needs of young girls and the needs of the Party:

> when we give them the possibility to dance and sing, and the knowledge that they are also capable of understanding and translating art, such girls will be less ignorant and more capable of being near us in the social fight for well-being and progress. This is the goal of the Union of the Young Girls…

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68 Paprik, 9th PCF Congress, «Stenographies des 4e-5e séance, » 107.
When compared to Casanova’s rhetoric on work among women, that of the former Central Women’s Section stands out for the way that retained elements of Soviet feminism. Their propaganda, however, did not reflect this.

With the French Communist Party in power, the women’s propaganda avoided the types of critiques it once aimed at French society, like the high cost of life, unequal pay, or even the ongoing Depression and unemployment. The journal *Femmes* underwent a considerable change in 1936, likely because of the Party’s new political position and because of Duclos’s speech. The articles on social and political issues and current events which once made up the majority of the journal gave way to an expanded section on film, literature, fashion, health and beauty, childcare, and household advice. The political articles, reduced in number, tended to draw the reader’s attention to tragedies and misery outside France, such as the Spanish Civil War, or a series by Bernadette Cattaneo on women in France’s African colonies.70 Those concerning France highlighted French history and culture, with articles on the history of lace-making, or covering a recent folk festival, interspersed with the occasional social critique concerning poverty, support for working mothers, and the fate of French children.71

The content of the *Femmes* journal suggest that the Central Women’s Section dropped many of its earlier mobilization themes in order to support the new Popular Front government. There was one critique, however, that it consistently directed at the country’s leaders: their failure to give women the vote. This was the point over which this generation of Central

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70 Gallica, *Femmes*, Comité Mondiale contre la guerre et le fascisme, 1936 - 1939. The articles by Cattaneo on this subject include those in May 1937, March 1939, March-April 1939, April-May 1939.
Women’s Section directors pressured and subtly challenged the Party leadership, in propaganda and in speeches to Party members. Cattaneo, for example, pressed the Central Committee for an answer concerning the Party’s plans regarding women’s suffrage in 1937, remarking that women “have counted on the Popular Front, who based its program on justice for all, and who could not do less than give women at least this justice: the right and eligibility to vote.”72

Despite this grievance, the women’s propaganda generally projected a positive image of life for women under the Popular Front. Its representations of women in Femmes phased out those elements of militancy and working-class appearance which remained in the 1934 and 1935 journals, and from mid-1936 onward, portrayed women as fashionable, feminine, and often surrounded by nature. The May 1937 issue (figure 3.5), for example, featured a smiling young woman framed by a flowering tree. Her curled and styled hair, makeup, and simple but form-accentuating outfit present a much more feminine, fashionable image. Some covers are extremely similar, featuring headshots of pretty, smiling women (figures 3.6 and 3.7), and others present bucolic scenes of cheerful peasant women (figure 3.8), families enjoying nature (figure 3.9 and figure 3.10), and a mother feeding her child (figure 3.11). Nothing about them would suggest that France remained gripped by the Depression; rather, they present idealized, but seemingly attainable, vision of life for the average French woman, as wife and mother first, then, maybe, worker.

The rare workers represented demonstrate the extent of this change. The March 1937 issue (figure 3.12) presents a young woman working with or creating tools, but with lipstick,

eyeshadow, fashionably thin brows, and a simple updo, she resembles all the other women gracing these covers. This image can be compared to that of women workers in a June 1936 special issue dedicated to the 1936 strikes which came out just before Duclos’s speech. The June 1936 cover (figure 3.13) portrayed a group of smiling women workers pouring out tea against the dark background of a factory. Engaged in this domestic task, the workers’ actions and appearance are unthreatening, without the militancy that earlier propaganda would have highlighted, but their appearances still mark them out as working-class.

This imagery in *Femmes* and other propaganda material after 1936 illustrate two points. First, the discrepancy between the women’s rhetoric and propaganda, as well as that between Casanova and the other directors, demonstrate that the construction of the French communist woman remained an ongoing process, even after Duclos’s 1936 speech. Second, they reflect the key difference between the Stalinist new woman and the French communist woman: while the Soviet woman balanced work and motherhood, the French communist woman did not. She was a mother first and everything else was second.

**Conclusion**

This transition from the Soviet new woman to the maternalist communist woman of the late 1930s was, as the other scholars argued, the sacrifice of Soviet feminism to the Party’s political needs. As chapter demonstrates, however, its shape and outcome reflected a variety of factors. The failures of Bolshevization and its emphasis on Party etiquette inspired the women of the Party to begin dropping elements of the Soviet new woman even before the Soviet Union did, although it was under the pressure of the male Party leadership, namely Jacques Duclos, that the directors finalized this transition. The slight discrepancies between rhetoric and propaganda from
1936 to 1938 indicate that the directors of the work among women grappled with the legacy of the Soviet new woman and the shape of the new communist woman, but they settled on a mix of maternity and militancy that differed from the Stalinist new woman in its neglect of the “worker” element.

This ongoing construction of the French communist woman suddenly paused in September 1939 when the French government outlawed the French Communist Party, forcing it underground, where it remained throughout the war and France’s occupation. This dramatic reversal of the Party’s fortunes began almost as immediately after its great success in the 1936 elections. The Party and the Popular Front government, led by the Socialist Leon Blum, fell out over the Blum government’s foreign policy, particularly concerning the Spanish Civil War, and its economic measures to address the ongoing effects of the Depression. In 1937, Blum resigned, and his successors created new cabinets, again without the French Communist Party, which represented more of the political center and right parties. Over the next two years, the PCF tried to renew the Popular Front energy of the early 1930s, but without success.\textsuperscript{73} The women’s propaganda in this period reflected the Party’s increasing alienation from the rapidly changing governments, in that it began to draw attention once again to the familiar themes of war, cost of life, and protections for working mothers, using the language of family and maternity as heavily as ever.\textsuperscript{74}

\textsuperscript{73} Martelli et al., \textit{Le parti rouge}, 71 – 73.
\textsuperscript{74} See for example this 1938 pamphlet titled “The family in danger.” AN, 20010216/4, dossier no. 72, folio 152.
As the PCF lost government support, the final blow fell in August 1939, when the USSR and Nazi Germany signed the Nazi-Soviet Pact. This move took all of Europe by surprise, including the French Communist Party; many members left the Party because of this about-face on Nazi Germany, including Bernadette Cattaneo who, already disquieted by Stalin’s purges in the Soviet Union, saw this as a final blow against the Party.\textsuperscript{75} Nevertheless, the PCF leadership announced that it would continue to support Moscow’s actions, while still denouncing Nazi fascism and promising to support any anti-fascist military operations. When the French government, led by Radical Edouard Daladier, declared war on Germany on September 3, 1939, it outlawed the Party and its mass organizations shortly afterward, arguing that the PCF answered to Soviet leadership, and, by extension, to their “ally,” Germany.\textsuperscript{76} The French police shut down the Party’s journals and arrested many of its prominent members, driving the rest into hiding. As Paula Schwartz argued in her study on communist women in the Resistance, the women were crucial to keeping the Party together during this period; because so few were in leadership roles, fewer were arrested, and those remaining established the underground communication links between arrested and hiding members which became so crucial during France’s occupation.\textsuperscript{77} When, in less than a year, Germany invaded and quickly defeated France, the Party pulled itself together enough to embark on a new stage of propaganda in which it further developed this image of the militant mother.

\textsuperscript{75} Pennetier and Pudal, \textit{Le souffle d’octobre 1917}, 168.
\textsuperscript{76} Martelli et al., \textit{Le parti rouge}, 76.
On June 17, 1940, the French state signed an armistice with Nazi Germany, marking the beginning of four years of German occupation in France. This rapid defeat after only six weeks of combat triggered more than a foreign military occupation. It deeply discredited the Third Republic and seemed to validate the pronatalists’ fears about population decline, gender roles, and France’s future. The day before France surrendered, the Daladier government resigned and was replaced by a coalition of conservatives, led by the World War I hero Marshal Petain, who vowed to restore France to its former glory. This new government, called Vichy after the resort town in the unoccupied zone where it operated throughout the war, argued that moral and cultural decadence, which both caused and was caused by individualism, modern mass culture, and the transgression of traditional gender roles, cost France the war, and envisioned a social, cultural, and political revolution that would create a better, stronger, and happier France.¹

One of the key aspects of Vichy’s National Revolution was the restoration of traditional gender roles, but Vichy went far beyond pronatalist rhetoric by introducing the pseudo-fascist idea of creating a new society by returning to the “natural” order of things, drawing on a notion that Francine Muel-Dreyfus called the “eternal feminine.” She defined this as the idea that the sexual division of the social world was based on so-called “‘natural’ inequalities that are eternally established and biologically founded and not culturally or historically constructed.”²

According to the “eternal feminine,” the woman’s natural role in society was motherhood, and the natural place in the home, subject to the authority of her husband. According to Vichy’s logic, the restoration of women to the home would restore society back to its “natural” state, remasculinize the men, and reinforce the paternalist state authority. As Miranda Pollard demonstrated, the Vichy regime approached this goal with a mixture of propaganda and legislation. Its rhetoric celebrated motherhood as the best (and only) role to which women should aspire, with mottos such as, “if you want to rebuild France, first give her children,” or “there is nothing sadder than a garden without flowers…than a woman without children.” It also passed laws to force women into their supposedly natural roles, such as their October 1940 law prohibiting the employment of married women in public services and the February 1942 law mandating harsher punishment for those seeking or providing abortions.

With such an attack on gender equality, how did the French Communist Party respond? Its activities in Paris and its outskirts, which was the Party’s headquarters and primary site of activity in the interwar period, can give a sense of the Party’s overall approach to Vichy’s national revolution. In June 1940, the Party leadership instructed its members to create local

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3 Muel-Dreyfus, Vichy and the Eternal Feminine, 1-11.
6 This section is mainly based on the propaganda material collected by the Paris police from the homes of communists arrested and put on trial for subversive activity at the Paris Court of Appeals from 1941 to 1944. The Court of Appeals archives are now housed at France’s Archives Nationales and have been mostly digitized. Although the arrests did not begin until 1941, the police confiscated any communist material they found, and so ended up with a wide selection of material dating as early as the 1920s. This material is supplemented by the Party’s clandestine press for women, which has been digitized by the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. While historians have studied women’s roles within the communist Resistance, none have addressed how the Party engaged with Vichy’s national revolution over gender roles. See Schwartz, *Today’s Sardines Are Not For Sale*; Jean-Marie Guillou, “Les Manifestations de Ménagères Protestation Populaire et Résistance Feminine Spécifique,” in *Les Femmes dans la Résistance en France*, Mechtild Gilzmer, Christine Levisse-Touzé, and Stefa Martens, eds. (Paris:
mutual-aid committees with which to incite the French public to acts of civil disobedience over the everyday trials of war and occupation. In response, communist women in Paris began to produce posters, leaflets, and clandestine newspapers urging women to join their local committee and to protest, strike, or boycott over key issues, such as supply shortages, the fate of French prisoners of war, and arrested communists. Although, in theory, the Party members worked in isolated cells during the occupation, the Paris police confiscated circulars dating from 1940 to 1943 about the goals, themes, and strategies for women’s propaganda, suggesting that there was an element of centralization, at least among the communist women in Paris. The universal similarity among the posters, leaflets, and press produced in the city and its outskirts further support the idea that the neighborhood-based cells received direction from a higher body, likely those women which led the Party’s work among women in the interwar period. Scholarship on communist women in the Resistance found that former Central Women’s Section directors, Martha Desrumeaux and Maria Rabate, as well as those from the UJFF played key roles directing Resistance women’s movements in the north of France.

While there is no evidence that these women received direction about the themes and content of the propaganda from male Party leadership or the Comintern, their women-specific propaganda reflected the broader contours of the Party’s propaganda, such as its silence on the
question of Nazism or German occupiers until Germany invaded Russia in June 1941. This was because of the ongoing Nazi-Soviet pact, which put the Party, as a whole, in an uncomfortable position regarding Nazi Germany. As Roger Bouderon pointed out, the Party’s propaganda did not even mention the word “occupation” until late 1940. ¹¹ Instead, it blamed the Vichy government for France’s misery, arguing that it was capitalist, traitorous, and benefitted financially from the war and occupation. ¹² This strong anti-Vichy rhetoric continued even after June 1941, when the Party’s propaganda began attacking the German occupiers and the Vichy government equally.

Thus, anti-Vichy rhetoric was a key element in the Party’s resistance propaganda, especially during the first year of occupation. The communist women, however, committed to the Popular Front era model of the militant mother, and appropriated the rhetoric of the eternal feminine, using it to redefine womanhood according to the Party’s needs, rather than attacking Vichy on ideological grounds. This approach, however, limited the party’s ability, or even motivation, to challenge Vichy’s harmful ideology and had lasting consequences for the Party’s attitude toward mobilizing women in the postwar era.

Vichy tried to mobilize what Muel-Dreyfus described as “the feminine culture of sacrifice” in order to enlist women to participate in the construction of its new order, calling on them to act as protectors of the social order, mistresses of the domestic sphere, and moral centers of the household, but with the patience, gentleness, and submission to authority characteristic, in

¹² See for example, AN, Z/4/112, dossier 21, scellé 9; Z/4/6, dossier 78, scellé unique.
theory, of the sex. The French Communist Party encouraged women to action in the public sphere with the same notions of duty, sacrifice, protection of the social order and morality, but without the peace, mildness, and obedience of the “eternal feminine.” Motherhood was the dominant theme. When calling for women to protest Vichy, and later the German presence, the Party framed these political activities as consistent with the duties of motherhood. For example, its pamphlets encouraging protests over food shortages exhorted: “if you love your children, you will protect them,” and “we have a duty to save out little ones from hunger and cold,” or “our honor as mothers demand that we assure [our children] their good health.”

When the Party’s propaganda began to advocate for more aggressive acts of resistance, it began to tie motherhood to patriotism and militant activism, again drawing on the notions of duty, sacrifice, and maternal love. For example, a 1942 Mother’s Day poster presented militancy and patriotism as a maternal duty, when it asked:

What are the duties of a mother?
To unite and to fight in order to protect her little ones.
To fight, if it is necessary, to assure them their daily bread...
To chase the barbarous Nazi hordes out of France, to assure their children a free and happy future….
Long live an independent, free, strong, and happy France which will assure our children a better future.

This poster framed Hitler’s defeat as a means to the end, which was the safety and happiness of the children, and there is an implied criticism that mothers who do not “unite and fight” to “chase the barbarous Nazi hordes out of France” were not doing their sacred duty as mothers.

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14 AN, Z/4/147/A, dossier 543, scellé 4; Z/4/112, dossier 21, scellé 13; Z/4/147/A, dossier 543, scellé 64.
15 AN, Z/4/153, dossier 605, scellé unique.
This new emphasis on patriotism and duty occurred as the Party increasingly called for women to step out of the domestic sphere and undertake more dangerous and more illegal activity. By 1943, its propaganda encouraged women to support the armed resistance, and even to join in the combat themselves, but it continued to frame this activity in terms of maternity and family. For example, when the Party created a women’s group geared toward supporting the action of the partisans called “The Union of Women for the Defense of the Family and the Liberation of France,” it explained that:

The French woman loves her country because she cherishes her children. It is because she wants to provide food and restore their father to her children that the French mother is a patriot. But she also knows that French children only eat when Hitler’s last soldier is full, and it is because of this that she wants to chase away the invader. For all these reasons, French mothers want to fight and fight for the Fatherland and save it from the oppression of strangers.

While the Party rhetoric tied motherhood and patriotism, it also used the idea of women as the moral center of the household to urge them to use their domestic influence over their spouses and children. “Lead the men in inciting them to resistance!” one pamphlet exhorted, while another, referring to the deportation of French workers to Germany proclaimed: “Women, mothers! Prevent your husbands and sons from leaving! By your will, put a stop to the deportation which deprives you of your breadwinner.”

While the Party primarily reached out to women as housewives and mothers, it also used the idea of the absence and suffering of prisoners of war to mobilize women who did not quite fit into either category. It called on the “women, mothers, daughters and sisters of prisoners of war”

16 For example, see Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BNF), La Voix des Femmes, July 1944, « Femmes De France!»; AN Z/4/95, dossier 640, scellé 29.
18 AN, Z/4/150, dossier 566, scellé 12; AN, Z/4/147/A, dossier 543, scellé 64.
to protest prison camp conditions and advocate for the rapid release of prisoners of war. Addressing “all those who live waiting for the return of their absent ones,” the Party called on women to engage in “a battle for the liberation of those whom the war has taken from us.” The Party also appealed to this possibly unmarried, childless demographic by emphasizing the evils of the fatherless POW families, lamenting that: “children are growing up far from their fathers, these little ones do not know the sweet smiles of those whom they call “papa,” and “when the imprisoned fathers return to their homes, what will they say when seeing their dear child, formerly robust and full of life, all pale and suffering today?” In this case, even when engaging women outside of the role of mother or housewife, the Party addressed them in relation to motherhood or familial roles.

For the French Communist Party, mobilizing women through the gender roles that Vichy also celebrated had its benefits. It lessened the stakes of the activities that the Party encouraged, like protests and public demonstrations. Women, acting as worried mothers over domestic concerns like food, supplies, and the fate of male family members, seemed less threatening to public order, and there was an expectation that the authorities would view them with more leniency. When the German or Vichy authorities arrested communist women, the Party responded by emphasized their maternal and familial roles, drawing on the notion that women are apolitical, so their activities must also be apolitical. One article, for example, described those arrested as “women who are shut away for having loved France too much, for having too

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19 AN, Z/4/2/, dossier 21, scellé 15.
20 AN, Z/4/2, dossier 21, scellé 15.
21 AN, Z/4/69, dossier 486, pièces 169-173 ; Z/4/64, dossier 439, scellé 2.
22 Though, as Paula Schwartz demonstrates, that was not always the case: Schwartz, Today’s Sardines Are Not For Sale, 120 – 138.
ardently wanting to defend the fate of the women and children in our country.”23 Such articles also used these arrests as a way to outrage the general public, emphasized that “because they had the courage to speak the truth, honest women, irreproachable mothers, valiant young girls are thrown into prison and mistreated.”24 Most powerfully maternalist was the Party’s protest against the execution of Liselotte Hermann, whom an article described as a “sorrowful mother who will have her neck chopped with an ax while she is breastfeeding her third child….”25

In this discussion of arrested women, the communist women used Vichy’s language of family and maternity to discredit it. At the same time, this strategy hindered the Party’s ability to engage with Vichy’s pseudo-fascist ideology or protest its more threatening measures concerning women, such as the prohibition of employment for married women and its stringent anti-abortion laws. While the Party did not address Vichy’s anti-abortion laws at all, it did respond to Vichy’s Law of October 11, 1940, which prohibited the employment of married women in public services, but it did so by avoiding the ideology behind the law and blaming it on capitalism. For example, an article in the clandestine press explained that: “Today, incapable of giving work to all, the Pétainist government preaches the woman’s return to the home…Work can be given to all if we make the rich pay the expenses of their war, by confiscating the huge fortunes. Women! Do not let yourselves be divided… reclaim your right to work and to independence.”26 The Party denounced this law in strong language, equating women’s exclusion from production with a “return to servitude and slavery.”27 In doing so, the Party took a strong stance regarding

23 AN, Z/4/147/A, dossier 543, scellé 64.
24 AN, Z/4/2, dossier 21, scellé 15.
25 AN, Z/4/14, dossier 128, scellé 1.
26 AN, Z/4/2, dossier 21, scellé 15.
women’s social roles: it affirmed her right to participate in production, but at the same time, it used motherhood as the reason that women should have the right to work. This is best outlined in a circular from the directors of the work among women, which stated:

Under the false pretext of the return of the women to the home, the female workers are thrown out of the factories, the shops, the offices. We who love our little ones want to be able to work in order to feed them....Our goal is noble: work for all, bread for our children, peace for our homes, liberty and independence for our land.28

This language differed significantly from that employed by the Party in the early 1930s regarding this very topic, when it argued that women’s right to work was “true equality, which alone leads to liberty and real fraternity.”29

This response to the Law of October 11 highlights the limitations of the Party’s approach to mobilizing women through traditional gender roles. It was the party of gender equality and the working class: Vichy’s Law of October 11 provided it with an opportunity to emphasize its commitment to both, but as its reaction demonstrated, it could not denounce the ideology behind the law without endangering its own message to women. The result was an argument that blamed capitalism and connected motherhood to social and political rights, but it was short-lived; all discussion of the law virtually ended in early 1941. Before June 1941, the Party could claim that this law was a capitalist plot to “enslave” workers, but after June there were no easy scapegoats. To blame Vichy or the German occupiers for the law would, again, require the Party to engage in

28 AN Z/4/2, dossier 21, scellé 15. This sentence was underlined in the original document.
the ideology behind the law, which was impossible under the circumstances. When Vichy repealed the law in September 1942, the Party remained silent.

If the Popular Front marked the end of the Soviet new woman, the Party’s response to Vichy’s national revolution well and truly demonstrated that she would not return, under any circumstances. What drove the communist women to commit to the maternalist image of the Popular Front, at a time when they were arguably most at liberty to pursue the mobilization strategies of their choice? It was likely the failures of the Bolshevization era and success of the Popular Front which taught them to cater their rhetoric to French sensibilities rather than focusing on ideological correctness. The Resistance-era propaganda highlighted the strength of the French republican framework which shaped the Party’s attitude toward gender roles throughout the interwar period: with the goal of mobilizing women at any cost, the women in the Party chose to do so through motherhood.

As a growing number of historians have demonstrated, women have played real and important roles in the French Resistance, not only as underground agents or armed combatants, but also in more gender-specific ways, engaging in civil disobedience, creating and disseminating women’s propaganda, assisting the partisan fighters, and more. While in no way lessening the value of the contributions of these women, and of the French Communist Party itself, to the Resistance struggle, its approach to mobilizing women through the “eternal feminine” casts a shadow on the French Communist Party’s commitment to gender equality and influenced its approach to mobilizing women in the immediate postwar era. While liberation finally brought French women the right to vote, the Party continued to address them as primarilywives and mothers rather than engage in key social issues concerning gender equality and
women’s rights, even after the women’s liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s brought these issues to the forefront.  

Nor does this thesis, on a broader scale, aim to lessen or judge the actions of the PCF’s Central Women’s Section by demonstrating how the overlapping theories of republican motherhood and pronatalism shaped their propaganda and strategy decisions. Rather than suggesting that Lucie Colliard, Marthe Bigot, and their successors succumbed to the pressure of their male leaders and peers, or unconsciously conformed to social gender norms despite their political convictions, this thesis seeks to highlight how these women in the Party made decisions in response to the concrete social and political realities that they faced in interwar France.

In doing so, this thesis supports broader arguments about women and politics in the French Third Republic posed in the sometimes-dissenting fields of women’s history and gender history. While gender historians such as Joan W. Scott and Mary Louise Roberts demonstrated how the contradictions and tensions regarding women’s gender roles shaped republican France, women’s historians such as Karen Offen and Christine Bard preferred to highlight women’s agency and the ways that they worked within or rejected the system which disenfranchised them. As a women’s history and a gender history, this thesis combines both approaches. It

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uses the French Communist Party’s approach to women’s gender roles as a lens through which to examine the power dynamics within the Party, its relationship to the Comintern, and its place in the French political sphere, building on and supporting Mary Louise Robert’s analysis, in particular, of the French interwar-era anxieties about labor, motherhood, and gender roles. At the same time, it highlights how the women directing the Central Women’s Section exercised agency as they both worked with and against these anxieties in order to achieve their goals.

In this way, this thesis also fits into the historiography of women’s movements in post-Revolutionary France, which stresses the variety of ways in which French women engaged in feminism and how French feminists prioritized concrete, political results over formulating a coherent philosophy. As Karen Offen put it: “Feminist claims are primarily political claims, not philosophical claims. They never arise in – or respond to – a sociopolitical vacuum.”32 While the tensions between the French Left and “bourgeois” feminists have been well-documented, the challenges and accomplishments of the PCF’s Central Women’s Section directors could serve as a case study to, as Marilyn Boxer suggested, reassess the relation between the two by moving away from the “earlier, dichotomous notions of class and gender relationships” which shaped past historiography on the subject.33 Such a study would benefit from a far more detailed history

32 Offen, European Feminisms, xv. See also, Offen, Debating the Woman Question in the French Third Republic, 1870-1920 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Bard, Les filles de Marianne, among others.

of the key members of the Central Women’s Section and their relationship to each other and to other women’s movements than this thesis provides.

Another angle of this topic that deserves further research is a consideration of the ways in which the Party’s interwar and war experiences shaped its activities in the immediate postwar era. In his *France’s New Deal*, Philip Nord highlighted the utility of taking a “transwar” approach to twentieth-century French history, arguing that it helps to identify important continuities and breaks from the end of the Third Republic to the creation of the Fourth. Most studies on women and the French Communist Party are isolated to specific time periods – interwar, war, and postwar – and could benefit from a transwar approach to highlight, as Nord proposed, the continuities and breaks within this period. By moving into the 1940s in the epilogue, this thesis highlights how the Party’s interwar experiences produced the Central Women’s Section’s Occupation-era mobilization strategies, and a similar reassessment of postwar Central Women’s Section’s activities could be equally revealing.

Finally, although this topic received very little attention in this thesis, the question of the relationship between race and gender, or the Central Women’s Section’s engagement with French colonialism, also deserves attention. The Comintern required its parties adopt an anti-imperialism platform on ideological grounds, similar to the way that it required its parties to adopt Soviet feminism. Studies regarding the French Communist Party’s response to the Soviet-imposed anti-imperialism demonstrate that this response was very similar in dynamic to the

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Party’s attitude toward Soviet feminism and mobilizing women as described in this thesis. Jennifer Boittin’s *Colonial Metropolis* highlighted how “class, gender, and race intersected among groups legally consigned to the outskirts of citizenship between the wars,” and a similar study of this intersection within the PCF would enrich the current and somewhat isolated historiography regarding these themes and the French Communist Party.

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35 There are several works that address the PCF’s attitude toward race and anti-imperialism as part of broader arguments, including Jennifer Anne Boittin, *Colonial Metropolis: The Urban Grounds of Anti-Imperialism and Feminism in Interwar Paris* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010); Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism between the Two World Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); and Michael Goebel, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis: Interwar Paris and the Seeds of Third World Nationalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015). There are no books specifically dedicated to this topic, to the best of my knowledge, but Julian Mischi’s *Le parti des communistes* dedicates a section to the topic, as does Romain Ducoulombier and Jean Vigneux’s edited collection, *Le PCF, un parti global.*

36 Boittin, *Colonial Metropolis*, xvi.
APPENDIX A: IMAGES
Figure 2.1. 1926 International Women’s Week Poster. “All working women in the single front, fight against the high cost of life and taxes, against the Moroccan and Syrian wars, against fascism, and for the protection of mothers and children, and political rights for women.”

Figure 2.2. 1927 *Union fraternelle des femmes contre la guerre* Poster. “To destroy war, let us stand up against those who divide the world with the blood of our sons!”

Figure 2.3. 1928/1929 International Women’s Week Poster. “Against the imperialist wars, the military laws, for equal pay for equal work, disarmament, the defense of Russia, total amnesty, mandatory for the protection of mothers and children, civil and political equality.”

Figure 2.4. 1930 *Union fraternelle des femmes contre la guerre* Poster. « Remember ! Down to war ! »

Figure 3.1. *Femmes* Cover, November-December 1935 Issue.

Figure 3.2. *Femmes* Cover, April-May 1935.

Source: Bibliothèque nationale de France, Gallica, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k4552731z/f0.item.
Figure 3.3. *Femmes* Cover, November 1934.

Figure 3.4. Femmes Cover, October 1934.

Source: Bibliothèque nationale de France, Gallica, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k4552728g?rk=64378;0.
Figure 3.5. Femmes Cover, May 1937.

Figure 3.6. *Femmes* Cover, April-May 1938.

Figure 3.7. *Femmes* Cover, April-May 1939.

Figure 3.8. *Femmes* Cover, May 1936.

Figure 3.9. Femmes Cover, April-May 1938.

Figure 3.10. *Femmes* Back Cover, May-June 1939.

Figure 3.11. *Femmes* Cover, June-July 1939.

Source: *Bibliotheque nationale de France, Gallica*, [https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k4552749n/f20.item](https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k4552749n/f20.item).
Figure 3.12. Femmes Cover, March 1937.

Figure 3.13. Femmes Cover, Edition Speciale, 1936.

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