

This is a self-archived version of an original article. This version may differ from the original in pagination and typographic details.

Author(s): Ihalainen, Pasi

Title: A Finnish socialist female parliamentarian stopped on the Dutch border : The (de)politicization of Finnish women's suffrage in Dutch battles on votes for women

Year: 2020

Version: Accepted version (Final draft)

Copyright: © Author and Amsterdam University Press, 2020

Rights: CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

Rights url: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Please cite the original version:

Ihalainen, P. (2020). A Finnish socialist female parliamentarian stopped on the Dutch border : The (de)politicization of Finnish women's suffrage in Dutch battles on votes for women. *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis*, 133(1), 53-75. <https://doi.org/10.5117/TVGESCH2020.1.004.IHAL>

A Finnish socialist female parliamentarian stopped on the Dutch border

The (de)politicization of Finnish women's suffrage in Dutch battles on votes for women

Pasi Ihalainen

TVGESCH 133 (1): 53–75

DOI: 10.5117/TVGESCH2020.1.004.IHAL

Abstract

A Finnish socialist female parliamentarian stopped on the Dutch border: the (de)politicization of Finnish women's suffrage in Dutch battles on votes for women

This research article in transnational history analyses an incident during which Hilja Pärssinen, a Finnish socialist woman MP, was stopped on the Dutch border in September 1913 on her way to visit a suffragette college in London. This two-hour event at the border and public controversy that followed were clashes between competing ideological and gendered discourses on women's political agency. The incident was a nexus of intersecting discourses on a range of issues: Dutch and international debates on women's suffrage, discourse on 'white slavery', racial prejudices towards East Europeans, Marxist class struggle discourse, and fears of socialism. During the incident, the authorities seemed to be casting the identity of an illegal immigrant or a Russian prostitute on Pärssinen. Provoked against her psycho-physical experiences, she protested by performing that identity. Afterwards, transnationally connected socialists politicized the case in their fight for women's political rights, while the authorities and the non-socialist press consistently depoliticized it.

Keywords: transnational history, women's suffrage, The Netherlands, Finland, socialist internationalism

Women's political agency is well established by now: in December 2019, the European Commission was chaired by a woman and the Finnish coalition in government, led by a 34-year-old woman, consisted of five parties all led by

women. Still on the eve of the First World War, few countries had awarded women full political rights. In 1913, 21 women MPs sat in the Finnish parliament and Norway had one woman deputy. Most polities lacked the concept of an active

female politician moving freely in the public sphere.

Finland, a grand duchy belonging to the Russian Empire, reformed its representative institution in conjunction with the Revolution of 1905, replacing a four-estate diet inherited from Sweden with a unicameral parliament based on exceptionally broad suffrage. The introduction of women's suffrage and the election of the first women MPs in 1907 amazed parliamentarians and suffragists abroad: a country on the periphery of Western civilization had awarded women full political rights before any major 'civilized' nation had done so. Furthermore, Finnish Social Democrats became proportionally the strongest socialist parliamentary party. Suffragists and socialists saw the Finnish reform as an important step in the transnational struggle for women's emancipation and/or future socialism, demonstrating an unavoidable development. For anti-suffragists, however, Finland remained a peripheral Russian governorate with anomalous political practices that allowed 'discontented' socialist spinsters to legislate over male liberties, as one British MP put it.¹

Finland nevertheless had women MPs who were eager to inform suffrage activists abroad about their experiences. One of the best known was Hilja Pärssinen (1878-1935) who published actively in *Die*

Gleichheit, the leading international socialist women's periodical. On 10 September 1913, Pärssinen was travelling with a younger woman in third class on the Hamburg-Amsterdam night train, heading for a suffragette college in London, invited by Alexandra Kollontai. On the Dutch border in Oldenzaal, she was ordered to leave the train and was questioned by the authorities, a representative of the shipping company, and a volunteer of the station mission.

Even if Pärssinen assured that she was a female teacher and a Finnish MP entitled to travel freely, the border authorities concluded that her visit to the Netherlands was 'unnecessary'. The border authorities and more particularly a representative of a non-socialist women's organization, seemed to be casting the identity of a Russian madam taking a teenage girl to the brothels of Amsterdam on Pärssinen. Assumed to be Russian, Pärssinen was interrogated partly in Russian. Provoked against the background of her psycho-physical experiences and ideology, she protested by performing that identity, undressing partly in the front of male officers and singing, dancing and laughing at the border station.

After a couple of hours, Pärssinen was allowed to cross the Netherlands on the condition that she bought second-class transit tickets. She met some Dutch activists on her way. Afterwards, transnationally connected socialists politicized Pärssinen's treatment in their fight for women's suffrage through a story in *Het Volk* calling for the accountability of the government and a question in the Dutch parliament, while the Dutch authorities consistently depoliticized the case during the press publicity and parliamentary

1 More extensively in Pasi Ihalainen & Tiina Kinnunen, 'A Model Country or a Peripheral Anomaly? Finnish women's suffrage and female MPs in transnational debates, 1906-19', in: Tobias Kaiser et al ed., *Entering the Parliamentary Stage: Women in Parliament and Politics in International Comparison* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 2020). I am grateful to the members of the Jyväskylä gender history group for their comments on drafts of this article.



Thirteen out of the nineteen first women MPs elected to the Finnish parliament in 1907. The 29-year-old Hilja Pärssinen is sitting first on the left together with more mature bourgeois ladies.

Helsinki City Museum

enquiry that followed. Pärssinen was invited back to Oldenzaal and interviewed as part of the enquiry. The Dutch MP Johannes van Leeuwen who had put the parliamentary question was present,² which demonstrates the commitment of this Dutch Social Democratic male feminist to her case. While the border incident in Oldenzaal did not directly advance women's political rights in the Netherlands, it illustrates the transnational character of the ongoing struggle.

In what follows, I carry out a transnational nexus analysis of a clash between

competing ideological and gendered discourses in the incident and the public controversy that ensued. I demonstrate that these discourses include Dutch and international debate on female political agency, discourse on white slavery, racial prejudices towards East Europeans, Marxist class struggle discourse, and fears of socialism, as well as illustrating the discursive and material consequences of their clash.

Together with Taina Saarinen I have argued that analytical concepts borrowed from language research such as *nexus*, *historical body*, and *mobility* deepen our understanding of the multi-level dynamics of policy-making, directing attention to links between various debates as well as

² *Provinciale Overijsselsche en Zwolsche Courant*, 15 December 1913, 6; *Provinciale Geldersche en Nijmeegsche Courant*, 17 December 1913, 1. Searches made with www.delpher.nl.

to transnational transfers. *Nexus* can be understood as the intersection of three elements – diverse ideological discourses of the time, human behaviour in interaction, and historical body in a specific social occasion; in this case, when Pärssinen was stopped at the border. *Historical body* focuses on the role of individuals as political agents, but also on the simultaneity and reflexivity of their lifelong psychophysical experiences and ongoing actions in a nexus, and emphasizes the physical and embodied nature of discourses.³ The transnational *mobility* of historical bodies and their crossing of borders enables discourses to intersect in nexuses and may contribute to transnational transfers, in this case Pärssinen bringing the concept of a woman parliamentarian to the Dutch context. I examine the nexus of the border incident in which discourses intersect, the political agency of various individuals, the impact of Pärssinen's lifelong experiences in her ongoing actions and mobility, and the links that enabled transnational transfers. Intersectionality is also relevant in that the incident was not only about gender, but also about class and ideology, as well as language and race.

First, we need to consider historical contexts related to the struggle for women's suffrage in the Netherlands, Pärssinen's life experiences as an internationalist campaigner for working women's rights, and middle-class charity discourse

3 R. Scollon & S.W. Scollon, *Nexus Analysis: Discourse and the Emerging Internet* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004); Pasi Ihalainen & Taina Saarinen, 'Integrating a Nexus: The History of Political Discourse and Language Policy Research', *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* 23 (2019) 500-519, here 505.

on white slavery. These contexts and related discourses intersected as Pärssinen and her travel companion woke up for a border control in the third-class compartment of the Hamburg-Amsterdam night train. Next, I reconstruct and analyse the competing discourses and related identities which the Oldenzaal incident reveals by focusing on the class-based, ideological, gendered, national, and racial meanings created by the various agents – Hilja Pärssinen, her ideological friends, the press, and the Dutch authorities – in the nexus and during the discourse cycles that followed. What were the experiences of a Finnish woman parliamentarian in the nexus, why was she so provoked, and how did she explain the event to different audiences? How and why did socialist suffragists politicize the case to challenge the capitalist state? What kind of political agency was constructed in Dutch and British newspapers when they wrote about Pärssinen as a female politician? How did the Dutch authorities explain away the political implications of the incident? Who was (de)politicizing what or whom, and why? What does the incident tell us about political practices in 1913?

Historical background

Struggle for women's suffrage in the Netherlands

Women's suffrage had been discussed in the Netherlands since the Dutch translation of John Stuart Mill's booklet on the subjection of women around 1870. In the Constitution of 1887, however, women had been explicitly excluded from suffrage. Liberals and socialists had founded a joint organization to advance universal

suffrage but became divided over the desirability and timetable of women's suffrage.⁴ Some liberals were supportive and found allies among feminists whose goal was equal voting rights for both sexes, but not necessarily universal suffrage.⁵ Even if supportive of equality between the sexes, the Social Democrats, too, were hesitant about votes for women, fearing that it would complicate their struggle for universal male suffrage or lead to upper-class women voting before working men. They also shared the international Marxist view that working women should subordinate gender to the class struggle that aimed at the creation of a socialist society through revolution. In the Netherlands as elsewhere, this standpoint caused tensions between socialists and 'bourgeois' feminists.⁶

4 Remieg Aerts, Herman de Liagre Böhl, Piet de Rooy & Henk te Velde, *Land van kleine gebaren. Een politieke geschiedenis van Nederland 1780-2012* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2013), 180; Monique Leyenaar, Jantine Oldersma & Kees Niemöller, *De hoogste tijd. Een eeuw vrouwenkiesrecht* (Amsterdam: Athenaeum, 2019) 17, 19, 22, 33, 45, 47, 59.

5 Leyenaar, Oldersma & Niemöller, *De hoogste tijd*, 47, 66.

6 Josine Blok et al. (eds.), *Vrouwen, kiesrecht en arbeid. Nederland 1889-1919* (Groningen: SSGN, 1977) 9, 15, 19, 55-56; Joyce Outshoorn, *Vrouwenemancipatie en socialisme. Een onderzoek naar de houding van de SDAP ten opzichte van het vrouwenvraagstuk tussen 1894 en 1919*, 3rd edition (Nijmegen: Socialistische Uitgeverij, 1979) 24-25, 45, 47; Henriëtte Lakmaker, 'Van de uiterste suffragette tot de kalmste strijdster, 1894-1919', in: Marja Blok et al. ed., *Vrouwenstemmen. 100 jaar vrouwenbelangen, 75 jaar vrouwenkiesrecht* (Utrecht: Nederlandse Vereniging voor Vrouwenbelangen, 1994) 25-26, 28, 48; J. Perry, P.J. Knechtsmans, D.F.J. Bosscher, P. Becker & P. Kalma, *Honderd jaar sociaal-democratie in Nederland 1894-1994 SDAP PvdA* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker), 27, 43; Piet de Rooy, *Ons stipje op den wereldkaart. De politieke cultuur van modern Nederland* (Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek,

Leyenaar, Oldersma, and Niemöller have emphasized the internationalization of the women's suffrage movement as developing communications enabled the cross-border transfer of arguments and increased knowledge of foreign examples.⁷ Their work leaves the impression that the Dutch mainly observed advances in the Anglophone countries. That is not the entire story: May 1906, for instance, saw intense debates on women's suffrage in the Netherlands while the Finnish diet, as the first European representative institution, was adopting women's suffrage.⁸ *De Tijd* informed readers that 'in Finland suffrage is now also for women', while *Het Volk* thanked 'strong social democracy' for 'the most democratic suffrage that exists anywhere'.⁹

In addition to the press, transnational contacts provided information on European examples. As the International Women's Suffrage Alliance convened in Amsterdam in 1908, some of the first women MPs from Finland attended, including Hilja Pärssinen. Aletta Jacobs, the Dutch hostess, greeted the Finns as 'the only nation that has given women a place in their parliament'.¹⁰ Finnish women were congratulated for their 'complete political emancipation', and the congress heard a

2014) 152-153, 181-182; Rudy B. Andeweg & Monique Leyenaar, 'Veroverd of gegund? De invoering van algemeen kiesrecht voor mannen en vrouwen', in: Rudy B. Andeweg & Monique Leyenaar ed., *Alle stemmen tellen! Een eeuw algemeen kiesrecht* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2017).

7 Leyenaar, Oldersma & Niemöller, *De hoogste tijd*, 13, 69-70, 74.

8 Leyenaar, Oldersma & Niemöller, *De hoogste tijd*, 75.

9 *De Tijd*, 7 June 1906, 1; *Het Volk*, 8 June 1906, 2. All translations of cited source material are my own

10 Aletta Jacobs, *De Telegraaf*, 15 June 1908, 5.

report on the legislative activities of women MPs.¹¹ The reporter Annie Furuhjelm of the conservative Swedish People's Party contested that Finland did not necessarily provide a model as its reform had emerged in a period of social unrest, including the political murder of a Russian governor and revolutionary movements in Russia and Finland.¹² The status of Finland as a non-independent country low in cultural hierarchies and subject to Russian autocracy also restricted the reception of its model abroad.¹³ Nevertheless, Pieter Jelles Troelstra, the chair of the Social Democratic group in the Dutch parliament, referred to women's suffrage in Finland alongside Australia, American states, and Norway when renewing his motion for universal suffrage in 1911.¹⁴ According to Troelstra, the Finnish example demonstrated that women knew what to do with their political rights, but he personally continued to doubt the political abilities of women.¹⁵

In 1913, women's suffrage was again intensely debated. In spring, leftist activists protested against a proposal to extend suffrage to male heads of households only. While non-socialists associated such

protests with the violent suffragettes of Britain, socialists denounced non-socialist calls for full citizens' rights for women as 'bourgeois' policy bypassing the working class.¹⁶ As the leftist parties won a majority in the June elections, prospects for universal male suffrage seemed promising.¹⁷ Women's suffrage remained a hot topic, however: Judith Felmans-Morpurgo, a Jewish lady from Amsterdam, accidentally received an invitation to vote but was stopped at the polling station, leading suffrage activists to demonstrate in favour of votes for women. The leading liberal newspaper, *Algemeen Handelsblad*, mocked 'the first Dutch female voter', publishing a stereotypical story of a woman nervous about her involvement in politics and hesitant about using her right. Felmans-Morpurgo was represented as unable to understand complicated political matters, lacking a party stance, ready to vote for some 'handsome' man after first consulting her husband, and ambivalent about suffrage in general.¹⁸ Expectations, prejudices, tensions, and public discourses for and against women's suffrage being such, both suffragists and their opponents yearned for further opportunities to idealize or ridicule politically engaged women.

11 *De Tijd*, 20 June 1908, 2; *De Telegraaf*, 17 June 1908, 2.

12 *Het Volk*, 19 June 1908, 4; Leyenaar, Oldersma & Niemöller, *De hoogste tijd*, 77.

13 *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 22 June 1908, 6; *De Telegraaf*, 22 June 1908, 1; Ihalainen & Kinnunen, 'A Model Country'.

14 Staten-Generaal Digitaal, <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/uitgebreidzoeken/historisch> (all later references to this database), Tweede Kamer, 14 November 1911, 582; Bas van Dongen, *Revolutie of integratie. De sociaal democratische arbeiders partij in Nederland (SDAP) tijdens de eerste wereldoorlog* (Leiden: Universitet Leiden, 1992), 75.

15 Tweede Kamer, 16 November 1911, 619; De Rooy, *Ons stipje*, 182.

16 Lakmaker, 'Van de uiterste suffragette', 55, 58-59; Leyenaar, Oldersma & Niemöller, *De hoogste tijd*, 91-92.

17 Blok et al., *Vrouwen, kiesrecht en arbeid*, 91-92; Outshoorn, *Vrouwenemancipatie*, 58-59; Perry et al., *Honderd jaar*, 50.

18 *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 11 June 1913, 2, 13 June 1913, 2, and 17 June 1913, 1; *De Graafschap-bode*, 27 June 1913, 2; Anne Petterson, 'Wat Marijtje van het vrouwenkiesrecht dacht', *De Nederlandse Boekengids* 4 (2019).



Judith Felmans-Morpurgo on the way to the polling station in Amsterdam during the parliamentary elections of June 1913.

Spaarnestad Photo, SFA022809893

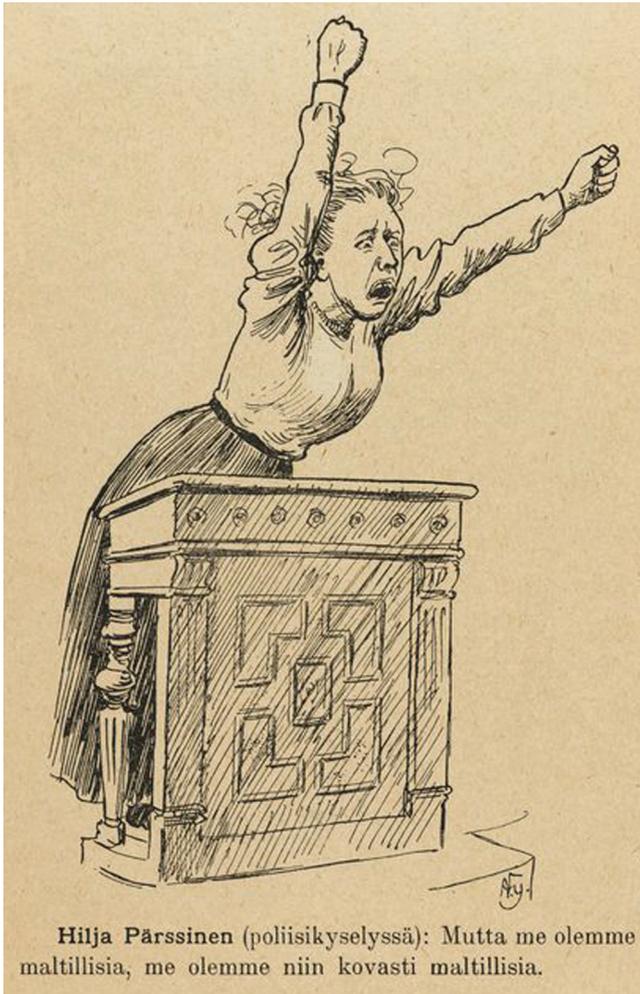
Enter Hilja Pärssinen, an internationalist campaigner for working women's rights

Hilja Pärssinen (formerly Lindgren/Liinamaa) was the ideological leader of the Finnish Union of Labour Women, and by 1913 had been a Social Democratic MP for six years. In addition, Pärssinen was a transnationally well-connected suffrage activist. This parson's daughter had been involved in the Finnish underground nationalist movement to the extent that her apartment had been searched by Russian gendarmes. Her experiences as a slum-school teacher and charity activist had inspired her to become a poet, agitator, and editor dedicated to the promises of socialism, opposing capitalist double

standards and social structures oppressing women.¹⁹ In parliament, Pärssinen attacked bourgeois forms of charity, and as she advocated communal housing for single mothers, the conservatives accused her of favouring promiscuity.²⁰ Described by both contemporaries and biographers as

19 Sari Oikarinen, 'Hilja Pärssinen – työväenliikkeen poliitikko ja runoilija', in: Pirjo Markkola & Alexandra Ramsay ed., *Yksi kamari, kaksi sukupuolta. Suomen eduskunnan ensimmäiset naiset* (Helsinki: Eduskunnan kirjasto, 1997) 109; Marjaliisa Hentilä, Matti Kalliokoski & Armi Viita, *Uuden ajan nainen. Hilja Pärssisen elämä* (Helsinki: Siltala, 2018) 7, 29, 75, 82-83, 87, 95, 115, 117, 146.

20 Valtiopäiväasiakirjat (Finnish parliamentary debates), avoindata.eduskunta.fi/digitoidut/, 15 October 1907, 2076, and 5 November 1909, 821.



Alex Federley's caricature of Hilja Pärssinen speaking during a Social Democratic parliamentary interpellation on the police, published in the satirical magazine *Velikulta* ("Beste broer"), no. 19, 19 September 1907, 3, 5. According to the account and caption, Pärssinen shouted with hands in fists and crying in the throat: "But we are moderate, we are so very moderate."

Finnish Heritage Agency

sentimental, touchy, choleric, and strong-willed, Pärssinen often found herself in controversies with her opponents, particularly as she challenged authority uncompromisingly and reacted spontaneously with her sharp tongue to any setbacks.²¹

²¹ Oikarinen, 'Hilja Pärssinen', 109; Hentilä, Kalliokoski & Viita, *Uuden ajan nainen*, 38-39, 41, 59, 158, 164-166.

Experiences as an anti-Russian activist, convert to socialism, opponent to bourgeois ladies, embodiment of a worker woman MP, deliberately misrepresented campaigner for the rights of working women, and combative personality were all features of her historical body that Pärssinen brought to the Oldenzaal nexus. Her working-class identity – as opposed to that



Instructions for young women on how to behave at a railway station by Nederlandsche Vereeniging ter Behartiging van de belangen der jonge meisjes.

Wikimedia Commons

of a teacher or an MP – was also reflected by her habit of wearing worn clothes and travelling third class.²²

In line with the international socialist women's movement, Pärssinen prioritized class struggle over gender and rejected sisterhood with bourgeois women. She contributed to pamphlets promoting women's suffrage published by the German Social Democratic women and normalized women's political agency with discourse on *Arbeiterinnen*, *Proletarierinnen*, *Agitatorinnen*, *Vertreterinnen*, and

Parlamentarierinnen in *Die Gleichheit* and *Vorwärts*.²³ For her, 'the victory of social democracy' rose from 'the brilliant political attitude of the Finnish woman as a voter' when rejecting the bourgeois parties.²⁴ Parliamentary work by socialist women was a further form of class struggle.²⁵ In international workers' conferences, Pärssinen became an admired embodiment of working women's parliamentary representation. She made friends with Alexandra Kollontai, the revolutionary leader of the Russian working women's

²² Hentilä, Kalliokoski & Viita, *Uuden ajan nainen*, 123, 125.

²³ *Vorwärts*, 26 April 1912, 13, 23 February 1913, and 26 February 1914, 7.

²⁴ *Vorwärts*, 30 April 1907, 6.

²⁵ *Vorwärts*, 2 October 1906, 11.

movement.²⁶ Her study visit in 1913 to Bebel House, a working women's college in London, had probably been arranged by Kollontai.²⁷

This anti-bourgeois international feminism defined Pärssinen's identity during the border incident. Her recent biographers have missed what exactly constituted a 'disgrace' in Oldenzaal towards 'a prestigious member of the Finnish parliament', and further analysis is hence needed: Pärssinen did not travel via Belgium, was not sitting in the first class, and was not suspected of smuggling²⁸ – unless allegations of white slavery count.

Middle-class charity discourse on white slavery

On the Dutch border, Pärssinen was confronted with a 'bourgeois' ideology of respectability, chastity, and evangelicalism represented by an activist of a charity organization familiar to her from Finland. A representative of the *Nederlandsche Vereeniging ter Behartiging van de belangen der jonge meisjes* dedicated to fighting prostitution interviewed Pärssinen at the border station after she had been stopped by the authorities. The activist belonged

to the middle- and upper-class international women's anti-trafficking movement that opposed 'white slavery', perceived as forced migration serving the needs of transnational prostitution. Their focus was on under-age working-class girls persuaded to travel for a job but in danger of being sold to brothels. The activists intervened to catch these poor girls among train passengers from Germany and the Russian Empire.²⁹ Pärssinen and her travel companion corresponded perfectly with the profile of white slavery regarding origin, destination, gender, class, race, and habitus.

Such mobility of independent and self-confident younger women challenged both the masculine gendering of space and established middle-class perceptions of femininity. Gerodetti and Bieri have interpreted early twentieth-century train stations as crossings between different national, social, and spatial contexts; sexualized spaces used to govern gender, sexuality, race, and class; and gateways between innocent and corrupt types of sexuality. Station workers associated their fears of moral decline with young female working-class migrants, aiming to prevent

26 Maria Lähtenmäki, "Pohjoinen mallimaa". Suomen työväenliikkeen kansainvälistyminen, in: Laine & Markkola ed., *Tuntematon työläisnainen*, 142, 144-145, 151; Oikarinen, 'Hilja Pärssinen', 106; Irma Sulkuinen, 'Suffrage, Gender and Citizenship in Finland – A Comparative Perspective', *NORDEUROPAforum – Zeitschrift Für Kulturstudien* 17 (2007) 27-44, esp. 37-38; Hentilä, Kalliokoski & Viita, *Uuden ajan nainen*, 7, 11, 115-116, 119, 127-128, 133-136.

27 Hentilä, Kalliokoski & Viita, *Uuden ajan nainen*, 138.

28 Marjaliisa Hentilä, 'Maa jossa piiatkin saivat äänestää. Suomen työläisnaisliikkeen kuva kansainvälisessä lehdistössä 1906-1914', in: Leena Laine & Pirjo Markkola ed., *Tuntematon työläisnainen* (Tampere: Vastapaino, 1989) 173; Hentilä, Kalliokoski & Viita, *Uuden ajan nainen*, 140.

29 Barbara Henkes, *Heimat in Holland: Duitse Dienstmeisjes 1920-1950* (Amsterdam: Babylon-De Geus, 1995) 42-45; Jens Jäger, 'International Police Co-operation and the Association for the Fight Against White Slavery', *Paedagogica Historica* 38 (2002) 566-569; Emily Machen, 'Travelling with Faith: The Creation of Women's Immigrant Aid Associations in Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century France', *Journal of Women's History* 23 (2011) 89-112; Philippa Hetherington, *Victims of the Social Temperament: Prostitution, Migration and the Traffic in Women from Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union, 1885-1935* (2014). ProQuest Dissertations and Theses; De Rooy, *Ons stipje*, 178. I am grateful to Maartje Janse for pointing at the centrality of this literature.

boundaries breaking down with their well-intentioned interventions. For them, any woman traveller – especially in third class and wearing a worker woman’s clothes – was a potential prostitute.³⁰ Rival discourses on gender and class (implicitly race) typically intersected in the nexus of a border station. Let us next explore how Pärssinen and the other parties of the Oldenzaal incident interpreted the case.

Hilja Pärssinen’s story: Bad treatment of a representative of working women

In her travel account, dated on 24 September 1913 in London and published in the Finnish journal *Työläisnainen* (Worker Woman) on 16 October, Pärssinen protested against the way in which the Dutch ‘administrative fist’ (*virkaoyrkki*, i.e. policemen; on Pärssinen’s attitudes towards the police, see image on p. 60) had prevented her from entering the country and forced her to buy a second-class ticket as a guarantee that she and her travel companion would not stay in Amsterdam as penniless Russian immigrants.³¹ She complained about the gawky manners of the Dutch, which reminded her of the lack of politeness typical of Finns.³² Yet she did not emphasize to her Finnish audience that

her identity as a respectable *woman* had also been questioned. Her political opponents, who were critical of female socialist MPs, might have exploited the story to demonstrate how such ladies were received abroad. Pärssinen did not want another round of accusations of promiscuity.³³

She did the opposite in her letter to *Het Volk*, the Dutch Social Democratic organ, published on 25 October. Here she emphasized the gendered aspects of the incident. Not only had the policemen removed her from the train and subjected her to interrogations for several hours, but a Dutch female charity worker from an ‘international association for destitute girls’ had suggested that Pärssinen’s travel companion – who had been mistakenly regarded as fifteen years old when she was 22 – needed help.³⁴ This insinuation, coming from a representative of a ‘bourgeois’ women’s international organization, had been a major provocation to a socialist internationalist involved in the fight for women’s rights and high morality. Instead of a respectable woman MP responsible for her younger travel companion, she had appeared as a prostitute or – even worse – as a bad mother or madam involved in trafficking the poor girl.

In another letter responding to *Algemeen Handelsblad*’s report from Oldenzaal, Pärssinen emphasized that she had previously been allowed to travel freely in Denmark and Germany.³⁵ According to Pärssinen, she had answered all questions posed to her in German and could not accept having been forced out of the

30 Natalia Gerodetti & Sabin Bieri, ‘(Female hetero) Sexualities in transition: Train stations as gateways’, *Feminist Theory* 7 (2006) 69–87; Natalia Gerodetti, & Sabin Bieri, “Falling women” – “saving angels”: spaces of contested mobility and the production of gender and sexualities within early twentieth-century train stations’, *Social & Cultural Geography* 8 (2007) 217–234.

31 *Työläisnainen*, 16 October 1913, 314.

32 *Työläisnainen*, 16 October 1913, 315.

33 On class-based doubts by non-socialist women, see Ihalainen & Kinnunen, ‘A Model Country’.

34 *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 7 November 1913, 1.

35 *Het Volk*, 19 November 1913, 7.

train and told to buy transit tickets to London on the grounds of being Russian.³⁶ Questioning the separate statehood and citizenship of Finland in an era of Russification was an insult to the nationalist Pärssinen.³⁷ Yet she insisted that she had not appealed to her status as an MP to gain privileged treatment but to the freedom to travel awarded by her Finnish passport. In addition to nationalist discourse, Pärssinen did not hesitate to use gendered language: the incident had been about gentlemen willing to 'display their power' to her. The attitude of the male officers had not been that surprising. What provoked Pärssinen was that of the female charity worker, instead of considering Pärssinen a respectable woman politician, suspected her of involvement in trafficking. Pärssinen concluded that the Dutch should be ashamed that foreign workers were treated worse on their border than on the Russian one³⁸ – a crossing that Pärssinen, whose home was near Saint Petersburg, knew well. She politicized her case against a capitalist state.

Back in Oldenzaal in December, on her way home from London, Pärssinen did not retract anything. When asked about lacking evidence on her MP status, she said that she had only been asked her profession, not required to provide proof thereof (Pärssinen had not understood the questions posed by a representative of the shipping company in Russian). She justified her complaints by referring to 'the rough

and obnoxious behaviour of the police', including gendarme on the train 'stamping his foot on the ground', 'the strict gazes' of the people, 'the loud and harsh way of speaking', the lack of privacy when she had searched for her hidden travel funds, and the unexpectedly strict application of Dutch law.³⁹ Regarding a statement on the responsibility of the Dutch government attached to her first letter to *Het Volk*, she said that she had not written it, implying that the editors had politicized the story domestically. Pärssinen herself wished that the investigation would come to an end so that she could be allowed to continue her journey back to Finland.⁴⁰

On her way home via Denmark and Sweden, however, when interviewed by the Social Democratic organs, Pärssinen continued to politicize her conflict with border patrol. She was proud of having been invited back to Oldenzaal for the investigation at the expense of the Dutch state; in that sense she had won. Questioning the intelligence of the Dutch border police, she complained how, regardless of their travel destination and passports, Nordic third-class travellers were treated as unwelcome emigrants trying to flee to Canada and subjected to the investigation of their luggage and funds. It was a shame that the Dutch authorities allowed the railway and shipping companies to make money by forcing emigrants to buy second-class tickets through the Netherlands. The border police had failed to justify their behaviour, or to be ashamed

36 *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 21 November 1913, 9.

37 Oikarinen, 'Hilja Pärssinen', 111; Maria Lähteenmäki, 'Hilja Pärssinen (1876-1935)', in *Kansallisbiografia* (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2000), <https://kansallisbiografia.fi/kansallisbiografia/henkilö/3946>.

38 *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 21 November 1913, 9.

39 National Archive, Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, P.J.M. Schaepman, *Een afschrift van een ambtsbericht van den officier van justitie te Almelo en process-verbaal van onderzoek*, 29 November 1913 and 18 December 1913, H28013, 2.02.22, A No 800, B No 634.

40 Schaepman, *Een afschrift*.



The Oldenzaal border station (1885), the nexus of competing ideological discourses on women's rights in the morning of 10 September 1913.

Wikipedia Commons

of it – like policemen everywhere. In this narrative, publicity in *Het Volk* and the parliamentary question of the Social Democratic group had been about the rights of Nordic working-class immigrants, not of women. It remained to be seen how the case would end but Pärssinen believed that the treatment of Nordic travellers needed to change in the 'harassment bureau' (*trakasseringsbyrå*) of Oldenzaal.⁴¹ There may have been a hidden gender aspect in this but Pärssinen's political point was directed against the maltreatment of Nordic workers by the Dutch capitalist state.

In her second travel account for the Finnish weekly published in January, Pärssinen kept silent about publicity and

parliamentary investigation in the Netherlands, writing about sights and her social observations. She merely concluded that women's suffrage was likely to be soon introduced in Denmark, the Netherlands, and Sweden but that Finland remained the only country in which 'working women have representatives in parliament'.⁴² International work for women's suffrage continued but not all of its challenges and methods were to be reported to fellow Finns. Different audiences received different versions of the narrative, all in line with international Marxism: while in Dutch publicity Pärssinen politicized the treatment of the lower classes, Finns, and women by the authorities of a capitalist state, in Scandinavian and Finnish publicity she focused on the class and nationality, ignoring the gender aspect.

⁴¹ *Social-Democrat*, 23 December 1913; *Social-Demokraten*, 22 December 1913. Press cuttings in the Finnish Labour Archive, 92, Pärssinen Hilja 2, Pärssinen Hilja in the foreign press, Foreign articles/news.

⁴² *Työläisnainen*, 8 January 1914, 4.

Internationalist socialists: transnational struggle for women's rights

At the same time, transnationally connected socialists used Pärssinen's case to intervene Dutch debates on women's suffrage. This did not happen immediately: Pärssinen's narrative was published in *Het Volk* on 25 October, seven weeks after the incident, when its potential value had been discovered.

Alexandra Kollontai, and perhaps fellow suffragettes, evidently encouraged Pärssinen. Pärssinen worked and spent free time in London with Kollontai,⁴³ who was the only person she could speak Finnish to – Pärssinen had only just started to study English.⁴⁴ Kollontai had written about the New Woman whom capitalism had created, but who challenged bourgeois morality with proletarian class struggle. She had also written about changing sexual relations that would end prostitution. Furthermore, she was eager to publish cases of injustice committed by authoritarian states.⁴⁵ Kollontai was Pärssinen's closest ideological friend in the cross-border struggle for working women's rights and saw her case as an opportunity to challenge capitalist states and bourgeois women while supporting the cause of women's suffrage in the Netherlands.

43 *Työläisnainen*, 16 October 1913, 315; Alexandra Kollontai, *Ich habe viele Leben gelebt...* (Cologne: Pahl-Rugenstein Verlag, 1981) 161; Cathy Porter, *Alexandra Kollontai: The Lonely Struggle of the Woman Who Defied Lenin* (New York: The Dial Press, 1980) 198.

44 *The Christian Commonwealth*, 3 December 1913, 1, on her 'broken English'; Lähteenmäki, "Pohjoinen mallimaa", 146; Hentilä, Kalliokoski & Viita, *Uuden ajan nainen*, 139.

45 Porter, *Alexandra Kollontai*, 186-187, 197-198.

She translated her story from Finnish into English, from which it was translated into Dutch in Amsterdam.⁴⁶

Pärssinen had been invited to stop in Amsterdam by Heleen Ankersmit, a Social Democratic radical feminist campaigning for women's suffrage and the secretary of the Union of the Social Democratic Women's Clubs, and Carry Pothuis-Smit, the Editor-in-Chief of *De Proletarische Vrouw*.⁴⁷ Whether an invitation by these socialist feminists had an impact on the course of events in Oldenzaal is unknown, but showing the invitation may have added to suspicions. Pärssinen's most recent contribution on women's suffrage had been published in *Vorwärts* on 28 August 1913, less than two weeks before the incident. Local Dutch activists, however, had not immediately politicized Pärssinen's experience despite their disagreements with the male leaders of the Social Democrats and bourgeois feminists on women's suffrage.⁴⁸

Pärssinen managed to meet Ankersmit and Pothuis-Smit briefly during her transit, welcoming the decision of her Dutch comrades not to join the ministry after the elections,⁴⁹ encouraging class struggle instead, and wishing that Dutchwomen would soon win suffrage. The Dutch activists concluded that the border authorities had broken Dutch law when preventing Pärssinen from entering the Netherlands freely but there are no indications that

46 *Het Volk*, 25 October 1913, 6, on translation as an explanation.

47 *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 7 November 1913, 1.

48 Leyenaar, Oldersma & Niemöller, *De hoogste tijd*, 83.

49 Van Dongen, *Revolutie of integratie*, 84; Perry et al., *Honderd jaar*, 51; De Rooy, *Ons stipje*, 170-171; Leyenaar, Oldersma & Niemöller, *De hoogste tijd*, 93.

the Women's Club had planned to politicize the incident.⁵⁰ On 1 November 1913, after *Het Volk* had already published her story, *De Proletarische Vrouw* wrote about Pärssinen, focusing on the methods with which women had achieved suffrage in Finland. Pärssinen was presented as a leading labour activist who had agitated proletarian women to demand suffrage in order to fight capitalism and exploitation. The Finnish model should be 'a fiery incentive' for Dutch proletarian women to 'untiringly fight so that the great weapon in the class struggle, namely the universal male and female suffrage, will be gained', *De Proletarische Vrouw* declared.⁵¹ Yet Heleen Ankersmit did not include Pärssinen's story in her list of articles on women's interests published in *Het Volk* during the autumn, unlike other news on the Finnish Social Democratic Party. Ankersmit did not mention Pärssinen in her annual report either.⁵² With hindsight, Pärssinen's case had not helped to advance women's political rights. Kollontai, Pärssinen, the editors of *Het Volk*, and especially Dr Johannes van Leeuwen had probably been more active in launching the related publicity than Ankersmit and Pothuis-Smit.

Het Volk, the Social Democratic organ, published Pärssinen's letter on 25 October under the title 'A foreign member of parliament on the Dutch border', underscoring Pärssinen's identity as a *woman* parliamentarian. Pärssinen complained about 'the most improper treatment' she had received, as the Dutch police had refrained

from accepting her and a younger Finnish woman's passports for entrance to the Netherlands en route to Britain and Canada, respectively. After Pärssinen's letter, the editors added lines politicizing the incident regarding immigration policies and implicitly the political rights of women:

Naturally the Dutch government must be given an opportunity to express themselves about the rude way in which certain categories of aliens are treated on our borders. That it concerned a woman member of parliament in this case provides a suitable reason to put an end to such shameful practices for good.⁵³

The news was coordinated with parliamentary work. The potential violation of the parliamentary immunity of a woman MP was brought onto the parliamentary agenda by Van Leeuwen on 5 November 1913,⁵⁴ nearly two months after the incident and the beginning of the parliamentary session. Van Leeuwen, a history and geography teacher from Utrecht and a socialist agitator, specialized in foreign affairs but was also regarded as the leading parliamentary feminist.⁵⁵ Pärssinen's case provided him with a chance to take up women's political rights and to demonstrate to parliamentary and newspaper audiences that women MPs existed – at a time when reforms were expected from a new liberal ministry and a report by the Parliamentary Commission for Proportional

50 *Työläisnainen*, 16 October 1913, 314-315.

51 *De Proletarische Vrouw*, 1 November 1913, 7.

52 International Institute for Social History, Archief Bond van Sociaal-Democratische Vrouwenclubs, Correspondence of Heleen Ankersmit, ARCH00085, 9-10.

53 *Het Volk*, 25 October 1913, 6.

54 Tweede Kamer, 5 November 1913, 7.

55 Blok et al., *Vrouwen, kiesrecht en arbeid*, 95; Outshoorn, *Vrouwenemancipatie*, 61; Johannes van Leeuwen's biography at https://www.parlement.com/id/vg09ll2qr6qn/j_jan_van_leeuwen.

Suffrage was due.⁵⁶ Women's suffrage had been mentioned by the Queen in her speech from the throne in September, and liberal suffragists appealed to her regarding the issue in early November.⁵⁷ On 5 November, at the time of the letter to the Queen, Van Leeuwen posed his parliamentary question to the ministers of foreign affairs and justice, calling for an investigation into the Oldenzaal incident. In the face of nationwide publicity, the (Independent Liberal) Minister of Justice, Bastiaan Ort, promised to launch such an investigation and to consider measures to which it might give rise.⁵⁸ We shall explore the results below.

In December 1913, women's suffrage was explicitly on the agenda. Troelstra, the chair of the Social Democratic parliamentary group, referred to liberal feminists and class-conscious working women who campaigned for women's suffrage but continued to subordinate the issue to universal (male) suffrage.⁵⁹ Theodoor Herman de Meester, the chairman of the Liberals, summarized the expectations of the feminists rising from a recent exhibition 'The Woman', an international meeting on women's suffrage, and the election victory of the leftist parties.⁶⁰ In January 1914,

the non-socialist Society for Women's Suffrage suggested to the Social Democratic Women's Clubs that they collaborate on a petition for the constitutional equality of men and women, which made Heleen Ankersmit conclude that the Liberals were coming to the side of the labour movement.⁶¹

Van Leeuwen, who had presented the parliamentary question on Pärssinen's treatment and attended the related investigation, continued his campaign with *De Vrouwenbeweging en de Strijd voor het Vrouwenkiesrecht in Nederland* (1914). He argued that the voters had rejected 'reactionary' policies excluding women from suffrage and accusing the new ministry of failure to take any reform measures and thereby bypassing the party programmes, the election result, and the promises the minister-president himself had given on 10 December 1913. According to Van Leeuwen, the bourgeois women's movement fought a conventional battle of the sexes instead of a proper feminist struggle. They subordinated women to men, marginalized their political influence, and limited suffrage to the privileged classes. The proletarian women's movement, by contrast, neglected feminism in favour of anti-capitalism. In Van Leeuwen's view, proletarian class unity would be best increased by strengthening the feminist element within the labour movement.⁶² He was implicitly challenging Troelstra's reserved line on women's suffrage.

In October 1916, once the Social Democrats and Liberals seemed ready to

56 Tweede Kamer, Uittreksel uit de algemeene beschouwingen van het Verslag der Staatscommissie voor Evenredig Kiesrecht, 15 November 1913. The Commission made observations on the Finnish electoral law of 1906, aside with other examples, but not on women's suffrage; van Dongen, *Revolutie of integratie*, 88.

57 *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 22 December 1913; Leyenaar, Oldersma & Niemöller, *De hoogste tijd*, 93-94.

58 Tweede Kamer, 10 November 1913.

59 Tweede Kamer, 3 December 1913, 510-511; Leyenaar, Oldersma & Niemöller, *De hoogste tijd*, 48.

60 Tweede Kamer, 4 December 1913, 555.

61 Correspondence of Heleen Ankersmit, 9-10, letter from the Society for Women's Suffrage and Jaarverslag 1913.

62 Johannes van Leeuwen, *De Vrouwenbeweging en de Strijd voor het Vrouwenkiesrecht in Nederland* (Baarn: Hollandia-Drukkerij, 1914) 4-6, 8, 27-29.

advance women's suffrage,⁶³ Van Leeuwen used an example borrowed from the Finnish Liberals to support the case for it. He quoted Senator Leo Mechelin, the former professor of constitutional law during whose ministry female suffrage had been introduced, on the basis of the liberal feminist journal *Belang en recht* which had summarized the pamphlet *Was die Männer Finnlands vom Frauenstimmrecht sagen* (1913), published by a Finnish feminist organization.⁶⁴ According to Mechelin, the Finnish parliament was agreed about the positive effects of women's political involvement on both society and women themselves. Parliamentary deliberation had become deeper and more extensive, and legislation had benefited from contributions by women.⁶⁵ Van Leeuwen cited Vera Hjelt, a liberal woman MP, describing how men and women had become politically equal:

To convince you of how groundless the fear of a detrimental influence on the family is, you only need to see how on election days most men and women – or man, wife, and adult children – go together to the polls. Usually the man and wife support the same political party, but there are also exceptions, and no-one has ever heard that this has caused any problems.⁶⁶

Belang en recht wished that such praise of the effects of women's suffrage by Finnish

statesmen would push the Dutch politicians to a similar decision.⁶⁷ While the majority of the Social Democratic group continued to oppose women's suffrage before universal male suffrage, Van Leeuwen defended equal political rights for women.⁶⁸

The Dutch debate would continue until redefinitions of citizenship in the constitution awarded women passive suffrage in 1917. Universal male suffrage was applied, and the first woman elected to the Tweede Kamer in 1918. Women's active suffrage was introduced in 1919 and applied in 1922.⁶⁹ By then, the Finnish model, which had received unexpected publicity in Dutch debates on women's suffrage, had become just one among many.⁷⁰

Press reports on Pärssinen as a female politician

Van Leeuwen's parliamentary question made Pärssinen's story public throughout the Dutch press.⁷¹ *Algemeen Handelsblad* reprinted Pärssinen's letter and sent a reporter to Oldenzaal to investigate. According to the male reporter, Pärssinen had insisted that, as a member of the Finnish parliament, she was entitled to travel

67 *Belang en recht*, 1 July 1915, 3.

68 Van Dongen, *Revolutie of integratie*, 396-397; Leyenaar, Oldersma & Niemöller, *De hoogste tijd*, 104-105.

69 Andeweg & Leyenaar, 'Veroverd of gegund?', 28; Leyenaar, Oldersma & Niemöller, *De hoogste tijd*, 11.

70 Only Swedish parliamentarians referred to the Finnish case more often than the Dutch. Ihalainen & Kinnunen, 'A Model Country'.

71 For instance, *Leidsch Dagblad*, 6 November 1913, 2; *De Tijd*, 6 November 1913, 1; *De Maasbode*, 6 November 1913, 1; *Haagsche Courant*, 7 November 1913, 1; *Amerfoortsch Dagblad*, 7 November 1913, 2-3; *De Eemlander*, 7 November 1913, 3; *Haarlem's Dagblad*, 8 November 1913, 6.

63 Lakmaker, 'Van de uiterste suffragette', 63-65.

64 *Belang en recht*, 1 July 1915, 2-3; Oldersma & Niemöller, *De hoogste tijd*, 60; Ihalainen & Kinnunen, 'A Model Country'; Leyenaar.

65 Tweede Kamer, 24 October 1916, 213.

66 *Belang en recht*, 1 July 1915, 3; Tweede Kamer, 24 October 1916, 213.

unhindered everywhere, due to her status as a politician. Pärssinen had refused to give further details of the purpose of her journey and had responded very rudely to questions posed to her. She had been told by the police that she should know that national legislation only concerned the country in question and was not valid in other countries, i.e. that her passport did not automatically entitle her to travel in the Netherlands. Eyewitnesses assured the reporter that there had been no unseemly treatment by the Dutch police whereas the Finnish lady herself had behaved rudely and brutally. All this made the reporter wonder about the motives of the Dutch socialists in publishing the case; he foresaw that the parliamentary investigation would end unfavourably to Pärssinen and her Dutch comrades.⁷² A leading daily played down the incident by concluding that nothing unusual had happened and that the socialists – and the said lady MP – had an attitude problem.

Once Pärssinen had responded to these conclusions, *Algemeen Handelsblad* gave the last word to its reporter. He wrote that the incident had arisen from two facts: firstly, the ‘emigrants’ had only possessed ‘governorate’ (Finnish) passports invalid in the Netherlands. Secondly, they had lacked boat tickets and could not hence be allowed to stay in the country.⁷³ When interviewed, the border authorities maintained their legalistic stance, referring to the dubious constitutional status of Finland: the country was considered a Russian governorate and not a separate legal entity entitled to award passports for foreign travel. Nationality and race were

also implicitly present: it was legitimate to treat travellers from Russia with suspicion as the Dutch did not want that kind of immigration. The author of yet another press report published far away in Dutch India (Indonesia) wondered at Pärssinen’s bad behaviour towards the Dutch charity worker and policemen and her unfounded emphasis on her status as an MP.⁷⁴ In a column of *De Tijd*, Pärssinen was explicitly criticized for having ‘way too high an opinion of herself and her worthiness’.⁷⁵ In such publicity, Pärssinen appeared as a lady whose head had been turned by her anomalous status as an MP, which depoliticized her claims to failures of personality.

In simultaneous British publicity, Pärssinen was much more successful in constructing an image of a woman politician. This ‘woman who can write M.P. after her name – a very womanly woman’, was presented positively in the *Daily News and Leader*: Pärssinen assured the paper that the current 21 Finnish women MPs were in their right place, doing excellent work for their country by increasing awareness on the need for social reform. Working women had direct contact with their representatives: several mothers spent their nights in the gallery, observing parliamentary debates and coming to talk about their problems to women MPs over a cup of coffee during breaks.⁷⁶ Even the conservative *Daily Mail* echoed Pärssinen’s statement on both sexes

74 *De Preangerbode*, 6 December 1913, 6.

75 *De Tijd*, 6 December 1913, 6.

76 *Daily News and Leader*, December 1913. This and the other British articles can be found at the Finnish Labour Archive, 92, Pärssinen Hilja 2; *Hufvudstadsbladet*, 3 December 1913, 7.

72 *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 7 November 1913, 1.

73 *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 21 November 1913, 9.

working harmoniously in Finnish political life.⁷⁷ The progressivist *Christian Commonwealth* reported about Finland as ‘a complete anomaly’, combining Czarist autocracy with the most democratic constitution that enabled women to become MPs. Amazingly, Pärssinen did not speak like a ‘professional politician’ (a man) but like ‘a happy, healthy, domesticated wife and mother’. Yet she assured readers that women spoke in the Finnish parliament just like men, even if not quite so often.⁷⁸

From the point of view of the established political order, Pärssinen was an embodiment of an undesirable kind of female involvement in politics as well as of relentless socialism. For reformists, and especially for socialists, she was a model of an unavoidable development towards women’s political agency. Clearly, she managed to politicize her example as a woman MP; the consequences of this publicity varied from country to country.

The Dutch authorities: no violations of the respectability of the lady

For the border authorities accountable to the Dutch parliament, the Oldenzaal incident was not about nationality, race, class, or ideology but was, indeed, about gender. The suggestions about transnational prostitution were not addressed by the Dutch authorities during the investigation – being considered a legitimate doubt – whereas attention was focused on the proper treatment of the lady by male

⁷⁷ *The Daily Mail*, December 1913.

⁷⁸ *The Christian Commonwealth*, 3 December 1913, 1.

WHERE WOMEN GO TO PARLIAMENT.

Mill-Hand Politicians of Finland.

LADY M.P. INTERVIEWED IN LONDON.

At Bebel House, the new working women’s college in Lexham-gardens, a woman who can write M.P. after her name—a very womanly woman, who is married, likes to be well dressed, and takes a keen interest in everything feminine—is staying in order to study English institutions. Mme. Hilja Pärssinen is one of the twenty-one women who sit in the Finnish Parliament, and she is thoroughly convinced that they are in their right place and doing excellent work for their country. She has been through six general elections, and sat in Parliament side by side



MME. HILJA PARSSINEN, M.P.

with men for seven years. As a Socialist she belongs to by far the largest group of women in the House—a group numbering thirteen in a total membership of two hundred.

The Daily Mail’s report on Finnish working-class politicians and women going to parliament, based on an interview with Hilja Pärssinen as a lady MP in London in December 1913.

Finnish Labour Archive, U:U3

officers. Pärssinen’s complaint about having had to partly undress in the front of male officers when searching for her travel funds hidden in her clothing became the

major concern, the authorities doing their best to prove that the lady's respectability had not been violated. The reason given for the inspection remained consistent: the travellers were Russian emigrants and lacked sufficient travel funds.⁷⁹ The possibility of a woman moving freely in the public sphere as a politician was not discussed, as the authorities did not possess a concept of woman parliamentarian.

Once the report on the investigation was delivered to the Tweede Kamer on 21 January 1914,⁸⁰ Minister of Justice Ort concluded that Pärssinen's claims had been unjust and that the investigation had yielded no reason to take further measures. The entire controversy had arisen from Pärssinen's misunderstanding of a clause in her *Russian* passport awarding her the right 'to travel in all countries of Europe and America'. Permission to cross the Russian border did not entail the same right to cross all frontiers: a passport based on internal Russian (Finnish) legislation did not guarantee free entrance to the Netherlands.⁸¹

On the basis of witness statements from the Oldenzaal station, the Officer of Justice of Almelo, P.J.M. Schaepman, considered Pärssinen's allegations in letters to *Het Volk* on 'the rough and obnoxious attitude of the police' unjust. The border officer, who spoke understandable German, had carried out the investigation in accordance with valid legislation on aliens. The modest travel funds

of the third-class passengers constituted a justification to remove them from the train. The delay had been caused by Pärssinen's unwillingness to cooperate: She had got annoyed about the fact that, although a member of the Finnish parliament, she was not allowed to enter the Netherlands with her inadequate Russian passport. She had declared to everyone interviewing her: 'I am a member of parliament in Finland, I travel everywhere freely. You can read it also in my passport.'⁸² As this claim remained unverified, there was nothing political involved. Pärssinen had rather attempted to politicize the event herself. She had also contributed to its gendered and ideological nature when challenging the policeman, she had first encountered on the train by saying that, according to her *Weltanschauung*, every policeman is 'a man of violence' (*ein Mann der Gewalt*). According to Schaepman, there was no denying that Pärssinen spoke excellent German and was able to express abstract intellectual concepts.⁸³

The report implies that there was a language problem which the Dutch authorities could not grasp: having classified Pärssinen as Russian they expected her to be able to communicate in that language. This was, however, not the case.⁸⁴ The border officers asked a representative of the shipping company Nederlandsche-Amerikaansche

79 *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 7 November 1913, 1.

80 Tweede Kamer, 21 January 1914, 1335.

81 National Archive, Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, B. Ort, Brief van den Minister van Justitie, H28013, 2.02.22, 765; *De Tijd*, 23 January 1914, 7. The same official statement was published in practically all daily papers.

82 Schaepman, *Een afschrift*.

83 Schaepman, *Een afschrift*.

84 Pärssinen's certificate from teacher seminar includes no grade in Russian. Hentilä, Kalliokoski & Viita, *Uuden ajan nainen*, 45 (illustration).

Stoomvaart Maatschappij⁸⁵ to interview Pärssinen in Russian. As he asked Pärssinen what it meant to be a member of the Finnish parliament, she evidently had not understood the question and had refused to listen, getting increasingly annoyed and threatening to disclose her scandalous treatment to the Finnish press. The woman's claims were not taken seriously, and her unwillingness to speak Russian was considered very strange. The interviewers had explained to Pärssinen that even if she were a member of parliament, she should nevertheless subject herself to the laws of other countries. The local officers emphasized that it was unreasonable to expect them to know about the existence of women MPs in Finland. After all, they had to handle 50,000-70,000 foreigners and emigrants passing through the border station annually.⁸⁶ That was to say that the case was not political but a consequence of Pärssinen's attitude – and partly also of the administrative burden on the border station.

Allegations of Pärssinen's improper treatment as a lady were denied as unfounded: she had been offered a chance to undress in a toilet to disclose her travel funds but she had refused to do so, stating that 'the gentlemen are for sure all married' and undressing partly in the front of male officers.⁸⁷ Pärssinen had reacted

impulsively to the allegations of being a Russian prostitute with a performance that challenged the policemen, making them feel embarrassed. Her performance had continued during the interview with the charity worker. Pärssinen had at first behaved indifferently and appeared unfriendly but then suddenly started to sing, dance, and laugh – at a border station in the early morning – playing (an amateur actress as she was) the role of a Russian prostitute in which she was cast, thus deliberately provoking the 'bourgeois' lady offering her 'charity'. She had carnivalized the contrast between a female socialist MP fighting for women's rights in the spirit of high morality and a middle-class woman controlling the mobility and sexuality of working women. Pärssinen's performance made an impact, as the charity worker stated in several press interviews that she found such behaviour very strange.⁸⁸ The encounter between a socialist and a bourgeois female activist was a nexus of discourses on women's political rights and freedom of movement, socialism as the only hope for working women, bourgeois women as opponents in class struggle, and the need to control the morality of women on the move.

Schaepman concluded that Pärssinen had been offered privacy but she had declined it. The male authorities had behaved appropriately and not violated

85 The representative on the border station had a role in the interrogations as the business of the company was based on Eastern European third-class passengers on the way to America. In order to meet the demands of the US immigration authorities, the company had to make certain that it did not contribute to white slavery. I am grateful to Bernhard Rieger for pointing this out.

86 Schaepman, *Een afschrift*.

87 Schaepman, *Een afschrift*.

88 There is no reason to believe that Pärssinen was intoxicated or promiscuous in the early morning. Her calls for temperance, emphasis on chastity, and rejection of free love were well known. She had described the character of a prostitute in her poems and wished to ban prostitution. Lähteenmäki, 'Hilja Pärssinen'; Lähteenmäki, "Pohjoinen mallimaa", 105, 110; Hentilä, Kalliokoski & Viita, *Uuden ajan nainen*, 41, 52, 76, 93, 98, 121, 170

the respectability of the lady traveller. In the future, controls on the Dutch borders should be performed with goodwill, obligingness, and politeness especially towards women; otherwise some travellers might experience their treatment as unpleasant.⁸⁹ The socialist attempt to politicize the incident in their struggle for immigrant, lower-class, and women's rights had been effectively depoliticized. Encountering the anomaly of a Finnish woman MP had not led to any reconsiderations beyond an emphasis on gentlemanly behaviour towards lady travellers.

Discussion

The border incident in Oldenzaal became part of the struggle for women's suffrage, as international socialist networks made Pärssinen's seemingly peripheral experience relevant to ongoing political processes in the Netherlands. While this attempted politicization did not directly advance Dutch women's suffrage, it illustrates the multiple ways of campaigning for political change. This analysis of the case demonstrates the very material and gendered consequences of the nexus of rival political discourses in the border control and the discourse cycles that followed. It also exemplifies how language-oriented transnational political history can benefit from nexus analysis.

What does the incident tell us about political practices in 1913? At least three things. Firstly, women's political rights remained limited to the extent that a

woman MP could not expect to travel without suspicion of assuming a false identity and criminal intentions. Prevalent discourses of respectable womanhood continued to limit her mobility. Secondly, rather than purely feminist goals, it was the transnational Marxist agenda of class struggle that motivated socialist internationalists to challenge such 'capitalist' and 'bourgeois' practices physically and discursively. This is illustrative of practical intersectionality – with class and ideology coming before gender. Thirdly, alleged violations of women's rights could be reframed in conventional gender roles by focusing on the improper behaviour of a woman and on her proper treatment by men, bypassing the potential political aspects of these practices.

The incident reflects deep prejudices and consequent misunderstandings on both sides: Pärssinen's identity, as an emancipated socialist woman MP engaged in class struggle against capitalist states and bourgeois women to extend working women's rights internationally, clashed with an interpretation of her as a perpetrator, a Russian madam taking a younger lady to the brothels of Amsterdam. This interpretation ignored Pärssinen's parliamentary status as an anomaly, questioned the constitutionally separate status of Finland, and defined her as Russian and as an unrespectable woman. Pärssinen's inappropriate behaviour was a reaction to questioning her identity as a Finn and as a woman politician, and to what she took as harsh treatment of a representative of working women by male officers representing a capitalist state. Even more, it arose from the bourgeois female charity worker's allegation that she might be involved in

⁸⁹ National Archive, Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, *Een schrijven van genoemden officier*, 19 December 1913, B No 636.

transnational prostitution. Pärssinen reacted by performing the identity cast on her. Her historical body – temperament, psycho-physical experiences as a female politician, and ideological worldview – moulded this discursive-material nexus. She deliberately seized an opportunity for class struggle against a capitalist state and bourgeois values, being intentionally provocative. As an MP Pärssinen would certainly have afforded to wear stylish clothes and buy a second-class ticket. She politicized her experience on site and later in Dutch publicity, turning it primarily into an act of class struggle and secondarily into a gender dispute, and bringing in the nationality aspect when talking to Scandinavians. As the politicization of gender and nationality did not fit to her parliamentary status in Finland, she focused on the class struggle when writing to Finns.

Internationalist socialists cooperated – with a delay due to hesitation and waiting for a suitable moment in Dutch parliamentary politics – to politicize the claimed maltreatment of a Finnish woman MP as part of their universal class struggle. The Dutch women activists and perhaps Pärssinen herself were hesitant but Alexandra Kollontai, the editors of *Het Volk*, and Johannes van Leeuwen were not. For them, Pärssinen's story demonstrated inequalities in a capitalist state that denied working women their political rights. They politicized Pärssinen's case to serve the common cause and Pärssinen accepted this in the interests of the international socialist women's movement. Van Leeuwen used the case to support his simultaneous parliamentary struggle for women's suffrage.

The Dutch non-socialist press effectively depoliticized these claims by focusing on Pärssinen's profile as a potential illegal immigrant, her 'unwomanly' behaviour, and her unfounded expectations of her anomalous status as an MP. The politicization of the case by the Dutch socialists was condemned. Pärssinen lost her case in Dutch publicity, unlike in the British media.

The Dutch authorities, too, did their best to depoliticize the incident, concentrating on the immigration pressures of the border station, invalidity of Pärssinen's documentation, her unwillingness to cooperate and unbelievable claims, and the proper treatment of a lady traveller by male officers. They did not possess the concepts of a woman MP or Finland as a separate constitutional entity but did have a concept of a mixed crowd of immigrants (of inferior races) originating from the Russian Empire and potentially involved in underground business. They stopped Pärssinen as part of their routine regulation of mobility in terms of class, gender, race, and sexuality – if not ideology.

Over de auteur

Prof. dr. **Pasi Ihalainen** is Professor of Comparative European History at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. His research on the history of political discourse in Northwest Europe focuses on themes such national identities, political parties, democracy, and parliamentarism. His most recent book is *The Springs of Democracy* (2017).

E-mail pasi.t.ihalainen@jyu.fi

