



Phantom Borders and Nostalgia: German Women's Associations in the Second Polish Republic after 1918*

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Transformations associated with the end of World War I had an immense impact on the population of the former Prussian partition area, most of which became, in the wake of the war, the Second Polish Republic. Members of the German women's associations, which had existed before 1918, found themselves in a new situation. As members of a national minority in the newly established Polish state, they were confronted with a reversed balance of power. Meanwhile, women's suffrage had been introduced, opening up new political spaces of action for women. This article examines gender-related spaces of action for German women in this region after 1918 and explores the strategies and points of reference used by these women. The two examples on which it focuses, the Vaterländischer Frauenverein in Graudenz/Grudziądz and the work of feminist activist Martha Schnee in Bromberg/Bydgoszcz, are examined using the concepts of phantom borders and nostalgia.

Keywords: Second Polish Republic, German women's associations, phantom borders, nostalgia, interwar period

Introduction

Women's activism in Central and Eastern Europe was strongly influenced by World War I and, in particular, the regime changes that came at the close of the war, with the emergence of new states after 1918. Women's associations, many of which now belonged to the national minorities in the new states (such as the Germans in the Second Polish Republic), occupied a special position in this context. On the one hand, German women's associations¹ found themselves in a reversed position of power, since they had belonged to the national majority in most regions of the Prussian partition area of the German Empire until its collapse. On the other hand, the founding of the Second Polish Republic, the introduction of women's suffrage in 1918, and the establishment of democratic

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1 An overview of the associations can be found at *Statistik der Frauenorganisationen*, 20–36, as well as Wyder, "Wielkopolskie działaczki," 48–72.

structures opened up new political, institutional, and imagined spaces of action for them. While the position of the German minority in the Second Polish Republic has been rigorously studied,² little attention has been paid to German women's associations, their networks, and their spheres of influence after 1918.³ As this paper will show, broadening the perspective by including the category of gender in the study of national minorities (in addition to, for example, denomination or class) offers new insights into women's agency in the interwar period and sheds light on the hitherto unstudied activities of women's organizations and their networks.

In the new political, institutional, and imagined spaces of action that emerged after 1918, women's organizations adopted strategies and types of activism that resembled prewar aspirations and efforts (e.g., organizing supra-regional network meetings), and they remained linked to their previous points of reference (e.g., the German Empire). These continuities in women's activism in a completely new political situation will be demonstrated with two examples: the Vaterländischer Frauenverein des Roten Kreuzes (VF – Patriotic Women's Association of the Red Cross) in Graudenz/Grudziądz and the efforts of feminist activist Martha Schnee in Bromberg/Bydgoszcz. The source material used consists mainly of records of the respective associations, as well as police files and court records. Two concepts will be used to explain the action strategies of Vaterländischer Frauenverein and Martha Schnee: the theoretical frame of phantom borders⁴ and the concept of nostalgia, drawing on the definitions offered by Svetlana Boym.⁵

The collected volume *Fragmentierte Republik? Das politische Erbe der Teilungszeit in Polen 1918–1939* edited by Michael G. Müller and Kai Struve, deals with the question of how experiences in the various partitioned areas as 'phantom borders' affected the actions of the political elites after 1918 and how this also contributed to the political fragmentation of the Second Polish Republic. A contribution to this discussion that explicitly considers the category of gender, however, is missing. Phantom borders can be described as "former mostly political borders or territorial divisions that continue to structure space

2 See for example Barelkowski and Schutte, *Neuer Staat*; Chu, *German minority*; Sakson, *Polska*.

3 Süchting-Hänger, "Politisch oder vaterländisch" (However, there are only a few geographical references to the area under study here); Harvey, "Pilgrimages"; Schaser, "Engagement."

4 Hirschhausen et. al., *Phantomgrenzen*. The book is the first volume in a series published by the research network "Phantom Borders in East Central Europe," which was active between 2011 and 2017.

5 Boym, "Nostalgia," 7–18.

after they have been institutionally abolished.”⁶ Phantom borders leave behind “tangible traces of the no longer existing political body and its external borders” over different periods of time. In our case, these are the phantom borders of the German Empire respectively the Prussian partition area in the Second Polish Republic, which was founded in 1918. The concept of phantom borders enables us to highlight the features of historical regions without essentializing them or reifying their physical borders. It reminds us that what had once existed as a very real political space can persist as an imagined space, and these imagined spaces can be incorporated into a historical analysis without perpetuating imperial narratives or lending persuasive force to revisionist claims.⁷ This is particularly important in the case of what had been, before the war, the eastern part of the German Empire, which remained the subject of nationalist and revisionist fantasies and a highly controversial political issue after the signing of the Treaty of Versailles.

Drawing on Henri Lefebvre’s triad of space,⁸ three dimensions of phantom borders can be characterized: The *Raumimagination* (imagining of space), the *Raumerfahrung* (experience of space), and the *Raumgestaltung* (formation of space).⁹ The relevance of phantoms borders in the creation, interpretation, and lived experience of spaces is clearly visible in the activities of the women’s associations.

The members of the Vaterländischer Frauenverein in Grudziądz maintained symbolic ties to the defunct German Empire in order to situate themselves in space and to give meaning and consistency to their situation and existence (*Raumimagination*).¹⁰ Their value orientations and practices, which had emerged from their experiences of successes under the German Empire, continued to function as routines under changed circumstances in the Second Polish Republic as they continued their association’s work (*Raumerfahrung*).¹¹ Phantom borders, however, are not simply metaphors for the ways in which spaces are imagined or experienced. They also shape the spaces in which they exist, for example through old and new institutional orders. Surviving legal traditions, for instance, contribute to the meaningful formation of space (*Raumgestaltung*).¹² The German

6 Hirschhausen et. al., *Phantomgrenzen*, 18. All translations are mine.

7 Ibid., 19–20.

8 Lefebvre, “La production.”

9 Hirschhausen et. al., *Phantomgrenzen*, 39.

10 Ibid. 42.

11 Müller et al., “Introduction,” 10–11.

12 Hirschhausen et. al., *Phantomgrenzen*, 50.

law on associations, for example, which was adopted into the new Polish legal system and only replaced in 1933, played a major role in the fate of the Vaterländischer Frauenverein.

In their “academic positioning on phantom borders in Eastern Europe,” Hannes Grandits, Béatrice von Hirschhausen, Claudia Kraft, Dietmar Müller, and Thomas Serrier point out that the three ways in which phantom borders can be understood as part of Lefebvre’s triad of space overlap.¹³ As Marko Zajc states, the “conceptual openness of the ‘phantom border’ concept bears the potential of its productive application.” Referring to examples in which the notion of phantom borders has been used as a fruitful theoretical concept, Zajc asks the following question: “Is this about ‘phantom borders’, or rather ‘phantom spaces’?”¹⁴

This paper explores this question by adding Svetlana Boym’s concept of nostalgia to the analysis. Boym defines nostalgia as a “longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one’s own fantasy.”¹⁵ She draws a distinction between reflective and restorative nostalgia: “Reflective nostalgia thrives on *algia* (the longing itself) and delays the homecoming—wistfully, ironically, desperately.” The notion of restorative nostalgia, which emphasizes *nostos* (home) and “attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home,”¹⁶ seems very useful as a perspective from which to study the activities of the German women’s associations in the aftermath of World War I. Boym describes the creation of a “phantom homeland” as an “extreme case of nostalgia.”¹⁷ After a brief historical overview, the two examples mentioned are discussed from the perspective of the concept of phantom borders. Women’s activism in the region before and during World War I is also described to offer context and some grasp of the reference points that were used by women in their work after 1918. Finally, I link the findings of this discussion to the concept of nostalgia.

13 Ibid., 50.

14 Zajc, “Contemporary Borders,” 302.

15 Boym, “Nolstalgia,” 7.

16 Ibid., 13.

17 Ibid., 9–10.

The End of World War I and the Negotiations Concerning the Borders of the New Polish State

With the collapse of the German, Habsburg, and Russian Empires and the end of World War I, new states emerged. These states saw themselves as homogeneous nation states despite the presence of considerable linguistic and confessional minorities. In 1918, 123 years after the Third Partition of Poland, which divided the land of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth among the Prussian, Habsburg, and Russian Empires, the Second Polish Republic came into being. But the proclamation of the Second Polish Republic in November 1918 did not determine the final borders of the new state. For another three years, military conflicts, armed uprisings and referendums shaped the nation-building and state-building processes of the region, which was still suffering from the consequences of the war. Industry and agriculture had collapsed, infrastructure was largely destroyed, food shortages and diseases were a common part of everyday life, and populations were dwindling because of resettlement, deportation, and civilian and military war casualties.¹⁸

The incorporation into the new Polish state of the formerly Prussian territories (the Province of Posen) and large parts of West Prussia was decided by the Treaty of Versailles. From then on, East Prussia was separated from the Weimar Republic by parts of the newly established Second Polish Republic, as the treaty guaranteed Poland access to the Baltic Sea. Danzig was placed under the supervision of the League of Nations as a Free City. In addition, referendums were to be held in parts of East Prussia and Upper Silesia, which, as an industrial region, was of great interest to both countries. The population here was able to vote as to whether to remain with the Weimar Republic or to be incorporated into the new Polish state.¹⁹ The first plebiscite in East Prussia took place on July 11, 1920, in the shadow of the Polish-Soviet war. 96.5 percent of the population voted to remain in the Weimar Republic. Only eight villages were made part of the Second Polish Republic.²⁰

18 Borodziej, *Geschichte Polens*, 98–99.

19 Ibid., 109.

20 Kossert, *Preußen*, 143–57.

New political spaces of action

Women's associations participated in the preparations for the plebiscites. In February 1921, for example, the main office of the Deutsch-Evangelischer Frauenbund (DEF – German Protestant Women's Association)²¹ sent a letter to local Silesian groups with instructions on how to prepare for the upcoming plebiscite in Silesia. The main office asked the local groups of the association in the voting areas for increased commitment. According to the letter, the members of the DEF were

obliged to be faithful to the program of the association and to promote moral-religious, German Protestant thoughts and principles [...] among the population, to stand up for German nature and German character, to strengthen national feelings and, ultimately, also to point out the responsibility of women to do their duty in the election.²²

In particular, the groups in Silesia were encouraged to mobilize women to vote in favor of remaining in the Weimar Republic. To this end, members were to travel to various areas to prepare group meetings and give lectures. Although the activities of the women in the DEF were voluntary and unpaid, the speakers were to receive honoraria for their talks. This offers a clear illustration of how urgent the matter seemed to the main office.²³

The statement concerning “the responsibility of women to do their duty in the election” should not be misunderstood to suggest that the DEF supported the introduction of women's suffrage. On the contrary, the DEF continued to oppose women's suffrage, which was introduced in the Weimar Republic and the Second Polish Republic in 1918. In 1919, women exercised universal, equal, direct, and secret suffrage for the first time in the first elections to the National Assembly. A woman's “duty” to exercise the right to vote derived, in the mentality of the DEF, from an obligation to the homeland (not to a democratic system) and loyalty to the fatherland, which transcended politics and parties.²⁴

21 The DEF was founded in 1899 at the Protestant Women's Day in Kassel and was one of the three large German confessional women's associations, along with the Katholischer Frauenbund (Catholic Women's Association) and the Jüdischer Frauenbund (Jewish Women's Association). It saw itself as a link between the Protestant Church and the middle-class women's movement. Its members were mainly involved in charitable work and in the field of education for women. They founded numerous children's homes, girls' homes, recreation homes, workers' homes, and later also homes for the elderly. Gerhard, *Unerbört*, 203–5.

22 AddF, NL-K-16; J-96.

23 Ibid.

24 AddF, NL-K-16; B-30.

As Andrea Süchting-Hänger has observed, the commitment to “Germanness” was presented as a “retreat into a politics-free space, which, however, was often linked to concrete nationalist demands and ideas.”²⁵

The activities of DEF women in the run-up to the plebiscite offer a clear example of how women's associations participated in (new) political spaces of action after 1918. It is worth noting that the DEF did not use a parliamentary space as a political space but continued to operate within the framework of the association's previous activities (such as lectures, trips, etc.) in its efforts to influence the upcoming plebiscite. In this way, political activism could continue to take place in a context that the DEF defined as apolitical, since it did not refer to democracy and elections as a means of political participation but continued to use the fatherland as a point of reference. At the same time, it becomes clear that the fatherland referred to by the association no longer existed as a political state and thus constituted an imagined space.

The outcome of the plebiscite in Upper Silesia was more ambiguous than the outcome in East Prussia. On March 18, 1921, almost 60 percent of the Upper Silesian population voted to remain in the Weimar Republic. While the League of Nations, which had the final decision on the future of the area affected by the vote, was discussing the partition of Upper Silesia, the third Silesian uprising broke out on May 3, 1921. Polish insurgents pursued the annexation of Upper Silesia to the Second Polish Republic. The civil war only ended at the end of June in an armistice and influenced the final decision of the League of Nations. In October 1921, Upper Silesia was divided. The result of the vote notwithstanding, the Polish demands, which were based on economic justifications, were granted. Both the Polish and the German parts of Upper Silesia had large national minorities. The rights of both groups were affirmed, at least on paper, in the Geneva Upper Silesian Convention in May 1922.²⁶

The emergence of the Second Polish Republic meant drastic changes for the peoples of the entire region, especially the German-speaking populations that found themselves within the political borders of the new state. They had to redefine their identity as Germans and adapt to their place as a national minority. This led to the founding of new parties and organizations to represent the interests of the Germans in the Second Polish Republic,²⁷ but it also meant fundamental changes for the organizations which had existed before 1918. The various

25 Süchting-Hänger, “Politisch oder vaterländisch?,” 76.

26 Boysen, “Zivil-militärische Beziehungen,” 179–81.

27 Lakeberg, “Das politische Leben,” 351–52.

organizations reacted in strikingly different ways. For example, the association *Frauenwohl* (Women's Welfare) in Thorn/Toruń focused on informing women about their civil rights after the introduction of women's suffrage, which had been one of the main goals of the association. The members of the association also discussed whether the associated legal aid office should also be opened to Polish citizens after the city's incorporation into the Second Polish Republic in 1920. Ultimately, however, the deliberations about the future of the association and the legal aid office came to nothing, because the association dissolved in September 1920, as more and more of its members simply left the city.²⁸ In the discussion below, I offer two examples of how other associations reacted to the new situation in the immediate postwar period.

The Vaterländischer Frauenverein in Graudenz/Grudziądz

Graudenz was a town of some 30,000 inhabitants in West Prussia with a large German population. There were numerous women's associations, including a local group of the *Vaterländischer Frauenverein*. The founding of the *Vaterländischer Frauenverein* (Patriotic Women's Association) in 1866 was essentially based on the voluntary work of women during the Coalition Wars between 1792 and 1815. The VF was one of the first interconfessional women's associations, the charitable work of which was primarily based on the patriotic motivations of its members.²⁹ The association's main tasks included nursing the wounded and sick in times of war and preparing for war in peacetime. It undertook these efforts in close cooperation with the Ministry of War. An amendment to the statutes in 1869 also brought the training of nurses in hospitals and infant homes into the focus of the association. In the event of war, the VF had to subordinate itself to the Central Committee of the German Red Cross Associations. The charitable activities of the association were financed by membership fees and donations, which often came from the state.³⁰ Local groups with their own executive boards were subordinate to the main board as branch associations, which in turn were organized into provincial and district associations. In 1900, the thousandth branch association was founded, and according to statistics from 1909, the VF had 395,054 members.³¹

28 AP Toruń, 69/291/0/-/5.

29 Süchting-Hänger, *Das Gewissen der Nation*, 26–36.

30 AP Olsztyn, 42/1555/0/1/1.

31 *Statistik der Frauenorganisationen*, 48–52.

By joining the VF, women shifted their traditional domestic activities into a more public sphere in which membership in an association had been seen as an integral part of bourgeois social life in the German Empire. Training as a nurse enabled women to pursue gainful employment, but this profession, furthermore, also corresponded to the ideal of femininity and did not constitute a threat to men working in this field. In principle, the association saw its activities as “women’s work.”³² According to Gabriella Hauch, the activities and foundations of these “women’s associations, which were not considered political, took place in the interplay of a heteronomous and self-determined definition based on their female gender” and “seemed to be embedded in the constructed ‘nature of women’.”³³ In addition to the specific opportunities it offered its members, both in terms of association activities and in the context of gainful employment, the association aimed to improve the living and working conditions of women and girls through special social facilities.

The VF viewed its activities in an apolitical context and was committed to political party neutrality. This self-image is evident from various letters and statements. In the spring of 1920, for example, the main board cancelled its participation in a protest against the occupation of the Rhineland by Black French soldiers. The protest had been launched by the Deutsch-Evangelischer Frauenverein, and it had met with the support of a broad alliance of various women’s associations. In its justification, the board stated that, “as this issue was a political one, we regret that we had to refuse to participate for fundamental reasons.” It nevertheless wished the organization “every success.”³⁴ Contrary to the official position of the VF in this matter, eight branch associations, together with 63 other German, Dutch, Swedish and Austrian women’s associations, signed a letter of protest to the League of Nations against the occupation of the Rhineland by French forces, which was described in the letter as “schwarze Schmach” (black disgrace).³⁵

32 AP Bydgoszcz, 6/477/16/-/137.

33 Hauch, “Politische Wohltätigkeit,” 202.

34 AddF, NL-K-16; H-421.

35 Ibid. See also Banks, “Mary Church Terrell.”

The Vaterländischer Frauenverein in Graudenz during the war: The “Army of the Empress”

When the German Empire entered World War I on August 1, 1914, the VF fulfilled its original purpose for the first time since 1871: to care for wounded and sick soldiers. At the request of the Ministry of War, the branch association founded in 1868 in Graudenz set up dining facilities for soldiers passing through, opened soldiers’ homes,³⁶ and treated soldiers in military hospitals.³⁷ VF nurses also worked in the artillery depot in the town of Graudenz.³⁸ The VF also advertised war bonds, which were used to help finance the war.³⁹ The VF itself benefited from financial support from the Ministry of War, the War Office, and the War Replacement and Labor Department, as it was given funds from the so-called “Kaiser Spende” (Emperor’s donation).⁴⁰ In a circular letter to all branch associations, the board appealed to each individual member to financially support a foundation affiliated with the association, and it emphasized that the “greatness of the Vaterländischer Frauenverein, which can call itself the ‘Army of the Empress’ with justifiable pride, rests on the joint work of all associations, branch associations, and association members.”⁴¹

During the war, cooperation with other women’s associations also intensified. Relationships among these associations had at times been tense due to competition in the same “areas of work” and also, for example, due to confessional differences.⁴² Although the association officially positioned itself as interconfessional, its members were predominantly protestants. The exceptional situation during the war and the increased demands on the various women’s associations prompted the main board of the VF to urge its branch associations to foster better relations and more intense cooperation in certain areas of work with the Deutsch-Evangelischer Frauenverein,⁴³ the Katholischer Frauenbund (Catholic German Women’s Association),⁴⁴ and the Jüdischer Frauenbund

36 AP Bydgoszcz, 6/477/16/-/137.

37 AP Bydgoszcz, 6/477/16/-/152.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 AP Olsztyn 42/565/0/14/120.

43 AP Bydgoszcz, 6/477/16/-/137.

44 Ibid.

(Jewish Women's Association),⁴⁵ all of which were also represented by local groups in the Prussian partition area. This intensified networking was thus a result of the war situation. The acute situation prompted the associations to set aside their differences, at least to some extent.

The period of transformation after World War I

The Vaterländische Frauenverein had to grapple with various upheavals and changes at the end of the war. These changes included the introduction of women's suffrage. The monarchy, which had served as a strong reference and identification factor, no longer existed due to the founding of the Weimar Republic, as well as the border shifts and referendums in the former Prussian partition area, which called into question the existence of the branch associations in the affected areas.

The introduction of women's suffrage put the VF in a complicated position, as the association rejected women's suffrage in accordance with its statutes. The association pursued the goal of integrating women into the existing system through its charitable activities and its commitments in the event of war, and not through democratic participation in the form of women's suffrage. From the perspective of the VF, women's suffrage endangered the prevailing order.⁴⁶ For the VF and the DEF, by exercising the right to vote, a woman was meeting a civic duty to the fatherland and not an obligation to the democratic system. The fatherland was to take precedence over politics and political parties. This meant that the association could continue to present itself as apolitical and not officially declare any party affiliation, even if it was clear from the association's principles that members could or at least should only vote for German nationalist parties.⁴⁷

After the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, the main board of the VF informed its members in July 1919 that the branch associations in the ceded territories would have to leave the organization of the Vaterländischer Frauenverein due to the treaties, which no longer permitted cross-border cooperation between branch associations. The main board expressed the hope that the members of the association would "continue to prevent and combat economic and moral hardship in their association's territory in the spirit of the Vaterländischer Frauenverein." To this end, the branch associations had to

45 Ibid.

46 Süchting-Hänger, "Gleichgroße mut'ge Helferinnen," 136.

47 AP Bydgoszcz, 6/477/16/-/137.

rename themselves and separate themselves from the main association. The newly founded association could keep the association's assets if it pursued the "same or similar goals of the Vaterländischer Frauenverein." These orders were passed with "bleeding hearts," and the main board expressed its "heartfelt thanks for everything they had done for the fatherland as the Vaterländischer Frauenverein."⁴⁸

The Polish constitution granted its minorities comprehensive rights and equality before the law, and the German minority was assured that it could run its own educational and cultural institutions with permission of the use of the German language.⁴⁹ After the incorporation of Graudenz (and the change of the name of the city to Grudziądz) into the Second Polish Republic in 1920, the branch association of the VF was renamed *Deutscher Frauenverein für Armen- und Krankenpflege mit dem Sitz in Graudenz* (DFVAK – German Women's Association for Care of the Poor and Sick with its headquarters in Graudenz).⁵⁰ The association also changed its statutes and from then on defined its purpose as the "elimination and prevention of economic and moral hardship" and the provision of "children's schools and care for the poor and sick." While the previous statutes had not contained any explicit requirements concerning the nationality of the members of the association, according to the new guidelines, membership was reserved for "women of German nationality of good repute."⁵¹ The association continued to be chaired by Amanda Polski, whose husband was mayor of the town until 1920. The DFVAK was also a member of the *Verband der Deutschen Frauenvereine Danzigs* (Union of German Women's Associations in Danzig), which coordinated cooperation among the individual German women's associations.⁵² In this case, cross-border cooperation under one umbrella organization seemed possible. After the German associations had been compelled to cut their affiliation with their umbrella organization in the German Reich, a kind of interstice opened up with the organizations that were active in the Free City of Danzig, which was located neither in the Second Polish Republic nor in the Weimar Republic. In order to strengthen the supra-regional connection to other German associations, the DFVAK also became a member

48 AP Bydgoszcz, 6/477/16/-/139.

49 Rumianuk, "Oblicze polityczne," 189.

50 Most of the other branch associations changed their name to *Hilfsverein Deutscher Frauen*. One of the aims of this change of names was to prevent Polish women from becoming members, AP Bydgoszcz, 6/4/0/2.1.3.4/2885.

51 AP Bydgoszcz, 6/4/0/2.1.3.4/2885.

52 Ibid.

of the *Deutscher Wohlfahrtsbund* (German Welfare Association in Poland). The *Deutscher Wohlfahrtsbund* also saw itself as interdenominational and apolitical, and it endeavored to support the affiliated associations “while fully preserving their independence through mutual communication and exchange of ideas and experiences, as well as to represent the common interests with authorities, legislative bodies, and in public.”⁵³ The DFVAK hoped that its affiliation with the *Deutscher Wohlfahrtsbund* would primarily help it secure financial support,⁵⁴ because the organization was one of the main administrators of the funds sent to Poland from the Weimar Republic.⁵⁵ This financial support was also a tool used by the Berlin government to exert political influence on the German minority in Poland.⁵⁶ Apparently, the positive network experience from World War I continued to have an effect here, and even in this (renewed) crisis situation, the focus was set increasingly on cooperation rather than competition.

In spite of the fact that, as of 1920, Grudziądz was part of the Second Polish Republic, the DFVAK attempted to continue its prewar undertakings, even though its main purpose (preparing for war and providing support in the event of war) had lost all relevance and the empress no longer served as the patron saint of the association following the deposition of the German imperial couple. The continued existence of the association preserved an area of activity for German women in theory, but this became less and less relevant, as the vast majority of the German speakers of the city (some 80 percent) began to leave the city in 1920, including active members of the association.⁵⁷

“Revisionist actions” – the DFVAK in court

While the DFVAK regarded itself as apolitical in the tradition of the *Vaterländischer Frauenverein* and continued its charitable activities, the chief of police of the Toruń district, to which Grudziądz belonged, initiated proceedings against the association. In his statement dated October 24, 1921, he accused the association of acting in a “revisionist” manner and continuing to follow the principles of the VF, even though it had changed its name and statutes. He also accused the association of cooperating with other nationalist associations,

53 AP Bydgoszcz, 6/477/16/-/139.

54 AP Bydgoszcz, 6/4/0/2.1.3.4/2885.

55 Rumianuk, “Oblicze polityczne,” 190.

56 Lakeberg, “Das politische Leben,” 354.

57 Boysen, “Zivil-militärische Beziehungen,” 150.

such as the Deutscher Schutzbund für Grenz- und Auslandsdeutsche (German Association for Border- and Foreign Germans), and thus of pursuing political goals in addition to its “humanist goals, which, however, are not laid down in the association’s statutes.”⁵⁸ Due to alleged violations of §§ 86 and 128 of the Criminal Code, he sought to initiate criminal proceedings against the chairwoman Amanda Polski and to dissolve the association in accordance with § 2 of the Associations Act of April 19, 1908, which stipulated that an association could be dissolved if “its purpose is contrary to criminal law.”⁵⁹ Here, the Prussian government’s Associations Act of 1908, which remained in force until 1933,⁶⁰ was coupled with Polish criminal law.

As evidence in support of the accusations, the chief of police cited several letters and other written testimonies which showed that the association continued to receive financial support from the VF, positioned themselves as irredentists through their cooperation with the Schutzbund and the Deutscher Wohlfahrtsbund,⁶¹ and pursued the “strengthening of Germanness” as its primary purpose. The last point was not in itself an offense, but according to the law on associations, it had to be reported to the Polish authorities.⁶² In December 1922, the Grudziądz police refused to issue Amanda Polski a passport, which she needed to travel to the Weimar Republic.⁶³ The DFVAK filed an appeal against its planned dissolution with the Supreme Administrative Court in Warsaw, but the appeal was rejected, meaning that the association was dissolved following a decision on November 6, 1923.⁶⁴ In a survey taken in March 1924, the Department of Public Security in Toruń confirmed the decisions taken, stating that there was sufficient evidence to show that the association, in addition to its charitable purposes, also pursued goals that were hidden from the state authorities, namely the promotion of so-called Germanness in the western border areas. It allegedly did so in agreement with the leadership of the organizations in the German state

58 AP Bydgoszcz, 6/4/0/2.1.3.4/2885.

59 Ibid.

60 *Prawo o stowarzyszeniach 1932*, in particular Art. 63e.

61 The Wohlfahrtsbund, which can be seen as a proxy organization of the Deutschtumbund zur Wahrung der Minderheitenrechte which was banned by the Polish authorities in mid-1923, was also monitored by the Polish authorities. Hauser, “Mniejszość niemiecka,” 285 and 300.

62 AP Bydgoszcz, 6/4/0/2.1.3.4/2885.

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid.

and thus exerted an influence on political events, even though the statutes of the women's association made no mention of political ambitions or orientation.⁶⁵

In May 1924, the Supreme Administrative Court in Warsaw confirmed that a criminal investigation would be initiated against chairwoman Amanda Polski and other members of the DFVAK's board.⁶⁶ The judges conceded that the women would have been permitted to dedicate themselves to the "promotion of Germanness" if this had been stated as the purpose of the association in the statutes. Thus, contrary to the women's understanding of their rights, they were allowed to represent a political cause. Their strategy of carrying out their national aspirations under the guise of charity in order to be able to use the label "apolitical" must therefore be considered a failure. It remains unclear whether the court really convicted the association of not having provided information about its "real activities" or whether this accusation was merely a pretext. With the dissolution of the association, the German women lost a sphere of action that had been reserved for them as a national minority and in which they had been able to continue their sociopolitical efforts.

Phantom borders and their influence on the DFVAK

The legal proceedings against the DFVAK show that the organization's attempt to present itself as an apolitical association was judged differently by the Polish authorities. The DFVAK's cooperation with other nationalist associations and its commitment to irredentism were judged as explicitly political by the organs of the Polish state. The ways in which phantom borders played roles in the interpretation, experience, and formation of space are all clear in this example. While referring to the German Empire as a point of reference and continuing their association's work as before the war, the leading women in the organization tried to situate themselves in the newly established Second Polish Republic. Their perception of the former German Empire and the "fatherland" gave meaning to their existence despite their new position in the new country as national minority and the reversed power position in which they found themselves (*Raumimagination*). Their experience of this space determined their strategy, which did not change despite the altered political circumstances (*Raumerfahrung*). Phantom borders also played a crucial role in the formation of this space. The

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

Polish state's reaction to the association's activities shows the persistence of old political traditions and, thus, borders, since the conviction was based on prewar German legislation that remained in force until 1933 (*Raumgestaltung*). The conviction of the association under Prussian's Associations Act reveals the reverse power dynamic after 1918. Previously, Polish associations in particular (but not exclusively) had been convicted by the Prussian authorities and their activities had been restricted with reference to § 2 of the act.

Martha Schnee's Activism in Bromberg

The city of Bromberg, which was one of the administrative districts of the Province of Posen (and which lies some 70 kilometers from Graudenz), also had a wide range of feminist activists and various associations aimed at improving the living conditions of women and girls. Martha Lina Ottilie Schnee was born on October 18, 1863 in Bromberg. Her father worked in the city's land registry office. After graduating from elementary school, she attended a Protestant teachers' training college and passed her teacher's exam there at the age of 20. She then obtained a certificate to teach at secondary schools for girls. After working as a governess for a short time, she opened a private girls' school in the autumn of 1888. The number of students grew to 80, so Schnee employed additional teachers at her school.⁶⁷ The teachers came to Bromberg from all parts of the German Empire. Many of these young women had already gained work experience in schools in Silesia, Berlin, or even England.⁶⁸ From 1905 on, the so-called "Familienschule" (family school) was also attended by boys. The student body consisted largely of Protestant children, with a few Catholic and Jewish children in each of the seven grades.⁶⁹ The teachers taught subjects such as German, French, history, and Protestant religion.⁷⁰ The school remained in operation until 1918.

In 1901,⁷¹ Martha Schnee became chairwoman of Frauenwohl (Women's Welfare), an association founded in Bromberg in 1897. The association was a member of the Verband der Fortschrittlichen Frauenvereine (Federation of Progressive Women's Associations). It campaigned for the "public

67 Błażejowski et al., *Bydgoski*, 127–28.

68 AP Bydgoszcz, 6/2/0/2.2.2.61/1270.

69 AP Bydgoszcz, 6/2/0/2.2.2.61/1272.

70 Ibid.

71 Or 1903. The various sources offer different information.

representation and promotion of women's demands." The association saw itself as part of the progressive wing of the German women's movement. § 1 of the association's statutes stipulated that the promotion of women's demands should be independent of "any political or religious party." The association sought to achieve its aims in part by listening to and discussing lectures and by working in committees. While any woman could become a full member, men could only obtain associate membership. For an annual subscription of 4.25 Deutsche Mark, the members received the federations' journal *Die Frauenbewegung*.⁷²

The Ostdeutscher Frauentag as a supra-regional networking space

As part of the organizing committee that was established as a cooperative effort between Frauenwohl and Hilfsverein weiblicher Angestellter (Aid Association of Female Employees), Martha Schnee organized the first *Ostdeutscher Frauentag* (East German Women's Day) in Bromberg in October 1903. This is one of the rather rare examples of cross-class cooperation between women's associations, since, in contrast to Frauenwohl, the Hilfsverein weiblicher Angestellter mainly consisted of women who did wage labor. At that time, there was no superior association of east German women's associations, but the associations were, according to Schnee, united by "the bond of belonging together at home." The organizers saw the national and international women's congresses that had taken place previously as a model for the first *Ostdeutscher Frauentag*, but they also hoped to "give the German east a certain counterweight to the west and south." The establishment of a "closed association of East German women's associations" was also under consideration. The focus of the *Ostdeutscher Frauentag* was on humanitarian and economic issues. Among the 180 visitors, representatives of different women's associations from the Province of Posen and East- and West Prussia attended the three-day event. They represented various denominations and political views. In her opening remarks, Schnee expressed her hope that the meeting would further the goal of gender equality.⁷³ On the last day, she emphasized the specific situation of women's organizations in the eastern parts of the German Empire and the duties arising from this situation for women, including organizational efforts among working-class women.⁷⁴ Working-class women, however, were not generally seen as equal. Here, the main focus was

⁷² AP Toruń, 69/291/0/-/3.

⁷³ N.N. "Erster Ostdeutscher Frauentag in Bromberg." *Ostdeutsche Presse*, 1903, no. 239.

⁷⁴ N.N. "Erster Ostdeutscher Frauentag in Bromberg III." *Ostdeutsche Presse*, 1903, no. 241.

on paternalistic notions of “aid.” The idea of gender equality thus referred primarily to the relationship between men and women within a class, and not across classes. After the first congress in 1903, the *Ostdeutscher Frauentag* was held in a different city every two years, including Lissa, Culm, and Danzig. It created an important networking space for the women’s movements in the Prussian partition Area. Due to her progressive stance on various issues, Martha Schnee was considered “very radical” by chairwomen of different associations, who warned against her participation at the *Ostdeutscher Frauentag*.⁷⁵

In February 1904, Frauenwohl established a legal aid office in the same building as Martha Schnee’s school.⁷⁶ The legal aid offices, which usually had been run by an affiliated association, were then united nationally in the Rechtsschutzverband (Legal Defense Association). The guiding principles of the association were to avoid legal conflicts and resolve such conflicts out of court on the one hand while also strengthening the legal awareness of women seeking advice, increasing solidarity among women across classes, and collecting evidence through counselling for the need to reform existing legislation. Efforts to resolve disputes out of court resulted above all from the inferior position of women as enshrined in private law.⁷⁷ The legal aid office’s letterhead book shows that Schnee and other members of the association provided free advice to people in need four times a month. These appointments were occasionally attended by men, but mainly by women. In July 1907, for example, a servant contacted the legal aid office because she had not received her wages. The association members then wrote a letter on her behalf to her former employer, demanding that the outstanding wages be sent to the association or directly to the woman concerned. Otherwise, “further steps” would be taken.⁷⁸ On the same day, a female worker, homeless with her nine children at that time, came to seek support. Members of the association contacted the local gas company and asked it to provide accommodation for the woman and her children.⁷⁹ Shortly afterwards, the legal aid office supported a woman whose husband was not paying alimony for their child and urged him to comply with this obligation.⁸⁰

75 AddF, NL-K-16; J-112 3.

76 AP Bydgoszcz, 6/477/19/-/159.

77 Briatte, *Bevormundete Staatsbürgerinnen*, 126–27.

78 AP Bydgoszcz, 6/477/19/-/159.

79 Ibid.

80 Ibid.

Unfortunately, it is not clear whether Polish-speaking people also made use of the counselling services. The statutes of *Frauenwohl* did not preclude this.

While the members of the association (including Schnee) usually came from an educated middle-class background, those seeking advice came from a broader spectrum of classes and were often unable to afford a lawyer and thus dependent on the free advice. The legal aid office supported those seeking advice on an individual level but also collected cases and reported them to the *Rechtsschutzverband*. In doing so, it provided examples of the need for legal reforms on a collective level. As Angelika Schaser notes, "What is certain, however, is that the legal protection movement developed around the turn of the century made an important contribution to political education and to the legal equality of women."⁸¹ The legal protection office was one of the association's spheres of activity in pursuit of its statutory goal of "promoting women's interests." Unfortunately, it is unclear how long the legal aid office remained open, but it probably ceased to operate after the end of World War I.⁸²

"Can we stay here?" The efforts of German Women's Associations after 1918

In May 1919, Schnee founded a new organization in Bromberg, the *Deutscher Frauenbund* (German Women's League), of which she served as chairwoman.⁸³ Schnee was also a political representative of the German minority in Poland and was one of the cofounders and a board member of the *Deutsche Vereinigung für Posen und Pomerellen* (German Association for Poznań and Pomerelia), which had its headquarters in Bydgoszcz.⁸⁴

In an undated speech at the opening of an exhibition on German craftsmanship (presumably in 1921) titled "Can we stay here?", Schnee laid out her thoughts on the future of the German population in Bydgoszcz. The Germans had "the feeling that they had to leave: The insecurity of the legal situation here, the lack of raw materials, the rising cost of clothing, the uncertainty of the political situation are driving them out." While she acknowledged the difficult living conditions of the Germans in Bydgoszcz, she also painted a bleak picture of the Weimar Republic, which "is no longer the Germany of 1914 either."

81 Schaser, "Einführung des Frauenwahlrechts," 103.

82 AP Bydgoszcz, 6/477/19/-/159.

83 AP Bydgoszcz, 6/474/0/15/490.

84 Błażejewski et al., *Bydgoski*, 127.

The country was economically on its last legs, she said, and emigration was not an option, because one would have to build a life from scratch. Economically, the German urban and rural populations in Poland were better off, so it was important to “hold out” until “Germanness had prevailed again.” After all, she insisted, “Germanness has asserted itself everywhere abroad.” Strengthening “Germanness” abroad was also an important task for German women. Schnee emphasized several times in her speech that “over there, we have no dwellings, no prospects, only the very difficult struggle for survival. Here, despite the difficulties we face, we have a home, we have at least a possibility of work, a place.” She repeatedly spoke of a “difficult transition period” that must be survived “in the duty to the German fatherland.”⁸⁵

The resumption of *Deutscher Frauentag* in Polen

Probably in the summer of 1922, the first new incarnation of the *Ostdeutscher Frauentag*, now renamed the *Deutscher Frauentag in Polen* (German Women’s Day in Poland), was held in Bydgoszcz.⁸⁶ Schnee gave one of the main lectures, in which she shared her thoughts on “German women in present-day Poland: cultural and economic work.”⁸⁷ In her lecture, she referred to the Polish national women’s movement, which German women should take as an example in the context of “cultural work.” She also emphasized several times how important it was, due to the new political situation, to join forces and work together with men in all fields.⁸⁸

Two years later, at the *Landfrauentag* (Rural Women’s Day) in Bydgoszcz, Schnee held a talk on “The German Woman in Poland.” In addition to lectures, the visitors, who had come to the event from all over Poland, were also able to see an exhibition on the subject of “domestic art.” This exhibition took place annually and was an attempt to improve the incomes of homeworkers by giving them an opportunity to sell handmade goods. The event was held as part of the efforts to reestablish a supra-regional *Landfrauenbund* (Rural Women’s Association). This association would be responsible primarily for dealing with economic issues faced by the German female rural population, including the

85 AP Bydgoszcz, 6/474/0/15/490.

86 AddF, NL-K-16; J-98 3.

87 AP Bydgoszcz 6/4/0/2.1.3.4/2903/2.

88 Ibid.

creation of new “employment opportunities, sales opportunities, and sales outlets for domestic crafts.”⁸⁹

In April 1924, the women's organizations active in Bydgoszcz and the surrounding area that were dedicated to charity decided to cooperate more closely. This association of 14 organizations (including Catholic, Protestant, interdenominational and Jewish ones) met monthly from then on to “discuss questions of a cultural nature, especially women's issues, through presentations and debates.”⁹⁰ The model for this was the association of German women's organizations in Poznań, which had been working together closely in various charity efforts for some time.⁹¹

For the city council election in the fall of 1925, the association called on its members to vote for women and to get involved in the elections.⁹² The members of the *Deutscher Frauenbund* were also involved in youth welfare, career counselling, soup kitchens, and other charitable institutions.⁹³ The *Deutscher Frauentag in Polen* continued to take place annually in different cities, in part simply to offer “a meeting place for all those who know that we must stand together firmly to preserve our homeland and our culture.” This shared commitment to “Germanness” led to unprecedented cooperation among the various women's associations, the religious affiliations of which within the women's movement were now eclipsed by the category of nationality. This is also evident in the call for women “living in foreign nations” to “appear as a unified group” at elections. While political elections are recognized as a legitimate democratic interest of the German minorities and women were also encouraged to exercise their right to vote, it was once again clear that the commitment to the “*Deutsches Volkstum*” was the highest priority. Explicit gender-specific interests and the resulting voting preferences were pushed into the background in the name of “Germanness” and its defense.⁹⁴

However, Martha Schnee did not consider the Germans living in Poland to be united enough:

We recognize [...] the absolutely hostile attacking position against Germanness. The goal: the complete annihilation of Germanness in

⁸⁹ AP Bydgoszcz, 6/477/22/-/192.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

Poland. In the face of this, Germanness is not yet united enough. We women must make it our mission to advocate for the unification of Germanness by all means.⁹⁵

In 1928, Martha Schnee began to run the *Frauenfürsorgestelle* (Women's Welfare Office) in Bydgoszcz. Women of the DEF were impressed by her work, as she provided "valuable suggestions for practical welfare work for women and children of German origin in Poland."⁹⁶ Schnee remained the chairwoman of the Deutscher Frauenbund until 1934, the year she retired from her various offices and memberships at the age of 70. She died in 1939, shortly after the outbreak of World War II. In an obituary published in *Die Frau*, feminist activist Gertrud Bäumer wrote of the death of the "German women's leader in the east."⁹⁷

Phantom borders and their influence on Martha Schnee

In founding the Deutscher Frauenbund in 1919, Martha Schnee built on the experiences she had gained in her efforts to improve the lives of women and girls through association work. In her speech "Can we stay here?" the importance of phantom borders in the imagining of space becomes clear. The German Empire had fallen, and yet it still served as a reference point. The "place" itself (i.e. the territories of the newly created Second Polish Republic which had been part of the German Empire) was so symbolically charged (as suggested by Schnee's contention that "Here, despite all the difficulties, there is a home") that it seemed better to remain there than to emigrate to the newly founded Weimar Republic. This imagined, symbolically charged place in the Second Polish Republic thus was preferred over the real German state (*Raumimagination*). Parts of Schnee's speech reveal a complete ignorance of the establishment of the Second Polish Republic and the minority protection treaties in force since January 1920, which Schnee regarded as illegitimate, since she denied the very right of the Polish state to exist. In view of the economically precarious situation of the German minority in Bydgoszcz, Schnee's argumentation, which emphasizes the economic advantages, is surprising, especially considering the overall difficult situation of the civilian population in Poland in the immediate postwar period.⁹⁸ She seems

95 AP Bydgoszcz, 6/477/22/-/193.

96 AddF, NL-K-16; J-98 3.

97 Bäumer, "Das Martyrium."

98 Rumianek: Oblicze polityczne, 187–93.

to have presented these arguments to persuade the German population to stay so that it could defend “Germanness abroad,” as she understood it.

Here, too, the experience of space played a major role. The experience of being (or at least of having been) in a position of power had such a strong effect that the actual economic and political situations were completely ignored (*Raumerfahrung*). Schnee sought to maintain the living conditions of the German population and their (formerly) privileged position, particularly in the economic sphere. This (imagined) living space could only survive if Germans were to stop leaving the city. This explains why Schnee was so keen to prevent them from doing so (or at least to encourage them not to do so). In the sense of phantom borders, the reintroduction of the *Ostdeutscher Frauentag* as the *Deutscher Frauentag in Polen* can be seen as an attempt to maintain existing structures of cooperation and a prewar, supra-regional networking space. This continuation is also an expression of a spatial experience that has influenced the actions of the women involved, despite the new circumstances.

Summary

The examples discussed above reveal gender-related spaces of action for the German minority in the newly created Second Polish Republic. The phantom borders of the fallen German Empire and the Prussian partition area continued to have an effect on the minds of Germans and their commitment to the preservation of “Germanness.” This was reflected in the continuing strategies of German women’s activism. We return, then, to Zajc’s question: “Is this about ‘phantom borders’, or rather ‘phantom spaces’?” Svetlana Boym’s concept of nostalgia thereby expands our perspective. Both forms of nostalgia, described by Boym, are relevant in this discussion. While the *Deutscher Frauenverein für Armen- und Krankenpflege mit dem Sitz in Graudenz* referred in its activism to an imagined homeland of the past, Schnee developed an imagined homeland in a(n) (utopian) future.

In the case of the *Deutscher Frauenverein für Armen- und Krankenpflege mit dem Sitz in Graudenz*, the renaming of the association was primarily a formal act. The adaptation of the statute offered an opportunity to create a German space of action and the cooperation with other German associations was a reaction to the changing power dynamics. Overall, however, the work of the association was shaped by a “carry on as before” mentality. The new political reality (a newly founded Polish democratic state and the resulting new

participatory opportunities) was largely ignored or denied. The new borders of the Weimar Republic were rejected and the previous borders remained as a strong point of reference. While these phantom borders (i.e. the borders of the fallen German Empire) remained an important element of understandings of German national and political identity, they were especially significant in areas that were no longer geographically part of the Weimar Republic or were separated from the “fatherland.” Geographical distance from the new German state strengthened the symbolic meaning of these borders and facilitated visions of a non-existent homeland and its borders. Until the dissolution of the association in 1923, its activities had taken place in a “phantom homeland.” Commitment to the fatherland remained in place at all times, regardless of the political system or ruling parties. This phantom homeland seemed more present and “real” than actual political spaces of action, such as the very right to vote in the elections in the Second Polish Republic. In the words of Svetlana Boym, it is a typical case of nostalgia and “a longing for a home that no longer exists.”⁹⁹ By constantly referring to “transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home” we see a characteristic case of restorative nostalgia.¹⁰⁰ This kind of nostalgia is primarily backward-looking and functions perhaps first and foremost to legitimize the existence of the association and its actions in the present.

Like the DFVAK, Schnee herself sought to keep up the association work and to create networking spaces for the remaining German women’s associations in the Second Polish Republic. At the beginning of her activist career around 1900, Schnee was radically progressive; however, she had always been radically nationalistic, too. As the power position of the Germans in Bydgoszcz changed, she focused more on her nationalism, distancing herself from her progressive feminism in the meantime. Nevertheless, she remained active in the women’s movement even after 1918. She was able to use her many years of experience as chairwoman of Frauenwohl, her position as headmistress, and her commitment to strengthening cross-regional cooperation among women’s associations in the eastern part of the German Empire in her work for the German minority. While she did not leave the field of association work, she was now involved in a much more politically charged area of activity. Furthermore, her comments on the situation in the Weimar Republic and her opinion that this state was no longer “the Germany of 1914” clearly show that Schnee did not see the actual German

⁹⁹ Boym, “Nostalgia,” 7.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 13.

state as a point of reference. She referred, rather, to “the German fatherland,” which no longer existed, and also to an imagined homeland in the future. Here, the fantastic side of nostalgia, as described by Boym, becomes clear: “Nostalgia [...] is also a romance with one’s own fantasy.”¹⁰¹ Since Schnee could not accept the new political reality, she seems to have imagined a future homeland where the German population was still in a position of power, even if this envisioned homeland was geographically in Poland. This kind of nostalgia was primarily forward-looking. It sought to legitimize the aspirations of the remaining German minority and also to encourage this minority to remain despite the difficult political and economical situation. In both examples, nostalgia serves the same purpose. It fills the gap between the fallen Empire on the one hand and the Second Polish Republic on the other, which was not seen by Schnee (and many members of the German minority) as legitimate.

The extension of the concept of phantom borders to include “phantom homelands as an extreme case of nostalgia” provides a useful theoretical framework for a more nuanced understanding of the motivations and actions of women living in what was, to them, something of a “phantom space.” Further research is needed to examine how the phantom borders of the Prussian partition area, as described here, also affected Polish women’s activism after 1918.

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