

# **A Baltic German Women's Movement. The German Women's League in Riga Preserving "Germandom" in Democratic Latvia, 1919–1934**

von  
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"It is up to us women to prove whether we are strong and wise, determined and willing to make sacrifices, and whether we are sufficiently united."<sup>1</sup>

After the First World War the German Women's League in Riga (Deutscher Frauenbund zu Riga) had to revive their activities after having been almost completely disbanded and restricted during the war.<sup>2</sup> The opening quote, written in 1921, refers to this situation and calls upon the women of the League to restore it to its former glory. The Women's League had been established in 1905 and existed until 1939. Its aim was clearly stipulated in the first paragraph of its statutes: "The German Women's League's purpose is to support and promote the German population in the Baltic provinces spiritually, morally and materially."<sup>3</sup> During the League's thirty-four years of existence it strove to preserve and strengthen Baltic German nationhood (Volks-tum) through social and cultural work.<sup>4</sup>

The organizations of Baltic German women have received relatively little attention in historical research, especially with regard to the interwar period. Ragna Boden, Anders Henriksson and Heide W. Whelan have all written on the woman question with regard to the Baltic Germans, but they have all focused on the late 1800s and very early 1900s. Robert G. Waite, on the other hand, has written a short article (supplemented by two documents) on the German Women's League in Riga. Yet Waite's article never goes beyond mere description. Overall the gender perspective and explicit studies of women are very sparse indeed within modern research on the Baltic Germans,

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<sup>1</sup> My own translation from the German: "An uns Frauen liegt es zu beweisen, ob wir stark und klug, tatkräftig und opferfreudig und einigermaßen genugsam sind", in: Jahresbericht 1918, 1919, 1920, in: Latvijas Valsts Vēstures Arhīvs, Rīga, Rīgas Deutscher Frauenbund (RDF), 3284/2/40, no pag.

<sup>2</sup> This article is written as a part of the research project Paradox at Road's End. The Simultaneous Fall of the German Baltic Elite and the Emancipation of its Women, 1905–1939. The project is funded by The Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies.

<sup>3</sup> My own translation from the German: "Der Deutsche Frauenbund hat den Zweck, die deutsche Bevölkerung der Ostseeprovinzen in geistiger, sittlicher und materieller Hinsicht zu fördern." The first paragraph of the statutes is quoted in: Der Deutsche Frauenbund zu Riga, 1905–1917, in: RDF, 3284/2/40.

<sup>4</sup> JOSEPHINE KIESERITZKY: Der Deutsche Frauenbund zu Riga 1905–1939, in: Jahrbuch des baltischen Deutschtums 3 (1956), pp. 81–86, here p. 81.

with the exception of the researchers already mentioned and of Anja Wilhelmi's study on women's autobiographies.<sup>5</sup>

The aim of this article is threefold: first, to make Baltic German women and the German Woman's League in Riga visible within the otherwise very male-dominated political history of the Baltic Germans. Second, to place the League in the more general context of the women's movement. Third, to analyse the endeavours of the League in relation to the ongoing democratization in Latvian interwar society. The interwar period was a turbulent one for the Baltic Germans: After the independence of the Baltic States they completely lost their privileged position. This situation raises an interesting question: what was the relationship between the democratization process in Latvia during the interwar period and Baltic German women and their women's movement?

This article is based primarily on sources originating from the Women's League, most notably annual reports and written accounts of the League's history. A substantial part of the material is written by Josefine Kieseritzky, the chairperson of the Women's League from 1917 until its liquidation in 1939, when the Baltic Germans left the Baltic lands as part of Nazi Germany's *Heim ins Reich* policy.<sup>6</sup> Complementary material has also been used, for example newspaper articles and the manuscript to a speech given on the League's 25th anniversary.

## 1 The Women's Movement

Was there a Baltic German women's movement and if so can the Women's League be seen as belonging to it? The answer is of course dependent on how you define and understand the term "women's movement".<sup>7</sup> The emergence

<sup>5</sup> RAGNA BODEN: Emanzipation – Nation – Konfession. Der Diskurs über weibliche Erwerbsarbeit bei den Deutschbalten (1880er Jahre bis 1910), in: *Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung* 56 (2007), pp. 539-565; ANDERS HENRIKSSON: Minority Nationalism and the Politics of Gender. Baltic German Women in the Late Imperial Era, in: *Journal of Baltic Studies* 27 (1996), 3, pp. 213-228; ROBERT G. WAITE: The German Women's League in Riga, 1905-1939. An Ethnic Women's Organization in the Baltic States, in: *Journal of Baltic Studies* 28 (1997) 4, pp. 339-356; HEIDE W. WHELAN: The Debate on Women's Education in the Baltic Provinces, 1850 to 1905, in: GERT VON PISTOHLKORS, ANDREJS PLAKANS et al. (eds.): *Bevölkerungsverschiebungen und sozialer Wandel in den baltischen Provinzen Russlands 1850-1914*, Lüneburg 1995, pp. 163-180; ANJA WILHELM: *Lebenswelten von Frauen der deutschen Oberschicht im Baltikum 1800-1939. Eine Untersuchung anhand von Autobiografien*, Wiesbaden 2008.

<sup>6</sup> JOSEFINE KIESERITZKY: Josefine Kieseritzky, in: ERIK THOMSON (ed.): *Baltisches Erbe. Fünfundsechzig Beiträge in Berichten und Selbstzeugnissen*, Frankfurt a.M. 1964, pp. 148-150, here p. 150.

<sup>7</sup> The argument made here concerns the "women's movement" as an academic term, not as a term used by the historical agents of the time. The *Baltische Frauenzeitschrift. Monatsschrift zur Förderung der Frauenbildung und der Frauenarbeit*, established in

of organized women's movements in Eastern and Western Europe and in North America is usually dated to the second half of the nineteenth century. Feminism as an idea however is of course much older.<sup>8</sup>

The question of the relationship between democracy, women's rights and the women's movement is a tricky one. There is no simple answer; historically democracy has not always included the rights of women. Even in the cases where a democratization process brought with it political and legal rights for women, as in Latvia in the interwar period, this did not automatically change people's views about what the "proper" social roles for men and women were. This article looks at this rather complex relationship between democratization and the women's movement.

The literature on Baltic German women usually rules out the possibility of a Baltic German women's movement, understood as a political movement.<sup>9</sup> Whelan, who deals with the period from 1850 to 1905, dismisses the notion that there was a Baltic German women's movement in the following way: "the woman's movement in the Baltic, such as it was (or, more properly, wasn't)".<sup>10</sup> Wilhelmi, who mentions that the discussions about women's emancipation kept going into the 1920s, also reaches the conclusion that if one "assesses the emancipation efforts of the Baltic German women it cannot be said to have been an organized (political) movement."<sup>11</sup>

The reason for this dismissal of a Baltic German women's movement and/or any political tendencies in the women's organizations that did exist is probably related to a common but narrow definition of what constitutes politics. It is certainly true, as the literature shows, that Baltic German women never demanded any political or legal rights, for example they never strove or fought for suffrage.<sup>12</sup> The struggle for women's suffrage that engaged many women in the United States, Great Britain and Sweden at the turn of the

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1906, explicitly saw itself as promoting the women's movement. The journal seems to have existed between 1906 and 1909, and then under a different name (*Leben und Wirken*) between 1909 and 1910.

<sup>8</sup> SYLVIA PALETSCHEK, BIANKA PIETROW-ENNKER (eds.): *Women's Emancipation Movements in the 19th Century. A European Perspective*, Stanford 2004.

<sup>9</sup> Irina Novikova has looked at the women's movement in all the Baltic countries, but the focus is on the post-communist period. The earlier period, and the Baltic German women's movement, are only mentioned in general terms at the outset. IRINA NOVIKOVA: *History, National Belonging, and Women's Movements in the Baltic Countries*, in: EDITH SAURER, MARGARETH LANZINGER et al. (eds.): *Women's Movements. Networks and Debates in Post-Communist Countries in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, Köln et al. 2006, pp. 141-162.

<sup>10</sup> WHELAN, *The Debate on Women's Education* (as in footnote 5), p. 180.

<sup>11</sup> My own translation from the German: "Bewertet man die Emanzipationsbestrebungen der deutschbaltischen Frauen, so kann man keinesfalls von einer organisierten (politischen) Bewegung sprechen." WILHELMI (as in footnote 5), p. 53.

<sup>12</sup> HENRIKSSON (as in footnote 5), p. 216; WHELAN, *The Debate on Women's Education* (as in footnote 5), p. 180; WILHELMI (as in footnote 5), p. 53.

century never really stirred any interest among Baltic German women.<sup>13</sup> With the establishment of the independent Baltic States in the interwar period, however, Baltic German women received political rights, as did all women in these new states.<sup>14</sup>

The women's movements in neighbouring areas were, however, more prone to voice political demands. When the Russian women's movement emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century it focused on employment and education issues, but after 1905 it began making political demands.<sup>15</sup> The Estonian women's movement had a similar trajectory: it sought to improve employment and educational opportunities early on but these were followed by more explicit political demands. At the Estonian Women's Congress in 1917 the demand was made that women should have unrestricted political rights regardless of marital status.<sup>16</sup> Latvian intellectuals had raised the question of the emancipation of women in the 1890s. Yet here too the early demands were limited to employment and education rights.<sup>17</sup>

In comparison, Baltic German women primarily focused their demands on educational and employment issues. They demanded that women be given the opportunity to receive an education and also that they should be given greater opportunities to work.<sup>18</sup> Whelan shows that by the end of the nineteenth century the debate among Baltic Germans were not so much centered on if women should work but rather what occupations were appropriate.<sup>19</sup> Boden has also shown that even traditional Baltic Germans advocated the idea that women could work outside the home. The argument put forward, based on

<sup>13</sup> SANDRA STANLEY HOLTON, JUNE PURVIS (eds.): *Votes for Women*, London 2000; JEAN H. BAKER (ed.): *Votes for Women. The Struggle for the Suffrage Revisited*, Oxford 2002; JOSEFIN RÖNNBÄCK: *Politikens genusgränser. Den kvinnliga rösträttsrörelsen och kampen för kvinnors politiska medborgarskap, 1902-1921*; [The Gender of Politics. The National Association for Women's Suffrage and Its Struggle for Women's Political Citizenship, 1902-1921], Stockholm 2004.

<sup>14</sup> INETA LIPŠA: *Frauen in den Parlamentswahlen der Republik Lettland 1920-1934*, in: *Forschungen zur Baltischen Geschichte* 2 (2007), pp. 127-148, here p. 127; NOVIKOVA (as in footnote 9), p. 146.

<sup>15</sup> NATALIA PUSHKAREVA: *Feminism in Russia. Two Centuries of History*, in: SAURER/LANZINGER (as in footnote 9), pp. 365-382. The German women's movement flourished between 1890 and 1914 and both the political and the private aspects of the woman question were discussed during that period. UTE GERHARD: *The Women's Movement in Germany in an International Context*, in: PALETSCHEK/PIETROW-ENNKER (as in footnote 8), pp. 102-122.

<sup>16</sup> SIRJE KIVIMÄE: *Frauen und Frauenbewegungen in Estland von der Jahrhundertwende bis zum Ausbruch des Zweiten Weltkrieges*, in: *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 34 (1994), pp. 199-221, here p. 209.

<sup>17</sup> VITA ZELČE: *Nezināmā. Latvijas sievietes 19. gadsimta otrajā pusē* [The Unknown. Latvia's Women in the Second Half of the 19th Century], Rīga 2002, pp. 14-41.

<sup>18</sup> WHELAN, *The Debate on Women's Education* (as in footnote 5), p. 180; WILHELM (as in footnote 5), p. 53.

<sup>19</sup> WHELAN, *The Debate on Women's Education* (as in footnote 5), p. 179.

the Protestant work ethic, was that it benefited society.<sup>20</sup> The demands for political rights that were raised in the Russian and Estonian women's movements were not voiced among Baltic German women. Even so, the question of women in the workforce was not completely uncontroversial during the interwar period in Latvia. Legally speaking, Latvian law stipulated that a woman had to have her husband's permission in order to take up employment.<sup>21</sup>

Baltic German women also never really questioned the traditional role of women as wives and mothers, but neither did the Estonian women's movement.<sup>22</sup> The activities with which Baltic German women preoccupied themselves were quite compatible with the traditional role of women, for example caring for the sick and elderly or caring for and educating children.<sup>23</sup> Neither Baltic German women nor their organizations used the word "feminism" to describe themselves.

There is a debate among gender historians about the definitions of "feminism", "women's movement" and "feminist movement". The common historical narrative on the women's movement draws attention to only two moments in time, the suffrage movement in the early 1900s and the second wave of feminism in the 1970s. This, however, ignores a wide range of women's organizations that existed during the intervening period and/or did not promote feminism according to the definition proposed by Karen Offen: "Feminism is the name given to a comprehensive critical response to the deliberate and systematic subordination of women as a group by men as a group within a given cultural setting."<sup>24</sup> As Caitríona Beaumont points out, however, such a definition makes it difficult to understand the role played by women's groups that did not challenge prevailing gender roles.<sup>25</sup>

Beaumont highlights the existing confusion within the literature on women's movements, as a result of the conflation of the terms "feminist movement" and "women's movement".<sup>26</sup> The obvious result of this is that a number of women's organizations have been underestimated or ignored.<sup>27</sup> Beaumont has studied a number of such women's organizations in England

<sup>20</sup> BODEN (as in footnote 5).

<sup>21</sup> LIPŠA (as in footnote 14), pp. 129-130.

<sup>22</sup> KIVIMÄE (as in footnote 16), p. 221.

<sup>23</sup> HENRIKSSON (as in footnote 5); WHELAN, *The Debate on Women's Education* (as in footnote 5).

<sup>24</sup> KAREN OFFEN: *European Feminisms 1700-1950. A Political History*, Stanford 2000, p. 20.

<sup>25</sup> CAITRÍONA BEAUMONT: *Housewives and Citizens. Domesticity and the Women's Movement in England, 1928-1964*, Manchester – New York 2013, p. 2.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 3.

<sup>27</sup> IDEM: *Citizens not Feminists. The Boundary Negotiated Between Citizenship and Feminism by Mainstream Women's Organisations in England 1928-1939*, in: *Women's History Review* 9 (2000), 2, pp. 411-429, here pp. 413-414.

between 1928 and 1964. They all endorsed domesticity and therefore never questioned traditional gender roles. Nevertheless they "sought to inform and educate their members about the importance of democratic citizenship".<sup>28</sup>

Beaumont stresses that "the term women's movement should refer to all groups which promoted the social, political and economic rights of women, regardless of whether or not they identified themselves as feminist".<sup>29</sup> The benefit of an approach such as Beaumont's is that it takes into account all the different women's organizations, whether feminist, political, or also more conservative. Organizations of the latter kind may not have called themselves feminist, but they may still have worked to improve the position of women in their respective societies.

A more inclusive definition and use of the term "women's movement" makes conservative women's organizations more visible. In Beaumont's words, "the women's movement needs to be liberated from its exclusive association with feminism".<sup>30</sup> I will argue for such an inclusive definition of "women's movement" and that the German Women's League in Riga should therefore be seen as a part of this "women's movement".

## 2 The Origins of the German Women's League

The Women's League was established in 1905 as a direct consequence of and answer to the revolutions of that year. The 1905 revolutions constituted a severe wakeup call for the Baltic Germans, long secure in their privileged position. The revolutions were primarily felt in the rural areas where many Baltic Germans were killed and manor houses destroyed.<sup>31</sup> During the League's first few months the main task was the care of the large number of refugees that the revolutions had driven from rural areas and into the city of Riga.<sup>32</sup>

Henriksson and Whelan both stress that the revolutions in 1905 led to an increase in women's public activity, for example the emergence of a network of Women's Leagues, among them the German Women's League in Riga.<sup>33</sup> The latter was launched on 4 December 1905, and according to Kieseritzky the background to this turn of events was that "the necessity of women's participation in the defense of the threatened German culture had been recognized".<sup>34</sup> This premise and the fact that the League focused specifically on

<sup>28</sup> IDEM, *Housewives and Citizens* (as in footnote 25), p. 3.

<sup>29</sup> IDEM, *Citizens not feminists* (as in footnote 27), p. 413.

<sup>30</sup> IDEM, *Housewives and Citizens* (as in footnote 25), p. 3.

<sup>31</sup> HENRIKSSON (as in footnote 5), p. 217.

<sup>32</sup> *Der Deutsche Frauenbund zu Riga 1905-1930*, in: *Jahrbuch des baltischen Deutschtums in Lettland und Estland*, Riga 1931, pp. 42-46, here p. 42.

<sup>33</sup> HENRIKSSON (as in footnote 5), pp. 217-219; WHELAN, *The Debate on Women's Education* (as in footnote 5) p. 179.

<sup>34</sup> My own translation from the German: "Die Notwendigkeit der Teilnahme der deutschen Frauen an der Schutzarbeit für die bedrohte deutsche Kultur war erkannt worden", in: *Der Deutsche Frauenbund zu Riga 1905-1930* (as in footnote 32), p. 42.

Germans, their own ethnic group and its preservation, made it, in Henriks-son's words, a "nationalist organization".<sup>35</sup>

That organizations in the Baltic provinces were based on ethnicity was nothing new in 1905. As Ulrike von Hirschhausen demonstrated in her study of Riga between 1860 and 1914, Latvians, Germans, Russians and Jews all had their own organizations.<sup>36</sup> The different ethnic groups in Riga lived parallel lives, and this remained true during the interwar period, when political parties were also based on ethnic lines.<sup>37</sup>

The German Women's League in Riga had emerged from the 1905 revolutions with the purpose of participating in the defense of German culture and the *Volkstum* of the Baltic Germans. Baltic German men and women alike experienced terror and tragedy as a result of the revolutions, but, as Henriksson points out, for Baltic German women the revolutions also brought "empowerment".<sup>38</sup>

### 3 An Independent Latvia or Incorporation into Germany

It is evident that the Women's League saw itself as part of the Baltic Germans' struggle for existence, but, in accordance with their statutes, they worked to achieve this aim through social and cultural means. The available material suggests that the League only seems to have taken what can be interpreted as political action on one single occasion. This is described in the annual reports for the years 1905-1917 and pertains to a course of action the League took in late 1917, when the future of the Baltic provinces was very much unclear. During 1916 both Latvians and Estonians had started to push for some kind of regional control, but political opinion was divided as to the details.<sup>39</sup> Germany had occupied Riga on 3 September 1917, a course of events that many Baltic Germans, and also the League, perceived as a liberation. By March 1918 the German army controlled the entire Baltic littoral. Imperial Russia had collapsed and in November 1917 the Bolsheviks had taken power in Petrograd.

Late in the year 1917, the Women's League submitted a petition to the German Empress, Prince Leopold von Bayern, the high command and the Imperial Chancellor with a plea that the three Baltic provinces should be incorporated into the powerful German Reich. In the annual report the League's action is portrayed as a consequence of the lingering uncertainty even after Germany's occupation of Riga as dark clouds gathered over the Germans in

<sup>35</sup> HENRIKSSON (as in footnote 5), p. 219.

<sup>36</sup> ULRIKE VON HIRSCHHAUSEN: *Die Grenzen der Gemeinsamkeit. Deutsche, Letten, Russen und Juden in Riga 1860-1914*, Göttingen 2006.

<sup>37</sup> MICHAEL GARLEFF: *Deutschbaltische Politik zwischen den Weltkriegen*, Bonn – Bad Godesberg 1976.

<sup>38</sup> HENRIKSSON (as in footnote 5), p. 218.

<sup>39</sup> ANDREJS PLAKANS: *A Concise History of the Baltic States*, Cambridge 2011, pp. 295-300.

the Baltic lands. The plea, or cry for help as it is also labelled in the report, is described as being made in the name of all German women in Livonia, Estonia and Courland.<sup>40</sup>

Since it advocated incorporation into the German Reich, the Women's League document went much further than the better known plea made some months later, on 12 April 1918, by the General Provincial Assembly, which was dominated by the traditional Baltic German elites. The latter called for a united Baltic State to be made a German protectorate.<sup>41</sup>

Neither the League's nor the Assembly's plea resulted in anything material, beyond showing that most Baltic Germans did not seem to care what kind of political future the Latvians (or Estonians) envisioned or wanted. On 18 November 1918 the Republic of Latvia and a Latvian Provisional Government were proclaimed in Riga.<sup>42</sup> The future of what would later become the democratic and independent state of Latvia was far from certain at that point, however, but eventually the Republic of Latvia became a reality.

The plea of the German Women's League cannot be construed as anything other than a political action, moreover a political action against the establishment of independent Latvia. This was also an action that even with the best intentions cannot be construed as democratic, since it only considered what would be best for a very small minority. The fact that the League's action in 1917 was not mentioned in an article about the League published in 1931 also indicates that it was a somewhat sensitive matter in independent Latvia.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, the 1917 plea is not mentioned in the history of the Women's League written in retrospect by Kieseritzky and published in 1956.<sup>44</sup>

The plea could well have been mentioned in the annual reports for 1905-1917 because the report seems to have been written specifically for the Baltic Exhibition (*Baltische Ausstellung*) in Berlin in early 1918.<sup>45</sup> So its main audience would have been Germans, not Latvians or Estonians, and in the light of this it does make sense that the League wished to emphasize their loyalty to Germany.

<sup>40</sup> Der Deutsche Frauenbund zu Riga 1905-1917, in: RDF, 3284/2/40.

<sup>41</sup> JOHN HIDEN: *Defender of Minorities*. Paul Schiemann, 1876-1944, London 2004, p. 26. See also RAIMONDS CERŪZIS: *Die deutsche Minderheit in Riga und ihr Verhältnis zum Staat 1918-1939. Das Prinzip des korporativen Lebens*, in: EDUARD MÜHLE, NORBERT ANGERMANN (eds.): *Riga im Prozeß der Modernisierung. Studien zum Wandel einer Ostseemetropole im 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhundert*, Marburg 2004, pp. 186-199.

<sup>42</sup> ANDREJS PLAKANS: *The Latvians. A Short History*, Stanford 1995, p. 117.

<sup>43</sup> Der Deutsche Frauenbund zu Riga 1905-1930 (as in footnote 32).

<sup>44</sup> KIESERITZKY, *Der Deutsche Frauenbund zu Riga 1905-1939* (as in footnote 4).

<sup>45</sup> Jahresbericht 1918, 1919, 1920, in: RDF, 3284/2/40.



#### 4 The Women's League in Democratic Latvia

Its chairperson, Kieseritzky, starts her account of the history of the German Women's League in Riga during the period 1919 to 1939, i.e. in the Latvian state, with the following words:

"The 20 years that now followed were, for the entire German endeavour, a time of painstaking and slow growth, in completely different circumstances in comparison to the times before the War. We had become impoverished and few in number."<sup>46</sup>

For Baltic Germans, men and women alike, the emergence of the independent Republic of Latvia had major consequences, not only for their position in society but also for their way of life. As Kieseritzky describes it, the immediate result was that the Baltic Germans lost their elite status in more ways than one. They became a small minority among other minorities in a state dominated by a majority of ethnic Latvians. Their privileged position, which had been increasingly questioned and to some extent undermined as far back as the late nineteenth century, was now definitely no more than a memory.<sup>47</sup> The Baltic Germans dwindled in numbers and during the twentieth century women increasingly outnumbered men.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, the agrarian reform implemented by the Latvian state in 1920-1923 was a fatal blow from the Baltic German perspective. According to Kurt Maydell, the Latvian state appropriated 2,721,503 hectares of land owned by the Baltic Germans. No compensation was given and after the land reform only 65,771 hectares remained in Baltic German possession.<sup>49</sup> From the perspective of the Latvians, on the other hand, the agrarian reform was not only necessary but entirely reasonable after centuries of serfdom and oppression.<sup>50</sup>

Kieseritzky's narrative, like other accounts by Baltic Germans depicting the period between the late 1800s and 1939, suggests a strong feeling of threat and of having lost something that was now no more. Liberal Baltic Germans also verbalized this sense of loss and sharp reduction in social status. The liberal politician and journalist Paul Schiemann, who had supported the idea of an independent Latvia already by the autumn of 1918, is one clear

<sup>46</sup> My own translation from the German: "Die 20 Jahre, die nun folgten, waren für die gesamte deutsche Arbeit eine Zeit mühsamen und langsamen Wachstums unter im Vergleich zur Vorkriegszeit völlig veränderten Verhältnissen. Wir hatten unsere führende Stellung verloren. Wir waren arm geworden und gering an Zahl", in: KIESERITZKY, *Der Deutsche Frauenbund zu Riga 1905-1939* (as in footnote 4), p. 84.

<sup>47</sup> MICHAEL H. HALTZEL: *Baltic Particularism and the Beginnings of Russification*, in: EDWARD C. THADEN (ed.): *Russification in the Baltic Provinces and Finland, 1855-1914*, Princeton 1981; WILHELM LENZ: *Vom politischen Schicksal des baltischen Deutschtums. Welches Maß an Freiheit besaßen die beiden letzten baltischen Generationen?*, in: *Jahrbuch des baltischen Deutschtums* 6 (1959), pp. 62-69.

<sup>48</sup> HENRIKSSON (as in footnote 5), p. 214; KURT MAYDELL: *Die Baltendeutschen vor ihrer Umsiedlung. Ein statistischer Rückblick*, in: *Jomsburg* 4 (1940), pp. 59-90, here p. 83.

<sup>49</sup> MAYDELL (as in footnote 48), p. 71.

<sup>50</sup> PLAKANS, *The Latvians* (as in footnote 42).

example. In a New Year's Eve editorial in 1919 he wrote that in some ways the new democratic era had impoverished the Baltic Germans. As John Hiden shows, however, Schiemann then went on to make the point that democracy was also a treasure to be preserved and protected.<sup>51</sup>

This positive and explicit assessment of democracy that Schiemann expressed is not noticeable in the material on the Women's League. There is no mention or discussion of democracy in Kieseritzky's accounts of the League, either those written during her time in Riga, or the one written in retrospect. There is of course a difference here; the League was not an explicitly political organization whereas Schiemann was an important Baltic German politician who gave voice to his opinions regarding political matters, in this case democracy.

It has already been noted that throughout the Women's League's existence it almost completely refrained from direct comment on the different political systems in the Latvian lands. Yet the League worked within very different political systems and situations. In 1905 when the League was launched, Riga and the Baltic lands were part of imperial Russia. The First World War then brought German occupation of Riga and the Baltic lands in 1917. In 1919 the Bolsheviks seized Riga for a short while. During the last twenty years of the League's existence it initially operated within the independent and democratic state of Latvia, and after Kārlis Ulmanis' coup in 1934, within an authoritarian political system.

In Kieseritzky's retrospective account of the League's history, the different political systems and situations seem to have made little difference to how the Baltic Germans and the League perceived their situation. Kieseritzky explicitly describes the League's work throughout its history as a defensive struggle, in which the Baltic Germans had to fight for the preservation of their very existence and of German culture. This struggle is depicted as being fought on two fronts, both against the Russian government and against the nationalistically minded of the Latvian people.<sup>52</sup>

The annual report for 1918, 1919 and 1920, written by Kieseritzky, ends with a short reflection on the years in question. 1918 is described in rather positive terms as a time when some recuperation from the war was evident.<sup>53</sup> There was also a significant influx in members in 1918 compared to 1917.<sup>54</sup> In contrast, the year 1919 is labelled "the time of destruction".<sup>55</sup> Exactly what this refers to is somewhat unclear. It could be any of a number of things, or a

<sup>51</sup> HIDEN (as in footnote 41), p. 56.

<sup>52</sup> KIESERITZKY, *Der Deutsche Frauenbund zu Riga 1905-1939* (as in footnote 4), p. 81.

<sup>53</sup> *Jahresbericht 1918, 1919, 1920*. in: RDF, 3284/2/40.

<sup>54</sup> The numbers given in the annual report are somewhat different to the numbers given in the history of the League published in 1931, but both show a significant increase in members in 1918. *Jahresbericht 1918, 1919, 1920*. in: RDF, 3284/2/40; *Der Deutsche Frauenbund zu Riga 1905-1930* (as in footnote 32).

<sup>55</sup> *Jahresbericht 1918, 1919, 1920*, in: RDF, 3284/2/40.

combination of them, namely: Bolshevik rule in Riga and Livonia, the Civil War and/or the final establishment of a Latvian government.

The period after 1919 is described as a time when things started to improve again, and, as Kieseritzky put it, they had to improve. Interestingly enough, the proclamation and establishment of the independent Latvian state is not mentioned in the annual report's concluding reflection on the years 1918, 1919 and 1920.<sup>56</sup> In a speech at the League's 25th anniversary celebration, however, Kieseritzky did mention the proclamation of the Latvian state in November 1918.<sup>57</sup> The reason for it being mentioned in that context could very well be that Latvian representatives were present. In her speech Kieseritzky welcomed, apart from prominent Baltic German guests, the President of the Latvian Charity Association (Lettischer Wohltätigkeitsverein). She also mentioned "Riga's women's organizations"; it could very well be that this phrase also included the Latvian organizations.<sup>58</sup>

Even if the Republic of Latvia was not commented on as a state and as a democracy until 1934 there was an awareness that the League's existence coincided with significant political events. In her speech at the Women's League's 25th anniversary Kieseritzky pointed out that their small *Volkstum*, i.e. the Baltic Germans, had been drawn into these political convulsions to an extraordinary degree.<sup>59</sup> She subsequently made a specific point that she would later repeat in other texts; that the history of the Women's League was a piece of contemporary history.<sup>60</sup>

## 5 The Women's League: Members and Activities

Membership of the Women's League peaked at 3,612 in 1908. It dwindled somewhat thereafter, and even further during the war. Directly after the war, in 1920, membership was a mere 1,024. By 1927, however, it had risen again to 2,259 members.<sup>61</sup> To put these membership figures in perspective it should be mentioned that of Riga's 337,699 inhabitants in 1925, only 43,792 were Germans.<sup>62</sup> In 1930 Riga had 377,917 inhabitants of which 44,105 were Germans: 17,970 men and 26,135 women. In other words there was a substantial

<sup>56</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>57</sup> Hochgeehrte Festversammlung, in: RDF, 3284/2/40.

<sup>58</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>59</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>60</sup> Ibidem; Der Deutsche Frauenbund zu Riga 1905-1930 (as in footnote 32); KIESERITZKY, Der Deutsche Frauenbund zu Riga 1905-1939 (as in footnote 4).

<sup>61</sup> Der Deutsche Frauenbund zu Riga 1905-1930 (as in footnote 32), p. 44.

<sup>62</sup> Statistik der Bevölkerungsbewegung. Bevölkerungsbewegung in Lettland nach Nationalitäten 1927, in: Jahrbuch des baltischen Deutschtums in Lettland und Estland 1929, Riga 1929, p. 48.

surplus of women among the Baltic Germans in 1930, 145 women for every 100 men.<sup>63</sup>

This may have created greater opportunities for Baltic German women. It is not unheard of that women in societies where they significantly outnumber men are more easily able to participate in the public sphere, receive an education and work outside the home. This was, for instance, the situation in Sweden during the late nineteenth century.<sup>64</sup>

After having been almost completely discontinued during the war, occupation and Bolshevik rule, the League's activities steadily expanded during the interwar years.<sup>65</sup> The increased level of activity is also commented on in the annual report for the year 1925. Yet the same report also emphasized that a deeper interest in the League's work was still lacking among much of its wider membership.<sup>66</sup>

The League had a wide range of activities, but the main focus was on issues concerning women and children. Some activities remained stable throughout the League's history, while others came and went over time. They ran schools, kindergartens and libraries, and also organized lectures and concerts.<sup>67</sup> Many of the lectures organized during the 1920s were on the subject of employment opportunities for women.<sup>68</sup> In addition the League, especially during the interwar period, organized popular exhibitions on domestic life. The exhibition "Table settings" (*Der gedeckte Tisch*) in 1931 drew 3,000 visitors.<sup>69</sup>

The League organized a number of exhibitions during the 1930s, all of which received considerable media attention in the Baltic German press.<sup>70</sup> It seems that the exhibitions were not only popular among the Baltic Germans in general, but Baltic German high society also became practically involved in the undertakings. It was reported that the exhibitors of "Table settings" included a number of society women and wives of foreign diplomats. Several prominent firms also participated in the exhibition.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Zur Bevölkerungsstatistik Lettlands unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des Deutschtums, in: Jahrbuch des baltischen Deutschtums in Lettland und Estland 1931, Riga 1931, p. 53.

<sup>64</sup> ULLA MANNS: *Upp systrar, väpnat er! Kön och politik i svensk 1800-talsfeminism* [Rise Sisters, Arm Yourself! Gender and Politics in Swedish Nineteenth-Century Feminism], Stockholm 2005.

<sup>65</sup> Der Deutsche Frauenbund zu Riga 1905-1930 (as in footnote 32), pp. 44-45.

<sup>66</sup> Jahresbericht des Deutschen Frauenbunds zu Riga für das Jahr 1925, in: RDF, 3284/2/40.

<sup>67</sup> Der Deutsche Frauenbund zu Riga 1905-1930 (as in footnote 32).

<sup>68</sup> Zeitungsausschnitte, in: RDF, 3284/2/26.

<sup>69</sup> Der gedeckte Tisch, in: Rigasche Rundschau from 26.10.1931.

<sup>70</sup> For example: Die Kostüm- und Trachtenschau, in: Rigasche Rundschau from 04.02.1933; Kultur im Heim, in: Rigasche Rundschau from 08.03.1935.

<sup>71</sup> Der gedeckte Tisch, in: Rigasche Rundschau from 23.10.1931.

The same elite character is notable in the 1933 exhibition “Clothes and folk dress” (Kostüm- und Trachtenschau) in 1933 that the League organized together with the women’s committee of another Baltic German organization, the Livonian Charitable Association (Livländischer Gemeinnütziger Verband). Those involved in the exhibition included prominent members of the Baltic German group in Riga, from both the nobility and the middle class. Once again, members of the diplomatic corps, for example the Austrian and Swiss consulates, also participated.<sup>72</sup> It is difficult to determine what impact these exhibitions had on the Latvian part of Riga’s population. In connection with an exhibition the League organized in 1935, a Baltic German newspaper published a photo showing the Latvian President’s wife, Elza Kviesis, visiting the venue together with the wives of other ministers.<sup>73</sup> This shows that the activities of the League, while primarily directed towards the Baltic German community, still had some impact on the Latvian part of society.

Nevertheless the League’s activities were, for the most part, exclusively for Baltic Germans and can therefore be seen as a kind of “nationalist activism”, as Henriksson labels it in his study on minority nationalism and Baltic German women in the late imperial era.<sup>74</sup> When the League’s activities included “non-Germans”, the Germans were still singled out for special treatment. The annual report for 1925 provides a telling example. In one of the retirement homes where the League made regular visits the Christmas celebration included all the residents irrespective of ethnicity. Germans and non-Germans alike received their fair share of cake and sweets, but the Germans were singled out for an extra gift.<sup>75</sup>

## 6 Promoting “Nationalist Politics” and Emancipation in Democratic Latvia

Giving the German residents at the retirement home an extra little gift at a more inclusive Christmas celebration was in line with the League’s aim of preserving and strengthening the Baltic German *Volkstum*. The League’s very reason for existing was helping the Baltic Germans, not the other ethnic groups. It was at the very core of their enterprise. They perceived the Baltic Germans as a nation under threat. This aspect had not changed with the emergence of the Latvian Republic. The point that Henriksson so convincingly makes for the 1905 situation can be said to remain valid in the interwar period.

<sup>72</sup> Wem verdanken wir die Trachtenschau?, in: Rigasche Rundschau from 07.02.1933.

<sup>73</sup> Alberts Kviesis continued as president of Latvia even after the Ulmanis coup in 1934 but without any real power. When Kviesis’ term of office ended in 1936 Ulmanis declared himself president. Ausstellung “Kultur und Heim”, in: Rigasche Rundschau from 09.03.1935.

<sup>74</sup> HENRIKSSON (as in footnote 5), pp. 221-222.

<sup>75</sup> Jahresbericht des Deutschen Frauenbunds zu Riga für das Jahr 1925, in: RDF, 3284/2/40.

From the Baltic German point of view the sense of threat seems to have been felt both in 1905 and during the interwar period. Both moments in time brought tragedy and turmoil for the Baltic Germans. In the 1905 revolutions many Baltic Germans lost their lives and their manor houses were also attacked. After the First World War the new and independent Latvian state affected an agrarian reform that shattered the world of the Baltic Germans; after it, only a fraction of the land was left in their hands.<sup>76</sup>

The "concern among Germans about the prospects for long-term survival" that after 1905 had led Baltic German women to submerge themselves in "nationalist politics", as Henriksson put it, had the same impact during the interwar period.<sup>77</sup> Baltic German women in Riga kept on working for the good of the *Volkstum*.

Henriksson ends his article on Baltic German women and minority nationalism in the late imperial era by stipulating: „The experience of the women in this study, however, reveals nationalism as an instrument for the advancement of gender and class agendas.”<sup>78</sup> The class agenda becomes evident in a number of ways. The bulk of the League's work was directed towards German families in the poorer social classes, because they were the ones that were most in danger of relinquishing not only the German language but also their nationhood as a result of their close coexistence with other ethnic groups.<sup>79</sup>

In her history of the League Kieseritzky makes the point that the focus on the less educated within the Baltic German community was an entirely new approach in 1905. She maintains that this part of the community has been neglected and that this balance has to be redressed.<sup>80</sup> In her statement there is an implicit criticism of how the Baltic German community had functioned in the past.<sup>81</sup> Historically the Baltic Germans had kept to their own social circles; the nobility, the different kinds of burghers in the cities and towns and the literati had not really mixed.<sup>82</sup> The pressure that the Baltic Germans faced from the late nineteenth into the twentieth century, and the perceived threat to their community, meant that they closed ranks, or at least tried to. The German Women's League was one of the organizations that worked to accomplish this.

<sup>76</sup> MAYDELL (as in footnote 48), p. 71.

<sup>77</sup> HENRIKSSON (as in footnote 5), p. 221.

<sup>78</sup> Ibidem, p. 224.

<sup>79</sup> KIESERITZKY, *Der Deutsche Frauenbund zu Riga 1905-1939* (as in footnote 4), pp. 81-82.

<sup>80</sup> Ibidem, p. 81.

<sup>81</sup> Henriksson shows that the League had made this point from the very beginning. In 1906 they had, in a press release, criticized the Baltic German elite of "not watching over its little brothers", i.e. servants and workers, which meant that they risked being assimilated into the Latvian community. HENRIKSSON (as in footnote 5), pp. 219-220.

<sup>82</sup> HEIDE W. WHELAN: *Adapting to Modernity. Family, Caste and Capitalism among the Baltic German Nobility*, Köln et al. 1999, pp. 29-37.

The class agenda did not just have implications for the League's work, it also had implications for its composition. From the origins of the League, the aim was that all German women in Riga should work together, irrespective of social standing and education.<sup>83</sup> The material on the Women's League however gives the impression that the reality did not completely measure up to this ambition; at least the leading posts in the organization seem to have been held by women from the middle and upper classes.

The League's work was directed at advocating a national identity among the Baltic Germans that, in Henriksson's words, "bridged class and estate differences".<sup>84</sup> Henriksson has only looked at the late imperial era, but it is clear that also during the interwar period the League had the same aim and worked in very much the same way.

The class agenda was maybe more obvious in one of the League's activities, the tea evenings (*Teeabende*). These were organized both before the war and during the interwar period.<sup>85</sup> As described in the annual reports for 1905-1917, the purpose of the tea evenings was to bring together German women from different social classes, rich and poor, from distinguished families and humble backgrounds.<sup>86</sup>

Given that the League's overall aim was to preserve and strengthen the Baltic German community, the question arises of what kind of relationship the organization had to the Latvian community in Riga. For the late imperial era Henriksson states that there was no "co-operation along ethnic lines".<sup>87</sup> Wilhelmi makes a similar claim when she states that the German women's organizations in Latvia worked in isolation from other ethnic groups and would not subordinate themselves to any umbrella organizations connected to the Latvian state.<sup>88</sup> The latter claim seems to be correct but the first one can be nuanced, at least regarding the Women's League in Riga. It is true that most of the League's activities were intended for Baltic Germans, but there are also examples of collaborations with Latvian organizations during the interwar period. The annual report for 1925 states that the League participated in the Day of the White Flower (*Tag der Weißen Blume*) every year. This day was organized by the Latvian organization for the fight against tuberculosis.<sup>89</sup>

Some tensions are evident in the relationship between Baltic Germans and Latvians in Riga in general during the interwar period. In connection with the 10 year anniversary of the liberation of Riga in 1929 these tensions surfaced. For the Baltic Germans the liberation from Bolshevik rule by the Baltic

<sup>83</sup> Der Deutsche Frauenbund zu Riga 1905-1917, in: RDF, 3284/2/40.

<sup>84</sup> HENRIKSSON (as in footnote 5), p. 219.

<sup>85</sup> Der Deutsche Frauenbund zu Riga 1905-1930 (as in footnote 32), p. 44.

<sup>86</sup> Der Deutsche Frauenbund zu Riga 1905-1917, in: RDF, 3284/2/40.

<sup>87</sup> HENRIKSSON (as in footnote 5), p. 216.

<sup>88</sup> WILHELMI (as in footnote 5), p. 53.

<sup>89</sup> Jahresbericht des Deutschen Frauenbundes zu Riga für das Jahr 1925, in: RDF, 3284/2/40.

*Landeswehr* was a cause for celebration. For the Latvians, however, this occurrence meant the beginning of *Landeswehr* terror against the Latvian population in Riga. In June 1929 a newly constructed monument in commemoration of the Baltic *Landeswehr* in Riga's cemetery was blown up. The Baltic German press immediately blamed Latvians.<sup>90</sup> The tension between the two ethnic communities seems to have been most evident in the predominantly male sphere of politics. The question is whether there were more exchange and collaboration in the female sphere, between Baltic German and Latvian women's organizations.

The annual report for 1925 mentions that the League was invited to participate in the Latvian Women's Congress (Frauentagung) and it accepted the invitation. This occasion was described in positive terms as it gave "an interesting insight into the congenial social and cultural efforts of Latvian women".<sup>91</sup> Kieseritzky describes the League's relationship to leading Latvian women as one of mutual respect. In connection to this she also mentions that an attempt to form a loose coalition of national Women's Leagues had failed. The reason for this failure, according to Kieseritzky, was the conduct of the Association of Young Latvian Female Students.<sup>92</sup>

The coalition mentioned by Kieseritzky can very well have been a committee established in 1929, made up of delegates from a number of Latvian women's organizations and the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA). This coalition also had connections to the International Women's League. In 1930 a German language newspaper in Riga reported that delegates from both the German Women's League in Riga and the Jewish Women's Council had joined the committee. This meant that at that time it included ten Latvian women's organizations, three German, one Jewish, and the YWCA. The task of the committee, as it is described in the newspaper, was philanthropic and cultural, but also to deal with special women's issues. It is explicitly mentioned that political and denominational questions were excluded.<sup>93</sup>

The Association of Young Latvian Female Students that Kieseritzky held responsible for the failure of the coalition is not mentioned in the newspaper article from 1930, but it is of course possible that they joined the committee later. Naturally, this is Kieseritzky's version of events. Most likely there were other versions as well, which may not have held the Latvian female students responsible for the failure of the committee. Further research is needed, both on the committee itself and also in order to investigate why and how this at-

<sup>90</sup> CERŪZIS (as in footnote 41), pp. 191-192.

<sup>91</sup> My own translation from the German: "ein interessanter Einblick in die sympathischen sozialen und kulturellen Bestrebungen der lettischen Frauen genommen werden". Jahresbericht des Deutschen Frauenbundes zu Riga für das Jahr 1925, in: RDF, 3284/2/40.

<sup>92</sup> KIESERITZKY, Der Deutsche Frauenbund zu Riga 1905-1939 (as in footnote 4), p. 86.

<sup>93</sup> Zusammenarbeit der Frauen, in: Rigasche Rundschau from 07.05.1930.



tempt at closer cooperation between different ethnic women's organizations failed.

## 7 The German Women's League in Riga: A Baltic German Women's Movement

The Women's League strove to preserve and strengthen the Baltic German *Volkstum* through social and cultural work.<sup>94</sup> It was not a political organization, and yet, as previously discussed in relation to the question of an independent Latvia or incorporation into Germany, it did take explicit political action at one specific time. In 1917 the League petitioned, among others, the German Empress, asking for the incorporation of the three Baltic provinces in the German state.<sup>95</sup> This incident has not to my knowledge been mentioned or discussed before and it therefore provides new information on how the Baltic German community, and notably its women, acted in response to the making of the independent Latvian state in the aftermath of World War I.

The League's action may not have been democratic, since it did not take into account what the Latvian and Estonian peoples wanted. Yet it did signal that women had and exercised the right to express a political opinion. Tellingly, the League made the plea in the name of all German women in the Baltic provinces and its main recipient was also a woman, the Empress.<sup>96</sup> That way they kept the extraordinary political action they took within the sphere of womanhood. However, the League did not entirely hold true to this line of action as they also addressed the plea to men, the high command and the Prince of Bayern.

The 1917 plea dovetails with the League's aim to preserve the German culture and *Volkstum* in the Baltics, although this was not so much a social or cultural endeavour as a political one. There was clearly a conservative aspect to the League's *raison d'être*, since the Baltic German *Volkstum* the League wanted to preserve was in a way built on inequality. The Baltic Germans had ruled for centuries as a minority elite. The world they wanted to preserve was in many ways a lost world. At the same time, the League also tried to unite the Baltic German community, to bridge the old demarcation lines of class and estate. As Boden has shown for the period between 1880 and 1910, the Baltic Germans traditionalist and nationalistic attitude was not anti-modernist *per se*, it could also be emancipatory.<sup>97</sup> This also holds true for the interwar years, a period that has not previously been studied in detail with regard to Baltic German women and democracy. Downplaying social and class barriers between the Baltic Germans meant a kind of internal democratization.

<sup>94</sup> KIESERITZKY, *Der Deutsche Frauenbund zu Riga 1905-1939* (as in footnote 4), p. 81.

<sup>95</sup> *Der Deutsche Frauenbund zu Riga 1905-1917*, in: *Rigaer Deutscher Frauenbund*, 3284/2/40.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>97</sup> BODEN (as in footnote 5).

The Women's League, from its establishment in 1905 until its liquidation in 1939, revolved around the task of defending and preserving German identity. Especially in democratic Latvia this can be seen as a way of working for, and in line with the rights of the Baltic German minority. Yet the League's activities showed a remarkable continuity, in spite of great societal changes and irrespective of the prevailing political system, in imperial Russia, democratic Latvia or authoritarian Latvia.

There were a number of Baltic German political parties in Latvia but no Baltic German women seem to have been politically active.<sup>98</sup> Few women were active in politics in Latvia during the democratic period, but there were some exceptions. There were women on party lists in all five parliamentary elections. In three of these elections there were even special women's lists. These women mainly belonged to Latvian parties, but two minority groups had women on their lists on at least one occasion, the Russians and the Poles. Yet no Baltic German parties ever had women on their party lists.<sup>99</sup> The general opinion in Latvia at that time was that women belonged in the family, not in politics.<sup>100</sup>

The politically active Latvian women did not try to change the traditional roles of men and women, but rather maintained that they should be valued equally – a similar line to the one adopted by the Estonian women's movement.<sup>101</sup> This approach to the woman question was very much like the one the German Women's League subscribed to. There is nothing in their activities that suggest that they challenged the traditional roles of men and women. Yet they did promote a more active role for women in society through their many activities. The League also contributed to making domestic life, i.e. the female sphere, more visible and as a consequence maybe also more highly valued, not least through their exhibitions on domestic life.

The exhibition "Table settings" was also covered by the Baltic German press in Riga, which not only wrote about it but also published pictures from it.<sup>102</sup> The same attention was given to the other exhibitions on domestic life organized by the League during the 1930s.<sup>103</sup> As mentioned above, at least some of these exhibitions also seem to have been acknowledged by the Latvian part of society. The 1935 exhibition "Culture in the home" (*Kultur im Heim*) was visited by the wife of the Latvian president.<sup>104</sup> This exhibition was

<sup>98</sup> GARLEFF (as in footnote 37).

<sup>99</sup> LIPŠA (as in footnote 14), p. 136.

<sup>100</sup> Ibidem, *passim*.

<sup>101</sup> Ibidem, p. 135; KIVIMÄE (as in footnote 16), p. 221.

<sup>102</sup> Der gedeckte Tisch, in: *Rigasche Rundschau* from 23.10.1931; Der gedeckte Tisch, in: *Rigasche Rundschau* from 26.10.1931.

<sup>103</sup> For example: *Kostüm- und Trachtenschau*, in: *Rigasche Rundschau* from 24.01.1933; *Ausstellung "Kultur und Heim"*, in: *Rigasche Rundschau* from 09.03.1935.

<sup>104</sup> *Ausstellung "Kultur und Heim"*, in: *Rigasche Rundschau* from 09.03.1935.

also advertised in Latvian newspapers.<sup>105</sup> In this sense it seems that the activities of the German Woman's League had at least some impact outside Baltic German circles. The promotion of a more active role for women, and making the female sphere more visible, probably found some resonance in wider society in Latvia. Naturally, this aim was not much different to what Latvian women themselves strove to achieve. The women of both ethnic groups did not question traditional gender roles; rather they wanted recognition of the fact that women had something vital to contribute to society. As stated in the beginning of this article, Beaumont stresses that the term women's movement should include all groups that endorsed rights for women, regardless if they called themselves feminist or not.<sup>106</sup> The German Women's League in Riga did not call itself feminist but it did promote social, political and economic rights for women, albeit sometimes implicitly, especially in the case of political rights.

Unlike the conservative English organizations that Beaumont has studied the Women's League did not consistently promote the importance of democratic citizenship.<sup>107</sup> However, the League sometimes did it implicitly. They certainly exercised their rights as a minority in democratic Latvia. The annual report for 1925 states that Riga's welfare department (Wohlfahrtsamt) financed the first kindergarten and heavily subsidized the second one. This is then commented on in the following way: "We receive this support with gratitude. We are entitled to this support, since the city gives considerable sums for the expansion and arrangement of Latvian kindergartens."<sup>108</sup>

The League continued to promote women's rights to education and employment throughout its existence from 1905 until 1939, for example through the lectures organized during the 1920s. This must be seen as an emancipatory activity even if the proposed professions were clearly within the traditional role of women; i.e. nurse, doctor, masseuse and kindergarten teacher.<sup>109</sup> The lectures in the 1920s usually focused on these different professions or career opportunities for women, not the education side of the issue.<sup>110</sup> Prior to 1914 women in the Russian empire had no access to university education. In independent Latvia women received the same right as men to attend university already in 1919.<sup>111</sup>

<sup>105</sup> Zeitungsausschnitte, in: RDF, 3284/2/26.

<sup>106</sup> BEAUMONT, Citizens not feminists (as in footnote 27), p. 413.

<sup>107</sup> BEAUMONT, Housewives and Citizens (as in footnote 25), p. 3.

<sup>108</sup> My own translation from the German: "Mit Dank empfangen wir diese Unterstützung – auf die wir mit guten Recht Anspruch erheben dürfen, da die Stadt zur Erweiterung und Ausgestaltung lettischer Kindergärten namhafte Summen ausgibt." Jahresbericht des Deutschen Frauenbundes zu Riga für das Jahr 1925, in: RDF, 3284/2/40.

<sup>109</sup> Zeitungsausschnitte, in: RDF, 3284/2/26.

<sup>110</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>111</sup> PER BOLIN: Between National and Academic Agendas. Ethnic Policies and "National Disciplines" at the University of Latvia, 1919-1940, Huddinge 2012, p. 130.

Yet Baltic German women did not engage themselves in university studies in Latvia to any significant degree during the interwar period, in comparison to both Baltic German men and Latvian women. Figures for the academic year 1928/29 show that female students from the Baltic German group studying at the University of Latvia and the Herder Institute constituted a mere 10.9 percent of the total German student body.<sup>112</sup> In comparison, female students at the Latvian-dominated University of Latvia in Riga constituted 34.8 percent of the students.<sup>113</sup>

It is now time to return to the question whether the Women's League in Riga constituted a women's movement. The fact that the Women's League sometimes behaved in a way that was undemocratic (most notably the plea in 1917) is not a reason for disqualifying it as a women's movement. There is no absolute correlation between feminism or women's movements and democratic values. Among white American feminists and in the American women's movement, for example, there were tendencies of both anti-Semitism and racism towards black Americans, from the nineteenth century well into the twentieth century.<sup>114</sup>

The relationship between women's movements and democracy in the German Woman's League was no exception from countless other women's movements. Baltic Germans in general never strove for democracy. Schie-mann was an extraordinary exception to this rule. Baltic German women, including the German Woman's League in Riga, suffered democracy but they never really strove for it, as the 1917 plea makes clear. During Latvia's democratic period the League worked within the system, but the same can be said for the League during the authoritarian period in Latvia from 1934.

The Women's League may not have been supportive of the establishment of an independent and democratic Latvia, but once the Latvian state was in existence they had no real problem with collaborating with other nationalities' organizations, for example the Latvian women's organizations. The Latvian and Russian aspects of society were also incorporated in the exhibitions on domestic life organized by the League during the 1930s; these were not restricted to Baltic German or German life.<sup>115</sup>

The German Women's League had what could be called a dual nature. They involved themselves in "nationalist activism", i.e. preserving German identity, but also in emancipatory activities, i.e. promoting women's rights to

<sup>112</sup> Statistische Uebersicht über die Deutsche Studentenschaft Riga im Studienjahr 1928/29, in: Jahrbuch des baltischen Deutschtums in Lettland und Estland 1930, Riga 1930, p. 85.

<sup>113</sup> Latvijas Universitāte Divdesmit Gados 1919-1939 [The University of Latvia during Twenty Years 1919-1939], Riga 1939, p. 66.

<sup>114</sup> CHRISTINE BOLT: Sisterhood Questioned? Race, Class, and Internationalism in the American and British Women's Movements, c. 1880s-1970s, London 2004.

<sup>115</sup> Der gedeckte Tisch, in: Rigasche Rundschau from 23.10.1931; Kostüm- und Trachtenschau, in: Rigasche Rundschau from 01.02.1933.

education and employment, as well as to some extent bridging class and ethnic boundaries. The Baltic German women's movement, as personified here by the German Women's League in Riga, did not always act in accordance with democratic values. Yet it did promote women's rights in certain ways and it also showed the world, and men, that women were capable of many things.

### Zusammenfassung

*Eine deutschbaltische Frauenbewegung. Der Deutsche Frauenbund zu Riga als Bewahrer des Deutschtums im demokratischen Lettland, 1919-1934*

Die Forschungsliteratur über die deutschbaltischen Frauen schließt für gewöhnlich die Möglichkeit einer als politische Bewegung verstandenen deutschbaltischen Frauenbewegung aus. Der vorliegende Artikel spricht sich für eine weiter gefasste Definition von „Frauenbewegung“ aus und plädiert dafür, den Deutschen Frauenbund zu Riga als einen Teil von ihr zu verstehen. Zu diesem Zweck werden Quellen aus dem Umfeld des Frauenbundes untersucht, in erster Linie Jahresberichte sowie Abhandlungen zur Vereinsgeschichte. Der Frauenbund wurde als direkte Antwort auf die Revolution von 1905 noch in demselben Jahr gegründet. Als Folge der revolutionären Ereignisse wurden Frauen stärker öffentlich aktiv. Der Frauenbund strebte nach einer Bewahrung und Festigung des deutschbaltischen „Volkstums“ durch soziale und kulturelle Arbeit. Er verfügte, so könnte man sagen, über eine Doppelnatur. Seine Mitglieder beteiligten sich am „nationalen Aktivismus“, d.h. an der Bewahrung des Deutschtums, aber auch an emanzipatorischen Aktivitäten, d.h. an der Förderung der Frauenrechte in Bildung und Beruf wie auch bis zu einem gewissen Grad an der Überwindung von Klassen- und ethnischen Barrieren. Der Bund war keine politische Organisation, aber in einem bestimmten Fall betätigte er sich ausdrücklich politisch: 1917 bat der Bund, zusammen mit anderen Organisationen, die deutsche Kaiserin in einer Petition um die Eingliederung der drei baltischen Provinzen in den deutschen Staat. Zwar hat der Frauenbund die Gründung eines unabhängigen und demokratischen Lettlands nicht gerade unterstützt, doch als dieser Staat dann existierte, bereitete es den Mitgliedern des Frauenbundes kein wirkliches Problem, mit anderen nationalen Organisationen, z.B. mit denen der lettischen Frauen, zusammenzuarbeiten. Die meisten Aktivitäten des Frauenbundes richteten sich an Deutschbalten. Aber es gibt auch Beispiele für die Zusammenarbeit mit lettischen Organisationen in der Zwischenkriegszeit.

Der Frauenbund bemühte sich auch darum, Klassen- und soziale Barrieren innerhalb der deutschbaltischen Gemeinschaft zu überbrücken, und trug so zu einer gewissen inneren Demokratisierung bei. Er bezeichnete sich selbst nicht als feministisch, unterstützte aber die sozialen, politischen und wirtschaftlichen Rechte der Frau, wenn auch manchmal, insbesondere hinsichtlich der politischen Rechte, nur sehr diskret. Mit manchen dieser Aktivitäten setzte sich der Bund für eine aktivere Rolle der Frauen in der Gesellschaft ein. Außerdem trug er dazu bei, das häusliche Leben, also die weibliche Sphäre, besser sichtbar zu machen und auf diese Weise aufzuwerten. Die Tatsache, dass der Frauenbund bisweilen recht undemokratisch agierte (insbesondere bei der Petition von 1917), berechtigt nicht dazu, ihn nicht als Teil der Frauenbewegung zu betrachten. Feminismus bzw. Frauenbewegungen korrelieren nicht automatisch mit demokratischen Werten. In jedem Fall förderte der Deutsche Frauenbund zu Riga in gewisser Weise die Frauenrechte und zeigte außerdem der Welt, und den Männern, dass Frauen zu vielem imstande waren.