



Domowina

ZWĚZK ŁUŽYSKICH SERBOW
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BUND LAUSITZER SORBEN

THE HISTORY OF DOMOWINA

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The umbrella organisation of Sorbian associations was founded in 1912 and has been known as the Bund Lausitzer Sorben (Lusatian Sorbian Association) since 1934. It acts as the representative of the interests of the Sorbian people. The work of the Domowina has shaped the political history and public perception of the Sorbs since the First World War. The Domowina (German for 'homeland') is based in Bautzen/Budyšin and, since the 1950s, has used three lime leaves growing from a trunk with eight roots as its symbol.

As early as the revolutionary year of 1848/49, a proposal was made to organise the numerous Sorbian associations that were springing up. The United Wendish Associations existed for a short time until the democratic patriotic associations were banned in Saxony in August 1849. From 1871 onwards, Sorbian associations, mostly operating locally, began to emerge again: farmers' associations with an economic focus, choirs and theatre groups, school and student associations, and local religious associations. Attempts to create an umbrella organisation failed in 1883 and 1898.

This was achieved in 1912 by a group led by Arnošt Bart, Handrij Króna, Jurij Słodeńk, Bogumił Šwjela, Jan Dwórnik, Jurij Deleńk, Awgust Lapštich, Franc Kral and Michał Nawka. On 13 October 1912, the 'Domowina – Bund wendischer Vereine' (Domowina – Association of Wendish Associations) was founded in Hoyerswerda by representatives of 31 individual Sorbian associations, including only one from Lower Lusatia (Mašica Serbska). Its goal was to promote the affiliated associations, especially in their efforts to achieve the intellectual and economic happiness of the Wendish people.' The founding ended with the adoption of the statutes and the election of the executive committee on 9 February 1913. All associations were then invited to join. Arnošt Bart, a member of the Saxon state parliament, was elected as the first chairman. By June 1913, 15 associations with more than 1,600

members had registered. Most of the Catholic associations represented at the founding meeting were initially unable to decide to join.

The outbreak of the First World War in 1914 interrupted all association activities for six years. In the post-war period, the Wendish National Committee dominated public Sorbian life with its far-reaching political demands (efforts to achieve autonomy). After the failure of this movement, which was also led by Bart, the Domowina was revived at the end of 1920. In 1924, it united 82 local clubs and associations, and in 1931, 85. In order to fulfil the tasks specified in its statutes, it organised lectures, concerts and holiday camps for children, and published plays and sheet music, which were particularly popular with the numerous choirs and amateur groups. Highlights of Sorbian life were central Domowina festivals with cultural programmes and parades. In Lower Lusatia, the Mašica Serbska organised traditional costume festivals (folk gatherings) and inaugurated monuments to Sorbian patriots, which were erected with its own funds.

The Wendish People's Council, formed in 1925, represented Sorbian interests vis-à-vis the Reich and state governments, and Domowina was also represented in it. At the end of the Weimar Republic, on their initiative, petitions were submitted demanding an improvement in the educational situation of Sorbian children, but these were largely unsuccessful. There were particularly close ties to the Sorbian gymnastics association Sokół. Repression after the National Socialists came to power in 1933 (temporary ban on the daily newspaper Serbske Nowiny, arrests, self-dissolution of the gymnastics association and the Wendish People's Council) paralysed Sorbian club life and deterred many members from further activities. A declaration of loyalty in September 1933 between government representatives and selected representatives of the Sorbian public – but no representative of Domowina – helped to calm the situation. Under the chairmanship of Pawoł Nedo, who was elected chairman of the Domowina at the end of 1933, a long-discussed structural reform took place, which provided for the conversion from association to individual membership and was intended to consolidate the organisation internally. It now presented itself as the political spokesperson for the Sorbs. The authorities viewed the expansion of activities, e.g. through the inclusion of Prussian Upper Lusatia and Lower Lusatia, as well as the establishment of youth groups, with suspicion. Increasingly, measures were taken to suppress the Sorbian language and Sorbian identity. This made it difficult for the associations to maintain a diverse cultural life. Attempts to legitimise themselves through Nazi folk ideology – ‘Ty sam ničo njejsy, naš serbski cyłk je naša móc!’ (You alone are nothing, our Sorbian community is our strength!) – also proved to be misguided. A statute imposed by the state, in which Domowina was initially defined as the ‘Association of Wendish-speaking Germans’ and later as the ‘Association for the Preservation of the Homeland and Wendish Customs,’ was rejected by the majority of the associations’ representatives. This led to the banning of events and meetings of all affiliated

organisations on 18 March 1937, and in August 1937, most of the remaining Sorbian associations were also banned. Domowina was thus deprived of the basis for its activities, followed in 1941 by the official ban – which was only relevant for administrative purposes – and the confiscation of its assets.

Immediately after the end of the Second World War, on 10 May 1945, Domowina was re-established in Crostwitz/Chrósćicy under the provisional chairmanship of Dr Jan Cyž and recognised by the Soviet command in Bautzen (initially limited to the region). At the same time, the Sorbian National Council was formed in Prague, which made political demands that once again ranged from autonomy to annexation to the ČSR. The Domowina leadership supported this in several memoranda. However, the Soviet occupying power rejected these ideas and only accepted cultural autonomy. This meant that the National Council was politically sidelined. The Domowina, which subordinated itself to Soviet directives, established itself from then on as the representative of Sorbian interests. Its leaders welcomed the post-war order in East Germany as the social liberation of the Sorbian people, considering socialism a prerequisite for national equality. In the 1946 local elections, the Domowina entered into an electoral alliance with the SED. Under the leadership of Nedo, who had resumed the chairmanship in 1945, the association established an apparatus headed by full-time officials, which, in addition to its regional structure, had departments (including culture, schools, youth/education, propaganda, and economics). Traditional club life could not be continued in the Soviet occupation zone and in the GDR, but in 1949 the Domowina was granted the status of a public corporation by the Saxon state government.

The revival of Sorbian cultural life and the introduction of differentiated Sorbian language teaching proved difficult at first. A noticeable upswing came with the law passed in Saxony on 23 March 1948 to protect the rights of the Sorbian population. It included state support and funding, so that in addition to Domowina as a membership organisation, several Sorbian institutions for education, culture and science were established.

In Lower Lusatia, the majority of the Sorbs were initially indifferent to or even hostile towards nationalist aspirations. Ethnic consciousness here was almost exclusively shaped by church life, but had rapidly lost substance. In the post-war period, Domowina struggled to gain a foothold in Brandenburg. Although a Domowina executive committee for Lower Lusatia had been elected in Werben in 1946 under the leadership of Měto Laški, the organisation was not granted permission to operate in the state until 1949, with a corresponding decree being ratified in 1950. After that, the first local groups were also founded here. However, reservations remained about guidance from Upper Lusatia, which was perceived as paternalistic and disregarding specific characteristics.

After 1950, Domowina, benefiting from the new organisational structure, was divided into a bureaucracy on the one hand and local groups on the other. Members loyal to the SED increasingly gained the upper hand in the governing bodies (secretariat, federal executive committee), who remodelled Domowina along the lines of the GDR's mass organisations. They saw it as their task to enforce the policies of the party and the state among the Sorbian population, for example through advertising campaigns for the collectivisation of agriculture or the intensification of lignite mining. In the mid-1950s, the power struggles intensified against the backdrop of social change. Concerns about the survival of the Sorbian people, which had been expressed publicly on several occasions, were denounced as nationalism by SED and Domowina officials at the Third Federal Congress in 1955. Under the slogan of 'completing socialist construction,' from 1958 onwards, influential SED circles tended to devalue the preservation and cultivation of the Sorbian language, describing it as incompatible with the principles of Marxism. After internal discussions, Domowina officials fell into line with this stance, causing numerous members to resign. Protestant and Catholic Sorbian pastors, who had previously played a major role in the organisation's work, now openly opposed it. Regardless of this, the local groups retained their relative independence, which was based on the individual's sense of responsibility for their origin and language.

In response to the decline in membership and influence, the then First Federal Secretary Bjarnat Nowak sought to reorient Domowina as a purely cultural organisation, but this was prevented by the SED. Another factor in this context was the introduction of voluntary Sorbian language lessons through the so-called 7th Implementation Regulation of 1964, which led to a considerable decline in student numbers. Although there was resistance from many Sorbs and some Domowina officials, the decree could not be prevented. Although many Sorbs and some Domowina officials resisted, the decree could not be prevented. It was not until the 1970s that the negative consequences were gradually offset.

From 1969 onwards, Domowina officially described itself as the 'socialist national organisation of the Sorbs in the GDR'. Many events organised by local groups reflected the uniform social life in the country, as they were centrally prescribed, part of a formal competition or purely ideological in nature. Domowina federal congresses were political highlights (twelve congresses between 1951 and 1990, always held in Cottbus/Chóšebuz from 1977 onwards). On a cultural level, the tradition of Sorbian folk gatherings was revived, which were celebrated from 1966 onwards as multi-day festivals of Sorbian culture (district festivals and seven central festivals).

Only when the political and ideological conflicts were no longer being fought with such intensity was it possible to halt the decline in membership through increased cultural engagement, and even reverse it by 1989. A growing proportion of activities was now

devoted to preserving language, culture and tradition. Despite generous legal provisions and institutional support, however, there was a lack of effective initiatives to halt the ongoing assimilation. In 1988, the leadership of Domowina offered Sorbian representatives of the Catholic and Protestant churches a 'national dialogue' in order to involve important partners in the preservation of Sorbian interests.

During the political upheaval of 1989/90, Domowina initially remained without a concept or personnel changes, leading to a wave of resignations and the dissolution of local groups. From November 1989 onwards, the movement in favour of programmatic renewal was supported by the Sorbian People's Assembly. In view of its tradition dating back to 1912, the opposition at the time also advocated the continuation of Domowina as a politically and ideologically independent, democratic organisation that held the Sorbian associations together.

Under this premise, Domowina was established in 1991 as a registered association with new statutes, committed to the preservation, development, promotion and dissemination of the language, culture and traditions of the Sorbian people. Both individuals and associations can become members of Domowina. In practice, the umbrella organisation is recognised by the state authorities as representing the interests of the Sorbs. Domowina's highest body is the general assembly, which is convened every two years; day-to-day work is decided by the federal executive committee, which is headed by a presidium. The managing directors in Bautzen and Cottbus are responsible for implementing decisions and supporting the associations. Domowina is divided into regional associations (Sorbian: *župa*), which have the same management levels (general meeting, executive committee) as the federal association. The first regional associations (Bautzen, Kamenz, Hoyerswerda and Niederlausitz) were formed in 1921. In the GDR, they corresponded to the district divisions: Bautzen (for a time, there was an independent association for the city of Bautzen), Kamenz, Weißwasser/Niesky, Hoyerswerda; in Lower Lusatia: Cottbus, Spremberg, Guben/Forst, Calau/Lübben; secondary school pupils and students formed the 'Jan Skala' university association. Today, there are five regional associations: 'Jan Arnošt Smoler' Bautzen, 'Michał Hórnik' Kamenz (based in Crostwitz), 'Handrij Zejler' Hoyerswerda, 'Jakub Lorenc-Zalěski' (based in Schleife), Lower Lusatia (based in Cottbus). A number of specific associations operate on a supra-regional basis. Following a decision by the general meeting in 2001, the Witaj Language Centre was affiliated to Domowina as an independent department. Its task is to support the intensive teaching of the Sorbian language in kindergartens and schools through projects and teaching materials.

The chairmanship of Domowina was honorary until 1951 and has been again since 1991; from 1952 to 1991 it was a full-time position, held from 1973 to 1990 by the first secretary of the federal executive committee. Chairmen: 1913 Arnošt Bart, 1927 Jakub Šewčik, 1930

Jan Křižan, 1933 Pawoł Nedo, 1951 Kurt Krjeńc, 1973 Jurij Grós, 1990 Bjarnat Cyž, 1991
Jan Pawoł Nagel, 1993 Jakub Brankačk, 2000 Jan Nuk, 2011 Dawid Statnik.

Lit.: R. Thiemann: Hoyerswerda, 13. Oktober 1912, Gründung der Domowina, B. 1987; F. Rajš: Stawizny Domowiny we słowje a wobrazu, B. 1987; S. Musiat: Sorbische/Wendische Vereine 1716–1937, B. 2001; E. Pech: Die Sorbenpolitik der DDR 1949–1970. Anspruch und Wirklichkeit, B. 1999; L. Elle: Die Domowina in der DDR, B. 2010.

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