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## REFLECTIONS ON THE INVOLVEMENT OF WOMEN IN THE DEMOCRATIC OPPOSITION IN THE LATE EAST GERMANY (1981-1989)

*“None of us felt particularly brave”.*  
Bärbel Bohley

The engagement of women in the democratic opposition movement in the Eastern Bloc countries is one of the themes in the discussion on the phenomenon of the bottom-up defiance of the communist system and its role in the final collapse of “real socialism”. In Poland, this problem has been analysed since the late 1990s, in both research<sup>1</sup> and printed publications<sup>2</sup>. Regarding the contributions at the junction of research and opinion journalism, their authors (in fact, female writers) attempt to highlight the role of women in the structures of the Polish opposition, analysing at the same time the reasons for the dominance of “the male narrative of events” in the literature.

In the context of the disputes over women’s involvement in the initiatives opposing the regime in late communist Poland, a question arises about the involvement of women in the organized opposition movements in other Eastern Bloc countries. The comparative analysis of this phenomenon is possible only to a limited extent. The fundamental problem is the inability to provide precise quantitative data, both in terms of the size of the groups and the involvement of women in them.<sup>3</sup> Another obstacle in the analysis is the relatively small number of memoirs written by women activists, who were typically unwilling to “emphasise” their role in the opposition movement.

The aforementioned gaps do not discourage the attempt to embark on at least a partial reflection on the female engagement in the democratic opposition in the

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Płeć buntu. Kobiety w opozycji społecznej i opozycji w Polsce w latach 1944-1989 na tle porównawczym*, ed. N. Jarska, J. Olszok, Warsaw 2014, p. 199 ff. The volume presents proceedings from the conference organised by the Institute of National Remembrance in Warsaw in April 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. E. Kondratowicz, *Szminka na sztandarze. Kobiety Solidarności 1980-1989. Rozmowy*, Warszawa 2001; *idem*, *Być jak narodowy sztandar. Kobiety i Solidarność*, Warsaw 2013; M. Dzido, *Kobiety Solidarności*, Warszawa 2016; A. Herbich, *Dziewczyny z Solidarności*, Krakow 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Even in the case of the “Solidarity” movement which was legal in 1980-1981, the statistics are incomplete.

1980s. It is within this context that the present paper, which is a discussion on the role of women in the opposition movement in the late East Germany (GDR), has been written. It is worth emphasising that this is an underresearched topic in Polish historiography both in the context of research on East German opposition groups and from the perspective of the comparison of female participation in opposition movements in the Eastern Bloc countries.<sup>4</sup> Even in Germany itself, the issue of women's role in the East German opposition is treated only selectively, most commonly in the form of questions about "the feminist awareness" of female activists. And yet the memories shared by the female participants of the events provide a much richer image of this phenomenon, and the range of the sources on female engagement is much broader than in the case of Poland.<sup>5</sup> While in Germany, too, there is a disproportion between memoirs written by male and female opposition activists, this imbalance is not so significant. There is a similar pattern with regard to reflections concerning the subsequent anniversaries of the fall of the Berlin Wall; on such occasions, the interviews, feature stories and documentaries are frequently narrated by women.<sup>6</sup>

The present paper does not aim to provide a comprehensive picture of the topic under investigation. In terms of source materials, it is based on diaries and journals written by key East German female oppositionists in the 1980s: Bärbel Bohley<sup>7</sup>, Marianne Birthler<sup>8</sup>, Freya Klier<sup>9</sup> and Vera Lengsfeld (then Wollenberg)<sup>10</sup>. Other important references include written reflections of eminent oppositionists in the GDR<sup>11</sup> and accounts published in the collection of memories shared by female activists from that group<sup>12</sup>. A valuable source material that has also been consulted is a monograph, co-authored by Katja Havemann, the widow of the 1970s oppositionist, Robert Havemann.<sup>13</sup> Important information has also been found in the volume documenting the activity of the Berlin-based "Peace Circle" from the Belin-Pankow district.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>4</sup> The above-cited volume *Pleć buntu*, which describes women's engagement in the opposition movements in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, does not contain references to the situation in the German Democratic Republic.

<sup>5</sup> More memories can be found in the diaries of Polish female oppositionists from the Workers' Defence Committee group; cf. *Romaszewscy. Autobiografia*, edited by P. Skwieciński, Warsaw 2014.

<sup>6</sup> An example of including women in narrating memories of the 1989 events is the 2009 TV documentary series *Das Jahr der Freiheit*. Its third part presents the circumstances surrounding the street protests in Leipzig and Berlin. The script was written by Guido Knopp.

<sup>7</sup> B. Bohley, *Englisches Tagebuch 1988*, ed. Irena Kukutz, Berlin 2011.

<sup>8</sup> M. Birthler, *Halbes Land, ganzes Land, ganzes Leben. Erinnerungen*, Munich 2015.

<sup>9</sup> F. Klier, *Abreiß-Kalender. Versuch eines Tagebuchs*, München 1988.

<sup>10</sup> V. Lengsfeld, *Von Nun an ging's bergauf .... Mein Weg zur Freiheit*, ed. 2, Munich 2007. Lengsfeld is the author's maiden name. She returned to it after divorcing from her second husband, Knud Wollenberg, when it was revealed that he had collaborated with the *Stasi*.

<sup>11</sup> *Eine Revolution und ihre Folgen. 14 Bürgerrechtler ziehen Bilanz*, ed. E. Jesse, Berlin 2001.

<sup>12</sup> *Mut. Frauen in der DDR*, ed. B. Bohley, G. Praschl, R. Rosenthal, Munich 2005.

<sup>13</sup> K. Havemann, J. Widmann, *Robert Havemann oder wie die DDR sich erledigte*, Munich 2003.

<sup>14</sup> *Ich wurde mutiger. Der Pankower Friedenskreis – politische Selbstbehauptung und öffentlicher Widerspruch. Interviews und Dokumente aus 20 Jahren*, ed. M. Subklew, M. Hoffmann, Berlin 2009.

The nature of this paper has had an impact on the restricted choice of the subject literature. While there are a number of monographs on the opposition movement in the GDR, they are not all necessarily relevant to the discussion of the role of women in dissident groups. Most of the publications available are synthetic works that show various trends of defiance against the regimes of Ulbricht and Honecker.<sup>15</sup> The only reference that directly concerns the subject matter of this paper is a monograph by German political scientist Ingrid Miethe, who described the activity of the female members of the Women for Peace (*Frauen für den Frieden*) group.<sup>16</sup> The merit of this work lies in the analysis of a relatively numerous group of people, including female grassroots opposition activists. Unfortunately, due to the small impact range of the group, the author's reflections address only some of the key issues.

The time frame of the present paper has been restricted to the years 1981-1989, i.e. to the period of the activity of the organised groups that opposed the East German reality. The first part of the text presents women's involvement in the mainstreams and key stages of the activity of this movement. The second part attempts to capture the nature of women's engagement in political defiance groups, and draws primarily on the memories of key women activists. Based on the source material, the following research problems have been identified:

- age, marital status, education, attitude to religion upon joining the opposition movement;
- reasons for joining the opposition;
- forms of opposition activity;
- problems resulting from the opposition activity;
- gender relations in the opposition groups.

The last part of the paper presents concisely the role of women opposition activists in the events accompanying the collapse of East Germany in 1989-1990. This section also provides some information about the lives of GDR's female oppositionists after German reunification.

The discussion of the key issues in this paper is preceded by a short description of the situation for women in East Germany. Special attention has been paid to the state policy of supporting women's professional activity and the government's promotion of the model of combining work and maternity. Given its subject matter, the paper also presents the most important features of the East German opposition movement in 1981-1989.

The source material compiled for the purposes of this paper has been analysed using a historical method.

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. E. Neubert, *Geschichte der Opposition in der DDR 1949-1989*, Bonn 1997; *Widerstand und Opposition in der DDR*, ed. K. D. Henke, P. Steinbach, J. Tuchel, Köln-Weimar 1999; D. Pollack, *Politischer Protest: Politisch alternative Gruppen in der DDR*, Opladen 2000. An extensive list of works devoted to the opposition movement in the GDR can be found in P. Zariczny, *Opozycja w NRD i PRL – wzajemne relacje i oceny*, Gdańsk 2013, p. 216 ff.

<sup>16</sup> I. Miethe, *Frauen in der DDR-Opposition. Lebens- und kollektivgeschichtliche Verläufe in einer Frauenfriedensgruppe*, Opladen 1999.

## THE SITUATION OF WOMEN IN THE GDR UNDER ERICH HONECKER'S REGIME

As in other countries of the Eastern Bloc, the situation of women in East Germany was defined by ideological slogans and economic needs of a country of "real socialism". Under Marxism-Leninism ideology, the position of an individual was dependent not on their background, nationality or gender, but on their role in society. Regarding the position of women, this meant – on the one hand – that all forms of discrimination (family law, access to education, jobs and public functions) had been eliminated, but – on the other hand – this resulted in the depreciation of the traditional image of a woman, who could fulfil herself only as a wife and mother.

In the reality of the communist system, support for emancipation resulted not only from ideological premises but also from economic problems. Struggling with the high costs of social policy and low work efficiency, the Eastern Bloc countries adopted the simplest form of increasing productivity, i.e. the promotion of women's work, also after getting married and giving birth. It needs to be stressed that these slogans were not followed by any broader changes resulting in women's broader access to political functions, either in the party or state apparatus.<sup>17</sup>

In the GDR, the aforementioned model was executed almost perfectly due to the orthodox views of the leaders of the *SED* (GDR's communist party) and the structural problems in East Germany (shortages of raw materials and workforce). Already under Walter Ulbricht's regime (1949-1971) women's professional development and girls' technical education received state support. After Erich Honecker came to power, funding for nurseries and kindergartens significantly increased. Facilitating measures were also introduced for mothers pursuing university education and single mothers.<sup>18</sup> The propaganda of "socialist gender equality" did not contribute to the significantly greater proportion of women in top political jobs, but the GDR could boast a few exceptions from this rule.<sup>19</sup>

## THE DEMOCRATIC OPPOSITION IN THE GDR IN 1981-1989

A common feature of the East German opposition in the 1980s was formal acceptance of the GDR's constitutional order. As in Poland and Czechoslovakia, the opposition groups appealed to universal human rights (predominantly to the Helsinki Accords)<sup>20</sup> and – in most cases – to the Christian system of values. The opposition

<sup>17</sup> It should be mentioned in passing that such careers in the communist regime were morally dubious.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. C. Wangerin, *Die DDR und ihre Töchter*, Berlin 2010, p. 82 ff.

<sup>19</sup> Spectacular political careers were made, for example, by Hilde Benjamin (Minister of Justice in 1953-1967), Margarethe Wittkowski (President of the East German National Bank in 1967-1974) and Margot Honecker (Minister of Education in 1963-1989).

<sup>20</sup> E. Neubert, *Der KSZE-Prozeß und die Bürgerrechtsbewegung in der DDR*, [in:] *Widerstand und Opposition...*, p. 295 ff.

movement was much smaller in numbers than in Poland but comparable in size to the Czechoslovakian opposition.<sup>21</sup> This state of affairs stemmed from a few reasons: the degree of surveillance by the security services, the brutality of repressions<sup>22</sup> and relatively small social support<sup>23</sup>. Another factor that hindered the opposition's activity was that GDR citizens were given opportunities to emigrate to West Germany (however, this entailed persecution). From 1988, the authorities even urged political contestants to leave the country. In the case of people who had been convicted of political offences or an attempted escape to the West (*Republikflucht*), the regime resorted to human trafficking, demanding money for the deportation to West Germany of defiant citizens.<sup>24</sup>

The core of the GDR's democratic opposition included representatives of the intelligentsia. In the late 1970s, the idea appeared to establish workers' circles in a similar fashion to the Polish Free Trade Unions; however, these plans never materialised.<sup>25</sup>

A defining feature of the GDR's opposition in 1981-1989 was its relations with the Evangelical Church. These connections were both direct (Evangelical, pacifist and environmental groups as well as pastoral work of individual ministers) and indirect (providing access to the Church's catechetical rooms or printing facilities and organising ecumenical services and prayer meetings). Worthy of mention is also the *Kirche von unten* (the Church from below) movement, which evolved in the 1980s. While it was not endorsed by Evangelical dignitaries, it was tolerated by the Church authorities.<sup>26</sup>

What also defined East German dissidents in 1981-1989 was that they were freely involved in various opposition groups. This stemmed from the convergence of ideas voiced by the three mainstreams of the opposition movement: the pacifists, the envi-

<sup>21</sup> From 1981 to 1989 about five thousand people were involved in the GDR's democratic opposition – *Eine Revolution...*, p. 266.

<sup>22</sup> *Mut...*, pp. 168-169. Critics of the communist government could be harassed due to special provisions of the GDR's Criminal Code, which were made more stringent in the late 1970s: Paragraph 106 (incitement to action against the state was punishable by up to eight years in prison) and Paragraph 220 (public insult of the state authorities was punishable by up to three years in prison). These paragraphs were colloquially referred to as "Gummiparagrafen" (literally 'made of rubber') since – due to their ambiguity – they could be applied to various offences (e.g. telling political jokes in public). From 1979, under the changed provisions of Paragraph 219, contacts with the western media were punishable (the so-called *lex Havemann*) – K. Havemann, J. Widmann, *op. cit.*, p. 283.

<sup>23</sup> The role of a safety valve in the GDR was served by West German television, which could be watched in almost every corner of East Germany. Under Honecker's regime, watching programs aired on ARD or ZDF networks was no longer subject to criminal sanctions.

<sup>24</sup> In 1962-1989 West Germany bought out more than 30 thousand people. The total cost of "ransom" (*Freikäufe*) paid for GDR citizens was over three billion West German marks – *Mut...*, p. 188.

<sup>25</sup> V. Lengsfeld, *op. cit.* p. 114. The author of the memoirs says that these circles were "so secret that no one had ever heard of them".

<sup>26</sup> In March 1978, the leaders of the East German Evangelical Church entered into an agreement with the state authorities. In return for the acceptance of the communist system, the Church was guaranteed the autonomy of "parish space". What this meant in practice was that the police could not interfere in the course of events and meetings held on the premises of churches – *ibidem*, p. 137.

ronmentalists and the human rights activists. The GDR's opposition groups also did not have any leadership structures and made decisions through compromise, which decreased the extent of personal competition and the likelihood of an internal power struggle.<sup>27</sup>

Until the autumn of 1989, the political defiance groups in the GDR avoided defining themselves as "opposition".<sup>28</sup> Such behaviour was dictated not only by tactical reasons but also by allegiance to the socialist system and fear of the consequences of the GDR's downfall. Also the opposition groups that were established in the autumn of 1989 (*Neues Forum*, *Demokratie Jetzt*, *Demokratischer Aufbruch*) did not aim to seize power, but strove only to force the democratisation of the East German state. As a result of this approach, members of the opposition movement were not instrumental in dismantling the GDR, making way for people who had previously not criticised the communist regime.

It needs to be emphasised that people who applied to leave East Germany in the 1980s were not considered to be members of the GDR democratic opposition. While such people sometimes suffered repression by the state authorities, their motives stood in contrast to the objectives set by opposition activists. The latter were primarily set on enforcing systemic reforms in East Germany, which is why they regarded such departures as a form of "desertion" of civic duty.<sup>29</sup>

#### WOMEN IN THE MAINSTREAMS OF THE EAST GERMAN OPPOSITION IN 1981-1989

Underlying the origins of the democratic opposition in the GDR in the 1980s was the issue of NATO's modernisation of medium-range missiles in response to the Soviet modernisation of its nuclear arsenal in Central Europe.<sup>30</sup> Unlike the participants of the demonstrations in West Germany, who protested against nuclear escalation in the NATO countries, the East German pacifists criticized the actions on both sides of the Iron Curtain.<sup>31</sup> By pushing forward the idea of the nuclear freeze by both military blocks, they also defied "the militarisation of life" in Eastern Germany, e.g. by promoting the National People's Army (*NVA*) in school curricula and the media. Regard-

<sup>27</sup> The opposition activists recall that there were some ideological differences between the groups with Christian background and the dissidents with communist roots; however, this problem was not an issue when the opposition groups intensified their activity in 1987-1989 – M. Birthler, *op. cit.*, pp. 116-117.

<sup>28</sup> Even the most uncompromising GDR dissidents shunned from using the term "opposition". Most of them defined themselves as civil rights activists (*Bürgerrechtler*).

<sup>29</sup> Cf. S. Wolle, *Flucht als Widerstand*, [in:] *Widerstand und Opposition...*, p. 309 ff.

<sup>30</sup> The reason for NATO's reaction was the deployment by the Warsaw Pact nations of a new generation of intermediate-range missiles, SS-20. The decision to modernise the *Bundeswehr* (in a way similar to the Soviets) made by Helmut Schmidt's *SPD/FDP* government sparked a wave of protests by opponents of nuclear weapons. The demonstrations accelerated the break-up of the government coalition and led to the collapse of the government. In 1983, the new coalition of the *CDU* and *FDP*, brought the modernisation program to ratification by the *Bundestag*.

<sup>31</sup> *Eine Revolution...*, p. 267.

ing women, the mobilising factor was the March 1982 amendment of the Military Service Act. Under its provisions, women could be included in general compulsory military service in the event of mobilisation.<sup>32</sup>

The pacifist groups, which began to be established in the autumn of 1981, were originally linked with the church circles. They were launched by young Evangelical pastors (males and females), who were just beginning their service. The activity of “Peace Circles” consisted in regular meetings held in church lecture rooms and in the participation in such events as: peaceful workshops, trips and tourist excursions (usually organised in the summer).<sup>33</sup> What defined this movement was not only its openness to people who had so far been indifferent to religious needs but also the family atmosphere of the groups, much to the credit of the women involved. The female activists were engaged in the work of those communities: they not only prepared meals, but also participated in discussions and came up with topic proposals for subsequent meetings.

The most extensively described church group was the already mentioned Peace Circle in Pankow – a district in eastern Berlin.<sup>34</sup> The group was established thanks to Ruth Misselwitz, a young female pastor who served as parson of the Alt-Pankow parish.<sup>35</sup> The community, which operated at varying levels of intensity until 1989, not only stimulated civic activity but it also fostered anti-regime attitudes among some of its members. The future well-known female oppositionists who were involved in the Peace Circle included Vera Lengsfeld, Freya Klier and Marianne Birthler.

The pacifist opposition groups were also established outside the church circles. Worthy of mention is the Women for Peace group (*Frauen für den Frieden, FfF*), which was established in 1982 and was designed to include only women. The group was originated by the painter Bärbel Bohley, who was supported by Katja Havemann, the widow of the opposition activist Robert Havemann, and Ulrike Poppe, the wife of the opposition activist Gerd Poppe. A letter of protest against the amendments to the Military Service Act, written by Bohley, was signed by about 30 people. In the following months, the group came to include approximately 500 female members. Originally, the *FfF* aimed to sensitise women to the issue of nuclear escalation in the West and East but then it also sought to promote women’s civic activity in East Germany. Katja Havemann later recalled that the group’s originators had been interested in the simplest form of activity, e.g. asking the regime’s representatives inconvenient questions.<sup>36</sup> Women for Peace operated not only in Berlin but also in several cities in the southern part of East Germany: Halle, Magdeburg, Leipzig, Dresden, Weimar, Eisenach and Erfurt.

<sup>32</sup> *Mut...*, p. 35.

<sup>33</sup> F. Klier, *op. cit.*, pp. 20-21.

<sup>34</sup> After 1945, Berlin-Pankow was known mainly for a peripherally located closed housing estate for GDR high officials.

<sup>35</sup> V. Lengsfeld, *op. cit.*, p. 136; F. Klier, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

<sup>36</sup> K. Havemann, J. Widmann, *op. cit.*, pp. 372-373.



Following Bohley and Poppe's arrest in December 1983, the *FfF* was not destroyed, largely thanks to the initiation of cooperation with the group centred around Berlin's Church of the Resurrection (*Auferstehungskirche*) and its pastor Christa Sengespeick. From May 1984, the church hosted regular women's "political prayers", which were preceded by a special sermon by Sengespeick.<sup>37</sup>

Most of the pacifist groups were dissolved after 1983 due to destructive activities by *Stasi* secret informants as well as the intimidation and harassment of the meeting's participants by the authorities.<sup>38</sup> Many grassroots members of the pacifist movement chose to emigrate, seeing no future for themselves or their children. On the other hand, it should be emphasised that these developments did not decrease the activity of the Church groups, predominantly the communities that described themselves as "the Church from below" (*Kirche von unten*). It was among the followers of this movement that an idea came up to hold Monday prayers (peace prayers) in Leipzig's St. Nicholas Church. In the autumn of 1989, those prayers would give rise to mass demonstrations in the streets of Leipzig.

Alongside the GDR's pacifist movement evolving from 1981, environmentalist groups were established. East German ecologists picked up on the points raised by the West German Green Party; however, they also highlighted issues related to the devastation of the environment in East Germany. Publicising the effects of air, soil and water pollution was regarded as a threat by the regime even though East German environmentalists formed a fragmented community that was unwilling to integrate (church activists, anarchists, punks, and others).<sup>39</sup> As the opposition activists recall, the environmental groups included many women in their ranks; however, their activity did not translate into authoring manifestos or leaflets.<sup>40</sup> The only exception was the radical pastor Angela Kunze.

Following a period of decreased defiance in 1984-1985, the autumn of 1985 saw a revival of opposition activity in the GDR. From the organisational and programmatic perspective, of great significance was the establishment of the Initiative for Peace and Human Rights (*Initiative für Frieden und Menschenrechte, IFM*). With regard to the founders of the group, a key role was played by Bärbel Bohley, who co-authored and signed the *IFM* declaration and hosted the group's inaugural meeting. The painter's flat in the then Berlin district of Prenzlauer Berg became the centre of opposition contacts while Bohley herself was responsible for contacts with western journalists.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>37</sup> *Mut...*, p. 49.

<sup>38</sup> The breakup of the pacifist groups in the second half of 1983 was related to the fiasco of protests in West Germany after *Bundestag's* ratification of the agreement on the modernisation of the *Bundeswehr's* nuclear arsenal.

<sup>39</sup> One of the environmentalists' meeting points was the Evangelical church *Zionskirche* in Berlin. The parish rooms of this church were home to *Umweltbibliothek* (the Environmental Library). Its originators edited a samizdat publication, „Umweltblätter”, which was printed on the church's duplicating machines.

<sup>40</sup> M. Birthler, *op. cit.*, p. 148.

<sup>41</sup> B. Bohley, *op. cit.*, p. 14.



What distinguished the Initiative for Peace and Human Rights from other movements in the GDR was that this group managed to combine pacifist ideas with the defence of human rights. The *IFM* consciously chose a semi-overt formula of activity (contacts with the western media), hoping that their actions would be tolerated by the East German regime, which was increasingly dependent financially on West Germany's support. The Initiative's members included both people with secular views (Bohley as well as the married couple Gerd and Ulrike Poppe) and opposition activists who were close to church circles (Katja Havemann and, from 1988, Birthler). Thanks to this cooperation, it was possible to organise meetings in parishes and to publish a periodical titled "Grenzfall".<sup>42</sup> In some ways, the *IFM* resembled the Polish Workers' Defence Committee opposition group; however, it was subjected to greater repression by the regime.

The Initiative for Peace and Human Rights survived until the fall of the Berlin Wall, but its existence was put under threat in the first weeks of 1988 after a wave of arrests in connection with an earlier secret police action. What triggered the so-called January events was an attempt by people wanting to leave the GDR (*Ausreisewillige*) to organise a counterdemonstration against the annual "peace march" to honour Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht.<sup>43</sup> While opposition activists were sceptical of prospective emigrants, some of them decided to join the counterdemonstration.<sup>44</sup> One of them was Vera Lengsfeld, who along with a friend (he later proved to be a *Stasi* secret informant), tried to spread a banner with Article 27 of the Constitution of East Germany about the citizens' right to the freedom of expression.<sup>45</sup> Like nearly 100 grassroots participants of the demonstration, she was arrested and then indicted.

The incidents of 16 January 1988 on the one hand triggered solidarity actions (quiet demonstrations in churches) by opposition followers; on the other hand, they led to further detentions by the *Stasi*. Under arrest were both members of the *IFM* (Bohley, Ralf Hirsch, and the married couple Wolfgang and Lotte Templin) as well as people who were not connected with this group (Freya Klier). They were all accused of either coordinating solidarity actions (members of the Initiative) or of contacts with West German journalists (Bohley and Klier).<sup>46</sup>

The paradox of the situation was that even though the opposition managed to have the grassroots participants of the incidents freed, their activists fell victim to the regime's foul play. Information about Lengsfeld's six-month prison sentence and the

<sup>42</sup> K. Havemann, J. Widmann, *op. cit.*, p. 384. Just like "Umweltblätter", the *IFM*'s periodical was printed on the duplicating machines owned by the *Zionskirche* parish.

<sup>43</sup> The official celebrations were held in connection with the execution of both revolutionaries by members of the right-wing *Freikorps* units in January 1919.

<sup>44</sup> M. Birthler, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

<sup>45</sup> V. Lengsfeld, *op. cit.*, p. 221ff. What is remembered is another slogan of the counterdemonstration, which is a quote by Rose Luxemburg: *Freedom is always the freedom of dissenters*. The idea to use these words came from Freya Klier's husband, Stephan Krawczyk, a dissident singer – F. Klier, *op. cit.*, p. 270 ff.

<sup>46</sup> Bohley contacted the media following earlier practices employed by the *IFM* members. Klier, in doing so, attempted to publicise her husband's arrest – F. Klier, *op. cit.*, p. 270 ff.

defence attorneys' pressure (as it turned out later they were *Stasi's* secret informants) made all detained opposition members decide to temporarily leave the country.<sup>47</sup> The regime made a concession by not stripping them of GDR citizenship and allowing them to return to their home country within 6-12 months. The list of people who headed for the West in early February 1988 included not only individuals who were detained after the 16 January incidents but also Vera Lengsfeld, who was directly involved in those events.<sup>48</sup>

Bohley's diary, written in exile, recorded the temporary crisis of the East German opposition movement. The activists and followers of the opposition groups who stayed in the GDR found it hard to understand the reasons for the decisions to emigrate.<sup>49</sup> The situation changed after some of the émigrés, including Bohley herself, returned to the GDR in August 1988. What reintegrated the opposition movement was the May 1989 municipal election in East Germany. Thanks to a well-coordinated monitoring of the polling stations, the opposition activists managed to prove that the regime had falsified the voting turnout data.<sup>50</sup> The idea of registering infringements of election law did not only activate the opposition groups but it also encouraged people who had not so far been in conflict with the regime. What characterised this stage of the opposition movement was that women began to play a much more prominent role in the process, building thus a sense of self-esteem as participants of the protest action against the regime's malpractices.<sup>51</sup>

The opposition did not inspire a wave of mass departures from the GDR in the summer and autumn of 1989. It contributed to the fall of the communist regime by attempting to provide a more distinctive organisational framework to the oppositional activity. The groups which emerged at the time, such as New Forum (*Neues Forum*), Democracy Now (*Demokratie Jetzt*) and Democratic Awakening (*Demokratischer Aufbruch*), were established by both members of the groups that had existed before and by people without any earlier affiliation.<sup>52</sup> The face of the opposition at the time was primarily Bohley, a co-founder of New Forum in September 1989, a co-author

<sup>47</sup> The main defence attorney for those under arrest was Wolfgang Schnur - V. Lengsfeld, *op. cit.*, p. 250.

<sup>48</sup> Besides Lengsfeld, among the opposition activists who left the GDR then were Bärbel Bohley and her partner, dissident Werner Fischer, Freya Klier and Stephan Krawczyk, Ralf Hirsch and the married couple Wolfgang and Lotte Templin. The dissidents who stayed in East Germany included Katja Havemann and the married couple Gerd and Ulrike Poppe, who were not arrested in January 1988.

<sup>49</sup> B. Bohley, *op. cit.*, pp. 37-39, 49. Many young followers of the opposition movement had a hard time accepting the departure of Krawczyk, who in the 1980s was a popular dissident bard in the GDR - *Mut...*, p. 203.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 213-214.

<sup>51</sup> The atmosphere surrounding the action of registering the turnout data is well reflected in Uwe Tellkamp's novel *The Tower (Der Turm)*, which was later adapted for the screen by Christian Schwochow.

<sup>52</sup> *Demokratie Jetzt's* founding proclamation was published on 12 September 1989. Its prominent members were Konrad Weiß, Wolfgang Ullmann and Ulrike Poppe. *Demokratischer Aufbruch* was established at a meeting in Erfurt on 28-29 September 1989. Its founders included many Evangelical theologians, such as Rainer Eppelmann and Erhart Neubert. At the end of October 1989, the group came to be headed by Wolfgang Schnur, who several months later was exposed as a *Stasi* informant.

of its proclamation and its spokesperson.<sup>53</sup> She endorsed the idea of reaching out to various opposition groups. This approach had both advantages and disadvantages: on the one hand, the group operated on a countrywide basis, but – on the other hand – its members had relatively low public profiles.<sup>54</sup>

An essential role in the Berlin events of November 1989 was played by those female opposition activists who happened to be in Berlin at the time (Bohley, Birthler and Poppe).<sup>55</sup> Vera Lengsfeld came back to the GDR on 9 November 1989 and her return only coincided with the fall of the Berlin Wall.<sup>56</sup> In the autumn of 1989, Freya Klier was staying in West Berlin and it was only after the incidents that occurred on the night of 10 November that she returned to her home country.

Key to the final collapse of the *SED* regime were Monday demonstrations (*Montagsdemos*) staged by members of the community centred around the parish of St. Nicholas Church in Leipzig. The group had been active in previous years but the breakthrough did not come until 4 September 1989 when, after the church service, it organised a demonstration that triggered a wave of protests in the city. One of its participants and a member of the community, Gesine Oltmanns, became a media symbol of the event as a camera team from West Germany captured the moment of *Stasi* officers snatching a banner from her hands.<sup>57</sup>

The communist regime in East Germany collapsed as a result of financial bankruptcy, social protests and lack of Soviet support. The leaders of the opposition groups played a minor role in the process: they were not initiators but mere participants of the events that occurred in the autumn of 1989. However, the opposition's contribution was appreciated by including its representatives in the Central Round Table (*Zentraler Runder Tisch*) talks convened in Berlin. The negotiations, which were held from 7 December 1989 until 12 March 1990, were attended by 33 participants, 17 of whom represented the opposition. The latter number included six women, but only one of them was known for her previous opposition activity (Ulrike Poppe from *Demokratie Jetzt*).<sup>58</sup> It needs to be emphasised that this situation did not result from discrimination but from conscious decisions made by the women activists themselves, especially

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<sup>53</sup> K. Havemann, J. Widmann, *op. cit.*, p. 418ff. The group, established in Katja Havemann's house on 9/10 September 1989, was the first opposition movement formed in the autumn of that year.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 417; M. Birthler, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

<sup>55</sup> The three opposition activists spoke at rallies in centre of Berlin in the first ten days of November 1989.

<sup>56</sup> V. Lengsfeld, *op. cit.*, s. 303.

<sup>57</sup> *Mut...*, pp. 217-218. Western TV reporters were allowed to work only in Berlin. The only exception to this rule was the annual fair in Leipzig.

<sup>58</sup> [www.ddr-wissen.de/wiki/ddr:plZentraler\\_Runder-Tisch](http://www.ddr-wissen.de/wiki/ddr:plZentraler_Runder-Tisch). Besides Ulrike Poppe, the following women represented the opposition side: Ingrid Köppe (*Neues Forum*), Marianne Dörfler (the Green Party in the GDR), Annette Seese (the United Left) as well as Ina Merkel and Walfriede Schmidt (the Independent Women's Union). Besides the *Neues Forum* and *Demokratie Jetzt* delegates, the remaining women represented groups that emerged only after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The Green Party was founded by environmental activists, the United Left – by communist dissidents (not to be confused with the *PDS*), and the Women's Union – by feminists.

Bohley. She did not seek to be invited to the negotiations, making way for other, less known female colleagues.<sup>59</sup> The need for a balanced gender representation on the opposition side is reflected by the fact that each group delegated at least one woman to the talks.<sup>60</sup> This was a considerable novelty on the political map of East Germany, a country which claimed to be promoting the idea of gender equality but which in fact had kept women away from having real political influence.<sup>61</sup>

FEMALE LEADERS OF THE GDR DEMOCRATIC OPPOSITION IN 1981-1989:  
ANALYSIS OF ROOTS, MOTIVES AND ATTITUDES

Most of the female leaders of the 1980s opposition groups were born in the first decade after the end of World War II (Bohley in 1945, Havemann in 1947, Birthler in 1948, Klier in 1950, Lengsfeld in 1952, Poppe in 1953).<sup>62</sup> They were more or less the same age as their male colleagues.<sup>63</sup>

Regarding the marital status of the top women activists, in the early 1980s, most of them were divorced (like Bohley<sup>64</sup>, Birthler<sup>65</sup> and Klier) or widowed (like Katja Havemann). In the first half of the 1980s, two women were married: Lengsfeld (her second marriage)<sup>66</sup> and Poppe; Klier remarried in 1986. With the exception of Lengsfeld's husband, all of these women's partners were members of the opposition. Katja Havemann (née Grafe) was the widow of the communist dissident Robert Havemann.<sup>67</sup> Bohley's partner was the oppositionist Werner

<sup>59</sup> A greater number of well-known women oppositionists were involved in the working groups, e.g., Marianne Birthler (the committee for education and youth) and Vera Lengsfeld (the constitutional committee).

<sup>60</sup> New Forum had three delegates while each of the other organizations two.

<sup>61</sup> Among the 16 people in the government delegation (this group also included delegates of the church authorities in the GDR) there was only one woman: Marion Valsmann. She represented the East German *CDU* party.

<sup>62</sup> It should be assumed that most of the grassroots female opposition activists were born a decade earlier, i.e. in the years 1935-1945. Such a conclusion can at least be drawn from the partial research by Ingrid Miethe, who studied the biographies of the Women for Peace group – I. Miethe, *op. cit.*, p. 281.

<sup>63</sup> Several of the male opposition activists were born during World War II, including Gerd Poppe (1941), Joachim Gauck (1940), Rainer Eppelmann (1943) and Christian Führer (1943). The last three were oppositional pastors.

<sup>64</sup> The first husband of Bärbel Bohley, née Brosius, was the painter Dieter Bohley. The oppositionist remarried after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

<sup>65</sup> The husband of Marianne Birthler, née Radtke, was the veterinarian Wolfgang Birthler. The marriage collapsed in the early 1980s.

<sup>66</sup> Vera Lengsfeld's first husband was Sebastian Kleinschmidt, a fellow university student, then a journalist. The couple, who had a son, Philip (Vera's oldest child), split up in the early 1970s. From 1980, Lengsfeld was married to Knud Wollenberger, an East German poet, whose mother was Danish while his father was an anti-Nazi exile from the Third Reich.

<sup>67</sup> Robert Havemann was the best-known East German oppositionist in the first decade of the Honecker regime. From November 1976 until May 1979, he was under house arrest. He died of cancer in April 1982.

Fischer.<sup>68</sup> Klier's husband was the dissident bard Stephan Krawczyk while Ulrike Poppe was married to the oppositional activist Gerd Poppe. It is worth noting that, except for Ulrike Poppe, all female opposition leaders were involved with men who were either the same age or even younger (both Bohley and Klier were their partners' seniors by five years).

All of the top women activists had children: Birthler and Lengsfeld – three, Poppe – two while Klier and Havemann had one each. Most of these children were born in the first half of the 1970s so they were in their teens when their mothers became engaged in opposition activity. With regard to maternal care, Lengsfeld was in a tougher situation as she had her second and third child from her second marriage; likewise Poppe gave birth in the early 1980s.

All of the female opposition leaders studied at university, but only the younger ones entered university straight after secondary school (Klier, Lengsfeld and Poppe). The others pursued university education only after starting jobs. Some of them studied part-time (Bohley, Havemann and Birthler) or also continued their education after starting families (Bohley, Klier, Lengsfeld and Birthler). All of these women earned their university degrees in the humanities<sup>69</sup>: Bohley was a painter, Klier – an actress and theatre director, Lengsfeld – a philosopher and a theologian, Birthler – a religious education teacher and an Evangelical social worker while Havemann and Poppe were pedagogues.<sup>70</sup>

As the women leaders frequently recalled, they felt satisfied with the work experience they had gained at a young age. This attitude was most prominently shown by Bohley, who emphasised the advantages of becoming financially independent after graduating from secondary school.<sup>71</sup> As they were getting involved in the opposition movement, these women were fully developed individuals, both in terms of age, family situation and professional independence.

Some of the well-known female opposition activists had a religious commitment, which resulted not so much from the atmosphere of their homes but from their conscious choice (Birthler, Klier and Lengsfeld).<sup>72</sup> Bohley and Havemann were not prac-

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<sup>68</sup> Bohley's relationship with Fischer broke up while they were both in exile in 1988. Later on, Fischer was Marianne Birthler's life partner.

<sup>69</sup> Many of the male opposition leaders had an educational background in science (e.g. Robert Havemann, Gerd Poppe and Jens Reich). Wolfgang Templin was a philosopher whereas Rainer Eppelmann was a theologian.

<sup>70</sup> Ulrike Poppe interrupted her university education after she unsuccessfully applied to be transferred to social psychology. From the mid-1970s she worked as a curator in Berlin's Museum of German History.

<sup>71</sup> *Mut...*, p. 22. After secondary school leaving exams, Bohley got a job as a supplier in industry while Birthler became a merchandiser. Klier and Lengsfeld gained vocational education as a result of curriculum changes in GDR secondary schools. In the latter half of the 1960s, in order to receive a secondary school diploma, students needed first to obtain professional qualifications. Klier qualified as a metal cutter whereas Lengsfeld was a certified cook.

<sup>72</sup> When at school, Birthler was an active member of a community of young Evangelicals (*Junge Gemeinde*). As an adult, she attended church services and was involved in the life of her parish. Klier and Lengsfeld were members of the Pankow Peace Circle.

ting individuals, but maintained close contacts with the dissident Evangelical clergy. Poppe had a secular worldview.

The analysis of the reasons why these women joined the opposition movement shows a few regularities. Some of them were raised in families with a distanced approach towards the communist reality (Bohley, Birthler and Klier).<sup>73</sup> As for Birthler, it was her mother who provided a positive role model. A widow with two children, she ran a private shop in Berlin after her husband's death.<sup>74</sup> Family background also had an impact on Lengsfeld, albeit in a totally different way: her father was a *Stasi* officer and she chose to defy her parents' values.<sup>75</sup> None of the female opposition leaders mentioned the need to break away from the Nazi legacy of her families as a reason for their activity.<sup>76</sup>

Some of the women made their life choices because their brothers were sentenced to prison for political reasons (Bohley and Klier).<sup>77</sup> It is worth emphasising that even if the female activists' families were critical of the communist regime, this did not have a direct impact on these women's choice to become part of the opposition. Their parents raised them in the spirit of "adjustment" to East German reality while the women initially accepted the communist system. Some of them (Klier and Lengsfeld) belonged to the communist party but were expelled due to their unorthodox views and engagement in anti-regime activity.<sup>78</sup>

Just like the male opposition leaders, none of the top female activists became involved on impulse. For Bohley, a key factor was her contact with Robert Havemann's group and friendship with his wife Katja.<sup>79</sup> Birthler, in turn, was involved with the Evangelical opposition movement in the Berlin district of Prenzlauer Berg.<sup>80</sup> Klier's engagement in the opposition resulted from her own problems with censorship and her support of Stephan Krawczyk's performances, which were banned by the regime. Havemann and Poppe joined the opposition being immersed in their husbands' milieus. The most convoluted path was followed by Lengsfeld, who first rebelled after

<sup>73</sup> In the 1950s, Bohley's father was dismissed as a teacher for his refusal to join the *SED*. Klier's father spent a year in prison for beating a policeman – *Mut...*, p. 20 ff.; F. Klier, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>74</sup> M. Birthler, *op. cit.*, pp. 52-53.

<sup>75</sup> Among the opposition activists, there were some other daughters of *Stasi* workers, including a friend of Bohley's, Irena Kukutz.

<sup>76</sup> The theme of expiation can be found in the narratives of opposition activists born in 1935-1945. According to Ingrid Miethe's findings, these women said that they had become involved to avoid being criticised by their children in the future. The female dissidents argued that they were themselves critical of how their families had behaved under the Nazi regime – I. Miethe, *op. cit.*, p. 236 ff.

<sup>77</sup> In 1970, Bohley's brother was sentenced to two years in prison whereas Klier's brother was sent to prison with a four-year sentence. In both cases, these sentences ruined their health (Klier's brother committed suicide) – *Mut...*, p. 25; F. Klier, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>78</sup> The male opposition leaders had very similar background. In the 1970s, the key role in this group was played by communist dissidents (Wolf Biermann, Robert Havemann and Rudolf Bahro). As regards the 1980s opposition, there was greater variety but even then some of the activists had a communist past and were former members of the *SED* (Wolfgang Templin and Stephan Krawczyk).

<sup>79</sup> *Mut...*, p. 29.

<sup>80</sup> M. Birthler, *op. cit.*, p. 116 ff.



she had been beaten by her father, a *Stasi* officer. He reacted this way because his teenage daughter had been dating the son of the Yugoslavian trade attaché.<sup>81</sup> Lengsfeld broke with her family not due to a one-off decision but as a result of her student contacts, her own reflections and evolution of her views.<sup>82</sup>

For some of the women activists their political mentors were their husbands or partners (Havemann and Poppe). These women recall that they sought “emancipation”, understood not in terms of feminist “liberation” but as the desire to start their own opposition activity. The issue of a patronising attitude to women was raised by those activists who studied at the University of Berlin in the 1970s and had contacts with the dissident groups there (Lengsfeld and Poppe). The male members of this community often posed as “conspirators” and ignored female fellow students as they tried to get involved in discussions.<sup>83</sup>

The analysis of the relationships among opposition activists shows that women were “pushed to the background” in the early days of the GDR dissident movement. This issue was explicitly raised by some of the members of the Women for Peace community (Havemann and Poppe). After 1989, they said they had been sick and tired of “standing in the back” or “being reduced to the role of sandwich makers in the kitchen”. However, in their view, the feminine nature of the *FfF* was not discriminatory in any way. The founders of the group predominantly aimed to reduce the competition between men, which sometimes occurred in the opposition movement.<sup>84</sup> The authors of the memoirs stressed, however, that even in the early stages of their opposition activity they had never felt “oppressed” or that they had lost control of their lives.<sup>85</sup>

Restricting the Women for Peace community to just one gender was also tactically motivated. The founders of the initiative hoped that at least in its early stages a women-only group would be less likely to face reprisals from the *Stasi*. Bohley, who had played a key role in the establishment of the *FfF* emphasised later that none of the other female members had felt “particularly brave”. “We wanted to be ‘cunning’ and ‘shrewd like snakes’”, she said.<sup>86</sup>

The life situation of the *FfF* members had an impact on the way the group worked. As a rule, members of the community could not be assigned tasks which they would be unable to carry out. Each of the activists was supposed to decide for herself what risk she was ready to take and did not have to be afraid that her approach might be criticised by the other members.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> R. Hoffmann, *Stasi-Kinder. Aufwachsen im Überwachungsstaat*, Berlin 2012, pp. 181-184. Vera originally did not break up with the Yugoslavian even though her father strictly forbade her to date him. Her teen love faded away as she left for university in Leipzig.

<sup>82</sup> V. Lengsfeld, *op. cit.*, p. 68 ff. Lengsfeld belonged to the *SED* until 1983 but her membership was of a purely formal nature. According to her memoirs, she did not want to give the party control officials the upper hand and wanted to be officially expelled from the *SED*.

<sup>83</sup> *Eine Revolution...*, p. 212; V. Lengsfeld, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

<sup>84</sup> K. Havemann, J. Widmann, *op. cit.*, pp. 360-361.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 364 ff.

<sup>86</sup> *Mut...*, p. 59.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibidem*.



Throughout the 1980s, an essential role in the promotion of women's oppositional activity was played by female pastors, such as Ruth Misselwitz of the Alt-Pankow parish or Christa Sengespeick of Berlin's Church of Resurrection. Members of the community established by Misselwitz later recalled that in their group, as a rule, they had spoken alternately to prevent discussions from being dominated by men, who "liked to talk a lot".<sup>88</sup>

Women's forms of oppositional activity did not markedly differ from men's. What made it gender-specific was the rationale behind women's involvement in the dissident movement. Bärbel Bohley spoke of herself that she was drawn to the opposition by "human" rather than "political" reasons.<sup>89</sup>

The awareness of the advantages of working with women was emphasised primarily by the members of Women for Peace. One of the group's activists recalled that thanks to the contacts with the community she had learned not to perceive women solely in terms of competition for men. That same woman also stressed that her engagement in the initiative had taught her to think independently.<sup>90</sup>

In their memories, most of the female opposition leaders mention the friendships they struck up at the time. They became close to each other not only because of a similar personal situation (running a home or maternity problems) but also as a result of shared interests or similar characters.<sup>91</sup> That did not mean that there were no differences between the oppositionists. Klier was a person who lived on her own terms being focused on her own and her husband's alternative artistic careers. However, she could also count on the support of her fellow oppositionists, who took care of her daughter when Klier was detained by the *Stasi*.<sup>92</sup>

A sense of gender solidarity was not always unconditional. For grassroots oppositionists, a good case in point was sabotage undertaken by women who were undercover *Stasi* officers, attending the Pankow Peace Circle meetings and disrupting the proceedings by putting forth formal motions or asking questions.<sup>93</sup> For the female opposition leaders particularly upsetting was the case of Monika Haeger, a secret informant of the security service, who infiltrated the Women for Peace group.<sup>94</sup>

One of the feminine aspects of the women's oppositional activity was concern about their children's future. Under East German conditions, defiance was not solely restricted to raising children in the spirit of disputing the official ideology (refusal to join the *FDJ* or engagement in the Evangelical youth community *Junge Gemeinde*). Such decisions as not sending a child to a nursery and women's staying at home were perceived in East Germany as disapproval of the communist model of maternity. The

<sup>88</sup> *Ich wurde mutiger...*, p. 128.

<sup>89</sup> B. Bohley, *op. cit.*, pp. 52-53.

<sup>90</sup> I. Miethe, *op. cit.*, pp. 154-155.

<sup>91</sup> Bohley's friendship with Katja Havemann and Ulrika Poppe is a good case in point.

<sup>92</sup> F. Klier, *op. cit.*, p. 280.

<sup>93</sup> F. Klier, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

<sup>94</sup> V. Lengsfeld, *op. cit.*, pp. 164-165. More on this topic in: I. Kukutz, K. Havemann, *Geschützte Quelle. Gespräche mit Monika H. alias Karin Lenz*, Berlin 1990.

analysis of accounts by oppositionists shows that this was how many of the female dissidents demonstrated their opposition to the GDR model of emancipation.<sup>95</sup> A noteworthy historical fact was the initiative of Ulrike Poppe, who in 1980 established an informal alternative kindergarten in a Prenzlauer Berg flat.<sup>96</sup> At least two other top women activists, Marianne Birthler and Freya Klier, were involved in supporting the non-official model of children's education.<sup>97</sup>

An important factor related to the women's involvement in the opposition movement was their fear about their children's future should they be detained by the *Stasi*. That fear resulted from the nature of the family law in East Germany. Under its provisions, parents could be deprived of parental rights if they raised their children in a manner which was not compliant with the systemic guidelines of the GDR. Such actions were taken most frequently against single mothers<sup>98</sup>, but in case both parents were arrested, their children were also at risk.

The threat of losing parental rights predominantly concerned divorced oppositionists or those whose husbands/partners were involved in the opposition movement. In late 1987 and early 1988, when the regime's repression intensified, those women granted notarised powers of attorney to trusted individuals, awarding them temporary custody of their children. That solution was not perfect because the women's representatives were also put at risk of repression.<sup>99</sup> It should be emphasised that it was the fear for their children that led the female opposition leaders to leave East Germany in February 1988.<sup>100</sup>

Another aspect of women's involvement in the opposition movement was the impact of gender relations in decision-making. In their memoirs, the top female dissidents do not make serious accusations with regard to restricting their influence on the programme and initiatives of the opposition groups. Some of the activists go even a step further, emphasising the support that they received from their life partners (Krawczyk in the case of Klier and Fischer in the case of Birthler) in that period.<sup>101</sup> In

<sup>95</sup> *Mut...*, pp. 152-153; M. Birthler, *op. cit.*, pp. 70-74, 79-80, 82 ff.

<sup>96</sup> *Mut...*, pp. 139, 154. The kindergarten operated until Poppe's arrest in December 1983 and was attended by eight children from families that were friends with each other. The group's teacher also came from the circle of the Poppes' friends.

<sup>97</sup> In 1990, Klier published a book about the East German education system. The monograph was inspired by illegal lectures given by the author in the latter half of the 1980s and was based on her interviews with secondary school students in East Germany; cf. F. Klier, *Lüg Vaterland. Erziehung in der DDR*, Munich 1990.

<sup>98</sup> Cases were reported of over 800 women who had lost parental rights in absentia and their children had been placed for adoption under changed names. More on this topic in: K. Behr, *Rozdzielone. Dzień, w którym NRD zabrała mi matkę*, Warsaw 2012.

<sup>99</sup> F. Klier, *op. cit.*, p. 230.

<sup>100</sup> All of the oppositionists who had been persuaded to emigrate in February 1988 left the GDR with their children. It was only Vera Lengsfeld's oldest son who chose to stay in East Germany in view of the upcoming secondary school final exams. He was at smaller risk of reprisals because his biological father was not involved in the opposition movement.

<sup>101</sup> F. Klier, *op. cit.*, p. 107; M. Birthler, *op. cit.*, p. 171ff.

Birthler's view, the good atmosphere in the opposition movement partially resulted from the similar life situation of both genders: the lack of prospects for career advancement and real power.<sup>102</sup>

In their diaries, nearly all of the female opposition leaders emphasise their distance towards the GDR model of emancipation.<sup>103</sup> Some of them even expressed their annoyance with the naïve admiration voiced by western left-wing groups for the quality of women's life under real socialism.<sup>104</sup> The only exception was Petra Kelly, a leader of the West German Green Party, who maintained close contacts with the East German opposition movement and befriended Bohley.<sup>105</sup>

Feminist themes (sexism and gender struggle) are mentioned only occasionally, in the context of contact with the reality of life in the West.<sup>106</sup> After the fall of the Berlin Wall, none of the women oppositionists joined the new feminist groups, e.g. the Independent Women's Association (*Unabhängiger Frauenverband, UFV*). The activity of this party could almost have cost Vera Lengsfeld a seat in the March 1990 election to East Germany's last People's Chamber (*Volkskammer*). As a candidate of the GDR Green Party she was requested to give up her seat to a representative of the Women's Association, which was in a coalition with *Die Grünen*. Lengsfeld's argument that, like an *UFV* candidate, she was also a woman proved unconvincing to the initiators of East German feminism.

#### THE ROLE OF LEADING FEMALE OPPOSITION ACTIVISTS IN THE POLITICAL LIFE OF THE REUNIFIED GERMANY

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the most recognisable female opposition leader was Marianne Birthler. In 1990, she was elected a *Bündnis 90* deputy to the GDR's last People's Chamber and then (from October to December 1990) a deputy to the unified *Bundestag* representing the *Bündnis 90/Die Grünen* bloc. From October 1990, she was a member of the state parliament of Brandenburg, and later – in 1990-1992 – she served as Minister for Education, Youth and Sport in the state government of Brandenburg. In October 1992, she resigned from the government in protest over the vague past of Minister-President of Brandenburg Manfred Stolpe.

In 1998, Birthler was again elected a *Bündnis 90/Die Grünen* deputy to the *Bundestag*. In September 2000, she was appointed Federal Commissioner for the *Stasi* Records (also by the opposition *CDU* and *FDP* parties) replacing Joachim Gauck, whose second term had come to an end. In this position, she did not succumb to the

<sup>102</sup> M. Birthler, *op. cit.*, pp. 119-120.

<sup>103</sup> Por. F. Klier, *op. cit.*, p. 26; B. Bohley, *op. cit.*, pp. 91-92.

<sup>104</sup> F. Klier, *op. cit.*, pp. 257-259.

<sup>105</sup> B. Bohley, *op. cit.*, pp. 36-37, 45, 62-64.

<sup>106</sup> That problem was mentioned in Bohley's emigration diary. Her approval for the feminist initiatives resulted from her conviction that men focus on what "needed to be done" [in the past] whereas women prefer to think about what "needs to be done" [in the future] – *ibidem*, pp. 104-105.

pressure to close access to Helmut Kohl's files. She also promoted greater involvement of the agency's education section.

In view of the early election to the *Bundestag* scheduled for the autumn of 2005, the *SPD/Greens* ruling coalition proposed that Birthler stand as a candidate for head of the agency again before the termination of the parliament's term. She declined the offer, running for the post only after the election of the new *Bundestag*. Even though she was officially supported by the opposition, she received the votes of all parties except for the *PDS*. Birthler served as commissioner until 2010. She is now retired.

In March 1990, Vera Lengsfeld was elected to the GDR's last People's Chamber and then went on to become a *Bündnis 90/Die Grünen* deputy to the *Bundestag* (1990-1998). In 1996, she changed party colours by joining the *CDU*. As the only former top female oppositionist she had to come to terms with the fact that one of her nearest and dearest proved to be a *Stasi* informant. That man was her husband, Knud Wollenberger.<sup>107</sup> Despite her own trauma, she continued to support the opening of the East German secret police files.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, Bärbel Bohley did not aspire to any political role. Despite her friendly contacts with the *Bündnis 90/Die Grünen* party, in election campaigns she supported not only the members of this political group but also *FDP* candidates. In the first half of the 1990s, she co-founded and worked for the Citizens' Registration Office, providing counsel and help to the victims of communism in East Germany.

In 1996, Bohley became a *Bundestag* envoy for humanitarian affairs in Bosnia and Herzegovina. On behalf of the UN, in 1996-1999, she was in charge of a project to rebuild the country. She married again, to Dragan Lukič, who came from Bosnia, and settled down for a few years in Split. In 2008, after being diagnosed with cancer, she returned to her Berlin flat in Prenzlauer Berg. She died of cancer in 2010.

After the downfall of the GDR, Ulrike Poppe consciously withdrew from politics as she wanted to devote more time to her growing children. In 1992-2010 she was head of the study programmes in political science and modern history at the Evangelical Theological Seminary Berlin-Brandenburg. In 2000, she declined the offer to run for Federal Commissioner for the *Stasi* Records as she did not want to compete with Marianne Birthler. Ten years later, she became Brandenburg's first commissioner for overcoming the effects of communist dictatorship.

In December 1990, Freya Klier was a *Greens* candidate to the *Bundestag* but since the party failed to make the 5% threshold, she was not elected as a deputy. In the 1990s, she became an independent writer and columnist. She wrote monographs describing not only the GDR's educational system but also the lives of women, the victims of Nazi medical experiments and Soviet labour camps.

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<sup>107</sup> Knud Wollenberger signed a collaboration contract with the *Stasi* in 1983, two years after he married Lengsfeld. He later attributed his decision to "ideological reasons" – V. Lengsfeld, *op. cit.*, p. 358.

After 1989, Katja Havemann did not have any political aspirations. She co-authored books about the opposition; she also fought for the exoneration of her husband, who in June 1979 had been convicted of alleged foreign exchange crimes.<sup>108</sup>

Just like most of the male opposition leaders, after 1989, all prominent female activists were critical of the mild approach to the GDR's communist past. Some of the oppositionists (Bohley, Havemann and Klier) tried to challenge the credibility of the regime's beneficiaries (the case of Gregor Gysi) through legal channels. Those attempts were unsuccessful because some of the files documenting the work of *Stasi*'s secret informants had been destroyed.

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The analysis of women's engagement in the GDR's democratic opposition shows that female activists played an essential role in this movement, both as leaders and as grassroots members. This stemmed from two factors: first, the lack of formal management in the opposition movement and, second, democratic decision-making. Partnership relations particularly existed in the Initiative for Peace and Human Rights group (*IFM*). Its female activists were engaged in defining the *IFM*'s programme, objectives and tactics and their names were featured in the group's documentation.

Both genders had an equal say in some of the church communities, which can be attributed to the Evangelical tradition of involving women in initiatives that serve the public good. A unique and solely feminine character defined the Women for Peace group, which operated in several large East German cities and was open to people with various worldviews.

The analysis of top female oppositionists' biographies does not indicate any gender-specific reasons for joining the opposition, taking into account their age, marital status, education or worldview. The strength of those women lay primarily in their life and professional experience when they became involved. That experience was key to reducing "feminine" shyness, which characterised some of the grassroots female oppositionists. Even though all of the female leaders were opposed to the GDR model of emancipation, it had a positive impact on their later roles in the opposition movement. With no inferiority complexes towards their male colleagues, those women declared at the same time their feminine distinctiveness, e.g. through private contacts and female friendships.

With regard to gender, the only distinctive feature of women's oppositional activity was the issue of maternity, which was strongly emphasised both in the context of educational problems and fear of losing children as a result of the regime's repression.

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<sup>108</sup> The trial was based on *Stasi*-supplied "evidence" found in Havemann's house, i.e. West German marks. Even though the oppositionist never accepted royalties for texts smuggled to West Germany, he was charged with the possession of a large amount of foreign currency. After blatant legal irregularities (Havemann could not be defended by his own lawyer), Katja's husband was punished with a fine. After 1989, he was completely exonerated.

The female dissident leaders had successful careers in the public life of the reunified Germany not only because they contributed to the fall of communism. Central to their success was also the congruence of the opposition movement, which, after 1989, enabled mutual support despite different worldviews. What linked the GDR opposition after the fall of the Berlin Wall was its shared approach to the East German legacy. That solidarity concerned not only the opening of the *Stasi* files but also the postulate to settle accounts with the beneficiaries of the communist system.

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**Keywords:** democratic opposition in East Germany, women in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), women in the democratic opposition in the Eastern Bloc

#### ABSTRACT

*The present paper discusses the engagement of women in various groups of the democratic opposition in East Germany in the years 1981-1989. It is based on the diaries and memoirs by and interviews with the female oppositionists in the German Democratic Republic (GDR): Bärbel Bohley, Marianne Birthler, Freya Klier, Vera Lengsfeld (Wollenberger), Ulrike Poppe and Katja Havemann. Reference is also made to accounts by grassroots members of the opposition movement.*

*The first part of the paper analyses the women's activity in different groups of the East German opposition: pacifist, environmental and the civil rights movement. The text discusses women's engagement in the Berlin demonstrations of January 1988, in monitoring the May 1988 municipal election in the GDR, and in the democratic protest actions in the autumn of 1989. This section of the paper also focuses on the involvement of the female opposition leaders in the Central Round Table talks in late 1989 and early 1990.*

*The second part of the contribution analyses various aspects of women's engagement in the East German democratic opposition. These aspects include age, marital status, education, the worldview upon joining the opposition movement and the reasons for becoming involved in it. This section also centres on gender-specific aspects of the oppositional activity, for example: women's interest in the problems of the educational system in the GDR, fear about their children's fate in case of being arrested, and gender relations in the opposition groups.*

*The final section of the paper discusses the public careers of the GDR's female opposition leaders after the German reunification.*

