

Sorbian Members of the People's Chamber in the GDR (1949–1990)

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The activities of Sorbian deputies in the People's Chamber, the highest legislative body in the German Democratic Republic, is a subject that has yet to be fully studied. This paper outlines the main findings of our research, undertaken in Germany in the years 2014–2016. For our study of Sorbian deputies, we have divided the existence of the People's Chamber into three basic periods: the Era of Kurt Krjeńc (1950–1964/1967), the Era of Jurij Grós (1967–1990), and the Era of Democratic Changes (1990). Each period is associated with important figures from Sorbian Lusatia. We counted a total of 28 deputies in the People's Chamber who were in some way associated with life in this region. However, there was no chance of promoting the interests of the Sorbs in the People's Chamber, since despite being the GDR's highest legislative body, its role was purely formal and symbolic.

Key words: Sorbs; politics; People's Chamber (Volkskammer)

For centuries, the historical region of Upper Lusatia – much of which has belonged since 1635 to one German state or another (Saxony, Prussia, unified Germany, the GDR, and a reunited Germany) – played an important role in the history of the Czech and Polish states. Today, twenty-six years after the demise of the GDR and subsequent German reunification, we have a sufficient historical distance to allow us to write scholarly works on this unique era in modern history. And yet, historical research continues to be hindered by the fact that many archives have not been made accessible and will remain inaccessible for the near future. Although historians can make use of first-person interviews ("oral history"), the results are often highly subjective and must be subjected to thorough historical review. When it comes to the history of the GDR, there are several foundational works in existence, including in particular Hermann Weber's classic *Die DDR 1945–1990* (5th updated edition, München 2012)¹ and numerous

¹ A Czech translation of this book, originally published in 1999, was released under the title *Dějiny NDR*. Praha, NLN, 2003.

monographs by Stefan Wolle.² The history and culture of the Sorbian minority represents a separate chapter in the history of the GDR, with the Sorbs enjoying special status under the socialist GDR, although the situation changed with the educational reforms of 1964 (7th DB, Die Durchsetzung der Siebenten Durchführungsbestimmung) and 1968 (4th DB, Die Durchsetzung der Vierten Durchführungsbestimmung).³

Over the past twenty years, numerous monographs have explored various aspects of Sorbian life during the aforementioned time period. An incomplete list includes Martin Kasper's *Die Lausitzer Sorben in der Wende 1989/1990. Ein Abriss mit Dokumenten und einer Chronik* (Bautzen 2000), Ludwig Elle's *Die Domowina in der DDR. Aufbau und Funktionsweise einer Minderheitenorganisation im staatlich-administrativen Sozialismus* (Bautzen 2010), and Edmund Pech's *Ein Staat – eine Sprache? Deutsche Bildungspolitik und autochthone Minderheiten im 20. Jahrhundert. Die Sorben im Vergleich mit Polen, Dänen und Nordfriesen* (Bautzen 2012). More recent works from the past five years include Timo Meškank's studies focused primarily on Sorbian collaboration with the Stasi, which caused a significant uproar in Sorbian life. But nobody has yet written an extensive, comprehensive overview of the history of the Sorbs during the GDR period.

During the existence of the GDR, members of the Sorbian minority sat on representative bodies at various levels of the political hierarchy. One topic that has received insufficient attention in Sorbian as well as German historiography is the question of Sorbian representatives in the GDR's highest legislative body, the People's Chamber (Volkskammer).⁴ This circumstance motivated me to undertake a project in which I spent the past two years looking at this issue.⁵ The project's main objective was to determine which Sorbian individuals were members of the People's Chamber during the GDR era, to gather detailed information about them,

² Cf. for instance Wolle, S. (2013). *Die heile Welt der Diktatur. Alltag und Herrschaft in der DDR 1971–1989*. Berlin; Wolle, S. (2013). *Der große Plan. Alltag und Herrschaft in der DDR 1949–1961*. Berlin; Wolle, S. (2013). *Aufbruch nach Utopia. Alltag und Herrschaft in der DDR 1961–1971*. 2nd edition, Berlin etc.

³ Cf. for more detail in Pech, E. (2012): *Ein Staat – eine Sprache? Deutsche Bildungspolitik und autochthone Minderheiten im 20. Jahrhundert. Die Sorben im Vergleich mit Polen, Dänen und Nordfriesen*. Bautzen.

⁴ For a more detailed look at the Volkskammer, see e.g., Patzelt, W. J., Schimer, R. (Eds.) (2002). *Die Volkskammer der DDR. Sozialistischer Parlamentarismus in Theorie und Praxis*. Wiesbaden; Lapp, P. J. (1975). *Die Volkskammer der DDR*. Opladen.

⁵ The project was undertaken at TU Dresden and the Sorbisches Institut (Bautzen) thanks to a grant from the Humboldt-Stiftung.

to evaluate their political activities, and to engage in a comparison of these people's profiles (their social origins and their relationship to the church, the Domowina, and Sorbian life in general). At the same time, it was important to outline which political parties or institutions sent candidates to the People's Chamber. Since no researcher has specifically studied the question of Sorbian deputies in the GDR's highest legislative body, from the beginning we were able to work on the basis of our own research.⁶ It soon became apparent that the process of seeking out the former deputies of the People's Chamber is very complicated, which also influenced the project's timeline (it was necessary to spend much more time searching).

In this paper, we would like to share some of the findings of our research, in which we discovered that during the period under review 28 Volkskammer deputies (fully-fledged deputies and successor candidates – Nachfolgekandidaten)⁷ were of Sorbian heritage or were closely (sometimes only partially) associated with the Sorbs. The research was first done through the Sorbian (primarily *Nowa doba*)⁸ and German press (in particular the *Sächsische Zeitung*) and through various institutions, including the Sorbisches Institut (Bautzen), Stadtbibliothek Bautzen, and Sächsische Landesbibliothek / Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Dresden. Also important was our archival research at the Staatsfilialarchiv in Bautzen, the Sächsisches Hauptstaatsarchiv in Dresden, the Bundesarchiv in Berlin, and the Archiv BStU in Berlin. At the same time, we recorded interviews with former Volkskammer deputies (Jurij Grós/Jurij Groß and Jurij Čornak/Georg Zschornack), and with selected deputies of the Bundestag (Marja Michalkowa/Maria Michalk

⁶ Exceptions include generalized works such as K. J. Schiller and M. Thiemann's *Geschichte der Sorben. Band 4. Von 1945 bis Gegenwart* (Bautzen 1979), which provides the number of Sorbian representatives for certain periods, or T. Meškank's monograph *Instrumentalisierung einer Kultur. Zur Situation bei den Sorben 1948–1989* (Bautzen 2014). Meškank's work was originally published in Sorbian as *Kultura w službje totalitarneho režima* (Budyšin, 2011).

⁷ "Nachfolgekandidaten" were elected to the Volkskammer starting in 1958. At first, their number was 100, which was gradually increased to 200. They were something like substitutes who had no voting rights. These members of the Volkskammer were there to replace a regular member if necessary. They were present at all meetings and also sat on most committees (with some exceptions). Cf. Lapp, P. J. (1975). *Die Volkskammer der DDR*. Opladen, pp. 76–77.

⁸ *Nowa doba* began publishing in January 1947 in Bautzen as a weekly; after October 1947, it appeared twice a week, after July 1948 three times a week, and in October 1955 it became a daily. The last issue of the Sorbian newspaper *Nowa doba* appeared more than two months after German reunification, in December 1990.

and Angela Stachowa) and the Sächsischer Landtag (Benedikt Dyrlich, Sieghard Kozel/Sieghard Kosel, Hajko Kozel/Heiko Kosel), as well as others who had been in contact with Sorbian politicians in the past (Gert Kral/Krahl, Hańža Winarjec-Orsesowa). The audio recordings and subsequent transcripts of the interviews will serve as an important source for future studies of the political life of Sorbs during the GDR period.

Over the course of our research, we found that there is a significant lack of written sources on many Volkskammer deputies. On the other hand, there is a relatively good number of sources on the main Sorbian functionaries of the Domowina who sat in the Volkskammer – Kurt Krjeńc (Kurt Krenz), Jurij Grós, and Jurij Handrik (Georg Handrick). However, there is significantly less information available on the other Sorbian deputies in the Volkskammer. Many of them were written about in the Sorbs' official newspaper *Nowa doba*, but for some former members of the People's Chamber practically the only information available is what can be found in the archives (e.g., Ingeborg Janke, Elisabeth Rehork). Another frequent difficulty is the task of identifying the true ethnic identity of the people we came across: in some cases the Sorbian press described even those people who were only partially associated with Sorbian national life as "Sorbian candidates." For instance, their spouse was of Sorbian heritage (Dieter Zwahr, Elisabeth Pech) or they had only distant Sorbian roots (Michael Kolanski, Manfred Scheler). One interesting case is that of Ingeborg Janke, whose Sorbian heritage was not reported in the Sorbian media, but who is described as Sorbian in the *Sächsische Zeitung*.⁹

The current state of research has unambiguously shown that the role of the Volkskammer as the GDR's highest legislative body was purely formal and symbolic. Representatives could not participate in debate, but merely voted (the successor candidates had no voting rights). The elections to the chamber were not democratic either; the Volkskammer representatives were people who had been delegated by the SED and the other ruling parties and institutions. As a result, the country's highest legislative body was home to very few truly great personalities (who had no interest in the post anyway). The same applies to deputies of Sorbian heritage, where there was an equal lack of great personages (unlike, for instance, during the pre-Nazi era). One possible exception was the

⁹ Inge Janke (VEB Rafena-Werke) zu ihrer Niminierung als Volkskammerkandidatin: Großartig, daß wir mitregieren. Belegschaft des VEB Rafena-Werke will 3 500 Fernsegergeräte zusätzlich produzieren. *Sächsische Zeitung*, Radeberg, 7. 9. 1963.

president of the Domowina, Kurt Krjeńc, who was well known in Sorbian circles and who enjoyed relatively great popularity among the Sorbs. But almost nobody today can remember the names of most of the other Sorbian deputies (who were for the most part manual workers and peasants unknown by the majority of people). As previously noted, deputies could not engage in debate during sessions of the Volkskammer. Debate only took place in the committees, where everyone including the Sorbs tried to promote their region's interests. In no way could their efforts be described as promoting the national interests of the Sorbian minority – it always involved the specific geographical region or area associated with the deputy's mandate (which of course was home to Sorbs as well), but not the improvement of the Sorbs' legal status.

From the Volkskammer's first session in 1950 until the year 1981, there were always 2–5 deputies of Sorbian heritage during each electoral period. However, there were no electoral rules to guarantee that the Sorbs would have a certain number of deputies. The final word was with the SED (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands) and the relevant parties of the GDR's National Front. The SED's members usually included leading functionaries of the Domovina, at least one of whom was a member of the GDR's parliament. As might be expected, in 1950–1990 most Sorbian deputies and Nachfolgekandidaten were delegated by the SED (nine), followed by the CDU (Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands) with six representatives, and the DBD (Demokratische Bauernpartei Deutschlands) in third place with five. The penultimate (ninth) People's Chamber for the 1986–1990 electoral period had an unusually large number of people associated with Sorbian life in the GDR: 11 fully-fledged deputies and successor candidates.

During the first democratic elections in 1990, six people of Sorbian heritage made it into the People's Chamber (this was also the last election to this legislative body). In other parties and organizations (outside the SED), Sorbs were represented in lesser numbers. After a comprehensive exploration of the subject at hand, the Sorbs' participation in the People's Chamber can be divided chronologically into three basic periods: the *Era of Kurt Krjeńc* (1950–1964/1967), the *Era of Jurij Grós* (1967–1990), and the *Era of Democratic Changes* (1990). This periodization will also be included in our planned book. Other chapters will look at Sorbian deputies in leading German institutions prior to World War II, the Volkskammer and how it functioned, elections in the GDR, and propaganda.

Of the 28 deputies whom we found (both fully-fledged deputies and successor candidates), five were informants for the Stasi (IM – Inoffizieller

Mitarbeiter; prior to 1968 Geheimer Informator): Jurij Krawčik (Georg Krautschick, CDU) Jurij Grós (SED), Jurij Handrik (SED), Jurij Pěčka (Georg Pötschke, SED), and Michael Koplanski (DBD). The Stasi thus clearly recruited its agents from among all the political parties and social organizations. Only one of the aforementioned Stasi informants, Jurij Pěčka, was active in Lower Lusatia. Another Sorbian deputy, Dr. Měrcin Wjeńcko (Martin Wenzke, NDPD: National-Demokratische Partei Deutschlands), was a member of the SA before and during the war. He was active in the Lower Lusatian town of Cottbus.

Five of the aforementioned deputies were employed in the Domowina or in other important Sorbian institutions: Kurt Krjeńc, Jurij Handrik, Jurij Grós, Jurij Pěčka, and Erich Křižan (Zschieschan). Two of the deputies were doctors (Měrcin Wjeńcko and Dieter Zwahr), and three (Ingeborg Janke, Werner Maruš/Marusch, and Stanisław Tilich/Stanislaw Tillich) held some kind of engineering degree. Two deputies worked as teachers (Jurij Pěčka and Ludwig Nowak/Noack) and two as “new-teachers”¹⁰ (Jurij Grós and Erich Křižan). Most of the remaining deputies of Sorbian heritage held various blue-collar or agricultural professions (although some, such as Marja Michałkowa, were secondary-school graduates).

The three periods that we have outlined in the history of the People's Chamber in relation to Sorbian national life are all associated with one person who symbolizes the said period. In the first period this was Kurt Krjeńc (1907–1978), a journeyman machinist, prewar member of the communist party, and longtime postwar president of the Sorbian Domowina who held many top functions in the SED. He was elected (nominated) to the People's Chamber seven times (elections in the years 1950–1976). For the second period, our choice of main personality was Jurij Grós (born 1931), a journeyman carpenter and later a new-teacher who became a leading Sorbian party functionary shortly after the SED's rise to power, and who held the post of first secretary in Domowina, where he replaced Kurt Krjeńc. He was a deputy in the People's Chamber for three electoral periods, starting in 1981 as a Nachfolgekandidat (elections in 1981–1990). The period of revolution and democratic changes is symbolized by Stanisław Tilich (born 1959), a member of the CDU and originally a construction engineer by trade, who began his political career as a deputy in the final session of the People's Chamber

¹⁰ “Neulehrer” were graduates of special teaching courses in occupied Germany in 1945–1949. The aim was to ensure that German children and youth would not be taught by teachers associated with Nazism. In the Soviet occupation zone, these courses generally lasted for 4–8 months.

following the 1990 elections. He later rose to political power in the Free State of Saxony, where he was a State Minister on several different occasions. He has been a regular member of the Saxon Parliament since 2004, and has been the Saxon Minister-President since 2008. In 1994, he was elected to the European Parliament.

These facts confirm that as fully-fledged citizens of the GDR and a reunited Germany, Sorbian representatives have actively participated in the functioning of the country's highest legislative body and have also been present at lower political levels in the towns and regions. But they are not delegated by the Sorbian Domowina or by any other Sorbian institution on the basis of pre-agreed criteria. Sorbian representatives tried to change this situation in early 1990, when a new constitution was being prepared. One member of the New Election Law and New Constitution working groups during negotiations of the Central Round Table in Berlin was Jan Malink (Maling), who attended as a Sorbian representative. He was given the task of promoting a modified version of his own proposal for the Sorbs' independent parliamentary representation, which had some similarities to later Sorbian councils in Saxony and Brandenburg. According to this proposal, the Domowina would elect three Sorbian deputies who would not have voting rights but who would have veto rights for votes on Sorbian matters. This proposal was presented to the People's Chamber via the Central Round Table, but without success: It was voted down during the first reading on 29 January 1990. On 20 February 1990, the People's Chamber adopted the new election law without any special Sorbian provisions.¹¹

¹¹ Malink, J. (2000). Jako Serb za Centralnym kulojnym blidom. *Rozhlad* 50, No. 7–8, p. 270.