

A Slav Nation in Germany

The Sorbs and their Organisations

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1. Historical: On the History of the Sorbs

More than 1,400 years ago the Slav tribes left their original area of settlement north-east of the Carpathian Mountains during the Slav migration and moved westwards. Amongst them were approximately 20 Sorbian tribes, including the Milceni and the Luzici. These tribes settled in a region which stretched in the west to the river Saale, in the north to just south of Berlin, and which was bounded in the south by the mountain ranges of the Erzgebirge and the Fichtelgebirge, and in the east by the rivers Oder, Bober and Queiss. The first mention in writing of the group of tribes settled there, the "Surbi", was made by the Franconian chronicler Fredegar.

After the loss of political independence in the tenth century assimilation and Germanisation reduced the settlement area of the Sorbs, primarily as a result of the influx of non-Slav populations. It was only the descendants of the Upper Lusatian Milceni and the Lower Lusatian Luzici who succeeded in maintaining their Sorbian language and culture up to the present day. Today they number approximately 60,000; of these about 40,000 live in Upper Lusatia and around 20,000 in Lower Lusatia. The Sorbs call themselves, "Serbja" (Upper Sorbian) and "Serby" (Lower Sorbian). In addition to these terms the Germans still use the term "Wenden" (Wends), especially in Lower Lusatia. This term can be traced back to Roman historians who used the term "Veneti" to describe tribes in the east, which were not known to them individually by name. From this the Germans derived the terms "Wenden" or "Winden" to describe the Slavs.

The Sorbian language belongs to the Slavonic group of languages and has particular affinities with Polish, Czech and Slovak. Sorbian is spoken in a number of dialects in Upper and Lower Lusatia. The oldest document in the Sorbian written language is the "Burger Eydt Wendisch" (The Wendish Civic Oath) for Bautzen from around 1500; the oldest, hand-written, translation of the bible comes from the year 1548.

The early nineteenth century saw the development of a Sorbian middle class, which led to a strengthening of Sorbian national consciousness. Numerous associations were founded, which were devoted to fostering the Sorbian language and culture (Further information available from: www.serbski-institut.de www.museum.sorben.com www.domowina-verlag.de), and contributed to strengthening the common bonds of the Sorbs as a people.

2. Political: On the Development of the Domowina

The Domowina was founded on 13 October 1912 in Hoyerswerda as the umbrella organisation of Sorbian societies and associations. It also set itself the goal of defending the democratic and national interests of the Sorbs as well as maintaining Sorbian language and culture.

In 1933/34 it was reorganised into the "Federation of Lusatian Sorbs (Wends)". Individual membership was introduced. In March 1937 the National Socialist authorities banned the Domowina from any further activity and confiscated its property, because it had opposed the systematic policy of Germanisation, and in particular because it rejected the description of itself as the representative of "Wendish-speaking Germans".

On 10 May 1945 the Domowina resumed its activities. The local occupation authorities recognised it as "the political, anti-fascist and cultural representative of the whole of the Wendish nation". A year later it succeeded for the first time in setting up an organisation in Lower Lusatia. In 1949 the Saxon state parliament conferred on the Domowina the status of a public corporation. The Brandenburg state government also authorised its activities; this move was strongly influenced by the "Law Guaranteeing the Rights of the Sorbian Population", which had been passed by the Saxon parliament in March 1948.

During the period when institutional support was given to the Sorbian language and culture in the GDR the Domowina was able to make substantial parts of the Sorbian population aware of its national identity, and to mobilise them to preserve it actively. However, as an officially recognised mass organisation in the GDR it subordinated this activity to the "building of socialism", especially in the 1950s and 1960s. This in turn reduced the degree of acceptance and the effectiveness of its support for the Sorbian language and culture in the eyes of some sections of the Sorbian population.

In November 1989 the Sorbian National Assembly was founded, whose aim was to force through a reform of the structure, programme and staff of the Domowina. A new statute was adopted at the Extraordinary Federal Congress of 17 March 1990, in which the Domowina was declared to be the politically independent national organisation of the Sorbian people. A year later its status as a registered association allowed Sorbian societies to join it alongside individual members. By doing this it was establishing its link to the foundation agreement of 1912 as the successor to the old Domowina. At the II. General Assembly on 15 June 1991 this process of renewal came to an initial conclusion with the adoption of a new programme, the accession of six individual Sorbian associations and the election of a new honorary chairman.

At the present time the Domowina - Federation of Lusatian Sorbs e.V. - has around 7,300 members in five regional associations and twelve associations which operate over the whole Sorbian area. It sees its main task as representing the political interests of the Sorbs in discussions with parliaments and governments. At the same time it supports the idea of greater autonomy, above all in educational and cultural matters. Amongst its goals are the maintenance and development of the language, culture and traditions of the Sorbian nation, and the promotion of tolerance and understanding between the German and Sorbian people. It is maintaining and extending its relations with the Slav nations, other national minorities and ethnic groups, together with their representative bodies.

3. Structure: The Membership Associations

On 21 July 1921 the first three regional associations for Bautzen , Kamenz and Hoyerswerda were formed, others followed. Today there are five regional Domowina associations (in Sorbian: župy). They co-ordinate and help to carry out the aims of the programme in their region and encourage mutual co-operation between the Sorbian associations.

Regional Associations:

Domowina Regional Association "Jan Arnošt Smoler" Bautzen , based in Bautzen / Župa "Jan Arnošt Smoler" Budyšin

Domowina Regional Association "Michał Hórnik" Kamenz, based in Crostwitz / Župa "Michał Hórnik" Kamjenc

Domowina Regional Association "Handrij Zejler" Hoyerswerda , based in Hoyerswerda / Župa "Handrij Zejler" Wojerecy

Domowina Regional Association Niederlausitz e.V. based in Cottbus / Župa Dolna Łužyca z.t

Domowina Regional Association Weißwasser/Niesky based in Schleife/ Župa Běta Woda/Niska

All the regional associations, as well as the individual associations, can be found on the Internet under www.domowina.de.

Individual Societies and Associations:

The Sorbian School Association e.V. / Serbske šulske towarstwo z.t.
(www.sorbischer-schulverein.de)

The Cyrill-Methodius-Association e.V. / Towarstwo Cyrila a Metoda z.t. (www.tcm-kp.de)

The Society of Sorbian Artists e.V. / Zwjazk serbskich wuměłcow z.t.
(www.zsw-skb.com)

The Association of Sorbian Students e.V. / Zwjazk serbskich studowacych z.t. (www.internecy.de/zss)

The Association of Sorbian Choirs e.V. / Zwjazk serbskich spěwarskich towarstwow z.t.
(www.domowina.sorben.com)

The Umbrella Organisation of Sorbian Sports Clubs and Individual Members e.V. / Serbski Sokol z.t.
(www.sokol.sorben.com)

Sorbian Cultural Tourism e.V. / Zwjazk za serbski kulturny turizm z.t. (www.tourismus.sorben.com)

Sorbian Youth Association "Pawk" e.V. / Serbske młodźinske towarstwo "Pawk" z.t. (www.pawk.de)

Society for the Promotion of Sorbian Culture and the Information Centre in Berlin SKI e.V. / Towarstwo za spěchowanje serbskeho kulturneho a informaciskeho srjedžišća w Barlinje SKI z.t. (www.ski-berlin.de)

The Sorbian Scientific Society Mać ica Serbska e.V. / Mać ica Serbska z.t. (www.macica.sorben.com)

The Association of Sorbian Traders and Craftsmen e.V. / Zwjazk serbskich rjemjeslnikow a předewzaćelow z.t. (www.zpr.sorben.com)

The Circle for the Promotion of Sorbian Folk Culture e.V. / Spěchowanski kruh za serbsku ludowu kulturu z.t. (www.volkskultur.sorben.com)

Outside Lusatia six associate membership associations of the Domowina maintain contacts to Lusatian Sorbs, in, amongst other countries, the Czech Republic, Poland, Australia and the United States.

4. The future: Questions and Goals

The future of the Sorbian nation is not only determined by its own will to exist, but also - to a large extent - by prevailing political, legal, social and not least financial conditions. With the Unification Treaty (Treaty on the Establishment of the Unity of Germany of 31 August 1990, Protocol note to Article 35.) as a basis, it has been possible to resolve the question of the long-term responsibility of the Federal government. On the other hand, it has not been possible up to now to secure the equal rights of minorities as a group in the Basic Law.

At state level the protection of and support for the Sorbs has been established as a state aim in separate articles of the constitutions of Saxony and Brandenburg. Firm commitments on this are contained in the Sorbian Laws; the "Law on Settling the Rights of the Sorbs" was passed in 1994 in Brandenburg, and in 1999 the Saxon parliament passed the "Law on the Rights of the Sorbs in the Free State of Saxony".

The Domowina is committed to working to maintain and develop the Lusatian economic area as well as to marketing it as a tourist area stretching from the Lusatian hills, through Central Lusatia with its chain of lakes created from areas excavated by lignite mining, and extending as far as the Spreewald in the north. In accordance with its programme it will continue to work to preserve the traditional settlement area of the Sorbs and to support the population which has been adversely affected by the excavation of its villages by open cast mining.

A significant element of Sorbian identity is the ability to use the Upper/Lower Sorbian language. For this reason priority is given to all measures to preserve and revitalise the language in the activities of the Domowina and its WITAJ Language Centre. Here it is important to stress the significance of the WITAJ project, which enables the youngest children to learn the Sorbian language through play in the kindergarten. It began in 1998 with 14 children in the kindergarten of Cottbus-Sielow; by 2004 more than 400 children were attending 6 WITAJ kindergartens and a further 13 WITAJ groups in Saxony and Brandenburg. In both states it is possible for school pupils to study Sorbian in bilingual classes in primary, middle and secondary/grammar schools, organised across the different school types.

The Foundation for the Sorbian People, which was established in 1991 and became an independent legal body in 1998, was created to administer the funds available and to finance projects and institutions, which have as their purpose the maintenance and support of Sorbian language and culture (research, art, culture, publishing and press). Its budget is co-financed by the Federal government (50 per cent) and the states of Saxony (33.3 per cent) and Brandenburg (16.7 per cent).

One aim of the Domowina for the future is to achieve a revision, based on the financial level of the year 1998, of the Financing Agreement, which would secure a future level of funding at the same rate, together with index-linking for inflation. Despite the difficult overall situation it is important to preserve unique institutions - for example the German-Sorbian Theatre and the Sorbian National Ensemble -, which are special features both within the Lusatian area and beyond. These professional ensembles are an indispensable prerequisite for the continued existence of Sorbian high culture; without them Sorbian non-professional activities would not survive in the long term.

The continued existence of Sorbian cultural organisations and institutions, along with a broad spectrum of associations, is an important prerequisite for the maintenance and development of a unique cultural area in Saxony and Brandenburg, which is proving its indispensable worth, particularly given the development of closer relations with the Czech Republic and Poland in this frontier region.

1st Edition Editorial deadline: 1 November 2004

Accessed September 2, 2012 at <http://www.domowina.sorben.com/strony/kurzienglish.htm>