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**East-South Women's
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by

CLARA FECHTNER

ABSTRACT

This article investigates East-South women's solidarity networks during the second half of the twentieth century. The paper focuses on the communist East German Democratic Women's League and its transnational relationships with women's organizations from the decolonizing world within and beyond the Women's International Democratic Federation, the largest transnational women's organization in the post-1945 period. In so doing, this article reveals not only how women's rights became an important marker in the broader interactions between the socialist camp and the 'Third World', but it also exposes how the concept of women's rights and its translation into practices at different socio-spatial levels gave rise to a transnational configuration of social practices, common symbols, and artefacts.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Clara Fechtner holds a Bachelor's degree in Political Science from the Philipps-University of Marburg. In 2019, she obtained an Erasmus Mundus Master's degree in Global Studies from Leipzig University and Ghent University in Belgium. Her research interests include encounters between the socialist camp and the decolonizing world in the post-1945 period, as well as gender perspectives in entangled Cold War and decolonization processes.

SETTING THE SCENE: EAST-SOUTH WOMEN'S ENCOUNTERS IN THE GLOBAL HISTORY OF THE COLD WAR

In its 1959 yearbook, the East German women's organization, known as the Democratic Women's League (DFD) listed its "demonstrations of solidarity" with women in the decolonizing world. By providing financial aid, material donations, and exchanging delegations with women's organizations from Southern countries, the DFD claimed to support materially and morally the "just struggle for freedom of all oppressed peoples".¹ Indeed, by 1963 the DFD had established contacts with no less than 22 African, 15 Asian, and 11 South American women's organizations.² Fourteen years later these numbers had almost doubled with regard to African and Asian organizations.³ Under the banner of *anti-imperialist solidarity*, the DFD embarked on a journey to "make young nation states, national liberation movements, and women

of the whole world aware of the situation of women under state socialism"⁴, turning the GDR into an international showcase for gender equality and cultural advancement.

Forging links with organizations in the (post-)colonial world, the transnational activism of the DFD forms part of the academic debate on the Global History of the Cold War, namely that of East-South connections following Stalin's death in 1953.⁵ Scrutinizing historical accounts that divide the global landscape of the Cold War into *superpowers* and *proxies*, actors from the decolonizing world are increasingly brought to the scene as agents within the global

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- 1 Foundation Archive of the Parties and Mass Organizations of the GDR in the Federal Archives (Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR im Bundesarchiv, henceforth SAPMO-BArch), DY31/1358, "Zur Vorbereitung des Jahrbuches 1959 (Inhalt 1958) kurze Angaben über unsere Arbeit", 08.01.1959, fol. 36.
 - 2 SAPMO-BArch DY 31/1358, Kontakte des DFD zu Organisationen und Frauen in der ganzen Welt, 27.5.1963, fol. 48 ff.
 - 3 SAPMO-BArch DY 31/1358, Beziehungen des DFD zu Frauenorganisationenm Anfang 1977, fol. 178.

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- 4 SAPMO-BArch DY 31/392 Dokumentarische Darstellung, fol. 4.
 - 5 James Mark, Artemy M. Kalinovsky, and Steffi Marung, *Alternative Globalizations. Eastern Europe and the Postcolonial World* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2020), 3; James Mark and Quinn Slobodian, "Eastern Europe in the Global History of Decolonization", in *The Oxford Handbook of the Ends of Empire*, ed. Martin Thomas and Andrew S. Thompson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). The term 'Third World' is used following Vijay Prashad and Laura Bier, defining it "not as a place on a map but as a project, as a political imaginary" (Laura Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood. Feminisms, modernity, and the state in Nasser's Egypt* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 156)) that linked colonized and formerly colonized countries in a common struggle for freedom and anti-imperialism. As a political project, the 'Third World' encompasses "the hopes and institutions created to carry them [peoples of Asia, Africa, and Latin America] forward" (Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World* (New York: The New Press, 2007), xv).

configuration now recognized as a multipolar conflict.⁶ Scholars, for one, explore transnational circulations across the 'Iron Curtain' and the 'First', 'Second', and 'Third' world – spatial constructs of dividedness that conventionally prevailed in Cold War historiography. For another, by building upon concrete cases of exchange between actors from the socialist camp and countries of the Global South, scholars bring to the fore the multifaceted entanglements between the Cold War and decolonization processes. In doing so, they also identify particular ideas of modernization and affiliated programs of development assistance provided by countries of the socialist camp and the 'West' to newly independent countries.⁷

Yet what remains fairly understudied in this vibrant field of research – as is so often the case – is the role of women and their transnational interactions.⁸ While

educational or military sojourns of actors from the (post-)colonial world in countries of the socialist camp are nothing new to scholarship, these exchanges are usually not brought into context with transnational women's rights activism. An in-depth analysis of interactions between 'Second' and 'Third World' women's organizations, however, reveals their significance in shaping and contributing to a globalizing women's rights discourse in the post-1945 period.⁹ What is more, this paper argues, from the mid-1950s onwards when the countries of the socialist camp increasingly turned towards the decolonizing world, interactions between respective women's organizations transformed into an important marker in these emerging relationships.

CROSSING BORDERS AND BLURRING LINES

Building off of previous studies, this research aims at contributing to the historiography of East-South encounters by integrating into the global history of the Cold War what Kristen Ghodsee labels "Second World-Third World alliances in the international women's movement".¹⁰

6 David Engerman, "The Second World's Third World", *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 12, no. 1 (2011), 183, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/411667>; Mark, Kalinovsky, and Marung, *Alternative Globalizations*, 3.

7 See most prominently Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War. Third World Interventions and the Making of our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 200); see also Young-Sun Hong, *Cold War Germany, the Third World, and the Global Humanitarian Regime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

8 Except for the work by Kristen Ghodsee. See Kristen Ghodsee, *Second World, Second Sex: Socialist Women's Activism and Global Solidarity during the Cold War* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019).

9 Celia Donert, "Women's Rights in Cold War Europe: Disentangling Feminist Histories", *Past and Present*, 218 (supplement 8), (2013), <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gts040>.

10 Kristen Ghodsee, "Research note: The historiographical challenges of exploring Second World-Third World alliances in international women's movement", *Global*

By empirically focusing on the DFD and its foreign relationships with what were considered to be 'peace-loving' women's organizations from the decolonizing world, the aim of this paper is to investigate whether these interactions gave rise to a new *anti-imperialist transnational space*. Examining the extent to which this space not only enabled women's mobility across Cold War oppositions but also entailed a circulation of women's rights discourses, the transnational perspective in this paper is to be understood as both methodological tool and spatial approach in the broader framework of global history, rather than juxtaposing the latter with transnational history.¹¹ The perspective of *transnational spaces* complicates dominant spatial imaginaries informing our historical understanding of the period. Built upon notions of bipolarity, separated 'blocs' with contrasting ideologies, and 'worlds' beyond these blocs, the narrative of dividedness and rivalry has been materialized and (re-) produced through forms as diverse as mapping, media, and scholarship.¹² To be sure, concrete spatialization

processes such as the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in 1949 and the Warsaw Pact in 1955 informed these perceptions. These new understandings also do not argue that bipolar representations of the period are incorrect, nor that rivalries between the USA and the Soviet Union were of minor importance. Rather, their aim is to bring to the fore other spatial formats that existed next to or emerged in reaction to bipolar formations. In this sense, this research adds to alternative readings of the Cold War by highlighting the constructed character of conceptualizations of space. Through the exchange of delegations and common political initiatives, transnational women's interactions crossed and blurred boundaries, making it worthwhile to consider the existence and relevance of 'Cold War spatialities' other than nation states, 'blocs', and 'worlds'.

A significant part of the DFD's international history was, as we will see, closely linked with the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF), the largest transnational women's organization in the post-1945 period. Embracing leftist and socialist women's organizations from all over the world, the DFD became one of the WIDF's communist affiliates in 1948. The transnational activism of the DFD within and beyond the WIDF is unquestionably only one among many (hi-)stories

Social Policy 14, no. 2 (2014), 244-264, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468018114527100>.

11 Davide Rodogno, Bernhard Struck, and Jakob Volgek, *Shaping the Transnational Sphere: Experts, networks, and issues from the 1840s to the 1930s* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2014), 574.

12 Steffi Marung, "Emerging Topics – Insights from "Behind the Scenes"", Interview, Collaborative Research Centre 1199 Processes of Spatialization under the Global Condition, May 2018, <https://>

research.uni-leipzig.de/~sfb1199/publications/247-sfb_blog_marung/.

of women's encounters throughout the period. As this article is based on archival sources from the DFD section in the Foundation Archive of the Parties and Mass Organizations of the GDR in the German Federal Archives, the Feminist Documentation and Information Centre in Berlin, and the WIDF section in the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam, it must be taken into account that it tells the story from the 'European' perspective rather than from women in India, Mozambique, or Egypt. By shedding light on the foreign activities of the East German women's committee, this paper is thus intended to contribute to a broader and more systematic research on East-South women's interactions during the era of decolonization and the Global Cold War.

ORIGINS AND DYNAMICS OF EAST-SOUTH WOMEN'S INTERACTIONS

Historically, the end of the Second World War heralded a watershed moment in transnational women's activism, with the established 'Western'-dominated organizations becoming increasingly challenged by anti-colonial solidarity projects among women from the decolonizing world.¹³ Not only was

the UN Charter the first international document to interpret gender equality as an universal right, the historical moment also signaled a turn in transnational women's organizing in that it gave rise to what can be described as a new form of "feminist internationalism whose roots lay in opposition to fascism in Europe and colonialism abroad".¹⁴ This feminist internationalist project united left wing, socialist, anti-fascist, and anti-imperialist women from all over the world in a struggle that presumed women's rights as inextricably linked with broader political, economic, and cultural dimensions. Such a movement found its most drastic expression in the 1945 creation of the WIDF in the presence of some 850 representatives from 41 countries in Paris.¹⁵ In contrast to older organizations, characterized

Study of Women and Gender: Faculty Publications. 1. (2016), 305-331, <https://doi.org/10.1086/682921>; For information on older transnational women's organizations and their (orientalist) boundaries, see Leila Rupp, *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), i.e. the chapter 'Who's in, Who's Out'.

14 Rashmi Varma, "Anti-Imperialism", in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of 21st-Century Feminist Theory*, ed. Robin Truth Goodman (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 464.

15 Francisca de Haan, "The Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF): History, Main Agenda, and Contributions, 1945-1991, *Women and Social Movements (WASI) Online Archive*, ed. Thomas Dublin and Kathryn Kish Sklar, <http://alexanderstreet.com/products/women-and-social-movements-international>.

13 See Elisabeth Armstrong, "Before Bandung: The Anti-Imperialist Women's Movement in Asia and the Women's International Democratic Federation",

by a predominantly Euro-American member- and leadership, the WIDF was marked by a firm participation of non-‘Western’ women.¹⁶ By 1953, 23% of all member organizations were from countries of the Global South, counting a total of 68 national affiliates among which included organizations from 16 Asian, 14 Latin American, and six African countries.¹⁷ By 1987, numbers had shifted in favor of 73 % non-‘Western’ members, embracing 27 Asian, 28 Latin American and Caribbean, and 35 African organizations among member organizations from a total of 123 countries.¹⁸ Concurrently, the WIDF represented the “primary international voice for women in Eastern Europe since 1945”¹⁹, counting some 14 members from the socialist camp by 1987, including

women’s committees from eight Eastern European countries, the Soviet Union, and organizations from China, Korea, Vietnam, Mongolia, and Cuba.²⁰

The WIDF’s principle aim was to fight for “equal rights of women at all levels of political, economic, legal, cultural and social life”.²¹ Its statutes set forth as main objectives (1) the active participation in the fight for the ultimate annihilation of fascism to secure lasting peace; (2) the collective mobilization of women from all over to world to defend their rights; (3) the protection of public health i.e. concerning children; and (4) strengthening friendship and unity among all women in the world.²² In doing so, the WIDF acknowledged that equal rights of women required more than legal concessions, advocating for the creation of socio-political and economic circumstances that would allow “all women in all continents to gracefully master their three main tasks: to be mothers, workers and citizens”.²³ To this end, the WIDF

16 Rupp, “Worlds of Women”, 63; Fransica de Haan, “Eugénie Cotton, Pak Chong-ae, and Claudia Jones: Rethinking Transnational Feminism and International Politics”, *Journal of Women’s History* 25 no. 4 (2013), 179-180, <http://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2013.0055>.

17 IISH Int 1994/156, Ein geeinter Wille nach Gleichberechtigung, p. 261 ff.; Countries from the Middle East were counted as Asian. It further embraced members from 26 European countries, and the US, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.

18 Frauenforschungs-, Bildungs-, und Dokumentationszentrum Berlin (FFBIZ) SOZ Int 48, Dokumentation und Information: IX. Kongress der Internationalen Demokratischen Frauenföderation, Moskau, UdSSR, 28-39 Juni 1987, p. 35-40.

19 Deborah Stienstra, *Women’s Movements and International Organizations* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1994), 87; other transnational women’s organizations had little or no membership from Eastern European countries.

20 FFBIZ SOZ Int 48, Dokumentation und Information: IX. Kongress der Internationalen Demokratischen Frauenföderation, Moskau, UdSSR, 28-39 Juni 1987, p. 35-40.

21 SAPMO-BArch DY 31/1351, Resolution über die wirtschaftliche, rechtliche, und soziale Lage der Frauen, fol. 18.

22 SAPMO-BArch DY 31/1351, Statuten der Internationalen Demokratischen Frauenföderation, fol. 1.

23 SAPMO-BArch DY 31/1353, Presse Kommuniké , 1 June 1958, Nr. 4, fol. 5; See also Melanie Ilic, “Contesting Inequality. Khrushchev and the Revival of the ‘Woman Question’”, in *De-Stalinization*

considered nuclear disarmament and national self-determination as prerequisites for world peace and women's emancipation.²⁴ Colonialism was principally seen as an impediment to women's rights, as it structurally restricted women's political, social, and economic status.²⁵ Acknowledging links between colonial oppression and women's oppression, the WIDF became the first transnational women's organization outspokenly condemning colonialism and launching anti-colonial campaigns.²⁶ Older established women's organizations, for their part, kept on declaring political neutrality towards anti-colonialism, not only preserving a detachedness of the international women's movement from anti-colonial struggles, but at times even actively fostering imperialist and Orientalist logics of 'Western' superiority vis-à-vis 'the backward colonial woman' whom to offer a helping hand.²⁷

Reconsidered: Persistence and Change in the Soviet Union, ed. Thomas M. Bohn, Rayk Einax and Michel Abeßer (Frankfurt/New York: Campus, 2014), 157-174.

- 24 Melanie Ilic, "Soviet Women, cultural exchange and the Women's International Democratic Federation", in *Reassessing Cold War Europe*, ed. Sari Autio-Sarasma and Katalin Miklóssi (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 161.
- 25 Katharine McGregor, "Opposing Colonialism: The Women's International Democratic Federation and decolonisation struggles in Vietnam and Algeria 1945–1965", *Women's History Review* (2016), 6, 14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2015.1083246>.
- 26 McGregor, "Opposing Colonialism", 2.
- 27 Leila Rupp, "Challenging Imperialism in

After a conflict with the French government sparked by a campaign denouncing French aggression in Vietnam, the WIDF was forced to relocate its headquarters from Paris to East Berlin in 1951.²⁸ As the first international organization based in the GDR, the WIDF helped to increase the political significance of its host organization, the DFD, vis-à-vis the SED-regime. On the part of the DFD, the relocation to Berlin was presented as a great success whose political weight was particularly due to the fact that the WIDF publicly supported the GDR's claim for a unified socialist Germany²⁹. While the DFD had been founded in 1947 first and foremost as a means to win women as workforce in an economy shattered by war³⁰, it gradually

International Women's Organizations, 1888-1945", *NWSA Journal* 8, no.1 (1996), 8, 10, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4316421>; Leila Rupp, "Worlds of Women"; Francisca de Haan, "Continuing Cold War Paradigms in Western Historiography of Transnational Women's Organisations: the case of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF)", *Women's History Review* 19, no. 4 (2010), 549-551, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2010.502399>.

- 28 Francisca de Haan, "Hoffnungen auf eine bessere Welt: Die frühen Jahre der Internationalen Demokratischen Frauenföderation (IDFF/WIDF) (1945-1950)", *Feministisch Studien* (2009), 254-255, <https://doi.org/10.1515/fs-2009-0207>; SAPMO-BArch DY 31/1351, Berliner Zeitung, „Die Deutsche Hauptstadt – neuer Sitz der IDFF“, 8 March 1951.
- 29 SAPMO-BArch DY 31/1376, Bericht des DFD an die Exekutive der IDFF vom 1.12.1948-1.7.1949, fol. 61.
- 30 Donna Harsch, "Approach/avoidance: Communists and women in East Germany, 1945-1949", *Social History* 25, no. 2 (2000), 158, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070010001651111>.

transformed into a valuable means for the GDR's foreign policies. The latter were curtailed by the Hallstein Doctrine, proclaimed by the West German government shortly after the GDR had joined the Warsaw Pact in 1955. The doctrine stipulated that the Federal Republic represented the sole legitimate German state and determined that they would end diplomatic relations with any state, except for the Soviet Union, that recognized the GDR's sovereignty.³¹ Caught in diplomatic isolation, the SED-regime thus had to find ways to "build bridges to the newly independent countries of the Third World"³² and the DFD certainly became such a bridge, using its WIDF membership and its bilateral relationships for promoting the diplomatic recognition of the GDR, at times even articulating it as an 'objective criterion' for the relationships themselves.³³

Even though the WIDF had a strong affinity with Soviet politics and was characterized by a broad membership of party-affiliated or otherwise socialist groups, it always included non-communist and independent women's organizations from African, Asian, and Latin American countries.³⁴ Drawing upon

its anti-colonial stance and broad membership, some scholars consider the WIDF as reversing "Western enlightened charity models"³⁵, arguing that members from countries of the Global South had the capacity to actively shape the political agenda and structural conditions.³⁶ A somewhat different picture, however, is drawn by Yulia Gradszkova, who claims that Southern representatives rarely obtained leading positions in the central bodies and were therefore faced with constraints when it came to asserting their interests.³⁷

Investigating WIDF and DFD documents, this research found that – despite all claims of equity – they not uncommonly revealed patronizing positions when it came to conceptualizations of women's rights. For one thing, they included recurring representations of religion, most notably that of Islam, as 'backward traditions'. For example, the liberation narrative spun around the Soviet-run unveiling campaigns in Central Asia served as one expression of the inequitable nature of representations. According to DFD chairwoman Ilse Thiele, these campaigns were emancipating women from being

org/10.1080/030710200363186.

31 Young-Sun Hong, "Cold War Germany", 36.

32 Ibid.

33 SAPMO-BArch DY 31/1573, SAPMO-BArch DY 31/1573, Bericht über die Delegationsreise zur Teilnahme am 7. Kongress der Nationalen Föderation der Indischen Frauen, 1970/1971, fol. 5.

34 de Haan, "Continuing Cold War

Paradigms", 555.

35 Armstrong, "Before Bandung", 328.

36 See e.g. de Haan, "Eugénie Cotton, Pak Chong-ae, and Claudia Jones"; Armstrong, "Before Bandung", McGregor, "Opposing Colonialism".

37 Yulia Gradszkova, "Women's international Democratic Federation, the 'Third World' and the Global Cold War from the late-1950s to the mid-1960s", *Women's History Review* 29, no. 2 (2020), 270-288, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2019.1652440>.

“nothing more than illiterate slaves who were forced to veil their bodies and remained excluded from public life”.³⁸ In addition, the vast majority of the sources disclosed a supposed preeminence and pioneering role of socialist states when it came to advancing the status of women. Even though the recurring notion of ‘progress’ was never explicitly defined, it constituted one of the WIDF’s founding and repeatedly occurring principles, and was clearly informed by socialist perspectives on development. Capitalist states and ‘developing countries’ were for differing reasons considered restrictive for women’s rights. By contrast, WIDF accounts repeatedly claimed that socialist states recognized equal rights of men and women in legislation as well as in practice. According to the brochures, this fact was empirically evidenced by women’s employment rates, their professional training, and their participation in political, social, and cultural life.³⁹ Consequently, despite the WIDF’s objective to unite women irrespective of their political worldview, socialist conceptualizations of modernity and ‘progress’ clearly not only informed its political agenda but also impaired its ideal of ideological inclusiveness.

38 SAPMO-BArch DY 31/1484, Vorbereitungen des Weltkongresses der Frauen im Jahr 1953 in Kopenhagen, Rede Ilse Thiele, fol. 32.
39 IISH, WIDF Collection, Folder 2, Women’s International Democratic Federation: Published for the 40th anniversary of the founding of the WIDF, p. 17.

At a meeting of the WIDF bureau in 1988, just to name one example, the Soviet delegate Alewtina Fedulowa conceded that one had to ‘critically and self-critically admit’ that the principle of ideological openness was not consistently realized, considering that the acceptance of new organizations was often predicated on their ideological foundations.⁴⁰

Notwithstanding the need for further research on the WIDF’s internal power structures, the key point here is that the WIDF was the only organization that *did* open up a space for East-South women’s encounters already in the direct aftermath of the Second World War. For the political leaders in the Soviet Union, the GDR, and Eastern European countries, the post-1945 years constituted a period in which the concern of domestic reconstruction exceeded the significance of the vast transformations proceeding in the colonial empires.⁴¹ It was only eleven years after the foundational congress of the WIDF that Khrushchev’s *Secret Speech* at the 20th congress of the

40 SAPMO-BArch DY 31/906, Alewtina Fedulowa am 15.4.1988 auf der Bürotagung der IDFF, fol.14 ff; IISH, WIDF Collection, Folder 2, Women’s International Democratic Federation: Published for the 40th anniversary of the founding of the WIDF, p. 14-17.

41 Constantin Katsakioris, “The Soviet-South Encounter: Tensions in the Friendship with Afro-Asian Partners, 1945-1965”, in *Cold War Crossings: International Travel and Exchange across the Soviet Bloc, 1940s-1960s*, ed. Patryk Babiracki and Kenyon Zimmer (Arlington, TX: Texas University Press, 2014), 136.

Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956 heralded a turning point in the socialist camp's policies towards the decolonizing world. Breaking with Stalinist Eurocentrism and integrating the 'Third World' into a globalized vision of socialism, the Soviet Union and Eastern European states began to act and portray themselves as "champions of Third World aspirations".⁴² With delegates from both the socialist camp and the decolonizing world, however, WIDF events had been fostering transnational interactions between actors from both 'worlds' already years before this political shift. Likewise, the WIDF's foundation had given birth to the only transnational women's organization outspokenly condemning colonialism and acknowledging imperialism as a 'women's issue'.⁴³

ANTI-IMPERIALIST WOMEN'S ACTIVISM: ENGENDERING A 'TRANS-NATIONAL SPACE'?

In order to investigate whether relationships between the DFD and 'Southern' women both under the auspices of the WIDF and on a bilateral level gave rise to the

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- 42 Constantin Katsakioris, "Burden or Allies? Third World Students and Internationalist Duty through Soviet Eyes", *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 18, no. 3 (2017), 540, <http://doi.org/10.1353/kri.2017.0035>; Westad, "The Global Cold War", 68.
- 43 Armstrong, "Before Bandung", 320; Varma, "Anti-Imperialism", 46.

emergence of an *anti-imperialist transnational space*, Ludger Pries' definition of transnational spaces will be utilized. Pries defines these spaces as "dense and durable configurations of transnational social practices, symbols and artefacts".⁴⁴ Here, space is considered to be constructed through interactions between actors. In other words, the concept relies on the assumption that all social interactions go hand in hand with processes of spatialization.⁴⁵ Transnational spaces thus arise from entanglements across bounded geographical spaces and can be thought of as "dense economic, political and cultural relationships between individuals and collectives that transcend the borders of sovereign states [and] connect people, networks and organizations in several places across national borders".⁴⁶

I. INTENSIVE AND STABLE SOCIAL PRACTICES

According to Pries' definition, the dimension of *social practice* relates to the "active and intervening

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- 44 Ludger Pries, "Transnational Societal Spaces: Which Units of Analysis, Reference, and Measurement?", in *Rethinking Transnationalism. The Meso-link of organizations*, ed. Ludger Pries (London: Routledge, 2008), 3.
- 45 Matthias Middell, "Raumformate – Bausteine in Prozesse der Neuverräumlichung", *Working Paper Series SFB 1199*, no. 14, (2019), 3-4.
- 46 Thomas Faist, *Transstaatliche Räume: Politik, Wirtschaft und Kultur in und zwischen Deutschland und der Türkei* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2000), 10.

side of human life entanglements”.⁴⁷ Regarding the interactions under investigation, this dimension becomes visible not only with respect to the circulation of actors, knowledge, and ideas, but also finds expression in congresses, donations, solidarity campaigns, and personal friendships.

WORLD CONGRESSES

When examining the transnational social practices of the WIDF, its World Congresses certainly played a crucial role. In the period between 1945 and 1991, it organized a total of seven World Congresses, which all lasted three to five days.⁴⁸ These were preceded by intensive preparations of the national member organizations, transforming the former into frameworks for local practices. Upcoming congresses were often used as inducement for local campaigns to raise awareness for international women's rights issues. Likewise, as in the case of the DFD, international women's congresses could figure in domestic politics as a means to propagate the merits of socialism for women. In preparation for the 1953 World Congress in Copenhagen, the DFD established an initiative committee, charged with 'educational work' among German women. As a mass-based organization strongly corresponding to the party line of

the SED, the educational mandate of the initiative committee consisted in reaching out to the largest possible number of women, conveying that gender equality in the GDR was already guaranteed by the Constitution and contrasting the situation of East German women with the devastating situation of women in 'capitalist, colonial, and oppressed countries'.⁴⁹

In 1972, WIDF delegates successfully suggested to make 1975 an 'International Women's Year' at a meeting of the UN Commission on the Status of Women.⁵⁰ In her revealing work, Ghodsee provides insights into how "Second World-Third World coalitions"⁵¹, existing throughout the Women's Decade following the International Women's Year, were able to "isolate and antagonize Western feminists"⁵² on the basis of shared political perspectives i.e. when it comes to anti-imperialism.⁵³ Accordingly, the East German Foreign Ministry

49 SAPMO-BArch DY 31/1484, Plan des Demokratischen Frauenbundes Deutschlands Zur Vorbereitung des Weltkongresses der Frauen, 2 March 1953, fol. 1-2.

50 Celia Donert, "Whose Utopia? Gender, Ideology, and Human Rights at the 1975 World Congress of Women", in *The Breakthrough: Human Rights in the 1970s*, ed. Jan Eckel and Samuel Moyn (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 74; At the first conference of the International Women's Year held Mexico City, the 'United Nations Decade for Women' was decided upon, lasting until 1985.

51 Ghodsee, "Research Note", 244.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid, 256.

47 Pries, "Transnational Societal Spaces", 13.

48 FFBIZ, Sammlung DFB, Soz Int 50, IDFF: Gegründet am 1. Dezember 1945, p. 4 ff.

promoted the final declaration adopted at the first Women's Conference in Mexico in 1975 as the outcome of close cooperation between non-aligned and socialist countries.⁵⁴ Following this, Thiele claimed that any positive results of the upcoming conference in Nairobi were dependent on a "consistent and coordinated demeanor of the delegation from the socialist states in joint action with the progressive non-aligned countries".⁵⁵ These coalitions, however, were not always running smoothly. A DFD report on a consultative committee meeting prior to the Mexico Conference, composed by representatives from 36 countries from all continents and devoted to revising the draft Action Plan of the conference, bemoaned that "representatives of the USSR, the GDR, and Romania were the only ones [...] to call for the [...] principle of maintaining and safeguarding peace and détente as a precondition for the equality of women and the close links between social and economic changes and the equality of women".⁵⁶ Representatives of the 'developing countries', by contrast, supposedly "showed little interest in a stronger political discussion", aiming at preventing any 'ideologization' of the Action

Plan. The report, however, positively emphasized that some of the non-aligned countries were showing a firm interest in the historical experiences of socialist states.⁵⁷ In addition to the Mexico Conference under the auspices of the UN, the WIDF had already in 1974 decided to organize a second congress in East Berlin in October 1975. This decision was based upon the claim that the International Year of Women should not remain an exclusive affair of the UN.⁵⁸ As the World Congress in East Berlin has already extensively been studied by Celia Donert⁵⁹, this article will thus focus only on some interesting points with respect to East-South women's relationships.

Welcoming delegations from over 139 countries, the World Congress constituted a major platform for transnational encounters.⁶⁰ Hosting an event of this size not only represented a great success for the DFD, but certainly also carried political weight for the SED-regime, taking place three years after the latter had gained its long-awaited diplomatic recognition and several months after the conclusion of the Helsinki Accords.⁶¹ The official objectives of the World

54 Donert, "Whose Utopia", 76.

55 SAPMO-BArch DY 31/1513, Einleitung der Schulungsveranstaltung zur Vorbereitung Nairobi, 28 June 1985, fol. 8.

56 SAPMO-BArch DY 31/637, Bericht über die Tagung des Konsultativkomitees zur Weltkonferenz der UNO zum Internationalen Jahr der Frau, fol. 3.

57 Ibid. 4.

58 SAPMO-BArch DY 311392 Dokumentarische Darstellung der Entwicklung des Gedankens zur Durchführung des Internationalen Jahres der Frau und des Weltkongresses der Frauen im Jahr 1975, fol. 2-4.

59 Donert, "Whose Utopia".

60 SAPMO-BArch Dy 31/1405, Teilnehmerlisten, fol. 83 ff.

61 Donert, "Whose Utopia", 70.

Congress were to discuss “openly and frankly all questions concerning the implementation of the equality of women, their active participation in the economic, social, and cultural development of their countries, the establishment of friendly relations between all peoples, and the consolidation of world peace”.⁶² Characterized by one of the highest rates of female employment in the world, the GDR portrayed itself as a role model for gender in this respect.⁶³ At the congress opening, the chairman of the Council of Ministers promised the visitors that the insights they would gain during their stay would demonstrate to them that the realization of gender equality was ‘one of the greatest and noblest achievements in the development of the socialist state’.⁶⁴

Between the plenary sessions, the congress consisted of thematic commissions, each attended by some 200 delegates and devoted to themes such as women’s access to education and their role in industry and agriculture. As described by a British delegate, similar to what has been reported on the Mexico conference, unanimity between communist women and delegates from (post-)colonial countries was especially reached over the condemnation of ‘Zionism’, racism,

imperialism, and (neo-)colonialism.⁶⁵ However, the congress also opened up space for friction. Women’s organizations from the socialist camp took a more quantitative approach to women’s emancipation, assessing the latter on the basis of employment rates, numbers of educational degrees, and mothers’ protection as workers. However, this perspective was challenged by African representatives, who claimed that women’s rights should not be ‘alms’ legally provided by male authorities. Rather, claims for dignity and liberty were women’s fundamental rights and had to be defended against their ‘selfish brothers’.⁶⁶ Suggesting that women were subject to a qualitatively different kind of exploitation than their male counterparts, the delegates from Guinea-Bissau, Somalia, and Congo hence implicitly questioned the kind of women’s rights endorsed by communist women’s organizations.⁶⁷

PHYSICAL MOBILITY AND THE COMPLEXITY OF NARRATIVES

From its foundation onward, the WIDF not only organized congresses and study trips but also fostered bilateral exchanges between its national affiliates, enabling actors

62 SAPMO-BArch DY 31/1405, Tel. 2109161, fol. 48.

63 Donert, “Whose Utopia”, 77.

64 SAPMO-BArch DY 31/1405, Ministerrat der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, der Vorsitzende, 20.10.1975, fol. 75.

65 SAPMO-BArch DY 31/645, Feministische Fragen fehlten auf der Berliner Frauenkonferenz, Sarah Benton, fol. 233.

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid. Sarah Benton describes the speeches of the African delegates therefore as yielding an “unspoken feminism”.

to become – albeit in a politically regulated setting – acquainted with the local circumstances in the countries of sojourn.⁶⁸ De-Stalinization also helped to ease these exchanges of delegations. Following the 1953 World Congress of Women in Copenhagen, representatives from Indonesia, Burma, China, Vietnam, Korea, and Southern American countries visited Berlin, representing the first women's delegations from Asia and Latin America in the GDR.⁶⁹ Between its foundation in 1947 and March 1972, the DFD hosted a total number of 382 women from African, Asian, and Latin American countries while dispatching 56 representatives to these countries in the same period.⁷⁰ Delegations were likewise exchanged between women's organizations from 'Southern' countries and Bulgaria, Romania, Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and other countries of Eastern Europe.

In her research on the Committee of the Bulgarian Women's Movement (CBWM), Ghodsee found that its activism among women's organizations in Africa, the Middle

East, and Asia "fit in well with Bulgaria's foreign policy and its vision of itself as a postcolonial country [...] play[ing] up its own colonial past and how socialism [...] had transformed the country from a rural, agricultural backwater to a modern, industrialized nation-state".⁷¹ While the end of empire in Eastern Europe after the First World War served as a basis for these regimes to foster a narrative of historical analogies between their own trajectories and the transition from colonialism to independence in the colonial empires⁷², the promotion of this narrative proved to be more difficult for the SED-regime and the DFD, citizens of a country with a colonial and fascist past. Notwithstanding the DFD's constant emphasis on international friendship, the historical context of its foundation in the aftermath of the Second World War should not be forgotten. In fact, its very accession to the WIDF in 1948 at the Second World Conference in Budapest was followed by debates and opposition from women who had suffered from the atrocities committed by Germany during the Second World War. As reported by the German delegate Maria Rentmeister, "the representative of Israel pointed out in very bitter words that all her relatives had gone to the gas chambers, asking whether all this should be forgotten" by the act of accepting the DFD to the WIDF.⁷³

68 IISH, WIDF Collection, Folder 2, Published for the 40th anniversary of the founding of the WIDF, p. 23 ff.

69 SAPMPO-BArch DY 31/1358, Delegationen aus dem Ausland, die während des Weltkongresses der Frauen in Kopenhagen im Juni 1953 in Berlin weilten, fol. 15-17.

70 SAPMO-BArch DY 31/1358, Dokumentation über die wichtigsten internationalen Beziehungen und Aktionen des DFD seit der Gründung des DFD am 8.3.1947 bis 8.3.1972, fol. 134.

71 Ghodsee, "Research Note", 255-256.

72 Mark and Slobodian, "Eastern Europe in the Global History of Decolonization", 351.

73 SAPMO-BArch DY 31/1566, Bericht über

In October 1970, DFD delegates attended the second national women's congress in Sierra Leone. In her speech, the German representative drew parallels between the historical experiences of both countries, comparing the 'possibilities' that arose through the 'defeat of Hitler-Fascism' with the opportunities opened up by the end of colonialism and advocating socialism as the only way to 'ultimately break the rule of Imperialism'.⁷⁴ Even though we do not know the reactions of the Sierra Leonean comrades, this poor comparison is particularly revealing. For one thing, it illustrates the tightrope act the German representatives had to perform against the backdrop of their fascist and colonial past when trying to champion an anti-colonial self-conception. On the other hand, it also reveals the contradictory dynamics at play when advocating 'international solidarity' on the basis of patronizing attitudes and by educational means, which for their part strongly resembled imperialist structures.

THE CIRCULATION OF KNOWLEDGE AND CULTURAL PERFORMANCE

Fostered by the physical mobility of its members, the WIDF concurrently entailed a circulation of ideas and served as a platform of knowledge production when it comes to women's rights and women's lived realities all over the world. At international and regional meetings, representatives gave speeches and submitted reports on socio-political and economic circumstances in their countries and the position of women therein. Moreover, the WIDF released a broad range of educational materials such as its widely distributed brochure entitled *Meeting with Egyptian Women*, published after a study trip to Egypt in 1957 which had investigated the situation of women and children following the Suez Crisis.⁷⁵

Likewise, WIDF congresses opened up a space for performative encounters, with representatives engaging in song and dance inspired by their respective cultural contexts.⁷⁶ Returning from the World Congress of women in Budapest in 1948, the DFD delegate portrayed the congress as "the face of the world", raving about the "picturesque picture of the women of India, China, Indonesia, and Korea".⁷⁷ Claiming to come

die Pressekonferenz am 10 Dezember 1958, fol. 11.

74 SAPMO-BArch DY 31/1426, Teilnahme einer Delegation des DFD am 2. Kongress des Nationalkongresses der Frauen von Sierra Leone am 7 Oktober 1970 in Freetown, Ansprache, fol. 6 ff.

75 IISH Int 1546/40 fol, Zusammenkunft mit ägyptischen Frauen.

76 IISH Int 1534/33 fol, The fourth congress in pictures, WIDF, 1.-5.6.1958, p. 18.

77 SAPMO-BArch DY 31/1566, Bericht über die Pressekonferenz am 10. Dezember 1948, fol. 9.

from a “monotonous Europe”, the congress thus offered the German representatives the opportunity to discover “the strength of the peace forces in the world”⁷⁸ only three years after the end of the Second World War. For them, like many others, WIDF events provided a way to evade travel restrictions imposed by their regimes and contributed to increasing their usually curtailed contacts with foreigners.⁷⁹ Even though the GDR, just as the Soviet Union and other socialist countries, was characterized by the presence of foreign contract workers and international students, scholars have exposed how personal contacts were regulated or even suppressed by political authorities.⁸⁰ In the same vein, scholars have not only accounted for discrimination and xenophobia faced by foreign actors in countries of the socialist camp, but also for paternalistic and at times even Orientalist discourses in the East-South friendship campaigns.⁸¹ A similar dynamic played out - perhaps

somewhat less clearly - in the context of relationships between the DFD and ‘Third World’ organizations. While DFD representatives expressed admiration for the beauty and strength of women fighting in anti-colonial struggles, they were similarly convinced that these women were in need of their advice when it comes to structuring their organizations and overcoming ‘backward traditions’ – most notably ‘Islamic belief’ – in favor of ‘more progressive’ social structures.⁸²

SOLIDARITY CAMPAIGNS

WIDF’s social practices further included broad solidarity campaigns, channeled through publications, requests at the UN, solidarity letters to individual women’s organizations, and local events. Solidarity expressions are abundant in WIDF and DFD archival sources and were mostly directed towards women suffering from armed conflict. A considerable part of solidarity manifestations consisted of letters expressing German women’s solidarity in light of the hardships women in countries of the Global South were experiencing as mothers and workers, or sending congratulations on the occasions of anniversaries of independence.⁸³ Likewise, the DFD, like other mass

78 Ibid.

79 SAPMO-BArch DY 31/825, Bd. 7, Berichte über die Arbeit des DFD, fol. 29.

80 Damian Man Con Uladh, “Studium bei Freunden. Ausländische Studierende in der DDR bis 1970”, in *Ankunft – Alltag – Ausreise. Migration und interkulturelle Begegnung in der DDR Gesellschaft*, ed. Christian Müller and Patrice Poutrus (Potsdam: Zentrum für zeithistorische Forschung, 2005), 202.

81 Nikolay R. Karkov and Zhivka Valiavicharska, “Rethinking East-European Socialism: Notes Toward an Anti-Capitalist Decolonial Methodology”, *Interventions* 20, no. 6 (2018), 807, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2018.1515647>; Katsakioris, “The Soviet-South Encounter”, 148-149.

82 SAPMO-BArch DY 31/1573 Bericht über die Reise einer Delegation des DFD vom 19.-31.3.1972 nach Bangladesch und Indien, fol. 22.

83 SAPMO-BArch 31/1358, Zur Vorbereitung des Jahrbuches 1959, 8.1.1959, fol. 38.

socialist organizations, organized solidarity initiatives including material donations and recreational stays of leading women activists or politicians from the (post-)colonial world. Material consignments ranged, just to name a few examples, from sewing machines to Guinea-Bissau for an orphanage run by the women's section of the national liberation movement PAIGC, to less typical objects such as fashion magazines to Cuba.⁸⁴ In 1965, the total sum of the DFD's 'solidarity budget' amounted to 173,000 German mark, of which around a quarter was used for material donations to women's organizations in Vietnam and several African countries.⁸⁵ These campaigns fit into the wider institutionalized practice of *international solidarity* in the GDR, which was since 1960 channeled through the Solidarity Committee, structurally resembling committees in other socialist countries.⁸⁶

Besides a range of other activities, the Solidarity Committee was responsible for the provision of scholarships for educational training in the GDR, constituting one of its

most important manifestations of solidarity with the 'Third World'.⁸⁷ As educational training evolved into a highly politicized tenet in the relationships between socialist states and newly independent countries, the socialist camp began not only to provide scholarships, but they also established new institutions for this purpose.⁸⁸ For the SED-regime, the training of foreign students and contacts with governments of the sending countries represented another means by which to counteract diplomatic isolation. In March 1955, the State Secretariat for Higher Education sent a letter to all higher education institutions, emphasizing the enhancement of the GDR's scientific reputation as important aspect in strengthening friendly relations with other countries and in achieving political and diplomatic recognition of the GDR.⁸⁹ According to the DFD, between 1965 and 1975 more than 10,000 students from developing countries had spent an educational sojourn in the GDR, among whom were reportedly "numerous women".⁹⁰ While women's

84 For Guinea-Bissau: SAPMO-BArch DY 31/1432, Schreiben an den Bundesvorstand des DFD, 26.3.1968, fol. 2; For Cuba: SAPMO-BArch DY 31/1331, Brief an Federación Mujeres Cubanas, 7.2.1974, fol. 135.

85 SAPMO-BArch DY 31/1592, Plansumme für die Soli-Aktionen des DFD 1965, fol. 86.

86 Ulrich van der Heyden, *GDR International Development Policy Involvement: Doctrine and Strategies between Illusions and Reality, 1960-1990, The example (South) Africa* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2013), 72.

87 van der Heyden, "GDR International Development Policy Involvement", 73.

88 Constantin Katsakioris, "The Lumumba University in Moscow: higher education for a Soviet-Third World alliance, 1960-1991", *Journal of Global History* 14, no. 2 (2019), 281-282, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S174002281900007X>.

89 SAPMO-BArch DR 3/986, Statistische Übersicht über das Studium von ausländischen Bürgern an den Hochschulen von 1951-1963, An die Herren Rektoren der Universitäten und Hochschulen, 16 März 1955.

90 SAPMO-BArch DY 31/638, Arbeitsmaterial

organizations in the Soviet Union, Bulgaria, and Cuba provided scholarships for female students from newly independent countries, the DFD was not authorized to do so.⁹¹ Although repeatedly receiving requests for educational scholarships, the DFD had to reject them in all cases.⁹² Apart from that, although educational cooperation did include female students, this part of East-South relationships remained a predominantly male story. While statistics of the GDR Ministry of Higher Education do not specify the gender distribution of study places, it can be assumed that a vast majority were male students, given the fact that in 1969-1970 only 11.3% of all 'Third World' students in the Soviet Union were female.⁹³

WOMEN'S RELATIONSHIPS AT THE INTERFACE OF COLD WAR AND DECOLONIZATION

While interactions between women's organizations from the 'Second' and the 'Third World' had initially been taking place almost exclusively under the umbrella of the WIDF, the mid-1950s not only

signaled the beginning of growing bilateral relationships, but also became increasingly informed by diplomatic relations and foreign policy agendas of their national governments. Social practices of 'international friendship' among women thus often served political purposes with women's organizations from both the socialist camp and the (post-)colonial world conveying messages and transporting policies from their governments into the area of women's activism. For more than a decade, the Soviet Union, Eastern European regimes (including the GDR), China, and Cuba provided military and logistical support to national liberation movements in southern Africa while the US, despite a rhetorical endorsement of national self-determination, remained allies with the colonial powers and the South-African regime.⁹⁴ Against this backdrop, the DFD, like other socialist women's organizations, forged links with women's sections of national liberation movements in the Lusophone colonies in Africa, most notably the PAICG in Guinea-Bissau and the women's section of the FRELIMO in Mozambique. In 1971, the All-African Women's Conference had organized a seminar in Dar-es-Salaam in cooperation with the WIDF, bringing together African women activists and members of socialist

für die Kommission III, fol. 111.

91 SAPMO-BArch DY 31/1458, Brief an Botschafter Schulze in der VR Angola, 20.02.1986, fol. 3; for Bulgaria, see Ghodsee (2014), 257; for Soviet women, see IISH 198/92, Frauen in Aktion, 26.

92 See e.g. SAPMO-BArch DY 31/1637, Aktenvermerk über eine Besprechung mit Vorsitzendem der K.A.N.U. am 6.8.1972, fol. 1.

93 Katsakioris, "The Lumumba University in Moscow", 287.

94 Chris Saunders and Sue Onslow, "The Cold War and southern Africa, 1976-1998", in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, ed. Melvyn Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, Volume 3, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 222.

women's committees.⁹⁵ The DFD was represented by two delegates who had received a list with precise instructions by its federal board, determining their appearance and political stance to be presented at the congress. The directive set forth that they should convey the African delegates an 'understanding of the foreign policy of the SED-regime' and describe the 'successful experiences of the GDR in the implementation of equal rights for women'⁹⁶, revealing how the propagation of socialist gender models were used as instruments of cultural diplomacy, intended at "wooing women from postcolonial countries with information about the apparent success of the communist model".⁹⁷

At times, the dispatch of delegations openly served political ends. On the occasion of the first anniversary of Bangladesh in 1972, a DFD delegation was received by the Bangladeshi president, several ministers, and representatives of the women's section of the Awami League. Prior to the meeting, Thiele had been commissioned to 'pave the way' for diplomatic relations between the GDR and the young nation state, which she described as 'extraordinary political success' upon her return.⁹⁸

In July 1974, only some months after the Carnation Revolution that had laid the basis for Mozambican independence in 1975, DFD representatives were received by the FRELIMO leadership and officials of the 'Organization of Mozambican Women' (OMM), the movement's women's section. Propagated as an act of anti-imperialist solidarity, the SED-regime had been providing military assistance to FRELIMO since 1967 while contacts between the DFD and Mozambican women were firstly instigated in 1972.⁹⁹ In 1973, the two organizations had concluded a friendship treaty that stipulated solidarity donations of 10,000 German marks to the OMM. As high-ranking officials, including Samora Machel, president of the FRELIMO and later president of the country attended the 1974 meeting, it was of great symbolic and political significance not only for the DFD but, in view of Mozambique's expected independence, also with regard to future diplomatic relations between the two countries.

95 Ghodsee, "Second World, Second Sex", 126.

96 SAPMO-BArch DY 31/1579, Politische Direktive für die Reise der Delegation des Bundesvorstandes des DFD nach Dar-es-Salaam, 19. Juli bis 6. August 1972, fol. 18-19.

97 Donert, "Whose Utopia", 72.

98 SAPMO-BArch DY 31/1573 Bericht über die Reise der Delegation, fol. 16-17.

99 Klaus Storkmann, "Fighting the Cold War in Southern Africa? East German military support to FRELIMO", *Portuguese Journal of Social Science* 9, no. 2 (2010), 154-155, https://doi.org/10.1386/pjss.9.2.151_1; SAPMO-BArch DY 31/1460, Programm für den Studienaufenthalt einer Delegation der Frauenabteilung der FRELIMO in der DDR, Juli 1972, fol. 1.

II. SYSTEMS OF SYMBOLS

Together with social practices, transnational spaces are created through 'systems of symbols', understood as "complex sign[s] [...] represent[ing] a mode of giving sense to social practice and of structuring social practice by meaningful behavior".¹⁰⁰ In the context of this research, symbols gain importance especially when it comes to a common peace rhetoric, figurative representations of women, and the International Women's Day. Moreover, logos used by the WIDF in its publications, its invitations, and on its conference banners were always symbols of peace. Its official logo was a dove with an olive branch that was flying in front of a globe represented through latitudes and longitudes¹⁰¹, embodying the sought-for world peace and friendship among nations. Logos with a similar message were also employed by its national affiliates, with the DFD using the symbol of a globe with three women from different continents holding hands.¹⁰² Yet, a symbolism of peace was not only imparted through images, but also by the means of emotionally charged motives and a certain rhetoric, recurrently referring to Khrushchev's *peaceful coexistence*

and nuclear disarmament of which the Soviet Union was considered a driving force.¹⁰³ These motives were embedded within discursively created 'universalist bonds' between women all over the world, such as equating womanhood with motherhood, thus framing the political agenda of the WIDF as representing the interests of all mothers alias every woman,¹⁰⁴

Symbolic mobilization also found expression in the annual celebration of the International Women's Day by WIDF affiliates all over the world. In 1922 Lenin had, supported by Clara Zetkin, established the International Women's Day as a communist holiday.¹⁰⁵ Advocated by the WIDF and celebrated by leftist and communist women's organizations all over the world, it thus represented an important marker in the globalization of socialist claims of women's rights while, concurrently, being translated into varying local contexts. Descriptions of the latter were again circulated through WIDF publications, depicting how celebrations took shape in different local-cultural

100 Pries, "Transnational Societal Spaces", 13.

101 Vera Mackie, "From Hiroshima to Lausanne: the World Congress of Mothers and the Hahaoya Taikai in the 1950s", *Women's History Review* (2016), 4, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2015.1114317>.

102 SAPMO-BArch DY 31/1351, Freie Presse Zwickau, 1949, Vier Jahre IDFF, fol. 167.

103 SAPMO-BArch DY 31/1352, Bericht Mme. Cotton, fol. 42.

104 Jadwiga Pieper Mooney, "Fighting fascism and forging new political activism: The Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) in the Cold War", in *De-Centering Cold War History: Local and Global Change*, ed. Jadwiga E. Pieper Mooney and Fabio Lanza (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 62.

105 Temma Kaplan, "On the Socialist Origins of the International Women's Day", *Feminist Studies* 11, no. 1 (1985), 170, www.jstor.org/stable/3180144.

settings.¹⁰⁶ Likewise, 8th March was framed as an occasion for delegation visits. In 1971, DFD delegates traveled to Cuba to attend the festivities. Visiting a cultural event reserved only for women from socialist countries, the East German delegate found, presumably with some surprise, that African representatives were counted among the socialist delegations,¹⁰⁷

This small example is interesting with regard to the puzzling character of spatial conceptualizations, or notions such as the *socialist world system*. For example, Cuba had been playing an important role in the formation of the 'Third World' project, not least since hosting the 1966 Tricontinental Conference. Representing an important actor in the advancement of anti-imperialist claims on behalf of the Non-Aligned-Movement while at the same time sustaining close ties with the socialist camp, Cuba constituted a "trans-continental hub"¹⁰⁸ between Eastern Europe and the 'Third World'. This perspective was also reflected in DFD representations, emphasizing the 'friendly relationships' between the Federation of Cuban Women

(FMC) with the 'socialist states' while stressing its good relations with African countries.¹⁰⁹ The FMC thus constituted one of the WIDF's 'orthodox' communist affiliates while it concurrently incorporated other 'Third World' women's organizations into the spatial concept of the 'socialist system of countries'. Including newly independent countries into the socialist camp by acknowledging the existence of varying models of state socialism, it was therefore women's organizations like the FMC blurring the lines between the supposed 'worlds' – the socialist, capitalist, and the young nation states – which representatives of the DFD were holding on to in their conceptualizations of 'socialist global space'.

III. ARTEFACTS

The third element in the generation of transnational spaces is "the production and use of artefacts" including all "objectified results stemming from human action".¹¹⁰ Regarding women's transnational relationships, the most significant artefacts were certainly a range of publications which can be seen as "materializations of the transnational"¹¹¹ serving as a means of transnational communication. The WIDF's farthest reaching publication

106 SAPMO-BArch DY 31/1354, Anhang zum Bulletin Nr. 8, 3 Juni 1957, Information über die Feiern zum 8 März, fol. 152-154.

107 SAPMO-BArch DY 31/1331, Einschätzung der Delegation anlässlich ihres Besuches nach Kuba vom 26.2.-17.3.1971, fol. 38.

108 Berthold Unfried, "A Cuban Cycle of Developmental Socialism? Cubans and East Germans in the Socialist World System", *Journal für Entwicklungspolitik*, XXXIII (2017), 69, <https://doi.org/10.20446/JEP-2414-3197-33-3-69>.

109 SAPMO-BArch DY 31/1331, Einschätzung der Delegation anlässlich ihres Besuches nach Kuba vom 26.2.-17.3.1971, fol. 36.

110 Pries, "Transnational Societal Spaces", 13.

111 Rodogno et.al., "Shaping the Transnational Sphere", 2.

was a magazine called *Women of the Whole World*, appearing in six languages.¹¹² According to de Haan, the journal served to create an “imagined community of progressive women worldwide”¹¹³, constituting not only a source of information about the organization but also about broader political developments and women’s issues in the whole world. Moreover, the Federation frequently issued the ‘Information Bulletin’ with news about the organization and studies on different topics. Besides these two, there were many other forms of publications such as topic-specific brochures, special bulletins, conventions, recommendations, and resolutions to the UN.¹¹⁴ Artefacts resulting from the DFD’s international relationships were manifold and could have different shapes, often with several actors involved. In 1965, to name only one example, the Ghanaian women’s organization in joint action with the DFD and the Free German Youth, the official youth organization of the GDR, established a public sewing room, which was supposed to serve as a culture center.¹¹⁵

112 de Haan, “The Women’s International Democratic Federation”, 14.

113 Ibid.

114 FFBIZ, Sammlung DFB, Soz Int 50, IDFF: Gegründet am 1. Dezember 1945, 21

115 SAPMO-BArch DY 31/1636
Maßnahmenplan für die Entwicklung der Beziehungen des DFD mit der Frauenorganisation Ghanas, 15.7.1965, fol. 3.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

From the following study, it can be concluded that encounters between the DFD and women’s organizations from the (post-)colonial world both under the umbrella of the WIDF and beyond can be interpreted as giving rise to a *transnational space* of cross-border relationships. These connections generated a complex configuration of intensive and stable social practices, systems of symbols, and artefacts and evolved into a “social-spatial reference of the everyday life world”¹¹⁶ for the actors involved. Through frequent interactions, at times characterized by disagreement, these women developed, invoked, and negotiated a political agenda that tied together women’s rights, global peace, and national liberation in a broader framework of *anti-imperialism*. This agenda was translated into forms of activism at different socio-spatial levels, transforming ideas of women’s rights into particular political and cultural programs. The extent to which *imperialism*, however, referred to mechanisms of colonial suppression or rather to attempts by ‘Western’ powers to exercise global hegemony remained fluid. Speeches given by representatives revealed the often blurred lines and diverging understandings between notions

116 Ludger Pries, *Transnationalisierung: Theorie und Empirie grenzüberschreitender Vergesellschaftung* (Wiesbaden: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2010), 30.

of imperialism, colonialism, and fascism.¹¹⁷

While the WIDF at times proved to be a space of contention when it came to challenging attempts by communist women to universalize socialist conceptualizations of women's rights, this seems less the case - at least from what is reported in DFD accounts - in the context of bilateral relationships of the DFD. Part of these imbalances was certainly owed to the fact that material transfers were exclusively flowing from the GDR to 'Third World' organizations. Under the flagship of international solidarity, German representatives portrayed themselves as being in a further stage of a path that women in newly independent countries were just about to take. A significant part of the DFD's communication in fact consisted in pushing assertions that socialism had not only eradicated inequalities between the sexes, but any forms of racial discrimination.¹¹⁸ Its claim to be different from 'Western imperialists' when it came to oppressive relationships,

national self-determination, and economic dependencies, however, was rooted in educational attitudes and narratives of 'advice' and 'help' which, paradoxically enough, structurally resembled the patronizing and imperialist boundaries they were actually directed against.

This latter dynamic is related to the recurring notion of 'progress', considered as contrasting with the 'barbarity of war'.¹¹⁹ Even though 'progress' was never explicitly defined and certainly meant different things to members, WIDF and DFD documents however suggest that its substance ties in with what Nikolay R. Karkov and Zhivka Valiavicharska describe as "evolutionary developmentalism" characterized by 'socialist frameworks of modernization, social progress, and liberation'.¹²⁰ Principles of women's rights, embracing dimensions of peace, nuclear disarmament, and economic modernization, and their advocacy in the context of transnational congresses, local campaigns, and at the UN were thus framed in a universalist model of socialist development; forming part of what has recently entered the scholarly debate as *alternative globalizations* during the Cold War.¹²¹ Consequently, even though women from the (post-)colonial world were actively involved in shaping the

117 See e.g. SAPMO-BArch DY 31/1352 Diskussionsbeitrag von Mamia Chentouf, Delegierte der Nationalen Befreiungsfront Algeriens in Vertretung der algerischen Frauen, IV Kongress der IDFF in Wien, 1-5.6.1958, fol. 122-123. In her speech, the Algerian women's rights activist Mamia Chentouf linked colonial oppression with fascism, framing the war in Algeria as waged by 'the fascists of the world' who were 'posing a threat to world peace'.

118 SAPMO-BArch DY 31/905, Information der DDR: zur Verwirklichung der Konvention über die Beseitigung aller Formen der Diskriminierung der Frauen, 2.3.1982, fol. 1.

119 FFBIZ, Sammlung DFB, Soz Int 50, IDFF: Gegründet am 1. Dezember 1945, p. 1.

120 Karkov and Valiavicharska, "Rethinking East-European Socialism", 804.

121 Mark, Kalinovsky, and Marung, "Alternative Globalizations", Introduction.

women's rights agenda underlying the relationships, the latter was rooted in a development paradigm that automatically placed women from the socialist camp in a position of 'further' development. Women's organizations, their transnational relationships, and gender structures more broadly should therefore not be excluded from scholarship on global modernization projects throughout the Global Cold War.