THE WOMEN AND RECONSTRUCTION

After years of suppression, German women's groups again are meeting together, gradually developing powers of discussion and a sense of responsibility for activities in their country. Because the first steps of reorganization are difficult after years of no practice, the conference of German women held last month at Bad Boll was partially a success and somewhat a disappointment.

Representatives of women's organizations from all over Germany met to acquaint each other with activities now in progress, pool their experience and ideas, and discuss the part that women could and should play in the reconstruction of Germany. Their first objective was realized; the second and third only to a limited degree, and the Germans felt this more keenly than the British and American guests whose expectations had been set less high.

The effort to form a German-wide group was unsuccessful because many delegates believed that they did not come provided with that authority. They felt that such a decision would be too sudden and that such an organization should be built more slowly on firmer foundations. It was the general opinion that the true and very great value of the conference lay in the mutual acquaintance of a large number of leading women in different zones from different walks of life and political viewpoints, and that the foundations for co-operation and understanding were being laid through this acquaintance.

The number of delegates was deliberately set at only 85, the capacity of the conference buildings at Bad Boll, so that the women could live together in the country and continue their discussions unhindered between meetings. Actually interest was so great that 204 delegates appeared, some without invitations, and managed to find places to stay in the neighborhood.

Delegates from all four zones appeared, although those representing the Soviet Zone were zone workers living in Berlin. Forty-two organizations were represented, including some of the largest of the non-partisan women's organizations, such as the Stuededeutsche Frauenarbeitkraiz and the Frauenverband Hesse. Representation was predominantly on the side of church workers and professional women, with only a scattering from whitecollar, labor, and farm workers. All political parties within Germany were represented. Efforts to bring in women from outside Germany were unsuccessful.

The speeches, for the most part, did not get beyond generalizations, on which all parties agree, but a few offered concrete applications, on which they do not agree. The original plan of dividing into several discussion groups for part of the program, as suggested by the American guests at the planning committee meeting, was abandoned. Discussion as a technique leading to action has not been fostered in Germany. Opinions were expressed with freedom and received with tolerance, but there was very little real discussion. It was an encouraging sign, however, that there seemed to be a general realization of this lack which is the first step towards improvement.

The proportion of younger people and the share they were given in the conference were too small despite much talk about the important part they must play.

By Elsa Fay Hartshorne

The principal speaker at the first day's meeting on "Peace and International Understanding" was Frau von Zahn-Harnack, founder and president of the "Wilmerstrper Frauenbund 1945" and one of the early workers for woman suffrage. Inserted into the middle of her speech, to underline the absolute necessity of avoiding any future war, was a description of atomic energy and the atomic bomb given by the physicist Freda Wuesthoff, from Lindau. The immense popularity of this talk showed how thirsty the women were for precise knowledge about atomic energy, and their reactions indicated that widespread information might be the best preventive of war.

In the afternoon, Katarina von Kardorff of Berlin spoke. She is a former member of the Reichstag and her husband was for many years its vice-president. Hers was a plea for the unification of Germany, for economic recovery an appeal to women that the fault for the past lies with men, that the women have let themselves be ruled too long.

A most effective talk was delivered by Frau Thea Baehnisch of Hanover, the only woman president of a Regierungszirk in Germany. A woman of about 45, a direct, efficient, and forceful personality, she said she had not intended, when elected, to concern herself with women's problems, but was soon forced to do so, standing as she did "in splendid isolation" among the men. She had to decide whether to execute her job as a man (for which she had the preparation), but chose instead to work from the point of view of a woman and found that her influence showed as little as a spring in a desert. Women have come through the war less damaged; they are tougher, and they comprise almost two-thirds of the votes. These facts make the small part women now play in public life something to be ashamed of, she insisted. Somehow women's interest in this work must be captured.

Frau Baehnisch saw in non-partisan women's organizations the solution to this need, and said that work only through the parties is entirely insufficient. This is one opportunity to
crystallize women's opinions and make them felt, she said, but warned at the same time that if the work were not truly non-partisan the opportunity would be lost and with it any chance for women's influence for all time.

Frau Baehnisch described the concrete gains which had been made in Hanover by the committees of the non-partisan women's organizations. On one of these a Communist labor leader sat near to a nun working out together such practical problems as the creation of a women's secretariat to guide people through the maze of bureaucratic procedure, the spreading of information on the use of corn in cooking, the designing and manufacturing of cheap, simple, durable furniture. Frau Baehnisch closed with the statement that a "Democratic Women's League of Germany" was still a dream which could be realized only by slow and careful building from the bottom up.

"Discussion" followed in the form of talks by anyone who turned in her name as having something to say. There were pleas to work through the political parties as the quickest and most effective way; protests against training girls to believe that boys always take precedence over them. Conscientious objectors, with protection by the law, were suggested as a solution to the problem of war.

The second day was devoted to youth problems. Frau Heidrich from Freiburg (French Zone) spoke from her 20 years' experience working in a school in Cuba. She emphasized the necessity of excluding all fear from parent-teacher-child relationships. She described the "three R's" as taught in her German school as Reverence, Rectitude, and Responsibility, and praised the American schools for their development in children of a sensibility for the feelings of others, self-help, and absolute honesty. It would be impossible, she said, to imagine a school in Germany where children did not copy their work from each other. Some in the audience insisted that this was no longer true.

A place was made for approximately 15 young delegates to sit in front and face the room. They were introduced by Marie Elisabeth Lueders. She was German Democratic Party member of the Reichstag under the Weimar Republic and is, even now at 60 a vivid personality who evidently has become very popular with the younger groups. She declared—as an economist and lawyer—that German youth should bear no guilt; that it was ridiculous to give them an amnesty, because they should have been declared not responsible. She herself also could admit no share in the guilt since she fought against the Nazi regime.

The young people spoke with a refreshing clarity and directness. Their points of view differed widely, from those who thought the churches had failed completely to offer help, to those who saw the salvation of Germany in a religious revival. They were mostly students and journalists. Workers were represented only by a labor organizer and there was no delegate from the farm or country population. Diverse as their opinions were, they shared distrust and disillusion, an unwillingness to commit themselves to a party, and a wish to cast off nationalism in favor of internationalism. They had a private meeting in the evening at which they were outspoken in their criticism of the long-winded and diffuse talk at the conference. The ideas of Frau Dr. Baehnisch also carried much weight with them.

The afternoon of the second day was devoted to education towards civic responsibility. Several persons spoke briefly for coeducation and the elimination of nationalism in teaching. Frau Kipp-Kaule representing the Trade Unions (Freier Deutscher Gewerkschafts bund) urged a unified school system without the many branches which today allow a monopoly in education to those who go to the "higher" branches.

Miss Alice Cameron of the British Military Government described the evolution of women's organizations in England and some of the concrete things they have accomplished. She made a distinction between two kinds of responsibility: one which carries out orders from above—in which Germans are well schooled; and the other which recognizes independently what is right, and needs doing, and does it.

Frau Barbara von Renthe, new chief of social welfare for the Soviet Zone, discussed the welfare program being carried out in eastern Germany. She said she had the feeling that the women of the West did not care to hear about the East and that the West distrusted the East because they said "we can live as we did before the war." The audience loudly expressed opposite views. "We in the East are not going to build a house in the old style which would then fall in," she stated.

Seized Arms Disposal

The disposal of surrendered or seized weapons and ammunition now in the custody of Military Government units was explained in OMGUS cable to Land OMG's. It read:

Officers in charge of MG units will immediately contact the nearest military post commander and arrange for the immediate turning over and disposal by the military post authorities of all weapons, ammunition, and explosive surrendered to or seized by Military Government during the recent arms amnesty. Army authorities are being instructed to make arrangements to accept custody and responsibility for further disposition of such material.

Weapons classified as museum specimens or specimens of historic value will not be disposed of as provided in the foregoing. MG officers having such weapons in their possession, or knowledge of the location of such weapons, will request the Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives Officer of the Land Office of Military Government, or such German authorities as may be designated by that office, to approve the classification of such weapons as museum specimens or specimens of historic value.

Upon approval of such classification, the weapons may be placed in a public museum, provided: the museum officials approve and the museum is secure and is not being operated in violation of Control Council or Military Government Enactments.

The Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives Officer of the Land OMG will at his discretion turn back to the German owner those items of this category which have no museum value.