

Women's Activism during the Revolution: Viennese Democratic Women's Association (1848–50)

Abstract

The statutes of the Viennese Democratic Women's Association, founded during the Revolution of 1848–49, define the group's various political, social, and humanitarian objectives: education aimed at democracy and women's equality, and assistance for the victims of revolutionary fighting. While men were allowed to attend group meetings on special occasions, only women were permitted as active, voting members. The following excerpts also include the association's 1848 petition to the Austrian Constituent Assembly. The petition was an unsuccessful, last-ditch attempt to mobilize the militia against approaching counter-revolutionary forces.

Source

I. Statutes of the first Viennese Democratic Women's Association (1848)

Price: 2 kr. C.M.

§ 1

The name of the association is: Viennese Democratic Women's Association

§ 2

The task of the association is threefold: political, social, and charitable:

- a) political, to inform oneself through reading and instructive lectures about the welfare of the Fatherland, to disseminate the democratic principle in all women's circles, to inspire the love of freedom in a child's heart from the very beginning of a child's upbringing, and at the same time to strengthen the German element;
- b) social, to strive for the equality of women by establishing public primary schools [*Volksschulen*] and higher educational institutions, to reform the curriculum for women, and to improve the state of the poorer girls through loving advancement;
- c) charitable, to express the deeply-felt gratitude of the women of Vienna for the blessings of liberty by providing conscientious care for all victims of the Revolution.

§ 3

The association shall consist of active (female) and supporting male and female members.

§ 4

Active members are obliged to exert themselves on behalf of the association as best they can and in every way. Consideration is given to each member's self-chosen primary occupation.

§ 5

Active members pay 30 kr. the first month and 20 kr. C. M. a month thereafter, supporting members pay 20 kr. C. M. monthly. The former contributions flow into the association's treasury, the latter into the support fund.

§ 6

Each member shall receive a card with the association's seal, which is shown at the meetings.

§ 7

Only women of good character and a free-thinking disposition can be members, both active and supporting. Should it happen, against all hope, that a member has joined who does not meet these criteria, she can be excluded by a majority vote.

§ 8

Gentlemen can be included in the meetings as honorary members only by way of exception, but they must refrain from voting.

§ 9

Female supporting members may attend the meetings, but they must refrain from voting.

§ 10

No differences in social rank shall exist among the members. The form of address is simply “Mrs.” [*Frau*] and “Miss” [*Fräulein*]. Married women take no precedence over unmarried women.

§ 11

The association is governed by a committee of five members (with three substitute members), of which one is the permanent chair, one the secretary, and one the treasurer.

§ 12

The committee runs all the affairs of the association.

§ 13

The committee must step down after three months, though it may be re-elected in whole or in part. The entire committee, or part of it, can also be compelled to resign earlier through a majority vote.

§ 14

The chairwoman grants the right to speak in the order in which speakers have asked to be recognized and moderates the debate. She can ask the speaker to stay on topic or issue a call to order only if a speaker departs substantially from the topic of the speech, if she engages in personal attacks, or if this is necessary to re-establish an orderly debate. After twice issuing a call to stay on topic or a call to order without success, she may revoke the speaker’s right to speak.

§ 15

In urgent cases the committee has the right to make decisions and carry them out, though it has the responsibility and obligation to bring the matter up for consideration at the next meeting.

§ 16

The clerks [*Schriftführerinnen*] keep a record of members and guests and a brief account of the debates and decisions, which are published. They also attend to the association’s correspondence and write down the names of those who wish to speak in the order in which they have asked to be recognized, for or against the topic of the debate.

§ 17

Every motion that is supported by three members must be brought to a vote.

§ 18

The member who proposed the motion is the last to speak. Like any other member, she can ask to be recognized three times during the debate.

§ 19

Once a vote has been taken, no further debate about the same motion is allowed to take place at the same meeting.

§ 20

All votes are decided by a majority vote. Voting is by written ballot.

§ 21

Every meeting requires half the members plus one.

§ 22

At least two regular meetings shall take place every week.

§ 23

Selecting the location and the weekdays for the meetings is left up to the association.

§ 24

Plenary sessions – which one-third of the members must attend – must be called for committee elections, changes to the statutes, larger expenses (over 50 fl. C. M.), important decisions that affect the welfare and existence of the association, and the intended dissolution of the association.

§ 25

The committee has the right to summon extraordinary sessions, just as every active member is called upon to come to the association's premises on important occasions, if possible without being summoned.

§ 26

The committee will report on the state of the association's treasury at the end of each month.

§ 27

Every three months, at a general meeting of all active and supporting members, a report will be given about the charitable work of the association (with respect to § 2.c) and the state of the support fund; the supporting members shall appoint five from among themselves as a commission to audit the report.

§ 28

All requests must be submitted in writing, and only delegations representing groups can be admitted.

§ 29

Placards will be signed by the committee on behalf of the association. Addresses and petitions shall be signed at a meeting by all members present.

§ 30

The chairwoman shall propose members for delegations, and the association shall decide by a majority vote.

§ 31

The association shall make it its task to set up similar associations throughout the country, which shall correspond with the association in Vienna as the central association.

§ 32

A commission shall be appointed for every suburb of Vienna, and it shall be composed, if possible, of members who live in the district in question. They shall reinforce themselves with female helpers, and shall establish branch or affiliated associations for the purely charitable purposes of the central association.

§ 33

For the public's greater convenience, every active member may receive donations of every kind in her

home, provide receipts for them, and then hand them over to the treasurer. – To that end, every member shall be given a subscription sheet and a certain number of cards embossed with the association's seal.

§ 34

Every member is free to leave the association. Only members of the committee must provide notice eight days ahead of time.

Admission location: Kärtnerstr. 1073, third floor, back stairway

Carolin Prin

President

To be reached in the office of the newspaper *The Radical*, Dorotheergasse 1119.

II. Actions, Activity, and Composition of the Association (1850)

Like the workers' associations, a democratic women's association also joined the democratic association. That association was set up around the beginning of September by the Baroness von Perin, née Baroness von Pasqualati. I estimate that it had 40 ladies as members, which were of the middle class. This association made it its task to support the poor and promote the diffusion of democratic ideas. I had little influence, really none at all. The ladies always participated in the torchlight parades of the democratic club and on several occasions they presented flower garlands to Tausenau^[1] as signs of respect. During the October Revolution this ladies' association, which was joined by about 300 young women, went to the *Reichstag* and handed the members meeting in permanent session a petition to call out the militia. Other than that I don't know anything about this association. I must note, though, that it is a lie that is being disseminated that the members of this ladies' association are prostitutes and that they took part in the fighting at the barricades with utter abandon. The women who fought on the barricades were from the working population. After the occupation of Vienna, the president, a fanatical elderly lady, was arrested, though it is said that she was released a short time later after having been caned.

III. Petition to Call in the Militia (October 16, 1848)

In the session of the Reichstag on October 17, the following petition was presented by four ladies and was very favorably received, although, as is known, the decision of the Reichstag regarding the militia was negative.

Venerable Reichstag!

The liberty of the fatherland is in danger! A cry of pain penetrates all hearts, an emotion quickens every breast!

Moved by the grave importance of the desperate conditions of our time, which call us to inevitable battle to escape military despotism, we consider it our duty to unite our wishes with those of our brethren, in order to present the venerable Reichstag with the urgent request that it seize the reins of government with vigorous force before it is too late. The courage and determination of our freedom fighters – we can say, the entire nation, which is ready to fight to the last man for the good cause – is so great that we would truly be able to defeat the enemy on our own. But long hesitations always have a weakening effect especially on those people whose resolution is half-hearted. It would thus be of the utmost necessity that a venerable *Reichstag* should call in the militia, which – with tremendous strength – is merely waiting for its nod, and thus – the more imposing the power, the greater the military forces, the fewer the victims will be – to gain a victory which has already been bought dearly enough with so much unnecessary bloodshed.

Now is the time to act. Every minute of delay may cost many human lives – as far as we can see, we

behold the murderous cannons drawing up before us – the destruction of the threat of military despotism shall be our rallying cry! We must no longer delay in preserving our precious achievements at any cost. O, hear our warning, our cry for help, representatives of a free people! Do not invite reproach from both your contemporaries and posterity alike through timid hesitation and deliberation when the welfare of millions is at stake. Free men of the nation, prove that you are worthy of the trust of so great a nation, and erect for yourselves a memorial in the annals of history that is indestructible. Citizen! We place our trust in your proven sense of duty.

Vienna, 16 October 1848

On behalf of the First Democratic Viennese Women's Association, Karoline Perin, Chairwoman (and about 1,000 signatures).

NOTES

[1] Tausenau was a prominent Viennese leftist and editor of the newspaper *The Radical* – ed.

Source: Statuten des ersten Wiener demokratischen Frauenvereins. Kriegsarchiv Wien, Zivil- und Militärgouvernement Wien. Politische Erhebungskommission. Post I. 100/155; Aktionen, Wirkung und Zusammensetzung des Vereins. Das Vereinswesen zu Wien im Jahre 1848. In: *Deutsche Monatsschrift für Politik, Wissenschaft, Kunst und Leben*, Hrsg. von Adolph Kolatschek, I. Jahrgang 1850, Stuttgart, p. 205f; Petition zur Einberufung des Landsturmes, *Der Radikale*, Wien, Nr. 106, 20. Oktober 1848, p. 426; reprinted in Gerlinde Hummel-Haasis, *Schwester zerreit eure Ketten: Zeugnisse zur Geschichte der Frauen in der Revolution von 1848/49*. Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuchverlag, 1982, pp. 247–53.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

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