

**The World Association of Women Entrepreneurs, 1945–1970s:  
Objectives and Results within Cold War Europe**

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The World Association of Women Entrepreneurs (Femmes Chefs d'Entreprises Mondiales, FCEM) currently organises national affiliates in 35 states, and has been headed since 1998 by the Tunisian entrepreneur Layla Khaïat. Despite its global spread, the association is scarcely known and its networking activities attract little public attention because, much like its male counterparts, it prefers to continue as an elite organisation without appealing to a mass base. FCEM started rather differently when the founder, metal processing entrepreneur Yvonne Foinant, created the French branch at the close of World War II and went on to disseminate the idea throughout Western Europe and initiate the establishment of affiliates. In my paper, I would like to inquire into FCEM's process of formation from the 1940s to the 1970s. My framework will be Cold War Europe. The analysis will begin with the concept behind the association, examining its attractiveness for non-French women entrepreneurs who were persuaded to found affiliates strictly subordinate to the French statutes. I will then describe the foundation of national affiliates, exploring the interests behind affiliation and the anticipated economic benefits. Finally, I will look at efforts to strengthen the international network, emphasising changes within the commitment of different national affiliates. Throughout my paper, I will draw on the history of 'Business and Professional Women' to elaborate with more precision how and with what consequences the association of women entrepreneurs contributed to the development of multilateral economic relations, and how it promoted the integration of women entrepreneurs into their national economies and national economic policy.

### *1. The Concept behind FCEM*

Yvonne-Edmond Foinant, 'le président fondateur de l'association Les Femmes Chefs d'Entreprise Mondiales' und Grand officier de la Légion d'honneur, was born on 10 October 1892 in Paris, the daughter of an engineer. In 1914, at the beginning of the First World War, she took over the directorship of the Savarin & Foinant tool factory in Charleville in the Ardennes. She was twenty-two years old at the time. The plant, which specialised in wrenches, had been founded by her husband and her brother-in-law in 1913. During the war, the company acquired exclusive rights from the Roll steelworks in Gerlafingen, Switzerland to manufacture and distribute their spanners in France. After the return of her husband in 1918 Yvonne Foinant remained active in the management of the company. She was now responsible for administration, bookkeeping and sales. From 1913 to 1928 she held the title of 'directrice commerciale'. After her husband's death in 1928 she changed the name of the company to 'Savarin & veuve Foinant' and for the next thirty years served as 'gérante statuaire' or general manager. In the years up to 1939 Foinant captured the tool market in England, Switzerland, Holland, Poland, Spain and Syria against strong German competition. In March 1938 she was named advisor to the Commerce Extérieur de la France. From 1939 Foinant mainly manufactured specialised tools for the French armaments industry.

Foinant was involved in economic policy from early on. In 1930 she became vice president of the Federation of the French Metalworking Industry, and in 1938 the representative of the Ardennes region in the French employers' association, the Confédération générale du patronat français (later CNPF, now MEDEF). She held various positions on the boards of industrial associations and in the French employers' association between 1941 and 1945, before becoming the first elected female member of the Paris Chamber of Industry and Commerce in December 1945.<sup>1</sup> While serving in an honorary capacity in a number of associations, she became increasingly convinced that women

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<sup>1</sup> Announcements of Industrie- und Handelskammer (IHK) Osnabrück Nr. 6, June 1966, p. 194, in: Archiv Verband deutscher Unternehmerinnen (VdU), Berichte über VvU Anfang 1962-Anfang 1973. Ordner Presse; La grande histoire de la lutte des femmes, in: [http://www.journee-de-la-femme.com/histoire-access-pouvoir-politique vom 31.03.2005](http://www.journee-de-la-femme.com/histoire-access-pouvoir-politique-vom-31.03.2005); Philippe Amedodji, *Les Femmes et leur Participation à la Gouvernance économique en Europe*, Université Liège 2003 ; Bergische IHK Remscheid v. 30.7.1951. Copy, in: VdU-Archiv Berlin. Ordner Gründungsunterlagen, Satzungsänderungen, Vereinsregister 1954-1975.

entrepreneurs needed to organise themselves in order for their achievements to be recognised by the trade associations and the public, and for them to be elected in larger numbers to the trade associations. To this end she founded the federation Femmes Chefs d'Entreprise, which was registered as an association in Paris on 11 February 1945.<sup>2</sup>

Foinant explained this step with the observation that 'les femmes qui dirigent leur entreprise et connaissent les aspérités du poste de commande n'ont pas les mêmes droits ni les mêmes avantages que les hommes alors qu'elles ont les mêmes charges, les mêmes devoirs'.<sup>3</sup> Foinant was a feminist who fought for women's rights to equal working conditions, equal pay and for the regular payment of women who worked in family enterprises. Foinant's feminism, however, was not considered militant, and she herself confessed her distaste 'de cet esprit club anglo-saxon des femmes et de comportements de dames seules'.<sup>4</sup> She stressed instead, 'L'homme et la femme sont les deux yeux de notre civilisation et il importe que celle-ci reste binoculaire'.<sup>5</sup> From this position she vehemently disagreed that entrepreneurship and trade associations could be reserved for one sex – the male sex. She called for collaboration between men and women under conditions of equality. In order to achieve this goal she founded the Association of Women Entrepreneurs.

When did Foinant first encounter feminism, and where did her very clear rejection of the 'Anglo-Saxon club spirit' come from? In August 1930, the U.S. lawyer Lena Madelin Phillips, president of the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs, which she had founded in 1919, met with representatives of fifteen other countries in Geneva to establish the International Federation of Business and Professional Women (IFBPW).<sup>6</sup> The aim of this organisation was and is to strengthen the economic position of professional women. Before the founding of the international organisation in Geneva, Phillips had undertaken two promotional tours through Europe in 1928 and 1929. On those trips, Phillips and her American federation colleagues informed their counterparts in France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Italy and Switzerland about organising professional

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<sup>2</sup> Statuts of F.C.E.M., founded as F.C.E., registered on 11. February 1945 at the police headquarters serial number 4996, changed on 19. April 1952 serial number 8409, changed in F.C.E.M. on 13. May 1965 serial number 65/614, in: Übersetzung der Statuten v. 20.12.1991, in: Archiv VdU, Ordner FCEM.

<sup>3</sup> Amedodji, *Les Femmes et leur Participation*, p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> Amedodji, *Les Femmes et leur Participation*, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> La Presse v. 5.10.1948, quoted from Amedodji, *Les Femmes et leur Participation*, p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.bpw-international.org/about-bpw/about-bpw-history v. 11.05.2007](http://www.bpw-international.org/about-bpw/about-bpw-history-v-11.05.2007), bes. 1930: Hours of Destiny; Angelika Timm, *Auf dem besten Wege. Zur Geschichte des Verbandes Business and Professional Women – Germany 1951 bis 2001*, Königstein/Taunus 2001, pp. 11ff.

women and inspired the establishment of national associations. The French BPW under the leadership of Yvonne Netter was among the six largest national associations that gathered in Geneva in 1930.

The IFBPW sought to improve the economic position of their clientele by promoting friendly relations among the qualified women of all countries and supporting cooperation in the pursuit of common interests, across party-political and religious lines. The federation's journal *Widening Horizons* contributed to this objective. More important, however, were the annual or biennial world congresses and board meetings that brought members of the national associations together beginning in 1930. The women also formed six permanent committees on the international level to address key tasks. The Parisian publisher M. G. Vernier headed the Committee on Commercial Exchange. In order to facilitate cooperation among the members, she suggested first 'that a real business woman should be appointed as the head of each national branch of this Committee' and second that contacts be intensified with those chambers of commerce that did not yet admit women members.<sup>7</sup>

In the 1930s the IFBPW held their board meetings in Paris, and it was here, too, that they organised the second International Congress.<sup>8</sup> The Congress was accompanied by elaborate banquets in order to facilitate conversations with members of government, officials from the Foreign Office, municipal administration and prefecture of police as well as the Chamber of Commerce. Although there is no concrete evidence, it seems likely that Yvonne Foinant, who had been active in trade associations since 1930, became acquainted with the IFBPW or their French member association in Paris in the 1930s. Her formulation of the aims of the association of women entrepreneurs and some of the political demands such as fair payment for women working in family businesses reveal an astonishing proximity to the Business and Professional Women.

Foinant also adopted the strategy developed by Phillips and the IFBPW of exporting an association formed in her own country and establishing its position of power by means of these international contacts. In 1945, Yvonne Foinant was no longer satisfied with her French association of women entrepreneurs. She saw the writing on the wall in the

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.bpw-international.org/about-bpw/about-bpw-history.v.11.05.2007> , History: 1931-1935 First Signs of Growth; Barbara Stambolis, Zum Wandel der Geschlechtertopographie am Beispiel männlicher und weiblicher Klubs, in: *Feministische Studien* 23, 2005, H. 1, pp. 114-128.

<sup>8</sup> The first international congress took place in Vienna in 1931, board meetings in Paris in 1932, an international exhibition in Paris in 1937.

economically devastated Western Europe of the immediate post-war years, with its desire for rapid reconstruction. Clearly following her own business connections, she initiated new associations in neighbouring countries. By January 1950, she had expanded her French association of Femmes Chefs d'Entreprises to an association of Femmes Chefs d'Entreprises Européennes. All new associations had to adopt the statutes of the French organisation and were accordingly known as 'provinces' of the French Femmes Chefs d'Entreprises. The first branch to be founded was in Belgium in 1948, with the Netherlands following one year later. At a 1949 meeting in Paris the existing associations of women entrepreneurs resolved to build a European network, and in January 1950 the statutes of the European association were signed in Brussels, with French designated as the official language.<sup>9</sup> From now on, new national associations were founded as members of the European and later of the world association. The presidents of the existing associations, especially Foinant, then promoted the founding of affiliates in the Federal Republic of Germany and other Western European countries. According to the president of the Dutch association, Carrierelensvelt, the aim was to extend the Benelux concept to the rest of Europe and to achieve European unity through economic cooperation, 'd'arriver en d'autres mots à une paix réelle basée sur de saines notions de justice humaine'.<sup>10</sup> Particularly in regard to securing lasting peace, it was important to integrate (West) German women entrepreneurs into the European association and not, in light of the Second World War and the terrible experiences of occupation, to exclude them.

According to the statutes, the first four paragraphs of which remain identical all over the world even today, the association's aim is to represent women entrepreneurs.<sup>11</sup> Profit-making considerations and political discussions are explicitly prohibited. Entrepreneurs are defined as the owners and directors of companies, and it is precisely here that the organised women entrepreneurs differ clearly from the Business and Professional Women: eligibility is based not merely on the potential member's activities and qualifications, but also her proprietorship of a company or business. Unlike the IFBPW, the World Association had no ambitions to become a mass organisation. The prescribed proof of company ownership

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<sup>9</sup> Amedodji, *Les Femmes et leur Participation*, p. 10.

<sup>10</sup> Bulletin de la Chambre de commerce néerlandais en France, novembre 1951, quoted from Amedodji, *Les Femmes et leur Participation*, p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> Letter Käte Ahlmann zo RA Dr. R. G. Müller, Hamburg, 29.12.1954 attached: Letter Madame Foinant, Paris, 23.12.1954; Bases Nationales des Statuts, adoptés à Bruxelles, lors du congrès européen tenu le 16.1.1950 dans les locaux de la Chambre de Commerce.

ensured that the organisation could present itself as the elite association of a small minority of women entrepreneurs. It was their interests and rights that the association represented; they were to be put forward as candidates for professional organisations and informed of all the positions open to them. The aims were to promote understanding, friendship and solidarity among them. In order to further these objectives, the European and World Association of Women Entrepreneurs, respectively, organised an annual international congress lasting several days. The Comitée Européenne and the Comitée Mondiale, that is, the boards made up of the national presidents of the European and World Association, respectively, charged one of the member associations with holding the congress, and the association met alternately in Paris, Brussels, Amsterdam or London, in the order in which the affiliates had been established. The members of the national associations decided individually about participation, and the leadership of the national groups then assumed the task of registration and offered travel packages. The one-day working meetings of the international congress were integrated into an extensive programme lasting several days, which offered opportunities for making contacts and initiating new business relationships. Tours of companies and receptions organised by the local authorities or trade associations (such as the chambers of industry and commerce) were a fixed component of the congresses. Every international congress was crowned by the association's gala dinner, to which the board invited the elite of the guest country's trade associations and officials, in particular. Foinant and her associations could thus quite rightly boast of having taken up the theme of 'Women and European Integration' (to quote the title of a lecture given at the 1955 international congress in Amsterdam) at an extraordinarily early date.

In 1945 the IFBPW also became active again. Staff members of the American, English and Norwegian associations, in particular, travelled across Europe to encourage and support the rebuilding and new establishment of the Federation of Business and Professional Women. It was agreed that the French branch of the BPW should be reorganised first, proceeding from there to Belgium and the other neighbouring European countries. The IFBPW organised their first post-war international congress in 1947 in Paris. Here, if not before, the president of the French association of women entrepreneurs Yvonne Foinant must have made the acquaintance of the Anglo-Saxon clubwomen from whom she distanced herself so radically. She juxtaposed a French-speaking organisational model orientated towards 'old Europe' to the IFBPW's model of an English-speaking international

organisation orientated towards the U.S. example. Incidentally, interested German women also attended the Paris congress, as well as the IFBPW's international congress of 1950 in London. They went on to found the *Verband berufstätiger Frauen* (Federation of Professional Women) in April 1951 in Wiesbaden, which was integrated into the existing international network of the IFBPW.<sup>12</sup>

The French and later European association of women entrepreneurs had a different orientation from its competitor organisation of professional women. It was not concerned with representing the interests of employed women at international organisations such as the International Labour Organization in Geneva, nor did it intend to serve in an advisory capacity or support scientific studies of women's working conditions. The association of women entrepreneurs regarded itself not as a professional association but as a trade association, which wanted to be able to participate along with the existing national and international associations. The founding of a European and then a World Association of Women Entrepreneurs was thus integrated in a fundamentally different manner into the process of economic reconstruction in Europe after 1945 and into the resulting process of the formation of a European economic community.

The French economy re-established itself after 1945, and particularly after 1947 with the European Recovery Program, the official name of the American Marshall Plan. The modernisation programme introduced by the planning commission under Jean Monnet proved successful, and France joined in the general post-war upswing in Europe.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, hopes for French political hegemony in Europe now waned. In the increasingly tense Cold War, the idea of creating a framework for European integration, which drew West Germany into the camp of the western allies and kept it under control at the same time gained in plausibility. The French government agreed to German participation in the Marshall Plan on the condition that industry in the Ruhr region was placed under the control of a community of interested European states. France also suggested the formation of a European customs union, which was to provide the basis for common economic regulatory structures for Western Europe, along the lines of the Benelux customs union established in September 1944.

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<sup>12</sup> Timm, *Auf dem besten Wege*, pp. 25-27.

<sup>13</sup> Wilfried Loth, *Geschichte Frankreichs im 20. Jahrhundert*, Frankfurt am Main 1992, pp. 141f., 147ff., 188ff.; Angus Maddison, *Economic Policy and Performance in Europe 1913-1970*, in: *The Fontana Economic History of Europe. The Twentieth Century*, Part Two, ed. Carlo M. Cipolla, Glasgow 1978, S. 442-491, esp. pp. 476ff.

The Western European community structures that the French government sought to promote after its fundamental decision in favour of a Germany affiliated with the West included the Brussels Pact of March 1948, which gave institutional form to political and military cooperation between France, the United Kingdom and the Benelux states. Finally, one should also mention the French plan for a European regulatory body for coal and steel production, which Schuman presented on 9 May 1950 in Paris.<sup>14</sup> Schuman's plan, which was controversial in France, put its hopes in a partnership with Germany arising from economic cooperation. The two selected economic sectors, coal and steel, were of key significance for economic growth, and steel production in particular was considered the benchmark for a nation's power and military potential. Schuman's plan of sectoral European integration is now rightly considered the 'hour of Europe's birth and Schuman celebrated as the midwife of Europe. Integration, which was initially only sectoral, was soon replaced by the integration of the whole economy, and the opening of markets followed gradually in the 1960s, within the framework of the European Economic Community (EEC) established by the 1957 Treaties of Rome.<sup>15</sup>

The French government's various initiatives for the economic and political integration of Western Europe after 1945 met with little support in the United Kingdom<sup>16</sup>, but they influenced entrepreneurs on the Continent. The annual meetings of the chairmen of the national trade associations, which had established themselves in the 1920s, resumed in 1946, and in 1949, on the initiative of French industrialists, they were institutionalised in the Conseil des fédérations industrielles d'Europe (CFIE).<sup>17</sup> These yearly meetings attracted the chairmen of the trade associations along with their wives, and aside from informal discussions they also featured a broad programme of leisure activities. From 1951, Fritz

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<sup>14</sup> Hans-Jürgen Wagener, Thomas Eger, Heiko Fritz, *Europäische Integration. Recht und Ökonomie, Geschichte und Politik*, München 2006, pp. 56-90; Clemens A. Wurm, Der Schuman-Plan, Frankreich und Europa, in: *Europa und die Europäer. Quellen und Essays zur modernen europäischen Geschichte*, hg. v. Rüdiger Hohls, Iris Schröder, Hannes Siegrist, Stuttgart 2005, pp. 448-455; Thomas Rhenisch, *Europäische Integration und industrielles Interesse. Die deutsche Industrie und die Gründung der Europäischen Wirtschaftsgemeinschaft*, Stuttgart 1999.

<sup>15</sup> F. Roy Willis, *France, Germany, and the New Europe*. Revised and expanded Edition Stanford University Press, Stanford 1968.

<sup>16</sup> Alan McKinley, Helen Mercer, Neil Rollings, Reluctant Europeans? The Federation of British Industries and European Integration, 1945-1963, in: *Business History* 42, 2000, pp. 91-116.

<sup>17</sup> Neil Rollings, Mathias Kipping, Networks of Peak Industrial Federations: The Council of European Industrial Federations (CEIF) and the Council of the Directors of European Industrial Federation (CDEIF), in: [www.sa.dk/ea.Aarboeg/Aarboeg2004/English%20summary.htm](http://www.sa.dk/ea.Aarboeg/Aarboeg2004/English%20summary.htm) vom 02.04.2007; Werner Bühner, German Industry and European Integration in the 1950s, in: Clemens Wurm ed., *Western Europe and Germany. The Beginnings of European Integration 1945-1960*, Oxford 1995, pp. 87-114.



Berg, the chairman of the Federal Association of German Industry (BDI) and the Trade Association of the Iron, Metalworking and Sheet Metal Industry (EBM) was on the board of the CFIE.<sup>18</sup> Yvonne Foinant's efforts on behalf of a European Association of Women Entrepreneurs were clearly a response to these initiatives, which were restricted as a matter of course to male business leaders.

## *2. The Formation of FCEM*

From the late 1950s, the European and the World Associations of Women Entrepreneurs were dominated by the closely cooperating French and West German national associations. When initiating new associations of women entrepreneurs in Western European countries, Foinant made use of contacts to the iron and steel industry that she had through her own company, as well as existing relationships between the French trade associations and those in the other countries involved in building a European economic area. This strategy meant that she initially approached mainly women in the Benelux countries and from the metal industry to form national associations. Her attempts to gain a foothold in Britain and the Federal Republic, however, proved difficult. I will illuminate this using the example of the German and English affiliates.

In 1950 Foinant began efforts to set up an association in West Germany. When she met with a group of tool manufacturers from the Rhineland in Paris, she asked about women entrepreneurs in West Germany and requested contact addresses. A first initiative in the summer of 1951 in conjunction with the Remscheid Chamber of Industry and Commerce (IHK) failed. The managing director of the Remscheid IHK, Dr. Hermann Ringel, explained the situation to the BDI: 'I believe that Mrs Foinant is quite disappointed and perhaps blames me. It is impossible, however, for me to push forward an association of women entrepreneurs in Germany if there is no consensus among the ladies themselves.'<sup>19</sup> The West German trade associations and particularly Berg from the BDI would apparently have gladly used the opportunity to do the Western European and particularly the French trade associations a favour by promoting the founding of a West German association of women

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<sup>18</sup> *Leitende Männer der Wirtschaft und der zugehörigen Verwaltung. Ein wirtschaftliches „Who is Who?“ Nachschlagewerk über Vorstandsmitglieder, Aufsichtsräte usw.*, Hoppenstedt & Co. Verlag, Heppenheim 1951.

<sup>19</sup> Letter Ringel to Wolff, 22.11.1954. Copy, in: VdU-Archiv. Ordner Gründungsunterlagen, Satzungsänderungen, Vereinsregister 1954-1975.

entrepreneurs. Economic relations, and particularly the relationships between the trade associations, however, were already so firmly entrenched by this point that the failure of this unaccustomed version did not cause much of a stir.<sup>20</sup> Should such a women's association come about, though, the BDI as an umbrella organisation wanted to be in on it from the beginning.

Foinant did not allow these unsuccessful attempts to discourage her. Once again, she tried to work through the French trade associations to reach their German counterparts and move forward the establishment of the hoped-for national association. In June 1954, the association of the Iron, Sheet Metal and Metal Goods Industry (EBM) turned to their member Käte Ahlmann, director of the Carlshütte ironworks in Rendsburg, and informed her about the European Association of Women Entrepreneurs and the founder and president Foinant.<sup>21</sup> Foinant 'urgently wishes to expand the association, which already has a European dimension in a certain sense, to include German *femmes chefs*.'<sup>22</sup> For that reason, she had asked the EBM to explore the chances of founding such an organisation. To this end, the EBM organised a preliminary discussion in Cologne between interested West German women entrepreneurs and Foinant. Ahlmann agreed to attend: 'Presumably, the formation of such a group will be unavoidable in Germany, too, for the purpose of greater ties within Western Europe, although I am not fully convinced that our economy will make more progress through the separation of the sexes in this area.' She soon learned that the motive for founding the organisation was not gender separation, 'but to create contacts among women company heads and win them over as personalities for the idea of mutual understanding in Europe.'<sup>23</sup>

In the event, the preliminary discussion about founding an association was organised not by the association of the Iron, Sheet Metal and Metal Goods Industry but by the BDI. It took place on 20 October 1954 in Cologne. The BDI had taken action because the Conseil National du Patronat Français, the French employers' association, had asked the BDI's

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<sup>20</sup> Karlheinz Neunreither, *Wirtschaftsverbände im Prozess der europäischen Integration*, in: *Politische Dimensionen der europäischen Gemeinschaftsbildung*, edited by Carl J. Friedrich, Köln 1968, pp. 358-445.

<sup>21</sup> Letter Association of the Iron, Sheet Metal and Metal Goods Industry (EBM) to Käte Ahlmann 10.6.1954, in: VdU-Archiv. Ordner Gründungsunterlagen, Satzungsänderungen, Vereinsregister 1954-1975.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Letter EBM to Käte Ahlmann 23.7.1954, in: VdU-Archiv. Ordner Gründungsunterlagen, Satzungsänderungen, Vereinsregister 1954-1975.

president Fritz Berg to take the initiative.<sup>24</sup> Berg had personal contacts in the French employers' association, and as a member of the executive board of the German association for the promotion of economic relations with France (DEFRA) as well as a board member of the CFIE in Paris he maintained long-standing organisational and business contacts with French companies. The industrialist Berg was also chairman of the association of the Iron, Sheet Metal and Metal Goods Industry and, according to his biographer, a master at accumulating offices.<sup>25</sup> Apart from Ahlmann, the other women invited by the BDI to participate in the discussion on founding a German association of women entrepreneurs were Elisabeth Hefendehl of Presswerk Westfalen (Westphalian Moulding Works) in Kierspe, Dr. Irmgard Spiess from Spiess & Sohn Chemicals in Kleinkarlbach, Frau Stolle-Goebel from the firm P.A. Goebel GmbH in Bad Godesberg and Frau Maria Müller of the Karstadt company in Essen.<sup>26</sup>

While the West German trade associations refused to exert any official influence<sup>27</sup>, they also kept a close eye on the project of a German 'branch' of the European Association of Women Entrepreneurs. Dr. Bruno Pilz, managing director of the EBM trade association, regularly supplied Käte Ahlmann with documents and press clippings and carefully cultivated the newly established connection between Foinant in Paris and Ahlmann in Rendsburg. The gentlemen of the trade associations shared Foinant's aim of promoting European cooperation. By taking the initiative in the Federal Republic, they were able from the beginning to push the association's founding in the desired direction and also show the French trade associations their willingness to cooperate and promote integration without making concessions on essential issues.

Advised and scrutinised from many sides, Ahlmann made preparations for the founding meeting on 30 November 1954 in Cologne.<sup>28</sup> She invited both Berg and Pilz to this meeting, after which she met with a small group to develop guidelines for future cooperation,

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<sup>24</sup> Yvonne-Edmond Foinant, Opening words, in: Internationaler Kongress Femmes Chefs d'Entreprise vom 22. bis 26. Mai 1957 in Bad Godesberg, unpag., in: VdU-Archiv. Ordner FCE Weltkongresse und Internationale Wochenenden 1955-64.

<sup>25</sup> Achim Schulte-Goebel, *Fritz Berg 1901-1979. Unternehmer und Industriepäsident in der Adenauer-Ära*, Phil. Diss. Universität Düsseldorf 1999, p. 26.

<sup>26</sup> EBM, Visit Madame Foinant on Wednesday, 20. October 1954, in: VdU-Archiv. Ordner Gründungsunterlagen, Satzungsänderungen, Vereinsregister 1954-1975; Handelsblattv. 22. Oktober 1954, S. 5.

<sup>27</sup> Letter Dipl.-Volkswirt S. Scholten, BDI, to Ahlmann 18.11.1954, in: VdU-Archiv. Ordner Gründungsunterlagen, Satzungsänderungen, Vereinsregister 1954-1975.

<sup>28</sup> Correspondance Wirtschaftsverband to Ahlmann 4.11.1954; Ahlmann to Wirtschaftsverband 9.11.1954; Wirtschaftsverband to Ahlmann 12.11.1954, in: VdU-Archiv. Ordner Gründungsunterlagen, Satzungsänderungen, Vereinsregister 1954-1975.

which were not to be made public.<sup>29</sup> After the founding of the West German affiliate of the European association, which went under the name Vereinigung von Unternehmerinnen, Pilz offered his congratulations, noting, 'What I regard as positive in this development – and in this I have gladly supported Madame Foinant from the outset – is that, together with similar efforts in other countries, it expands the foundations of a European conversation among entrepreneurs more generally, and does so on a level that leaves room for female initiative outside the purely professional discussion.'<sup>30</sup>

The prospect of better international economic relations was tempting in the early Federal Republic. The German association's founding meeting in November 1954 attracted thirty-four women entrepreneurs. They agreed on the following criteria for admission: In order to become a member, each entrepreneur must demonstrate that she was the owner of a company with at least five employees and that she managed the firm herself. The membership grew rapidly, reaching 100 at the end of 1955. In 1956 there were already 250 members, rising to approximately 800 in 1964, ten years after the association's founding. The one-thousandth member was accepted on 31 August 1967. Since the mid-1970s, the membership has stagnated at around 1350.

The politics of invitation to the founding meeting followed a rather odd and arbitrary system. Those invited were either personally known to Käte Ahlmann or to one of the women entrepreneurs she approached. Of the 35 women who agreed to attend, 34 actually came to Cologne, 32 are named on the list of attendees and according to the minutes of the founding meeting, 31 had voting rights.<sup>31</sup> Eleven of these entrepreneurs owned and managed companies in the metalworking industry. Another 15 managed firms in other manufacturing industries, and only five were involved in commerce. The founding meeting of the German association of women entrepreneurs was by no means representative of West German women entrepreneurs in the mid-1950s. The dominance of women engaged in industrial production and export-orientated manufacturing over those in commerce persisted in the association until the end of the 1960s, in obverse proportion to the relative positions of manufacturing and commerce in the West German economy during the same period.

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<sup>29</sup> Letter Ahlmann to Berg 26.11.1954, in: VdU-Archiv. Ordner Gründungsunterlagen, Satzungsänderungen, Vereinsregister 1954-1975.

<sup>30</sup> Quotation from minutes general meeting VdU in Frankfurt on 5. March 1955, 11.00 o'clock, Hotel Frankfurter Hof, Frankfurt/Main, Bl. 2, in: VdU-Archiv. Ordner Mitgliederversammlung 1954-1973.

<sup>31</sup> Minutes founding meeting on 30. November 1954 in Cologne, in: VdU-Archiv. Ordner Gründungsunterlagen, Satzungsänderungen, Vereinsregister 1954-1975, unpag.

We find no comparable influence on the part of trade associations in the founding of the women's entrepreneurs' associations in other European countries. The example of the British association of women entrepreneurs points to a different pattern. While in England the IFBPW pursued its goals even during the war, women entrepreneurs remained passive. The British Association of Women Executives was only founded in 1953 on the initiative of the Belgian entrepreneur Tinou Dutry. Dutry went into exile in London in 1940 and founded a second import-export firm there with her husband. After 1946, as a member of the board of directors of her Belgian and English companies, she was constantly travelling back and forth between Brussels and London. In 1952 she joined the Belgian organisation of women entrepreneurs, becoming a member of the board in 1954, vice-president in 1958 and president of the Belgian association in 1979. During a crisis situation in 1974 she took over the presidency of the British association, to which she also belonged, but stepped down after the association's reorganisation.<sup>32</sup> By following her own business connections and working on behalf of the women entrepreneur's association, Dutry applied the model used by Foinant in building up the association and proved the perfect successor to the founder and world president Yvonne Foinant when she retired in 1979 at the age of 89.

With the vigorous support of the Belgian entrepreneur Dutry, the first step was taken in the Anglo-American world, but it would be quite some time before American women entrepreneurs founded their own association. Foinant had already travelled through North America in the early 1950s to gain support for her project. The association's strong French accent met with enthusiasm in Montréal and an affiliate was founded in Francophone Canada. In the United States, however, the French-orientated association met with little interest. The U.S. affiliate of the women entrepreneurs' association was not founded until 1984.

### *3. International networking*

The attractiveness of the European Association of Women Entrepreneurs clearly lay in the potential for facilitating connections and thus business relationships beyond national boundaries. The association and its international meetings made it easier and more pleasant to capture new markets.

This was particularly true for women entrepreneurs from the Federal Republic of

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<sup>32</sup> Madame Dutry, in: *Die Unternehmerin* Nr. 3, 1979, pp. 21f.

Germany. Even before the German association was founded, its future president Käte Ahlmann and her daughter-in-law Juliane attended the world congress of women entrepreneurs in Brussels in November 1954 as an unofficial German delegation. One year later, in September 1955, a small group of West German women entrepreneurs travelled for the first time to a congress of the Femmes Chefs d'Entreprise Européennes, for which 250 women gathered in Amsterdam.<sup>33</sup> The German delegation was impressed by the 'friendly reception, which we especially appreciated after the events of the recent past. All divisive matters were avoided with tactful sensibility, we extended our hands to each other in the knowledge that it is up to women to lead the way, and certainly also to businesswomen, to entrepreneurs.'<sup>34</sup> This first contact between German and Western European women entrepreneurs did not take place in the glare of publicity, and was scarcely mentioned in the German press. The German trade associations also did not comment on these encounters.

The German association was all the more eager for publicity when it organised the world congress of women entrepreneurs in May 1957 in Bad Godesberg. The conference programme was very low-key. In contrast to the congresses held in Amsterdam and Brussels, there was not a single visit to a plant, although there were bus and boat tours along the Rhine. The artistic highpoint was not a visit to the opera or theatre, but an evening of chamber music. A highlight of the congress were the words of welcome on the very first evening by Minister of Economics Ludwig Erhard on behalf of the German federal government. Two days later he also opened the banquet with an address.<sup>35</sup> Few VIPs attended, however. Apart from the ministers of economics for the states of Hesse and Saarland, they included the French, British, Dutch and Canadian ambassadors as well as a few representatives of the trade associations. Now that the Treaties of Rome had been signed economic relations were regulated on a European level, and the importance of the association of women entrepreneurs among the European trade associations had shrunk accordingly. It could no longer claim to be the first to practise European cooperation, and it no longer encompassed all EEC states. The congress was an asset all the same, however. The association of family-owned enterprises (Arbeitsgemeinschaft Selbstständiger

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<sup>33</sup> Käte Ahlmann, Annual report [1955], in: VdU-Archiv. Ordner Mitgliederversammlung 1954-1973; Kongress der Femmes Chefs d'Entreprise Européennes. Amsterdam 22. bis 24. September 1955, in : VdU-Archiv. Ordner FCE Weltkongresse und internationale Wochenenden 1955-1964.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>35</sup> Programmheft Internationaler Kongress der Femmes Chefs d'Entreprise vom 22. bis 26. Mai 1957 in Bad Godesberg, in: VdU-Archiv. Ordner FCE 55-64.

Unternehmen) praised the women entrepreneurs for 'having reopened the gates to the world for us Germans'.<sup>36</sup>

The desire of German association members for integration on equal terms in the Western European economic area was not dampened by the lack of public interest in Germany. In fact, it increased. The groups exchanged invitations to gala dinners on the occasion of annual general meetings across national borders. The German women entrepreneurs were at the table in London in 1961 and in Brussels in 1962.<sup>37</sup> Naturally they also invited their colleagues to their own festivities.<sup>38</sup> The large number of German participants at international conferences is impressive. In 1958 more than 180 women entrepreneurs from West Germany registered for the Brussels conference.<sup>39</sup> One year later, the German association sent 58 women to the London conference, making them the largest national contingent.<sup>40</sup> In the 1960s, German women were consistently the largest delegation at the international meetings.<sup>41</sup> At the 23<sup>rd</sup> world congress in Mexico in 1973, 70 of the 150 European participants came from the Federal Republic and only 33 from France.<sup>42</sup> As late as 1979, the chairwoman of the German association of women entrepreneurs apologised to her Italian counterpart for the fact 'that the unexpectedly large number of participants from Germany caused so much trouble for you, your committee and also the travel agency'.<sup>43</sup> Because the yearly international meetings were felt to be too infrequent, additional 'international weekends' were organised in Brussels, Berlin, Venice, or in February 1974 in Majorca.<sup>44</sup> A sustainable network based on personal relationships developed, and the women used it for international exchanges to send their own daughters, granddaughters and female relatives abroad for training or to improve their language skills.<sup>45</sup> The network included international business: friendly national associations could help in the search for

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<sup>36</sup> Address Dr. Paul Mertens CEO ASU to VdU to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the association on 10. May 1964, F.C.E. Kongress in München, Bl. 3, in: VdU-Archiv. Ordner F.C.E. 55-64.

<sup>37</sup> Registrations for the F.C.E.-Congress in Brussels in May 1958 having arrived at the office up to 15. January 1958, in: VdU-Archiv. Ordner F.C.E. 55-64.

<sup>38</sup> Annual report of board 1958-1959, Bl. 3, in: VdU-Archiv. Ordner Mitgliederversammlungen 1954-1973.

<sup>39</sup> Circular VdU 1/61, February 1961, p. 2; Circular VdU 6/61, December 1961, p. 8.

<sup>40</sup> Circular VdU 3/62, April/May 1962, pp. 3-6.

<sup>41</sup> So in June 1963 in Turin, Circular VdU 3/63 July 1963, p. 8

<sup>42</sup> The Italian and the Netherland's association were represented by 14 delegates respectively, the other 19 European women came from Belgium, Austria, Spain and United Kingdom. Die Unternehmerin 3, 1973, Der Weltkongress der Unternehmerinnen in Mexiko 1973, pp. 4-12.

<sup>43</sup> Letter Lily Joens to Claudia Matta 12.7.1979, in: VdU-Archiv. Ordner FCE ab Mitte 1972.

<sup>44</sup> VdU-Archiv. Ordner FCE Weltkongresse und Internationale Wochenenden 1965-1976.

<sup>45</sup> Circular VdU 1/64 February 1964, p. 15.

investors as well as successors for one's own enterprise.<sup>46</sup> At their meetings, the women entrepreneurs loftily invoked the 'friendship among women entrepreneurs of different lands' and thus gave 'evidence that we are truly a strong link in the great work of serving peace'.<sup>47</sup> The German women entrepreneurs viewed themselves as enthusiastic model Europeans.

Their enthusiasm, however, scarcely disguised the dominant role played by the German association of women entrepreneurs within the world association. This dominance expressed itself, among other places, in the committed support of German women entrepreneurs for the founding of new associations in other European countries, such as Austria in 1964 and Spain in 1971. In January 1971, Eleonore Habermeier of the Huckauf & Bülle engineering works in Hamburg, who had been a member of the VdU since 1962, asked the chairwoman of the VdU to support her Spanish friend Pola Borragán in setting up a Spanish association of women entrepreneurs.<sup>48</sup> Since the Federal Republic was one of Spain's most important trading partners it was a logical place to request assistance. Habermeier, who had studied in Spain in the 1940, was happy to help, and President Joens examined the draft statutes and consulted with the president of the world association Foinant in Paris about how to proceed. Foinant recalled that in the 1960s, several attempts to incorporate a Spanish association of women entrepreneurs into the world association had failed because the Falange intervened with their own demands. The Spanish association of women entrepreneurs would thus have been a sort of mole.<sup>49</sup> The political independence of the national associations had top priority, and if there was any question, the group had no place in the World Association. At the international congress held in early June 1971 in Versailles the misgivings about contacts with Franco's Spain had apparently dissipated. The Spanish association of women entrepreneurs was now admitted to the world association. Joens commented, 'I am very curious to see how matters develop. On the one hand, I can well imagine that the trend towards 'more democracy' will also reach, or has already reached, the Spanish syndicates, and in our case we need only strengthen the liberal wing and put the brakes on the political one! Moreover, loose cooperation between entrepreneurs from diverse systems that focuses more on the practical exchange of experience can do no

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<sup>46</sup> Letter Tomatis of Deltom Transports, Nice, to Joens 16. February 1978, in: VdU-Archiv. Ordner FCE Mitte 1972.

<sup>47</sup> Address of Worldpresident Yvonne Ed. Foinant, in: Circular VdU May 1964, p. 5.

<sup>48</sup> Letter Habermeier to Joens 28.1.1971, in: VdU. Landesgruppe Hamburg 235.

<sup>49</sup> Letter Foinant to Joens 18. March 1971, *ibid.*



harm'.<sup>50</sup> One year later, in 1972, on the occasion of the 22<sup>nd</sup> world congress in Madrid the women entrepreneurs took part in General Franco's reception and passed a resolution stating that 'For the world of commerce and industry, a united Europe is a necessity, a categorical imperative.'<sup>51</sup>

The advantages of a practical exchange of experience between different systems also overcame nervousness about contact with the Argentine military dictatorship and inspired the women entrepreneurs to extend their business dealings to Eastern Europe and to make the relevant inquiries. In April 1971 the German affiliate of the world association of women entrepreneurs took a study trip to Moscow with the explanation that it was 'the duty of women in positions of responsibility to explore all possibilities for peaceful coexistence, indeed to literally hunt them down!'<sup>52</sup>

In foreign trade, the German economy, which was traditionally export orientated, had undergone a structural transformation after 1945 and particularly with the realisation of the EEC in 1958. The formerly strong orientation towards Eastern and South-East Europe was replaced by a decidedly Western orientation. Trade with the state socialist countries of Eastern Europe was stagnating at a low level, however.<sup>53</sup> Only with the conclusion of the treaties with the East (*Ostverträge*) in 1970 did German women entrepreneurs again seek ways to increase the share of small and middle-sized enterprise and thus their own share in trade with Eastern Europe. On their journey to Moscow, the women entrepreneurs also wanted to 'gain a more precise picture of the situation of women in the USSR'.<sup>54</sup>

While the building and cultivation of business relationships on an international level was accorded great importance by all the women entrepreneurs, particularly the Germans (*faire de l'amitié*), the European women entrepreneurs expended different amounts of energy implementing the second objective mentioned in their statutes, 'gaining recognition for women in executive positions' and securing their participation in all business bodies.<sup>55</sup> It was 'above all the Frenchwomen who tackled this task with a great deal of pathos', as was noted with some sarcasm east of the Rhine. In this context the French women spoke of

<sup>50</sup> Letter Joens to Habermeier v. 29. Juni 1971, *ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Joens, Internationaler Kongress der Unternehmerinnen in Madrid 1972, in: Circular VdU 4/72, April 1972, pp. 16-21.

<sup>52</sup> Lily Joens, Unternehmerinnen in Moskau. MS 14 pp., in: VdU-Archiv, Ordner Referate Joens 256; printed in: Circular VdU 3/71 March 1971, pp. 4-9. Quotation from the printed version, p. 9.

<sup>53</sup> Werner Abelshäuser, *Deutsche Wirtschaftsgeschichte seit 1945*, München 2004, pp. 260ff.

<sup>54</sup> Joens, Unternehmerinnen, p. 4.

<sup>55</sup> Joens, 20 Jahre Vereinigung von Unternehmerinnen, in: Die Unternehmerin 6, 1974, pp. 4-9.

injustice, unequal treatment and oppression, while the Germans revealed their 'soberness and sense of the pragmatic' by trusting in long-term change.<sup>56</sup> In comparison to the IFBPW the women entrepreneurs quite plainly put their economic interests first and did not take the political stage with demands for equality. They addressed these concerns instead in the informal framework of trade associations and chambers, approaching the state only very rarely. The IFBPW, in contrast, fought on the political level for equal opportunities for women in all areas of paid employment, and thus generally approached parliaments or international organisations such as the ILO.

The primacy of economic issues for the women entrepreneurs is also evident in the fact that they deliberately promoted their international association, which had scarcely grown in the 1970s, in Asia and Africa in the 1980s. In that decade the national associations of women entrepreneurs in Taiwan, India, Indonesia, Malaysia and Japan all joined the world association. In Africa it was mainly the associations in former French colonies such as Cameroon, Mauritius, Gabon, Ivory Coast, Benin and Senegal that were admitted to the world association of women entrepreneurs. The geographical framework, which had been set by post-war Western Europe and its allies and was extended only in the 1970s in favour of Spain, Argentina and Mexico, had completely lost its function.

#### *4. Conclusions*

My research on the European association of women entrepreneurs in the period between 1945 and 1980 produced the following conclusions:

a) The FCEM followed a very narrow concept. What made them attractive was their promotion of economic relations between the Western European countries by providing a framework for intensive personal contacts among women entrepreneurs. Their functions resembled those of other internationally active elitist clubs such as the Rotary or Lions Club, which did not admit women as members in the period under study.

b) All of the FCEM's activities were influenced by the dominant position of the French national association and its founder and long-time president Yvonne Foinant. Foinant found a congenial partner in the German association's president, Lily Joens. The French-West German axis in the nascent European Community was mirrored in the association of women

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<sup>56</sup> All quotations: Joens, 20 Jahre, p. 5.

entrepreneurs. The association of women entrepreneurs failed to gain a foothold in English-speaking countries, where the IFBPW developed all the more vigorously.

c) The FCEM never made political demands. This reticence was in keeping with the principle of property they represented. In contrast to the FCEM, the IFBPW represented the principle of professional qualification. The women entrepreneurs identified themselves by their titles of ownership and demanded recognition as business owners. The IFBPW, however, fought more generally for the recognition of qualified women. In comparison to other trade associations, the association of women entrepreneurs did not develop a profile of their own.

d) The European Association of Women Entrepreneurs acted mainly as a booster for the national members associations, which in turn hoped that membership in the umbrella organisation would increase their own importance. The IFBPW behaved differently on the international political stage. Their reference to the national associations was intended to give greater weight to international demands.

e) The European Association of Women Entrepreneurs indirectly influenced the construction of the European economic area by lending Europe a positive connotation through their network and establishing it as a self-evident sphere of action for women entrepreneurs.