

The Congregation of the *Sisters of Notre Dame* Training
Female Teachers in Prussia: Foreign Languages in Vechta's
Lehrerinnenseminar

La formazione delle insegnanti nella *Congregazione delle Suore di Nostra Signora*: le lingue straniere nel *Lehrerinnenseminar* di Vechta

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Abstract

[EN] This article examines the *Lehrerinnenseminar* (normal school) in Vechta, a private teacher-training institution operated by the *Sisters of Notre Dame* (*Schwester Unserer Lieben Frau*) from 1877 to 1926. Founded in the Grand Duchy of Oldenburg yet closely tied to the Prussian educational system, the seminary trained both elementary school teachers and language teachers and is characterised by the breadth and social diversity of its catchment area, drawing predominantly from the provinces of Westphalia and the Rhineland. Using the institutional chronicle, the enrolment register (1904-1926), and other archival material, this study attempts to reconstruct the role of modern foreign languages – above all French – within female teacher formation, as well as to describe the seminary's diocese-based catchment area. Evidence shows that in addition to being aimed at teaching in public schools, foreign-language study was regarded as professional credential for private employment: at least 1,039 women were trained at Vechta, all taking French at first-level examination and some qualifying for language teaching in the *Höhere Mädchenschule*. The example of

the Vechta seminary confirms the importance of congregations in the expansion and professionalisation of girls' schooling in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Germany, until the nationalisation of teacher training in 1926 reconfigured the field.

KEYWORDS: foreign language teaching, history of female teaching, *Lehrerinnenseminar*, *Schwestern Unserer Lieben Frau*, teaching congregations

[IT] L'indagine si sofferma sul *Lehrerinnenseminar* di Vechta, un istituto per la formazione delle insegnanti fondato dalle *Suore di Nostra Signora* (*Schwestern Unserer Lieben Frau*), che lo gestirono dal 1877 al 1926. Aperto nel Granducato di Oldenburgo ma strettamente legato al sistema educativo prussiano, il seminario formava insegnanti sia delle elementari sia di lingua straniera, e si caratterizzò per la varietà delle classi sociali e l'ampiezza di un bacino di utenza prevalentemente vestfalico e renano. Attingendo ai dati contenuti nella *Cronaca* del seminario, nel registro delle iscrizioni (1904-1926) e in altro materiale di archivio, si ricostruiscono il ruolo rivestito dalle lingue straniere (e in particolare dal francese) nella formazione delle insegnanti e la composizione del bacino di utenza, con il suo forte riferimento alla diocesi di Münster. Si evidenzia come lo studio delle lingue straniere non solo fosse necessario per ottenere la certificazione di insegnante, ma venisse anche considerato rilevante per l'impiego nel settore privato. L'istituto di Vechta formò almeno 1039 insegnanti; tutte aggiunsero il francese alle materie obbligatorie per l'esame di qualificazione di primo livello, e alcune sostennero lo specifico esame per diventare insegnante di lingua straniera nei licei femminili. La storia di questo seminario conferma dunque l'importanza rivestita in Germania dalle congregazioni religiose nella diffusione dell'istruzione femminile nel tardo XIX secolo e nel primo ventennio del XX secolo, fino alla nazionalizzazione della formazione degli insegnanti.

KEYWORDS: insegnamento delle lingue straniere, storia dell'insegnamento femminile, *Lehrerinnenseminar*, *Suore di Nostra Signora*, congregazioni per l'insegnamento

The normal school (*Lehrerinnenseminar*) in Vechta was a private institution founded and run by a congregation of nuns, the *Schwestern Unserer Lieben Frau* (*Sisters of Notre Dame*). It operated between 1877 and 1926, preparing students to work either as teachers for various school grades, or as language teachers. The seminary set itself apart from other institutions of the time that were training female teachers through the social composition of its student body: the catchment area was more diverse than expected, as it provided pupils belonging to a wide array of social classes and from a varied range of geographical origins. Since the *Seminar* provided a significant service in the region – it trained 1039 female teachers from 1877 to 1926, when it closed following the complete nationalisation of teacher training – this paper seeks to contribute to the reconstruction of the role played by women’s congregations in the history of German education during the last decades of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. Although the available archival evidence is limited, the focus is on the role played by foreign languages in the seminary, given their importance in women’s education and particularly in teacher training.¹

¹ I am grateful to Dr. Peter Sieve of the Bischöflich Münstersches Offizialat for providing me with the material.

1. GIRLS' SCHOOLING IN PRUSSIA IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

1.1. *Education and foreign languages*

Schooling in Prussia had become compulsory in 1839, but for a long time there was little interest in women's education and in the training of female teachers. The education of future civil servants was far more important for the state, which explains the tighter control exercised over boys' schools. Primary and secondary education for girls lacked systematic organisation: in nineteenth-century Prussia, girls' schools were not a clearly defined segment of the educational system. The state's attention was directed primarily towards elementary education, while higher secondary schools were largely neglected for a long time and remained predominantly privately run. Only in 1874 was a division of the girls' high school system introduced, based not on curriculum, but on examination regulations and teaching qualifications.² The same legislation also established specific guidelines for the certification of language teachers' examination.³

Compulsory schooling ended with elementary school (*Volksschule*), which lasted eight years, but very often grouped together pupils from different years in co-educational classes. The usual practice, especially in small villages and towns, was to place students in a single class containing several grades while maintaining three lev-

² ZYMEK - NEGHBABIAN - ZIOB 2005, p. 32.

³ Ivi, p. 33.

els of instruction. The teaching of a foreign language (French) was exceptional and limited to schools that had at least six different classes, which was typical in bigger towns and cities.⁴

Girls belonging to the middle class went to the *Höhere Mädchenschule*, a generic term for “secondary” schools for girls, which often included elementary school and stopped at age fifteen or sixteen.⁵ In these “higher girls’ schools”, the most common foreign language that was taught was French, while English could be added in the upper classes.

As a form of intermediate education, in 1872 the Prussian Ministry of education combined all schools that had previously been situated between elementary schools and high schools – i.e., all those schools that had outgrown primary school status – to form the *Mittelschule*. In most public women’s *Mittelschulen*, only one foreign language was taught, but the majority of the private schools taught both French and English.⁶

It was not until 1908 that a comprehensive restructuring of girls’ schooling was introduced. The reform occurred in response to the pressure of the middle class, who wanted a form of education beyond middle school, and it created different courses leading to the high-school diploma (*Abitur*), thus introducing a possibility for women to enrol in university. All *Studienanstalten* for girls (*Oberrealschule*, *Realgymnasium*, *Gymnasium*) taught French and English, with the exception of the *Gymnasium*, where in the last years learn-

⁴ SCHÖPPA 1909, p. 5.

⁵ ALBISETTI 1988, p. 24. After 1912, the official designation for those Prussian schools recognized as ‘secondary’ under the new regulations was *Lyzeum*.

⁶ KUHLEMANN 1991, p. 219.

ers followed only one of the two modern foreign languages.⁷ The reform also created the Women's school (*Frauenschule*), which was intended to provide some kind of professional training through technical courses – including a course for language teachers. These were then abolished in 1917.⁸

Before and alongside the reform, the other driving force for the progress of the women's education system had been the development of the *Lehrerinnenseminare*, as teaching was the only suitable field of work for middle-class girls, and seminaries were, until 1908, the only form of higher education open to women. As a result, all aspiring female teachers – including language teachers, who at this stage did not receive separate training – enrolled in a *Seminar* to receive their education. Women's seminaries thus served two functions: providing job-oriented training as well as cultural education.

1.2. *Female teacher qualifications*

Since the number of schools for girls had risen sharply during the second half of the nineteenth century, girls' education had become an expanding occupational field for women, who increasingly found regular employment in elementary and higher girls' schools – both public and private – after obtaining their teacher qualification.

Certification had become compulsory in 1845.⁹ Future female teachers could undertake their preparation in both public or pri-

⁷ SCHÖPPA 1909, pp. 95-98.

⁸ ZYMEK - NEGHBANIAN - ZIOB 2005, pp. 86, 92.

⁹ This varies according to the state (ALBISETTI 1988, p. 64).

vate *Lehrerinnenseminare* – which consisted of three years of education, the last of which provided classroom training¹⁰ – and they sat an examination that included French at a state-recognised institution. Until 1874, this certification permitted teaching in elementary schools as well as in higher girls’ schools, though usually in the lower grades.¹¹ For headmistresses there was a second examination.

In 1874 regulations changed. The certification obtained from the first examination without French allowed teaching only in elementary schools; candidates who also passed examinations in French and English could teach in the lower grades of higher girls’ schools. To become language teachers at any grade of a higher girls’ school there was a specific examination for French and English.¹²

Throughout most of the century, women were not allowed to teach in the upper grades of secondary schools, since they didn’t have access to academic training. These positions were reserved for academically qualified male teachers. It was only in the last decade of the nineteenth century that advanced courses for women teachers were introduced, so that they could teach in the upper grades; between 1894 and 1913, those institutions prepared women for the *Oberlehrerinnenprüfung*, an examination that could be taken after completing five or six semesters of university-level courses in two subjects.¹³ Such courses were offered exclusively by institu-

¹⁰ Seminaries were initially two-year courses, and later three. In 1908 they were transformed into *Oberlyzeum* with three years of “scientific” training and one year of practical training.

¹¹ ALBISETTI 1988, p. 24.

¹² SCHÖPPA 1909, p. 269.

¹³ ALBISETTI 1988, p. 253.

tions created for this purpose.¹⁴ French and English were among the subjects included, so the courses trained language teachers for the upper level as well.

Whilst certifications were regulated, there was a legislative vacuum regarding the syllabus. This gave individual seminaries a margin of freedom: as Prussia did not prescribe a curriculum for the *Lehrerinnenseminare*, private institutions – which grew alongside public ones – were able to develop their own identity.

1.3. *Private institutions: The congregations*

The history of girls' education in the German states is deeply intertwined with the history of female orders, particularly congregations. Throughout the nineteenth century, the schooling system depended not only on public initiatives, but also on private, regional, and local ones. Local authorities were responsible for providing primary schools to the population; in instances where they were unable to establish an adequate number of public schools, there was room for the expansion of schools run by congregations.¹⁵ The need to compensate for the state's inadequate provision of education, especially for the weaker social classes, was soon acknowledged by women's religious associations, which had begun to flourish towards the end of the eighteenth century.

As in other countries, in the nineteenth century Germany witnessed the establishment of numerous new congregations that re-

¹⁴ Ivi, pp. 219-220.

¹⁵ SCHAFFER 1988, pp. 12-14; ZYMEK - NEGABIAN - ZIOB 2005, p. 205.

defined women's religious roles from contemplative life to active ministry, which entailed undertaking a vital work in fields such as education, nursing, and social service. Unlike the old monastic orders, where charitable aims were of secondary importance, congregations placed education and social assistance at the core of their ministry: joining together in monastic life served as a means to achieve these aims more effectively. In Prussia, twenty-three new female congregations were founded between 1803 and 1872/73.¹⁶ This expansion was so significant that the period came to be regarded as an *Ordensfrühling* ("Monastic Spring") and became known as the *Age of the Teaching Congregations*.¹⁷

Between 1840 and 1860, Prussia's liberal policy towards religious associations facilitated the establishment of numerous new foundations. The accelerating process of urbanisation, in particular, brought to light social problems such as the issue of female education, to which the congregations sought to offer solutions.¹⁸ It is therefore no coincidence that the new congregations were created in cities of the Catholic regions, with only five founded in rural areas. Most of them were dedicated to caring for the sick, and those that devoted themselves to education initially concentrated on the education of orphans, as well as teaching pre-school and elementary classes to lower class children, only later extending their activity to young women from all social classes. An exception to this are the *Schwestern der christlichen Liebe* (*Sisters of Christian Charity*) and the

¹⁶ MEIWES 2000, p. 75.

¹⁷ BART HELLINCKS - DEPAEPE 2009, p. 10.

¹⁸ MEIWES 2000, p. 86.

Schwestern Unserer Lieben Frau, which recognised the importance of educating girls and young women in order to prepare them for employment or a profession and therefore provided higher education from the outset – unlike other congregations, who only integrated higher education into their mission years after beginning their teaching activity.¹⁹

In the course of the following decades, these and other religious orders and congregations evolved into an institutional instrument and a driving force for the development of modern girls' schools.²⁰ One of the areas over which they exerted their influence was teacher training, which had been a focus of interest from the very beginning of these foundations, as running schools required nuns to earn qualifications in order to teach at different levels. Their members therefore needed to be prepared for state teacher examinations. However, until the 1870s there was a marked scarcity of state teacher training colleges for women – for instance, as late as 1877 only two colleges, located in Paderborn and Münster, existed in the provinces of the Rhineland and Westphalia. Consequently, most women's congregations prepared their members in their own teacher training colleges. This was also the case for the *Sisters of Notre Dame*.

¹⁹ Ivi, p. 189.

²⁰ ZYMEK - NEGHBANIAN - ZIOB 2005, p. 207.

2. THE *LEHRERINNENSEMINAR* IN VECHTA

2.1. *The origin*

Of the three seminaries founded by the *Sisters of Notre Dame* in Germany, the one with the longest history and of which the most archival documents exist is that of Vechta, a town in the Grand Duchy of Oldenburg at the time. Though it was outside of Prussia, its history is inseparable from Prussia and the Prussian school system: its origins were rooted in the educational complex that the *Sisters of Notre Dame* had created in Prussia in the mid-19th century; it always had a very high percentage of Prussian trainees; the certification was recognised by Prussia; and, finally, many trainees went to teach in Prussia.

The *Seminar* was originally founded in 1852 in Coesfeld within the Prussian province of Westphalia, by the German Congregation of the *Sisters of Notre Dame*. Its main aim was training young women who wished to join the Congregation, whose main purpose was education and teaching. The foundation charter of the first institution (1853) explicitly mentions the education of female youth as the main purpose of the Congregation, and when taking their vows, the members professed not only chastity, poverty and obedience, but also resolved to devote themselves to children's education.²¹ The primary aim of the *Sisters of Notre Dame* was educating girls in order to help them find a role in society; therefore, the seminary formed,

²¹ *Satzungen und Regeln* 1850, § 24. This is later expressly stated in the Coesfelder Rules of 1855 and following versions (e.g. *Konstitutionen* 1936, ch. 1, § 4).

in addition to aspiring members of the Congregation, lay teachers who could be employed by public *Volksschulen*. The number of lay girls who enrolled steadily increased through the years.

The founders of the Coesfeld *Seminar* were two qualified professionals: Hilligonde Wolbring and Elisabeth Kühling, young seminary-trained teachers who had attended the Royal Teacher Training Seminary for Women (*Königlicher Lehrerinnenseminar*) in Münster. This institution – inspired by the innovative pedagogical principles of priest Bernard Overberg – was one of the first two seminaries for women founded by the Prussian government, back in 1832, and was attached to a higher girls' school. The two teachers wanted to dedicate themselves to the education of poor children, and therefore needed to give their work a firm and lasting institutional basis. As there was no female religious congregation in Prussia at that time that provided higher girls' education,²² the two teachers decided to found a congregation themselves.²³ The Coesfeld foundation can thus be considered an example of the expansion of Catholic congregations that considered the schooling of girls as their main field of activity. In Prussia, the regional core areas in which new school orders were founded were the provinces of Westphalia and the Rhineland.²⁴ Those were also the two provinces where the Sis-

²² At the time, the only religious community devoted to teaching was the order of the Ursolines, who took solemn vows. Members of congregations took instead simple vows and were therefore more apt to fulfil their purpose of educating disadvantaged children; the sisters remained *personae sui juris*, and could teach outside the convent (MEIWES 2000, pp. 54-63).

²³ They first joined the Dutch Congregation of the *Sisters of U. L. Frau* of Amersfoort (Holland), then separated from Amersfoort and founded the German Motherhouse of the *Schwestern Unserer Lieben Frau* in Germany.

²⁴ SCHAFFER 1988, pp. 139-140; ZYMEK - NEGHBABIAN - ZIOB 2005, p. 205.

ters of *Notre Dame* founded most of their many schools: kindergartens, elementary schools, and higher girls' schools. This wide range of educational activities developed a social network that focused on women's education in all social classes, for whom there were hardly any opportunities provided by the state.²⁵ The offer was very well received: whereas most of the Catholic convent schools were quite small,²⁶ the thirty institutions founded by the *Schwestern Unserer Lieben Frau* in the first two decades of activity had opened with an average of 200 pupils each.²⁷

It has long been assessed that the teaching orders sought to improve the quality of the education they provided and that they made considerable efforts to meet the state requirements of certification.²⁸ It is therefore not surprising that the *Coesfeld Seminar* – which was soon attached to an elementary school and a higher girls' school – adopted the structure and ideals of the *Königlicher Lehrerinnenseminar* in Münster, and would become a model for normal schools that the Congregation later opened in Vechta (1877), Mülhausen (1904) and in the United States. At that time, trainees had a first year of theoretical *Päparandie* following Münster's timetable (with six hours of French per week). The year ended with a first examination on every subject held before the *Domkapitular* (canon) and the director of Münster's seminary.²⁹ The teachers were nuns who had taken a higher teaching qualification; for example, in the 1850s Elisabeth

²⁵ DAMBERG 1998, p. 103.

²⁶ ALBISETTI 1988, p. 36.

²⁷ BÖCKMANN - MORTHORST 1993, p. 97.

²⁸ BART HELLINCKS - DEPAEPE 2009, p. 47.

²⁹ BÖCKMANN - MORTHORST [1993], pp. 71, 73.

Kühling (Sister M. Ignatia) taught pedagogy, French, drawing, calligraphy and Italian. Only one lay teacher was employed by the seminary: the English teacher.³⁰ The second year consisted in practical training in the Congregation's own elementary school and higher girls' school, and was concluded with the written and oral examination in Münster that qualified the examinees as teachers.³¹

In those years and until the early 1870s the number of seminaries increased due to their popularity, especially those attached to girls' schools,³² like the one in Münster. This popularity is exemplified by Coesfeld's case: in the 1860s the number of nuns and girls attending its *Seminar* increased so much that it was necessary to split the *Präparandie* into two courses. In its twenty-four years of activity, Coesfeld's seminary formed 230 teachers: 150 nuns teaching in the Congregation's schools (40 *Volksschulen* and 10 higher girls' schools, where they taught foreign languages as well) and 80 lay teachers that worked in Prussian elementary schools.³³

The flourishing activity of the Congregation was interrupted in 1877, when the *Kulturkampf* (Bismarck's campaign to weaken the influence of the church) caused the expulsion of all teaching orders, and the *Sisters of Notre Dame* had to leave Prussia for some years, mainly expanding overseas; between 1874 and 1888, the nuns took on an increasing number of teaching assignments in elementary schools in Ohio and Kentucky, laying the foundation for the devel-

³⁰ BÖCKMANN - MORTHORST 1993, pp. 11, 73, 82.

³¹ BÖCKMANN - MORTHORST [1993], pp. 71-74.

³² ALBISETTI 1988, p. 67.

³³ *Deine früheren Lehrerinnen* [1926], p. 2.

opment of the *Sisters of Notre Dame* in the United States.³⁴ But the Congregation didn't want to give up the teachers' education in Germany altogether; the *Seminar* was therefore moved to the nearest foreign country, the Grand Duchy of Oldenburg. There, in the town of Vechta, the Congregation had since 1859 an elementary school and a higher girls' school that could both be used for the compulsory practical training of future teachers. They also had a boarding establishment, which was particularly important for the learners, given that a very large number of them came from Prussia. In those years Vechta's school complex would become a multifunctional institution, like other Catholic foundations of that time:³⁵ it included a higher girls' school, a *Seminar*, a boarding establishment, a commercial school, and a handicraft school.

The new *Lehrerinnenseminar* in Vechta opened with 40 trainees coming from Coesfeld's *Präparandie*, and until 1904 it remained the only seminary of the *Sisters of Notre Dame*. Although in 1887 (after the laws enacted during the *Kulturkampf* had been relaxed) the Bishop of Münster had asked for the sisters to return, and a Motherhouse had been founded in Mülhausen (1888), in the first decades following their return the Congregation preferred to maintain only the seminary in Vechta. There were great social issues to be addressed in the industrial area of the Ruhr, and the Congregation focused foremost on its educational task by founding kindergartens and elementary schools in those densely populated areas.³⁶

³⁴ BÖCKMANN - MORTHORST 1994, pp. 1-53.

³⁵ ZYMEK - NEGHBABIAN - ZIOB 2005, p. 206.

³⁶ BÖCKMANN - MORTHORST 1994, pp. 79, 112.

2.2. *The institution*

Right from the beginning, Vechta's *Seminar* prepared for teaching in elementary schools, *Mittelschulen* and higher girls' schools, for the language teacher exam and the exam for headmistress of a girls' school.³⁷ For nearly three decades the examinations continued to be taken in Prussia, in Münster, and the certifications issued were recognised by the ministry in Oldenburg, because the *Seminar* filled a gap in teacher training for the Catholic Münsterland: at that point, there was no further educational opportunity for Catholic girls in the Grand Duchy after completing elementary schools. The mutual recognition – Prussia accepted the education in Oldenburg, Oldenburg accepted the Prussian certification – was in the best interest of both states.

Things changed in 1904, when the Prussian Ministry issued a decree that examinees wishing to teach in Prussia could only take the examination in the same district where they had received their education. This meant that Vechta's trainees now had to take the examination in Oldenburg – where an examination board for the confessional *Seminare* had yet to be created – and that the Oldenburgish certification had to be recognised by Prussia. For Vechta's institution, achieving Prussian recognition was important both for the future lay teachers and for the nuns themselves. The nuns were not only involved as teachers educating the next generation of teachers, but also as learners, as some young nuns were training there for the first level certification or to become foreign lan-

³⁷ *Chronik*, p. 1.

guage teachers.³⁸ Therefore the Congregation once again took all necessary steps to keep their certification valid in both Oldenburg and Prussia.

The head of the *Seminar* approached the Oldenburg Ministry with the request to work towards ensuring that the certifications for teachers issued in Oldenburg would also be recognised in Prussia. The proposal to set up a separate examination board in the Grand Duchy was accepted in October 1905, and the Prussian Ministry of Spiritual, Educational and Medical Affairs (*Ministerium der Geistlichen, Unterrichts- und Medizinal-Angelegenheiten*) recognised it in the same year, on condition that the examinees also passed the mathematics examination. Moreover, since the preparation for teacher certification for the upper grade was not at an academic level, as in Prussia, the agreement required that in order to head a Prussian school, the teacher must also take the Prussian *Oberlehrerinnenprüfung*.³⁹

An undated⁴⁰ draft reproduces the Prussian regulations of 1874 and 1894 for Vechta (*Prüfungs Ordnung für Lehrerinnen im Großherzogtum Oldenburg*). To obtain certification as an elementary school teacher, no foreign language examination was required; nevertheless, the *Chronicle's* account of the examinations demonstrates that Vechta's trainees continued to add French to the subjects of the

³⁸ As with the second level examination, there are no minutes for the further examinations prepared in Vechta (RENSING 2022, pp. 41, 77).

³⁹ RENSING 2022, pp. 72-73.

⁴⁰ The draft is written in *Kurrent* handwriting, in ink, and is not dated; a recent, modern hand has added in pencil «genehmigt am 21. Jan. 1905» («approved on the 21st Jan. 1905»).

general first-level exam.⁴¹ This is evidence of the students' interest in learning French, which increased their chances of finding employment as private tutors or educators.

The Prussian requests of 1904 and the Oldenburgish adaptations of 1912 interrupted the seamless continuity between Coesfeld's and Vechta's seminary, and were accompanied by paperwork connected to the changes that had to be introduced. While the documentation concerning the period between 1877 and 1904 is scarce and not significant for this research, from 1904 onwards relevant archival materials increase (lists of enrolments, documents on the structure of the courses, chronicles), making it possible to reconstruct at least the broad outlines of the seminary's organisation.

By 1904, Vechta's institution had three years of *Präparandie* followed by a three-years *Lehrerinnenseminar*. Girls could attend the *Präparandie* after elementary school or *Mittelschule* but had to pass an entrance examination that existed in the Prussian system until 1920. Those who had obtained a high school diploma (introduced in 1908) were admitted directly to the seminary.

With a few exceptions, wherein the theoretical and practical preparation in pedagogy had to be entrusted to a lay person, the teachers at the seminary were all nuns, like the headmistress. With the new regulations of 1905, the pedagogical direction was entrusted to the lay *Oberlehrer* Joseph Kösters. The teacher who supervised the *Übungsschule* (the training school for pedagogical practice) and evaluated the trainees' practicum hours was also a layperson. As was the case with other seminaries that were affiliated with an ur-

⁴¹ *Chronik*, pp. 33, 46, 56, 66, 79, 89, 101.

ban elementary school,⁴² the seminary's staff was the same as that of the higher girls' school. As far as languages were concerned, the Congregation relied mainly on its nuns for the teaching of French: the subject was covered by Sister M. Pauline and *Oberlehrer* Kreutzmann, and later by Sister M. Gregorie (who was also headmistress of the *Seminar*), Sister M. Alexa, Sister M. Raphaela, and Professor Kösters.⁴³ There were also native lay teachers for French and English whose hours do not officially appear in the timetable that was submitted to the Oldenburgish Ministry and who testify to the interest in learning oral skills.⁴⁴

Little is known about the organisation of foreign language lessons, and the information available relates almost exclusively to French. In 1905 there were three classroom hours per week of French in the first and second year, and two hours in the last year; they dropped to two hours in each year in 1912, when English was also added, albeit optionally.⁴⁵ The timetables of seminary and school were coordinated as far as possible, in order to facilitate classroom training hours.⁴⁶ The 1912 syllabus for the three years includes an extensive review of the entire French grammar, and the reading of light prose texts, followed by speaking exercises. Each week trainees had a small written assignment.⁴⁷

⁴² ANDERSON 1970, p. 272.

⁴³ *Chronik*, pp. 11, 23; RENSING 2022, p. 48.

⁴⁴ The chronicle mentions M.lle Kern and M.lle Lagade for French, Miss Keogh and Miss Havigan for English (*Chronik*, p. 16).

⁴⁵ RENSING 2022, p. 50.

⁴⁶ *Ivi*, p. 52.

⁴⁷ [KÖSTERS], p. 19. The 1912 report names two textbooks: Dubislav, Bock, Gruber, *Methodischer Lehrgang der französischen Sprache. Ausgabe D.* Weidmann, Berlin, and X. Ducotterd, W. Marder, *Lehrgang der französischen Sprache auf Grund der*

While we know a lot about the importance of foreign language learning for the grades that the seminarians would teach, and the documents give us insight into the contents and methods for preparing for the first level examination, we have much less information about the training of future language teachers. According to a report written in 1912 by director Kösters, methodological principles (*Methodik*) were part of the teaching hours for each subject,⁴⁸ but the timetable he encloses that specifies whether a methodological part for each subject is included does not indicate one for French. This is not surprising, given that until the 1920s there was no real didactic training for teaching foreign languages.⁴⁹ The only indirect information we can rely on is Kösters' statement that in the second year, each week sample lessons and readings in all subjects were held in two lessons, followed by explanations of the methodological aspects. In the third year, each trainee had six hours of teaching per week in all subjects as traineeship;⁵⁰ the practical training could take place in all three levels of the higher girls' school.⁵¹

As far as the language teacher examination is concerned, the draft of the Oldenburg regulations required for it to be identical to the Prussian one, both in the oral and the practical part. In the oral examination, the candidate was required to translate a prose text without preparation, and to give proof of precise knowledge of grammar, verse, history of literature, methodology, and school

Anschauung und mit besonderer Berücksichtigung des mündlichen und schriftlichen freien Gedankenausdruckes, Jügel, Frankfurt a. M. (Ivi, p. 39).

⁴⁸ Ivi, p. 11.

⁴⁹ CHRIST 2020, p. 94.

⁵⁰ [KÖSTERS], pp. 11-12.

⁵¹ *Chronik*, pp. 24, 56, 92.

reading books.⁵² The written examination, on the other hand, showed a modern approach because it allowed the traditional translation to be replaced by an essay.⁵³ This certification allowed teachers to teach French and/or English in any grade of a higher girls' school.

2.3. *The trainees*

As previously mentioned, a distinctive feature of the *Seminar* in the small town of Vechta is that its catchment area extended far beyond local and regional boundaries. The data are based on the *Verzeichnis der Schülerinnen des Lehrerinnen-Seminars zu Vechta*, the trainees' name list of the last twenty-two years of the seminary's activity (1904-1926) that contains the names of the girls enrolled, their place of residence, and when 701 of them passed the teacher's examination.

⁵² *Prüfungs Ordnung*, §14.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, §31: «In der schriftlichen Prüfung haben die Bewerberinnen [...] anzufertigen: 1. Übersetzung eines schwierigen Prosaabschnittes aus der deutschen in diejenige fremde Sprache, für welche die Bewerberin geprobt wird 2. Die Übersetzung eines Abschnittes erzählender Prosa aus der betreffenden fremden Sprache in die deutsche. An Stelle der zwei Übersetzungen kann nach Wahl der Bewerberin eine freie Arbeit treten. Für jede der zwei bzw. 4 Arbeiten werden drei Stunden Zeit gewährt. Die Aufgabe stellt der Vorsitzende auf Grund von Vorschläge der Kommissionmitglieder. Der Gebrauch eines Wörterbuches ist gestattet.» («In the written examination, candidates must complete the following tasks: 1. Translation of a difficult passage of prose from German into the foreign language for which the candidate is being tested. 2. Translation of a passage of narrative prose from the relevant foreign language into German. Instead of the two translations, candidates may choose to complete a free assignment. Three hours are allowed for each of the two or four pieces of work. The task is set by the chairperson on the basis of suggestions from the members of the commission. The use of a dictionary is permitted»)

The trainees came partly from Vechta and the neighbouring area in the Duchy (156 out of 701: 22,25%), but the vast majority of the learners (529, i.e. 75,46%) came from Prussia, particularly from Westphalia (336) and the Rhineland (121), and this remained constant throughout the history of the *Seminar*.⁵⁴ It is only in the central years of the First World War that there was a change, which mainly concerned the percentages of pupils who came from Westphalia and the Rhineland: the overall number was almost unchanged, but there was a sharp drop in new enrolments from Westphalia which was matched by an equivalent increase in enrolments from the Rhineland. It is likely that the nuns wanted to give priority to the girls most threatened by their proximity to the war front.

The high numbers of trainees coming from Westphalia and the Rhineland may be related to the fact that, following the closure of the seminary in Coesfeld, Vechta was the only seminary of the *Sisters of Notre Dame* until they opened one in Mülhausen in 1904: this possibly attracted Catholic girls from the main area of the nuns' activity. It is conceivable that the recruitment of both nuns and schoolgirls in the countryside surrounding the branches helped to raise familiarity with the Congregation and its seminary outside urban centres. In general, it is well known that the opening of branches strengthened relations between cities and

⁵⁴ Except for two siblings coming from Holland, all other trainees came from the following states of the German Empire: Prussia (529), Oldenburg (156), Hamburg (5), Braunschweig (1), Sachsen-Weimar-Eisenach (1). On the upper administrative level of the Empire, the Prussian districts from where the girls came were Westphalia (336), Rhineland (121), Hannover (69), Schleswig-Holstein (5), Berlin (2), Hohenzollern (1).

the rural areas.⁵⁵ Moreover, it is noteworthy that ninety-four per cent of the area from which the pupils came belonged to the diocese of Münster (Westphalia), where most of the Congregation's schools were located. This shows the importance of the ecclesiastical administrative territory (the diocese) and its possible unifying function beyond any political boundary.

Catholic teachers preferred to teach in small towns and cities. Since the percentage of Catholic teachers was particularly high in Westphalia and in the Rhineland,⁵⁶ we can assume that teachers who had been trained in Vechta would go to work in Prussian towns as small as the ones they came from. In November 1904 the *Chronicle* reported that not only their Prussian trainees sought employment in Prussia, but so did the majority of the seminarians from the Grand Duchy of Oldenburg.⁵⁷

It's interesting to note the very high fragmentation over the territory with regards to the students' hometowns: the 701 girls who passed the teachers' examination between 1905 and 1923 came from 312 different places, mostly villages or even hamlets. Of all the medium-sized towns that were part of the *Seminar's* catchment area, only eight provided the school with a number of students equal to ten or higher; the highest registered number of girls from the same town was 22, all originally from Münster. Girls who came from these centres made up only 16.26% of the total student population.⁵⁸ This confirms what recent studies on the social background

⁵⁵ MEIWES 2000, p. 86.

⁵⁶ ALBISETTI 1988, p. 83.

⁵⁷ *Chronik*, p. 5.

⁵⁸ The other seven towns were in Westphalia (Buer, Bottrop), Rhineland (Essen, Hamborn) and the Duchy of Oldenburg (Damme, Lohne, Vechta).

of teachers in the nineteenth and early twentieth century have shown: the background is more diverse than previously indicated by researchers of the field.⁵⁹ Besides daughters from educated middle-class families and from the upper, propertyless middle class, there were also those coming from artisan and rural families.⁶⁰ In Vechta, school fees seem to have been low and therefore also accessible to the lower middle class, not least because the nuns did not receive a salary. Nor did they have demanding income ambitions: a budget allowing for the efficient operation of the school complex was sufficient. For example, when heavy inflation created financial difficulties for families in 1923, and the nuns could not obtain the necessary quantities of potatoes for the boarding school, they asked the families to pay the remaining school fees with 50 kilos of potatoes.⁶¹

Social background is also generally related to the type of qualification the teachers obtained. The first examination is believed to have been chosen by girls from the lower class, while the second level examination – which gave access to the middle grades of higher girls' schools – was taken by those from the propertyless bourgeoisie and the intellectual middle class.⁶² This distinction may not necessarily apply to Vechta, where the catchment area crossed the border between the Duchy and Prussia, including villages and the agricultural middle class as well as possibly master craftsmen. It would be interesting to compare the data regarding the girls who

⁵⁹ NIESWANDT 1996, p. 178.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem.*

⁶¹ *Chronik*, p. 76.

⁶² NIESWANDT 1996, p. 178.

took the first examination with those of the girls who took the second examination to become language teachers, but we have the complete name list only of those who took the first level examination. For the second level we have the name list for 1906 and 1907; of the other years we only have the number of graduates – in 1911, for instance, out of 37 trainees, 11 took the second level exam,⁶³ and in 1922 they were 12.⁶⁴ For the period before 1904, we only know that every year «some» girls took the examination for the higher teaching position.⁶⁵

There is also little information on the employment of Vechta's young teachers. The *Chronicle* only begins to report on their employment from 1915 onwards, and it does not distinguish between generic teachers and language teachers. We have no data on the employment of young women trained in the early decades, but it is known that the *Kulturkampf*, by excluding nuns from teaching in state primary schools, created many new jobs for lay teachers who had to replace them. Later on, during the war, they all found employment in schools because many male teachers had gone to the front, but from 1920 onwards the economic situation in the country worsened and an increasing number of young women were unable to enter schools. According to the *Chronicle*, they were employed in banks and post offices, or became governesses; some worked for their own families.⁶⁶ By that time, the number

⁶³ RENSING 2022, p. 41.

⁶⁴ *Chronik*, p. 62.

⁶⁵ Ivi, p. 2: «[es] befanden sich jedesmal einige, die die Prüfung für das höhere Lehrfach ablegten» («[there] were always some who took the examination for the higher teaching certification»).

⁶⁶ *Chronik*, pp. 20, 39-40, 47-48. In 1922, the situation was particularly difficult for

of university-trained teachers had increased, teacher training was going to be completely nationalised (1926),⁶⁷ and the Congregation's *Seminar* in Vechta was preparing to become an *Oberlyzeum* of modern languages, once again adapting to the educational needs of women, as did other Catholic schools in Prussia in those dynamic and challenging years.⁶⁸

CONCLUSION

On the whole, the success of the multifunctional school complex in Vechta – and the seminary in particular – is evident, as is its ability to attract pupils from a wide area for decades, and to bring thirty or so young people to teaching certification each year.

It is almost impossible to draw a line between teacher training for elementary schools on the one hand and middle school and foreign language teacher training on the other. The data relate almost exclusively to the main activity of the Vechta *Seminar*, i.e. that of general training, which for a long time guaranteed the young girls a job in a school. However, there are sufficient indications that there were trainees who obtained certification for language teaching every year, and it is at least clear that foreign language learning played an important role in personal education and for professional purposes (all trainees took at least the French examination even when it was not compulsory). It is conceivable that the peculiar situation of the *Semi-*

female graduates from areas occupied by the French and Belgians, but they all managed to be employed in schools (ivi, p. 68).

⁶⁷ BÖCKMANN - MORTHORST 1996, pp. 72, 89.

⁶⁸ ZYMEK - NEGHBANIAN - ZIOB 2005, pp. 206-207.

nar, offering a certification recognised by two states, as well as the wide catchment area, may have made the *Seminar* stand out against other institutions of the time training female teachers. Its history and ideals, on the other hand, do not contrast with the overall picture of private catholic education in those decades. They confirm the role that religious orders and congregations played – especially in the second half of the nineteenth century and in the beginning of the twentieth century – as an instrument for the development of the girls’ school system in Germany,⁶⁹ a role that is a relevant research topic in the history of German women education.

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⁶⁹ Ivi, pp. 204-207.

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