



“Terror against Women.” The Struggle of “Red” Women at the Beginning of the Nazi Era: Between Invisibility and Solidarity*

Anna Veronica Pobbe

Ca' Foscari University of Venice

veronica.pobbe@gmail.com

When the men kill, it is up to us women to fight
for the preservation of life. When the men are silent,
it is our duty to raise our voices on behalf of our ideals.¹

In a 1934 publication of the International Red Aid (MOPR), it can be read that Rudolf Diels, head of the Gestapo between 1933 and 1934, described communist women as “the most stubborn enemies of the state because they did not become informers despite being tortured.” Despite their absence in higher positions of the RHD (Rote Hilfe Deutschland, German Red Aid), women played a major role in the activities of the RHD: “It was women [in fact] who drove the bailiffs out of their homes and the provocative Nazis out of the welfare office. [...] In the Ruhr region, proletarian housewives put together a delegation and demanded a pay rise for their husbands in the factories. Women prevented arrests and demanded the release of their husbands. This was the case in Berlin and Breslau, where women snatched an arrested apprentice and market trader from the police. In Berlin, the police were unable to arrest a communist in one factory because the workers threatened to go on strike. In the Rhineland, 40 women went to the district administration office and demanded the release of their husbands. In another place, 60 women and their children forced the release of 40 prisoners through a demonstration. In Freiburg, women achieved the release of a communist woman.”² Taking this attestation as our starting point, the current paper aims to shed a light, at first, on the communist women activism during the Nazi Era. This activism is also reported by some members, like Rosa Lindemann, who was also the leader of a mostly women resistance group based in the Tiergarten district of Berlin: “Some of our women helped the men whose wives had been arrested in the household and looked after the children. We had contacted over thirty families and were able to alleviate some of the suffering. It was a particular joy for us to hear how happy our comrades in the

* The research has been founded by European Union – Next Generation EU, related to the project PRIN 2022, entitled *Political Repression and International Solidarity Networks* (PRISON). *The Transnational Mobilization on Behalf of Political Prisoners in the Interwar Period* (1918–1939 ca.) (2022XBMWZ3).

1 Clara Zetkins: *Selected Writings*, 116.

2 Winter, Ella. *Frauen unter faschistischem Terror!*

prisons and penitentiaries were that we were looking after their relatives and caring for them.”³ Secondly, the paper aims to address the peculiar strategies that were used by the women, like it has been reported in the Berlin Moabit case, where there was a circle of women, that organized relief campaigns and met weekly, disguised as coffee parties or meetings in garden sheds; these women collected money for relatives of the prisoners and helped resistance fighters who had gone into hiding.⁴ Last, but not the least, the paper aims to address some key-role women in the Red Aid scenario: like Ottilie Pohl, who died in Theresienstadt.

Keywords: communist women, political activism, solidarity, Third Reich, resistance

Introduction:

Solidarity among German Women between Weimar and the Nazi Era

The history of German women’s associations is a complex, varied, and intertwined with the history of the legislative recognition of women as actors in public life.⁵ Far from proposing to offer an exhaustive picture of this history, the following essay focuses on politically oriented women’s associationism, with specific emphasis on a communist association, attempting to highlight behaviors, personalities, and actions carried out in the period between the National Socialist regime’s rise to power until the end of 1935, the year of Liselotte (Lilo) Hermann’s arrest.⁶ The choice to focus on this period and in these specific terms is motivated by what the documents have shown. Communist women were, initially, underestimated, even by their own comrades, who often hindered their efforts in the Party. Secondly, when the Nazi party took power, these women began to be persecuted, deported, and often killed by the new regime. Through a constant search for strategies, first of resistance and then of survival, these women never ceased to be activists. The final aim of this essay is to show how the struggle of communist women to be recognized was fought until it was no longer physically possible to do so.

It is also important to emphasize at the outset that, despite its specific goals, the story to be told here is neither specifically German nor monochromatic in terms of political alignments. Communist women’s associationism was, in fact, avowedly transnational, and the battle for the recognition of women’s

3 Schilde, “Das Columbia Haus.”

4 Ibid.

5 Hong, “Gender, Citizenship, and the Welfare State,” 1. Cfr. Evans, *The Feminist Movement in Germany*; Briedenthal, Koonz, Stuard, *Becoming Visible*.

6 Fischer, “Aber den Mut werde ich schon nicht verlieren.”

participation was a common thread among almost all party platforms of the time. Emblematic in this regard are the words of Gertrud Bäumer, president of the Bund Deutscher Frauenvereine (BDF), the largest bourgeois women’s association during the Weimar Republic. In a 1918 speech, Bäumer declared that “German women are forced to breastfeed their babies with their hands tied behind their backs.”⁷ The image evoked by Bäumer later became one of the strongest and most defining symbols of femininity in the interwar period, namely the icon of the self-sacrificing mother.⁸ This iconography of the mother-martyr was also part of the narrative of proletarian women, according to which sacrifice was oriented toward a totalizing political life.⁹

In addition to the roles of icons of womanhood, another motif in the narratives and events I describe here is the link between women (also understood as political actors) and welfare activities. Associationism on a welfare basis was initially the main area of aggregation among women, since at least until the 1920s many German states denied women the right of associationism.¹⁰ However, even when political associationism was secured, care activities were defined as “a special area for women’s abilities, and as such they [women] must be given a prominent role in this area.”¹¹ Statements like this reflect what Rouette and Selwyn say was a fairly common expectation in early postwar Germany, namely that women were the caregivers of society.¹²

The social tensions and clashes that ensued in the period following World War I, however, made evident what Kaplan describes as the “contradiction between the feminine sacrificial ideal and real female power in society,” leading to the consolidation of what Kaplan defines as a new female obsession: survival.¹³ This “obsession” was also visible in the activities carried out by German communist women, who managed to forge a path of militancy and solidarity despite a cumbersome iconography and increasingly cramped spaces.

7 Fischer, “Aber den Mut werde ich schon nicht verlieren.” For the conservative movements, see also Reagin, *Sweeping the German Nation*.

8 Apel, “‘Heroes’ and ‘Whores’,” 367.

9 Ibid.

10 Honeycutt, “Socialism and Feminism in Imperial Germany,” 31.

11 Hong, “Gender, Citizenship, and the Welfare State,” 8.

12 Rouette and Sewyl, “Mothers and Citizens,” 50.

13 Kaplan, *Women and Communal Strikes in the Crisis of 1917–1922*, 446.

The Struggle for Recognition inside the Parties

One of the difficulties that German women encountered within the parties in their efforts to have the “women’s” issue recognized and put on the political agenda was the autonomous management of welfare activities. Regardless of political alignments, between the 1920s and the 1930s, a real “commonality of difficulties” regarding women’s associations came to be established. I offer below three examples of this “commonality.”

The first example comes from the context that one might label with the adjective “bourgeois.” In 1924, Humanitas was founded, a handmaiden association of the BDF, which in its founding statute declared that women should be guaranteed a primary role in welfare work.¹⁴ Humanitas was founded at the initiative of Gertrud Bäumer, who had entrusted Anne Von Giercke with the organization of humanitarian activities, especially in areas involving members of the younger generations. This universalistic humanitarian ambition never really found expression, however, due mainly to the opposition of male officials and doctors within both the Ministry of Labor and the Langstein organizations, which were a series of interdenominational organizations dedicated to welfare activities and medical care.¹⁵

The second example concerns the German women’s socialist movement, which, as historian Charles Sowerwine has observed, was the largest women’s movement of any political color on the European continent between 1890 and 1914.¹⁶ Sowerwine contends that the initial independence of the female side from its male counterpart was central to the success of this movement.¹⁷ However, the goal of liberating working women from both the male yoke and capitalism, which Marxist theorist and activist for women’s rights Clara Zetkin called for in a speech in 1889,¹⁸ was never achieved because of a dependence on the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Social Democratic Party of Germany, or SPD), which, as Karen Honeycutt has observed, was always male-driven and was fundamentally incapable of liberating women from the oppression of the family.¹⁹ Zetkin herself, who left the SPD after the assassination of Rosa

14 Langstein to Labor Ministry (no date), BAF Ram 9149.

15 Hong, “Gender, Citizenship, and the Welfare State,” 8.

16 Sowerwine, *The Socialist Women’s Movement from 1850 to 1940*, 406.

17 Ivi.

18 Ibid., 407.

19 Honeycutt, “Socialism and Feminism in Imperial Germany,” 31.

Luxemburg, was highly critical of the party’s failure to develop a strategy of women’s emancipation, as this failure, in her eyes, meant an unwillingness to break with bourgeois tradition.²⁰

Finally, the most emblematic example in this regard was the evolution of women’s activism within the Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (German Communist Party, or KPD). In the mid-1920s, the KPD implemented a series of measures to recruit women into the party ranks and improve women’s rights, culminating in the creation of a new association called the Roter Frauen und Mädchen Bund (Red Women’s and Girls’ League, or RFMB), which was founded in 1925.²¹ As Sara Ann Sewell has noted, the party considered women’s militancy fundamental,²² and RFMB members were incited to take part in a variety of propaganda activities.²³ However, while inciting the active participation of female comrades, communist men generally remained reluctant to grant political equality to their female counterparts, as evidenced by the following statement made by a woman at the 1930 district party convention: “Very many male party comrades still hold the petty-bourgeois-opportunistic viewpoint that women belong at the cooking pot. They don’t believe it is necessary to inform their wives or to bring them to meetings.”²⁴

The “commonality of difficulties” described above never led to cooperation among the various associations, which always directed their outpourings of solidarity more toward their own “comrades” than toward other women’s organizations.²⁵ According to Honeycutt, the lack of solidarity among the various women’s associations was due to at least three reasons: 1) the “long shadow” of the anti-socialist laws issued under Bismark; 2) strong discrimination against proletarian women; and 3) the presence of anti-cooperation activists such as Zetkin, who always opposed cooperation with women whom she regarded as bourgeois.²⁶

20 Apel, “Heroes and Whores,” 368.

21 Sewell, “The Party does indeed fight like a man,” 166.

22 Sewell, “Bolschevizing Communist Women,” 281.

23 Ibid., 283.

24 Genossin Th., quoted in “Im Zeichen der revolutionären Selbstkritik,” SR (May 14, 1930) in Grashoff, *Gefahr von innen*; Sewell, “The Party does indeed fight like a man,” 167.

25 Honeycutt, “Socialism and Feminism in Imperial Germany,” 33.

26 Ibid., 32.

Rote Hilfe Deutschland: A Women's Association

Rote Hilfe Deutschland (Red Aid Germany, or RHD) was founded in 1924. In the period between the Weimar Republic and the early years of the Nazi era, it became the leading humanitarian organization devoted to the cause of political prisoners on German soil.²⁷ RHD was formally set up as a German detachment of the Russian social-service organization *Mezhdunarodnaya organizatsiya pomoshchi bortsam revolyutsii* (or MOPR), known most commonly in English as International Red Aid. MOPR was a humanitarian organization linked to the Communist International. It was founded in 1922 to provide support and aid to communist prisoners and their families.²⁸

RHD can be defined as a women's association for two reasons. First, it was heir to a specific humanitarian tradition, including the work of organizations such as *Frauenhilfe für politische Gefangene* (Women's Aid for Political Prisoners),²⁹ which was founded in Munich in 1919 and which in its four years of activity managed to distinguish itself as a humanitarian body even outside the work of the KPD. Second, RHD was called a "women's organization" even by the male members of the party.³⁰

The clearly defined political orientation never limited, at least in terms of public statements, the humanitarian thrust of the RHD's communiqués, in which it defined itself as "a nonpartisan organization devoted to the assistance of all political prisoners, whatever their political beliefs."³¹ Within this narrative, the notion that welfare efforts should never show any trace of discrimination was central:

27 There are comparatively few works on the history of RHD, and there is little overlap in the existing secondary literature on the subject, mainly due to the scattered nature of the sources. For a framing of the RHD as a welfare/humanitarian organization, see Hering and Schilde, *Die Rote Hilfe*; Brauns, *Schafft Rote Hilfe!* It is important to point out, however, that the approaches used in these works are more militant than scientifically rigorous. To date, there is only one monograph that has attempted to deal with RHD in the years following the Nazi rise to power: Makowski, *Helft den Gefangenen in Hitlers Kerkern.*"

28 Ryle, "International Red Aid and Comintern Strategy."

29 The founder of *Frauenhilfe für politische Gefangene* was Rosa Aschenbrenner, who later served as the head of the RHD Committee at Munich, Schilde, "Schafft Rote Hilfe," 34; Sewell, "Bolshevizing Communist Women," 269.

30 "For most party members, the RHD's welfarist attitude was better suited to women than the self-defense Red Brigades." Sewell, "The Party does indeed fight like a man," 172.

31 BArch, RY1/3211, *Berichte der Zentralvorstandes*, "Terror's statistics," 132.

Aid is not only a relief to the material needs of prisoners and their oppressed families, it is also an enormous lever to uplift all those who hesitate, to strengthen the spirit and resistance of prisoners, to give new strength to those in the anti-fascist struggle. [...] Solidarity must include all victims, without exception, regardless of which party they ever belonged to and regardless of their worldview.³²

However, as was true in the case of the way in which the women’s issue was regarded within the KPD, there was a similarly strong discrepancy between words and acts in the RHD. Historians such as Kurt Schilde and Klaus-Michael Mallmann have called attention to this ambivalence.³³ Their analysis of the communiqués issued by the organization reveal that the RHD did not even consider itself a welfare organization, even going so far as to declare, “we never intended to become charitable in the bourgeois sense of the term.” Despite this contention, however, both Schilde and Mallmann agree that the RHD, by pruning its welfare activities, closely resembled the various “bourgeois” associations that were particularly active on the German scene at the time.³⁴

Like many other welfare associations, RHD was an association with high female participation,³⁵ but it never succeeded in balancing power relations within the Communist Party, where women always represented a minority. As Sewell observes, one should not be fooled by the presence in the history of the KPD of figures such as Zetkin, Luxemburg, Fischer, who managed to hold high ranks in the party hierarchy. The presence of these women did not change the nature of the party, which remained, according to Helen Boak, an “out-and-out men’s party.”³⁶ Mallmann notes, however, that in 1928 women comprised 23 percent of the KPD, a proportion significantly higher than in any other German party of the time. So even before the beginning of the “Terror Era” (as it was dubbed by the KPD), the scenario for women involved in political activities was very limited and limiting. In the 1930s, the women involved in RHD welfare activities had to face another hardship: the National Socialist movement. The Nazis’ rise to power became the fundamental external factor that drastically limited women’s opportunities for political involvement. It had two immediate consequences. The

32 BArch, RY1/3211, Berichte der Zentralvorstandes, “Our duties,” 253.

33 Mallmann, “Zwischen denunziation und Rote Hilfe,” 81; Schilde, “‘Schaft Rote Hilfe,’” 31

34 Among the many, the one with which a similarity in terms of services provided appears evident is Caritas, Schilde, “‘Schaft Rote Hilfe,’” 32.

35 RHD activities were considered by fellow party members to be more suitable for women, Hagemann, “Frauenprotest und Männerdemonstrationen,” 210.

36 Boak, *Women in Weimar Germany*, 157.

first was a collapse in women's participation (in KPD activities), which declined by up to 10 percent. The second concerned the motivation that drove many "comrades" to withdraw from militancy and activism. This motive was fear.³⁷

On the Front Lines: Activism and Acts against Nazi Terror

With the banning of the KPD by the Nazi authorities, one of the first measures taken by the party was to dissolve all women's auxiliary associations, a step taken in August 1933, i.e., very soon after the Nazi rise to power. There were two main reasons behind this decision. The first involved the disorientation experienced by the KPD in the early years of the "period of illegality," as has been noted by Silke Makowski.³⁸ The second (which was probably more important than the first) relates to the prevailing machismo within the party itself. About the latter, we have already seen how associations such as the RHD were considered more in keeping with the "feminine nature" of "women's" work than the efforts of groups that might have engaged in armed struggle.³⁹ It took two years for the KPD leadership cadres to open itself again women's activism, as shown, for instance, by the following statement:

Women are particularly well-suited to carry out outreach activities. Women must be included in the functions of all our work, as broadly as possible, decisively and through the elimination of all prejudices that exist within our ranks. There is much evidence that the wives of arrested anti-fascists have agreed to take over the functions of their husbands.⁴⁰

Despite the formal disestablishment of women's sections, communist women continued to be active promoters of spontaneous initiatives and demonstrations, sometimes exploiting in their favor the prejudices according to which they should serve merely as a "fifth wheel" of the party.⁴¹ As for the media-propaganda sphere, a 1934 pamphlet offers the following words of encouragement for women's participation in activism of all kinds, including militant activism:

37 Mallmann, "Zwischen Denunzation und Rote Hilfe," 86.

38 Makowski, *Helft den Gefangenen in Hitlers Kerkern.*

39 Mallmann, "Zwischen Denunzation und Rote Hilfe," 86.

40 BArch, RY/3213, Rundschreiben der Zentral Vorstandes (ZV), 26, "Unsere Antwort auf die neue Terrorwelle und die Massenprozesse im Reich," 1935.

41 Mallmann, "Zwischen Denunzation und Rote Hilfe," 85.

It was women [in fact] who drove the bailiffs out of their homes and the provocative Nazis out of the welfare office. [...] In the Ruhr region, proletarian housewives put together a delegation and demanded a pay raise for their husbands in the factories. Women prevented arrests and demanded the release of their husbands. This was the case in Berlin and Breslau, where women snatched an arrested apprentice and market trader from the police. In Berlin, the police were unable to arrest a communist in one factory because the workers threatened to go on strike. In the Rhineland, 40 women went to the district administration office and demanded the release of their husbands. In another place, 60 women and their children forced the release of 40 prisoners through a demonstration. In Freiburg, women achieved the release of a communist woman.⁴²

Such spontaneity was not always welcome within the KPD or even within the RHD itself, which from 1933 onward had been promoting a genuine policy of mass demonstrations. The reopening to women’s activism was, in fact, a necessity, deeply linked to the mass revolutionary movement envisioned by the communist leadership. In a scenario in which, to use the Party’s words, Germany “had been turned into a prison,”⁴³ “mass resistance” was considered the only means by which it would be possible to stop the “degenerateness of this dictatorship,” which through increasingly intense political repression had already set the stage for the “looting and further impoverishment of the working masses.”⁴⁴ From this perspective, the RHD represented itself as a guiding light capable of leading the masses, even before rousing them to action:

We as Rote Hilfe must show the way to the social democratic workers, showing them how their leaders have betrayed them and how they too are victims of the fascist regime. Our main task must be to make social democratic workers join the RHD, the struggle against fascist terror and active solidarity within a collective discussion.⁴⁵

The goal of uniting communist-driven anti-fascist resistance efforts (or even some of these efforts) was never reached, however, as recently pointed out by Udo Grashoff, who studied the resistance practices implemented by

42 Winter, *Frauen unter faschistischem Terror*, 2.

43 BArch, RY1/3213, Rundschreiben der Zentralvorstandes, 1.

44 BArch, RY1/3213, Rundschreiben der Zentralvorstandes, 2.

45 BArch, RY1/3213, Rundschreiben der Zentralvorstandes, 5.

communists against the Gestapo.⁴⁶ Despite attempts at coordination, communist women continued to hold spontaneous demonstrations and shows of defiance:

The wives of those arrested went first to the police stations, then to the SA [Sturmabteilung] centers, and finally began demonstrating outside the KLs [Konzentrationslager]. They often brought their children to these protests [...] The entire group of women from our committee participated in the funeral of a well-known pediatrician who had been denied treatment because he was Jewish, thus turning that moment into a large demonstration.⁴⁷

This resilience was also noted by some comrades, as in the case of Georg Bruckmann, who in 1934 noted that women were more effective than most of their male comrades in the strategies they used to pass on information. This observation was confirmed by Mallmann, who shows how women used at least three specific expedients: 1) carrying propaganda leaflets inside strollers; 2) disguising themselves as “mistresses” to distribute information, especially at night; and 3) using sites that were regarded as typical gathering places for women to share information, such as cemeteries and cafes.⁴⁸

The histories of some RHD committees offer perhaps the most emblematic examples of women’s defiant activism. One could mention, for instance, the issue concerning the “refunding” of the Central Committee (ZV). In 1933, Kurt Bartz, coordinator of the Central Committee of the RHD was arrested. Taking the reins of the ZV was his wife Erna Bartz, who together with Hilde Seigewasser and Maria Lehmann tried to push forward both humanitarian-solidarity activities, such as providing financial aid for the families of political prisoners, and propaganda activities, such as founding a communist newspaper devoted explicitly to women’s issues.⁴⁹ One could also mention the welfare activities carried out by the Berlin-Tiergarten Committee, where Rosa Lidemann, who was also involved in an array of other activities, coordinated an assistance group for orphans and the children of political prisoners:

46 Grashoff, “Outwitting the Gestapo?”

47 BArch, RY1/3217, Presse Und Information Material, 93–94, “Gestapo Methods.”

48 Mallmann, “Zwischen Denunzation und Rote Hilfe,” 88.

49 Lehmann was arrested in 1935 and sentenced to a two-year prison term; in 1939, she fled to England; Seigewasser continued her welfare work until she was arrested in 1943. She died in 1945 as a result of a bombing that hit the prison in which she was imprisoned; Bartz’s trail was lost shortly after the “closure” of the Berlin ZV. BArch, RY1/3211, 86.

Some of our women helped the men whose wives had been arrested by offering assistance in the household and looking after their children. We had contacted over 30 families and alleviated some of the suffering. It was a particular joy for us to hear how happy our comrades in the prisons and penitentiaries were that we were looking after their relatives and caring for them.⁵⁰

Perhaps the most emblematic case was that of Otilie Pohl. Pohl, who was Jewish and a long-serving activist, was a member of the Berlin-Mohabit Committee. She had devoted the previous years of her life, up to the time of her deportation in 1942, to assisting the children of those politically persecuted by the Nazi regime. She was arrested the first time in 1940 on charges of aiding an “enemy of the state,” but she was released after only eight months.⁵¹ She was subsequently arrested by the Gestapo in 1942 and deported to Theresienstadt, where she died in 1943.⁵²

“The Most Stubborn Enemies”

Rudolf Diels, head of the Gestapo between 1933 and 1934, described communist women as “the most stubborn enemies of the state because they did not become informers despite being tortured.” However, the targeting of communist women was not an immediate goal for the Nazi regime but rather the result of a gradual path toward the construction of a new “enemy of the state.” This propaganda goal was only achieved in late 1935, when Liselotte (Lilo) Hermann was arrested. More than others, Hermann’s case could be read as a real turning point for at least two reasons. The first reason concerns the mother-martyr symbolism. The second concerns the radicalization of Nazi policies against women activists. Hermann was indeed a young mother who was deeply involved in the KPD’s illegal activities.⁵³ After her arrest in December 1935, she was incarcerated for almost two years. She was then put on trial at the People’s Court in Stuttgart,⁵⁴ where she was sentenced to death in June 1937. Before 1935, if arrested, communist women were usually given light prison sentences, usually less than a

50 Schilde, “‘Schaft Rote Hilfe!’”

51 BArch, R3018/2757.

52 BArch, R3017/5540; BILDY 10/1101.

53 Schad, *Frauen gegen Hitler*, 203–20.

54 BArch, R3017/28892-28917. The charge was “treason in concomitance with preparation of high treason in aggravating circumstances.”

year. Beginning in 1935, however, the sentences imposed on communist women arrested by the Nazi regime increased dramatically, as evidenced, for instance, by the case of Eva Lippold, who was arrested in 1935 and sentenced to nine years in prison.⁵⁵ But even in this case, there are exceptions, as we have seen in the case of Otilie Pohl, who, despite being a communist and a Jew, was initially sentenced to an eight-month prison term. One could suggest two possible reasons for the initial “levity” with which the Nazi authorities dealt with communist women. The first involves the simple fact that, as repeatedly pointed out in the discussion here, women’s activism was consistently underestimated. The second is simply the general failure to consider even the possibility that women were political aware and engaged.

From 1935 onward, references to violent acts committed against communist women specifically by the Nazi regime appeared ever more frequently in RHD communiqués. In this regard, the most emblematic documents are those collected in two files, *Methods of the Gestapo* (Methoden der Gestapo)⁵⁶ and *Terror Against Women* (Terror gegen Frauen).⁵⁷ Both files were compiled by several hands, probably in 1934, and were part of the information that was reported in a series of pamphlets published by MOPR between 1935 and 1936. In these files, we read of how the Gestapo would arrest the wives of dissidents to increase pressure on these dissidents and to limit their sabotage actions.⁵⁸ The intensification of so-called precautionary measures against communist women was also recorded in the last reports issued by the RHD Central Committee, which sought in its final months to collect as much material as possible concerning political persecution in Germany. One of these reports describes how as many as 193 Communist women were arrested in the early months of 1935.⁵⁹

After not even two years of Nazi rule, only a few scattered committees of the RHD remained in operation, often run by the wives of the men who until recently had headed them. The more the horizon narrowed and the dark clouds of the regime smothered any attempt at solidarity, the more the goals of the RHD came to seem little more than mirages:

55 BArch, NY 4550.

56 BArch, RY1/3217, 79–89.

57 BArch, RY1/3217. 45–51.

58 BArch, RY1/3217, 80.

59 BArch, RY1/3211, Berichte der Zentralvorstandes, “Our Duties,” 251.

The RHD has the urgent task of organizing aid and protection for the persecuted and organizing reception facilities. Relief for all detainees and victims is a duty for all who reject this barbarism.⁶⁰

In 1935–1936, these illusions gradually gave way to a bitter realization:

Efforts so far have not been sufficient to organize effective protection and truly comprehensive help for all victims. There are tens of thousands of families who are without aid. There are tens of thousands of prisoners with whom there is no connection and/or communication. [...] The situation in Germany requires that the whole problem of protecting all politically persecuted people and their families be considered.⁶¹

The latter reports reveal a more intense awareness of the need to create a common humanitarian front, unencumbered by political allegiances, though this awareness, alas, was belated:

In the interest of helping all victims imprisoned behind prison walls and barbed wire, in the interest of helping families deprived of their livelihood, in the knowledge that only together can a dam be built against this terror... The RHD declares itself willing to accept any proposal to be absorbed into such an (all-inclusive humanitarian) organization.⁶²

As the circumstances in Germany made it increasingly difficult for the RHD to remain active, the work of gathering information regarding the conditions of political prisoners was increasingly directed to foreign interlocutors in cities such as Paris, London, Prague, Brussels, Basel, Oslo, and Copenhagen. The intention was to encourage protests in these cities and demonstrations of solidarity with, in particular, the defendants in the trials of the People's Courts.⁶³ In Paris, for example, several RHD leaders took refuge, organizing in 1935 within the Lutetia Kreis (Lutetia Circle), which was established to promote an international campaign for the release of Rudolf Claus and then, following Claus' execution, to promote mass demonstrations, efforts which continued until 1937.⁶⁴ In early 1936, two newspapers in Prague, a city in which KPD leadership had taken refuge, published detailed reports on the developments in two political trials: the

60 BArch, RY1/3211, Berichte der Zentralvorstandes, "Our Duties," 252.

61 BArch, RY1/3211, Berichte der Zentralvorstandes, "Our Duties," 253.

62 BArch, RY1/3211, Berichte der Zentralvorstandes, "Our Duties," 254.

63 BArch, RY1/3219, Internationale Protests Kampagnen gegen den Terror in Deutschland, 1–121.

64 BArch, RY1/3219, Internationale Protests Kampagnen gegen den Terror in Deutschland 1, 121.

Wuppertal Trial⁶⁵ and the third trial concerning clashes between KPD members and the SA, which took place at Berlin's Richardstasse.⁶⁶ A rally led by German women in front of the German embassy was also reported during this period.⁶⁷ In the summer of 1937, several student and working women's committees in Basel responded to the call for mass mobilization in reference to the abuses reported in a trial in Stuttgart.⁶⁸

It seemed for a moment that the long-sought goal of solidarity, which was consistently part of the RHD appeals at the beginning of the "Nazi Era," had finally been achieved. This proved a fleeting illusion, however, for things had radically changed in Germany, and the few remaining members of the RHD had been silenced and forced to hide their political activism out of fear for their lives. The story of the "Red Caritas," as it was called by Mallmann, had its final act in 1938, when what remained of the RHD (as an association) was absorbed by the Deutsche Volkshilfe, one of the many humanitarian organizations directly controlled by the Nazi party.

As with many of the moments in the history of the RHD, even in this case the fate of this association was deeply intertwined with the fate of the women who belonged to it and who tried to pursue humanitarian actions against a very hostile backdrop. The RHD ceased to exist in 1938, the year in which Liselotte Hermann was executed on June 20 in the Plötzensee Prison in Berlin.

Archival Sources

Bundesarchiv, Berlin

Das Digitale Bildarchiv des Bundesarchives (BILDY)

Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde (BArch)

RY1/3211, Berichte der Zentralvorstandes

RY/3213, Rundschreiben der Zentral Vorstandes (ZV)

RY1/3217, Presse Und Information Material

RY1/3219, Internationale Protests Kampagnen gegen den Terror in Deutschland

65 BArch, RY1/3219, 10, Nova Svoboda, 10 Febbraio 1936; 12, Prszaky Vecer, February 22, 1936. Cfr. Moos, *Anti-Nazi Germans*.

66 BArch, RY1/3219, Internationale Protests Kampagnen gegen den Terror in Deutschland 9, February 1, 1936.

67 BArch, RY1/3219, Internationale Protests Kampagnen gegen den Terror in Deutschland 7, "On the Rudolf Claus death."

68 BArch, RY1/3219, Internationale Protests Kampagnen gegen den Terror in Deutschland, London, October 10, 1936, 45–50.

Bibliography

- Apel, Dora. “‘Heroes’ and ‘Whores’: The Politics of Gender in Weimar Antiwar Imaginary.” *The Art Bulletin*, no. 3 (1997): 366–84. doi: 10.2307/3046258
- Boak, Helen. *Women in Weimar Germany: The “Frauenfrage” and the Female Vote in Social Change and Political Development in Weimar Germany*. Edited by Richard Bessel, Edgar J. Feuchtwanger. London: Routledge, 1981.
- Brauns, Nikolas. *Schafft Rote Hilfe! Geschichte und Aktivitäten der proletarischen Hilfsorganisation für politische Gefangene in Deutschland (1919–1938)*. Bonn: Pahl-Rugenstein, 2003.
- Briedenthal, Renate, Claudia Koonz, and Susan Staurd, eds. *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.
- Evans, Richard J. *The Feminist Movement in Germany 1894–1933*. London–Beverly Hills: SAGE Publications, 1976.
- Fischer, Cristina. “‘Aber den Mut werde ich schon nicht verlieren.’ Das letzte Lebensjahr der Widerstandskämpferin Liselotte Herrmann (1909–1938) im Frauengefängnis an der Barnimstraße.” In *Berlin in Geschichte und Gegenwart: Jahrbuch des Landesarchivs Berlin 2021*, 101–36. Berlin: Mann Verlag, 2022.
- Grashoff, Udo. “Outwitting the Gestapo? German Communist Resistance between loyalty and betrayal.” *Journal of Contemporary History* 57, no. 2 (2022): 365–86. 10.1177/0022009421997906
- Grashoff Udo. *Gefahr von innen: Verrat im kommunistischen Widerstand gegen den Nationalsozialismus*. Göttingen: Wallstein, 2021.
- Hagemann, Karen. “Frauenprotest und Männerdemonstrationen.” In *Massenmedium Strasse: Zur Kulturgeschichte der Demonstration*, edited by Bernd Jürgen Warneken, 202–30. New York: Campus, 1991.
- Holtman, Karen. *Die Saefkow-Jacob-Bästlein-Gruppe vor dem Volksgerichtshof: Die Hochverratsverfahren gegen die Frauen Und Männer der Berliner Widerstandsorganisation 1944–1945*. Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2010.
- Honeycutt, Karen. “Socialism and Feminism in Imperial Germany.” *Signs* 5, no 1 (1979): 30–41.
- Hong, Young-Sun. “Gender, Citizenship, and the Welfare State: Socialist Work and the Politics of Femininity in the Weimar Republic.” *Central European History* 30, no. 1 (1997): 1–24.
- Kaplan, Temma. “Women and Communal Strikes in the Crisis of 1917–1922.” In *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, edited by Renate Briedenthal, Claudia Koonz, Susan Stuard, 430–46. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977.

- Mallmann, Klaus-Michael. "Zwischen Denunziation und Roter Hilfe: Geschlechterbeziehungen und kommunistischer Widerstand 1933–1945." In *Frauen gegen die Diktatur-Widerstand unter Verfolgung im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland*, edited by Christl Wickert, 82–98. Berlin: Hentrich, 1995.
- Makowski, Silke. "Helft den Gefangenen in Hitlers Kerkern!" *Die RHD in der Illegalität ab 1933*. Berlin: Hans Litten Archiv, 2016.
- Moos, Merilyn. *Anti-Nazi Germans: Enemies of the Nazi State from within the Working Class Movement*. London: Community Languages, 2020.
- Reagin, Nancy. *Sweeping the German Nation: Domesticity and National Identity in Germany 1870–1945*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Ryle, James Martin. "International Red Aid and Comintern Strategy, 1922–1926." *International Review of Social History* 15, no. 1 (1970): 43–68.
- Rouette, Susanne, and Pamela Selwyn. "Mothers and Citizens: Gender and Social Policy in Germany after the First World War." *Central European History* 30, no. 1 (1997): 48–66.
- Schad, Martha. *Frauen gegen Hitler: Schicksale im Nationalsozialismus*. Munich: Wilhelm Heyne, 2001.
- Sewell, Sara Ann. "Bolshevizing Communist Women: The Red Women and Girls' League in Weimar Germany." *Central European History* 45, no. 2 (2012): 268–305. doi: 10.1017/S0008938912000052
- Sewell, Sara Ann. "The Party Does Fight Indeed like a Man: The Construction of a Masculine Ideal in the Weimar Communist Party." In *Weimar Culture revisited*, edited by John Alexander Williams, 161–82. New York: Palgrave, 2011.
- Schilde, Kurt. "Das Columbia-Haus – aus den Augen, aber nicht aus dem Sinn." In *Mitteilungen des Vereins für die Geschichte Berlins* 91, no. 2 (1995): 379–86.
- Schilde, Kurt. "'Schaft Rote Hilfe!' Die Kommunistische Wohlfahrtsorganisation Rote Hilfe Deutschland." In *Die Rote Hilfe: Die Geschichte der internationalen kommunistischen 'Wohlfahrtsorganisation' und ihrer sozialen Aktivitäten in Deutschland (1921–1941)*, edited by Sabine Hering and Kurt Schilde, 31–56. Opladen: Leske und Budrich, 2003.
- Sowerwine, Charles. "The Socialist Women's Movement from 1850 to 1940." In *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, edited by Renate Briedenthal, Claudia Koonz, Susan Stuard, 399–426. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.
- Winter, Ella. *Frauen unter faschistischem Terror! Frauen in der Solidaritäts- und Kampffront!* Edited by Willy Trostel. Zurich: MOPR Verlag, 1934.
- Zetkin, Clara. *Clara Zetkins: Selected Writings*. Edited by Philipp Foner. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2015.