The Rosenstrasse Protests: Collective Action by Women Against the Nazi Regime

Las protestas de la *Rosenstrasse*: acción colectiva de mujeres frente al régimen nazi

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Abstract

In February 1943, the Nazi regime arrested 2,000 Jewish men who were taken to an administrative office located in Rosenstrasse in Berlin. The spouses of the incarcerated Jews gathered in front of the building to demand the return of their loved ones. Very quickly a protest of 600 women had developed and it lasted a week. Although this event was relevant within its context, it has remained unexplored from the point of view of the history of social movements. The protest is one that deserves recognition in the historical account of struggles by women.

This paper will critically address debates around the women's social movement involved in the Rosenstrasse protests that took place between February and March of 1943 in Berlin under the Nazi government. Our interest lies in discussing the nature of the social demand led by the women; analyzing their demand for justice taking into account that it was at an unfavorable time for the German feminist movement and for women's rights; identifying their position from a gender perspective; and to assess the impact of the social movement. The thesis of this paper is that the Rosenstrasse protests represent an extraordinary act of successful resistance which proves that German bystanders were aware of the Nazi terror. These protests, though not against the system, were a spontaneous collective action that did have an impact on public opinion and on the Nazi government in the context of a weak State. Even though the women were questioning the State from their position as

wives, not from a feminist perspective but on the basis of the traditional morality of home and family values, the importance of this protest in the construction of the memory of social movements cannot be underestimated.

Keywords: Holocaust, female resistance, German feminism, gender perspective, collective action.

Resumen

En febrero de 1943, el régimen nazi arrestó a 2,000 hombres judíos quienes fueron llevados al centro administrativo ubicado en la *Rosenstrasse* de Berlín. Las parejas de los judíos encarcelados se reunieron frente al edificio a demandar por el retorno de sus seres queridos. Rápidamente estalló una protesta de 600 mujeres que duró una semana. Si bien esta coyuntura fue relevante en su contexto, desde el punto de vista de la historia de los movimientos sociales ha permanecido como un evento poco explorado. Esta protesta merece un lugar a destacar en el recorrido de lucha de la historia de las mujeres.

En el presente artículo abordaremos críticamente los debates respecto al movimiento social de las mujeres que protagonizaron las protestas de la *Rosenstrasse* que ocurrieron entre febrero y marzo de 1943 en Berlín durante el gobierno nazi. El interés radica en discutir la naturaleza de esta demanda social liderada por mujeres; analizar este reclamo de justicia tomando en cuenta el período desfavorable para el movimiento feminista alemán y los derechos de las mujeres; identificar su posición respecto a la perspectiva de género; y evaluar el impacto del movimiento social.

La tesis de este artículo es que las protestas de la *Rosenstrasse* significaron un acto extraordinario de resistencia exitosa que demuestran el conocimiento del terror nazi por parte de los testigos alemanes. Estas protestas, a pesar de no ser antisistema, fueron una

acción colectiva espontánea y lograron incidir tanto en la opinión pública como en el gobierno nazi en un contexto de fragilidad estatal. Si bien las mujeres se movilizaron interpelando al Estado desde su lugar de esposas, no desde una perspectiva feminista sino desde la moralidad de los valores tradicionales del hogar y la familia, no podemos dejar de resaltar la importancia que esta protesta tuvo en la construcción de la memoria de los movimientos sociales.

Palabras clave: Holocausto, resistencia femenina, feminismo alemán, perspectiva de género, acción colectiva

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Introduction

On Saturday the 27th of February 1943, during the so-called *Fabrikaktion* (Factory Action) organized by the Berlin Gestapo, the last Jews left in the city were arrested in an attempt by the regime to put an end to the exceptions that had been made for individuals married to "Aryan Germans". About 2,000 men were taken to the administrative center for Jews in Rosenstrasse (Rose Street) 2-4, and were detained there to await their probable deportation to Auschwitz. The spouses of the imprisoned Jews, nearly all of them women, gathered in the street outside the building to demand the return of their loved ones. Very soon it turned into a protest, that lasted a week, by 600 women who were clamoring at the door: "Give us back our husbands!"

The Rosenstrasse protests have certainly led to much discussion among historians as they have a bearing on various controversial aspects in the historiography of the Holocaust, but they have also remained as a little explored event in the historiography of

social movements and the history of feminism. This non-violent demonstration was held by a group of particularly enigmatic individuals: not only were they witnesses of the Third Reich, but also "Aryan" women – to use the Nazi terminology – married to Jews.

In this article we shall take a critical look at the debates deriving from the Rosenstrasse protests, that took place from February to March 1943 in Berlin under the Nazi regime. The interest guiding our work is to comprehend the nature of this social demand led by women. In the first section, to explain the context, we shall analyze who the German witnesses were, and the debate around the degree to which they were aware of the ongoing genocide, and also the attitude of Nazism to the anomaly represented by "mixed-race" subjects. In the second part, we shall study the state of German feminism at the time, and the link between the female population and Nazism, in order to determine the ideological position from which these women were demonstrating in terms of whether or not they had a gender perspective. We are interested in analyzing the case intersectionally and taking into account the role of women in the context of the project of national reproduction of the time. To conclude, we shall review the historiographic debate on the success of the protests, in order to evaluate the impact of the women's social movement.

The thesis of this article is that the Rosenstrasse protests represent an extraordinary act of female resistance which shows that German witnesses had knowledge of the Nazi terror. Although they were not aimed against the system, these protests were a spontaneous collective action that managed to influence both public opinion and the Nazi government at a time of fragility for the state. Although the women joined together to appeal to the State from their position as wives, not from a feminist perspective but on the basis of the traditional values of the household and family, we cannot exaggerate the

importance this protest had in the construction of the memory of social movements. These are the postulates we propose to prove in our research.

Historical context of the protests

It is important to make it clear that we are using for our analysis the triptych presented by Raul Hilberg (2005) dedicated to the actors in the Holocaust: the perpetrators, the victims, and the witnesses. However, we note that according to Enzo Traverso (2012) this model reconstructs three separate histories running side by side – and although the distinctions are still valid on the plane of analysis, the three actors were actually involved in a single historical event, however radically different their destinies may have been.

The category of interest to us for studying the Rosenstrasse protests is that of "witness" (or "spectator") but the accepted term in the historiography of the Holocaust is that of a *bystander*. According to Hilberg (2005), the bystanders were contemporaries of the facts, which would cover those collaborating with the perpetrators and also those who helped the victims. However, the definition has proved to be troublesome as a standardized way of describing the actions of nations or citizens in response to the genocide. The multiplicity of responses cannot be reduced to a dichotomy between rescue and indifference, as studies have proved that ambivalence was more prevalent (Cesarani and Levine, 2013).

As the Rosenstrasse ptotests were held by German witnesses who fought for the liberation of Jews, we should look into public opinion and how much the German population of the time knew about what was going on. Until fairly recently the character of public opinion under the Nazis was considered essentially that of a society of masses manipulated by a combination of propaganda and coercion (Kershaw, 2008). After the second world war, warped images of the German population predominated: on the one

hand that of a population entirely convinced by Nazi ideas and on the other one of a population of helpless victims unable to express their disagreement with the regime. These generalizations have been disqualified, as the behavior of "ordinary people" was far from being homogeneous.

Historians who have studied the public opinion of the time have come to various conclusions about the extent to which the German population showed themselves to be in agreement with the anti-Jewish laws. For example, Bankier claims that there was complicity between the people and the regime, while Otto Kulka suggests that most Germans agreed with the laws as a way of ending injustices and violence (Gellately, 2005). In general, the population went along with attacks against Jews as long as they did not harm non-Jews or the interests of the nation.

According to Ian Kershaw (2008), with regard to public opinion in Germany between 1941 and 1943, when the process of genocide had reached its culminating point, it can be established without doubt that rumors about the fate of the Jews were in circulation. This opinion is also shared by Eric Johnson (2003): "sources of information on the mass murders were so numerous, so detailed and so credible that it would have been very difficult for millions of Germans to be unaware of the facts" (p. 481). Some people were more aware than others of what was going on, but mostly there was silence in German society on the crimes that were being committed, due to a lack of moral concern for the victims and a tendency to submit to authority, "a tradition that the Nazis cultivated but did not start" (p. 502). While Johnson stresses the silence of the Germans, Kershaw reinforces the idea that the general reaction of the population was to be passive about the facts. The passivity, as explained by Kershaw (2008), reflects a lack of interest in the "Jewish question", something that had a minor role in the formation of public opinion.

The rise of neutrality as the predominant form of reaction was not due to ignorance, but the result of a strategy that the great majority of people found easier to follow and to justify, a safe option. In this sense, as noted by Hilberg (2005), the Rosenstrasse was an exceptional circumstance, that shows that for the most part the non-Jewish husbands or wives in mixed marriages remained faithful spouses. However, other writers have pointed out that the rate of mixed marriages in Nazi Germany had fallen from 45% to 15% (Thalhammer et al., 2007).

This brings us to the second question, concerning "mixed marriages"; which according to Nazi terminology, consisted of a couple, one of whom was "a Jew" and the other "an Aryan German". Given Hitler's conviction that any race that allowed "mixed blood" was doomed to die out, it was only a matter of time before mixed sexual or marital relations would be banned (Gellately, 2005). This was laid out in the Nuremberg Laws of the 15th of September 1935, in the *Law to protect German blood and German honor*, which established that: "Marriages between Jews and subjects of the State with German or kindred blood are forbidden. Marriages contracted abroad to get around the law will be considered invalid" (Arad, Gutman and Margaliot, 1996, p. 86). As a result, when this law was applied, the government encouraged and facilitated divorce for mixed marriages. The legislation – which was fundamental for building a border to separate "us" from "them" – would reach down through the generations, as women, biologically the "producers" of people, also give birth to national collectives (Yuval-Davis, 2004). Moreover, we can link it to the proposal made by Eilish Rooney (2008), who emphasizes that the concept of gender can also illustrate the intersectional inequalities of race and social class.

The problem of defining who was a Jew was not an easy task. The racial laws that had been elaborated demonstrated their secular character and claimed to have scientific

status, professing to calculate the quantity of Aryan and Jewish blood present in every individual, thus defining various categories of “mestizos” or “hybrids”, known as *Mischlinge* (Traverso, 2012). To start with the Mischlinge were not subject to the process of destruction. However those in the first category especially would suffer a series of more and more grievous discriminations, such as being fired from positions in public administration, being required to obtain a special agreement to marry Germans, non-admission to educational institutions, and forced labor to build fortifications (Hilberg, 2005).

After the declaration of the Final Solution, the most radical Nazis like Joseph Goebbels considered that it was a public humiliation for Jews to continue to live in Germany, and in 1942 he called for the Jews who remained to be deported. The Gestapo put a lot of pressure on mixed marriages, though there were still 16,760 couples of this kind in Germany by the end of the year (Thalhammer et al., 2007). At the beginning of 1943, the Central Security Office of the Reich (RSHA) ordered the Gestapo to take measures to incriminate in any way they could Jews who were part of a mixed marriage, so as to arrest them and deport them immediately (Gellately and Stoltzfus, 2018).

On the 20th of February 1943 the RSHA published the guidelines for the deportation program, even though Jews in mixed marriages were still exempt (Stoltzfus, 2005). A week later came the *Fabrikaktion*, organized by the Gestapo and the SS, as an attempt to make Berlin free of Jews (*Judenfrei*). Approximately 10,000 Jews were detained in factories producing war materials and in places of forced labor, and removed to various locations. A few days later, about 8,000 of them were deported to Auschwitz. The 2,000 Jews who were not immediately sent to the East, were men who were in mixed marriages, and the Gestapo transferred them to the Jewish Community’s public youth and

welfare Administrative Center, a building situated in Rosenstrasse in the heart of Berlin (Stoltzfus, 1992). We can identify this event as the spark that set off the protests.

The relation of the women to Nazism

Efforts to resist by the female population in Nazi Germany have received little attention from academics. Indeed, the majority of the women who resisted are still anonymous, invisible to history (Koonz, 2013). Further, in studies of memory, the research projects that addressed questions of gender explicitly, tended to be seen as less relevant than other works on memory that put more of an emphasis on national identity or traumatic memory (Reading, 2014). For this reason it is worth exploring the female ingredient of the Rosenstrasse protests so as to be able to frame this occasion as part of the women's struggle. It is crucial to understand the situation of the women's movement in Germany at that time, and also the point of view of women towards the Nazi regime and vice versa, in order to analyze the positions from which the wives in mixed marriages whose spouses were detained in Rosenstrasse, mobilized.

The historian Richard Evans (1976b) studied the German feminist movement and maintains that it was not radicalized until 1894 with the foundation of the *Bund Deutscher Frauenvereine* (BDF), the principal association of German women. It was part of a more general movement in German liberalism, that was much concerned with solving the tensions that had come with the arrival of industrialization. The turn towards conservatism came in 1908; Evans argues that it was because of changes to the nature of German liberalism, which were the result of the weakness of the Weimar Republic. With the emergence of Nazism, the BDF lost many of its members but it also openly repudiated the party. The Nazis closed down independent associations, including feminist ones. However, the BDF dissolved itself, although this was not an act of ideological defiance.

On the contrary, in their justification they insisted on their social and nationalist character, on the patriotic tradition and on their concern for the well-being of "woman as mother".

Traditionally it has been claimed that it was the female vote that led to Hitler's triumph, but Evans says this is quite wrong. Although contemporaries from the 1930s tried to explain female support for Hitler as a rational decision mixed with emotional enthusiasm, this explanation has recently been more systematized (Evans, 1976a). One position adopted is that the material conditions of women during the Weimar Republic should be taken into consideration, during a period that is usually thought of in an exaggerated way as one of female emancipation, thanks to their insertion into the labor market. Young women were opposed to the Weimar government because of its failure to provide economic security, and this is why they accepted the Nazi proposal to bring stability to the household in their way (Evans, 1976a). However, this only affected a small minority of women who had been harmed more by the short term Depression than by the long term modernization that the Weimar republic had brought in (Evans, 1976a).

The general tendency suggests that the female contribution to Hitler's success in the elections was limited and shows that Nazism did not have a special attraction for women. The middle class professional people who had supported the feminist movement tolerated the Third Reich because it coincided with their own interests. It was the economic and social changes, and not the contents of dogma, that determined the position of women and sealed the fate of German feminism (Evans, 1976a). The final expression of the removal of feminism from politics was seen in the physical separation of feminist leaders from the country.

The policy of the Nazis towards women was complicated and contradictory; the common idea is that that is was just anti-feminist. Generally the Nazi's vision of women is classified as purely reactionary, as a call to women to return to the servitude of

household duties. In practice, however, it was a synthesis of progressive and reactionary views, characteristic of fascist ideology (Evans, 1976a). The Nazis regarded feminism as part of a Jewish conspiracy to undermine the Aryan race. However, the Nazis did not require women to be completely excluded from the world of work, just from political space. Their main concern for women had to do with their role as child bearers for the dominant race of the future (Mason, 1976). As Nira Yuval-Davis (2004) comments on this, understanding the leading part played by women in the reproduction of nations biologically, culturally and symbolically, is of great significance.

Another generally accepted commonplace is that the Nazis just wanted women to go back to their traditional roles as mothers and housewives. Actually their policies were considered to have been more radical. This could be seen in the "eugenic measures" that included medals, reduced taxes and other privileges for fertile mothers (Mason, 1976). Also, abortion was allowed in cases of racial "unfitness", just as divorce was easily granted in cases of infertility. These measure were even more drastic than those proposed by the BDF and other political parties, and were seen by many as a moral affront to the integrity of the family (Evans, 1976a). However, we should not see measures such as abortion and divorce out of context. In the context of the time they did not have a progressive meaning but, on the contrary, were another mechanism for controlling women and the reproduction of bodies, linked to measures of a eugenic type (Yuval-Davis, 2004).

Nazi hostility towards the "bourgeois family" was based on the belief that it promoted so-called "private" values. One of the characteristics of the Nazi tendency towards totalitarianism was to blur the distinctions between public and private life, and politicize every aspect of the individual's existence (Mason, 1976). Thus for the Nazis the family was an institution as public as the State. For example, the city of Berlin

symbolized everything that conservatism feared in the development of life under the Weimar Republic. At that time the cosmopolitan city accommodated young women who had joined the labor market and it had the lowest birthrate and the highest divorce rate in the region (Mason, 1976).

Women were not completely eliminated from public life under the Nazi regime but their role was reduced to what the party considered to be female matters. The Nazi feminist organizations were probably composed of upper class women, not from the proletariat or peasant population. The tendency shows that there was a lower rate of female participation in resistance groups, which is linked to the degree to which women in Germany accepted the regime passively (Mason, 1976).

However, other studies show that there was resistance by women and that their efforts were significant (Wales, 2013). Through protests or else clandestine movements, many women undermined the Nazi authorities and surpassed the expectations for their gender, of resistance in the public and private spheres (Kwiet, 1979). This historiographic omission reinforces the widely sustained belief that women were passive bystanders in a patriarchal Third Reich (Stibbe, 1993). In spite of having different motivations, many women developed methods of opposition based on femininity: exploiting their roles as housewives, they re-appropriated the norms of gender so as to re-signify them and protect their acts of dissidence in the private sphere (Stibbe, 1993). These studies vindicate the cases of Sophie Scholl, women in the Kreisau Circle and the Red Orchestra, as well as of the wives in the Rosenstrasse protests (Wales, 2013).

The book *Resistance of the heart: Intermarriage and the Rosenstrasse protest in Nazi Germany* (1996) by Nathan Stoltzfus has information on the Rosenstrasse compiled from an extensive literature provided by witnesses. The author argues that the spouses of the arrested Jews used personal connections to learn about events and quickly formed a

crowd. The sudden breakout of the protest can be seen in the following source: a witness statement from 1955 in response to a request from the Reparations Office in Berlin, by Gertrud Cohen, one of the wives in the demonstration. The source is valuable because, as pointed out by Anna Reading (2014), many of the accounts of women who survived the holocaust were kept on the margins of public memory. All the same, distortions produced by the passing of time should be taken into account (as the declaration was made twelve years after the protest); and so should the fact that oral testimony may be affected by subjective biases inherent in personal reconstructions of the past.

> On Saturday the 27th of February at night, my husband Dr.jur. [*lowest title for a Doctor of Law*] Hans Cohen, a Jew who wore the yellow star, was arrested by the SS. I tried to find out where my husband was and discovered that the Jews who had been arrested were being held in the Jewish community building in Rosenstrasse, and I went there, where many wives had gathered. Although the police in charge ordered us to disperse we defied them together in chorus: "we want our husbands back!" (Stoltzfus and Maier-Katkin, 2015, p. 242)

For a week they protested day and night, which was extremely dangerous as they risked being killed or imprisoned. The SS guards ordered them to leave the streets or they would shoot. Time and again the protest broke up with the threats to shoot, and each time more women gathered together again, calling out to their husbands who could hear them and gained hope. It is estimated that a group of 600 people formed in the street, and even people who were not members of the families were attracted to the scene (Stoltzfus, 1996). As one witness said, "the sounds of the women's demands rose above the noise of the traffic" (Stoltzfus, 1992, p. 88). The protest caught the attention of the upper levels of the Nazis, which can be seen in the diary entry by Goebells who wrote that: "A large

number of people gathered and even took the side of the Jews" (Thalhammer et al., 2007, p. 120).

In order to understand the ideological position on the basis of which the women mobilized, we can see another statement by a woman at the protest. As with the previous source, it is necessary to note that this is someone who was a contemporary of the event, but the interview was conducted by Stoltzfus in 1989, in other words, after even more time had passed. All the same, in the testimony of Elsa Holzer, it is possible to identify a synthesis of the motivations of the women who took part in the protest:

> I was there alone the first time I went to the *Rosenstrasse*. I didn't necessarily think it would do any good, but I had to see what was going on. We acted from the heart, and look what happened. If you had had to calculate if it was worth protesting, you wouldn't have gone. But we wanted to show that we were not prepared to leave our husbands. When my husband needed protection, I protected him. I went to the Rosenstrasse every day before work. And there was always a crowd of people there. It wasn't organized, or instigated. Simply everyone was there. Just like me. That's what's so wonderful about it. (Stoltzfus, 1996, p. 343)

It is important to emphasize that feminist studies themselves are a work of recollection that has recovered the memory of many women as actors in history, and their very existence is a testimony to the gendered dynamics of power in remembering and forgetting (Reading, 2014). On this point we understand that the social legacy of traumatic events in society is found to have been gendered through its different forms of communication.

At the same time, having these two witness reports we can say that gendered analyses of traumatic memories appear to be particularly delicate realms due to the

emotions and losses involved (Troncoso Pérez and Piper Shafir, 2015). The hegemonic memory of women as victims of the Holocaust was principally built on two visual marks of reference: women as mothers, seen through the traditional lens of motherhood and maternal suffering, and as victims of the atrocities committed, specifically as sexual objects of subjugation and rape. So these points of reference announce themselves in the witness reports on the basis of "frames of recognition" that, according to Judith Butler, are produced socially (quoted in Rooney, 2008). So we must wonder to what extent do these representations reinforce gender stereotypes, and only partially document the realities of women under the Nazi regime. This is because

> [...] concentrating on the suffering and distress, the images are blurred of acts of resistance and heroism by women who adopted multiple roles under the Nazi oppression including risky and combative acts that seem to be pretty much ignored in the hegemonic constructions of their memories. (Troncoso Pérez and Piper Shafir, 2015, p. 81)

It can be seen in the testimony of the Rosentrasse that they base the legitimacy of their claims against the State on their place as wives, and they do not adopt the position of brave heroines. In the intersections between gender and nation, this is a context that presupposes the "naturalized" role of women as biological reproducers of the nation (Yuval-Davis, 2004). In this sense this female social movement appeals, maybe strategically, to its "must-be" as it is proclaimed from their role as wives. In this protest action family relations are appealed to as a higher instance of morality, preceding the Nazi State.

We consider it necessary to insist that the Holocaust is a vital test for the historian of the 20th century. Just as it was recognized by many authors to have been an "exceptional" occurrence, others believe it may be used as a "model" for the study of

other acts of violence (Traverso, 2012). In this sense studies of political anthropology and recent Argentine history and the political components of the Plaza de Mayo Mothers turn out to be useful as a point of comparison, as they allow us to illuminate and comprehend the position of the wives who resisted in the Rosenstrasse.

In the context of the Argentinian military dictatorship, family relations have been revealed as a central value in the construction of public demands for justice. Relatives of the victims had appropriated the traditional model of the family to themselves in order to produce a discourse of opposition to power (Zenobi, 2014). The transformation of family matters into political matters was the product of the invasion of private space by dictatorial power through repressive measures, a situation that politicized the domestic arena (Vecchioli, 2005). Just as in the case of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, the effectiveness of this position resides in the appeal to blood ties as a principal of collective adhesion (Vecchioli, 2005), so we can see that in our case, it is family ties that are appealed to in order to form an alliance.

The history of the Rosenstrasse shows there was a spontaneous unified resistance and it marks out how individuals who are not formally organized can collectively demand justice (Thalhammer et al., 2007). For many of these women, their public resistance was not a transformation into another kind of behavior, but more like a continuation of everyday resistance. They had been under constant pressure since 1933; had been ostracized socially and suffered economic hardship for refusing to get a divorce. So it is not surprising that at the moment of the detentions they took another step on that road (Thalhammer et al., 2007).

On the 6th of March 1943 the Gestapo freed the Rosenstrasse Jews after a week of protests. It is evident that the protests were not disruptive or against the system, but, rather, a mobilization to influence public opinion (Thalhammer et al, 2007). Because of

the particular characteristics of the protest, the German public supported the women's demand (Thalhammer et al., 2007). We may observe that under conditions where the German feminist movement had dissolved, the women used as a binding force the perspective of the household, the family and the relevance of the institution of marriage. It is worth pointing out that the demonstrators established their own limits of activism. With the decision by the Nazis to free their husbands, the women went back home. That is to say, their close contact with other women remained as an isolated episode and did not lead to militancy or a search to free other victims. The women worked together just for a limited period of time and did not form a permanent community that would last (Thalhammer et al., 2007).

Was it a successful female resistance?

The motives behind freeing the Jews in mixed marriages and the size of the impact and success of the Rosenstrasse protests created a historical dispute, or *Historikerstreit*, as noted by Stoltzfus (2005). Historians have argued for various causes that would explain the results of the protests, analyzing the actors and the general context of the Nazi government.

In this sense a number of academics have noted that the protests did indeed have an impact, although this occurred at a moment of weakness for the State. Around 1943 the government needed to avoid social agitation, and the fact that the protest was in a public place, in the context of an enormous war effort, made it hard for the Nazis to respond violently and they were forced to take a step back (Gellately and Stoltzfus, 2018). At the same time, the protest was effective because Goebells was afraid of resistance, and if this was allowed to continue it might serve as an example and so eradicate popular support for the regime. The demonstrating women's demands were met for short term strategic

reasons, as they were limited to a specific objective (Stoltzfus, 1992). In this sense Gellately also agrees that the regime did not need any more disastrous publicity, especially after the defeat at Stalingrad (Gellately, 2005). The author also emphasizes that the wives could not know what the plans of the Gestapo were, and this reinforces that fact that the government had never been quite clear about their policy towards the *Mischlinge*. Following the same line of thought we find Evans (1996), who suggests that Hitler and Goebbels probably wanted to avoid alarming the female population of Germany just when the Nazi leaders had put out a call to mobilize for "all-out war".

Stoltzfus maintains that if more people had acted in ways like that of the Rosenstrasse women, the deportations and extermination would have stopped. However, the historian Wolf Gruner (2003) does not agree with this idea, as Stoltzfus's research was based only on the testimony of survivors. According to Gruner, the classical thesis is that during the *Fabrikaktion*, the Gestapo was planning to deport all the Jews who were part of a mixed marriage, who up until then had been considered "protected". It is assumed that their detention was to prepare for their deportation and supposedly the public demonstration by their wives succeeded in preventing it. Gruner's own proposition is that to the contrary, the Gestapo never intended to deport the Jews in mixed marriages, and were holding them in order to determine their racial status and to select individuals to work in Jewish institutions, who would replace the *Volljuden* (full Jews) who had already been deported, in other words that the purpose of the *Fabrikaktion* was simply to fire Jews in mixed marriages from their jobs in industry and put them into unpaid work with no other option.

While Stoltzfus assumes that the dominant view among the Nazi leadership was that the protest could not be stopped by force but only by freeing those detained, Gruner (2005) wonders why the regime tolerated a public protest for so many days. The author's

answer is that maybe academics have exaggerated the number of demonstrators and that the protest was probably less of a provocation than they think.

On the other hand, Stoltzfus (2005) disagrees with Gruner (2003) and claims that if the women had not protested, the Jews would probably have been deported to forced labor camps or concentration camps. The Nazi leaders freed the Jews for tactical reasons, not for any concerns about morality. According to Stoltzfus, it is hard to recreate the decisions taken by the Gestapo so there is no support for the idea that the demonstrators had no effect at all on the Gestapo's verdict. A protest like that of the Rosenstrasse could only take place in Berlin, where mixed marriages were widespread enough to create this level of protest. Gruner does not think Nazi concern for public opinion had much to do with it, but it is hardly likely that open dissent would be of no concern to the regime. One possible explanation is that the release of the Jews was to avoid even more crowds arriving in the street, which would bring more attention to the extermination program that the regime wished to conceal.

It is more useful to observe how the protests turned out to see how successful they were. The 2,000 Jewish men married to German women were released and stayed in Berlin with an official status, that included food rations until the end of the war (Thalhammer et al., 2007). The protests caused the regime to use their deportation policy only for those Jews in mixed marriages whose wives had died or agreed to a divorce. According to Stoltzfus, the great majority of German Jews who survived the Holocaust, and were not deported to the camps and did not have to hide away, were from mixed marriages. So even if we accept that the "Aryan" women who protested in the Rosenstrasse were not the principle cause of the release of the Jews, we can at least concede that they were agents of their survival.

Conclusion

Reflecting on the Rosenstrasse protests, Walter Laqueur says: "what happened in this ordinary little street in Berlin was a demonstration of courage at a time when such courage tended to be sadly lacking" (Stoltzfus, 1996, p. 11). Even though their opposition to the regime was based on personal reasons, the behavior of the Rosenstrasse women of publicly supporting the Jews was significant.

As we have explained in this article, the protagonists of the protests were non-Jewish women who demonstrated for the release of their spouses. As we were able to illustrate, at the moment the protests took place there were varying degrees of awareness of the genocide against the Jews, but there is a general agreement that a large proportion of the German public knew about the deportations and the extermination. Because of this, the women in mixed marriages in Berlin went out to protest as they could probably imagine the fate that might lie in store for their Jewish husbands, which is a sign of the diffusion of information that the Nazi regime wished to conceal. It also contradicts the notion that the German "bystanders" were passive subjects under the Third Reich, and more specifically, it also contradicts the idea that the women were indifferent to Nazism.

In this sense it is interesting to note that the women who protested were connected to the Jewish victims as their allies, and because of this alliance they had suffered acts of discrimination for ten years for being part of a mixed marriage according to Nazi legislation. For this reason, from a wider perspective, the Rosenstrasse protests can be seen as a point of inflection in the daily resistance of the women.

We have also seen that at this point of time German feminism was not sheltered by any formal organization and its ideology in an emergency was not at all radical. We understand that the women who mobilized did not do so from a feminist or gender-based perspective, they just re-appropriated traditional values in order to confront the regime in

a situation where their own families were not in line with the norm. The struggle may be classed as conjunctural, for being spontaneous and not forming a collective militancy afterwards.

To sum up, while the motives behind the release of the Rosenstrasse men continue to be debated by historiographers, it is clear that the protest had an impact, as the majority of German Jews who survived the war were from mixed marriages. To be precise, around 1933 there were 525,000 Jews living in Germany, and about 35,000 were married to non-Jewish people. When the war ended, around 65% of the 15,000 Jews who survived the Holocaust were in mixed marriages, meaning that these marriages were a factor that increased their chances of survival.

At the same time it can be determined that at a time of weakness for the Nazi regime, the protests could influence public opinion due to the fact that the demands that were made by the women were based on family relationships, and the family was an institution that had a legitimacy that in this case could intercede with the State.

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