

A Conversation with Rebecca Donner, author of *All the Frequent Troubles of Our Days*

Who was Mildred Harnack?

Mildred Harnack was an American graduate student from Wisconsin who became a leader of one of the largest underground resistance groups in Germany during Hitler's regime. Few people know her story.

How did you hear about her?

Mildred is my great-great-aunt. Three generations separate us. She's an enigmatic, historically misunderstood woman who has intrigued me since I was a teenager, when my grandmother pressed a fragile bundle of Mildred's letters into my hands and urged me to tell her story.

Why did you write Mildred's story in the present tense in your book?

To bring a sense of *immediacy* to the story. Germany went from a parliamentary democracy to a totalitarian dictatorship in just six months. Mildred was there when the Nazi party won 3% of the vote, then 18%, then 44%. My readers are with her on the streets of Berlin, witnessing the rise of fascism.

How did a young American from Milwaukee become involved in the German resistance?

Mildred was the daughter of a suffragette. She was deeply inspired by the Progressive movement in Wisconsin, which was the first state to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment in 1919 and grant women the right to vote. Mildred went to college at the University of Wisconsin, which accepted both women and men, and in 1926 received a Master's degree. The same year she married Arvid Harnack, a German graduate student who shared her passion for women's rights. In 1929, at the age of twenty-six, she moved to Germany to pursue a PhD and witnessed the meteoric rise in Hitler's popularity. She began holding secret meetings to discuss how best to oppose Hitler. She helped Jews escape, plotted acts of sabotage, and collaborated in writing leaflets that denounced Nazi atrocities and called for revolution. During the Second World War she engaged in espionage, couriering top-secret intelligence to the Allies.

Can you describe the people in her underground resistance group?

The group was diverse: its members were Jewish, Catholic, Protestant, atheist. They were factory workers and office workers, students and professors, journalists and artists. What united them was their opposition to Hitler. Most were in their twenties and thirties. Gestapo records show that approximately forty percent were women.

Did the group have a name? How many people were in it?

Mildred privately referred to the group as "the Circle." Over the course of eight years, the Circle intersected with three other underground resistance groups—Tat Kreis, Rittmeister Kreis, and Gegner Kreis—forming an interlocking chain. By 1940 there were approximately sixty Germans in this group, which continued to recruit new members as the Second World War progressed. In 1942, the Gestapo arrested one hundred nineteen of them.

Are there any photographs of them?

Yes, *All the Frequent Troubles of Our Days* is the first book published in the English language that features rarely seen, even in Germany, Gestapo mugshots of eighteen members of this group.

How did Mildred Harnack recruit Germans into the resistance?

I discovered diaries, letters, and testimonies that describe her recruitment techniques. Here's one: While teaching a class at the University of Berlin, Mildred would keep an eye out for students who appeared to oppose the Nazi party. Her lectures moved fluidly from depictions of poor farmers in American novels to the prevalence of the poor in Germany and the need for political reform. By studying her students' reactions to her lectures over several months, she would get a sense of who might be receptive to joining the underground resistance. This technique required tremendous patience and shrewd intuition.

It's important to remember that after Hitler became chancellor in 1933 Germany swiftly transformed from a parliamentary democracy into a dictatorship, so recruiting Germans into the resistance became much more difficult, a harrowing endeavor. If Mildred asked the wrong person to join her group, she could easily be turned over to the Gestapo.

An American boy was Mildred Harnack's courier during the Second World War. How did you find out about him?

My grandmother told me about him. Don Heath was eleven when he became Mildred's courier in Berlin. When I tracked him down in California, he was eighty-nine. Twice a week, between 1939 and 1941, Don visited Mildred's apartment, ostensibly for tutoring sessions. At the end of a session, Mildred would slip a note into his knapsack, which he would pass on to his father, a diplomat at the U.S. Embassy in Berlin who had a confidential arrangement with Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau Jr., Assistant Secretary of State George Messersmith, and Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles to obtain intelligence from key sources in Berlin. The Heath family gave me exclusive access to twelve steamer trunks filled with letters, datebooks, and diaries. What a treasure! I'm immeasurably grateful to the Heath family for allowing me to view these rare documents, which are in the process of being archived at the Hoover Institution.

How was Mildred Harnack arrested?

After a key member of the group was arrested by the Gestapo on August 31, 1942, Mildred and Arvid Harnack fled Germany, planning to escape to Sweden. Horst Kopkow, a high-ranking SS officer, drove 500 miles in pursuit of them. Mildred and Arvid were led in shackles to the basement prison at Gestapo headquarters. The prison was jam-packed with their friends in the resistance.

What was life in prison like for Mildred?

Mildred was placed into solitary confinement. Every day, she was interrogated and tortured by Walter Habecker, a sadistic Nazi renowned for his brutal torture techniques. Several prisoners in her group committed suicide when they learned that they would be interrogated by Habecker.

How did members of the resistance group communicate with each other in prison?

They developed a “knock” language, a kind of morse code. They also wrote notes —called *Kassiber*—which were strictly prohibited at the prison. Guards were paid for each note they confiscated, and prisoners were punished severely if they were caught writing them or passing them. Among the photographs in my book are images of the *Kassiber* that Mildred’s coconspirators wrote in prison. When I discovered them in a Berlin archive, I was gobsmacked. They are among my most significant archival discoveries.

Hitler’s regime called Mildred and her coconspirators “The Red Orchestra.” Why?

German intelligence agents used the word “Orchestra” to describe any enemy espionage network. When they discovered that members of Mildred’s group had sent coded messages to Moscow, the intelligence agents called the orchestra “Red.” Mildred Harnack and seventy-five of her German coconspirators were charged with treason and forced to undergo a mass trial at the highest military court in Nazi Germany, the Reichskriegsgericht. “The Red Orchestra” was not a name that Mildred or her coconspirators ever used. Mildred called their group “the Circle.”

What happened to Mildred at the trial?

A panel of five German judges found her guilty of treason and sentenced her to six years at a prison camp, but Hitler overruled the decision and ordered her execution. On February 16, 1943, at Plötzensee Prison in Berlin, Mildred Harnack was strapped to a guillotine and beheaded.

Were the men in the German resistance executed the same way as the women?

No, the men were either hanged or shot, and the women were decapitated by guillotine. Dr. Hermann Stieve, chairman of the Anatomical Department at the University of Berlin, had a secret arrangement with the director of Plötzensee prison to deliver women’s bodies to his laboratory, where he dissected them to investigate the effects of stress on their reproductive organs. Dr. Stieve kept a list. There are 182 names on it. Mildred is number 84.

Why is Mildred not better known? How have historians gotten her story wrong?

Historians typically name Arvid Harnack as a leader and either ignore Mildred entirely or mention her merely as Arvid’s wife. Mildred’s recruits have been transformed by historians into Arvid’s recruits. Arvid is often presented as presiding over the meetings, with Mildred as a kind of silent partner, but in fact, archival evidence establishes that beginning in 1935, she led most of the meetings. These errors have calcified over time into “facts.”

In 1947, the *New York Times* ran a story about Mildred under the headline “Hitler Beheaded American Woman as a Personal Reprisal in 1943.” It was riddled with factual errors. Most consequential is that Arvid is called “an underground leader” and Mildred is dismissed as “his wife.” In 2008, the eminent British historian Richard Evans wrote that “women played a particularly prominent role” in the underground resistance, “notably Harnack’s American wife Mildred Harnack-Fish,” and then went on to ignore her contribution entirely. As recently as 2020, the bestselling German writer Norman Ohler trivialized Mildred’s central role in the resistance and confused the manner of her death, describing

Mildred as an American woman who “climbs the scaffold” and is hanged, although we know she was beheaded. According to all available records, Mildred Harnack was the only American—man or woman—in the leadership of the German underground resistance during the Nazi regime. Still, even today, the focus remains on her husband, Arvid Harnack.

Why is your book called *All the Frequent Troubles of Our Days*?

Mildred spent the last hours of her life in a cell at Plötzensee Prison, translating a book of Goethe poems. The title of my book, *All the Frequent Troubles of Our Days*, is a line from one of those poems. The prison chaplain, Harald Poelchau, was a secret member of the resistance and smuggled out Mildred’s translations under the folds of his robe.

What research did you do for this book?

I conducted extensive archival research in Germany, Russia, England, and the United States, and I drew on letters and documents in my family archives as well as the letters, datebooks, diaries, memoirs, and testimonials that her friends and conspirators left behind. In my book, I engage the reader in a kind of scholarly detective story as I piece together the story of Mildred’s life, weaving these documents into the narrative.

Why is your book important now?

I think we have a current, urgent need for stories about resistance, especially given the rise of neo-Nazism here and abroad. Black-and-white newsreels about the Third Reich seem ancient to contemporary viewers, and I worry about people dismissing them as outdated and irrelevant. I wrote this biography in the present tense because I want readers to experience this period of history as if it were happening right now, not as a distant, sepia-toned, dust-caked story from the past. My aim is to write a new kind of biography, one that is based on robust research with an extensive bibliography and endnotes, but is novelistic in tone and peppered with images. I want contemporary readers to see this story, to understand that it is both topical and true.