

Intelligence in Public Media

All the Frequent Troubles of Our Days: The True Story of the American Woman at the Heart of the German Resistance to Hitler

Rebecca Donner (Little, Brown and Company, 2021), 576 pages, illustrations.

Reviewed by Melissa Jane Taylor

In the past several years, a number of notable fiction and nonfiction books on women's resistance during World War II have been published, further enhancing our understanding about the myriad roles women undertook during the war and underlining popular interest in the subject.^a Understanding these nuanced, and often dangerous, roles undertaken by women on both the home front and abroad is long overdue and has been long under-acknowledged in the historiography of this period.

Rebecca Donner's *All the Frequent Troubles of Our Days* contributes to this expanding understanding of women's roles by shining a light on the story of Mildred Harnack. This is a story of war and resistance, American diplomats and students, politically affluent circles and political neophytes, and espionage. The book, intended for a popular audience, is skillfully written. It reads like an absorbing mystery that is difficult to put down. A unique feature of the book is that it incorporates portions of primary source documents, highlighting the archival repositories around the world that Donner consulted. This technique helps bring the reader closer to the time period.

Mildred Fish was Wisconsin native, who married German-national Arvid Harnack in 1926 and moved with him to Germany after he completed his studies at the University of Wisconsin. The Harnacks became active in the *Rote Kapelle* (Red Orchestra) resistance movement while living in Berlin. Although the Red Orchestra was a relatively small, diffuse network of anti-fascist resisters, its tactics become more daring the longer the Nazis remained in power. The Harnacks' connections read like

a political "who's who" in wartime Berlin. Mildred was an academic and skilled at recruiting her students; Arvid eventually joined the Ministry of Economics and used his position to provide intelligence to the United States and the Soviet Union. Told in parallel with Mildred's story is that of her courier, Donald Heath, Jr., son of a US diplomat posted to Berlin. There is no doubt the story of the Harnacks and Heath deserves to be told, and Donner has told the story well. However, given its originality and the relative paucity of publications previously devoted to Harnack, it is disappointing that Donner's citations make it difficult to reproduce her findings. In several instances where I was familiar with the archival sources cited, the citations were inadequate to replicate the research, and it was only through my own knowledge of the collections that I could determine where the documents were located.^b

Two other problems mar the work. First, Donner does not always provide adequate context for Harnack's life and work. Historians interested in gender during the Nazi period have argued that women were successful at taking on new and often dangerous roles because it was not expected—they were inconspicuous. Donner fails to make this link between the early historiography on resistance that she cites and the historiography on gender. In a similar vein, there is little contextualization for the Red Orchestra as a resistance movement. Because most of the individuals discussed in the book participated in the resistance, the movement seems larger than its actual membership—about 150 people.^c Furthermore, many of the members were women, which also cries out for

a. For example, Anthony Doerr, *All the Light We Cannot See* (Scribner, 2014); Kristin Hannah, *The Nightingale: A Novel* (St. Martin's Press, 2015); Judy Batalion, *The Light of Days: The Untold Story of Women Resistance Fighters in Hitler's Ghettos* (William Morrow, 2021); and Liza Mundy, *Code Girls: The Untold Story of the American Women Code Breakers of World War II* (Hatchett Books, 2017).

b. For example, on page 494, the citation reads: "'With few exceptions': Messersmith to Undersecretary of State Phillips, June 26, 1933, Messersmith papers." No box or folder number is listed. On page 519, the citation reads: "'principally on business': 'Foreign Service Officers,' *American Foreign Service Journal*." The *American Foreign Service Journal* has been published at least 10 times a year since 1918. A date would be necessary to locate this quotation. On page 526, the citation reads: "enciphers intelligence reports: *The Rote Kapelle* (Finck Study), RG 319, 66, NARA." Because Records Group 319 contains more than 15 million items this citation is insufficient.

c. The German Resistance Memorial Center estimates that the Red Orchestra had about 150 members. (See <https://www.gdw-berlin.de/en/recess/topics/14-the-red-orchestra/>). The figure provided by the German Resistance Memorial Center seems to only account for the

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additional analysis. Without this type of contextualization, it is difficult to understand the significance of Harnack's actions: as a woman, was she an anomaly in the resistance movement? Was this a huge movement or a relatively small, localized one? Donner uses myriad sources to paint a compelling picture of Harnack, but absent greater context, it is difficult to understand the significance of her story.

Donner also makes some claims for Harnack that require additional explanation. Donner writes briefly that Harnack helped Jews escape Nazi Germany. A claim such as that warrants more than the three paragraphs devoted to it. Donner makes it appear that it was pro forma to be able to help Jews escape by knowing US diplomats who could assist, in this instance Ambassador William Dodd and Consul General George Messersmith. (212) However, historians of the US response to the Holocaust have documented how difficult immigration was, even in the best of circumstances.^a Harnack's actions, in this instance, deserve to be explored in greater detail so that her efforts, whatever they were, can be appreciated. In one chapter, Donner outlines the transition that Arvid Harnack made in 1941 from anti-fascist informant to spy for the Soviets. (338–45) Here again, Donner is not explicit about the type of intelligence Arvid shared with the Soviets, although it was clear that intelligence was being gathered from a number of Red Orchestra members and it included military intelligence. If Arvid was providing two discreet types of intelligence to the United States and the Soviet Union, that is worthy of teasing out in more detail.

Nearing the end of the book, Donner writes, "Mildred Harnack and her coconspirators are charged with treason." (418) More detail or a stronger argument is needed here. How was a US citizen charged with treason against the German government? There may be adequate

explanations, but a seeming contradiction devoid of any explanation raises a multitude of questions for the reader. Hitler's decision to overturn Mildred's original verdict and order that she be retried, resulting in her execution, heightens the need for explanation.^b (428)

The second major problem with the book is Donner's lack of familiarity with the history of the US Foreign Service, which leads her to make some inaccurate claims. For example, citing an interview with Heath, Jr., Donner outlines Donald Heath, Sr.'s career in the department. (273–76) Donner writes that the senior Heath "had talked his way into a job with the US State Department as vice-consul." (274) Heath may have been charming, but he was not exempt from the Foreign Service entry requirements, and the department's *Register* makes clear that Heath took and passed the consular exam in 1920.^c Donner goes on to describe a career that fails to comport with the natural trajectory of a Foreign Service Officer's career, which despite ebbs and flows is governed by the various Foreign Service Acts and policies applicable during his tenure. Donald Heath Jr.'s interview, absent substantiation through Department of State documentation, leaves readers with a mistaken view of Heath's career.

Donner describes Heath's intelligence work at great length, but when considered in the context of the evolution of the department, Heath's career can be given a different interpretation. Donner writes that "Heath would need to devote most of his time to his second job, which was the real, off-the-books reason Heath was being dispatched to Berlin. The second job wasn't within the ranks of the State Department. It didn't even have a name." (276) Heath operated in his informal capacity to provide economic intelligence to Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau, thus becoming "Morgenthau's Man." Heath

members in Berlin. The organization was diffuse and operated in several countries in Europe. For more information, see Norman J.W. Goda, "Tracking the Red Orchestra: Allied Intelligence, Soviet Spies, Nazi Criminals," in *U.S. Intelligence and the Nazis*, eds. Richard Breitman, Norman J.W. Goda, Timothy Naftali, and Robert Wolfe (National Archives Trust Fund Board, National Archives and Records Administration, for the Nazi War Crimes and Japanese Imperial Government Records Interagency Working Group, 2004): 293–316.

a. For the history of America's response to the Holocaust, see Richard Breitman and Alan M. Kraut, *American Refugee Policy and European Jews, 1933–1945* (Indiana University Press, 1987); Rebecca Erbelding, *Rescue Board: The Untold Story of America's Efforts to Save the Jews of Europe* (Doubleday, 2018); Melissa Jane Taylor, "Bureaucratic Response to Human Tragedy: American Consuls and the Jewish Plight in Vienna, 1938–1941," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 21:2 (Fall 2007): 243–67; and Barry Trachtenberg, *The United States and the Nazi Holocaust* (Bloomsbury, 2018).

b. See also the German Resistance Memorial Center's biography of Mildred Harnack. https://www.gdw-berlin.de/en/recess/biographies/index_of_persons/biographie/view-bio/mildred-harnack/?no_cache=1 (accessed 26 October 2021)

c. See *Biographic Register of the Department of State, 1922* (Government Printing Office): 131. <https://archive.org/details/registercontaini-1922unit/page/130/mode/2up> (accessed October 25, 2021)

was not the only “Morgenthau Man”; these ranks also included FSOs Merle Cochran in Paris and William W. Butterworth in London. While Donner is not explicit about what type of intelligence work these men were doing, a letter from then Assistant Secretary of State Messersmith explained their assignments: Heath was “to do this financial reporting which is becoming increasingly important and in which Mr. Morgenthau, the Secretary of the Treasury, is personally and deeply interested. By assigning some of our own officers in whom Mr. Morgenthau has confidence to this special work, we have been able to stave off the appointment of financial attaches, which, as you know, is very important.”^a

Knowledge of the organizational history of the department and the Foreign Service for this period lead me to a different interpretation of the evidence than Donner derived. I read this evidence as an example of the evolution of the Foreign Service toward greater specialization among its officers and to meet the need for a greater focus on economic issues.^b Before the latter half of the 20th century, no such specializations existed; officers were generalists in the broadest sense. Beginning as early as the

1920s, some senior officers in the department acknowledged a need for economic specialists in the Foreign Service. In reading the evidence from the organizational perspective, I see the need for in-country economic expertise during a period when the Foreign Service had too few officers and was not hiring new ones. Morgenthau’s men were the answer to this dilemma, and these men were some of the first economic officers in the department. Donner characterizes Heath’s work as conducting highly secret intelligence when in reality it was a bureaucratic reorganization as the result of an expanding foreign policy agenda. Donner’s description is broad and imprecise when this topic calls for much greater detail and context.

Readers looking for a great read, whose basic historical arc is factually accurate, are in for a real treat with Donner’s book. Mildred Harnack’s story is fascinating and is finally getting the attention it deserves. The story is well told and enjoyable to read. However, readers looking for precise research and a contextualized story supported by the historiography will be sorely disappointed with this book, which falls short on those counts.



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a. George Messersmith to Raymond Geist, April 5, 1938, Box 9, Folder 61, MSS 0109, George S. Messersmith papers, Special Collections, University of Delaware Library, Newark, Delaware. https://udspace.udel.edu/bitstream/handle/19716/6950/mss0109_0974-00.pdf (accessed October 26, 2021). Donner cites a document from Messersmith to Geist dated April 15, 1938. No document with that date was found in the corresponding folder and box. Neither did the subsequent folder contain a document that met the cited criteria.

b. Today, FSO generalists have the option of five specialized tracks they can pursue during their careers—political, economic, management, consular, or public affairs—also known as cones. That system was formally established in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

