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Resisting Nazism Within Hitler's Germany

***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. New York, Boston, London: Little, Brown and Co., 2021. 560 pp. Hardcover: ISBN 978_0_316_56169_3; LCCN 2020951489.**

Patricia M. Mische*

Neo-Nazi, authoritarian, and far-right movements are on the rise in many countries, undermining democracy, human rights, and ecological security, and raising questions: Is what happened in Nazi Germany happening again? In my country? In yours? Where else? Why? And What should be done?

As happened 100 years ago in Germany, the signs and sounds may emerge softly, almost imperceptible at first, then grow more shrill, blatant and oppressive, and finally become unstoppable. As it does now, so it began 100 years ago with disinformation, fear mongering, and the fomenting of xenophobia and bigotry; the demeaning of all who are deemed "other" (whether other races, religions, classes, ethnicities, nationalities, genders, or mental or physical abilities) while aggrandizing one's self and one's group; the appearance of bullies, thugs and self-appointed para-militaries attacking elected officials and law-abiding citizens; the incremental take-over of educational, religious, cultural, media, electoral, governmental and judicial systems; the suspension of human rights and suppression of opposition and dissent in the name of national security -- all leading step-by-step to a "final solution" of genocide and a war killing millions.

Rebecca Donner's book arrives at the right time. It examines what happened in Germany 100 years ago – both the rise of Nazism and resistance to it. In the process it leads us to ask "What can we learn from this past?" "What actions can we effectively take, not later, but now, to ensure a democratic, humane future."

Resistance movements in *Nazi-occupied* countries have been documented and honored in many books and films. But until recently, resistance movements *within* Nazi Germany received scant attention. Yet many thousands within Germany did resist, for the most part nonviolently. They acted courageously under threat of death, but unlike military heroes whose names are etched on grave markers and saluted with annual military honors, they remained nameless and unsung. The very nature of the resistance within Germany required secrecy, including secret meeting places, secret tactics, and secret code names. A breach in secrecy could, and too often did, result in capture, torture, rigged trials, and execution, not only of the resisters themselves, but also of their families, friends, and colleagues. The bodies of the executed were not sent to relatives for burial, but to Nazi research laboratories where their limbs and organs were ultimately trashed or bottled in formaldehyde.

Today some people may know the names of a few of the more famous German opposition leaders, such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer or Claus von Stauffenberg. Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran theologian and pastor who, long before Germany invaded other countries, warned his country and the world of the moral and political dangers of Nazism. Later, after his warnings went largely unheeded despite increasing Nazi brutality, and after much soul searching about the prospects for a

nonviolent solution, he joined a plot to assassinate Hitler. Bonhoeffer was caught and, along with some of his family members, sentenced to concentration camps and eventually executed.

Colonel Claus von Stauffenberg was a key figure in a group of German officers who, after the war was well underway and millions in Germany and the occupied countries had been killed, tried to end the devastation by conspiring with other military leaders to assassinate Hitler. Their several attempts failed, and Stauffenberg and his military co-conspirators were caught and summarily executed. His pregnant wife was not privy to the assassination plot, but nevertheless sentenced to a series of concentration camps, and their children sent to an orphanage. Stauffenberg and the story of these military assassination plots was depicted in the film *Valkyrie*.ⁱ

But beyond the famed few there were thousands of others whose names, until recently, seemed lost to history. Only after the Berlin wall came down in 1989, was documentation found buried in Nazi archives identifying thousands of other resisters who had been executed. About that time documentation was also uncovered in official British, US and Soviet intelligence files and in unofficial documents such as letters by resisters to their relatives.

These documents provide evidence that, beginning already in the 1920s and early 1930s, long before Hitler's "final solution" in which millions of Jews, Roma, communists, homosexuals, and resisters were exterminated, and even before Hitler's *Mein Kampf* was published in two parts in 1925 and 1926, there was already an organized movement of opposition to Nazism that included Germans from a wide variety of backgrounds, from clergy and communists, Jews and Christians, aristocratic elites and factory workers, to accountants, clerks, farmers, artists, intellectuals, and students.

Once Hitler grabbed power, he ordered a systematic effort to hunt down, imprison, and put to death all those who opposed him. By 1943, many thousands of German men, women and youth in the resistance were hung, shot or decapitated, and hundreds of thousands more were sentenced to concentration camps where they were underfed, tortured and died.

Mildred's Choices in the Face of Nazism

At the core of the resistance within Germany was a little-known American woman, Mildred Fish Harnack. These were her official names. She also had secret code names by which she was known in the different circles of resistance that she organized.

Rebecca Donner, the author of this work and a descendant of Mildred's aunt, pieced together Mildred's story from letters written by Mildred that were recently found in her mother's attic, as well as from official Nazi records, from US and British embassy records, from the diary of Louise Heath (wife of Donald Heath, Sr, a US diplomat stationed in Berlin), and from interviews with Donald Heath Jr. who, as a boy was tutored by Mildred and also served as her courier, carrying messages between her and the US embassy hidden among books in his knapsack.

Donner focuses on Mildred, but interweaves accounts of other resisters, including Arvid Harnack (Mildred's German husband and his family, cousins of the Bonhoeffers), Claus von Stauffenberg and other military leaders involved in Operation Valkyrie, and hundreds of others who joined the resistance groups organized by Mildred and Arvid.

Mildred grew up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and from a young age was passionate about social justice, a passion that deepened during her student years at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. There she met a visiting student from Germany, Arvid Harnack, who shared her passion. They dedicated their marriage to making the world a better place and planned to begin their social justice work in Mexico. But events took them to Germany instead where they both worked on doctoral degrees.

In her letters home, Mildred described the hunger, joblessness and suffering that beset Germany at this time. To help support themselves, Mildred taught English language and American literature courses at the University of Berlin. She assigned works by Theodore Dreiser, William Faulkner, John dos Passos and others that focused on the plight of the downtrodden. Songs of resistance and protest were included in her English language lessons. She and her classes were very popular with the students, but her focus on social justice troubled the administration and soon got her fired. Students petitioned for her return and, to welcome her back, covered her desk with flowers. But, persisting in her social justice focus, she was soon dismissed again.

With her doctoral work jeopardized, and no way to pay for rent or food, what will she do? She does not give up teaching for social justice. Instead of the prestigious University of Berlin, she begins teaching factory and construction workers, electricians, clerks, and poor students at the free Berliner Abend Gymnasiums (BAG), a vocational training school. There, besides English grammar, she again assigns readings about the downtrodden. She also starts an "English club" and gathers its student members in her apartment or cafes to discuss political ideas, including whether Hitler should be Chancellor.

Donner writes in the present tense. You are there, inside Germany in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s. The rise of Nazism is happening now. The devastating consequences for Germany and the world are happening now. Month-by-month and year by year, she chronicles the rise of Nazism and, parallel to it, the responses by Mildred and members of the resistance movements.

In 1928, the Nazi Party has only 3 percent of the vote. In 1930, 18 percent. In 1932, with 37 percent, it becomes the largest party in the Reichstag. The private paramilitary forces, organized by the Nazi Party and operating outside of local or national government controls, also grow steadily, and include the Schutzstaffel or SS, an elite corps of officers in black uniforms, and the Sturmabteilung, or storm troopers (SA), in brown shirts. By 1932, a year before Hitler takes power, there are already a staggering 400,000 storm troopers who threaten and bully the German population. In January, 1933, Hitler is appointed chancellor and Nazis light up Berlin with their torch-light celebration parades. Then come the book burnings, silencing of the churches, control of the media, bans on all forms of opposition, followed by rising prejudice and brutality against homosexuals, Roma, and Jews, from loss of their jobs, through Kristallnacht, to the "final solution."

Donner also chronicles the shifting policies and personnel within the American embassy, the responses by the U.S., U.K. and U.S.S.R. governments and embassy personnel to the rise of Nazism, and their relationships with Mildred, Arvid and growing resistance movements.

In 1932, Mildred reads *Mein Kampf*. Hitler's book had been panned by reviewers when first published several years earlier. Critics considered it the work of a fuzzy mind with illogical ranting. Most Germans never read it. But when Mildred did, chills went down her spine. She was alarmed into action and invited a small band of political activists to a clandestine meeting in her small apartment. More meetings followed. By the end of the decade this group grew into the largest resistance group in Berlin. She continued to recruit more people to join, and, as the movement grew, divided its members into small circles that met separately and secretly in changing places, sometimes cafes, sometimes parks or hiking trails, and sometimes apartments. The many circles were interconnected through Mildred and a few key figures who fed them vital information but kept their names and meeting places secret. Codes and code names were used for these secret communications and Mildred and Arvid meticulously translated messages and information into these codes and found ways to transmit them.

Methods of Resistance

The circles of resisters used both passive and active methods of resistance. Passive resistance methods included non-complying tactics like refusing to display the Nazi flag in one's home or workplace, or refusing to say "Heil Hitler" even though it was required with every transaction, from entering a shop or classroom to buying train tickets. Some substituted other words, such as "God bless you." Such passive acts of resistance may seem modest, even innocuous, but they carried the risk of being arrested, imprisoned, and sent to a concentration camp.

Active resistance methods included such tactics such as

- writing and distributing leaflets and posters criticizing Hitler and Nazism (putting them in pockets, mailboxes, workplaces, phone booths, public bathrooms, buses and trains, etc.)
- assisting Jews and others under threat to escape from Germany with phony passports, exit visas, and other documents;
- broadcasting information via underground radio transmitters.

These strategies and tactics were more reactive than proactive. That is, they were direct responses to Nazi preachments, policies and actions. For example, teenagers in the resistance responded to anti-Semitic posters by posting their own with messages such as: "Every decent human being is ashamed to say that this is the German way." Or, "All anti-Semitic students are assholes and assholes do not belong at the university. They belong in the shithouse."

When Nazi authorities abruptly cut off a radio broadcast in which Dietrich Bonhoeffer criticized Hitler (such criticism was banned), the resistance movement defied the ban by building or procuring their own transmitters and broadcasting alternative information from frequently changed underground locations.

Nazi reaction to the resistances' public information campaigns was swift and brutal. The Gestapo hunted down and smashed underground radio transmitters and printing sources. They seized leaflets, and arrested those they caught distributing them. Those not arrested moved to new locations and started printing anew. In 1934, the Gestapo seized 1,238,202 leaflets. In 1935, 1,670,300. In 1936, 1,643,200. These numbers were meticulously noted by Nazi officials.

Within a 14-month period from 1935-1936, 2,197 members of German resistance groups in Berlin were arrested, imprisoned and tortured, including some of Mildred's recruits.

Undeterred, resistance movements in Germany undertook new, more dangerous strategies, including espionage. Some, including Mildred's husband Arvid, joined the Nazi Party and penetrated high-level Nazi circles, where they gathered information and transmitted it to foreign governments and embassies. Sometimes this inside information was the opposite of what Hitler publicly preached to the German people and the world. In speech after speech, Hitler promised peace. But behind closed doors he was preparing to invade neighboring countries, including the Soviet Union with whom he had an alliance pact. Arvid and Mildred, through their network of resistance movements, transmitted these invasion plans to foreign governments, including the U.S.S.R, Britain, and the U.S.

Unbelieved, Unsupported, and Vulnerable

Unfortunately, this information too often fell on deaf ears and closed minds. Resistance movements in Germany were not seen to be as credible as Hitler. When Stalin received the information from the resistance about Hitler's intent to break their pact and invade the U.S.S.R, he considered it ridiculous. He could not believe Hitler would betray their agreement. Only after Hitler invaded Poland in 1939, soon followed by invasions of other European countries and the U.S.S.R, did most foreign governments realize that the information coming from the resistance movements within Germany was reliable.

And when these resistance movements sought support for their work, the U.S., U.K. and other governments thought they were too small or weak to make a difference and buried their pleas for help. Only years later did they realize how mistaken they were about the level of resistance within Germany. Meanwhile, the German resistance movements, although growing in numbers, were left isolated, unsupported and in a precarious situation.

Eventually their secret codes were broken, in part by determined Nazi authorities, but sometimes by a moment of carelessness on the part of a resistance member. For example, when an underground operator transmitted information to a foreign government and forgot to use code names for people and locations instead of their actual names, it led not only to the arrest and deaths of those named, but also of other members of their circle.

There were also betrayals, sometimes by spies that penetrated the resistance movements, and sometimes by dillettantes, such as the daughter of the American Ambassador who enjoyed playing at the edges of the resistance, but betrayed her resistance friends when she was arrested and threatened with torture.

Betrayal and Death

As a result of acts of carelessness or betrayal by a few, thousands of resisters were sentenced to concentration camps or to death.

By 1945, Nazi Germany operated more than 1,000 concentration camps within Germany and the occupied countries. Some were forced labor camps, some extermination camps, and some were

both. Women in the camps were routinely raped, and many prisoners were made objects of medical experiments that left them maimed, crippled or dead.

In 1941, the number of prisoners in these concentration camps was about 53,000. In 1942, the number grew to 80,000. In 1943 it skyrocketed to 315,000. Auschwitz had the largest number (more than 85,000), with Dachau, Buchenwald, Sachsenhausen, Mauthausen and Ravensbruck each having between 24,000 to 37,000, and other main camps having about 6,000 prisoners.

Between 1933 and 1944, German judges ordered 17,383 executions, the overwhelming majority for political crimes (all forms of opposition were considered acts of treason and subject to the death penalty). Their bodies were delivered to German universities for anatomical research.

Mildred and Arvid were arrested in 1942. Like thousands of other resisters in Germany, they were forced to submit to rigged trials with predetermined verdicts and sentences. Arvid, found guilty of espionage, was sentenced to death by hanging. Mildred, then 40, was sentenced to a concentration camp, but remained in a dank prison cell, shackled in solitary and not allowed paper, pencil or any visitors or communications. Tortured, undernourished, emaciated, she contracted tuberculosis, her hair turned to a wisp, and her spine into a question mark. Not satisfied with her sentence, Hitler personally intervened and demanded that she be resentenced to death. In February, 1943, by Hitler's command, Mildred Fish Harnack, who loved Arvid and humanity and great literature, who used her voice for social justice, and who gave her life as a leader in the resistance against evil, was decapitated by guillotine.

Love Forever

While in prison awaiting death, Arvid wrote a letter to Mildred that never reached her. It was later found among surviving unofficial documents. It was a poignant expression of his love for life and her. He begins:

My dear beloved heart,

If in the last months I found the strength to be inwardly calm and composed, it is because I feel a strong attachment to all that is good and beautiful in this world, a feeling that sings out of the poet Whitman. Those who are close to me embody this feeling. Especially you.

Despite the pain, I look back gladly on my life. The bright outshone the dark. And our marriage is the greatest degree the reason for this. Last night I let many of the wonderful moments of our marriage go through my head, and the more I thought about them, the more memories came. It was as if I looked at a starry sky in which the numbers of stars increase the more meticulously one looks.

And, encouraging her to remember the love that carried them through overwhelming times, he concludes:

You are in my heart. You shall be in there forever. My greatest wish is that you will be happy when you think of me. I am when I think of you.

Many, many kisses. Hugging you tight . . .

Your

A.

About the Book

The title of this book, “All the Frequent Troubled of Our Days,” comes from a poem by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Mildred was translating the poem in her prison cell just before her execution. The book had been smuggled in to her and she used a pencil stub that she had lifted from a courtroom desk while on trial to write her translation in the book margins.

Over the years I have read countless books and viewed many documentaries about Nazism, resistance movements, and this period in history. All were memorable, for this was a watershed moment in history when the struggle between good and evil deeply challenged human souls and the human future. Among these works, Donner’s is one of the most engaging and compelling. She writes simply but masterfully. There is not one excessive or misplaced word. The book is also elegantly structured, with short chapters that alternate between historic events and systems of injustice on the one hand, and on the other, how human beings, with free will, choose to act in the face of these forces. The book is academic in that it includes extensive notes and documentation, but unlike many academic works, never comes across as pedantic, stiff, or detached from the human condition. There is an alchemy that humanizes academic work when historic forces and human choices are explored through the lenses of individual human beings who face incredible odds and yet courageously choose to do the right thing. In this regard, Donner is a gifted alchemist.

I highly recommend that educators include this work in their reading lists for courses about social movements, social justice and peace. It is also an excellent choice for book clubs.

Donner does not include questions for discussion, but based on my reading, I suggest the following for use in both classroom and book clubs:

Questions and Suggestions For Discussion:

1. After reading this work what passages and images stand out? What are your feelings? Thoughts? Questions?
2. What motivated Hitler and the Nazis in their hate and dehumanizing actions? What strategies and methods did they use to garner support and suppress opposition? in education? judicial systems? churches? youth groups? media? How effective were these strategies in the short run? Long run?
3. What motivated Mildred, Arvid and other resisters? Bonhoeffer? Von Stauffenberg and other military officers? US Embassy personnel?
4. What strategies and tactics were used in passive and active resistance? How effective were these nonviolent methods? How effective were the violent strategies (e.g., assassination attempts)? What might have been more effective against such ruthless power?
5. What would you have done if you were in Germany during this period of Nazi takeover?

6. Could this or something similar happen today? Is it happening now? Where? Is there citizen resistance? What methods are being used? How effectively? With what types of support?
7. Why were the US, UK, and USSR governments relatively unresponsive when they received information or pleas for help from German resistance movements? How much responsibility should other governments have to help in cases of gross violations of human rights?
8. The League of Nations was too weak to respond effectively to the situation in Nazi Germany. As a result, the United Nations was established after WWII with the intent that this never happen again. How effective is the United Nations today in securing countries against invasions and protecting human rights? How can/should international systems of war prevention and human rights be strengthened to assure greater peace and human rights compliance in the future? Should the UN or a future international system have the right or obligation to intervene? If so, by what means? Armed forces? Nonviolent corps? Diplomatic channels? The International Criminal Court? Other? How can these structures be made more effective? What new systems are needed to assure a humane future for coming generations?

*Co-founder, former president, Global Education Associates; Author, *Star Wars and the State of our Souls*; *Toward a Human World Order: Beyond the National Security Straitjacket*; *Toward a Global Civilization: The Contribution of Religions*; and numerous other works.

ⁱ In Norse mythology, *Valkyrie* (“chooser of the slain”) are warrior goddesses who decide the fate of combatants and carry the chosen slain to Valhalla where they fight alongside the god Odin. The German composer, Richard Wagner included the Valkyries in his ring trilogy opera series. No doubt the heroic significance of the Valkyrie in German culture underscores why these military leaders chose to name their mission “Operation Valkyrie.”