All the Frequent Troubles of Our Days

What’s in it for me? Discover a remarkable tale of resistance that took place in the heart of Nazi Germany.

They called him Young Don. He was just eleven years old. Though he was born in the US, his father worked as a US intelligence agent in Berlin, Germany. In Berlin, Young Don took English lessons from Mildred Harnack – another American expat. But the lessons weren’t exactly ordinary. Every time he visited Mrs. Harnack’s apartment, his father would remind him to never take the same route twice. To make sure he listened, Mrs. Harnack would quiz him about the names of the streets he took. And before he went home, Mrs. Harnack would always slip a very important piece of paper in between the books in his bag. Young Don was a courier, helping the anti-Nazi resistance in Berlin. After Adolf Hitler became chancellor in 1932, rights and civil liberties in Germany were quickly erased. Some people made excuses; others felt apathetic or hopeless. Then there were those, like Mildred and her husband Arvid, who decided to fight back however they could. This is the story of their determination in the face of overwhelming oppression. In these blinks, you’ll learn

how an American English teacher became part of a German resistance group; why Stalin didn’t trust his own intel about the impending war; and how German resistance leaders got entangled with Russian intelligence.

A Whirlwind Romance from Wisconsin to Berlin

Mildred Fish didn’t come from money. In fact, her family had often struggled to get by. But Mildred proved herself to be a dedicated student, earning a bachelor’s degree in humanities and a master’s degree in English. By 1926, she was teaching American literature at Wisconsin University. That’s where she met Arvid Harnack. He’d walked into one of her lectures by accident – he was actually visiting the university to hear a talk about labor unions. But upon seeing Mildred, he was immediately smitten. When he showed up a second time, he was carrying a bouquet of wildflowers he’d picked himself. By the end of the year, the two were exchanging vows, and Mildred Fish became Mildred Harnack. As for Arvid, his background was something else entirely. He was the nephew of the esteemed German historian and theologian Adolf von Harnack, who had helped draft Germany’s Weimar Constitution after WWI. Von Harnack was so beloved that a building in Berlin, the Harnack House, was named after him. By the time Arvid met Mildred on his trip to the US, he had a law degree and was on his way to getting his PhD. In fact, not long after their marriage, they made plans to return to Germany so he could do so. Mildred would also work on her PhD while lecturing at the University of Berlin, where she’d been hired to teach American literature. When Mildred finally arrived in Berlin for the first time, it was 1929. It was like she’d landed in the middle of some European crossroads, where passing voices might speak German, English, French, Russian, Italian, Polish, or Dutch. But it was also clear that something was wrong. Germany was facing a severe inequality crisis; everywhere Mildred went, there were penniless and homeless families in the streets. One poor woman that Mildred passed haunted her mind. The dress she was wearing was just like one Mildred’s mother used

to wear. One of the things that Mildred and Arvid truly bonded over was a deep mutual commitment to social causes. In Arvid's case, this meant periodically traveling to Moscow to serve as secretary for a group called ARPLAN, or the Working Group for the Study of the Soviet Planned Economy. At the time, the Soviet Union's economy was booming. Some Germans, like Arvid, thought its ideas could help turn the German economy around as well. The Harnacks didn't know it at the time, but Arvid's involvement in ARPLAN would have profound consequences in both their lives in the years to come.

Work, Freedom, Bread

By the start of 1930, Mildred and Arvid had some reasons to feel hopeful about the future. While disparity still existed, the economy had been on the mend since 1923. Plus, there were the tenets of the 1919 Weimar Constitution, which in many ways was a progressive document that guaranteed a lot of freedoms and equalities between the sexes. Women had the right to vote, censorship was largely banned, and there was religious freedom – all of which had brought about an artistic and intellectual renaissance in the country. But, on the other hand, there was no ignoring the pulse of the street: an underlying tension was brewing. One German writer in Berlin explained that despite the "extraordinary freedoms," there was a persistent feeling that "someday all of this will suddenly burst apart." Indeed, in the early 1930s, things began to change at a rapid pace. Berlin entered, as Mildred put it, "such very dark hours." On July 29, 1932, Mildred held her last lecture at the University of Berlin. No reason was given as to why she was asked not to return – but it wasn't hard for Mildred to understand. For two years, she'd been presenting lectures on authors like William Faulkner and Theodore Dreiser, whose works commented on the plight of the downtrodden working class. Mildred didn't hide her political views; she drew direct connections between these books, the hardships facing many Germans, and the troubling rise of the National Socialist German Workers' Party – otherwise known as the Nazis. Two days after Mildred's final lecture at the university, an election was held. It wasn't the first time the Nazi party had appeared on the ballot; in the 1928 elections, it had earned less than 3 percent of the vote. But in 1932, that jumped to 37 percent, making the Nazis the largest party in the German parliament. Their slogan – "Work! Freedom! Bread!" – could be seen all over Berlin. In a letter to her mother, Mildred explained that the German people, facing the threat of poverty, had come to the conclusion that things had been better before. They thought a return to "a more absolute government" was the best course of action. As a result, fascism was on the rise. Many in Germany were concerned by the Nazi party's gains, but they weren't yet panicking. After all, the party's leader, Adolf Hitler, was seen as a buffoon and was widely ridiculed in the press. When he'd run for president in 1930, he'd been soundly defeated. People believed the government, the rules of the constitution, and more experienced politicians in parliament would keep Hitler and the Nazis in check.

A Fire That Changed Everything

There were some warning signs about the Nazi party's true intentions. By 1932, Hitler had already published his manifesto, Mein Kampf. Though few people had actually read it, both the left- and right-wing press had dismissed it as little more than unhinged ravings. Still, it did offer insight into the antidemocratic motivations behind the Nazi party, including Hitler's rampant anti-Semitism. In 1932, the Münchener Post published

even more worrying news about Hitler's agenda: a story about the Nazi Party's "Cell G," a secret death squad created to murder Hitler's enemies. Given alarming reports like these, as well as the mockery that Hitler had faced in the press, it wasn't surprising that the Nazi party quickly worked to outlaw free press and free speech. But that was just one piece of the puzzle. On February 27, 1933 – just a few weeks after Hitler had been sworn in as chancellor – a fire broke out in the Reichstag that completely gutted the German parliament building. Did an angry communist sympathizer set fire to the Reichstag, as the official story goes? Or was the fire set deliberately as an excuse for the Nazi party to enact its agenda? Either way, it placed immense pressure on Germany's president as well as members of the parliament. Despite vocal opposition from a few of those members, a vote was taken; the majority approved a new law, the "Law to Remove the Distress of People and Reich." It essentially tore the Weimar Constitution to shreds. Some still believed that this would only be a temporary emergency measure. But the law, along with a presidential order titled "Decree of the Reich President for the Protection of the People and State," effectively turned Germany into a dictatorship. It was a bloodless coup. Hitler was no longer the chancellor; he'd become the Führer, or leader. And he now had the legal backing to silence all opposition and arrest anyone who spoke ill of him or the Nazi party. More laws – some official, some simply ideological guidelines – soon followed. The Weimar-era attitude of female liberation was now a thing of the past. Joseph Goebbels, the head of the Ministry for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, publicly declared that Germany's recent problems were partly due to the fact that women had been granted too many freedoms. Women shouldn't be working, he said; instead, "her most glorious duty is to give children to her people and nation." In the public sector alone, over 19,000 women were fired from their jobs.

Spy Club

Once she'd left the University of Berlin, Mildred didn't stay jobless for long. She soon found work teaching English at the Berlin Night School for Adults – or the BAG, as it was known by locals. In a way, the job suited Mildred. Both she and Arvid were dedicated to helping the working class, and BAG students were exactly that. Many were unemployed, some were Jewish, and more than a few were unhappy about the recent political shift in Germany. The school itself was pioneering; before it opened, the only schools for working-class adults had been vocational and trade schools. The BAG wanted to help people escape poverty by teaching them things like history, philosophy, literature, and science – things that could potentially broaden their horizons. At the BAG, Mildred continued to speak openly about politics, much to the surprise of some students. Along with discussions about Ralph Waldo Emerson, Shakespeare, and Charles Dickens, she sang folk songs like "John Brown's Body," about the abolitionist who died trying to free slaves in the American South. And she wasn't afraid to make connections with current events in Germany; a discussion about slavery could lead to her asking a student, "Do you believe Hitler should be chancellor?" Early into her teaching career at BAG, Mildred launched an extracurricular English club that met on a regular basis. She invited provocative people from her social circle – like George Messersmith, who worked at the American Consulate. These guests opened the door for further political discussions. We're not exactly sure of what Messersmith said at the English club meeting. But when he spoke to a colleague at the White House, he described the Nazi government as being "of a mentality that you and I cannot understand. Some of them are psychopathic cases and would ordinarily be receiving treatment somewhere." At first, the club met in Mildred and Arvid's apartment. But by

early 1933, this was deemed too much of a risk. The walls weren't very thick, and rumors were already circulating about people turning in neighbors who they suspected of committing treason – which now included benign activities like listening to non-German radio stations. The secret police, known as the Gestapo, and Hitler's SS, a paramilitary unit, acted with impunity. They broke down doors and hauled people off for interrogation, enforcing Hitler's new laws with extreme prejudice. The threat of indefinite imprisonment, torture, or death was very real. The Harnacks took this threat seriously, but it didn't stop them from pushing back against the new regime. Before long, Mildred was using her English club to recruit people into what became known as "the Circle." The Circle started out by making leaflets and flyers that countered the brute force of the Nazi propaganda machine. They'd leave these materials in between newspapers or stacked them in factories and warehouses where workers would find them. The Circle was part of a German resistance movement that was very much in its infancy in 1933; it would become more complex and even international in the years ahead.

Fighting a Dangerous Fight

In 1933, the Nazi government rounded up 20,000 political prisoners. Like many other people, Mildred and Arvid asked themselves, Should we stay or should we go? After all, with Arvid's ties to Moscow, he could have easily been branded a communist and become a prisoner himself. Even so, they decided to stay and fight for as long as they could. They were at the center of the Circle, organizing leaflet campaigns to try and inspire people to rise up against the Nazi government. Meanwhile, new and increasingly oppressive laws kept getting passed. On September 15, 1935, the "Reich Citizenship Law" and the "Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honor" stripped Jewish people of their citizenship as well as their civil and human rights. Suddenly, it was against the law for a Jewish person to marry or have sex with a non-Jewish person. The growing marginalization, segregation, and confinement were all leading up to the larger Nazi plan of extermination. In 1933, a newspaper explained how, due to the limited capacity of the normal German prison system, a former gunpowder factory in Dachau was going to house political prisoners in what was called "protective custody." The government claimed that there was no intention of holding these prisoners any longer than was absolutely necessary. Dachau was the prototype concentration camp. About 170 smaller, makeshift camps were set up in Berlin; over the next ten years, larger-scale camps like Buchenwald, Mauthausen, and Auschwitz were also established. One called Ravensbrück would be for women prisoners only. For many Jewish families, the decision was clear: leave. And for the Harnacks, the need to help Jews escape was equally clear. To do this, they would use their connections as best they could. By early 1935, these connections were significant; having Adolf von Harnack as his uncle was still paying dividends for Arvid, and he was able to get a job at the Ministry of Economics. This also gave him access to the Deutscher Club, a social club for high-ranking Nazis – a place where he could meet others in the upper echelon of the government who were interested in undermining Hitler's plans. Meanwhile, Mildred had connections at the US embassy and the American Women's Club, which was populated with the wives of diplomats. Because of Arvid's family background, the Harnacks socialized and rubbed shoulders with some of Berlin's most influential figures. Thanks to this, Mildred was able to obtain visas and help people like the Jewish editor Max Tau, who found safe haven in Norway.

The Cost of Resistance

The Circle's efforts didn't go unnoticed. In 1934 alone, the Gestapo confiscated more than a million of their leaflets. But by that time, more resistance groups had emerged. One important figure in the Berlin resistance was Harro Schulze-Boysen, a young officer in the Ministry of Aviation, who led the Gegner Kreis resistance group. Another, former magazine editor Adam Kuckhoff, led a small group called Tat Kreis. And John Rittmeister, a neurologist, led one called Rittmeister Kreis. These were just a few of the resistance groups in Berlin that occasionally interconnected with Mildred and Arvid's own Circle. The risks weren't diminishing, either. In 1936 alone, over 12,000 people were arrested for distributing opposition leaflets. Two of them were individuals Mildred had recruited through her BAG meetings. With people like Arvid and Schulze-Boysen in the resistance, the leaflets became more detailed. From his position within the Ministry of Aviation, Schulze-Boysen provided details about the troops, weapons, and supplies Hitler was sending to Spanish dictator Francisco Franco. But keeping secrets was starting to take a toll on Mildred and Arvid. It was well known that every building in Berlin had its own Gestapo informant, and the informant's identity wasn't always a mystery. For instance, there was a period when the Harnacks lived in a building owned and occupied by Hela Strehl, a mistress of Joseph Goebbels. And no matter where they lived, the Harnacks had good reason to believe their home was bugged. It wasn't uncommon for mysterious workers to show up, claiming they were there to fix a problem or update some wiring – and install surveillance equipment instead. Both Mildred and Arvid also had to spend their days posing as Nazi supporters. For Arvid, it was more than just posing; he'd made the difficult decision to officially register himself as a Nazi in order to keep his job and gain access to the people at the Deutscher Club. Mildred, on the other hand, frequently posed as a supporter in order to recruit people into the resistance. She'd say something kind about Hitler in order to see how a person responded. Sometimes they were disgusted with her – and that was just the response she was hoping for. In 1937, when Mildred briefly returned to the US to visit friends and family, it was apparent that something had changed deep within her. Even on the other side of the Atlantic, she couldn't shake the feeling that she was being followed or tested for loyalty. So she was cold and tight-lipped about what was happening in Germany. When she gave a friend a peck on the cheek goodbye, the friend turned to her husband and said, "I have the feeling I've just been kissed by a Nazi."

Messages Not Received

Hitler wanted "peace." That's what he said again and again when asked about why he was defying the orders of the WWI armistice that forbade Germany from stockpiling arms, building tanks, and making weapons of war. Of course, he was lying through his teeth. In their positions at the finance and aviation ministries, both Arvid and Harro Schulze-Boysen could see that the Führer was gearing up for a large-scale war. The Soviet Union was becoming concerned; it wanted good intel. Alexander Hirschfeld, an old friend of Arvid's from his days in ARPLAN, was working for Moscow Center – the Soviet foreign intelligence agency's headquarters. Hirschfeld arrived in Berlin and tried to recruit Arvid to be a Soviet agent, but Arvid refused – for the most part. He wouldn't take any money, and he wouldn't be controlled or answerable to Moscow Center, but he would provide information. Germany invaded Poland and France in 1939, and over the next few years, Moscow Center made similar arrangements with a number of people from the loosely connected Berlin resistance groups, including Harro Schulze-Boysen.

In 1941, the intel from the German resistance had become irrefutable: an invasion of Russia was imminent. But Soviet leader Joseph Stalin wouldn't believe it. There were two reasons for this. First of all, at the start of the war, Hitler and Stalin had signed a nonaggression pact. Hitler was sending Stalin tanks in exchange for gasoline, and to Stalin, the idea that Germany was simultaneously plotting to invade Russia just seemed absurd. The second issue was the Great Purge. Between 1936 and 1938, Stalin had ordered the executions of around a thousand people a day. These were people he suspected of being threats; among them were some of the most senior intelligence staff at Moscow Center. Oddly enough, Stalin was intensely paranoid about those closest to him, while he was dangerously trusting about his relationship with Hitler. The fact that Moscow Center was being run by less experienced minds at such a crucial time would also have a fateful effect on the German resistance. The Soviets had equipped the German resistance groups with portable transistor radios. On August 26, 1941, the young new director of Soviet intelligence, Pavel Fitin, sent an encrypted message telling one of his agents to visit three addresses in Berlin and ensure that the radios were operational. It was one of the more egregious intelligence mistakes of WWII, as Fitin listed the addresses and the full names of Harro Schulze-Boysen, Adam Kuckhoff, and Arvid Harnack. The Nazis immediately intercepted the message. Although it was encrypted, code breakers were on the job – and the clock was ticking.

No Escape

As the war escalated, the leaflet campaign continued, with anti-Nazi flyers urging arms factory workers to sabotage ammunitions and bombs. Some resistance groups also got more aggressive, targeting the railroads with explosives. And as early as 1938, high-ranking members of the German and Austrian military plotted ways to kill Hitler. Their efforts became known as the Oster Conspiracy, named after General Hans Oster, one of the group's masterminds. Their efforts culminated in Operation Valkyrie, an attempt to assassinate Hitler by planting a bomb that, in the end, only partially detonated and left Hitler with minor wounds. So many executions took place in Nazi Germany that beheadings were reintroduced. At one prison in Berlin in 1935, there were over 80 beheadings. These were performed with an axe, until a steel guillotine was brought in to make the process more clean and efficient. Execution was the threat that loomed large over the Berlin resistance – and it became all too real when, on July 14, 1942, Nazi decoders cracked the message. The names and addresses of three key resistance leaders were laid bare. It's not clear whether Mildred and Arvid knew that the Gestapo was closing in on them, but they did plan their escape at precisely this time. In the summer of 1942, the Harnacks fled Germany for Lithuania, where they planned to take a boat to Sweden. However, before they even managed to set foot on the boat, they were captured at a house by the Baltic Sea and dragged back to Berlin. At the Gestapo headquarters, Mildred and Arvid were separated. Mildred was put into a cell and found herself surrounded by a number of other resistance members, including Harro Schulze-Boysen and his wife, Libertas. The head of the Tat Kreis group, Adam Kuckhoff, was also there – as were members of the Rittmeister Kreis and two of Mildred's own recruits from BAG meetings. All of the circles in the Berlin resistance were together. Over the following days, the Gestapo tortured them in order to obtain statements that implicated each other in treason and named other conspirators. Some broke; others, like Mildred, never admitted anything. One person didn't have to be tortured at all: Libertas, Schulze-Boysen's wife, revealed one name after another. The involvement of Libertas and Harro came as quite a shock to Hermann Göring, one of the highest ranking ministers in the Nazi party. Libertas was an aristocrat; her grandfather was a prince, and she had a

family castle in Liebenberg. Göring had attended her wedding to Harro Schulze-Boysen. He'd entrusted all his military plans and blueprints to Schulze-Boysen. It was nothing less than a humiliation.

A Letter from Arvid

After arresting 76 people who would stand trial, the Gestapo branded them the Red Orchestra – even though the various resistance groups in Berlin were never that organized. On December 15, 1942, Mildred and Arvid Harnack began a trial that lasted four days. It was the first time they'd seen each other in months. And when the trial ended, it became the last. While they weren't allowed to speak to each other, Arvid was able to get a letter passed along to Mildred. It contained his last words. The trial was mostly a formality – Hitler had the final say when it came to sentencing. Oddly enough, he believed that women should be beheaded rather than hung, so many women in the resistance died this way. Nearly everyone who was arrested in connection with the Berlin resistance groups received a death sentence. On December 22, 1942, Arvid, Harro Schulze-Boysen, and eight others were executed by hanging. As for Mildred, she was given a six-month prison sentence at first. But Hitler found this unacceptable and demanded another trial. One of Mildred's BAG recruits testified that she had coerced him into being a spy – and Mildred was sentenced to death by beheading. On February 16, 1943, Mildred was awaiting the guillotine. She gave Arvid's letter to her cellmate, Gertrud Klapputh, for safekeeping. The chaplain at Plötzensee Prison had smuggled in a book for Mildred so she could spend her final moments doing what she loved most: reading. In the margins of the book, she translated a poem by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: "In all the frequent troubles of our days / A God gave compensation – more his praise / In looking sky- and heavenward as duty / In sunshine and in virtue and in beauty." After Mildred's execution, Gertrud was taken to Ravensbrück, the concentration camp for women. It was a place where brutal slave labor and horrific medical experiments took place. Because Gertrud knew how to write shorthand and type, she was given work as a secretary for an SS officer at the camp. Gertrud was there on April 30, 1945 – the day Hitler committed suicide and the Red Army discovered the Ravensbrück camp. She was left to wander the bombed-out streets of Berlin looking for a place to sleep. She had only two things: the clothes on her back and the letter that Arvid had written to Mildred. By 1952, Gertrud had married a journalist and was mother to three children. She now had the strength to write to Clara Harnack, Arvid's mother. She explained how she met Mildred in prison, and enclosed the letter she'd been given. The letter is five paragraphs long. Arvid recounts the many "wonderful moments of our marriage." These are the moments he cherished in his last months. It ends with the words, "You are in my heart. You shall be forever. My greatest wish is that you are happy when you think of me. I am when I think of you."

Final summary

The key message in these blinks is that: Much has been written about anti-Nazi resistance groups in Europe during WWII. Yet few know about the individuals living in Germany who risked their lives to fight back against their own government. Even during the war, these people received little acknowledgment from the Soviet, British, or American allies. Their warnings went unheeded, and they received almost no support – besides what the small, unaffiliated groups could provide to one another. Mildred Harnack devoted herself to working to save her new home from the fascist dictatorship

that took over. She spent over ten years as part of an underground anti-Nazi resistance group before she, and many of her peers, were mercilessly executed.