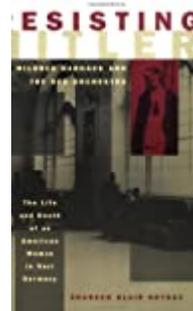




Shareen Blair Brysac. *Resisting Hitler: Mildred Harnack and the Red Orchestra.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. xv + 498 pp. \$17.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-515240-1.



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Published on H-German (January, 2005)

It is not only recent anniversaries and commemorations that become obligatory dates for historians and biographers. The quantity of publications and the speed at which they appear, at times of memorable anniversaries, certainly are based on the demands of a book market which finds itself under strong competitive pressure. If, for example, a book on the German resistance against National Socialism is published out of step with the official remembrance and not timed to any media attention, it could in fact create economic risks for the publisher. The work under review here is not a reflex to the present German memorial hype in regard to the sixtieth anniversary of July 20, 1944. It already appeared in the United States some years ago and is now available in German translation and accessible to German readers. Surprisingly, this book is barely mentioned in German reviews and press references. It seems as if current new German publications or new editions of older works are attracting the entire attention of the media and the book sellers. This is regrettable, because Shareen Blair Brysac's biography of Mildred Harnack and the "Red Orchestra" (dubbed "Rote Kapelle" by the Nazis) certainly not only deserves major attention in the professional world but also wide readership.

The activities of the "Red Orchestra" found comparatively late attention in historical research. Decisive for

this neglect of one of the most important German resistance groups is obviously the connection of the "Red Orchestra" and its leading protagonists to Communist ideology and its propagandist exploitation by German Democratic Republic historiography. Most of the interest of historical research is usually focused on Harro Schulze-Boysen and Arvid Harnack, the most prominent leaders of the group. Other personalities, even from the inner circle of the group, are rarely touched on in detail. This applies in particular to Mildred Harnack, who often is mentioned in the relevant literature with only a subordinate clause or in a meager footnote. The merit of Shareen Blair Brysac's biography lies not only in closing this gap but also in narrating for us the as yet untold and tragic story of a fascinating and courageous woman. It should be noted that Mildred Harnack was the only American woman executed in Nazi Germany—on the personal instruction of Hitler himself. As a result of Brysac's research, the significance of alleged peripheral figures like Mildred Harnack for the internal structure of the "Red Orchestra" and for the motives and actions of its well-known protagonists becomes clearer now.

Brysac bases her biography on important sources regarding the resistance, as well as on the accounts of persons she interviewed who had known Mildred Harnack personally, and on family letters. Beyond that, recently

declassified intelligence files from the CIA, FBI, and KGB shed a new light upon these resistance activities and provide informative evidence about the valuation and judgement of the “Red Orchestra” and its members after 1945. These sources give Brysac a solid basis for developing an exciting and very personal life story understandably sympathetic to the tragic fate of the young American woman. She describes, for instance, Mildred Harnack’s experience of relationships and influences of the Berlin literary and intellectual scene. It also becomes clear how the immediate experience of the economic crisis of the early 1930s shaped Mildred and Arvid Harnack’s acceptance of Communist ideas, and how this contributed to their inner legitimation to fight the Nazi regime, even by means of espionage.

Finally, Brysac’s viewpoint of the way the “Red Orchestra” was judged in postwar Germany and in the Federal Republic is one of astonishment. While after 1945 the survivors and descendants of the murdered resistance fighters had to defend themselves against the reproach

of *Landesverrat* (treason) and espionage for the Soviet Union, the chief proponent for the death sentence, the prosecutor and air force officer Manfred Roeder, as well as the Gestapo officials who had taken part in the trial, continued their lives largely undisturbed by police and by legal inquiries. Brysac does not exclude the Western allies either, whom she accuses of recruiting former German Secret Service officials and Gestapo members, while former resistance fighters, who had risked their lives during the Nazi period, remained socially and politically discredited.

Brysac’s biography of Mildred Harnack is a convincing example of non-academic historiography, which unfortunately is often discredited and put down by the scientific community as “popular.” This much is true: this book tells history in its best sense and, due to its strong literary style and great descriptive power, has the potential to change attitudes, clearly exceeding the range of many specialized scientific monographs.

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Citation: Andreas Heusler. Review of Brysac, Shareen Blair, *Resisting Hitler: Mildred Harnack and the Red Orchestra*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. January, 2005.

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