

WISCONSIN WOMEN MAKING HISTORY

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MILDRED FISH-HARNACK

1902-1943

City: Milwaukee

County: Milwaukee

Mildred Fish-Harnack was the only American woman to die by Adolf Hitler's direct order for spying on Germany during World War II.

Mildred Fish was born in Milwaukee in 1902. She studied and then taught English at the UW-Madison, where she also met a German student named Arvid Harnack. When the couple married in 1926, Mildred chose to hyphenate her last name (as Fish-Harnack), because she was a progressive woman and proud of her name. A few years later, she and Arvid both moved to Germany, where she taught and also worked on her doctorate while he worked for the German government. During this time Fish-Harnack became interested in the Soviet Union, where women could choose where to work and also had other rights that women in the U.S. did not have.

During the rise of Hitler and the Nazi regime, Fish-Harnack and her husband joined a small resistance group, which the Nazi secret police—or Gestapo—would later call the Red Orchestra. The group smuggled important secrets about the Nazis to the U.S. and Soviet governments and helped Jews escape from Germany. Their espionage cost them their lives. Fish-Harnack's husband was hanged in December 1942, and in February 1943 she was executed as well. Fish-Harnack was the only American woman ever put to death on the direct order of Adolf Hitler for her involvement in the resistance movement. Her last words were, "And I have loved Germany so much."

In the Cold War years after World War II, Fish-Harnack's name and legacy were not honored in the U.S., because she and her husband were believed to have been connected with Communism. That eventually changed, however, and in 1986, Mildred Fish-Harnack Day was established in Wisconsin. It takes place every year on her birthday, September 16th.

To learn more, visit womeninwisconsin.org/profile/mildred-fish-harnack