



WER IST WALTER?

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A Ring of Invisibility – Wives and the Resistance Against National Socialism in Germany

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Freya von Moltke, née Deichmann, was a founding and engaged member of the so-called Kreisau Circle (*Kreisauer Kreis*)¹ – a German civil resistance group active from 1940 to 1944 that prepared plans for Germany’s democratic reorganisation after the anticipated loss of the war. She held a doctoral degree in law. Her wartime memoirs, published in 1997, demonstrate a remarkable knowledge and awareness of almost all resistance events, connections and members linked to the *Kreisauer Kreis*.² From 1989, she was a leading figure in turning the *Kreisauer Kreis*’ former meeting point in Kreisau into an international youth centre promoting European values of freedom and equity to this day. Despite her indisputable achievements, Freya von Moltke’s German Wikipedia article states that she became known to the majority of the public as the widow of the resistance fighter Helmuth James von Moltke’s.³ Although Wikipedia may not be the most reputable source, it nevertheless gives an impression of how the memory of certain events is transmitted to the general public, since Wikipedia is often consulted for initial information on a topic.

Another noteworthy way in which public historical narratives are created and transmitted is through film. The 20 July 1944 plot is an explicit example of this. Nina Schenk von Stauffenberg, née von Lerchenfeld, whose

1 The name refers to the village of Kreisau (today situated in Poland and named Krzyżowa), where the Moltke family had their residence. It was presumably first mentioned in a report by the *Reichssicherheitshauptamt* (Reich Security Main Office) in August 1944, see Henric L. Wuermeling, *Adam von Trott zu Solz. Schlüsselfigur im Widerstand gegen Hitler* (Munich: Pantheon Verlag, 2009), 133. For more information on the *Kreisauer Kreis*, see e.g. Volker Ullrich, *Der Kreisauer Kreis* (Reinbek near Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2008). See also footnote 10, below.

2 Freya von Moltke, *Erinnerungen an Kreisau 1930 – 1945* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1997).

3 “Freya von Moltke”, Wikipedia, https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freya_von_Moltke (last accessed on 30 October 2023); for more information on Helmuth James von Moltke, see e.g. Günter Brakelmann, *Helmuth James von Moltke. 1907 – 1945. Eine Biographie* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2007).

husband Claus Schenk von Stauffenberg carried out the unsuccessful assassination attempt against Hitler, is mostly portrayed as an unknowing or even reluctant character in her small amount of screen time.⁴ Nina Schenk von Stauffenberg experienced this representation as an injustice to her character and contribution.⁵ She and 11 other women of the resistance were interviewed by Dorothee von Meding for the book *Courageous Hearts: Women and the Anti-Hitler Plot of July 1944*.⁶ In von Meding's work, they spoke for themselves as individuals, while the choice to cluster their tales in a book acknowledges a distinct female experience of resistance. Through von Meding's book, it becomes obvious that these prominent and widely known men – after whom streets, buildings and barracks were named – did not act in a hermetically sealed setting. They had wives who were privy to the resistance activities, who contributed to them, who suffered the consequences and who did significant work in keeping alive the memories of their husbands' and of the ideas of the resistance. The statements given in von Meding's book are unique, but they contain the usual difficulty of interviews: the interviewer's bias. Dorothee von Meding's interview questions often focused on the wives' husbands and other male members of the resistance. Therefore, their historical importance could not be completely recorded in this publication. In that sense, von Meding explicitly asked Marion Yorck von Wartenburg, née Winter, who herself was a founding member of the *Kreisauer Kreis*, "When did your husband and his [male] friends start to think about what they could do?"⁷ Furthermore, these interviews were neither put in an academic context nor thoroughly analysed. The fact that the historian Klemens von Klemperer wrote, in his preface to von Meding's publication, that the resistance is already fully investigated and the purpose of this publication is not to create new research findings, is a significant statement for the long overlooked importance of including wives of this resistance group in historical research.⁸

4 See e.g. *Stauffenberg*, directed by Jo Baier (ARD: 2004); *Valkyrie*, directed by Bryan Singer (20th Century Fox and MGM Distribution Co: 2008).

5 Susanne Beyer, "Der Tragödie zweiter Teil", *Spiegel*, 20 April 2008, <https://www.spiegel.de/kultur/der-tragoedie-zweiter-teil-a-fd772076-0002-0001-0000-000056670345>.

6 Dorothee von Meding, *Mit dem Mut des Herzens. Die Frauen des 20. Juli* (Berlin: Siedler Verlag, 1992). The English version was published in 1997 by Berghahn Books, Oxford.

7 Von Meding, *Mut des Herzens*, 201. Original quote: "Wann begannen Ihr Mann und seine Freunde, darüber nachzudenken, was man tun könnte?"

8 Klemens von Klemperer in von Meding, *Mit dem Mut des Herzens*, 12.

Beginning in the 1990s, an increasing research focus on the topic of women in the resistance could be observed. Female contribution was given more credit, both in Germany as well as in other European countries.⁹ In Germany, women of the *Kreisauer Kreis* gained more attention in this context, though a clear differentiation between women in general and wives in particular has yet to be made. While all of them were women, their marital status defined to a great extent their agency, treatment and self-perception from the period in question until today. Despite the unfortunate fact that due to the passage of time, these married women cannot speak for themselves anymore, there are testimonies, statements, letters, memoirs and other primary sources left by them that have not been analysed in a way that focuses on the wives as individual participants, members and contributors to resistance activities. These sources were used to research their husbands or the role distribution between them and their spouses instead of considering these women as contributors to the resistance in their own right.

Therefore, this text deals with the long forgotten and neglected role of wives – as in women who became famous through their husbands' resistance activities – in the German resistance against National Socialism. Furthermore, it seeks to give an impression of why wives acted and perceived themselves as they did and how they were treated by the Nazi regime and later on, in public remembrance. Wives who contributed to the *Kreisauer Kreis* and the 20 July 1944 plot¹⁰ (these groups were notably interconnected) will be compared to wives who were members of the so-called Red Orchestra (*Rote Kapelle*)¹¹ – alleged by the Gestapo to be a communist resistance group – in order to find out why wives of the former two networks were treated differently, both by the Nazi regime and by the culture of remembrance. They will be compared on the grounds of their

9 See e.g. Christl Wickert ed., *Frauen gegen die Diktatur. Widerstand und Verfolgung im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland 1933 – 1945* (Berlin: Edition Hentrich, 1995); Frauke Geyken, *Wir standen nicht abseits, Frauen im Widerstand gegen Hitler* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2014); Florence Hervé, *Mit Mut und List. Europäische Frauen im Widerstand gegen Faschismus und Krieg* (Köln: PapyRossa, 2020).

10 For more information on the *Kreisauer Kreis* and the 20 July 1944 plot, see e.g. Wolfgang Benz, *Der Deutsche Widerstand gegen Hitler* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2014); Linda von Keyserlingk-Rehbein, *Nur eine "ganz kleine Clique"? Die NS-Ermittlungen über das Netzwerk vom 20. Juli 1944* (Berlin: Lukas Verlag, 2018).

11 For more information on the Rote Kapelle, see e.g. Hans Coppi, Jürgen Danyel, Johannes Tüchel (eds.), *Die Rote Kapelle im Widerstand gegen den Nationalsozialismus* (Berlin: Edition Hentrich, 1994).

socio-economic background, involvement, treatment by Nazi persecutors and self-perception. In that sense, this contribution attempts to create an intersectional approach to providing explanations for the long invisibility of wives of the *Kreisauer Kreis*. It furthermore wants to reveal the importance of wives as distinct resistance actors which have long been concealed by male-dominated historiography.

Marriage: Wives' self-perception and identification during the Nazi period

In academic discourses, wives in the German resistance against National Socialism are neither forgotten nor overlooked deliberately but rather degraded to secondary roles – if they are given agency at all.¹² This deprivation of agency and recognition of their actual contribution to resistance activities in present-day remembrances is not a new phenomenon but follows a continuity that started in the Nazi period. It derives from a combination of various factors that influenced how and why wives behaved (or had to behave due to social circumstances), how they were recognised and treated in a certain way.

At first glance, a derogative and restrictive image of women seems to have been prevalent in Nazi Germany. Still, the prevailing opinion today seems to be that all women were reduced to being wives and mothers instead of acting as constructive individuals themselves. This reduction does not acknowledge the complexity of different competing ideological strands of the women's image at that time. Starting in the early 1930s, disputes between the male perspective of Nazi ideology – reducing women to wives and mothers while usurping them from public places – and the female perspective of women loyal to National Socialism arose, states Leila J. Rupp.¹³ The latter group, which defended the female perspective, was declared as consisting of “Nazi Feminists” by their adversaries, acknowledged a gender difference but was convinced that so-called “Aryan” women should become more essential members of German society.¹⁴ Since there were overwhelmingly more male

12 See e.g. Martha Schad, *Frauen gegen Hitler. Schicksale im Nationalsozialismus* (Munich: Wilhelm Heyne Verlag, 2001).

13 Leila J. Rupp, “Mother of the Volk. The Image of Women in Nazi Ideology”, *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 3, no. 2, (December 1977): 364–365, DOI: 10.1086/493470.

14 *Ibid.*, 365.

Nazi officials, it is likely that the male-dominated view happened to be the most influential version subjugating “Nazi Feminists”.

Here, it is important to state that the wives of the 20 July 1944 plot and the *Kreisauer Kreis* particularly consisted of so-called “Aryan” women, often with educated, higher or middle-class backgrounds. They were married to respected members of the military, aristocracy and/or elites with long-honoured families and raised on Christian values, though the church could sometimes play a minor role in their education.¹⁵ At the time, marriage was a decisive factor for the self-identification of many of these women. In hindsight, Freya von Moltke stated that they were wives of their husbands rather than actual driving forces of the resistance and that she herself followed her husband in many ways.¹⁶ Hence, according to given testimonies, marriage seems to be one of the most decisive influences. The women’s self-perception as wives contributed to how they portrayed themselves and have been portrayed in academia and commemorative culture ever since.

When Marion Yorck von Wartenburg was questioned about the role of women in the *Kreisauer Kreis*, she replied: “I would first like to answer that all friends lived in a particularly good marriage.”¹⁷ Nonetheless, it is rather interesting that she recalls that Julius Leber¹⁸ – a social democrat and loose member of the *Kreisauer Kreis* – did not take his wife Annedore Leber seriously, as he did not fill her in on the activities.¹⁹ Despite this minor critical remark, Marion Yorck von Wartenburg’s own self-perception and identification as a wife become even more evident in *Die Stärke der Stille* (The Strength of Silence), a published story of her life as she told it to Claudia Schmölders, who wrote it down and published it in her name.²⁰ The title itself raises a question; why does it refer to silence? Marion Yorck von Wartenburg participated in the majority of the *Kreisauer Kreis*’ important meetings and maintained contact with influential figures such as Claus

15 The family ties become particularly obvious when looking at the names and backgrounds stated in von Meding’s publication before every individual interview. Here, even statements on early education and family expectations are given. For more information on the education based on Christian values, see e.g. Marion Yorck von Wartenburg, *Die Stärke der Stille* (Moers: Brendow, 1998), 14.

16 Freya von Moltke in von Meding, *Mut des Herzens*, 130–131.

17 Marion Yorck von Wartenburg in von Meding, *Mut des Herzens*. Original quote: “Darauf möchte ich zunächst antworten, daß alle Freunde in einer besonders guten Ehe lebten.”

18 For more information on Julius Leber, see e.g. Claus Jander and Ruth Möller, *Julius Leber. Sozialdemokrat, Widerstandskämpfer, Europäer* (Berlin: Luisenbau-Verlag, 2013).

19 Yorck von Wartenburg, *Stärke der Stille*, 63.

20 Claudia Smölders in Yorck von Wartenburg, *Stärke der Stille*, 7–8.

Schenk von Stauffenberg and Julius Leber.²¹ Does the title of her memoir refer to the importance that silence had in all resistance activities for necessary concealment? Does it refer to her own view of being a silent supporter of her husband more than an individual resistance fighter? There is no definite answer to this question.

When one looks into this publication, traces of her activities and self-perception can be detected. Marion Yorck von Wartenburg describes how her parents and family encouraged her to act in a restrained and conforming way during her childhood and youth.²² Political issues were of no interest to her during her studies of jurisprudence in the 1920s. Because of her lack of interest, she called herself a “bad citizen” in the non-gendered, hence male, version of the German term.²³ Her interest in politics arose with her husband’s resistance activities – another indication of her identification with the role of wife. It almost seems as if her whole personality and activity revolved around her husband. She also defined the other women primarily as being wives, mothers and tacit supporters of their husbands. Despite her advanced legal clerkship, she did not register for the final exam. Her desire to have children took priority – a desire that was never realised.²⁴ Ironically, when she met her future husband, Peter Yorck von Wartenburg, she first refused to deepen their connection because she was afraid of losing her autonomy. Marriage was – in her description – a deep incision in women’s lives.²⁵

Actions: Wives’ participation in the resistance

Soon after Hitler’s seizure of power, as early as 1933, Marion Yorck von Wartenburg and her husband were aware of the existence of concentration camps. These early atrocities as well as the mass-murder of Jews starting in 1941 and further war horrors committed by Germans were some of the main reasons for her husband’s resistance activities.²⁶ Remarkable in Marion Yorck von Wartenburg’s records are her early connections to prominent

21 Von Moltke, *Kreisau*, 52–72.

22 Yorck von Wartenburg, *Stärke der Stille*, 16–17.

23 *Ibid.*, 20. Original quote: “schlechter Staatsbürger”.

24 *Ibid.*, 27, 36.

25 *Ibid.*, 27.

26 *Ibid.*, 37.

persons such as the Protestant theologian and resistance figure Dietrich Bonhoeffer,²⁷ who died in Flossenbürg concentration camp in 1945, and later relations and friendships to several aristocratic and/or famous families.²⁸ For instance, Claus Schenk von Stauffenberg was her husband's cousin. Her records demonstrate that she was very aware of all the connections and contributors in the resistance, such as the aforementioned Helmuth James von Moltke and Julius Leber as well as Ludwig Beck,²⁹ chief of the German General Staff, who actively participated in the 20 July 1944 plot. All of them met later in the couple's apartment on Hortensienstraße in Berlin. The von Moltkes and the von Wartenburgs made up the core of the *Kreisauer Kreis*, as most of the meetings took place either at von Moltke's residence in Kreisau, today Krzyżowa, or the von Wartenburgs' apartment in Berlin. According to Freya von Moltke, the term "resistance" was not used by her or her husband, probably not even by other members. She and Marion Yorck von Wartenburg explained how all of them called themselves (or rather the men) a group of friends.³⁰

However, Freya von Moltke's husband explicitly asked her if she would like to support his activities against the injustice of the Nazi state: "Now comes the time one can do something against it; I'd like to do it but I can only do so if you go along with it".³¹ She agreed and was aware of the dangers and actions right from the beginning. Being in the resistance fell into natural everyday tasks like writing letters or keeping the business, their farm in Kreisau, running. For her, "resistance was everyday life".³² Overall, three major planning meetings were organised and held in the von Moltkes' mansion in Kreisau, during which various topics were presented and passionately discussed by invited members and supporters. Topics and focal points included the educational system, the relationship between state and church, the economic and state structure as well as the future dealing with

27 For more information on Dietrich Bonhoeffer, see e.g. Christiane Tietz, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Theologie im Widerstand* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2013).

28 Ibid., 13–15, 28, 31, 39.

29 For more information on Ludwig Beck, see e.g. Klaus-Jürgen Müller, *Generaloberst Ludwig Beck. Eine Biographie* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2008).

30 Ibid., 58.

31 Freya von Moltke in von Meding, *Mut des Herzens*, 132. Original quote: "Jetzt kommt die Zeit, daß man etwas dagegen tun kann; ich möchte das machen, aber das kann ich nur, wenn du es mitträgst [...]".

32 Ibid., 132. Original quote: "Widerstand war Alltag".

Nazi perpetrators, and foreign policy.³³ Both Freya von Moltke and Marion Yorck von Wartenburg attended all meetings in Kreisau. At least two other women attended the meetings as well, until one of the husbands forbade his wife from attending any further reunions since it would be too dangerous for her and “she can, after all, do little more than listen.”³⁴

This shows how even husbands of that group underestimated their wives’ capabilities and agencies, using safety as a justification. Freya von Moltke however was in close contact with Helmuth James von Moltke and aware of all the events and discussions, even when smaller meetings took place in Berlin with only her husband attending while she stayed in Kreisau. The spouses wrote each other letters regularly, keeping each other updated, even while both stayed in Kreisau.³⁵ Protocols of the larger discussions were handled carefully and typewritten by Katharina Breslau, Helmuth James von Moltke’s secretary. According to Freya von Moltke, Katharina Breslau knew exactly what she was typewriting. However, there were no legal consequences for her when the *Kreisauer Kreis* was discovered by the Nazi regime, which was most likely a result of the regime’s underestimation of female contribution in general. Freya von Moltke’s husband gave her a copy of the combined plans of the *Kreisauer Kreis* to hide in Kreisau where even her husband would not be able to find them for security reasons. She hid the papers and took them with her after 1945 when she had to leave the property, which the occupying Soviet army had confiscated.³⁶

Resistance and everyday life: Wives’ dual roles

It is noteworthy that Freya von Moltke and Marion Yorck von Wartenburg were two of the few wives of the group that had regular and close contact with each other due to their husbands’ close companionship. Occasionally, Freya von Moltke interacted with other female (and male) guests in Kreisau, showing hospitality and, in that sense, created an image of everyday life to the outside. This hospitality, evident to the whole neighbourhood, and the resulting distraction from everything else that went on inside the premises

33 Von Moltke, *Kreisau*, 54–63.

34 Ibid., 59. Original quote: “[...] sie könne ja doch nicht viel mehr tun, als zuzuhören”.

35 Ibid., 58.

36 Ibid., 65–66.

is in turn another contribution to resistance. This was not just a minor contribution, since secrecy was an essential prerequisite and basis for all activities. In that sense, wives were important actresses – here, stressing the word act – as they had to play their roles in order to keep the resistance going. It is furthermore noteworthy that they were the most important figures when it came to feeding the family. Wives constantly ensured the supply of food, a task that became even more difficult with wartime shortages.³⁷

Nevertheless, there was no organised network of wives of the *Kreisauer Kreis* or 20 July 1944 plot. This was mostly due to them not seeing the need for an all-female network, as they perceived their husbands' relationships as sufficient. Regular meetings with other members' wives could even have turned into a threat to the maintenance of secrecy. Despite the aristocracy of the aforementioned core members, they were able to gather supporters from a social democratic and theological background. Originally, their goals and ideology largely varied, which made collaboration only possible in the context of the overall goal of resisting the Nazi regime. It was considered that they could not meet in public spaces or on a regular basis as it would have been too suspicious for members of such disparate groups to be in close contact. What counted for the men was even more pivotal for their wives. How could they have explained regular meetings with wives of different social and political backgrounds, whom they would not have met in their everyday lives? Therefore, the reason for the absence of female networks was a combination of practical and sociocultural factors that would have hindered the discretion necessary for resistance.

***Sippenhaft*: Wives as perceived non-contributors to the resistance**

According to Marion Yorck von Wartenburg, she was aware of the assassination plans early on as her husband was related to Claus Schenk von Stauffenberg and knew the actual date since the beginning of July 1944.³⁸ Peter Yorck von Wartenburg was arrested immediately after the assassination attempt. His wife's requests to receive visiting permission remained

37 Frauke Geyken, *Freya von Moltke. Ein Jahrhundertleben 1911 – 2010* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2011), 105.

38 Yorck von Wartenburg, *Stärke der Stille*, 68.

unsuccessful. When she was questioned by a Gestapo officer about what she had known, her answer was that her husband was very reserved about his actions.³⁹ On 9 August 1944, Marion Yorck von Wartenburg was arrested under so-called kin liability (*Sippenhaft*) and released in October 1944.⁴⁰ *Sippenhaft* was the Nazi term used for arresting the accused's family members. These relatives were often not regarded as individually responsible, but could be used to pressure the accused or to gather additional information. Often, these arrests were used to set an example to the public. Marion Yorck von Wartenburg, however, was never arrested or prosecuted as an individual contributor nor accused on a "racial" basis, although she had a Jewish grandfather. She was perceived by the Nazis as an "Aryan" woman from a civic-noble family background who was foremost a devoted wife.

The nobility of von Moltke and von Wartenburg was noted by Gestapo members, who examined the meeting place on Hortensienstraße. According to Marion Yorck von Wartenburg, Gestapo men were surprised that two male counts – Helmuth James von Moltke also temporarily lived there – could reside in such a simple apartment.⁴¹ Freya von Moltke, on the other hand, was not arrested on the grounds of any contribution to the resistance despite her constant participation, organisation, personal relationships and knowledge. She was also not arrested in *Sippenhaft*, and was even allowed to visit her husband once a month at Ravensbrück concentration camp during his imprisonment there. Furthermore, they were allowed to exchange letters.⁴² From September 1944 on, he was imprisoned in the prison in Tegel, Berlin. Here, they were able to frequently exchange secret letters via the prison's pastor, Harald Poelchau, which Freya von Moltke gave to Helmuth James von Moltke's secretary Katharina Breslauer, who in turn kept them hidden until further notice.⁴³ These last letter exchanges between September 1944 and January 1945 were published in 2011 after Freya von Moltke's death.⁴⁴ Within that clandestine communication, the spouses were able to be more frank. While official letters contained private statements, descriptions and questions regarding Freya von Moltke's everyday life, business of

39 Ibid., 74.

40 Ibid., 81.

41 Ibid., 58.

42 Von Moltke, *Kreisau*, 70–71.

43 Ibid., 73–74.

44 Helmuth Caspar von Moltke, Ulrike von Moltke (eds.), *Helmuth James und Freya von Moltke. Abschiedsbriefe Gefängnis Tegel September 1944 – Januar 1945* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2011).

the farm in Kreisau and other rather mundane topics, these hidden letters contained important questions regarding the resistance's future. Here, Helmuth James von Moltke discussed the topic with his wife in a very honest and outspoken way that proves how much she must have known before and how much he trusted her.⁴⁵

However, even exchanging official letters and the possibility of visiting were privileges, as was the fact that Freya von Moltke was never arrested in *Sippenhaft*. Whether the Nazi regime granted her a certain innocence on the grounds of her being a wife and mother or deemed her husband's alleged connection to the 20 July 1944 plot as lesser than others' (Helmuth James von Moltke was already arrested on 19 January 1944 due to a denunciation that had nothing to do with the *Kreisauer Kreis*⁴⁶) is unclear. Most probably, it was a combination of both, as well as the timing of her husband's imprisonment – the majority of arrests under *Sippenhaft*, children and other family members occurred after the 20 July 1944 plot.⁴⁷ However, Helmuth James von Moltke was ultimately sentenced to death and executed on 23 January 1945 when other interrogations resulted in the identification of him as a leading opposition figure.⁴⁸

Current research suggests that at least 180 people were included in the network that participated in the 20 July 1944 assassination attempt.⁴⁹ At the time, the Nazi prosecutors identified 132 relevant people who contributed and/or were responsible for the conspiracy, of which around 100 were then sentenced to death.⁵⁰ Margarethe von Oven was the only woman among the arrested, and she was released within two weeks, since the Nazi prosecutors did not find enough evidence nor deem the available evidence as sufficiently conclusive. Again, it is unclear on what grounds her early prosecution was based. At that time, she was Henning von Tresckow's secretary.⁵¹ Von Tresckow was major general of the Wehrmacht and, together with Claus

45 See e.g. Helmuth James von Moltke's letter to Freya von Moltke on 30 September 1944, *Abschiedsbriefe*, 39–45.

46 Von Moltke, *Kreisau*, 70.

47 See e.g. the fates of Nina Schenk von Stauffenberg and Clarita von Trott zu Solz in von Meding, *Mut des Herzens*.

48 Von Moltke, *Kreisau*, 72.

49 Antje Vollmer and Lars-Broder Keil, *Stauffenbergs Gefährten. Das Schicksal der unbekanntesten Verschwörer* (Munich: Hanser Berlin, 2013), 13.

50 Von Keyserlingk-Reihbein, *Nur eine "ganz kleine Clique"?*, 142.

51 For more information on Henning von Tresckow, see e.g. Bobo Scheurig, *Henning von Tresckow. Ein Preuße gegen Hitler. Biographie* (Berlin: Propyläen, 2004).

Schenk von Stauffenberg, one of the assassination's main coordinators. Margarethe von Oven got the position as his secretary due to her close friendship with his wife, Erika von Tresckow.⁵² Here, it is noteworthy that she was unmarried and childless at the time of her work and that her family situation made it necessary for her to earn money. In comparison to other women in the network, she held an official position and was connected to the plot through acquaintances and work – not because of her marriage. Though she was the only woman arrested individually, in contrast to wives who were arrested in *Sippenhaft* at most, her work was still not considered important enough, which led to her release.

Comparing wives of different resistance groups: Treatment by the Nazi regime

The Nazi regime based many of its verdicts on gendered role assignments, which tended to deny or exaggerate female agencies in accordance with how dangerous the regime defined each deed of resistance, as well as women's agencies in it. This arbitrariness gives a first – although unsatisfactory – explanation for why wives of the 20 July 1944 plot and *Kreisauer Kreis* were spared individual prosecution, why the only woman working for the plot, Margarethe von Oven, was released and, in contrast to the former, why wives of the *Rote Kapelle* experienced a different fate. One noteworthy example, though it will not be discussed further here: Sophie Scholl was executed within a week of the revelation of her action because of mere leaflet distribution.⁵³ Verdicts furthermore depended on how the Nazi prosecutors defined the type of resistance and, hence, which political importance they attributed to the various groups, as becomes clear when comparing the aforementioned groups to the *Rote Kapelle*.

The previously discussed prevalent reduction of women to being wives and mothers and the associated negligence of wives' possible contribution

52 Von Meding, *Mut des Herzens*, 99–102.

53 One noteworthy example, though it will not be discussed further here: Sophie Scholl was executed within a week of her action's revelation because of mere leaflet distribution. For more information on Sophie Scholl, see e.g. Maren Gottschalk, *Wie schwer ein Menschenleben wiegt. Sophie Scholl. Eine Biographie* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2020); Barbara Beuys, *Sophie Scholl. Biographie* (Munich: Carl Hanser, 2010); Ulrich Chaussey and Gerd R. Ueberschär, *„Es lebe die Freiheit!“ Die Geschichte der Weißen Rose und ihrer Mitglieder in Dokumenten und Berichten* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 2013).

to resistance is insufficient when one compares it to the way women – the majority of them married – of the *Rote Kapelle* were treated and perceived. Freya von Moltke herself stated that she felt adoration for the activity of the women who were “actual resistance fighters” and that she wished she had had the same courage at that time. She was – in her own words – too invested in being a wife, even though she wished she could have played a more active role.⁵⁴

The *Rote Kapelle* is nowadays the most widely used name for the Berlin network dominated by two couples – Mildred Harnack and her husband Arvid Harnack together with Libertas Schulze-Boysen, née Haas-Heye, and her husband Harro Schulze-Boysen – though there were many more members, contributors and supporters.⁵⁵ The name was used by the Gestapo in order to define an alleged organised group of resistance fighters who were in radio contact with the Soviet regime. Nowadays, it is known that there was never a strictly structured group with the purpose of widespread espionage for the Soviets. Affiliated members were not only in contact with the Soviets but also with other groups and diplomatic services, which means that it was never an exclusively communist resistance group, even if it was defined as such by the Gestapo.⁵⁶ It did have various connections to the Soviet regime, as well as to other regimes and authorities, such as US diplomats, which perhaps made it look solely communist at first glance.

Several married women who are acknowledged as actual resistance fighters today (e.g. when looking at their official representation in the German Resistance Memorial Centre) joined and sometimes acted together with their husbands. Most famous are probably the aforementioned Mildred Harnack and Libertas Schulze-Boysen. What is an important difference between these wives and the ones of the *Kreisauer Kreis* and 20 July 1944 plot? These two women could never speak for themselves about their activities and legacies after 1945. They were sentenced to death for their contribution in the resistance. When the *Rote Kapelle* was detected and its members arrested by the Gestapo in 1942, amongst the more than 130 arrested were at least 36 women, of whom 19 were put on a trial (while 49

54 Freya von Moltke in von Meding, *Mut des Herzens*, 131.

55 See e.g. Johannes Tüchel, “...wenn man bedenkt, wie jung wir sind, so kann man nicht an den Tod glauben.” Liane Berkowitz, *Friedrich Rehmer und die Widerstandsaktionen der Berliner Roten Kapelle* (Berlin: Lukas Verlag, 2022).

56 *Ibid.*, 13–35.

men were tried and five executed immediately).⁵⁷ Overall, 19 women and 35 men – those without a trial already included – were sentenced to death and executed between the end of 1942 and 1943.⁵⁸ Libertas Schulze-Boysen was executed on 22 December 1942 in Plötzensee, Berlin, together with her husband,⁵⁹ while Mildred Harnack was sentenced to death on 16 January 1943 and executed within a month.⁶⁰ How can this harsher treatment by the Nazi prosecutors be explained? How and why did they differ from those of the *Kreisauer Kreis*?

Comparing wives of different resistance groups: Actions and self-perception

Most female members of the *Rote Kapelle* worked as journalists, physicians, teachers, lawyers, writers and translators, among other jobs.⁶¹ Therefore, some women held a similar academic status to those of the *Kreisauer Kreis*. They differed from each other in the sense that more women in the *Rote Kapelle* actually worked in their academic field. The actions of these women also differed from those of the *Kreisauer Kreis* and the 20 July 1944 plot. Predominantly organisational and logistical work fell into the hands of women, such as writing and distributing leaflets informing about Nazi atrocities. Women furthermore held important positions as messengers or hid other resistance fighters.⁶² Since these women were in more active positions – superficially at least – and were treated similarly to their husbands by the Nazi prosecutors, one can assume that their self-perception was different from that of the aforementioned wives and that they regarded themselves as equal to their husbands. These two groups are partly comparable in their cultural imprint.

Libertas Schulze-Boysen came from an aristocratic family background as well, though her parents were – uncommon for that time – divorced.⁶³

57 Schad, *Frauen gegen Hitler*, 222–223.

58 Christian Mrowietz et al., “Die Rote Kapelle”, in *Mildred Harnack und die Rote Kapelle in Berlin*, ed. Ingo Juchler (Potsdam: Universitätsverlag Potsdam, 2017), 67.

59 *Ibid.*, 60.

60 Schad, *Frauen gegen Hitler*, 233.

61 *Ibid.*, 222–223.

62 *Ibid.*, 223; for more information, see Tuchel, “...wenn man bedenkt”, 141–192.

63 Christian Mrowietz et al., “Die Rote Kapelle”, in *Mildred Harnack und die Rote Kapelle in Berlin*, ed. Ingo Juchler (Potsdam: Universitätsverlag Potsdam, 2017), 60.

She joined the NSDAP early in 1933 and worked as a press officer for Nazi propaganda. Her pro-Nazi attitude changed when she met her husband. The importance of the prevalent opinion of a role reduction for women came into play when she left the NSDAP in 1937, stating that she was now too busy being a wife and could not be a worthy member of the party anymore.⁶⁴ This explanation was sufficiently credible for the NSDAP to accept.

Another case in which the role of being a wife was used in favour of women is Mildred Harnack's. Growing up in the USA, she experienced a completely different social imprint and childhood. She came from a lower-middle class background and had three siblings. Her father died while she was still in high school. From an early age, Mildred Harnack was independent and worked her way to a master's degree in the USA and a PhD in Germany, where she had moved with her German husband, Arvid Harnack.⁶⁵ In December 1942, both were tried for their membership in the *Rote Kapelle*. Mildred Harnack's defence lawyer exculpated her contribution by framing her as a good wife dutifully following her husband's orders. These circumstances were attributed as mitigating. While her husband was sentenced to death immediately and executed within a few days, she only received six years of prison time.⁶⁶ However, she was tried again on the orders of Hitler himself. This second trial took a different turn. While she was defended as the obedient and caring wife before, she was now accused of bigotry and seduction of German men. Her reputation was sexualised.⁶⁷ She was ultimately sentenced to death, the only American civilian executed by the Nazi regime on the grounds of her resistance activity.

Academic research: Acknowledgment and importance

According to Martha Schad, women of the *Rote Kapelle* were informed about every event and participated in important meetings and discussions,

64 Rainer Blasius, "Ein Weihnachtsgengel vor der Hinrichtung", *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, 22 December 2012, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/gesellschaft/menschen/libertas-schulze-boysen-ein-weihnachtsgengel-vor-der-hinrichtung-12000641-p2.html>.

65 Kären Knutson, "Mildred Fish-Harnack honored as hero of resistance to Nazi regime", University of Wisconsin-Madison, written on July 11 2019, <https://news.wisc.edu/mildred-fish-harnack-honored-as-hero-of-resistance-to-nazi-regime/>.

66 Schad, *Frauen gegen Hitler*, 231.

67 *Ibid.*, 231–233.

which gave them major agency in the resistance. This knowledge and contribution distinguished them from wives of the *Kreisauer Kreis* and those associated with the 20 July 1944 plot, who were rather left in the dark and remained in their roles as wives, summarises Schad.⁶⁸ This article strongly disagrees with Schad's interpretation.

Despite the difference in self-perception, actions and treatment between the women of the *Rote Kapelle* and those of the *Kreisauer Kreis* and 20 July 1944 plot, one should not underestimate the role of the latter two for the activities of the resistance. Their self-perception came from a different cultural imprint. As Frauke Geyken proposes, current research should not make the mistake of adapting today's understanding of feminism to their thinking at that time.⁶⁹ The fact that they took the wives' perspectives does not deny them any agency or capabilities. Freya von Moltke stated that she went along with the resistance from the beginning and wanted her husband to continue despite all dangers and potential consequences.⁷⁰ Helmuth James von Moltke introduced almost every participant or possible supporter to his wife and asked for her assessment, as he believed her knowledge of human nature was more pronounced.⁷¹ References to the importance of a functioning and supportive marriage were made by almost every wife and spouse interviewed by von Meding. Since marriage played such a key role in the lives of these couples, just as it did in their social stratum, one can assume that this key role continued to further the resistance's progress. In Helmuth James von Moltke's letters to his wife during his imprisonment, he constantly referred to her strength and resilience and the fact that none of his deeds would have been possible without her.

As Geyken states in her biography of Freya von Moltke, women and men had different tasks and roles here. "In the bourgeois resistance, women operated more in the background."⁷² This supposed operating in the background does not mean, by any means, that their contribution was less important or irrelevant. On the contrary, without their silent and constant provision for the family and the creation of an everyday life, the *Kreisauer Kreis* would not have been possible. These wives fell into a strenuous double

68 Ibid., 222.

69 Geyken, *Freya von Moltke*, 106.

70 Freya von Moltke in von Meding, *Mut des Herzens*, 126.

71 Ibid., 131.

72 Geyken, *Freya von Moltke*, 104. Original quote: "In der bürgerlichen Opposition agierten die Frauen mehr im Hintergrund."

position when their duties increased; being a mother and wife became intertwined with their participation in the resistance. This interrelation turned them into the backbone of the resistance. Without their support and approval, their husbands could not have acted like they did in the first place. This made wives indispensable.

This paper argues that wives should be considered a distinct group of resisters and therefore, should receive the acknowledgment that they have been entitled to but long denied. The reason for their exclusion was, first and foremost, that historical periods have often been reduced to allegedly important men and their important deeds. The Nazi period is no exception. Due to its own ideology, so-called “Aryan” women were considered only capable of having children and doing housework. Wives of the *Kreisauer Kreis* were not held responsible individually but were arrested in *Sippenhaft*. In short, wives were regarded as posing almost no threat to the Nazi regime if they did not belong to a communist resistance group. Resistance research, at least in Germany, for a long time focused too much on obvious acts meant to overthrow the regime or create a new one.⁷³ Very polemically speaking, only those who directly took up and used arms – or explosives in the case of the 20 July 1944 plot – and those who were directly held responsible by Nazi prosecutors were defined as resistance fighters, while those responsible for the logistics in the background were reduced to secondary roles.

As the military adage goes: “Amateurs talk tactics, professionals talk logistics”. In the *Kreisauer Kreis* and the 20 July 1944 plot, most wives were aware of the activities. They provided ideological support and intellectual exchange. They were responsible for the logistics, prepared and cared for the premises so that meetings could take place, they fulfilled administrative duties as well as created an unobtrusive environment for the group’s secrecy. Wives were the basis of the resistance. Everything that followed originated from their personal support while they were aware of the potentially life-threatening situation.

When comparing their tasks to those of wives of the *Rote Kapelle*, one can clearly see a difference in their activity. This difference should not – and this is key – lead to an assumed reduction of importance of wives in

73 See e.g. Detlev Peukert, *Volksgenossen und Gemeinschaftsfremde. Anpassung, Ausmerze und Aufbegehren unter dem Nationalsozialismus* (Cologne: Bund-Verlag, 1982) for research that defines resistance as an act to overthrow the regime.

the *Kreisauer Kreis* and hence, their contribution. The difference arose due to varieties in their cultural imprint and self-perception, which led to a conflicting understanding of their own roles. Almost all the wives of the *Kreisauer Kreis* and the *Rote Kapelle* received excellent or good education. While the *Kreisauer Kreis*' wives' motivations did not differ from their husbands', they still refrained from defining themselves as active resistance fighters and regarded themselves only as listeners at most. Their capabilities were restricted due to their own upbringing and family background and even more due to the expectations that came with marrying into aristocratic families. Nevertheless, they used all their capabilities to support the resistance, which was – and this cannot be emphasised enough – essential.

This distinct role expectation led to a different perception by the Nazi regime, which regarded them as more dependent and subservient to their husbands than those of the *Rote Kapelle*, who were defined as actual threats. Most probably, this assumption was based on Nazi ideology, which regarded communists as one of the most threatening groups of all. This assumed communist background led to a harsher prosecution of wives of the *Rote Kapelle*. The wives of the *Kreisauer Kreis*' different treatment by the Nazi regime was not caused by their lesser degree of involvement, motivation or knowledge, but by the disparate political nature of the resistance and the Nazis' contradictory perceptions. The same ideology that regarded communist women as politically active threats with their own agency assumed that "Aryan" women could be hardly more than their husband's appendage.

Historical research has often adapted to this ideology by neglecting wives of the *Kreisauer Kreis* as a group that contributed to the resistance. Their husbands' legacies overshadowed them from the beginning. Wives were able to spare themselves and their children further punishment due to their pretended innocence and ignorance. This fact was later used to justify their unawareness and non-participation in commemorative culture and research. In that sense, it was their marriage that created a metaphorical ring of invisibility around wives in the *Kreisauer Kreis*.

WER IST WALTER?

Resistance against Nazism, fascism, occupation and collaboration occurred throughout Europe during World War II. But how much do we know about this history in other European countries? Gathering 32 contributions and case studies on the history of this resistance, as well as on its transmission after 1945, especially in museums, the present book is an invitation to look at resistance in Europe in an interdisciplinary, international, transnational and comparative perspective. It is the result of the international research project “Wer ist Walter? Resistance against Nazism in Europe” which gathered historians, curators and other researchers mainly from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, France and Germany.



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