



WISCONSIN
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY





Mildred Fish-Harnack



Mildred Fish, 1923

Courtesy of University of Wisconsin–Madison

Mildred Fish-Harnack was a poet, a storyteller, and a teacher. Why did she become a spy during World War II (WWII)? Simple: It was the right thing to do.

Mildred Fish was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 1902. As a young girl, Mildred learned how to read, write, and speak in both German and English.

In 1921, Mildred started college in Madison. She studied English literature and loved writing poems and stories. In 1925, Mildred graduated from college. She returned the next year for her master's degree. In 1926, she met Professor Arvid Harnack, her future husband. Arvid was from Germany and teaching in the United States. They were married in 1928, and a year later they moved to Germany.

The Great Depression began in 1929. It was a crisis that affected nearly everyone in the world. People lost their life savings. Jobs were hard to find. Banks closed. Many people all over the world went hungry.

In Germany, things were very hard. The country was bankrupt and struggling even before the Great Depression. Germany had been forced to pay huge sums of money to other countries it had invaded during World War I. Many Germans were unhappy and wanted someone to blame. They turned to the National Socialist (Nazi) leader Adolf Hitler. He unjustly blamed Jewish people for all of Germany's problems. When he became leader of Germany, he imprisoned and murdered Jewish men, women, and children. This was called the Holocaust, and millions died. In 1939, Germany invaded Poland, and WWII began.

Mildred and Arvid joined other men and women in the resistance to fight against Nazi rule in Germany. They had many friends. Together, they formed a spy group called the Red Orchestra. Because Mildred and Arvid were communists, they decided to help the Soviet Union, a wartime ally of the United States.

Between 1940 and 1942, Mildred and Arvid secretly sent messages to the Soviets. They reported on the strength of Germany's air force. They even knew how many fighter planes Germany could build each month! They warned of Nazi attacks and reported how much fuel and weaponry German armies had. This information helped Russian forces survive long enough to defeat the Nazis. In August 1942, the Nazis captured a Soviet spy. The spy told the Germans all about the Red Orchestra. Mildred, Arvid, and 116 other people were arrested.

Arvid and Mildred were put on trial in Germany in December 1942. They were found guilty of espionage (spying). Arvid was sentenced to death and Mildred was sentenced to four years in a prison camp. But because she was an American spy, Nazi leader Adolf Hitler wanted to make an example out of her. He ordered the court to change Mildred's sentence to death. The judges did what he wanted.

Mildred spent her last month in prison doing what she loved, reading and translating poetry. She was killed on February 16, 1943. Her last words were, "And I have loved Germany so much."

Mildred Fish-Harnack is celebrated in Wisconsin on September 16. She was an amazing woman and a true hero to all the people whose lives she helped save.

Learn more about Mildred Fish-Harnack from [PBS Wisconsin!](https://pbswisconsineducation.org/biographies/harnack.html)

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