

FROM THE BESTSELLING  
AUTHOR OF  
*THE ESCAPE ARTIST*

# The Traitors Circle

The True Story of a Secret Resistance Network in  
Nazi Germany—and the Spy Who Betrayed Them

**JONATHAN  
FREEDLAND**



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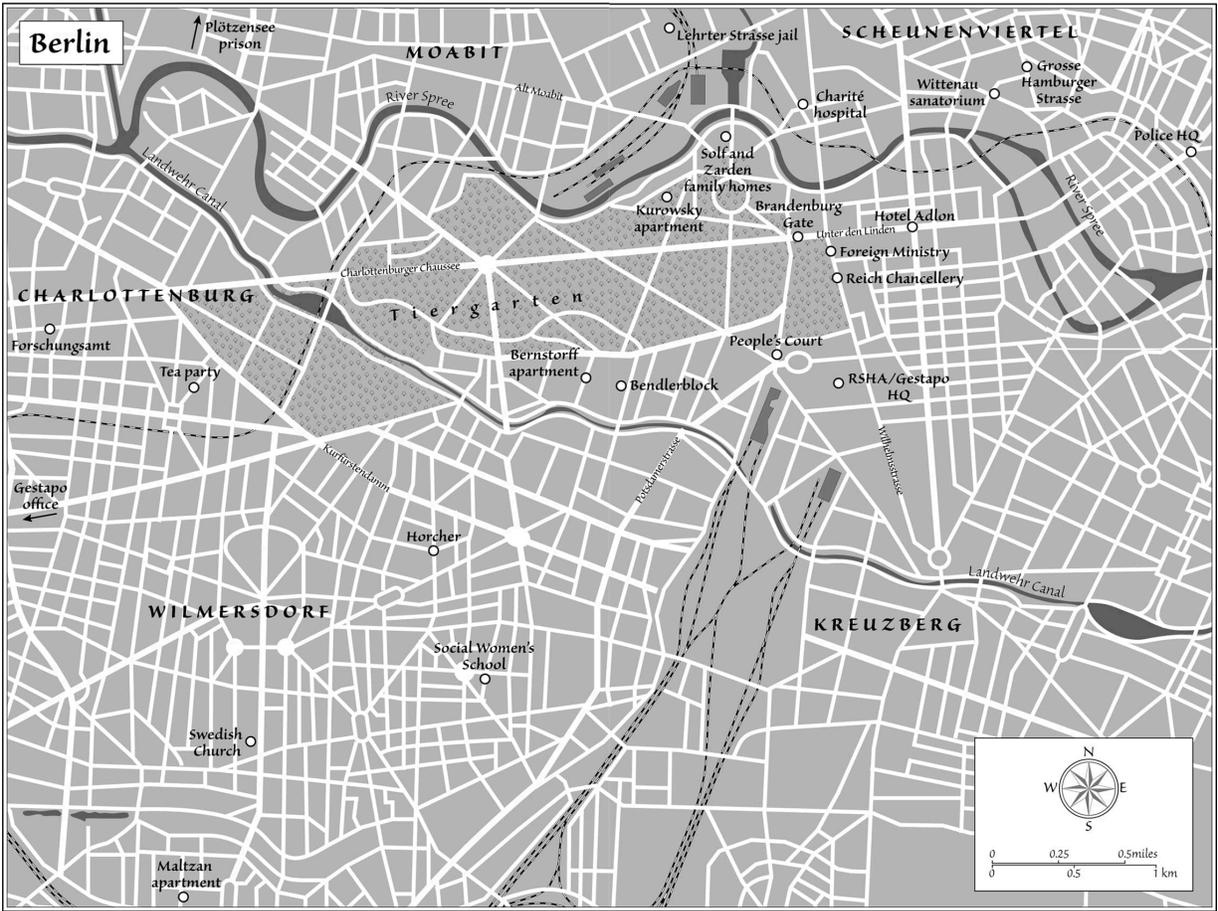
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# Dedication

*For my sons, Jacob and Sam –  
with the love of a proud, grateful father*

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## About the Sources

**T**HIS IS A work of non-fiction. Every detail on these pages is drawn from letters, diaries, testimonies and court documents, from the memoirs of those involved, from contemporaneous reports and historical accounts or from interviews with the surviving descendants of the central players. It is the product of scouring archives in Berlin, Munich, Karlsruhe, Koblenz, Lichterfelde, Lüneburg, Anklam, Jerusalem, Washington DC, Stanford and London.

Where there is direct speech, it is taken from that same documentary record. Barring the odd change to punctuation, the quotations appear untouched. The sources of those quotations and of the key facts are to be found in the endnotes, which are not numbered but arranged by chapter, matching the order in which they appear in the text. The endnotes are best used alongside the bibliography, which lists all sources, published and unpublished, in full, with URLs for material whose primary publication was online.

National spellings are the default, with a few exceptions, among them the German Eszett, which appears as a double ‘s’ except in the case of family names.

## Author's Note

**I** GREW UP IN a house where nothing German was allowed. No Siemens dishwasher or Krups coffee machine in the kitchen, no Volkswagen, Audi or Mercedes in the driveway. The edict came from my mother. She was not a Holocaust survivor, though she had felt the breath of the Shoah on her neck. She was just eight years old on 27 March 1945, when her own mother was killed by the last German V-2 rocket of the war to fall on London, a bomb that flattened a corner of the East End, killing 134 people, almost all of them Jews. One way or another, the blast radius of that explosion would encompass the rest of my mother's life and much of mine.

Of course, she knew that the bomb that fell on Hughes Mansions had not picked out that particular building deliberately. But given that the Nazis were bent on eliminating the Jews of Europe, she also knew how delighted they would have been by the target that fate, or luck, had chosen for that last V-2, how pleased that at twenty-one minutes past seven on that March morning it had added 120 more to the tally of dead Jews that would, in the end, number six million. And so came the rule. No trace of Germany would be allowed to touch our family: no visits, no holidays, no contact. The Germans were a guilty nation, every last one of them implicated in the wickedest crime of the twentieth century.

There were other Jews I knew whose parents followed the same prohibition, but few were as strict on the matter as my mother. And yet, though her practice was unusual, her underlying thinking was not. Far

beyond the Jewish community, many shared, and perhaps still share, the assumption that I was raised on: that, with just a handful of exceptions, Adolf Hitler found a universally willing accomplice in the German nation. We know of the French resistance and of underground movements across Europe, but tend to hear little about opposition in Germany itself. If we think about it at all, many of us assume the dissidents were entirely swept away and rounded up as soon as the Nazis took power in 1933: *First they came for the communists . . .*

And yet that's not quite right. There were Germans who defied the Third Reich from the very start and throughout the Nazi dictatorship. In the immediate aftermath of the war, one Allied investigator<sup>1</sup> estimated that, during the twelve long years of national socialism, some three million Germans had been in and out of prisons or concentration camps for crimes of dissent, sometimes punished for nothing more than a critical remark. There were 65 million German citizens in 1933, which means the vast, overwhelming majority, more than 95 per cent, did as they were told. They raised their right arm in salute and said 'Heil Hitler!' But quite a few did not.

What does it take to step out of line like that? What makes one person refuse when everyone around them obeys? And what compels them to do it when it would be so much easier to do nothing, when breaking ranks can only bring pain, hardship or death?

Anyone who has stared hard into the abyss of the mid-twentieth century has surely asked themselves versions of those questions, and one question above all: what would I have done? Most of us like to think we would have been one of the rebels or refusers, that we would have been brave. But the statistics suggest that most of us would not. Almost all of us would have stayed silent.

Several years ago I began work on *The Escape Artist*, the story of a Jewish teenager who escaped from Auschwitz. That book required me to contemplate the darkest parts of the human heart, the gravest evil of which human beings are capable. But while I was doing it, I stumbled across a

different story from that same era, a tale of staggering bravery that, save by a few experts, had been almost entirely forgotten. It had its share of terrible cruelty, of course, but at its centre was something just as inexplicable: acts of radical, unnecessary, mortally dangerous good.

In pursuing that mystery, I learned that though none of those directly involved was still alive, some of their children and grandchildren were, several in their eighties and nineties. They still carried the memory of a group of men and women who were not consistent in their opposition to Nazism, still less perfectly heroic, who were instead flawed, often hesitant, sometimes fearful individuals who nevertheless dared to say no to a mighty and terrifying regime – and so found themselves engulfed in a drama that would exact a heavy cost and whose impact would be felt at the very top of the Nazi state.

The questions confronting those people pressed with a particular intensity in the Germany of the 1930s and 1940s. But those questions are not only of that time or that place. Some of them echo down the decades. Some of them reverberate especially loudly at this moment.

## Cast of Characters

**Hubertus ‘Hubert’ von Ballestrem** (born 1910): count, military officer and second husband of Lagi Solf.

**Albrecht von Bernstorff** (born 1890): count; former diplomat, previously posted to London.

**Marie-Agnes ‘Anza’ Braune** (born 1893/1894): younger sister of Elisabeth von Thadden.

**Wilhelm Canaris** (born 1887): head of the Abwehr, German military intelligence.

**Roland Freisler** (born 1893): jurist and politician, president of the Volksgerichtshof, the People’s Court.

**Nikolaus von Halem** (born 1905): lawyer and businessman; friend of Hubert von Ballestrem.

**Hans Hirschel** (born 1900): lover of Maria von Maltzan.

**Otto Kiep** (born 1886): former German consul general in New York, diplomat and lawyer.