

*The Women Who Flew for Hitler*. Clare Mulley. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2017, Pp. xxvi, 470. ISBN: 9781250063670. US\$27.99.

*The Women Who Flew for Hitler* is a fascinating true historical account of the lives of Hanna Reitsch and Melitta von Straffenberg, the only female test pilots who actively served for the benefit of the Nazi regime. At its heart, this is a story of two women who, while best known in history for the profession and flying passion that they shared, were polar opposites in almost every way, with vast political and personal differences that divided them as people. Readers looking for original insight into some of the inner workings and turmoil of Germany during Hitler's domination will not be disappointed.

In the Preface, Mulley depicts Reitsch as von Straffenberg's antagonist, and in many ways a paragon of contemporary views on the inner workings of the Nazi regime. This striking dichotomy between the women carries on throughout the biography and captivates the reader with the personal and political complexities of serving Nazi Germany throughout World War II. Nonetheless, it would be a gross disservice to this book to assume it is simply a story of good versus evil, shown through the lives of these women; rather, this is a complex historical accounting of the beliefs and inner turmoil of two amazing women serving their country during a horrific period in history.

Unlike so many biographies and historical accounts involving Nazi Germany, this biographical account immerses readers in the lives of these women as individuals, rather than in their traditional place as German tools in the footnotes of history. Von Straffenberg's diaries and the memories of her friends and family shine with her patriotism and passion for aeronautical engineering. She is consistently depicted as a consummate scholar, grounded by her love of learning and flight. Reitsch comes through as vivacious, tenacious, passionate, and rebellious, thriving in the patriotism and energy fostered by the Nazi regime. It is the very personal stories of these women, their journeys to careers as pilots, their deep patriotism, and their individual actions during World War II that set this biographical work apart from the many other historical accountings of Germans from this era.

Perhaps the most spellbinding aspects of this book lie in the astonishing feats these women accomplished, for both good and ill. From flying in the 1936 Olympics, as contemporaries of Amelia Earhart, to fully immersing themselves in an overwhelming male world, these women's accomplishments are beyond compare. Von Straffenberg's research as an aeronautical engineer substantially changed German flight capabilities and aerial assault techniques. The infamous failed assassination attempt of Hitler in his bunker was carried out by von Straffenberg's brother-in-law, and planned by many other influential Germans, including von Straffenberg, herself. Through her vital contributions to German aeronautics, she was able to save herself and offer some protection to her extended family who were interred in VIP housing in a concentration camp. Her story is one of bravery, daring, and brilliance.

Reitsch's biography is no less fascinating. By all appearances, through her personal relationship with Hitler, she presented the idea of suicide bombers via glider to the Nazis. Operation Seltopfer (self-sacrifice) as Reitsch named it, was never executed, but is well documented as having been masterminded by Reitsch. Throughout her life, before, during, and after World War II, Reitsch shattered international gliding records, and at one point became the first woman to fly a helicopter. Despite her unwavering dedication to Hitler and the Nazi regime, Reitsch's story still shines with her own bravery, determination, and unwavering self-preservation in the post-war era.

The book flows seamlessly between von Straffenberg's and Reitsch's stories, paralleling their personal journeys through a calendar timeline, rather than a harsh division of one woman's story to another. Mulley's heavy reliance on diaries and the written words of both women, as well as interviews and reflections from those who knew them, creates a compelling and clearly well-researched work. The vast number of resources beyond the personal accounts is impressive as well, with pre-Nuremberg Trial era interview transcripts, newspaper clippings, and photographs.

From the first page to the last, *The Women Who Flew for Hitler* is engrossing and well written. Mulley's ability to put a fresh face to the inner workings of World War II-era Germany, and to draw out the best and worst of both women in a raw and haunting narrative truly makes this book a must read for those interested in early feminists, World War II Germany, or simply immersing themselves in a story so rich that at times it is difficult to forget that it is a biographical account of these women and not historical fiction.

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