REFEREED GENERAL ARTICLE

Women and Nonviolent Resistance to Nazism in WWII: Media, sabotage, smuggling and hiding

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This article aims to add to the small body of literature on non-violent resistance to Nazism and help reverse historiographic gender imbalance by highlighting the contribution of women active in the resistance to Nazism. It focuses on the use of underground media, the smuggling and hiding of people and sabotage. It considers whether sabotage can be construed as non-violent in some contexts and concludes by evaluating the contribution of women's non-violent resistance to Nazism.

KEY WORDS: Non-violent action, women, Resistance, Nazism, Sabotage, Smuggling and Hiding

Introduction

There is a widespread misconception that WWII Nazism was only overcome through violence, mostly performed by men. Both nonviolent action and the activities of women are often dismissed or overlooked. In a previous article (Branagan 2022) I provided an overview of nonviolence by women in resistance to WWII Nazism and examined the connections between nonviolent and violent actions. Symbolic actions, overt non-cooperation, covert tactics, and the gathering and communicating of intelligence were examined. This article will focus on other covert means of nonviolent resistance through use of underground media, the smuggling and hiding of people, and of sabotage. It will then examine the impacts of these actions. The aims of the article are two-fold: to help reverse the historiographic gender imbalance by highlighting stories of pivotal women activists, and to add to the small body of literature about nonviolence in resistance to Nazism.

Underground media

Closely related to intelligence gathering was the underground media, a form of protest and persuasion, which gathered and disseminated information to a range of audiences for a variety of purposes. These included resisting and countering Nazi propaganda, correcting misinformation, recruiting people into the Resistance, and encouraging resistance activities. Resistance to German propaganda started in a basic way which nevertheless had an impact. Art historian and Resistance leader Agnès Humbert heard in July 1940 that 'as fast as German posters are put up in Paris they are slashed and torn down again. The people of Paris are rebelling already' (2008 [1946]: 8). Although this resistance seems minor, the news of it was enough to motivate her to return to Paris, rather than emigrating or hiding in a Provençal village, and once in Paris she began one of the first organised resistance groups. One of her early actions involved creating home-made stickers reading 'Vive le général de Gaulle' and 'Nous sommes pour le général de Gaulle', plastering them on walls in her neighbourhood and distributing them to friends to display in public urinals, telephone boxes, Métro tunnels and even German trucks (Humbert 2008 [1946]: 19). She also typed messages on banknotes – which no-one would destroy as banknotes were scarce.

Such actions were also undertaken in Berlin by women associated with the Red Orchestra, a resistance group that operated in Germany during WWII. Liane Berkowitz was the nineteen-year-old daughter of a Russian–Jewish symphony conductor. She participated in resistance activities inside Nazi Germany. She joined with art students in plastering hundreds of stickers on walls darkened by the blackout. The same night, Berkowitz and a young soldier were given a hundred handbills and told to act like young lovers, wandering from lane to lane in the Kurfürstendamm, leaving a trail of handbills in their wake (Nelson 2009: 255-6). Berkowitz was executed in August 1943. The Red Orchestra was a resistance group that operated inside Germany. Members Mildred Fish and Greta Lorke translated the banned speeches of Roosevelt and Churchill into German, and their husbands helped distribute them to various discussion circles (Nelson 2009: 106). Sophie Scholl and others from the White Rose student group also distributed fliers before their betrayal, trial and execution (Hanser 2012; Ginder 2001).

In Holland, Truus and Freddie Oversteegens began their resistance by writing pro-resistance slogans on walls, and with their mother printed illegal magazines at home on a stencil machine (Poldermans 2019: 30), while their comrade Hannie Schaft delivered *Waarheid* (Truth) and *Vrij Nederland* newspapers, and a doctor, Ada van Rossem, ran an illegal radio station from her house (Poldermans 2019: 92-4). In Belgium, 50,000 copies of a fake Le Soir, filled with anti-Nazi sentiments, were distributed on 9 November 1943 by the Front for Belgian Independence (Assouline 2009: 95).

In France, a Dernière Colonne group began with minor sabotage but turned to propaganda, beginning with graffiti in chalk before moving to leaflets, type-written tracts circulated hand-to-hand, and finally to 10,000 handbills in four different versions in six cities of the southern zone (Wieviorka 2016: 61). Charlotte Nadel was a co-founder of the resistance group Défence de la France, whose eponymous newspaper had evolved, in only two years, from '5000 copies of a primitive flier to a serious newspaper with a circulation of 150,000, as well as numerous subsidiary publications and forgery operations' (Nelson 2017: 178).

Such resistance was widespread, with 'illegal printing presses running off anti-German pamphlets in basements in the dead of night, distributed away from the gaze of the dreaded Gestapo' (Veitch 2017: 130). In 1940, there were only a few newspapers in France, but by 1944 there were 100 national and 500 regional and local papers with a distribution of over two million copies (Opar 2012). The Germans realised the importance of such activity, and instituted severe punishments including transportation to a concentration camp, or execution.

The activity was perilous in other ways, with Marie Servillat (alias 'Lucienne') having her arm crushed in 1943 in a printing press for the underground newspaper *Combat*, and on 17 June 1944 being shot in the chest and legs before being taken by the Gestapo to Grange Blanche hospital, whence she later escaped (Rossiter 1986: 150-1). Bertie Albrecht, chief of staff of *Combat*, decided to establish a social service to aid those captured and imprisoned, which became a model for other such organisations. Having escaped once from imprisonment, she was captured again on 26 May 1943 in a trap meant for her boss, Henri Frenay. Imprisoned in Fresnes, she died two days later (Rossiter 1986: 157-8).

Functions of the underground media

The underground press firstly concerned itself with the gathering of accurate military and political information to counter that being disseminated by the Germans. It offered news 'more accurate and truthful than the Germans' (Nelson 2017: 125), such as revealing that food and other shortages were due to Nazi looting rather than, as claimed, British blockades (Humbert 2008 [1946]:24-5, 38). One publication gave detailed figures about the large shipments of French food and other resources to Germany (Rossiter 1986: 146). The underground press showed the occupation and Pétainist regime as mendacious, unnatural, irrational and, importantly, reversible, positioning the resistance forces as reasonable, sensible, normal, rational and practical (Kedward in Wieviorka 2016: 63-4).

The second role of the underground media was propaganda. In addition to denouncing the Nazis, the newspapers recanted specific stories or provided different versions of events from that presented in the Nazi-controlled media. Much of it was at first tactful and occupied the middle ground regarding Pétain and the Vichy government, aiming for a gradual education of the public (Blanc 2008: 288). Newspapers initially debated whether or not to publish news about the mass exterminations of Jewish and other people or not, partly out of concern for the victims' families, but *J'Accuse* broke the story on 20 October 1942, and on 30 September 1943 Défence de la France eventually released the first photographs of a concentration camp and mass murders (Nelson 2017: 124, 178), some from a Sorbonne professor who was a prisoner of war. This was in striking contrast with the propaganda of the pro-Nazi newspaper *Le Petit Parisien*, which reported that same week that 'English, Americans and Russians Want to Dominate Europe and Make Its Inhabitants Slaves, says Monsieur von Ribbentrop' (ibid). Although the Nazis discredited Jewish people through many cultural means, such as a propaganda exhibit entitled 'Le Juif et La France', they were keen to avoid the spread of unease about inhumane treatment of Jews, aiming to eliminate them without upsetting the political equilibrium (Nelson 2017: 26). As such, they hid the truth about deportations (Nelson 2017: 62), and were desperate to prevent resistance media from exposing these atrocities.

Underground newspapers also served as recruitment tools for resistance organisations, and aimed to give the impression of a much larger movement, a self-fulfilling strategy (Hanser 2012: 212) which the Otpor movement would later use against Milosevic in Serbia. They aimed to encourage hope and optimism, and champion the notion that France was not defeated as long as there were daily acts of resistance, refusal, noncooperation and defiance – preferably organised and displaying discipline and vigilance. These instructions were given, in the case of *Resistance*, in the name of a National Committee of Public Safety which, by presenting itself as a responsible, authoritative, energetic, courageous organisation, situated itself as an 'expression of a clandestine structure that was already established' (Blanc 2008: 287).

A related function was the encouragement of demonstrations and other resistance activities, ideally thoughtful, strategic and effective ones. Wives and mothers were encouraged to demonstrate for additional food rations, such as by the women's publication *Femmes Françaises*, issued by the Union des Femmes Françaises. On July 14th (Bastille Day) 1944, women were urged to place red, white and blue flowers on war monuments and then to march to the prefectures demanding bread (Rossiter 1986: 146). Such overt resistance was a concern to the Nazis and their desires to appear legitimate (Summy 1995).

Impact of media

Underground media were 'the first means of action and for many militants the only likelihood of practical action for many months' (Bourdet, cited in Wieviorka 2016: 64), thereby combatting despair, apathy, and feelings of powerlessness. Even when they started small, and their impacts were not obvious, the very fact of clandestine newspapers had a large psychological impact, giving tangible proof of active dissenting groups, setting examples and offering encouragement and ideas for strategic action (Blanc 2008: 289). They 'talked up' a vast anti-racist movement which would save many lives covertly (Nelson 2017: 107).

Humbert described an early tract, '33 conseils à l'occupé ('33 Hints to the Occupied')' as:

> a glimmer of light in the darkness. … Now we know for certain that we are not alone. There are other people who think like us, who are suffering and organising the struggle: soon a network will cover the whole of France, and our little group will be just one link in a mighty chain. We are absolutely overjoyed (Humbert 2008 [1946]: 14).

Soon afterwards, radio was her 'sole pleasure', with a De Gaulle speech inspiring her: 'I feel I have come back to life. A feeling I thought had died forever stirs within me again: hope. … I decided not to put an end to everything after all. He has given me hope, and nothing in the world can extinguish that hope now' (Humbert 2008 [1946]: 7). This belief in the future that was encouraged by media was 'an absolutely essential weapon in their arsenal, without which nothing was possible' (Blanc 2008: 297).

Underground newspapers impressed potential recruits as evidence of brave people taking risks distributing banned or unauthorised publications. Those perils conferred a prestige and credibility beyond ordinary demonstrations: 'the freedom to speak under threat precedes and authenticates, by that very means, what it authorises itself to say' (Aglan, cited in Wieviorka 2016: 64). They also aided the movement's strategising and directions:

> The press became the matrix of movements that were destined to prosper. In fact, the print media obliged promoters to clarify their thinking, define their strategy, and speak clearly to the general public, who had to be persuaded before they could be mobilized. … [T]he underground press restored a lost political complexity and allowed them to make choices and no longer simply submit (Wieviorka 2016: 63).

Overcoming the logistical difficulties of creating media – setting up organisations, building trust and distribution networks, obtaining scarce paper and outlawed printing presses, finding warehouses and office guards — often led to other resistance activities such as sabotage. They reinforced cohesion, solidarity, identity and complicity in risky endeavours. Eyewitness accounts of deportations published by *Solidarité* were uncensored and 'the closest thing to contemporary news coverage that the event would receive', making 'a major impact' (Nelson 2017: 92-3). Media often had strong moral authority, such as Christian reviews *Temps nouveau and Esprit, Cahier du Témoignage Chrétien*: 'Thanks to that opinion column, for four years the Christian world would be able to counter Nazism and Pétainism with the force of its word' (Wieviorka 2016: 63).

Hiding and smuggling

Hiding, escaping and using false identities are not usually classified as tools of nonviolence, but when 'a regime seeks the arrest, internment or perhaps extermination of a particular group' they do constitute nonviolent action (Sharp 1980: 313), within the category of noncooperation. Women played a prominent part in smuggling and hiding Jewish people and other evaders from the Holocaust. This ranged from individuals such as Hannie Schaft hiding Jews at her parents' house and elsewhere (Poldermans 2019: 18, 29), to movements such as the National Movement Against Racism led by Suzanne Spaak, which engaged in organised, exemplary and courageous work in and around Paris (Nelson 2017: 105).

As with other women resisters, Spaak demonstrated exceptional social intelligence, networking and recruiting skills, bringing together women from all classes, including the Jewish communist immigrant Miriam Sokol, with their friendship and humanitarian common ground transcending their political and ideological differences – in contrast to their husbands' mutual animosity (Nelson 2017: 9-10). Spaak also recruited Jewish immigrant Sophie Schwartz, as well as social workers, clergy, scouts, officials and guards, in dangerous operations to save Jewish children (Nelson 2017). Some were smuggled to remote villages

such as Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, where more people were saved per capita than anywhere else in France, assisted by enterprising women such as Madeleine Barot and Madeleine Dreyfus, and organisations such as the Organisation de Secours aux Enfants and Cimade, (Moorehead 2015).

Women also helped keep downed airmen and escaped prisoners from incarceration, and facilitated their return to active service:

> The German victory created an immediate need for organized operations that would help Allied soldiers and sympathizers escape to Britain. The earliest efforts by patriots wanting to do something for the Allies were feeding, sheltering and transporting the fugitives they met more or less accidentally … Such impromptu aid by ordinary people gradually developed into a complex structure of escape lines involving about 10,000 resisters, many of whom were women (Rossiter 1986: 23).

Women were in charge of some of the major escape lines, such as Marie-Louise (codenamed 'Françoise') Dissard, who at the age of sixty took over the O'Leary escape network until the war's end after Nancy Wake was forced to flee to England (Braddon 2019 [1956]: 278). Dissard first resisted the Germans by distributing anti-Nazi propaganda in Toulouse, before she was asked to rent a place for the Ullmans, a Jewish tailor and his wife. She later enlisted guides and keepers of safe houses, procured food, civilian clothing and medical supplies, and opened her small flat as a headquarters for the O'Leary line, later known as the Françoise line. There she sheltered airmen, agents and fugitives, and travelled to Switzerland to obtain finances for her work, a journey which entailed climbing barbed wire fences and dodging border guards (Rossiter 1986: 31-4).

The 'Comet' line was 70% staffed by women and led by a young Belgian woman Andrée ('Dedee') de Jongh. In twenty perilous journeys, many of them at night, she conducted 118 evaders across the Pyrenees to safety in Spain, until she was arrested by the Gestapo on January 15, 1943. Subjected to seventeen interrogations by the police of the Luftwaffe, transferred to numerous prisons, and then the infamous Ravensbrück and Mauthausen concentration camps, she was finally rescued by the International Red Cross in early May, 1945 (Opar 2012).

The former wife of Surrealist painter Francis Picabia, Dadaist art critic Gabrièle Buffet-Picabia was second-in-command for her region and the Paris link for the Belgian-French escape line, and had to cross the Pyrenees herself to escape, while Genevieve Soulié was head of lodging in Paris for the Burgundy line, responsible for the security, wellbeing and morale of Allied soldiers awaiting departure. Soulié helped the escape of 136 Allied airmen, carrying out, according to the assistant chief of the line, 'dangerous and tiring work with complete disregard for her own comfort and safety' (Rossiter 1986: 68). Another notable was Yvonne Beauvais, the mother superior of a convent of Augustinian sisters in Malesroit, Brittany, who hid escapers, evaders and resisters in the convent clinic. Skilled at throwing the Germans off the scent, she once disguised a group of Allied airmen as nuns (Opar 2012).

Effectiveness of hiding and smuggling people

Through the efforts of Dissard alone, 230 aviators were returned to Britain, with 110 of them in the period when the Gestapo was intensely searching for her (Rossiter 1986: 35). The escape line which Nancy Wake helped create enabled 1037 men to escape from France (Braddon 2019 [1956]: 105). Many airmen on the run in France later acknowledged that without the perseverance and courageous assistance of women they would not have escaped from France. For example, Flight Officer Kenneth Woodhouse was helped by ten different women on his week-long journey to Brittany and England, while Second Lieutenant Robert V. Lau was assisted by nineteen women, including nine safehouse keepers in his 41-day escape. Lau believes that '[n]either I nor any of us could have evaded or escaped without the women helpers' (cited in Rossiter 1986: 97). Women, Rossiter notes, 'took a keen interest in helping them return to their bases, while many Frenchmen were involved in sabotage and guerrilla operations' (1986: 97). This illustrates the gender differences regarding categories of resistance work, with women tending to work on the more nonviolent end of the spectrum of resistance activities.

Although countries such as Denmark saved a much higher percentage of its Jewish population (93%) than France, the efforts of women such as Suzanne Spaak preserved the lives of 80 to 150 children in one operation alone (from a camp in Vénissieux), and approximately 1000 over the course of the war (Nelson 2017: 104, 244). The communes and isolated farmhouses in the vicinity of Le Chambon hid around 800, with perhaps 3000 passing through (Moorehead 2015: 336). Truus Wijsmuller was a prescient Dutch woman who realised, after *Kristallnacht* (the 'Night of Broken Glass'), that Jewish children were no longer safe in many European countries. Prior to the war, and aided by British activists such as Helen Bentwich, she devoted her life to negotiating with Nazis such as Adolf Eichmann to allow the migration of some 10,000 Jewish children to England and away from the Holocaust (Astaire 2019; Auntie Truus, The Forgotten Rescuer n.d.).

Sabotage and its effects

While Gandhians such as Burrowes (1996) consider sabotage as outside the boundaries of nonviolence, others such as Hastings (2020) consider that it can be considered nonviolent within some contexts (such as against ruthless opponents), albeit located at the more extreme end of the nonviolence continuum, in the category of nonviolent intervention, and provided that only property and not people are targeted. Sabotage as a form of resistance began as opportunistic acts by individuals on a small scale. Teenager Simone Segouin, later known by her codename, Nicole Minet, commenced by stealing a bicycle from a German military administration, slicing the tires of the other bikes and motorcycles so she could not be pursued. Joining the organised resistance, she used the stolen bike to deliver messages between Resistance groups. She quickly became adept at tactics, explosives use, and the sabotage of German equipment. Her deeds escalated to derailing German trains, blocking roads, and destroying bridges, helping to retake France from the inside and clear Germans from the path of the advancing Allied forces. (She also led teams of Resistance fighters to capture German troops and set traps, although this could not be considered nonviolent.) Never captured, she was one of the few women recognised, being awarded a number of medals, including the Croix de Guerre (Belden 1944: 20-3; 'Girl with a Gun - Simone Segouin' n.d.).

Agnès Humbert, even as a slave labourer in a German prison, managed to sabotage rayon production and crate manufacture (Humbert 2008 [1946]: 181-2, 210). Christine Granville sabotaged German communications and helped blow up barges transporting oil from Rumania to Germany (Mulley 2012: 88). Nancy Wake had arrived in France with a handbag full of money and a pistol, and a month later was the leader of the Maquis d'Auvergne, who carried out numerous sabotage actions after D-Day on German installations, rail junctions, bridges and telephone communications. She organised supply and money drops of up to 15 million francs per month (Braddon 2019 [1956]: 158-9). 'No sector in the whole of France caused the Germans more trouble. Nancy led from the front and took part in ambushes, sabotage and raiding parties' (Stanton and Cox n.d.).

In addition to the obvious impacts of sabotage on infrastructure and production were the effects on morale, with Humbert recording that 'I feel much happier now that I know that not a single one of my spools is any good, not a single one will be of the slightest use to the Third Reich!' (2008 [1946]:132). Her attempts at sabotage were her 'one consolation' in prison:

> After every successful act of sabotage my heart feels lighter. It's a sort of rite of atonement for me, between me and my conscience (2008 [1946]: 181-2).

Conclusion

It is difficult to pinpoint any one reason – violent or otherwise – for the overthrow of Nazism. Each of the activities described taken singly, helped to undermine the Germans in small ways; when considered together they had a considerable impact, providing intelligence for use by the Allied forces; encouraging internal dissent, resistance and non-cooperation; saving numerous lives; repatriating many highly trained servicemen; and destroying Nazi resources.

Whereas Hofer's *fundamentalist* approach argues that resistance had little effect, Broszat's *societal* approach suggests that resistance in many spheres of activity and through numerous forms of civil courage made a difference to the ability of the Nazi regime to manipulate society at will (Kershaw 2000: 197-9). Although there were many weaknesses and failures of resistance at national and international levels, and some effective nonviolent strategies were under-utilised, such as economic noncooperation through boycotts, divestment and sanctions against the international corporations which propped up Nazism (Branagan 2014), nonviolent actions by women preserved many lives through the smuggling and hiding of people. Resistance through media eroded support for Nazism and built internal resistance which aided the military objectives of the Allies, as did the gathering and communicating of intelligence.

The smuggling and hiding of people are most easily quantifiable, such as in numbers of people who survived the war but would likely not have if not aided to flee or hide from Nazism. The effects of resistance through media and intelligence were more subtle and less easily measured, but certainly contributed to the growth of groups such as the Maquis, whom the Germans regarded as a major threat, and who greatly facilitated the Allied advance after D-Day. At the very least, it should be acknowledged that Nazism was not defeated solely through Allied military violence (which itself was slow and extremely costly in numerous senses), but that it was supported and complemented by many nonviolent activities.

Although it is problematic to compare different campaigns, the successes of Christine Granville can be compared to the relative inaction of the male Vosges Maquis over the course of the war, most of their time being spent on the run or in hiding (Veitch 2017). Granville made the first contact between the French resistance and the Italian partisans on opposite sides of the Alps in preparation for D-Day; boldly facilitated the defection, with no loss of lives, of an entire German garrison on a strategic pass in the mountains; and audaciously liberated captured Resistance leaders. Granville's 'inestimable value' (Mulley 2012: 253), and the ability of women such as Agnès Humbert and Suzanne

Spaak to swiftly build broad networks of resistance, or the others who published newspapers and smuggled people and information, question traditional narratives that armed men are more effective against ruthless opponents than unarmed women.

Humbert, for example, although too humbly viewing herself as no more than a typist and go-between, was 'essential' and 'indispensable', an 'enthusiastic liaison agent and recruiting sergeant' (Blanc 2008: 285). At the very beginning of the resistance, Humbert introduced key contacts, expanded the numbers greatly (Humbert 2008 [1946]: 29-30) and helped the organisation to grow and diversify, being a vital element of the development of French resistance from 'small autonomous entities' to a crystallized, cohesive, effective organisation (Blanc 2008: 284-6).

This resistance sometimes morphed into reconstruction and justice work after the war, which can be categorised under the 'constructive programme' of the nonviolent intervention category. Humbert, for example, took charge of a town's administration in Germany where she had been imprisoned; she organised camps, food, first aid, and denazification, and refused payment for it (Blanc 2008: 306). Malou sat on judges' panels, worked on committees, and headed the rebuilding and recovery group the Union des Femmes Françaises (Huppert 2021: 77). This and the resistance work of women was a likely contributing factor to some long-term gender-related changes, such as French women securing the right to vote in 1944.

These stories also demonstrate how 'women can step out of the construct of conventional femininity to defy all the stereotypes, if only they are given the chance' (Purnell 2020: 6). Despite their lack of recognition (and women downplaying their own contributions):

> [W]omen were an outstanding presence throughout the movement. Fulfilling a wealth of different roles, responsible at the highest levels, setting up and often running their own groups, these women played an active part at every level and in every field' (Blanc 2008: 293).

As Poldermans notes, 'women are often depicted as the main victims [of war], while it is often precisely women who resist under such circumstances and show genuine leadership' (2019: xxiii).

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Regeneration #3

Blade   becomes hand   pierces the distance   of the social.

Body's arms   are   breadth   when touch is cry

push off.   Who   leaves   the quiet ground?

Comfort   is not shivering rue.   Each   sharp   sweep

toward passage   lulls   till   tilt   & fill   &

frantic   shake me   awake in that   craft

taken once   with wind-song   wave   & lightning

slice.   A rocking lunge.   A deity.   A trough.   This

ancient   whose eyes close now   on need   pending

collaboration.   Weight of you   on palms outstretched.

Anne Elvey

Influencer

Molecules are scattered lavishly across the screen;
blinking and breathing performance art.
Garments shout other people's names

and yet I'm instantly recognisable
instantly recognising myself
as whoever I think I am or want to be:

Aaliyah or Amy Winehouse?
Kurt Cobain or Kevin Samuels?
But I'm none of them; the dead are just the dead.

As are the vapid trolls that hashtag every misstep.
And you in your flannelette haute couture.
Time moves quicker than thought.

I sidestep wars, politics, pandemics
and deep discussion
to be current, in the now, a thing;

a moth floating on the stock exchange
chasing a light that always shines brighter elsewhere:
to live and die in neon.

Christopher Palmer

Today is my enemy

I thought it was an urgent morning tea
but arrived, not quite early

at the Knowledge Festival
where masters of process gather

to discuss programmes versus programs
and thrash out three-word slogans.

A quick scan of who's who in the room:
the usual nodders and shakers.

It's not what's said that's important
but who says it and how loud.

Time to go round the room.
Feign some interest

speak with the freshness of Scandinavia.
The name's Grey I say. Yes, someone says.

Christopher Palmer