

Alma Luckau Molin, 1908-2000

Alma Luckau Molin, who died on November 2, 2000, belonged to one of the most distinguished generations of Vassar historians in recent years, side by side with Evalyn Clark, Mildred Campbell, and Charles Griffin. In her own special field of diplomatic history and twentieth-century revolutions and dictatorships, she worked with many renowned scholars, most notably with her teacher at Columbia, James T. Shotwell.

Alma's major publication was *The German Delegation at the Paris Peace Conference* (Columbia University Press, 1941), which drew very favorable reviews from the historians Hans Kohn and Bernadotte E. Schmitt among others. Her topic was of particular importance to the Allies in anticipation of the many difficult decisions awaiting them at the conclusion of the ongoing conflict.

Alma's life work was profoundly marked by the impression left on her by Germany's turbulent political situation at the end of the First World War. Born in 1908, she was the daughter of a prominent Socialist who in the 1920's passionately opposed the Hitler movement and who sent Alma to America to get an American education. Back in 1918 and '19, when Berlin was wracked by political violence, he was worried over Alma's childish insouciance as she roamed the streets of the big city attracted by all the political excitement.

Since she was a very independent-minded ten-year old Mr. Luckau could finally restrain her boundless curiosity only by insisting that she should share what she was learning with her old father. "Let me come with you. I want to see all the things that you are discovering too!" he told her. "A neat trick of child psychology," Alma recalled as a retired history professor more than half a century later, "and good pedagogy too."

Alma studied at Connecticut College in New London where she earned her B.A. in 1932 and M.A. in 1933. Then she took up doctoral work at Columbia where Professor Shotwell directed her research on the German delegation at the Paris Peace Conference--a work which to this day has not been superseded. Her search for original documents took her back to Berlin shortly after the Nazi Olympics of 1936. There she befriended the head archivist, Dr. Johannes Ullrich, who was also an opponent of Hitler. The two of them were dumbfounded when, one day in the Wilhemstrasse, they found themselves standing on the sidewalk not far from Hitler who at that moment was emerging in an open car from the Reich Chancellery. "How easily I could have shot him!" Alma later would tell her friends at Vassar -- and this only half in jest.

In 1944 Alma became an American citizen, sponsored by Dean C. Mildred Thompson and President Henry Noble

MacCracken. This was truly a remarkable event, considering that few German nationals were thus honored in the midst of the Second World War.

Alma became a specialist on the impact of the First World War on Germany and on Eastern Europe. She worked on the complicated relationship between Germany and Russia from Lenin to Stalin, both on the diplomatic level and through the relationship of the Third International to the German communist party.

Alma was too young to be counted among the roster of German émigré historians, but she surely shared many of their virtues: a passionate interest in contemporary affairs and the conviction that for the sake of a better world contemporary history must be taught to the young generation, particularly in Germany. She wrote about the many lectures she gave at international summer courses in Germany and Austria between 1949 and 1953:

[Our] main purpose was to give German students, teachers and young workers an historical perspective on the events in their own lifetime and to counteract both Nazi and communist indoctrination.

The same zeal got her involved as director of the Citizenship's Institute for German Women under the auspices of the U.S. High Commissioner for Germany (1951). In 1953 she also worked for HICOG helping to organize a number of conferences by German civic organizations debating the prospects of a new West German army. The purpose of these conferences was to insure against a resurgence of German militarism. Alma's final report for HICOG was kept classified for many years.

In the same spirit of trying to help advance a more democratic and peaceful postwar Europe Alma took part in a number of international scholarly conferences. Between 1950 and 1960 she lectured at the Free University in Berlin-Dahlem, whose students and faculty had just seceded from the communist-dominated university in East Berlin. And as late as 1973, the year Alma retired from Vassar, she took part in the work of the International Institute for History Textbooks in Braunschweig, West Germany.¹

Alma brought a missionary zeal to Vassar during her long service to our college. In a letter to a friend in 1946, she wrote:

¹ Alma L. Molin, *Elemente eines atlantischen Geschichtsbildes. Empfehlungen der 5. amerikanisch-deutschen Historikertagung 1963* (Braunschweig, 1965), 134 pp.

Alma Molin, Memorial Minute, Feb. 14, 2001

[When I came to Vassar] I discovered to my surprise that I liked teaching, that I was interested in all my students and that I was able to instill in all but the unteachable a desire to learn for the pleasure of learning [...]

Alma turned against the Prussian method of teaching

[...] To know what is wrong is only the first step. The question is what is right.

Alma taught courses on nineteenth and twentieth-century Europe, on Kievan, Tsarist, and Soviet Russia, and offered diverse seminars to promising seniors. Having herself once experienced America as a foreign student, she took particular interest in advising and helping students from abroad. Following the Hungarian revolution of 1956 she personally took under her wing two Hungarian refugee students who had come to Vassar.

Alma advanced from instructor in 1940 to full professor in 1959. From 1967-68 she chaired the Committee on Fellowships and Graduate Study. In 1968-71 she served as chairperson of the History Department. This was the time when Vassar College made the transition to coeducation and when there was much turnover in the History Department.

Alma's efficient directions and solicitous advice were much appreciated by students and colleagues alike--not least by the junior faculty in whose family lives she also took a keen interest.

Finally, as we think of Alma we remember her not only as a scholar but as a person who went to concerts and museums, walked in the redwoods of California and enjoyed learning about African art. In 1955 Alma married Werner Molin, someone who had first met her when he was still a student in Germany and she only a small girl. Werner adored Alma his entire life until his death in 1991 and Alma had moved heaven and earth to bring him to America after the war. She was also concerned about her parents, who were stranded in East Germany in 1945. When the East German authorities in 1950 learned that the Luckaus had a daughter who taught at Vassar College and who lectured for HICOG and UNESCO, they accused them of being agents of American imperialism. Alma saw to it that her parents were resettled in West Germany.

In 1964 Alma suffered a serious heart attack and was confined to a hospital for two months. Her health remained delicate for the rest of her life. Following her retirement in 1973 she nonetheless continued to be deeply interested in the welfare of Vassar College and of its History Department. In fact, throughout her last years she never seemed to lose any of her ebullient spirits and lively curiosity. Many old

Alma Molin, Memorial Minute, Feb. 14, 2001

students like Marilyn Senn Moll and Stella S. Gabuzda (Class of 1951 and '59) remained in close touch with her. When a friend visited her in the hospital two days before she died, she surprised him by vigorously chastising Eisenhower for "his colossal blunder in 1944 of letting Stalin have Berlin and half of Germany." Thereupon she asked this friend to bring her more reading on the Second World War.

Alma Luckau Molin, a passionate historian of our turbulent twentieth century--literally from her childhood in revolutionary Berlin to her dying day. We remember her with esteem, admiration, and affection.

Respectfully submitted,

Hsi-Huey Liang, Professor Emeritus of History,
Chair

Elisabeth B. Chapman, Assistant Director of
Admissions, Retired

Robert T. Fortna, Professor Emeritus of
Religion

David L. Schalk, Professor of History

Richard Wilson, Professor of Music

Anthony S. Wohl, Professor of History