

Reading 3

LETTER TO NAZI YOUTH

Helen's essays on socialism found a receptive audience in socialist newspaper and magazines. Other publications were outraged. The editor of The Brooklyn Eagle wrote that Helen's "mistakes spring out of then manifest limitations of her development." Helen wrote that she remembered meeting this editor and that he had been especially generous with his compliments. "But now that I have come out for socialism, he reminds me and the public that I am blind and deaf especially liable to error. I must have shrunk in intelligence during the years since I met him."

In 1924 Helen joined the new American Foundation for the Blind as a spokesperson. The organization urged her to give up writing and speaking publicly about her politics because she was drawing attention away from the needs of the blind.

One episode, however, put her socialist views on the front page of the New York Times.

In Germany, the Nazi party, led by Adolf Hitler, had come to power in 1933. Hitler chose May 10, 1933, for a national "Action Against the Un-German Spirit" to be held at German universities. The "action" was public burnings of books that differed from the Nazis' views on political, social, or cultural matters, as well as all books by Jewish authors.

As she was a member of the Socialist Party, Helen's books were on the list of books to be burned.

On May 9, Helen published a short but powerful letter to Nazi students that was published in several hundred newspapers.

To the student body of Germany:

History has taught you nothing if you think you can kill ideas. Tyrants have tried to do that often before, and the ideas have risen up in their might and destroyed them.

You can burn my books and the books of the best minds in Europe, but the ideas in them have seeped through a million channels and will continue to quicken other minds. I gave all the royalties of my books for all time to the German soldiers blinded in the World War with no thought in my heart but love and compassion for the German people.

I acknowledge the grievous complications that have led to your intolerance; all the more do I deplore the injustice and unwisdom of passing on to unborn generations the stigma of your deeds.

Do not imagine that your barbarities to the Jews are unknown here. God sleepeth not, and He will visit His judgment upon you. Better were it for you to have a mill-stone hung around your neck and sink into the sea than to be hated and despised of all men.

[Click here to read a draft of the original letter, with corrections and annotations by Polly Thompson, one of her assistants.](#)

The Nazis ignored her letter.

In 1937, Helen said that her books would no longer be sold in Germany, expressing disgust with "Germany's antisemitic atrocities, fear-clamping state control over lives and home, and imprisonment of thousands without trial." The war in Europe began in 1939.



THINKING ABOUT WHAT YOU'VE READ

1. The Nazis burned Helen Keller's writings because of her socialist views. Why did they find socialism threatening?
2. Which word (or words) best expresses the tone of Helen's letter
 - Threatening
 - Offensive
 - Indignant
 - Placating
 - Insulting
 - Disgusted
3. Write an open letter on an issue or a problem that troubles you. You might choose current political issues, e.g., the environment, immigration, climate change, or you might focus on an issue that divides your family or friends. Try to copy Helen's tone of righteous indignation. Righteous indignation is a way of expressing anger about mistreatment, insult, or malice of another.

