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British Women in Espionage: From Heroes to Housewives

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Abstract: World War I and World War II provided British women with the opportunity to move outside of the domestic sphere and enter the public realm of work. Women not only supported war efforts by working at the home front, but also by contributing overseas as members of British Intelligence. Secret roles placed these women in a realm of physical and moral danger. By using their sexuality to the state’s advantage, they defied traditional British gender roles, provoking a "moral crisis" upon their return. During their service in agencies such as MI5 and MI6, women were revered for their efforts. However, after the Wars’ end, the appreciation towards these women’s acts of courage was quickly discarded and replaced with an urgency to return them to their domestic roles. Elise Grandprenz, Yvonne Cormeau, Krystyna Skarbek, Vera Atkins, Louise de Bettignies and Virgina Hall are just a few of the many women whose service in British Intelligence was overlooked in postwar biographies and commemorations in order to restore gender normalities.

Keywords: British Women; Espionage; MI5; WII; WWII

During World War I and World War II, women served their country not only as nurses and factory workers, but as members of British Intelligence. Throughout their war service, these women were praised for their heroism and contributions; however, after the war, British patriarchal society only viewed them as members of the private domestic sphere. After their
service, many women continued living their lives as "enigmas," even though society was pushing them back into the role of the honest and pure housewife. These women continued to break from the domestic norm through divorce, continued secrecy (code names), and by re-telling their stories through autobiographies. Their shifts between hero and housewife are also commemorated through monuments, photos, intelligence memos, films, and also awards presented long after the Wars’ end. I will be exploring these shifts through the lives of former British Intelligence agents and members of Special Operations Elise Grandprez, Yvonne Cormeau, Krystyna Skarbek, Vera Atkins, Louise de Bettignies and Virgina Hall.

Between 1915 and 1919, more than 600 educated women at MI5 were entrusted with keeping government secrets. They had varying roles as report writers, translators, printers, messengers, chemical testers (for invisible inks), searchers, and clerks.¹ This became part of the rapid expansion of jobs available to women in the United Kingdom.² In addition to these contributions to the war effort, women also offered their labour through espionage. The image of the woman as an undercover agent had become popularly seen as the "female spy-prostitute."³ After their service in the war, this image of the woman as a "seducer" had violated British gender norms as women’s greater "womanly" attribute (virtue) was brought into question. There are two phases of the "woman spy" that can be traced as they shifted from ideal to immoral in society. First, the woman would take on the role as the seductive spy⁴ who aided in the war effort, then after the war would become the upright domestic woman who abandoned her former role in order to rejoin society.

² Ibid., 55.
³ Ibid., 144.
Even though female sexuality was seen as a key trait in slipping past enemy suspicion, as long as women Intelligence agents were seen as sexual servants of the state, they could not be professionals; as a result, their histories are marginalized. There was a fear in that the "fallen woman" could not be trusted as a citizen. This new image of the untrustworthy woman was a scapegoat that allowed men to project their post-war anxieties onto women— anxieties that their jobs would be filled by women and that their wives were possibly unfaithful during their leave, and that women overseas could be bringing venereal disease back to their homeland. Espionage was seen as foreign and corrupting work and could not fit into British society’s understanding of women’s proper roles as domestic and good-natured wives. The shift in gender roles placed anxiety on the gendered nation; the simple solution was to create a sexualized, unnatural, and improper image for the female spy.

Historical monuments are one example demonstrating how women are taken from the position of hero to domesticity. Elise Grandprez and her family worked closely with British Intelligence during World War I. They supplied information about German troops by observing territory and trains and assisted in hiding soldiers in Ardennes in eastern Belgium. Elise was an unmarried woman who spoke fluent French— a rare and valued trait in agents and lived at home with her mother until her forties. Her role in the family’s espionage work was to supervise operations, train-watch, courier, and to transcribe reports with invisible ink onto ordinary objects such as packing papers, box covers and book pages. The information would then be delivered

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5 Proctor, *Female Intelligence: Women and Espionage in the First World War*, 149.
6 Ibid., 144.
7 Ibid., 145.
8 Ibid., 112.
to the Intelligence service in Liege, and this method of sending confidential information became known as the "Grandprez network," which was successful until March of 1916, when a member of the Dieudonne Lambrecht group was caught by a German. In 1917, Elise, along with the rest of her family, were imprisoned on the charge of espionage.\textsuperscript{11} Elise and a handful of members were held in the fortress of the Chartreuse in Liege, where they were condemned to death and executed by firing squad 1917. For her service during the war, a monument was erected in Stavelot, Belgium. However, the statue did not portray her service as a female spy at all. Instead, the monument to commemorate Elise Grandprez and her companions depicts a young girl treading on a soldier’s grave.\textsuperscript{12} The design, sculpted by Maxime Real del Sarte, was chosen to depict the young woman as nurturing and caring—seen as the woman’s duty at the time—instead of her work in espionage. The shift in women being praised for their work and then forced back into the domestic role through imagery can be seen through how women who passed away are remembered, and also in surviving women’s lives after the World Wars.

Yvonne Cormeau was born on December 18\textsuperscript{th}, 1909, and was one out of fifty women brought into France by the Special Operations Executive (SOE) between 1942 and 1944.\textsuperscript{13} She was recruited into the SOE during her management of a small hotel in west London.\textsuperscript{14} One of the guests staying at the hotel was impressed by Yvonne’s “calm efficiency” and happened to have connections with the SOE. Recruited women were aware of the conditions and risks that they would be working under, but situations proved to be far worse than expected by their superiors. The roles these women played were highly gender-specific. They were communication agents

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 113.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 114.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 57.
and leadership utilizing their “good looks” in order to slip past enemy suspicion. Thirteen of the fifty women died, and all except one were killed by the Germans, but not a single member betrayed her country’s trust. Yvonne survived, and her recollections of the past sacrifices made by these women and how their post-war country saw them as mainly domestic women and no longer as heroes appear in her biography:

What I admired so much was not their courage, which I am afraid no one took for granted, but their charming, disarming, simplicity. No display of temperament, no bravado. Yet they might have been excused a little show of pride. Today, the greater number are happy wives and mothers, and the others have settled into different everyday jobs.

Women who bravely dedicated their lives to espionage during the war succumbed to society’s pressure to return to the domestic household. By doing so, they left behind the scandalous and adventurous lifestyle that came with spying for Britain. Yvonne enjoyed continuing to defy gender norms through her opinion of marriage. When asked about marriage she laughed and said, “It would ruin my career, what’s wrong? Aren’t we happy the way things are?”

Another example of how women in espionage were seen as heroes then quickly placed back into the role as housewives is illustrated by Krystyna Skarbek (cryptonym “Christine Granville”). Even to the present, Skarbek’s dedication to secrecy has led to the publication of many historical papers containing incorrect information— for example, she was coy about revealing her true age. The discrepancies originated from her escape from a mission in

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15 Pattinson, Behind Enemy Lines, 63.
16 Gleeson, They Feared No Evil: The Women of Britain’s Secret Armies 1939-45, 37.
Budapest in 1941. Sir Owen O’Malley, the British Minister to Hungary, had his staff prepare false travel documents for her and her informant Kowerski. Her name was changed to Christine Granville and her date of birth was altered. She maintained the fiction that her birth year was 1915 for the remainder of her life.\(^\text{19}\) She was denounced by a man named Jakob Alek who believed that her actions in a mission in Budapest resulted in some of his men’s deaths.\(^\text{20}\) Although both the British and the French gave her their highest accolades after the War, because of her role as a female spy and association with being "responsible" for male casualties, she continued to be viewed as a controversial character by British society and not as a hero who risked her life for her country.

Women who volunteered for Special Operations, such as the enigmatic Vera Atkins, challenged traditional expectations about gender roles. Vera volunteered for the Special Operations Executive created by Winston Churchill.\(^\text{21}\) At the time there was a fear of the "voluntary" spy. Those who seemed too eager to join the Intelligence agencies were generally seen as "crackpots" or "infiltrators" sent by the opponent.\(^\text{22}\) In the war office of Churchill’s government, staff officers resented the secrecy surrounding the Special Operations Executive, and feared that its agents were too violent and had gone against the ways of democracy that they were defending.\(^\text{23}\) Vera convinced William J. Donavan, a trusted American confidant of President Roosevelt, that the tide of the war would turn in Britain’s favour.\(^\text{24}\) She was a key factor in convincing Roosevelt’s authorization of the Allies' deployment, but her role in the

\(^\text{19}\) Ibid., 94.
\(^\text{20}\) Ibid., 97.
\(^\text{24}\) Ibid., viii.
Americans joining the Allies in the Second World War is barely mentioned if at all in British and American histories. Vera mastered several languages. She was sent on fact-finding missions to supply information to a few trusted souls in Britain. Vera was born in Bucharest with the Romanian Jewish name Vera Maria Rosenberg. The name "Vera Atkins" came from the use of her mother’s maiden name in order to avoid detection as an enemy alien. She remained anonymous as "Miss Atkins" to those in the SOE with whom she remained in contact until the SOE came under attack by postwar critics. During both her social life and wartime service she was seen as an enigma. She took after her father, Max Rosenberg, who had lived a private life. Similar to Krystyna Skarbek, her date of birth is debated by historians due to the discrepancies between the Romanian and Western calendar, as well as her maintenance of an alter persona. However, her inclination towards a life of secrecy went further; she was also described as constantly falling in love with men, but her interest lay with women. Such scandals cloaked her true identity as a secret wartime Intelligence agent. Her service like many of the other agents', was praised and recognized by the British government during the war, but was quickly dismissed and replaced with a sudden urgency to return women to the household. Atkins did receive support from MI6 until 1947 then went on to work in the civilian sector. However, the French realized Vera's extensive contributions made during the war, and awarded her the highest rank in the Legion of Honour in 1995 when she was well into her old age. The French then shamed the British into matching this long overdue recognition with a CBE in 1997. Even though the war was over and she had done as society expected of her as a woman, this did not stop her from

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25 Ibid.
26 Ibid., xi.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid., 1.
29 Ibid., 5.
maintaining the undesirable characteristics of a spy that women were not supposed to have. In
2006, classified files detailing Vera’s life from the investigation by MI5 were released by the
British national archives.30 The files reveal that even at age 75, she continued the habit of secrecy
while the public saw her as a simple housewife. This fact is apparent in a phone conversation
between herself and Bill Casey:

Bill: “Moneypenny?”

“Yes,” Vera said into the phone at her home in Winchelsea.

Bill: “Is this a good connection?”

Vera: “I hear you very well,” she replied.

Bill: “Can you come over for dinner?”

Vera: “Where?”

Bill: “New York.”31

Although they appear to be concealing important information, the document later reveals that the
conversation was simply a dinner invitation to her friend Bill's home. "Moneypenny" is a code
name featured in the James Bond novels, and Vera and Bill continued to use cryptonyms with
each other (but never the ones assigned to them during the war). Vera was determined to live the
secret lifestyle of a spy, contrary to the pressures of society to uphold her natural womanly duties
as an honest and pure caregiver. Although Vera was cautious, the information collected by the
MI5 allows us to observe the evidence that female espionage existed. Though this evidence of
female Intelligence contributions is concrete, there is still a shying away by modern historians to
include this in photographs of women in wartime.

30 Ibid., 2.
31 Ibid., 317.
Louise de Bettignies is yet another example of how women’s service during the war quickly became overshadowed by domestic duties upon their return. Louise was born on July 15th, 1880, in St. Amand, France.\(^{32}\) Before the First World War, she worked in Italy and Poland as a governess. During the early stages of the war she was approached by French and British Intelligence, but chose to work for the British because they promised a larger salary.\(^{33}\) Once she commenced work for British Intelligence, assuming the cryptonym Alice Dubois, her training included understanding codes, inks, and other important military information and tools. By February of 1915 she covered an expansive area around Lille and passed information about military emplacements, troop movement, and the location of airfields.\(^{34}\) She traveled to Britain between fifteen to twenty times, putting herself in high-risk situations to deliver the collected information. Although she was described in Intelligence memos as “brave, devoted and highly intelligent…with services to British Intelligence that are simply invaluable,”\(^{35}\) this was not how her service to her country was portrayed in her own autobiography. Her postwar biographers had instead chosen to focus on her purity, patriotism and femininity as a woman, rather than her qualities as a soldier.\(^{36}\) In Odette Hallowes’ (another female British spy) autobiography, the author states that many of these gallant women were shown as ordinary after the war, and through her book she was there to speak for them and shed light on the honour with which they had served with.\(^{37}\)

However, the popular imagery of women in espionage was highly sexual and disregarded women's abilities and actual work in wartime. Women agents in spy films portrayed how the

\(^{32}\) Proctor, Female Intelligence: Women and Espionage in the First World War, 116.  
\(^{33}\) Ibid., 117.  
\(^{34}\) Ibid., 119.  
\(^{35}\) Ibid.  
\(^{36}\) Ibid.  
female spy inherited sexual characteristics that were not appropriate for a housewife, and such
dangerous women's behaviour needed to be discarded immediately after the Wars ended. Women
have historically been defined by their fathers, husbands and states and yet were seen for their
work during the war as exceptional and independent.\textsuperscript{38} An example of this can be seen
with Virgina Hall, who was a member of the British Special Ops and later inspired an espionage film.
Virgina was educated at Harvard and wanted to join the Foreign Service. This was interrupted
when she accidentally shot her own leg on a hunting expedition, resulting in its amputation.
Although she had a prosthetic leg and a limp, it did not deter her from signing up for the British
Special Ops. During her time as a member, she passed on important military information and
trained resistance fighters.\textsuperscript{39} Virginia was the inspiration for the main "secretive" woman
character in the film \textit{Wolves at the Door}. Secrecy was portrayed in a negative light bordering on
"sneaky" and "distrustful," as the woman uses her sexuality to manipulate men. Another female
spy who inspired a film character is Krystyna Skarbek, said to be Ian Fleming's inspiration for
Vesper Lynd in \textit{Casino Royal}\textsuperscript{40} as well as Titiana Romanova in \textit{From Russia with Love}.\textsuperscript{41}

Besides the sexualized imagery that developed, there was— and still is— little
recognition that women even participated in espionage. Since the beginning of the First World
War, new opportunities for women altered their living conditions and brought about the potential
to earn a sustainable income. As a result, there was a gradual acknowledgment that women were
moving from the private sphere into the public sphere of activity.\textsuperscript{42} However, this
"acknowledgment" did not mean that this shift was accepted by all, and even to this day

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\item Proctor, \textit{Female Intelligence: Women and Espionage in the First World War}, 149.
\item Ibid.
\item James Parish, \textit{The Great Spy Pictures} (Metuchen: The Scarecrow Press, 1974), 105.
\item Ibid., 188.
\end{thebibliography}
historians tend to overlook the shift from heroic women back to housewife in their published works. For example, Diana Condell’s book *Working for Victory*? (1987) focuses on a compilation of photos featuring women’s contributions during the First World War. All of these photos show women either employed as nurses or factory workers, tending to soldiers’ graves, or in some manner caring for the community. The photos all depict women in the stereotypical light as smiling caregivers using their charm and “good looks” not for espionage, but as responsible women at home. Even though the book does not address any female participation in Intelligence during the war, it does acknowledge that for all the positions depicted in the book that seemingly appear to be dominated by women, the women were always under male supervision.\footnote{Ibid., 89.} This gendered nature of the state was continually imposed. Director of the American Office of Strategic Services Maj. Gen. William Donovan said that women silently participated in the war and their continued silent presence throughout the twentieth century was important.\footnote{Proctor, *Female Intelligence: Women and Espionage in the First World War*, 55.} Confidentiality for all members regardless of gender was important to keeping both state as well as personal members’ secrecy, but as more recent works on the World Wars reveal, women in espionage are still largely silenced and unrecognized.

In conclusion, the brave women who served British Intelligence during the First and Second World War were initially seen as heroes. During the war, they shed their alleged feminine frailty to take on the masculine role of a soldier. In doing this, they stood as figures of strength, but were also seen as dangerous for gender-bending and going against social conventions.\footnote{Ibid., 115.} Social recognition for their service was quickly replaced with an urgency for them to return to the household and put aside their wartime experiences. Through the individual cases

\footnote{Ibid., 89.}
of the women agents Elise Grandprez, Yvonne Cormeau, Krystyna Skarbek, Vera Atkins, Louise de Bettignies and Virgina Hall, monuments, autobiographies, delayed recognition for service, and photos attest to the continued secrecy in their private lives in the domestic sphere.

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