Bureaus of Ungentlemanly Warfare: Comparing the Roles of Women in the Special Operations Executive and the Office of Strategic Services During World War II

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Abstract

In 1940, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill created the Special Operations Executive. The SOE was one of the first government agencies to recruit female spies. In 1941, United States President Franklin Roosevelt commissioned the Office of Strategic Services, which also employed women. The organizations approached the concept of female agents differently. The OSS maintained female staff in domestic offices, but employed foreign women as agents. The SOE recruited women to go abroad, as they were less suspicious than men in occupied territories. The study of female staff in the OSS and the SOE allow historians to understand roles of women in espionage and compare U.S. and British involvement in World War II.

Bureaus of Ungentlemanly Warfare: Comparing the Roles of Women in the Special Operations Executive and the Office of Strategic Services During World War II

As Nazi forces drove into Western Europe at the start of World War II, it became necessary for the Allied powers to defend both their own nations and their interests. France fell to the Germans in June 1940 and was quickly split into the pro-Nazi Vichy government and a Nazi-occupied territory.[1] When the Nazi *blitz* struck London soon after, the need for defense—and offense—was magnified. As France fell to the Nazis, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill commanded Hugh Dalton, then the Minister of Economic Warfare, to "set Europe ablaze," thus, was born the Special Operations Executive (SOE).[2] Throughout the war, the SOE worked primarily in France, sabotaging machinery and transportation crucial to Germany's maintenance in the country, gathered intelligence, and disseminated propaganda.

The SOE's stringent recruiting criteria disqualified many from service in the field. Finding individuals who could speak French with a native accent and without characteristically "English" mannerisms was difficult.[3] Further, though intelligence had previously been seen as man's work, hiring men as agents would cause suspicion, as the Vichy and Nazi governments in France had required all able-bodied men to serve in the German ranks.[4] By allowing female agents, the SOE broadened its recruitment pool and benefitted from access to French wives of Englishmen living in Great Britain. Historian Michael R.D. Foot, the author of several SOE

[1] M.R.D. Foot, *Memories of an SOE Historian* (New York, NY: Pen & Sword Books Limited, 2009), xii.

[2] Ibid., vii.

[3] Maurice J. Buckmaster, *Specially Employed: The Story of British Aid to French Patriots of the Resistance* (London, UK: The Batchworth Press, 1952), 30-31.

[4] Sarah Rose, *D-Day Girls: The Spies Who Armed the Resistance, Sabotaged the Nazis, and Helped Win World War II* (New York, NY: The Crown Publishing Group, 2019), 29.

histories, estimates that of the 13,000 SOE employees, roughly 3,000 were women.[5] The SOE hired many women to be domestic wireless operators or couriers who could ride their bicycles through occupied France without arousing suspicion. However, recruits, including female agents, were also trained to carry out industrial sabotage and be deployed by parachute—a new practice in the world of international espionage.[6]

At the start of the war, Great Britain operated several centralized espionage organizations, including MI5 and MI6. The SOE joined them after France's fall to Nazi forces in June 1940. In the United States, however, no such organization existed. The State Department, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and individual military branches gathered intelligence, fought for resources, and were generally unwilling to share intelligence or resources with one another.[7] Additionally, the United States had never used large-scale espionage, and many leaders viewed spying as dishonorable and underhanded.[8]

In 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt commissioned World War I hero and successful executive William J. "Wild Bill" Donovan to establish a national intelligence agency. Inspired by the British, Donovan christened his presidential organization the Coordinator of Information (COI).[9] Other intelligence-gathering organizations, especially the FBI, disliked the COI and refused its efforts to collaborate with it.[10] However, following Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor,

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[5] M.R.D. Foot, "Was SOE Any Good?" *Journal of Contemporary History* 16, no. 1 (January 1981): 174.

[6] Buckmaster, *Specially Employed*, 19, 29-35.

[7] Rebecca Donner, *All the Frequent Troubles of Our Days: The True Story of the American Woman at the Heart of the German Resistance to Hitler* (New York, NY: Back Bay Books, 2021), 277.

[8] Patrick K. O'Donnell, *Operatives, Spies, and Saboteurs: The Unknown Story of the Men and Women of WWII's OSS* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2004), xi.

[9] Ibid., xiii.

[10] Helen Edith Parker, "Helen Edith Parker Collection," interview by Wanda C. Driver, Library of Congress, November 10, 2005, audio, 5:20, https://www.loc.gov/item/afc2001001.37867/.

Donovan began working with the Joint Chiefs of Staff to expand his organization's scope to include the Pacific Theater. With this transition, the Coordinator of Information was renamed the Office of Strategic Services (OSS). This name change also encompassed a shift in tactics from "clean," propaganda campaigns to covert "shadow" warfare.[11] Prior to the inception of the OSS, the United States held to the principle of "white" or "clean" propaganda. Intelligence staff refused to read captured documents, and engaging only in the distribution of "truthful information publicly acknowledged to be of American origin."[12] It was not until the beginning of World War II and the creation of the OSS that American intelligence work involved deception, sabotage, and the dissemination of false documents with seemingly foreign origins.

Even at this early stage, in 1942, the OSS was employing women at a relatively high rate, with 4,000 female officers out of 13,000 total personnel.[13] These women served as interrogators, interviewers, counterintelligence agents, and researchers: roles previously assigned to male personnel.[14] The women of the OSS served in leadership of some OSS branches, recruiting and interviewing new staff, cartography, and ciphering.[15] The organization's unorthodox methods unfortunately continued to provoke strife with other intelligence organizations throughout the war.

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[11] O'Donnell, *Operatives, Spies and Saboteurs,* xv.

[12] Ibid., xiii-xv.

[13] "The 'Glorious Amateurs' of OSS: A Sisterhood of Spies," Central Intelligence Agency, https://www.cia.gov/stories/story/glorious-amateurs-of-oss-sisterhood-of-spies/#:~:text=Of%20the%2013%2C000%20personnel%20that,analysis%2C%20and%20engaged%20in%20counter intelligence.

[14] Ibid.; Adelaide Margaret Hawkins, "Adelaide Margaret Hawkins Collection," interviewed by Barbara Matusow, Library of Congress, July 29, 2003, audio, 4:59, https://loc.gov/item/afc2001001.25835/.

[15] Hawkins, 00:50; Parker, 08:20; "Marion Frieswyk," Central Intelligence Agency, https://www.cia.gov/stories/story/marion-frieswyk-the-first-female-intelligence-cartographer/.

Given societal norms of the period, the SOE and the OSS operated in ways that were uncouth, unprecedented, and most of all, ungentlemanly. Sabotage, covert espionage, and the employment of women unite the history of the two organizations. However, though they often worked together to defeat their common enemies, the two spy organizations were different in many ways. The SOE's primary focus on liberating occupied France limited their influence in other occupied nations, though they still maintained a small presence in regions like Eastern Europe. The influence of the OSS spanned across the European front, and agents were often used in the Pacific theater as well.[16] The tasks assigned to female agents of either organization marked another crucial difference. While English women trained to go abroad and work in the field, American women often found themselves working in domestic offices. Understanding the SOE's and the OSS's activities through the stories of these women clearly shows the importance of their contributions to the war effort.

The Special Operations Executive

Having been formed as one of a number of intelligence organizations and very early in the war, the SOE began operations in France roughly one year after its inception.[17] Churchill was adamant that the SOE fight a war of "unconventional methods."[18] In the same vein, many sources claim that he referred to his new organization as the "Ministry of Ungentlemanly Warfare."[19] Thus, the SOE dealt mostly in sabotage to undermine the German war effort, attacking factories,

[16] Elizabeth P. McIntosh, *Sisterhood of Spies: The Women of the OSS* (New York, NY: Dell Publishing, 1998), 65.

[17] Robert Bourne-Patterson, *SOE in France, 1941-1945: An Official Account of the Special Operations Executive's 'British' Circuits in France* (New York, NY: Pen & Sword Books, 2016), xi.

[18] Winston Churchill, "CHAR 20/75/39-40," The Churchill Archives, https://www.churchillarchive.com/catalogue-item?docid=CHAR20_75_39-40.

[19] Rose, *D-Day Girls,* 27.

electrical centers, and transportation routes. It employed female agents and recruited an army of rebellious civilians ready to harass and, eventually, drive German forces out of France.

The F-Section: Case Studies on the Roles of Female Agents

The most prolific section of the SOE was the F-Section, the *F* representing France. Eventually, the SOE would merge circuits of the F-Section with French General Charles de Gaulle's Free French (R.F.-Section), which also recruited women, though at a lower rate.[20] The nearly 500 agents of F-Section, though not the only group deployed by the SOE, are the best-documented, especially for understanding the roles of the thirty-nine female agents that worked with the organization.[21] F-Section's most renowned female agent was Odette Hallowes (née Sansom). By the end of World War II, Hallowes had become the most highly decorated spy of the war due to her enthusiasm for her work, her bravery in the face of adversity, and her effectiveness in performing both assigned and unassigned duties. She was awarded the British George Cross, the Order of the British Empire (M.B.E.), the French *Chevalier de la Légion d'honneur,* and many other medals for her World War II service.[22]

Odette Sansom Hallowes: Reaching Her Full Potential. Hallowes serves as an example of a woman's potential as an SOE agent. Her life and story were not the norm, but her excellence as an agent was permitted and encouraged by her male superiors, including Captain Peter Churchill and Maurice Buckmaster, who worked closely with her throughout the war.

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[20] Jean-François Muracciole, *Les Français Libres. L'autre Résistance* (Paris, France: Éditions Tallandier, 2013), 35.

[21] Kate Vigurs, *Mission France: The True History of the Women of SOE* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021), 8.

[22] Larry Loftis, *Code Name: Lise: The True Story of the Woman Who Became WWII's Most Highly Decorated Spy* (New York, NY: Gallery Books, 2019), 265 (in footnote).

Hallowes' recruitment to the SOE was textbook. A vivacious Nazi-hating, French-born woman, Odette Sansom was the ideal agent for the SOE.[23] She was discovered by the War Office, known for its work with the SOE, after she misunderstood a radio announcement seeking photos of the French coast for a planned naval operation (that would later become D-Day). Instead of sending her old family photographs to the navy, Sansom sent them to the War Office.[24]

Upon receiving Sansom's photographs, Captain Selwyn Jepson and his colleagues searched her records for criminal activity to determine her loyalties and discover her motives for service. Jepson used the information he gathered to convince her to join the SOE. During the interview, Jepson talked with Sansom about her father's Great War death, her childhood in France, and her marriage to Roy Sansom and life with their daughters.[25] Eventually, Odette Sansom placed her daughters in boarding school and began training to serve as a courier in France with the SOE.[26] Like many other areas of her career, Sansom's deployment to occupied France also demonstrated the full potential of an SOE agent. Inclement weather, Gestapo raids, and other conditions thwarted her deployment several times. After multiple attempts to arrive by plane alongside another agent, Sansom eventually crossed the Channel in a small boat with other agents en route to France.[27]

Though trained as a courier, Sansom was recognized by her commanding officer, Captain Peter Churchill, as exemplary in her field. Her enthusiasm for and determination to complete her

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[23] Rose, *D-Day Girls,* 19-21.

[24] Odette Marie Céline Hallowes, "Hallowes, Odette Marie Céline (oral history)," interviewed by Conrad Wood, Imperial War Museums, October 31, 1986, audio, 00:44, https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80009265.

[25] Ibid., 08:00.

[26] Loftis, *Code Name: Lise,* 12, 16.

[27] Rose, *D-Day Girls,* 115.

work caused Captain Churchill to use her as an actual agent, and she eventually became a core leader of the SPINDLE network.[28] In April 1943, the SPINDLE leaders, including Sansom, were captured by the Gestapo and imprisoned. Sansom was tortured and interrogated, yet she never betrayed her colleagues nor her true identity. Posing as Churchill's wife, she was taken to Ravensbrück, an all-female concentration camp, where she was held in solitary confinement.[29] At the end of the war, a physically unrecognizable, but mentally intact Odette was freed from Ravensbrück by American soldiers who had advanced into Germany.[30]

Odette divorced Roy Sansom and married Captain Churchill after the war. However, their relationship crumbled, and she remarried once again, becoming Odette Hallowes.[31] The story of Odette Hallowes was widely publicized during her lifetime. The adventures, romance, and danger Hallowes faced during her time with the SOE were a perfect target for Hollywood movies, sensational books, and news interviews. Civilians were enamored with the sweet, gentle woman's prowess as a spy.[32] In an announcement for the biopic film, *Odette*, *The Times* (London) lauded the drama of the "bare authenticity" of Hallowes' work with the SOE.[33] Additionally, her survival of the war, Gestapo torture, and solitary confinement in Ravensbrück allowed Hallowes to speak out about the role of female agents in the organization, to expose the horrors of the Third Reich, and to encourage a new generation of women to take chances. In a 1980 interview about her service, Hallowes noted, "women can be very useful" in the field of

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[28] Penny Starns, *Odette: World War Two's Darling Spy* (Chicago, IL: The History Press, 2009), 42.

[29] "Gestapo Papers relating to Odette Churchill, Second World War," Imperial War Museums, https://www.iwm.org/uk/collections/item/object/1030008044.

[30] Loftis, *Code Name: Lise*, 230-231.

[31] Ibid., 280.

[32] "Odette Hallowes, Interview, 1980," ThamesTV, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N7oN6xSnG4Y.

[33] "Film of the Resistance Movement," *The Times*, 16 August 1949, 7.

espionage.[34] She stated that her human love of others drove her to unparalleled bravery; she "love[d] people…and if you love people, you don't ask questions. When something is needed, you do it."[35] Odette Hallowes was not a normative female SOE agent, but her work with the organization exemplifies the possibilities available to female agents.

Violette Szabo: A Common Spy. Though her story was rather abnormal, Odette Hallowes was not the only female SOE agent in France. Another storied female agent known for her bravery and strength under pressure was Violette Szabo. In Major Maurice J. Buckmaster's F-Section memoir, he describes Szabo as a "beautiful, dark-haired and olive-skinned [woman] with…porcelain clarity of face and purity of bone that one finds occasionally in the south-west of France—" the perfect Frenchwoman.[36] She had inherited these physical characteristics from her French-born mother, who also taught her to speak the language with a native accent and verbiage.[37] Buckmaster also noted a "most useful characteristic" in Szabo's ability to take on her cover identity fully, tuck away important facts and details, and later reproduce them perfectly and immediately. Her sharp mind also put her a step ahead of even Major Buckmaster, anticipating problems and asking for solutions before he ever finished explaining missions to her.[38]

No record remains describing how Szabo was recruited to the SOE, but she may have been recommended to the organization based on her work with the Auxiliary Territorial Service, where she worked from 1941 until the birth of her daughter in 1942 or by friends who already

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[34] "Odette Hallowes, Interview, 1980," 01:32.

[35] Ibid., 12:13.

[36] Buckmaster, *Specially Employed,* 103.

[37] "Who Was Violette Szabo?," Imperial War Museums, 2018.

[38] Buckmaster, *Specially Employed,* 103-106.

worked for the SOE.[39] Following an interview with Selwyn Jepson, she was trained by the SOE to be a field agent, undergoing the standard physical training, weapons instruction, and other necessary arts of espionage.[40] After suffering a sprained ankle during her first attempt at parachute training, Szabo returned to the program and passed, ready to receive her field assignment.[41] She was assigned her cover story, checked over by Buckmaster's assistant, Vera Atkins, and prepared to parachute into France. Szabo's first mission as a courier with the SOE was to work alongside Phillippe Liewer, another SOE agent, to investigate a collapsing network and do what they could to preserve agents and the network itself.[42]

Like Hallowes, Szabo also fell victim to inclement weather that delayed her plane to the heart of France and, according to Buckmaster's account, significantly altered her mission.[43] Successful completion of her first mission made Szabo an excellent candidate for arranging a new espionage network. On 7 June 1944, only one day after D-Day, agents Phillippe Liewer and Violette Szabo parachuted into France, and the two organized a new circuit to replace Liewer's previously collapsed network. Most sources credit Szabo with two missions into France with the SOE, but Buckmaster's memoir combines the two, as he attributes only one continuous mission to her. Though she landed in France twice, and secondary sources tend to separate the two

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[39] Susan Ottoway, *Violette Szabo: The Life That I Have* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2002), 30-50.

[40] As Szabo deployed to France in 1944, she left her two-year-old daughter, Tania, in the care of her maternal grandparents. The Bushells remained Tania's caretakers after Szabo's death. Tania was presented with her mother's awards, the British George Cross and French *Croix de Guerre*, which she often wore with pride, along with her father's awards, throughout her childhood. (Ottoway)

[41] Ottoway, *Violette Szabo*, 54-65.

[42] Ibid.,77.

[43] Buckmaster, *Specially Employed,* 106-107.

landings, it is possible that, from Buckmaster's point of view, the two landings were part of one overarching mission.[44]

Regardless of the number of missions completed by Szabo, historians agree on what occurred during her second stint in France. Sent separately from Liewer as a courier to Jacque Dufour, also called 'Anastasie,' the two made their way into the French countryside and were stopped by German soldiers at a roadblock. Rather than taking the Nazis' questions, Dufour immediately began firing on the soldiers, and Szabo followed suit. Dufour was able to escape with relative ease, but Szabo was taken captive by the Germans and interrogated harshly as to the whereabouts of her leader, who unbeknownst to her, was hiding in a haystack nearby. Szabo was briefly held in a prison in Limoges, but she was quickly transferred to the Fresnes prison that held many of the SOE's female agents.[45]

Accounts from survivors of Ravensbrück indicate that Szabo was deported to the women's camp on 10 August 1944 and killed in the spring of 1945.[46] Though the accuracy of Maurice Buckmaster's narrative regarding Violette Szabo is questionable, his account verifies that Szabo was killed by firing squad, though not tortured as were Odette Hallowes and other agents. The chapter of his memoir, entitled 'Violette,' ends with a statement by Buckmaster that notes the commonality of Szabo's experience, writing, "it is the story of thousands of brave Frenchwomen who refused to buy their lives temporarily by giving away a colleague…only those who endured the hell of Ravensbrueck, of Belsen, or of Dachau, can know the whole truth."[47]

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[44] Ibid., 83.

[45] Ibid., 103-117.

[46] Ibid., 120.

[47] Buckmaster, *Specially Employed,* 114.

Vera Atkins: The Powerhouse of the SOE. Another well-known, female SOE employee, Vera Atkins, provides a more normative view of women in espionage during World War II. She was known for her work with Major Buckmaster.[48] Most literature surrounding the women of the SOE mention Vera Atkins in passing, and often only in the context of her work supporting field agents like Odette Sansom. However, her work with the SOE was vital, and her role as Buckmaster's secretarial assistant allowed the F-Section to run smoothly.[49] In an interview with the British Imperial War Museum (IWM), Atkins recalls her secretarial training, taken at Triangle College following her recruitment to the SOE.[50] She had been recruited by way of an interview request letter, which contained no further details than that the interview would provide the opportunity for her to assist with the war effort.

Once vetted by her interviewer, Atkins was assigned to a falsely named government office, which was actually the SOE, and was commanded to report to the renowned 64 Baker Street building.[51] Atkins was partnered as a secretarial assistant to two notable SOE leaders, then Captain Maurice Buckmaster and civilian leader Robert Bourne-Patterson, both of whom would become major historians for the SOE following the war. She split her time between the two men until the end of 1941, when Buckmaster was promoted to serve as head of the F-Section.[52] Remaining as Buckmaster's assistant, Atkins was promoted as well to a position as an officer in the SOE, a moment she notes with pride in her interview with the IWM.[53] As Buckmaster's

[48] Vera Atkins, "Atkins, Vera May (Oral history)," interviewed by Conrad Wood, Imperial War Museums, January 6, 1987, audio, 21:20, https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80009338.

[49] Ibid., 16:15.

[50] Ibid., 11:40.

[51] Ibid., 13:00.

[52] Ibid., 14:20.

[53] Ibid., 22:50.

official secretarial assistant, Atkins became the heartbeat of the F-Section and was loved by female field agents. Before deploying to occupied territories, agents' pockets were searched by Vera and any item of British origin was removed, from coins to English matchboxes and clothing tags.

Atkins' everyday duties included gathering intelligence from foreign newspaper headlines and field reports and pasting them together in one file. She also served as the send-off and welcoming party for agents departing for the field or returning home from assignments. Outside of her prescribed duties, Atkins forged strong relationships with her agents, sending secret messages through the BBC into France to give them family updates, such as the birth of a child, and witnessing important document-signing, like the agents' estates.[54] Accounts of many SOE agents' work in France mention Atkins' work; she filed and maintained Violette Szabo's last will and testament and traveled with her to the plane that would take her to her final resting place, and at the end of the war, searched for months to discover Szabo's fate.[55] All of this she did while hiding her own secrets—she was a Romanian immigrant and a Jew, two characteristics often scorned in England during the 20th Century.[56] Atkins' work in the SOE was critical to the success of the F-Section. Her intensely detail-oriented searches, her support of agents, and her care for the humanity of her agents and their families are what made Atkins "the soul of the SOE."[57]

Atkins was something of a powerhouse in her role as secretary to Major Buckmaster. However, the more traditionally feminine connotation of secretarial work and the domestic,

[54] Rose, *D-Day Girls,* 53.

[55] Ottoway, *Violette Szabo,* 81-82, 100, 148-153.

[56] Atkins, 00:20.

[57] Rose, *D-Day Girls,* 63.

mostly office-bound nature of her work allows her to represent a typical female employee of the SOE. Agent stories of those like Odette Sansom or Violette Szabo, though important, do not reflect the normative role that women played in the organization. Vera Atkins, as one of the most notable SOE women, provides a balancing element to create a more well-rounded and socially reflective narrative regarding women's involvement in the SOE's French Section.

The SOE Beyond Vichy France

The F-Section has been the most-studied section of the SOE, and it has been the most celebrated in film and television. The easily sensationalized stories of the women of the F-Section often overshadow the equally brave, but sometimes more complicated, involvement of female agents working in other regions. However, the SOE worked in other nations in Europe as well. Period documents indicate that the SOE maintained a presence across Eastern Europe and the Middle East. The SOE Mid-East Mission was responsible for countries and areas like Romania, Bulgaria, Albania, Greece, Iraq, Syria, Palestine, and Egypt.[58]

Though there were not as many female agents in Eastern Europe as in occupied France, there is evidence that the SOE employed women in these nations. One photograph, included in a *National Geographic* article on the women of the SOE, shows the author's father serving with the SOE in the mountains of Greece. In the photograph, Major Philip Worrall is joined by twin

[58] SOE/OSS Policy and Liaison: Mediterranean Group: Top Level Planning of Activities, 1941-1944, The National Archives (Kew, United Kingdom), https://go.gale.com/ps/retrieve.do?tabID=Manuscripts&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&searchResultsType=MultiTab&retrievalId=07809a43-a0ec-431b-b5bc-5c0fd8c130cb&hitCount=835&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm&currentPosition=1&docId=GALE%7CIVTGBT897010685&docType=Government+document&sort=Relevance&contentSegment=ZDDO-MOD1&prodId=GDCS&pageNum=1&contentSet=GALE%7CIVTGBT897010685&searchId=R2&userGroupName=vic_liberty&inPS=true.

girls from the city of Athens, whom the author claims worked as translators for the SOE agent.[59] Other accounts speak of the role of female agents in North Africa and in Italy, primarily, it seems as First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (FANY) employees of the SOE rather than as agents.[60]

In the Middle East, one female agent, Hannah Szenes, displayed her bravery and has been immortalized by historians for her work with the SOE. Born in Budapest, Hungary, Szenes was notably only one of a few Jewish agents recruited by the SOE.[61] Cooperating with the SOE, the Palestinian Palmach was an offshoot of a Jewish defense organization called Haganah, which aimed to protect the Palestinian Jewish community from both Arab attacks and Axis incursions during World War II.[62] Szenes was a member of the Palmach in 1943, when the organization collaborated with the SOE to use Jewish agents to establish networks across Europe, and eventually, to assist other Jews escaping Nazi-occupied territories, including Szenes' Hungary. After interviewing with British agents in Palestine and local Haganah leadership, Szenes was trained as a paratrooper and entered Eastern Europe on behalf of the SOE.[63]

At age twenty-two, Szenes parachuted with another agent into occupied Yugoslavia, a drop that would pose less risk than landing directly in an at-risk Hungary.[64] With the goal of assisting in the exodus of Hungarian Jews before Nazi forces overtook the country, Szenes and

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[59] "Sister Secret Agents in World War II Fought Alongside Men," *National Geographic*, https://www.nationalgeographic.co.uk/history-and-civilisation/2017/11/sister-secret-agents-in-world-war-ii-fought-alongside-men.

[60] Pamela Mary Niven, "Niven, Pamela Mary Catherole (Oral history)," interviewed by Roderick Bailey Imperial War Museums, audio 26:15, https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80024201.

[61] Candice F. Ransom, *So Young To Die: The Story of Hannah Senesh* (New York, NY: Scholastic, 1993), 7-9.

[62] Stephen Russell Cox, "Britain and the Origin of Israeli Special Operations: SOE and PALMACH during the Second World War," *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 8, no. 1 (2015): 61-62.

[63] Ransom, *So Young*, 84.

[64] Ibid., 91.

her Palmach team were devastated when they received news of the German invasion of Hungary on 19 March 1944, only days after their landing in Yugoslavia, closing the border to the Palestinian agents.[65] Following this disappointment, Szenes became disenchanted with the SOE's methods, and eventually, she crossed the Hungarian border with her parachute partner and a group of miscellaneous partisans with whom she had connected during her small Yugoslavian missions.[66]

Today's sources conflict on exactly when Szenes was captured by collaborating Hungarian authorities. Nevertheless, the agent did not spend a significant amount of time in enemy territory before she was interrogated and tortured by Hungarian leaders for information about the SOE and British intelligence.[67] The Hungarians coerced Szenes to confess her involvement with the SOE and Palmach, thus implicating her beaten and tortured colleagues who had remained. She was further baited by the presence of her mother, whom she had left behind in Hungary after her decision to move to Palestine.[68] Szenes faced trial for treason in Budapest, and was eventually killed by a firing squad, which she faced unblindfolded, on 7 November 1944.[69] Though brave in the face of danger, Szenes sold out her colleagues and caused the arrests of her comrades. Her countenance in the face of death was inspiring, but unnecessary. Had she followed the prescribed plan of the SOE, perhaps Szenes would have lived long enough to be awarded for her bravery rather than punished.

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[65] Marc Vargo, *Women of the Resistance: Eight Who Defied the Third Reich* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2012), 158.

[66] Ibid., 168-170.

[67] Judith Tydor Baumel, "Hannah Szenes (Senesh)," *Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women*, 31 December 1999, https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/szenes-hannah.

[68] Vargo, *Resistance*, 172-174.

[69] Baumel, "Hannah Szenes."

The Office of Strategic Services

Formed in 1941, the OSS was born of a desire to eventually consolidate American intelligence into a centralized institution. The organization was founded by a World War I hero and lawyer named William J. Donovan, who earned himself the nickname "Wild Bill" during his Great War service.[70] The OSS was composed of several branches. Intelligence Services was the most effective. Within Intelligence services were the Secret Intelligence (SI) branch, a counter-espionage branch (X2), and Research and Analysis (R&A).[71] In contrast to the women of the SOE, the OSS generally did not send female agents into occupied territory on the European nor the Pacific fronts. However, the work of female OSS employees laid the foundation for women in American intelligence, and as the OSS was converted into the Central Intelligence Agency, women were involved with the new agency, at least in domestic offices.

Understanding the Role of Women in the OSS: Case Studies of Female Agents

Consistent with military recruiting during World War II, agent testimonies indicate that the OSS began hiring women to release American men from their office-bound administrative duties so that they could serve as field agents or in the conventional military. Women often served stateside, while their male counterparts took on the dangerous tasks of overseas espionage, sabotage, and propaganda distribution. Contextually, this meant that while thousands of men completed OSS parachute training, a mere few dozen female agents were able to pass through this stage of preparation. The women who were sent overseas as spies were often the only women in their group or unit.[72] While the normative narrative of a woman in the OSS is

[70] O'Donnell, *Operatives, Spies, and Saboteurs,* xiii.

[71] "Secret Agents, Secret Armies: The Short Happy Life of The OSS," The National WWII Museum, https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/wwii-secret-agents-the-oss.

[72] O'Donnell, *Operatives, Spies, and Saboteurs,* 12-13, 231.

unexciting in comparison to the SOE, their work for the organization likely impacted the war effort. However, there are several notable female staff members who encapsulate the bravery of women in the OSS.

Betty MacDonald: The Bravery of American Women. Elizabeth "Betty" MacDonald is regarded as one of the most successful, and renowned, female OSS agents. Notable for her work in the Pacific Theater, she was also the author of the popular OSS history, *Sisterhood of Spies*, chronicling the ever-evolving role of female field agents in America's intelligence operations. During the Second World War, MacDonald worked as an OSS disinformation specialist, and she designed campaigns to undermine Japanese morale in the Pacific.

MacDonald and her husband at the time, Alex MacDonald, were both deeply intrigued by Eastern culture in the years leading up to the war and had both pursued careers as foreign correspondents. Living in Hawaii at the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor, Betty MacDonald's newspaper piece on the tragedy gained her a promotion, and she was transferred to Washington, DC to write a women's column covering things like rationing and shortages, and instructing American women how to deal with these uncertainties. Accounts conflict on MacDonald's recruitment to the OSS, but they agree that it was based on her study of and experience with Japanese and other East Asian cultures. Her recruiter remains unnamed across multiple sources, and his occupation varies depending on the narrative.[73]

MacDonald was assigned to work in the Far Eastern section of Morale Operations (MO), where she engaged in psychological warfare, writing pamphlets about the starvation and suffering of Japanese women and children to undermine the loyalty of enemy soldiers to

[73] Gene Santoro, "At War With The Enemy's Mind," *World War II* 28, no. 1 (May-June 2013): 20; Ann Todd, *OSS Operation Black Mail: One Woman's Covert War Against The Imperial Japanese Army* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2017), 38-39.

Emperor Hirohito.[74] Her work also included designing these pamphlets to appear as though they originated in Japan, something called "black" propaganda, which was pioneered by the OSS. Previously, the United States had only engaged in "white" propaganda, distributing literature to their own troops and civilians in order to boost morale.[75]

MacDonald's training taught her how to trail a target, to master a false identity, and how to use a weapon.[76] She was trained to shoot a gun and to use the OSS's specially-designed, baseball-shaped hand grenades that were easier to throw than standard-issue grenades.[77] MacDonald was also evaluated under interrogation, so OSS leadership could understand her responses in difficult situations, should she be captured by enemy soldiers or agents.[78] Her first operation, Project Black Mail, was the result of a captured mailbag containing already-censored postcards and letters home from Japanese troops. MacDonald and other members of MO worked to erase the messages, replacing them with cries of desperation.[79] MO also rewrote letters both from Japanese troops home and from women and children on the home front. These "letters" from home were sent full of gossip and veiled criticisms of the Japanese loyalty, subtly undermining a perceived "single-minded adoration of the emperor."[80]

In early August 1945, MacDonald completed her final mission with the OSS and MO, sending a black propaganda broadcast across Japan, predicting a made-up catastrophe that would soon strike the nation. Unfortunately, this broadcast came only a few days before the atomic-

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[74] Elizabeth P. McIntosh, "Interview with Elizabeth McIntosh," interviewed by Leslie Sewell, Veterans History Project, n.d., video, 08:05, https://www.loc.gov/item/afc2001001.30838/.

[75] Santoro, "At War," 20-21.

[76] McIntosh, "Interview," 14:45.

[77] Ibid., 8:05.

[78] Santoro, "At War," 21.

[79] Todd, *Operation Black Mail*, 77-79.

[80] Ibid., 80, 81-85.

bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.[81] Elizabeth MacDonald's last mission of the war ended in 1945 amidst great chaos, as MO received a harsh scolding for inadvertently having "almost blown [a] top-secret mission."[82] In late 1945, MacDonald left the Pacific theater, flying from Asia to Africa, and finally she returned to Washington, DC and her career as a journalist.[83] Her husband chose to stay behind in Burma, a decision which the caused their post-war divorce.[84] She married again upon her return to the United States, but her second husband died in 1958.[85] In 1962, she married Frederick McIntosh and became Elizabeth "Betty" McIntosh, the name under which she published *Sisterhood of Spies*.[86]

Maria Gulovich: The North Star of The OSS. The story of Maria Gulovich is one that exemplifies the OSS's use of foreign individuals to accomplish American purposes in Europe during World War II. Born in Slovakia, Gulovich was educated to be a teacher, a career she pursued for a brief period before the war.[87] At the age of 23, Gulovich's sister asked her to hide escaping Jews as the Nazi regime tightened its grip on her homeland in 1944. She joined the Slovak underground resistance, and due to her fluency in Russian, German, Hungarian, Slovak, and English, was well-respected until the collapse of the resistance group. Though composed of mostly Slovak partisans, the resistance was led by communist Russian military leaders. As the Slovak resistance crumbled around her, Gulovich encountered a group of OSS agents who

[81] Santoro, "At War," 21.

[82] Todd, *Operation Black Mail,* 77-79.

[83] Ibid., 190-191.

[84] McIntosh, "Interview," 18:50.

[85] Santoro, "At War," 21.

[86] McIntosh, "Collection," 1:30.

[87] Dennis McClellan, "Maria Gulovich Liu dies at 87; helped American agents during World War II," *Los Angeles Times,* 1 October 2009, https://www.latimes.com/local/obituaries/la-me-maria-gulovich-liu1-2009oct01-story.html.

recruited her to serve as an interpreter and a guide to the men as they completed their work in Slovakia.[88] She guided this group for roughly two months as they crossed the dangerous, mountainous terrain of the Slovakian border in a blizzard en route to Hungary, where they were safe from Nazi patrols.[89]

Unfortunately, the mission, codenamed DAWES, went awry, and the twenty members of the group dwindled. On 7 November 1944, for example, six agents were captured by German patrols as they sought food, and the remaining members barely escaped.[90] Suffering from severe frostbite, Gulovich almost lost her leg to gangrene and was treated by an Associated Press correspondent who was part of the group. Soon after, two of Gulovich's commanders were captured by the Germans as a result of a letter written by a female colleague which betrayed the two and placed them in harm's way.[91] After only a short reprieve, most of the remaining members of the DAWES team, along with many other OSS agents, were captured during a surprise German patrol raid on 26 December 1944.[92]

Historians differ in their telling of the raid, but all agree that Gulovich had left the raided building and was further up the mountain as she watched as her friends were rounded up and arrested or shot on sight. The remaining two OSS agents, two British agents, and Gulovich evaded the notice of the raiding Germans and escaped into the mountains once again for a final attempt to reach Hungary. Gulovich suffered from a second bout of frostbite as she and her group sought refuge following their escape. The agents eventually found a deserted mine, where

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[88] Elizabeth P. McIntosh, *Sisterhood of Spies* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1998), 155-157.

[89] "The Indomitable Maria Gulovich," Central Intelligence Agency, https://www.cia.gov/stories/story/the-indomitable-maria-gulovich/.

[90] McIntosh, *Sisterhood*, 158.

[91] Ibid., 159-162.

[92] McClellan, "Maria Gulovich Liu."

they hid until they received word that the Soviet army had liberated the region.[93] However, the American agents soon realized that their new enemy would be the Soviet KGB and Soviet sympathizers in her homeland, Slovakia. Following their emergence from the mine, the group was taken in by the KGB, and throughout a series of interrogations, Gulovich maintained the cover of herself and her colleagues. She was the first OSS operative behind Soviet lines.[94]

Discovering her Slovakian citizenship, the KGB nearly held Gulovich as a political prisoner. Her quick legal marriage to British citizen, Lieutenant Guilliam Davis allowed Gulovich to escape being retained in Slovakia.[95] Gulovich was also detained in Budapest, but she arranged her escape along with three other women with the help of Sergeant Steve Catlos, who alerted American authorities and brought Gulovich and the other women to safety. Briefly stopping in Czechoslovakia to visit her family, Gulovich emigrated to the America in order to pursue further education. Impressed by stories of Gulovich's bravery, head of the OSS, William Donovan, arranged her entry to the United States.[96] Donovan later honored Gulovich with the Bronze Star for her bravery during the war. Maria Gulovich became a United States citizen in 1952.[97]

Marion Frieswyk: Research and Analysis. While a few female OSS agents served as field agents to sabotage Nazi infrastructure, guide other agents to safety, or engage in propaganda campaigns, the majority stayed stateside and manned the offices left vacant by male

[93] McIntosh, *Sisterhood*, 164.

[94] Ibid., 165.

[95] Ibid., 165-166.

[96] Ibid., 166-167.

[97] "Indomitable Maria Gulovich."

agents leaving the country. One of these women was Marion Frieswyk, and she worked for the Research and Analysis (R & A) branch of the OSS's stateside office.

In general, R & A served to "fill the void of current intelligence that would enable military authorities to deal most effectively with foreign resources."[98] By design, the R & A branch was composed of academics: from philosophers and historians to geographers and scientists, and their job was to debate the efficacy of intelligence and suggest actions based on their findings. Using maps, photographs, census data, field reports, academic journals, newspaper clippings, and other social data, the R&A agents drew conclusions about specific regions of the world (including both Europe and the Orient) that would aid in tactical improvements for military operations in each theater of World War II.[99]

As an OSS cartographer, Marion Frieswyk worked with R&A geography teams to design maps that Allied militaries would use to make tactical and operational plans. Frieswyk was a founding member of R&A, and the first American woman to work as an intelligence cartographer. She was one of only a few female cartographers working in the OSS for the duration of the war.[100] Intelligent and suited to her position in the Map Division's Cartography Section, Frieswyk was part of a team that would create a new system of map production unique to the OSS that allowed cartographers to produce higher quality maps at a much quicker rate.[101] Throughout World War II, she honed her craft, eventually creating three dimensional topographic maps as well as customized maps, a concept that had emerged only a few years

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[98] Barry Katz, *Foreign Intelligence: Research and Analysis in the Office of Strategic Services, 1942-1945* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 66.

[99] Trevor J. Barnes, "Geographical Intelligence: American Geographers and Research and Analysis in the Office of Strategic Services 1941-1945," *Journal of Historical Geography* 32, no. 1(January 2006): 152.

[100] "Marion Frieswyk."

[101] Ibid.

before, and one that was pioneered by one of her supervisors. This contribution likely allowed the Allied powers to devise new military plans at a much faster rate, as geographic data became more readily available.[102]

Marion Frieswyk married her colleague, Henry Frieswyk in 1943. At the time of her employment, the ratio of male to female cartographers was roughly two to one.[103] At the end of the war, Marion Frieswyk remained with the cartography division of the then-dissolved OSS, and eventually, she joined the CIA, resuming her role as an intelligence cartographer.[104] She remained with her husband until his death, leaving her position with the CIA to stay by his side as he was transferred to different intelligence offices throughout his career.[105]

The Differing Roles of the Women of the SOE and OSS: A Comparative Analysis

After reviewing several case studies of women's roles in both the SOE and the OSS, one can make general observations about both organizations. While the roles of women in either organization were similar in many ways, comparing the differences between the two allows historians to understand some differences between the United States and Great Britain in the war. Additionally, one can draw conclusions about the overarching societal views of women that may have influenced the expectations of American and British women who took on positions as intelligence agents. In order to fully understand the difference in the women of the SOE versus the OSS, one must first understand the general differences in operations between the two. From there, it is possible to compare the roles of female employees, and understand the influence of these female agents on the societies from whence they were recruited.

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[102] Katie Sanders, "The Women Whose Secret Work Helped Win World War II," *New York Times,* 6 March 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/06/magazine/intelligence-world-war-ii-oss-women.html.

[103] Ibid.

[104] "Marion Frieswyk."

[105] Sanders, "Women Heroes."

The SOE and the OSS: Operational Differences

In Great Britain, the SOE was primarily designed to "set Europe ablaze," liberating occupied territories, and funding, arming, and assisting underground resistance organizations within occupied Europe.[106] Conversely, the OSS was designed to consolidate and expand American intelligence to prevent another future attack like what occurred at Pearl Harbor. It also encompassed a shift from "white" propaganda to Betty McIntosh's "black" propaganda designed to disorient the enemy.[107] Additionally, the OSS was divided into more well-defined branches that generally remained separated than the SOE, which contained more fluid branches that often interacted and shared staff.[108]

Another key difference in the SOE and the OSS were their respective proximities to the center of the fighting. The SOE was merely kilometers away from the most dangerous parts of Europe, across the English Channel from Vichy France and Nazi-occupied Europe. Meanwhile, though the United States was attacked by Japan, the majority of U.S. territory was far removed from the realities of war. Despite the geographic separation, Americans' zeal to support the war effort was evident in the influx of women in intelligence. After the war, some Americans also glamourized the work of OSS agents, especially that of female field agents, but civilians were generally unaware of the actual situations faced by OSS staff until after the war.[109] Based on historical evidence, it seems that the OSS preferred to employ foreign women as field agents rather than endangering American women. This likely also stemmed from a lack of linguistic

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[106] Rose, *D-Day Girls,* 27-28.

[107] O'Donnell, *Operatives, Spies, and Saboteurs,* xii-xiii.

[108] Ibid., xvi.

[109] "Strategic Services," *New York Times,* 20 September 1945, 22; "'O.S.S,' War Spy Thriller, With Alan Ladd, Miss Fitzgerald in Leading Roles, Makes Its Appearance at the Gotham." *New York Times,* 27 May 1946, 26.

diversity and an unfamiliarity with foreign culture that could be easily bypassed by recruiting agents from their home nations.[110]

The SOE's proximity to the heart of the war caused a great desire in Britons to take up arms and join the fight. Many British citizens were affected, however indirectly, by Hitler's bloodlust, and they often harbored deep resentment for the Third Reich. Londoners, especially, felt deeply the impact of Nazi campaigns, as they had lived through the Battle of Britain. Finally, French expatriates or French-born British subjects especially loathed Hitler and his attacks on both their motherland and their adopted home. Some who had fled France saw the SOE as an opportunity to exact revenge on the Third Reich for their brutal conquest of France or on the Vichy government for their quick capitulation. Odette Sansom, for example, was furious when her country was overtaken, and her loathing of Hitler fueled her involvement in the SOE.[111] Similarly, the death of Violette Szabo's husband, Etienne, sparked in her a hatred of Nazi Germany that carried her to the SOE to do "whatever it took… to avenge her husband's death."[112]

Studying the Effects of Female Agents on American and British War Efforts

Within the general operational differences between the SOE and the OSS, it is possible to take a narrower view to compare their uses of female agents. The OSS was notable for its use of women in their stateside offices, like R & A and X2, the counterespionage branch. When women did go abroad, they were typically assigned to primarily male cohorts and often were the only female agents present in a given situation.[113] Though many women travelled overseas to serve with the OSS, stories like that of Betty McIntosh indicate that American-born women were still

[110] O'Donnell, *Operatives, Spies, and Saboteurs,* xvii.

[111] Rose, *D-Day Girls,* 20.

[112] Ottoway, *Violette,* 43.

[113] O'Donnell, *Operatives, Spies, and Saboteurs,* 231-232.

relegated to paper-based, academic work rather than the dangers of sabotage or espionage. Naturally, there were exceptions to this trend, but the normative experience of a female OSS agent was the experience of an academic office job. Due to the risks of a career in intelligence, American women were required to complete weapons training, but rarely was this training put to use. In the words of General Donovan, the women of the OSS were the "invisible apron strings of an organization that touched every theater of war."[114]

There is also something to be said for the progressive nature of the British approach. Sending female agents to the field was risky and unprecedented: the SOE was one of the first governmental agencies to train and deploy female agents in a manner equal to their male counterparts.[115] The British method of female espionage challenged societal perceptions of womanhood by highlighting the unique female perspective, feminine strength, and the ability of many women to succeed in a previously masculine field. British women were recruited to be female agents, as German conscription policies created an environment in which civilian men wandering the streets of Paris or Budapest would garner suspicion. They also took on domestic office work, allowing men to enlist in the armed forces in droves.

The SOE was intentional in its recruitment of women, gathering French expatriates, Englishwomen educated in France, Canada, or Belgium, and recruiting female nationals from other underground networks, like Hannah Szenes. The desperation of Britain to defend her shores dictated the use of female agents in the SOE. Each woman recruited was required to sign a waiver testifying that she understood the consequences and severity of killing and dying.[116] In

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[114] Katz, *Foreign Intelligence*, 25.

[115] Kathryn J. Atwood, *Women Heroes of World War II: 26 Stories of Espionage, Sabotage, Resistance, and Rescue,* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2011), 57.

[116] Rose, *D-Day Girls*, 29.

spite of an initial lack of confidence in the capability of women to fight and die for their country, the SOE treated men and women as equals. In this, the two organizations were quite similar, as both the OSS and SOE opened the doors for women to enter careers in intelligence, with past members joining post-war agencies, such as the CIA.[117] Both male and female agents were subjected to the same expectations and were evaluated in training and in the field on equal footing.[118]

Conclusion

The female agents of the SOE were celebrated in adaptations of their stories like *Odette* (1952), *Carve Her Name With Pride* (1958), and *A Call To Spy* (2019) while the women of the OSS were represented by fictionalized, romanticized characters in films like *O.S.S.* (1956).[119] Films about the SOE were predominantly based on factual stories: Odette Hallowes, Violette Szabo, and other female field agents. The women of the OSS remain largely in obscurity, unknown by the American public, with few notable examples like Betty McIntosh, who is not widely recognized. The role of female heroes in espionage changed warfare forever, opening the door for women like Frieswyk to continue working in intelligence, even after World War II.[120]

The work and bravery of agents like Hallowes, Szabo, Gulovich, and McIntosh display the full potential of female strength, proving the physical and mental prowess that women are

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[117] "Marion Frieswyk."

[118] SOE/OSS Policy and Liaison: London Group, 1943-1945, The National Archives (Kew, United Kingdom), https://gogale.com/ps/retrieve.do?tabID=Manuscripts&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&searchResultsType=MultiTab&retrievalId=83b0bf81-20ef-45be-bd5e-542929f63723&hitCount=835&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm&currentPosition=2&docID=GALE%7CIURUBX689983158&docType=Government+document&sort=Relevance&contentSegment=ZDDO-MOD1&prodId=GDCS&pageNum=1&conentSet=GALE%7CIURUBX689985158&searchId=R2&userGroupName=vic_liberty&inPS=true&aty=ip.

[119] "'O.S.S.' War Spy Thriller, With Alan Ladd, Miss Fitzgerald in Leading Roles, Makes Its Appearance at the Gotham," *New York Times*, 27 May 1946, 26.

[120] "Marion Frieswyk."

capable of demonstrating. Behind the scenes, women like Atkins and Frieswyk created environments conducive to military success with their innovative methods and determined attitudes. Beyond these few agent profiles lie the stories of other female operatives who worked tirelessly, experienced great physical and mental suffering, were doubted by their supervising officers, and in many cases, gave their lives for the service of their countries. Despite their differences, the roles of female agents in both the SOE and the OSS opened doors as the world entered a new era, one of opportunity for the brave women of both Great Britain and the United States.

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