

Band of Sisters:

Gendered Roles for Women Agents in the Strategic Operations Executive During World War II

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They were spies and saboteurs trained as cryptographers, cartographers, and analysts. They were masters in communication, leadership, and disguise. They were the women agents of the Strategic Operations Executive with one mission: to ‘set Europe ablaze.’ Women undertook a wide variety of work in attempts to do their bit to help their country during World War II. Their work followed a natural progression from peacetime jobs linked to care or service compatible with the conceptions of femininity and womanhood. British society could not contemplate the idea of putting women in dangerous positions. However, in 1942 the Strategic Operations Executive’s F Section¹ recruited its first women secret agents. These agents were trained in guerilla warfare and were the few women among Western Allies to serve in combative roles behind enemy lines to establish a web of resistance groups in every European occupied country. The women agents were told that the only crime that they must never commit was being caught, which was the fate of only fifteen women from the F Section. The agents of the F Section not only contributed to an important role in intelligence during World War II, but they also broke through the gender and cultural barriers that were placed by the British society. Even though gender barriers were broken, there were still gendered differences that are evident. These gendered differences can be seen by examining the recruitment and training processes,

¹ The F Section of the SOE was the section that was placed in France to aid the French resistance networks to sabotage the German Nazi forces during the occupation. This was the largest section of the SOE during World War Two.

motivations for joining, mission roles, and sacrifices of the SOE F Section women agents during their clandestine operations in Occupied France.²

In 1940 the Nazi forces made their way through Europe, occupying Poland, Czechoslovakia, Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium, and France. Great Britain stood alone, guarding its coasts against the threats of a Nazi juggernaut³ that cast a dark shadow over the country. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill gave a speech, referred to as the “Their Finest Hour”⁴ speech, to the House of Commons explaining that the Battle of Britain was inevitable. He explained how the people of the British Empire needed to assume their duties to protect themselves and “Christian civilization.” The Battle of Britain lasted from July 10 to October 31, 1940. The skies over London were filled with the Royal Air Force (hereinafter

² The leading secondary sources on the origins of the SOE and the stories women secret agents of the F section in France include Beryl E. Escott, *The Heroines of SOE: Women in France F Section* (Gloucestershire: The History Press, 2010); Gordon Thomas and Greg Lewis, *Shadow Warriors of World War II: The Daring Women of the OSS and SOE* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press Inc., 2017); Marcus Binney, *The Women Who Lived for Danger: The Agents of the Special Operations Executive* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2002); Juliette Pattinson, “‘Passing unnoticed in a French crowd’: the passing performances of British SOE agents in Occupied France,” *National Identities* 12, no.13 (September 2010) 291-308; Juliette Pattinson, “‘The thing that made me hesitate...’: re-examining gendered intersubjectivities in interviews with British secret war veterans” *Women’s History Review* 20, no.2 (April 2011) 245-263; Lorie Charlesworth, Shompa Lahiri, “Clandestine Mobilities and Shifting Embodiments: Noor-un-nisa Inayat Khan and the Special Operations Executive, 1940-1944,” *Gender & History* 19, no. 2 (August 2007) 305-323; Patricia DelGiorno, “Crossing Borders: Women Agents of Britain’s Special Operations Executive (SOE) in the Second World War” (PhD diss., Stony Brook University 2014); Kate Vigurs, “Handbags to hand grenades: preparing women for work behind the lines in Occupied France” *Women’s History Magazine* 76 (Autumn 2014) 23-29; Kelly Keith, “More than Just a Pretty Face: The Women of the SOE and the ISS During World War II” (master’s thesis, College of Bowling Green State University, 2013); and Deirdre Osborne, ‘I do not know about politics or governments... I am a housewife’: The Female Secret Agent and the Male War Machine in Occupied France (1942-5)” *Women: A Cultural Review* 17 (August 2006) 42-64.

³ A massive inexorable force, campaign, movement, or object that crushes whatever is in its path.

⁴ The speech can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G4BVzYGeF0M>. Churchill delivered this speech on June 18, 1940.

referred to as RAF) fighting against the Luftwaffe.⁵ Thousands of British citizens gathered in underground bomb shelters and subways to escape bombings and falling rubble, only to find hundreds of people wounded or dead when they surfaced. During the Battle of Britain, Churchill's speech echoed through the minds of the people, holding the British morale together. The future of the world rested on their shoulders and, by exercising their strength and morale, they managed to outlast Germany's repeated bombardments and ultimately won the skies over their homes.⁶

Churchill realized that the Nazis could not be defeated by conventional techniques alone; therefore, the approach of the MI6⁷ was no longer be effective. Consequently, he approached the War Cabinet with a proposal to achieve a victory against the Axis powers through the use of an army of 'bandits.'⁸ He created a secret agency that was charged with the mission to "obtain secretly the best possible information about the German forces in various countries to establish intimate contacts with local people and to plant our agents among them." This agency was called the Strategic Operations Executive (hereinafter referred to as the "SOE"). The SOE was also known as Churchill's "Secret Army" and was directed to infiltrate agents into German-occupied countries to organize, supply, and expand resistance groups so that they might inflict chaos upon enemy operations and communications.⁹

⁵ Germany's aerial warfare branch for the military forces during World War II.

⁶ Escott, 7.

⁷ The United Kingdom's Secret Intelligence Service, which is the foreign intelligence service of the government. They were considered as an intelligence service that used gentlemanly concepts of war and techniques to bring the enemy down. Churchill realized to win the war, they would have to use ungentlemanly techniques, such as guerilla warfare and sabotage to defeat the Nazis.

⁸ This was the MI6's derogatory name for the Strategic Operations Executive (SOE).

⁹ Thomas and Lewis, ix.

On July 16, 1940, Churchill gave Hugh Dalton, the Minister of Economic Warfare, the task of molding the new organization with the direct orders to “set Europe ablaze.” Dalton chose a candidate to be second-in-command for the SOE, Collin Gubbins. Gubbins had a distinguished career in the Royal Artillery during the First World War and won the Military Cross. He also joined the War Office’s Military Intelligence Research Department (MIR) during the Interwar Period to carry out an examination of guerilla tactics and irregular warfare. Churchill met with Gubbins to discuss the key component of Sun Tzu’s *Art of War*, the infiltration of secret agents into enemy territory to gather intelligence and commit acts of sabotage. Churchill read every one of Gubbins’ handbooks¹⁰ and decided that Gubbins would be the most qualified person to lead and develop the selection and training programs of SOE for the recruited agents.¹¹

The SOE was divided into different sections that focused on the countries that were occupied by the Germans. After the SOE was formed, France was one of the first countries to receive Britain’s aid. SOE’s F Section (F for France) was dedicated to assisting the liberation of France. The F Section received the most support from Britain and had the largest number of agents. There were approximately five hundred SOE agents working in the F Section. Each SOE country section had its own section leader and Maurice Buckmaster was chosen to head F Section in the fall of 1941. Hitler was known to have said, “When I get to London, I’m not sure who I shall hang first - Churchill or that man Buckmaster.”¹² Although there was Buckmaster and the other head positions of the F Section that worked in SOE’s headquarters on London’s Baker

¹⁰ Gubbins authored several books and pamphlets on the nature of guerilla warfare, including *The Art of Guerilla Warfare*, *Partisan Leader’s Handbook*, and *How to Use High Explosives*. Each of his books provided practical information on topics such as how to organize an ambush and immobilize a railway engine.

¹¹ Thomas and Lewis, ix; Mark Seaman, review of “Founding Father? Sir Colin Gubbins and the Origins of SOE” *Intelligence and National Security* 11, no 2 (April 1996) 360-363.

¹² Binney, 7; Escott, 9.

Street, there were several SOE circuits, or réseau¹³ within each occupied country. These circuits were scattered throughout France and each network had its own organizer, courier, and wireless operator. The director was tasked with recruiting French resistance volunteers, identifying sabotage targets, and arranging arms and supply drops. The courier was the person who traveled between the director and the wireless operator, as well as the resistance groups. Wireless operators transmitted Morse-coded messages to and from London. One of the main tasks when the SOE was formed was to find and recruit the brave agents to assist in its efforts.¹⁴

War was organized around a clear gender divide prior to World War II. Fighting was centered around men. They served in combatant roles to protect their helpless women and children. Women were seen as having a natural connection and purpose in the domestic domain, which was strengthened by their reproductive capacity and the cultural notions that they were innocent, nurturing, and unable commit the immoral acts of war. There was a cultural taboo that existed against sending women into combat zones. The British military regulations explicitly forbade women from serving in combative roles. Even though the British military did not allow women to serve in dangerous positions during World War II, Britain achieved the greatest subordination of conventional concepts of femininity to the British war time needs. Over seven and a half million British women worked in paid positions by 1943 and approximately 500,000 women joined the auxiliary services. The government and military created jobs that were specifically designed for unmarried women and only suitable women could volunteer to do their part to serve their country. These jobs included positions in the Women's Land Army (WLA), the Women's Auxiliary Army Corp (WAAC), the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS),

¹³ French for 'network'.

¹⁴ Thomas and Lewis, 9-11; Pattinson, "Playing the daft lassie with them," 271-2.

Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF), and the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (FANY).

Moreover, one of the main sentiments of Britain getting involved in the war was to safeguard the nation and its women and children from the Nazi oppressor. The thought to intentionally place a woman into harm's way was anathema to most Britons; therefore, the SOE was the perfect organization for women to be involved in because of its secrecy. Britons would not have suspected that the country was sending women to infiltrate behind enemy lines and commit acts of sabotage.¹⁵

Gubbins was one of the main advocates for the SOE to recruit women agents. He argued that "women can do the job as secret agents as well as men," and told the prime minister about the roles that women played in Russia, Ireland, and Poland¹⁶ as couriers, weapons carriers, and spies. Gubbins' views were extremely controversial and took a great deal of convincing to persuade Churchill, officials, and SOE heads to allow women to be employed into the SOE and be trained in guerilla combat, shooting firearms, parachuting, and other risky tasks that the male SOE agents performed. Gubbins wrote a page-long letter to Churchill on why women with exceptional language skills should be recruited and trained by the SOE to be sent off into German-occupied countries. He believed that the women agents would be less likely to get stopped by the German Gestapo¹⁷ during their missions. Another reason why Gubbins thought women should work as agents was because there was a shortage of suitable male agents. Churchill ultimately acquiesced and allowed women to be recruited as secret agents into the SOE.

¹⁵ DelGiorno, 1-2; Pattinson, "Playing the daft lassie with them," 271-2.

¹⁶ Gubbins was sent to serve in Russia in the White Army and was later sent to serve in Ireland during the interwar period between Great War and World War II.

¹⁷ The Gestapo was the official secret police of Nazi Germany and German-occupied Europe.

Among the five hundred agents that were employed in the F Section, only thirty-nine of those agents were women. The SOE desired women to work in the organization because they would be able to blend in among the French population. Men in Nazi-occupied countries were expected to work in German munitions factories during the day; therefore, male SOE agents posing as regular citizens walking around in town during the day would immediately come under suspicion. Women agents were able to move more freely than their male counterparts without arousing as much suspicion. These women agents of the F Section were of diverse nationalities and backgrounds. They were British, French, Swiss, Polish, Australian, Mauritian, and Indian recruits. They varied in age, ranging from their early twenties to middle age. Some of the women were single and just out of school, while some were wives or widows with children. Before the war, they were students, housewives, teachers, shopkeepers, and even an Indian princess. Fifteen of the agents came into the SOE with experience serving in the women's military auxiliaries at the beginning of the war, such as the WAAF and the WRNS, before being recruited by the SOE.¹⁸

The motivations of the SOE officials were based on the assumption that women would be an extraordinary asset to the SOE, especially the F Section in France. The women agents were able to act like Frenchwomen to convince the French and Germans that they were French in order to get by with sabotage and secret operations that were carried out. There were fewer and fewer suitable men who had the language skills and abilities to be recruited into the SOE, so the SOE authorities thought it would be wise to consider allowing women to be trained as SOE agents and to go to the occupied countries. This was also a great idea because the British played on the German gender norms and ideas that were even more traditional and less progressive than

¹⁸ Pattinson, "Playing the daft lassie with them," 274.

the British views of women's gender roles in society.¹⁹ The Germans thought that women were unintelligent, naïve, and unable to form political opinions. This idea of fooling the Germans and using their views on gender as an advantage would save several agents' lives if they were ever caught or questioned by the Gestapo or SS²⁰.

The motivations of SOE agents varied greatly. Author Juliette Pattinson interviewed SOE agents after the war and pointed out the differences between their motives for getting involved in the SOE. Most of the men she interviewed stated that patriotism was their primary factor being their main drive for their involvement. None of the men mentioned fatherhood, acting to protect their families, as a reason for joining. In contrast, women cited patriotism and family as being their primary motivations. Since British women were not allowed to fight in combat alongside men, they undertook jobs that were specifically created to accommodate the acceptable feminine positions that the government and military offered. SOE's most senior recruiting officer, Captain Selwyn Jepson, was in charge of recruitment for the F Section. Jepson did not see women agents as different than men. His opinion of women in acquiring non-conforming positions during the war was best captured when he stated, "air raid bombs that demolish homes and kill children bring every woman by every natural law the right to protect, to seek out and destroy the evil behind these bombs by all means possible to her- including the physical and militant."²¹ Jepson's statement summarizes the general motivations of women joining the auxiliary positions and the

¹⁹ Ibid, 276; Vigurs, 24; Escott, 11-12.

²⁰ Sicherheitsdienst is the full title for SS, which is the German political security and intelligence service.

²¹ Selwyn Jepson, interview by Conrad Wood, *Imperial War Museum*, July 3, 1986, accessed November 2, 2017, <http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80009120>.

SOE. The women wanted to do their part to serve their country, to protect their homes and families, and to avenge their families that were afflicted with the horrors of war.²²



When former SOE agent Pearl Witherington-Cornioley (pictured left) was asked why she became involved with the French resistance in the SOE, she replied saying, “intense anger.” She, as well as many other agents such as Nancy Wake, was furious about the Nazi brutality and injustices that they inflicted upon others, and especially the occupation of France.²³ Violette Szabo (pictured right) provided another reason for joining the SOE. Szabo was a British citizen and a mother of a two-year-old daughter, Tania.²⁴ When she joined the SOE, she was recently

²² Osborne, 45; Pattinson, “The thing that made me hesitate,” 246-8.

²³ Witherington-Cornioley, 19; ABC News (Australia), “Tribute to Nancy Wake” (video), accessed October 5, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=juVSj6qhOJ0&t=1s>. More information about Pearl Witherington-Cornioley can be found at

<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/99822>

²⁴ Picture above of Violette Szabo. She initially joined the WAF when the war broke out and then she was in the Auxiliary Territorial Services (ATS) in 1941. She was recruited in the F Section of the SOE and went on her first mission into France in 1944. She went on a second mission the day after D-Day. More information about Violette Szabo can be found at

<http://www.iwm.org.uk/history/who-was-violette-szabo> or <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/38046?docPos=1>

widowed after her husband had been killed while fighting German forces at El-Alamein in 1942. Her motivation to serve in France was powered by her anger and desire for justice for the death of her husband. She acquired her husband's determination to protect what he was defending in the war--their country, home, and their daughter's future. Although Witherington-Cornioley and Szabo's motivations for joining the SOE were different, they both demonstrate how women, like mother bears, felt the need to protect their homes and families when they felt threatened by the Nazis.²⁵



Many of the agents came from Anglo-French backgrounds. Most of them came from families that were British and French or had lived in France during their childhood and continued to study in French schools in Britain. They were loyal to Britain and France and could not bear to think about both countries being under Hitler's Nazi Germany.²⁶ Agent Noor-un-nisa Inayat Khan (pictured above) had motivations that differed from her fellow Anglo-French SOE peers' because she was Muslim and Indian-American. She was a descendant of Tipu Sultan, the last

²⁵ DelGiorno, 10; Vigurs; 25; Witherington-Cornioley, 4.

²⁶ Witherington-Cornioley, 3. Foot, 50. DelGiorno, 10; Vigurs, 24.

Mughal emperor of southern India, who lost his life by resisting the British conquest. Noor was an Indian princess and had multiple transnational affiliations that pulled her loyalty in opposing directions.²⁷ She told her friend that it was distracting to have a foot in so many countries- England, India, America, France, and Russia and yet not have one to call her own and that she envied people for whom the question of loyalty was a straightforward one during the war. Her question of loyalty was questioned when she and her brother tried to find ways to participate in the war efforts against the Hitler's forces. She originally decided to work as a nurse in the Union des Femmes de France (the French Red Cross) because she felt it was a suitable role for her as a Muslim woman to care of wounded men. She worked in a hospital in Paris until the Germans invaded and escaped to England, where she enlisted in the WAAF because she wanted to be more involved in the efforts. She joined the SOE although her national loyalty was questioned. She said that her first loyalty was to India and if she had to choose between Britain and India she would choose India because she supported Indian independence. Even though her motivations and loyalties differed from other women SOE agents' motivations, they all had something in common: they wanted to do their part to defeat the Nazis and liberate France.²⁸

Before women were allowed to work for the SOE, recruiters generally recruited their male agents from universities through personal networks and professional finance and business organizations. The same strategy did not work for the recruitment of women agents. Prior to the

²⁷ Khan's father was Indian and her mother was American. She was born in Moscow, Russia and her family settled in Paris for a few years. Because her father was a mystic, her family traveled with him throughout the world. She travelled throughout Europe visiting England, Germany, Switzerland, Belgium, Holland, Scandinavia, Italy, and Spain. Her travels and ties to multiple countries She was largely Europeanized, wearing Western clothing and light make-up. More information about Khan can be found at

<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/45793?docPos=1>

²⁸ Lahiri, 314-6; Binney, 158-60; Witherington-Cornioley, 3; Foot, 50; DelGiorno, 10; Vigurs, 24, Keith, 28-9.

war, women did not generally attend university or hold high employment positions in the workplace. Since there were no networks to recruit these women, the agency resorted to the accepted covers that were established with the FANY²⁹, where over half of their organization's women were connected to the SOE. The women in FANY were from higher social classes and introduced other women from their personal circles. Although many of the SOE women joined the FANYs as a cover for their actual role in the SOE, Witherington-Cornioley, along with fourteen other women of the thirty-nine female F Section agents, had covers as part of the WAAF.³⁰

Captain Jepson was faced with opposition against recruiting women for the work. In addition to the discussion of the motivations of women who wanted to work for the SOE, he argued that women were much better than men for the clandestine work. He said, "Women, as you must know, have a far greater capacity for cool and lonely courage than men. Men usually want a mate with them. Men don't work alone; their lives tend to be always in company with other men." His argument demonstrates how women in clandestine situations are able to keep their composure alone, while men had to be in company with another person in order to obey orders and remain poised.³¹

Some of the factors that helped recruiters choose who they wanted to join the SOE were language skills and appearance. SOE agents needed to blend in and "pass" as French women when they were undercover in France; therefore, they needed to speak and look the part. The women needed to have the correct dialect, accents, and use the correct cultural language that was used in certain areas in France to avoid being caught by the French or Nazis. It was also

²⁹ First Aid Nursing Yeomanry

³⁰ Escott, 12-13. Cornioley, 31.

³¹ Selwyn Jepson Interview; DelGiorno, 5.

important that the women were beautiful, in hopes that the German men would be taken by their beauty and not realize what the couriers or operators were actually doing. The use of their appearance could possibly save their lives if they were ever caught by the Germans.³²

SOE recruits were taken to training schools that were located throughout Northern England and Scotland. Men and women SOE recruits trained together in parachuting, hand-to-hand combat, shooting, coding, various forms of sabotage and communications, as well as how to act French. All recruits, male and female, were treated fairly and equally during their training; however, their assessments and notes that were taken by their instructors showed sexual discrimination. The male instructors were known for complaining about having to train women for a man's job. It is evident in female recruits' files that their male instructors wrote condescending notes about them. M.R.D Foot revealed in his memoir *SOE in France* that there were many comments and notes in Noor-un-nisa Inayat Khan's file, where her male instructors suggested that she was not a good candidate for the SOE. Colonel Spooner, who was the head of the training school Khan attended, noted that she was "too emotional and impulsive to be suitable."³³ Agents that trained with Inayat Khan agreed with the trainers, saying that she was a "dreamy creature" and that she was far too conspicuous- that she was "twice-seen, never forgotten." Other female SOE recruits in training had similar notes written about their performances by their instructors. A note in Nancy Wake's file stated that she "would be an excellent leader, despite being a woman." Although the SOE was progressive in allowing women to work and train in dangerous roles alongside the male recruits and agents, the instructors and other male recruits were less accepting to let go of society's gender barriers and stereotypes of

³² Pattinson, *Passing Unnoticed in a French Crowd*, 297; Foot, 94.

³³ Keith, 36; Binney, 162-63.

women in combative roles. Each of their comments and suggestions comply with the socially constructed image of a young woman who did not fit the ideal description of a secret agent who was ready to go on a clandestine mission and demonstrates that women were not being compared equally to their fellow male agents.³⁴

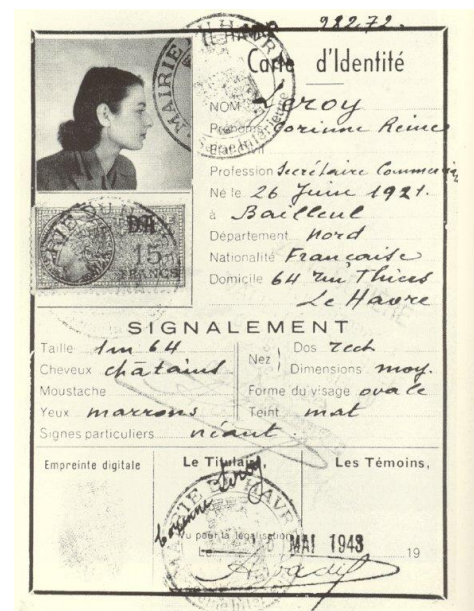
There were also instructors who praised the female recruits, such as Witherington-Cornioley and Odette Sansom, for being excellent shots and for excelling in their training. Instructors also stated in later interviews that they liked to have the women recruits during their parachute training to jump out of the plane first. They wanted the women to jump before the men because it would encourage them to not hesitate before they jumped. The instructors believed that if the women jumped first, it would push the male recruits to jump after them because they thought that if a woman could do it, then they could do it. It helped eliminate the fear that would cause men to freeze and miss their jump. This example demonstrates not only the bravery and willingness of the female recruits to complete dangerous tasks, but how they influenced the men to carry out the tasks as well.³⁵

SOE agents not only had to sound like they were French, but they also had to look like they were French. Each agent that was recruited into the SOE was recruited partially because of their appearance. The SOE officers chose recruits who looked like a stereotypical French person, with dark hair, olive skin tone, brown eyes, and medium height. The criteria that the officers were looking for was set because they wanted to not arouse any attention because they were unable to visually blend in to the French society. However, Inyat Khan was Indian, which made

³⁴ Foot, 337; Keith, 28-9; Binney, 161-3; Noreen Riols, *The Spy Who Loved Me*, on *The Moth: True Stories Told Live*, streaming audio lecture, accessed October 2, 2017, http://player.themoth.org/#/?actionType=ADD_AND_PLAY&storyId=10326

³⁵ Witherington-Cornioley, 22.

her distinctly different from her fellow SOE agents. The SOE did not recruit on appearances alone, but they did consider the physical appearances of their agents to be important factors in their decisions to send them into France. Men and women agents had to perfect their physical appearances to look French as well. Adjustments in their appearances included changing the way their hair was cut and getting rid of the men's mustaches. Another adjustment that the SOE had to make their agents replace was their British fillings. The fillings in the British agents' teeth had to be changed to gold fillings because that was how the French did them. Other small adjustments included the methods regarding how the agents' clothes were made. The SOE agents also had to have clothes from France or Czechoslovakia, or have a Jewish tailor from there to alter their clothes because the French collars, buttons, and cuffs were different than those in Britain. These changes and adjustments in the male and female agents' appearances only played a small contributing factor to help them blend into French society.³⁶



³⁶ Pattinson, *Passing Unnoticed in a French Crowd*, 292, 299-302.

The SOE agents undertook false French identities before they infiltrated into France. In training, they were given a false name, a false family, and that was drilled into them before they left for France (Pearl Witherington-Cornioley, pictured left, and Violette Szabo's, pictured right, false French identification cards). Former agent Noreen Riols recalled in an interview and her memoir that she was given the false identity of Madeline DuPont and before she left for France she actually became her new identity. Before the agents left, they were given a final briefing by SOE intelligence officer, Vera Atkins, about the nuances of everyday life in France to avoid suspicion. Examples of small details that SOE agents learned included remembering not to go into a café and ask for a café au lait because there was no milk and there was no sugar on certain days. If the agents did not pay attention to the subtle details about everyday life in France, they were at risk for getting stopped. Remembering these subtle differences and mannerisms could mean life or death in the event that they would get caught.³⁷

Men and women had different ways of putting on performances and embodying their new identities to help them pass³⁸ as French citizens. Their gendered performances had to imitate the French perceptions of acceptable male and female actions and roles within their society. Juliette Pattinson's research stated that the agents were not imitating the French nationals, but were performing the French masculinities and femininities by choosing from a range of behaviors that were acceptable for their new identity and for the region in which they were working. Male

³⁷ Interview with Noreen Riols <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8oImDIZO2N4&t=61s>; Pattinson, *Passing Unnoticed in a French crowd*, 297-8; Riols, 48; Noreen Riols, "Doing her Bit in Churchill's Secret Army," interview by *Forces TV*, September 13, 2013, accessed September 13, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nDSYOcj2ec>; Yvonne Beatrice Corneau, interview by Conrad Wood, *Imperial War Museum*, February 9, 1884, accessed November 2, 2017, <http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80007171>.

³⁸ All sources use the word 'pass' when referring to SOE agents blending into the French culture and acting like a French person during their missions; therefore, I will also use the word throughout my paper as well.

agents generally decided to embody the young bachelor lifestyle to maintain their covers. When he was based in a network in Paris, former agent André Watt decided to personify a playboy-like character as his cover by dining at black-market restaurants, going to nightclubs, theaters, and movie theaters with various girls during the week. He acted on this cover to draw less attention to himself because such behavior was the most accepted behavior of young Frenchmen at the time. There were several homosexual agents, such as Brian Stonehouse, who got girlfriends or who were seen in public accompanied by young women to hide their sexuality as a way of passing.³⁹

Compared to the male agents, women had more advantages and opportunities to pass in France. The women undertook feminine performances by incorporating appropriate conduct and appearances that allowed them to do dangerous clandestine work under Nazi noses. They were able to pass as housewives shopping and undertook household chores to protect against detection. They were able to take advantage of their femininity when they were in the presence of German soldiers. Claire Everett⁴⁰ stated that femininity was the best disguise that enabled her to pass. She said that she recalled many instances where she stumbled upon German checkpoints, “Women could get by with a smile and do things that men couldn’t and no matter what you had hidden in your bag or your bicycle bag, if you had a nice smile, you know, just give them a little wink.” Women SOE couriers and wireless operators took great advantage of their appearances and their feminine performances, in order to get by the male German soldiers, which assisted them in having an easier time passing than their fellow male agents.

³⁹ Pattinson, *Passing Unnoticed in a French crowd*, 297-8

⁴⁰ Claire Everett was a British SOE F Section agent. She was best known for her weapon skills during her training.



There were only two roles that were assigned to women agents, couriers and wireless operators.⁴¹ During the Nazi occupation, women in France were often seen going everywhere. They travelled by different types of transportation, especially on bikes with large baskets and carriers. French women were normally seen doing their daily errands, such as buying food and other items, looking for or visiting family members, or going to work. Women did not create suspicion and women agents acting as couriers were able to blend more easily into the roles of French women. Women were seen as being more suitable for the courier position than men because they attracted less attention from the established French security forces. Couriers had to be constantly moving and traveling long distances by bicycle and train to locate the SOE and French resistance safe houses. Couriers also had to locate drop zones to retrieve parachuting agents and supplies, and carry messages, wireless sets, money, and sabotage materials. Wireless

⁴¹ Wireless operators for the SOE carried wireless transmitters disguised in suitcases (pictured above). These transmitters were the smallest transceivers available during World War II. More information on the wireless transmitter can be found at <http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/30005779>

operators also had to change locations periodically in to avoid their signals being detected.⁴² The wireless operators carried around their large wireless devices that were disguised as suitcases. Their suitcases helped them blend in more when they were traveling and offered them another cover, because they were traveling and needed their suitcases. Both the couriers and wireless operators faced extreme danger when carrying such items because it put them in a position where there was potential of being intercepted by the Nazi soldiers and the Gestapo.

The women agents were calmer when attempting to talk their way out of tight situations at check points. They were able to use their femininity to distract the male security if they ever needed to avoid being caught.⁴³ The agents' performances were largely successful; however, some performances did not convince the Gestapo and the German SS officers. One night in October 1942, agents Blanche Charlet and Brian Stonegate were embracing in front of a chateau in Lyon when they were caught by German counter-intelligence forces. The agents believed if they acted like passionate lovers the Germans would forget about them and move on. Earlier in the day, Stonegate sent a radio transmission to Britain and the German forces' direction finding van picked up on the wireless transmission and was able to locate their position. This was one of the ways that Germans found out about SOE agents in France. Out of the thirty-nine women agents in the F Section, seventeen women were arrested and imprisoned in French prisons or

⁴² The Germans had direction finder vans that would go through the streets of all of the French towns and cities to locate the location of signals that were being given off by the French resistance and SOE networks.

⁴³Pattinson, *Passing Unnoticed in a French Crowd*, 291-3.

sent to concentration camps. Out of the seventeen who were arrested, three agents managed to escape, Blanche Charlet (pictured below) and Mary Herbert.⁴⁴



When the agents were caught by the Nazis, they were arrested for paramilitary activities in France. In training, they were told that they had to develop strategies that both male and female agents had to implement if they were ever caught and interrogated. These strategies were gendered. Male agents and other members of the French resistance were told to hide their identities by pretending to work in the black market in the hopes to be released with a lesser crime than resisting. Other male agents like as Bob Shepard and Edward Zeff pretended to be Allied aviators trying to cross the Pyrenees to rejoin their squadrons. They pretended to be pilots in the RAF, only speaking English, and to not know anything that was going on when they were

⁴⁴ Blanche Charlet and Brian Stonegate's performance did not convince the Nazi officers. They were transported to prison, interrogated, tortured, and Stonegate was executed in a Nazi concentration camp.

being questioned. The act of passing as pilots was a successful strategy as it deceived the Gestapo, who allowed the men to go.⁴⁵

Strategies for passing as black market workers or RAF airmen were not appropriate for women to use. Acting out their femininity was one of the only options that were available for women to use. In the event that they were arrested, they relied on hyper-femininity strategies to get them out of the situation. These strategies contradict the progress of crossing the gendered barriers that society placed by having them join in the SOE, but they played this to their advantage because the German attitude to women was far worse than the attitudes of the British. The Germans believed that women were only able to carry out duties that revolved around the domestic sphere. They did not believe that women were capable of having political stands and ideas, they believed that women were foolish, timid, innocent, anxious, and lacked common sense. In interviews and memoirs, female agents took the German stereotypes and gendered-norms and played with it. Women agents recalled batting their eyelashes and smiling to get past the Gestapo. They also pretended to be helpless and weak so the Gestapo would feel gallant helping the beautiful 'Frenchwomen', not knowing that they were handling suitcases with radios and weapons at the checkpoints. The women's behavior strategy was reassuring and unthreatening to the Gestapo, which was another reason they were unnoticed and not arrested.⁴⁶

When the women agents were arrested, they still played along with the German perceptions about women. Some agents, such as Blanche Charlet, did their best to conceal their British identity by pretending to faint from being overwhelmed, portraying a stupid woman who had no idea that there was a French resistance, and that they were only sending messages

⁴⁵ Pattinson, "Playing the daft lassie with them," 280-7.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 280-7.

because someone told her to. Eileen Nearne, a wireless operator that was also arrested, tricked her interrogators by claiming that she was a scatterbrain and a tomboy who liked the excitement and fun that the resistance offered. Of all the arrests and interrogations of agents who were arrested there was a theme that corresponded with the strategies women used during captivity. Women were able to use strategies while in captivity which men were unable to use: foolishness, vulnerability, and naïveté.⁴⁷

During their interrogations, many of the men and women were tortured to extract any information they had about the resistance and if they were truly who they said they were. When the women were being tortured, they had their nails pulled out, were beaten, water boarded, and starved. The women's treatment during their captivity was far worse than the men's treatment in terms of what was done to them physically. Women's torture had sexual dimensions. Germans punished the women for assuming men's roles in the resistance operations because it went against their social perceptions of women. During imprisonment, they put electrodes on the female agents' nipples and vaginas, cut off their nipples, and in some cases performed genital mutilation. Sometimes the women agents were raped by officers and guards. Men did not face the same degree of torture when they were imprisoned; however, men and women were treated equally when they were sent to concentration camps. Neither were given special treatment because of their gender. Men were forced to work in some camps, but all were left there to eventually die.⁴⁸

The agents who were fortunate to return home to Britain safely resumed their traditional feminine roles after the war. Parliament and news agencies were outraged when they discovered

⁴⁷ Ibid, 277-80.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 277-80

that Churchill allowed women to go behind enemy lines into the Nazi-occupied countries. The British government kept all SOE information a secret from the public and did not credit or celebrate the majority of women SOE agents like they had with the male agents. Many agents who died in France and concentration camps (such as Khan and Szabo) were awarded the George Cross, Britain's highest civilian award, for their exemplary service and bravery. Other agents, such as Odette Sansom, safely returned to Britain and were awarded the George Cross. However, when Sansom received the award, she made it clear to the press that she was an ordinary housewife and that she desired to return to her domestic duties and life with her children. Men returned from their military life and continued their civilian jobs while women were expected to resume their roles at home or gender-accepted jobs. Women such as Sansom, Riols, and Witherington-Cornioley played on their popularity as heroes to express their desire to go back to the domestic sphere so they could influence other women to do the same. It appeared that even though women broke down gender barriers, taboos, and feminine and masculine stereotypes that placed by British society, they did not change society's concepts of women's roles in society until decades later. As more information was uncovered, journalists and filmmakers created works that glamorized the women SOE heroes and demonstrated how the women agents were capable of performing the dangerous and daring acts of sabotage that they carried out during the war.⁴⁹

In addition, primary sources from women agents fail to recognize the gendered differences and unfairness between themselves and the male SOE agents. It may be concluded that this observation is a result of the culture at the time, as women were expected to receive gendered roles that differed the roles given to men or that it seemed to be such a groundbreaking

⁴⁹ Keith, 32-40.

idea to be working equally alongside men in combative roles that they failed to recognize the differences between them.⁵⁰

For the ongoing events of World War II, Great Britain was under pressure to defeat the Nazis. In the attempts to liberate Nazi-occupied countries, they recruited brave women to join the men in the Strategic Operations Executive. British society thought that war and sabotage was only suitable for men; however, Churchill proved them wrong. Women agents had different motivations, advantages, and disadvantages than their fellow male agents because of their gender. Despite the differences in gender, women were able to overcome society's perceptions of femininity and were able to complete the same training that their fellow male agents had to complete in order to assume their roles in France. The women agents of the F Section proved that they were capable of guerrilla warfare, sabotage, and endure the pressures of potential of captivity and torture if they were caught by Germans. The brave women served as Joan d'Arcs, ultimately assisting and leading the British organizers and French resistors to victory against the Nazis, liberating France.

⁵⁰ DelGiorno, 27-30, Corneau Interview, IWM.

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ABC News Australia. "Tribute to Nancy Wake" (video). Posted on August 16, 2011. Accessed October 5, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=juVSj6qhOJO&t=1s>.

The video includes background information about Nancy Wake's life and her life's story. The most important information from this video is a clip from a press conference with Wake discussing why she decided to join the SOE in France.

Yvonne Beatrice Cormeau, interview by Conrad Wood, *Imperial War Museum*, February 9, 1984, accessed November 2, 2017, <http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80007171>.

Interview with Yvonne Cormeau discusses how she served with the Women's Auxiliary Air Force as a wireless operator with the SOE F Section from 1943-1944. Her interview was helpful because she specifically recalled how she had to remember to pay attention to the cafés and restaurants on what they were and were not serving, how men were only allowed to serve as organizers and perform true acts of sabotage and guerilla warfare.

Foot, M. R. D. "Reflections on SOE." *Memoirs and Proceedings*. Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society, 87-96. Manchester: 36 George Street, 1968-1969.

In the collection of *Memoirs and Proceedings*, M.R.D. Foot explains the origins and purpose of the SOE. It was helpful in providing a background about the agency, how the men ran it, and the occupied countries where their agents worked.

Jepson, Selwyn. Interview by Conrad Wood, *Imperial War Museum*, recorded July 3, 1986, accessed November 2, 2017, <http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80009120>.

Interview with Selwyn Jepson, a British officer who served as the head recruiting officer with the F Section for the SOE. In his interview, he discusses the loyalties of non-British nationals, the recruitment process and his interviews with the women SOE recruits.

Riols, Noreen and Forbes-Robertson, Elspeth. "Churchill's Spy School" (video clip of documentary), *BBC*, January 16, 2011, accessed on September 13, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8oImDIZO2N4>

The interview with Riols and Forbes-Roberston provides certain information about the work SOE agents did as couriers and wireless operators in France and how the women had an advantage compared to the men because they could get by without suspicion from the Germans.

Riols, Noreen. "Doing her Bit in Churchill's Secret Army," interview by *Forces TV*, September 13, 2013, accessed September 13, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nDSYOcj2ec>.

The interview with Riols provides information about the dangers the SOE agents faced while in France and how the women as couriers and wireless operators provided an advantage to the British because they could get by without suspicion from the Germans.

_____. *The Secret Ministry of Ag. & Fish: My Life in Churchill's School for Spies*. Australia: Pan Macmillian, 2013.

In her autobiography, Riols recalls how her background in France and her language skills led her to be recruited by the SOE. She discusses the events that occurred during the recruitment process, her time in training, her involvement with the French resistance, as well as the other experiences that other SOE agents faced while in France during World War II.

_____. *The Spy Who Loved Me*. The Moth: True Stories Told Live, streaming audio lecture, accessed October 2, 2017, http://player.themoth.org/#/?actionType=ADD_AND_PLAY&storyId=10326

In her lecture, Riols recalls her process of recruitment for the SOE and her training experiences at the different schools around northern Britain and Scotland. She also discusses the importance and weight that Jepson's notes during training carried for the agents. This was helpful because it provided information to explain the training and recruitment in the sections of my paper.

Witherington-Cornioley, Pearl Hervé Larroque, and Kathryn Atwood, eds. "*Code Name Pauline: Memoirs of a World War II Special Agent*." Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2015.

An engaging memoir about Pearl's time working for the SOE. She recalls the recruitment process, training, her code names and covers, as well as her post war life. It was useful to read a person's personal stories and to see photos of her false passports and accounts of parachuting into France.

Secondary Sources:

Binney, Marcus. *The Women Who Lived for Danger: The Agents of the Special Operations Executive*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2002.

Provides information on the recruitment, training, and lives of the agents living secretly in France. The stories about nine agents and their close encounters about revealing their true identity to Germans are useful because they allow me to have more of an understanding about the types of jobs each agent had in France.

Charlesworth, Lorie. "2 SAS Regiment, War Crimes Investigations, and British Intelligence: Intelligence Officials and the Natzweiler Trial." *Journal of Intelligence History* 6, no.2 (October 2012): 13-60.

Examines the investigation, prosecution, and conviction of Nazi war criminals for the murder of four women. Of these four women, three were SOE agents that were killed by lethal injection at the Natzweiler-Struthof concentration camp, which assists my research in knowing what happened to the women who were caught by the Germans.

DelGiorno, Patricia. "Crossing Borders: Women Agents of Britain's Special Operations Executive (SOE) in the Second World War." PhD diss., Stony Brook University, 2014.

The dissertation addresses the highly gendered cultural, social and military borders that Odette Sansom and other female SOE agents crossed in order to carry out dangerous work as secret agents for the SOE, as I compare the treatment of women and men in the SOE.

Escott, Beryl E. *The Heroines of SOE: Women in France F Section*. Gloucestershire: The History Press, 2010.

An accumulation of biographies about 40 women that served as secret agents in the F Section of the SOE. Each biography discusses the roles the women played, their heroic efforts in the French resistance, and their life after the war or the end of their lives when they were caught by Germans.

Keith, Kelly. "More than Just a Pretty Face: The Women of the SOE and the OSS During World War II." Electronic Thesis. Bowling Green State University, 2013.
<https://etd.ohiolink.edu/>.

This thesis argues that the existing works about the female SOE agents oversexualize and deprive the women of their agency because they suggest that the women would have been less successful during their missions if they were less attractive. It was useful in this research paper because it provided examples of how the agents were portrayed during the post-war period.

Lahiri, Shompa. "Clandestine Mobilities and Shifting Embodiments: Noor-un-nisa Inayat Khan and the Special Operations Executive." 1940-1944, *Gender & History* 19, no. 2 (August 2007): 305-323

A description on how agent Noor-un-nisa Inayat KhanS used her body to create multiple gendered, national, and racial lenses that helped the agent with her performances and identity to help with disguises during her wartime mission.

Osborne, Deirdre 'I do not know about politics or governments... I am a housewife': The Female Secret Agent and the Male War Machine in Occupied France (1942-5)." *Women: A Cultural Review* 17 (August 2006): 42-64.

A well written article examining how women SOE agents were overshadowed by post-war men to reclaim their authority from women's reinvented wartime roles by producing depictions of wartime femininity through cultural representations in films.

Pattinson, Juliette. "Playing the daft lassie with them': Gender, Captivity and the Special Operations Executive during the Second World War." *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire* 13, no. 1 (June 2006): 271-292.

Uncovers the experiences SOE agents that were arrested by the Nazis in concentration camps to better understand the identities and gender-stereotypes of women, soldiers, and prisoners during their incarceration. This article contains information from autobiographies and SOE reports that provide additional information about SOE agents in the camps.

_____. "“Passing unnoticed in a French crowd’: the passing performances of British SOE agents in Occupied France." *National Identities* 12, no.13 (September 2010): 291-308.

Discusses how British men and women SOE agents developed French linguistic skills, mannerisms, and knowledge of culture and customs. It is helpful in the way that it uses case studies and stories about how women and their SOE partners were able to construct their French identities.

_____, "“The thing that made me hesitate...’: re-examining gendered intersubjectivities in interviews with British secret war veterans." *Women's History Review* 20, no.2 (April 2011): 245-263.

This article was helpful because it provides interview transcriptions from the author's personal interviews with multiple male and female SOE agents about relationships with their fellow agents and analysis of their behaviors towards the opposite sex and their performances for blending in to French society.

Thomas, Gordon and Lewis, Greg. *Shadow Warriors of World War II: The Daring Women of the OSS and SOE*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press Inc., 2017.

Introduces the origins of the British SOE and the American OSS and how the two agencies worked together along with the French Resistance to fight against the Nazis. It was helpful because it explains the sabotage that was used and how the women adapted their techniques that coincided with French culture.

Vigurs, Kate. "Handbags to hand grenades: preparing women for work behind the lines in Occupied France." *Women's History Magazine* 76 (Autumn 2014): 23-29.

Explains why women were chosen instead of men to be sent to France because they could move more freely and were able to do the same jobs as men. It also lists the requirements and their training from being teenagers and mothers into silent killers.

_____. "The women agents of the Special Operations Executive F section- wartime realities and post war representations." PhD diss., The University of Leeds, 2011.

A close evaluation of the wartime experience of the women SOE agents and how they were represented in films, books, and other media outlets. It is a very important source for my paper because it looks into how the women were treated differently because of their gender and addresses why there is a fascination with the women agents and not the male agents.