



# Ungentlemanly Warfare: Women Spies of the Special Operations Executive During WWII

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## Background

During World War II (WWII), the world of espionage called for many noble individuals, men and women alike, to step forward on behalf of their country. Ungentlemanly Warfare: Women Spies of the Special Operations Executive During WWII explores the pivotal role played by women in the Special Operations Executive (SOE) during World War II, shedding light on their contributions as spies and wireless operators. These women demonstrated exceptional courage and resourcefulness, undertaking covert missions in occupied territories to gather crucial intelligence, sabotage Axis operations, and aid resistance movements. These women demonstrated incredible devotion as they continuously faced the threat of capture, torture, rape, and execution. Through a series of literary analyses, depositions, and previously classified SOE documents, this research aims to uncover the truth behind the women operatives' stories, examine the societal attitudes toward their work, and their impact on the Allies' success in Europe. This research will elevate the often-overlooked history of these women and their invaluable role in World War II.



Violette Szabo, recovering from an injured ankle after parachuting, 1944. National Army Museum.

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## Introduction

The Special Operations Executive (SOE) was an organization formed during WWII to perform subversion and sabotage. Churchill wished for the SOE to do two main tasks, "create and foster the spirit of resistance in Nazi-occupied countries... [and] committing or at least instigating acts of sabotage" (Foot, 14). The organization was split by the task they were given; this study focuses on the F section, which operated across France to complete acts of resistance and sabotage. F section was also the first to officially employ women in the field as secret agents. F section would end up deploying 39 female agents during the war out of the 480 they deployed in all. Their jobs would range from working as wireless operators to conducting covert missions. While some of these female agents are well-known and studied, many are not as well understood. They also faced inherent sexism in their job; however, the extent is not known. This study strives to better understand both the stories of the women and the challenges they faced based on the sexism that they dealt with.

## Methods

- Analyzing a plethora of artifacts provided within Vera Atkin's attempts to find the agents at large from the SOE, such as images, newspapers, depositions, and letters obtained by Vera.
- Examining these manuscripts, reading and looking for identifiers of possible gender bias that these female agents might have faced.
- Searching for any interesting factors surrounding the execution of four female SOE agents, Andree Borrel, Vera Leigh, Sonia Olschanezky, and Diana Rowden, and their execution at Natzweiler-Struthof concentration camp.
- Utilizing our computers and tablets to annotate and highlight any important language we noticed and recorded our findings via Google Sheets.
- Transcribing and analyzing recordings of interviews of SOE agents



Andree Borrel, Vera Leigh, Sonia Olschanezky, and Diana Rowden, the four women executed at Natzweiler-Struthof in 1944.

## Results

Our research focused on conducting a comprehensive literary analysis of academic texts about female spies of the Special Operations Executive (SOE). We found a notable trend where authors tended to interject personal opinions and biases into secondary sources, often embellishing details or including irrelevant information not pertinent to female spies. This observation suggests a potential gender bias in the portrayal of female spies within the historical narrative.

Additionally, we delved into primary sources by examining files housed at the Imperial War Museum in London. During this research phase, we read through numerous documents, paying close attention to any biases that may have manifested in the documentation. We observed instances where diminishing language skewed the portrayal of their contributions and sacrifices. This bias was apparent in texts, such as newspaper articles that referred to the female operatives as "girls" or included unnecessary personal details. Overall, we observed that women in the SOE were often treated with less respect than their male counterparts.

It is important to note that our research into the women spies of the Special Operations Executive is an ongoing endeavor. Continuing this investigation aims to contribute to a more accurate and inclusive historical account of these women and the pivotal role they played in Allied success in World War II.

## References

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