

Ungentlemanly Warfare: The Women of the SOE

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1. Abstract

During WWII, the British Special Operation (SOE) Executive's F Section, in France, employed a variety of spies and employees, a number of these being female, who have often fallen through the cracks of history. We addressed the question of what life was like for these women and how their lives differed from their male counterparts. We investigated this question not only to bring these women to light, but also because understanding their work is critical to understanding WWII operations and the defeat of the Third Reich and its allies. We examined a multitude of primary documents relating to both male and female spies. Then, we conducted literary analyses of these documents to gain a first-hand understanding of the lives of these female spies. At the end of our project, we chose a few women to focus on and examine in depth. Our results found that there were significant differences in the lives of the women of the SOE and the men in terms of how they were treated and discussed. However, they were given equal responsibilities and put in situations of comparable danger. These results provide more evidence to the brushing over of the work of women in the field during wartime, as well as highlighting how influential that work actually was during WWII. The results suggest that there may be more undiscovered heroes of WWII and other historical events who were disregarded because of their gender, which implies that further historical analysis into these events is necessary.



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2. Context

- Winston Churchill created the Special Operations Executive to conduct sabotage, espionage, and support resistance movements during WWII.
- The France section (F-section) was a key part of the SOE.
- Unlike many military branches, women served as field agents in dangerous roles such as couriers, wireless operators, and organizers.
- After the war, gender bias distorted recognition, and many F-section women were overlooked.
- The official history by M.R.D Foot often minimized women's contributions, suggesting they were not essential to the war effort.

3. Purpose

- Post-war representation and recognition of women in the F-section was heavily distorted by gender bias, leading to many important female agents being overlooked.
- Many historical accounts rely on wartime reports shaped by censorship, propaganda, and internal politics, which affected how these women were portrayed.
- This misogynistic framing influenced both scholarly research and broader public perception of F-section women.
- Additionally, classified information continues to limit what scholars and the public can fully know about these agents and their work.
- The purpose of this project is to help fill that gap by closely analyzing primary documents on both male and female spies in the SOE F-section.
- To support this research, we created an Excel sheet to compile background information on these women, including family ties, religion, nationality, and other relevant details.

4. Methods

We examined primary sources such as personal letters, classified military reports, and government documents from a variety of personnel that were active in and around the SOE. These sources were collected from national archives across the world, transcribed, and then analyzed.

The purpose of this examination was to find themes and common occurrences throughout the lives of female spies, both in their direct experiences and the ways in which others perceived them.

We conducted this study through literary and comparative analysis. Through synthesising sources and extracting main points, we were able to compare them to draw out the most prominent themes. Furthermore, we were able to separate the themes by which gender experienced them and contrast the two.



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5. Results

No results have been concluded yet, we are still in the process of researching the agents, specifically the female agents, of the SOE. However, even on the surface level we have found that there is a distinction between male and female agents in the SOE.

6. Next steps

Our research is very much ongoing, as there is a lot of information and documents to sift through, and there are many women in the SOE to cover and research deeper. Because of the confidential nature of the SOE and spywork in general, we have limited access to not only documents and accounts of the war, but also the background of these women spies.

7. Future Considerations

Suggestions for future research are to focus on correcting misleading or incorrect information that is readily available online about these female agents, especially on heavily used websites like Wikipedia.

References



Escott, Beryl E.