



# Ungentlemanly Warfare: Historical Research on Women Spies of the Special Operations Executive

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## Introduction

The Special Operations Executive (SOE) during World War II was an organization rooted in espionage and sabotage that worked against the Axis powers. This organization played a large role in the defeat of the Axis powers during the war, and many of the agents in the SOE were recognized for their brave efforts. There were many female agents who worked for the SOE, and in this project we specifically look at those involved in the F Section (French section). Many of them have gone without recognition for their valiant work during the war due to their sex. The project focuses on bringing light to these women's duties during the war and the role they played in aiding the Allies. We are focused on doing research to prove the hypothesis that these women did play a part in the war and should be recognized as successful agents just as their male counterparts were. Furthermore, some of these women should not only be recognized for their war efforts, but for the human rights atrocities that were committed against them in concentration camps because of their agent status. These women were tortured and sometimes even killed for being loyal to the Allied Forces and deserve recognition for all that they did for the war effort, which is the driving purpose of this research project.

## Methods

The methods used for the research were as follows:

- Literature analysis
  - Transcriptions
  - Numerical data regarding gendered/biased language
- Literature Analysis
- The following books were read and analyzed:
    - *Special Operations Executive: A New Instrument of War* by Mark Seaman
    - *Heroins of the SOE* by Beryl E. Escott
  - Through detailed notes and analysis, instances of skewed historical context and stories were investigated.
- Transcriptions
- Through transcriptions, first hand accounts of experience in the SOE were recorded and analyzed for further historical context and collection.
- Numerical data regarding gendered/biased language
- Through both literature read and interviews transcribed, research was done to code how many times certain elements of gendered or biased language was used.
  - Examples:
    - "She was a very beautiful woman," "She wasn't very smart," etc.
    - The number of times the father was introduced prior to the woman, the amount of times the women were referred to as incapable

## Some Women of the S.O.E.



Figure 1: Noor Inayat Khan pictured with a *vina*. Noor was a descendant of Indian Royalty and was sent to France as a field operative.



Figure 2: Vera Atkins CBE, pictured on the left, worked as an intelligence officer in the F Section of the SOE.



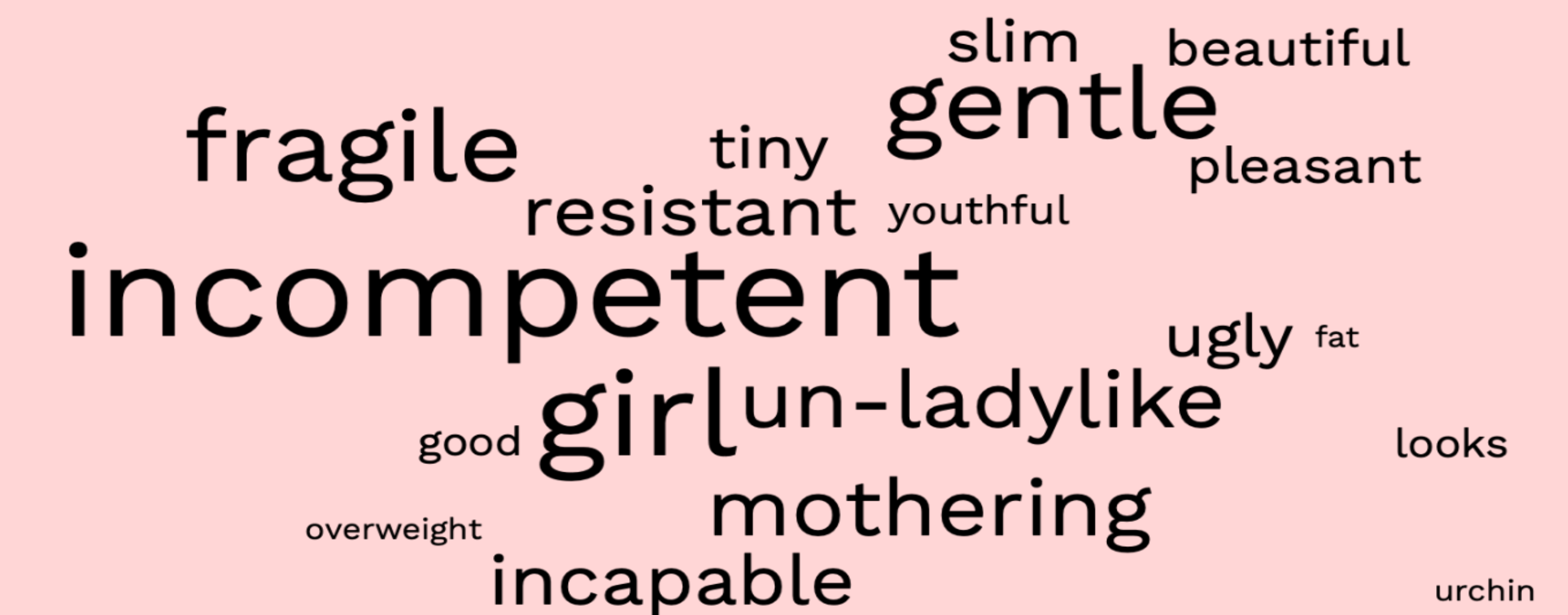
Figure 3: Odette Sansom, pictured on the right, worked as an undercover agent in the F Section of the SOE.

Figure 4: Pearl Witherington pictured below on the far right with French resisters. Her fiancé is pictured third from the left.



These are just a select few of the 41 women who contributed to the Special Operations Executive F Section

## Preliminary Results



Quantitative results from literature analysis on the book "Heroines of SOE: Britain's secret women in France" were coded according to how often elements of gendered language and bias were used. A word cloud of some of the words used the most often out of the entire book is shown. Each chapter contained information about a specific woman, including the women featured to the left.

## Conclusions

The research done this year has been additional to previous findings from this project. Instances of gendered language and gender bias in historical texts and transcriptions furthers the idea that history is written from a male-centered point of view, and there aren't many female-centered narratives that tell a female perspective in most events. Furthermore, mentions of women are scarce and will continue to be scarce if no modern effort is made to elaborate on the female role in social and governmental affairs. Regarding the Special Operations Executive, the women that have been researched had occupations ranging from high-ranking leadership roles to field operative roles. The research that has been conducted recently will be added to our growing database on this specific historical information.

## References



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