Behind Enemy Lines: Gender, Passing and the Special Operations Executive in the Second World War

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Author: Juliette Pattinson
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Behind Enemy Lines is about the experiences of women and men who were recruited and trained by the British Special Operations Executive (SOE), and then infiltrated into France to undertake clandestine resistance operations such as sabotage. Just before the Second World War broke out, Military Intelligence Research concluded that guerrilla warfare could help divert enemy troops, if it were used in conjunction with regular armed forces. After Winston Churchill became Prime Minister in May 1940 the War Cabinet agreed to give sabotage and subversion a higher priority than it had enjoyed under Neville Chamberlain, and on 1 July 1940 SOE was established with the task of co-ordinating subversion and sabotage abroad. Each country was assigned its own SOE section and staff. Pattinson devotes her study to F section, which built up a network of circuits in France, each with its own organiser to build up the group, an arms instructor or saboteur to train new recruits and plan and conduct sabotage, a wireless operator to keep in contact with the UK and arrange drops for people and supplies, and a courier who undertook various tasks including conveying weapons, passing messages between resisters and locating dropping grounds. Pattinson does not engage with the debate over the effectiveness of F section, but simply asserts F Section’s important contribution to increasing resistance, which among other achievements delayed German troops from reaching the Normandy beaches in June 1944 at the time of the Allies’ invasion.

In this meticulously researched and fascinating study Pattinson analyses how ‘ordinary’, law-abiding citizens were transformed into paramilitary secret agents. She examines how those who worked for SOE subsequently reconstructed their wartime experiences of recruitment, training, clandestine work, and – for some – their captivity. Throughout the study, Pattinson emphasises the importance of gender, and of agents’ attempts to ‘pass’ as French citizens. Her justification for focusing on gender is that SOE was the one British organisation during the Second World War to deploy women in a combat situation; even so, women were not sent in as organisers of resistance networks; 28 were couriers and 11 were wireless operators. Like many others who have written or made films about SOE, Pattinson focuses on women (and uses a film still of a woman training from the 1947 film School for Danger , on the book’s front cover, a visual indication of her preoccupation); unlike most other writers on women in SOE, however, Pattinson offers a justification for this focus, a gendered analysis of the experience of women and men in SOE, and a thematic rather than biographical approach to the subject. While considering recruitment, training, female agents’ experiences and post-war lives, she also delves into constructions of manliness in testimonies, official documents and
films. She devotes far less attention to class, cultural expressions of the agents’ French or British identities, and issues of loss and separation.

Pattinson shows precisely how one aspect of the popular/public history of the Second World War was created and sustained. From the moment that the existence of female agents became public knowledge, there was an immediate curiosity about them. Since the Second World War, journalists, writers, film-makers and the general public have all displayed a fascination with female agents. In the 1940s newspaper articles delved into the fate of women agents and in the late 1940s covered the award of prestigious medals to female agents: the George Cross to Odette Sansom in August 1946, and posthumously to Violet Szabo in December 1946 and Noor Inayat Khan in April 1949. When a plaque to the 52 First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (FANYs) killed in the war was unveiled at St Paul's Church, Knightsbridge, the ceremony attracted a good deal of press interest, as did the presence of women agents who had survived. (All female agents were seconded to FANY, a paramilitary organisation, in order that all members – whether they were members of the auxiliary services or not – would hold the rank of officer. During the war FANYs were also deployed as coders and wireless operators in Britain and around the globe.) Although nearly twice as many male as female agents were killed, the men remained anonymous and without commemoration. Subsequently, biographies of agents have focused almost exclusively on the women, although a number of the men have written autobiographical accounts of their exploits.

Pattinson argues that the agents helped shape the public’s image of their role by adhering to conventions of the spy and thriller genre as they provided readers with gripping tales of derring-do and close shaves. Two F-section agents also helped in the making of a film about SOE recruitment, training and work. Biographies of Odette Sansom and Violet Szabo were both adapted for the screen: *Odette* (1950) and *Carve her Name With Pride* (1958). Both films portray their heroines as unflappable and psychologically strong. In contrast, Pattinson maintains that subsequent oral and written testimonies suggest that female agents were often plagued by doubts, although there was no gender difference in the experience of fear. Interest continued with criticisms of an organisation that could send women into such perilous situations; with TV series that featured female agents; with documentaries; and most recently with the feature film *Charlotte Grey* (2002). So the public is far more familiar with female than male SOE agents. Pattinson offers a number of reasons for this interest in female rather than male agents.

Pattinson suggests that it is by virtue of their gender and the concomitant disruption of social mores that female agents have generated so much interest in writings and films. Women agents were executed in war when wars were supposedly fought to protect women and children; war generally has been seen to be organised around a definite gender divide with combatant males protecting non-combatant females. Women have supposedly been more interested in the domestic and passive spheres of life. Pattinson’s suggestions that women were seen as passive and non-combatant in war, are not wholly convincing, given the role that many women had played in uniform and war work, even if they did not carry firearms. More convincing is Pattinson’s point that there is a perennial interest in women who transgress codes of behaviour and ideas of women’s appropriate role. Maybe too, in the early post-war years with the shift away from working-class heroes of the war years on screen towards middle-class heroes, women agents fitted this middle-class focus, and they went some way to counterbalance the majority of post-war films set in the war with men as heroes.

Pattinson draws on official records and films, personal testimonies written and oral, both from the time and from memory. Her opening quotation comes from an interview she conducted at the Special Forces Club in 1999 with Nancy Wake ‘if I had accommodated one man, the word would have spread around. They would have been coming over from the next mountain! [laughs] I would have had a very sore arse! [raucous laugh] The pine needles! And when would I have done the work which I had done and would those men have had respect for me?’ Wake was a gift to an interviewer; she was always willing to talk colourfully about her wartime experiences, and her blunt speech made her highly quotable. This can be problematic for the researcher who needs to balance the personality of an interviewee such as Wake against a far quieter, gracious and refined interviewee, such as Yvonne Basedon. One cannot assume that colourful language is closer to original experiences, and while recognising the problems of using oral testimony, Pattinson does
seem to use it uncritically in places, for example, when she quotes without critiquing Yvonne Basedon’s verbatim account in 1999 of a conversation that took place in 1943 when she was recruited. It is hardly credible that anyone would remember a conversation word-for-word 50 years later.

A gendered analysis of SOE is the central thrust of Pattinson’s study. Gender was significant right from the start in the recruiting process, with some attributes regarded as, and motivations for joining often being, gender-specific. As well as using the conceptual tool of gender, Pattinson explores ‘passing’, and uses the concept to explain the assumption of alternative identities by agents who had to conceal their real function in France. Agents, she shows, crossed a number of identity borders, including occupation, nationality, religion, gender, class and sexuality in attempts to distance themselves from their clandestine identity and in order to enable them to carry out their undercover work. At the initial interviews candidates were assessed for their ‘passing’ skills; all recruits had to speak French like a native. Despite the crucial need to be able to ‘pass’, couriers and wireless operators had to be mobile and ‘pass’ much more frequently than those undertaking other roles, yet they received little training in ‘passing’, with greater attention being given to military combat, which many would never use. None of the women recalled advice on how to make the most use of the fact that they were women, although men were taught how to outwit agents provocateurs.

Pattinson challenges the dominant post-war representations of women agents. While Maurice Buckmaster, the head of F section, and Gervase Cowell, later SOE advisor to the Foreign Office, claimed that there had been a systematic approach in looking for fluency, appropriate appearance and motivation in recruits, Pattinson suggests that in reality it was haphazard: there was a shortage of personnel, and compensating qualities were sometimes accepted. While these were not true for all agents. Nancy Wake, for example, gained it through employment, residence and marriage. Pattinson claims that a French habitus was best acquired unconsciously but it could be nurtured and culturally reproduced. Despite previous assertions that gender was irrelevant in training, Pattinson shows how it shaped men and women’s experiences. Initially, men and women trained separately, and unsurprisingly Pattinson has found some evidence that women were treated differently in the physical training. Pattinson suggests that gender has often not been addressed in other historical accounts of training or in veterans’ testimonies for a number of reasons: women agents subsequently gave contradictory and complex accounts of the gender dynamics during training, which may in part have been due to them not wanting to give the impression that they had received special treatment while acknowledging that there were some differences beyond their control. Pattinson goes on to suggest that when agents later reflected on their training it usually elicited positive recollections that crowded out memories of discrimination.

Once in the field, gender differences persisted. Both men and women recalled the importance of behaviour appropriate to the region in which they were working, coupled with behaviour appropriate to their gender. Women undertook feminine performances by mobilising conventionally attractive appearance and appropriate conduct, which usually made it possible to undertake couriering. Adopting certain femininities was actually an empowering strategy, and women mobilised those femininities that could be strategically empowering. Different circumstances required different types of femininity, and Pattinson gives examples of women drawing attention to themselves through chic, urban appearance and flirtatious behaviour in order to attract the attention of German soldiers so that they would unwittingly give the agents protection and safe passage; or the agents might adopt an unglamorous, peasant femininity. The agents had to be adept at choosing a disguise. Their posture, accent, behaviour, clothing and hairstyle were all crucial to the performance of specific forms of femininity, and had to be adapted depending on the situation. It was assumed at the time that it was unlikely that women would be suspected of resistance activities, and indeed women were less likely than men to be rounded up and deported to work in Germany. Nazi ideology emphasised women’s role in the home, so it is hardly surprising, as Pattinson notes, that German soldiers were slow to suspect that young, attractive women were politicised and in the Resistance. In fact,
assumptions that women would not be involved in clandestine, illegal or violent activities were prevalent across Europe, and were not confined to the Nazis.

Pattinson draws a picture of agents who were neither naive idealists, ruthlessly sacrificed, nor idealised heroines. Rather, Pattinson describes a rather more prosaic experience of fear, boredom and post-war psychological problems. We learn about a group of women who were highly motivated, often driven by a desire for revenge, well aware of the dangers they faced, and determined to undertake their missions. Beyond Enemy Lines offers new insights into the complexities of gender relations during the Second World War, and hints at a number of related areas, such as the role of FANYs who were not agents, or the way in which competing identities were constructed and expressed in wartime, that still require scholarly research and analysis at the level that Pattinson has given to agents.

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