In June 1940, shortly after the fall of France and the humiliating armistice signed by the French government, Winston Churchill convened his war cabinet in the greatest secrecy and set up a clandestine organization responsible for taking action in countries that had fallen under the Nazi yoke. Its purpose was to keep the flame of resistance alive, notably by encouraging budding centers of opposition by supplying arms and ammunition and by coordinating their actions, a mission which the “old lion” summed up in his now-famous lapidary formula, “And now, set Europe ablaze!”

The methods of the Special Operations Executive (SOE) were very different in spirit and in action from conventional warfare, but Churchill did not intend to confine himself to a purely defensive posture. However, the most controversial aspect of SOE—and one which still arouses fascination—was undoubtedly the deliberate recruitment of female officers, most of whom served in France. Indeed, out of the 480 F section agents deployed over French territory, 39 were women, aged between 19 (Sonia Olschanesky) and 51 years old (Marie-Thérèse Le Chêne) and coming from all walks of life, ranging from working-class backgrounds to the aristocracy. It is the story of these 39 women that Kate Vigurs has masterfully succeeded in encapsulating in a gripping and well-researched book entitled Mission France: The True History of the Women of SOE.

Kate Vigurs is a professional freelance historian, author, and academic adviser. In 2011, she completed a PhD thesis at the University of Leeds entitled “The Women Agents of the Special Operations Executive F section: Wartime Realities and Post-War Representations.” She frequently contributes to TV and radio programs on SOE, and with Mission France, Vigurs confirms her status as a key author on the subject.
A couple of years after its creation, SOE took the groundbreaking decision of hiring women. SOE’s recruitment of female officers was indeed unique and innovative, both in the military and civilian domains as women had never engaged in combat behind enemy lines before. Some of them had already worked on escape lines, but beyond their patriotic will to serve both Britain and France, they all shared excellent language skills and knowledge of France. Indeed, they had to pass as natives and blend seamlessly into French society. They also had to show mental stability and the aptitude to keep a low profile and work alone, especially wireless operators, who literally represented a lifeline between the field and London. The thirty-nine specially selected women were instructed in the art of sabotage and silent killing alongside their male counterparts and were mostly trained as radio operators and as liaison officers, otherwise known as couriers. Although they had served in civilian capacities prior to the war, they were all affiliated with the Women’s Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) or the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (FANY), the first women’s military corps, created in 1907. In actual fact, the agents did not wear a uniform and were exposed to the same risks as male agents, namely violent interrogations, torture, and deportation. Thirteen of them paid for their commitment with their lives and only three returned from the camps.

The experience of these women may come as a surprise given the societal expectations of the time. In 1940, it seemed inconceivable to send women on military missions behind enemy lines, at a time when the governments involved in the conflict used women as guarantors of the family unit. It is precisely the assumptions of the period that played in favor of their recruitment. Women were able to move around more freely without drawing undue attention. Conversely, men were natural suspects in the eyes of the Germans, especially from the summer of 1942 and the introduction of the Compulsory Labour Service (Service du Travail Obligatoire, STO).

Although the F section and its female agents have been extensively written about, Mission France constitutes an original piece of work as Kate Vigurs had the opportunity of conducting interviews with two veterans, Pearl Witherington and Yvonne Baseden. Vigurs also draws widely on all available primary sources (unfortunately, a lot of files were “weeded out” after the war and many others were destroyed in a fire at SOE Headquarters on Baker Street in 1946), and the amount of research carried out is quite impressive, drawing on personal files, oral archives, and memoirs but also on war crimes trial records and affidavits.

Mission France’s greatest strength lies in Vigurs’s will to introduce the thirty-nine women all together instead of telling their stories individually. Moreover, while some agents like Violette Szabo or Odette Sansom have become household names and their achievements are widely known, most of these war heroines have fallen into oblivion. Yet they are all worthy of our attention. Vigurs thus tells the stories of several women who have never been mentioned or at any rate very rarely, and takes up the challenge of interweaving their stories, sketching their journeys from early recruitment to their undercover missions behind enemy lines. This new angle allows the author to analyze the way they interacted with one another while shedding light on the achievements of overshadowed figures. As stated by Vigurs herself, “far from seeking to undermine the images of high-profile agents, I aim to redress the clear imbalance of recognition. So the primary purpose of this book is to bring to light, however briefly, the journeys of all thirty-nine women” (p. 9).

Another much-needed purpose of this book is to reveal the true nature of these women’s experiences, attitudes, and characters, departing from the preconceived, hagiographic public perception that, over time, has been distorted by a romanticized and often glamorized vision of SOE female
agents. Vigurs thus approaches these women in their human dimensions, focusing on their strengths, bravery, and determination but also acknowledging their frailties and mistakes and mentioning the security slips that sometimes led to dreadful consequences for them as well as their fellow resisters. As mentioned by the author, “all thirty-nine women are included in a way that seeks to bring due recognition to their endeavours, and which offers criticism as well as plaudits to those who undertook SOE work behind enemy lines” (p. 12).

Vigurs tells their interwoven stories and traces their journeys, placing them within the wider context of war and of SOE, both chronologically and thematically. The first part, entitled “Foundations,” goes back over the origins of SOE and the selection and recruitment of the first “trailblazers,” introducing colorful figures like Virginia Hall, whose observations of life in occupied France were crucial to SOE agents. One of the seemingly innocuous pieces of information concerned the smoking ban for women, who were no longer allowed to buy cigarettes. The second part, called “War,” relates the rise and fall of PROSPER, by far the largest F section circuit, while the “army of shadows” subpart narrates the run-up to D-Day. Indeed, the role of the organization evolved as the war progressed. Between 1941 and 1943, sabotage activities mainly concerned strategic targets. In the months leading up to the landings, sabotage activities intensified and focused more on cutting off communication routes (railroads and bridges but also power and telephone lines), which affected the enemy’s communications of all kinds. This second part ends with the “Incarceration” chapter, which deals with the imprisonment of agents who had fallen into the hands of the Gestapo. It provides a transition to the final part of the book—also its darkest and most powerful—entitled “Death and Deliverance.”

In this very sensitive section, Vigurs succeeds in finding the right tone to narrate the fate of the agents sent to concentration camps, including harrowing details concerning the deaths of Andrée Borrel, Vera Leigh, Sonia Olschanesky, and Diana Rowden, executed at Natzweiler. These agents had fallen under the sadly notorious Nacht und Nebel (night and fog) decree that planned the “disappearance” without a trace of all those opposed to the Nazi regime. Of the sixteen women sent to the concentration camps, only three survived and were able to tell their stories. The others would have fallen into oblivion as the Night and Fog decree had intended, had it not been for the determination and relentless efforts of their staff officer, Vera Atkins. Vera was undoubtedly the person who knew the agents best, the one they confided in and the one who helped them to write their wills at the start of each mission. Atkins went in search of each of “her girls,” visiting the camps and attending trials after the war, ultimately delivering the story of what had happened to them.

Kate Vigurs’s Mission France is an essential book for both scholars and readers interested in SOE and the Second World War. It successfully adds to the works of earlier SOE historians.[1] One minor shortcoming is paradoxically related to its main strength and the author’s will to weave the thirty-nine stories together. In some sections, the approach makes it a bit difficult to follow, especially in case of a fragmented reading. Likewise, although the author made sure to contextualize these stories in their broader settings, for a readership that is not familiar with the French context of collaboration, further elements depicting life under Nazi occupation and Vichy France would have been useful additions. Nevertheless, this in no way detracts from the quality and value of this very ambitious and highly readable book.

Note


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