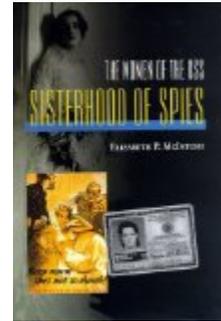


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Elizabeth P. McIntosh. *Sisterhood of Spies: The Women of the OSS*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1998. xiv + 282 pp. \$27.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55750-598-9.

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Published on H-Minerva (August, 2002)



## Women Spies of World War II

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Elizabeth McIntosh's *Sisterhood of Spies* details the history of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the World War II precursor to the CIA. What gives McIntosh's telling of the story particular poignancy is that she served in the Asian field of operations for the OSS during the war, and adds her personal perspective to the book, including recollections of people and places as well as her experiences. Based primarily on interviews, the book attempts to "recapture and document for the reader that exciting period in our history when women served as a true Sisterhood of Spies" (p. xiv). In order to do this, approximately the first half of the book constitutes a chapter-by-chapter account of the different branches of the OSS that were responsible for activities such as coding, research, and propaganda. The chapters in the latter half of the book focus more closely on the activities and experiences of individual women.

It is in the second half of the book that McIntosh's goal can be most clearly seen, as she recounts numerous stories including those of women who went behind enemy lines and were captured by the Germans. The anecdotes related here start to portray some of the adventure and excitement that these women must have experienced, even as the chapters discuss the hardship and danger that they faced. These chapters provide McIntosh's most thorough commentary on the uniqueness of women as spies, their particular contributions, as well as how they were regarded and treated. For example, she makes note of such factors as medals that women re-

ceived, and times when women spies received information or engaged in missions of importance, noting that it was one of the women stationed in Ceylon that first reported on the Japanese labor camp later immortalized in the movie *The Bridge on the River Kwai*.

Yet these comments are sparser than a reader interested in women's contributions might hope. Given the organization of the book, the first half does not relate detail on individual women, but instead emphasizes the operations of the entire OSS. In doing so, men often become the focus of chapters. For example, McIntosh purports to tell of Jane Clark, who was assigned to research the movements of a Nazi Waffen-SS officer. The story told, however, is that of the German officer—what he did during the war and his situation at the war's end—with little information about Clark herself, only what she gathered about the officer. Indeed, those reading the book for anecdotes of women spies will find this first half, with its emphasis on the duties of different branches of the OSS, sorely lacking. Moreover, even though McIntosh provides comments regarding how women were perceived or treated, this evidence is less developed and certainly not the focus of the book.

At numerous points throughout the book McIntosh's comments seem to reinforce stereotypes and attitudes about women. The women spies giggle, join up in order to find husbands, and are remembered by others for their looks and personality. For example, one OSS agent is remembered by a colleague as "a marvelous combination of beauty and brains, and she loved to swim nude in

the Danube,' he recalled with a smile" (p. 83). These comments, while perhaps accurate, tend to negate other evidence concerning the women's professionalism. McIntosh also continuously comments on what women did after the war. Unfortunately, this includes great attention being paid to their husbands' careers, their children, and their hobbies. A prime example details how one woman agent was proposed to by another male agent (p. 238). This emphasis on family and free time reflects, in part, the era in which McIntosh and these women lived, when wartime experiences may well have been exceptional and the lives of female spies conformed to the conventional standards once the war was over. However, the attention

paid to these details seems to mark the women's experiences in the OSS as outside the norm—a norm they readily acceded to afterwards. Thus, any political message about how women can contribute to wartime operations is contravened by these comments.

Overall, McIntosh's book is an interesting look into OSS activities during World War II, including how the OSS started and how it evolved into the CIA. The book, however, is less useful as an in-depth study into women's roles, either in how these activities opened up new roles for women or how women were perceived in these roles. The book touches on these ideas, but only in passing, as they are not central to the book's purpose.

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**Citation:** Heidi Hamilton. Review of McIntosh, Elizabeth P., *Sisterhood of Spies: The Women of the OSS*. H-Minerva, H-Net Reviews. August, 2002.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=6602>

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