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Kate Vigurs, *Mission France: The True History of the Women of SOE*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2021. xxii + 301 pp. Maps, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$27.50 U.S. (cl.) ISBN 9780300208573.

Review by Rachel Nuñez, Hollins University.

In June 1940, in the wake of the fall of France to the Nazis, Churchill established the Special Operations Executive (SOE), with the goal of conducting espionage and sabotage and aiding resistance movements in occupied Europe. Its directive was “to set Europe ablaze.” The section focused on France would be known as “F section” and would ultimately infiltrate 480 agents into France, including thirty-nine women.

These women are the subject of Kate Vigurs’ lively book, *Mission France: The True History of the Women of SOE*. The most famous of these women—like Violette Szabó, who was interrogated, tortured, and executed at Ravensbruck, or Odette Sansom, who survived her imprisonment—have received ample public attention (both women were the subject of films in the 1950s). In contrast, the lives and exploits of the others have remained less known, an imbalance Vigurs aims to correct. Drawing on archival records (including personnel files of the women), biographies and autobiographies, and interviews she conducted (with some of the agents, others who worked alongside them, and their descendants), Vigurs details the origins of SOE, including its controversial decision in 1942 to recruit women agents; the training provided to new recruits; each woman’s background; their infiltration into France and the actions they carried out; and their fates at the end of the war.

As Vigurs shows, the background of section F women varied. They came from many nationalities (French, American, English, Polish). Some were married or widowed, others were single. Several of them were Jewish and one was Muslim. There were also notable similarities. Many of them had parents of different nationalities and/or had emigrated during their childhood, had traveled widely, and spoke multiple languages, including French. Most of them, whatever their country of origin, had experience living in France, at least before the occupation. They found their way to SOE through different means. A few were the wives or sisters of SOE agents; others were recruited through other women’s organizations like the Women’s Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) or the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (with the delightful acronym of FANY).

Once potential agents came to the attention of SOE, how were they assessed? What was SOE looking for? The primary criteria were that one had knowledge of France and spoke at least some French. Some candidates seem to have been weeded out after the initial interview, but generally,

it was only during the process of training that their suitability for the work became clear. Vigurs emphasizes that training tended to be similar for men and women. Recruits were taught map reading and basic signaling, put through rigorous physical and weapons training, and practiced parachute jumping in preparation for infiltration into France. If they were training to be a wireless operator, they would learn Morse code, practice sending and receiving messages, master the skills of transposition into cipher, and learn how to fix their wireless set if the need should arise. But much of what recruits had to learn was more subtle. Pouring milk into a teacup first would be a dead giveaway for an English agent, as would cycling on the wrong side of the street; a woman smoking would draw unwanted attention, as women were not given a cigarette ration in occupied France. Of the seventy-three female recruits who started SOE training, thirty-eight passed and went on to become agents. Vigurs mentions multiple examples of women who received poor assessments yet were approved to work in the field anyway. The desperate need for agents seems to have trumped any strict standards.

The heart of the book covers the women's infiltration into France and their work in the field from late 1941 through D-Day. Chapter three, "the Fall of PROSPER," traces the rise of SOE's most extensive network in France, established in October 1942, and its collapse in mid 1943. Chapters four, "Army of Shadows," and five, "D-Day," cover preparations for the Allied invasion as well as SOE actions in the months following. Chapter six, "Incarceration," covers the imprisonment of agents who had been arrested as far back as 1943. Vigurs helpfully provides detailed biographical information about each agent as she is introduced, though the constant back and forth--in time and between action and biography--makes these chapters a bit hard to follow. While I applaud Vigurs' dedication to making sure each woman's story is told, I did wonder if focusing on fewer agents might have been more effective.

The last part of the book looks at the fate of the agents in the final days of the war. Sixteen of the women were sent to concentration camps in Germany (Natzweiler-Struthof, Dachau, and Ravensbrück). Of those, only two would survive. Many of the agents had been arrested under Hitler's "night and fog" decree (*Nacht und Nebel*) that aimed to "disappear" political activists and resisters without a trace; they were not allowed to mingle with other prisoners and thus little information about them remains. The two chapters on their deaths are the strongest parts of the book, as the story narrows to fewer women and Vigurs carefully pieces together the limited and often conflicting evidence we have of their final days. Particularly haunting is the story of the four women taken to Natzweiler-Struthof who were given lethal injections and then cremated, in one case while still alive.

For the fortunate agents who survived the war, transition back into "normal" life wasn't easy. Many were dealing with physical and mental trauma. One agent turned to painting to help process her experience. Some got married, others got divorced. Three of them returned to France in 1945 and 1946 as part of the Judex missions to evaluate SOE's work and thank individuals who had supported their efforts. Vera Atkins, the agents' SOE handler, focused on finding out what had happened to those who had gone missing.

Vigurs' intended audience seems to be readers interested in British spy craft during the Second World War. France's own situation during the war--defeat in 1940, the establishment of the Vichy regime, collaboration with the Nazis, daily life, and, notably resistance--receives surprisingly little attention and tends to come up only as brief asides. For example, Vigurs mentions only in passing that "During the Nazi occupation there were collaborators in France"

(p. 37). This doesn't necessarily undermine her stated purpose, which is to tell the stories of women agents in SOE. It does mean, however, that historians interested in France's experience during the war, the war's impact on gender roles, or debates about the forms and meaning of resistance may be frustrated that Vigurs does not engage with any of the abundant scholarly work in these fields in recent decades. Additionally, readers without a strong grasp of the trajectory of the war may find themselves confused as little context is provided. An opening chapter providing historical background would have helped immensely.

What led these women to agree to undertake this work—or in some cases, to actually seek it out? Perhaps due to the sheer number of women included and the incorporation of their biographies across the book, Vigurs never offers a systematic discussion of motivations. A large proportion of the women had experienced loss of male loved ones as a result of the war. Patriotism certainly seems to have been a factor: supposedly, the final words of two agents just before their execution were “Vive la France” and “liberté.” Two of the agents were Jewish: Sonia Olschanesky had been arrested in a round up in June 1942 but remarkably, was freed before deportation; Denise Bloch just narrowly escaped the Vel d'Hiv roundup one month later. Nancy Wake explicitly claimed that witnessing Nazi treatment of Jews in Vienna in the 1930s had resolved her to “make things difficult for their rotten party” (p. 131). Were any of these women motivated by political ideology? Or by a desire for adventure? Vigurs includes the fascinating example of Lise de Baissac, who, upon arriving in France, was shocked to learn that she would be working “only” as a courier (she had assumed she would be the circuit leader); she was also critical of the circuit's socialist leanings and questioned whether it was wise for SOE to be arming socialists at all.

While Vigurs clearly wants the reader to recognize the contributions of these agents *as women*, she never really makes gender a specific aspect of her analysis. Sprinkled throughout the narrative are anecdotes about how the agents used assumptions about femininity to their advantage. Nancy Wake claimed “women's problems” to avoid early morning runs (p. 33); more impressively, Noor Inayat Khan, after being arrested by the Gestapo and interrogated for several hours, requested a bath; when her interrogator told her to leave the door ajar, she claimed modesty and was allowed to close the door and then “climbed out the bathroom window and attempted to flee across the rooftops of Paris” (p. 166). Yet Vigurs never really explores in what ways gender might have been relevant to their experiences. The threat of sexual violence in particular is left largely unaddressed (she mentions only in passing that an agent was raped by two SS officers in 1944) (p. 153). Similarly, in her assessment, “F section ignored all precepts and prejudices by recruiting and deploying women” (p. 256). But being willing to set aside common gender stereotypes for the purposes of more effectively supporting SOE's mission in France does not mean gender did not matter at all. Though Vigurs is focused on the women agents, it might have been interesting to offer some comparisons with how male agents were written about in SOE sources. In what ways and to what extent did gender matter?

That said, this is a well-researched and very readable book. Vigurs has done an admirable job bringing to light the stories of these thirty-nine fascinating women.

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