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Wives of Secret Agents: Spyscapes of the Second World War and Female Agency

Claire Hubbard-Hall and Adrian O'Sullivan¹

Abstract

Few existing archival records or secondary sources appear to narrate or describe the circumstances, relationships, and activities of “spy wives” during the Second World War. Intelligence historians currently find themselves at a turning point, where new approaches to the writing of intelligence history have been called for that transcend the study of operations and policy, while drawing when necessary upon the methodologies of such adjacent disciplines as social history and historical geoinformatics. It is therefore surely appropriate to conduct an examination of the hitherto neglected social phenomenon of female agency in the “spyscape” of wartime British and German covert operations. Through an examination of case studies of individual wives of intelligence operatives, constructed on the basis of

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information gathered from scattered primary and secondary sources, it is possible to assemble and analyse a wide, highly differentiated range of gender relationships at the intersection of the manifest and secret worlds.

Keywords: Abwehr; covert space; espionage; MI6; SOE; spyscape; war; wives.

Introduction

The experience of women married to spies during the Second World War has routinely been omitted from wartime operational intelligence narratives or in most cases relegated to a mere footnote. War brides,² wives of active servicemen,³ wives of prisoners of war,⁴ wives of demobbed servicemen,⁵ and war widows⁶ have to-date received scholarly attention, but the “voice” of those married to intelligence operatives remains “missing” from wartime intelligence studies. Such women were connected to the fighting front via the clandestine nature of their husbands’ wartime occupation. Unlike the wives of servicemen, who resided on the home front in a visible and overt manner, those married to spies dwelled within the covert space that existed (and still exists) between the “spyscape” or secret world of intelligence organisations and their operatives, and the manifest world, the wartime home front.⁷ As an effective operational playground of spies, this liminal space connected both

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2. Duncan Barrett and Nuala Calvi, *GI Brides: The Wartime Girls Who Crossed the Atlantic for Love* (London, 2013); Teresa K. Williams, “Marriage between Japanese Women and US Servicemen since World War II,” *Amerasia Journal* 17, no. 1 (1991): 135-154.
 3. Eileen Boris, “‘You Wouldn’t Want One of ’Em Dancing with Your Wife’: Racialized Bodies on the Job in World War II,” *American Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (1998): 77-108.
 4. Jonathan F. Vance, “Canadian Relief Agencies and Prisoners of War, 1939-45,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 31, no. 2 (1996): 133-147; Hester Vaizey, “Husbands and Wives: An Evaluation of the Emotional Impact of World War Two in Germany,” *European History Quarterly* 40, no. 3 (2010): 389-411.
 5. Susan M. Hartmann, “Prescriptions for Penelope: Literature on Women’s Obligations to Returning World War II Veterans,” *Women’s Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 5, no. 3 (1978): 223-239.
 6. Janis Lomas “‘So I Married Again’: Letters from British Widows of the First and Second World Wars,” in *History Workshop Journal* (Oxford, 1994), 218-227.
 7. George Simmel suggested at the turn of the 20th century that secrecy offers “the possibility of a second world alongside the manifest world; and that the latter is decisively influenced by the former.” George

wartime worlds, and as a consequence of their husbands' covert actions, such women found themselves as co-occupiers of the clandestine world. Defined by marital status, their lives were shaped, knowingly or unknowingly, by their husbands' wartime espionage and counterintelligence work, yet they were still expected to uphold feminine constructions of being a wife and mother. Many wives experienced separation from family and friends; poor mental wellbeing and low resilience during prolonged periods of operational absence; family (in)stability; "moral laxity"; the inevitable element of risk and danger; and for some, a crisis of identity through the act of cover and role play to the extent that some wives questioned their husbands' loyalty to them and the state. In some cases, the clandestine convergence of such factors influenced their husband's decisions and behaviour, which in turn had an impact upon wartime intelligence operations. For example, Araceli Pujol (née Gonzalez), wife of the Security Service (MI5) double-cross agent GARBO (Juan Pujol), experienced severe homesickness when relocated to Britain. She threatened to disclose her husband's espionage activity to the Spanish Embassy if the British did not let her return home to Spain. Had this occurred, it would have had a direct impact on Operation FORTITUDE, the D-Day deception operation, as Pujol was responsible for running a network of agents that fed false information to the Nazis.⁸

By examining the nature of these women's socio-marital relationships with their spy husbands, it is possible to recast their lives, thereby writing their experiences into history and

Simmel, "The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies," *American Journal of Sociology* 11, no. 4 (January 1906): 462.

⁸ See: Ben Macintyre, *Double Cross: The True Story of the D-Day Spies* (London, 2016); Mary Kathryn Barbier, *D-Day Deception: Operation Fortitude and the Normandy Invasion* (Westport, 2007); J.C. Masterman, *The Double-Cross System in the War of 1939 to 1945* (New Haven, CT, 1972).

demonstrating the need to explore the broader spectrum of human agency within Second World War intelligence history. By drawing upon a range of Allied and Axis wartime intelligence files, post-war spy memoirs, and rare examples of memoirs penned by their wives, several carefully selected case studies of women married to agents of the German military intelligence service (the Abwehr), the Security Service (MI5), the Secret Intelligence Service (MI6), and the Special Operations Executive (SOE) are presented here, in an attempt to reconstruct the lives of those currently missing from the historical narrative, despite the impact the secret world had upon their lives, and vice versa. Whether their husbands fully or selectively disclosed the true nature of their secret work, or never at all, such women found themselves caught within a web of secrecy and deception, having to respond to certain situations as they arose. These occurred at specific points during a husband's life as a spy, where particular actions within the clandestine world of wartime intelligence initiated a series of events which had an impact on the lives of agent wives.

Such actions occurred as a result of a husband's recruitment, throughout the vetting process, and during his operational activity at home or abroad, with some wives accompanying their husbands on overseas postings. Other spy-related occurrences included possible financial difficulties and criminal charges, defection, retirement, and possible injury and/or death as a result of operational service. Equally, a wife's actions could also support or threaten her husband's intelligence work. For example, a wife may have played a role in ensuring her husband's recruitment and/or defection, or she may have threatened her husband's secret employer by suing for compensation after the death of her husband. This happened when the British agent Sidney Reilly, known as the "Ace of Spies", died at the hands of the Soviet Secret Service (OGPU) in 1925. As a result of his death, his two former

wives⁹ sued MI6 for compensation.¹⁰ Such evidence reinforces the importance of a wife's presence and agency within the secret world of the intelligence services, highlighting the need to understand how secrecy was managed and negotiated by the State, and an agent's spouse and family during periods of peace and war.

Constructing the Missing Marital Narratives

The question remains as to why most women married to secret agents remain missing from the historical narrative of Second World War intelligence history. The answer is twofold. First, intelligence historians have barely begun to explore the secret war. With historians still writing operational histories, the focus is still very much on intelligence missions and operations.¹¹ This state of the specialist literature, combined with the large number of spy

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9. Famous for his role in the international Zinoviev Letter scandal, Sidney Reilly married twice. Under suspicious circumstances, he married his first wife, the widow Margaret Thomas (née Callaghan) in 1898. It is highly probable that both played a part in the death of her first husband, the Reverend Hugh Thomas. His second marriage to the Russian actress Pepita Bobadilla in 1923 was bigamous; she only became aware of the fact after Reilly's death. See: John Ainsworth, "Sidney Reilly's Reports from South Russia, December 1918-March 1919," *Europe-Asia Studies* 50, no. 8 (1998): 1447. Sidney Reilly's memoir contains several interesting chapters written by his second wife, who sheds light on her experiences of being married to Sidney and those following his disappearance. See: Sidney George Reilly and Pepita Bobadilla, *Britain's Master Spy: The Adventures of Sidney Reilly* (New York, 1933).
 10. Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones, *In Spies We Trust: The Story of Western Intelligence* (Oxford, 2015), 52.
 11. An example of this can be seen in the recent body of work on British and German intelligence operations in Persia (Iran) and the Middle East. Adrian O'Sullivan has written several ground-breaking works in this area: *The Baghdad Set: Iraq through the Eyes of British Intelligence, 1941-45* (London, 2019); *Nazi Secret Warfare in Occupied Persia (Iran): The Failure of the German Intelligence Services, 1939-45* (Basingstoke, 2014); *Espionage and Counterintelligence in Occupied Persia (Iran): The Success of the*

memoirs and autobiographies, and countless spy biographies, feeds the public's insatiable appetite for all things espionage-related. Second, the wives of secret agents are rarely mentioned in the official government records. They only gain mention if they impacted upon secret operations and/or the covert performance of their husbands. In a few cases, the security services of a specific country were proactive, in the sense that they put in place certain safeguarding measures to oversee and protect families while agents were on active operational duty. For example, in South Africa, vigilance committees were established to provide quick communication between the central government and its rural districts. One of the committees' major roles was to "immediately report all cases of hardship from whatever cause arising as affecting the wives and families of those away on active service with a view to prompt examination and where necessary, early redress."¹² However, such glimpses into the marital life of a spy, his wife, and their family typically remain buried deep within contemporary records and the current body of historiographical studies.

In 2002, the doyen of Second World War intelligence history, John Ferris, urged fellow scholars to adopt new approaches to existing archival material, if future progress were to be

Allied Secret Services, 1941-45 (Basingstoke, 2015); "Joe Spencer's Ratcatchers: British Security Intelligence in Occupied Persia," *Asian Affairs: Journal of the Royal Society for Asian Affairs* 48, no. 2 (July 2017): 296-312; "Neglected Narratives of Nazi Subversion," *Journal of The Iran Society* 2, no. 16 (September 2017): 7-19.

12. Memo by Brink Esselen and Collyer dated 6 June 1940, South African National Archive, Transvaal Archive Depot, Jan Christian Smuts papers, A1, vol. 143, cited in Kent Fedorowich, "British Espionage and British Counter-intelligence in South Africa and Mozambique, 1939-1944," *Historical Journal*, 48, no. 1 (2005): 215.

made in the field.¹³ One year after his call to arms, Tammy Proctor's study of female spies during the First World War was published. Within her introduction, she highlighted how "histories of intelligence, military strategy, and societies have not overlapped. Past histories of intelligence would best be described as intellectual and diplomatic studies of policy."¹⁴ The focus of her work was female intelligence agents — an area which at the time deserved more intense historiographical scrutiny. By writing women into intelligence history more broadly, Proctor broke new ground, moving away from the popular perception of female spies as being defined by their sexuality. Such women were no more honey traps than they were seductresses. This highly sexualised trope can also be found in the cases of early modern "she-intelligencers". A recent study of female agents accused of honey-trapping during the seventeenth century found no such evidence to support such practice. In the first study of early modern women spies, Nadine Akkerman found that women were just as effective as men, possessing the same level of spycraft, which included the art of secret writing, using ciphers, and monitoring a range of communication forms. Interestingly, Akkerman's research revealed that such women only became active as single independent agents after their husbands left them or died, or happened to be constantly travelling, leaving their wives alone. Other female agents were unmarried.¹⁵ Akkerman concludes her study with

13. John Ferris, "The Road to Bletchley Park: The British Experience with Signals Intelligence, 1892-1945," *Intelligence and National Security* 17, no. 1 (2002): 56.

14. Tammy M. Proctor, *Female Intelligence: Women and Espionage in the First World War* (New York, 2003), 3-4.

15. Nadine Akkerman, *Invisible Agents: Women and Espionage in Seventeenth-Century Britain* (Oxford, 2018), 225.

the words: “The only question that remains is why there were not more of them. The answer, of course, is surely that there were, we simply have not caught them yet.”¹⁶

The work of Proctor and Akkerman demonstrates how the study of female intelligence agents “not only adds new subject matter but also forces a critical re-examination of the premises and standards of existing scholarly work.”¹⁷ By writing women into intelligence history, new histories are created which focus on female agency. Interestingly, the contemporary awareness that the Second World War was having a profound impact on gender identities and relationships took some time to enter the subsequent historiography of the war.¹⁸ Such delayed attention rested on the simple fact that it was only in 1973, with the revelation of the ULTRA secret, that historians suddenly appreciated the value of intelligence to Allied success.¹⁹ The subsequent decades saw former intelligence personnel slowly share their experiences. This was accompanied by the equally slow release of wartime intelligence files,²⁰ including the archive of the Special Operations Executive (SOE),²¹ whose final

16. Ibid.

17. A.D. Gordon et al., “The Problem of Women’s History” in B. Carroll (ed.), *Liberating Women’s History* (Urbana, IL, 1976), 89.

18. Corinna Peniston-Bird and Emma Vickers, eds., *Gender and the Second World War: The Lessons of War* (London, 2017), 1.

19. Gustave Bertrand’s *Enigma ou la plus grande énigme de la guerre 1939-45* (Paris: Plon, 1973) did not quite have the same explosive impact as the following study published a year later and in the English language: F.W. Winterbotham, *The Ultra Secret* (New York, 1974).

20. Not all wartime intelligence agencies have released records. MI6 records remain closed, probably forever.

21. SOE is recorded as the only British wartime organisation to deploy women into the field.

records were released to The National Archives (TNA) in 2002.²² A number of historians are now venturing beyond the construction of operational narratives and the discussion of intelligence policy, to “mine the record” in new and interesting ways, employing interdisciplinary approaches.²³ For example, Juliette Pattinson’s work on SOE adopts a gendered analysis of both male and female agents when examining their attempts to “pass” as French citizens via the adoption of cover identities.²⁴ Shompa Lahiri builds on Pattinson’s work, exploring the changing identity over time of SOE operative Noor-un-nisa Inayat Kahn.²⁵ More recently, other wartime intelligence services have attracted a gendered approach. Katrin Paehler’s study of the German agent Hildegard Beetz establishes how Beetz used gendered expectations of the time to her advantage while carefully negotiating her path as a female agent of Amt VI (Office VI) of the Reichssicherheitshauptamt (Reich Security

22. See: Duncan Stuart, “‘Of Historical Interest Only’: The Origins and Vicissitudes of the SOE Archive,” *Intelligence and National Security* 20, no. 1 (2005): 14-26.

23. For examples of new and innovative research, see: Chris Smith, “Bright Chaps for Hush-Hush Jobs: Masculinity, Class and Civilians in Uniform at BP,” in Linsey Robb and Juliette Pattinson, eds., *Men, Masculinities and Male Culture in the SWW* (London, 2018), 145-168; Claire Hubbard-Hall and Adrian O’Sullivan, “Landscapes of Intelligence in the Third Reich: Visualising Abwehr Operations and ‘Covert Space’ during the Second World War” (forthcoming 2019).

24. See: Juliette Pattinson, *Behind Enemy Lines: Gender, Passing and the Special Operations Executive in the Second World War* (Manchester, 2007); idem, “‘Passing Unnoticed in a French crowd’: The Passing Performances of British SOE Agents in Occupied France,” *National Identities* 12, no. 3 (2010): 291-308; idem, “The Twilight War: Gender and Espionage, Britain, 1900-1950,” in Simona Sharoni, Julia Welland, Linda Steiner, Jennifer Pedersen, eds., *Handbook on Gender and War* (Cheltenham, 2016), 66-85.

25. See: Shompa Lahiri, “Clandestine Mobilities and Shifting Embodiments: Noor-un-nisa Inayat Khan and the Special Operations Executive, 1940–44,” *Gender and History* 19, no. 2 (2007): 305-323.

Directorate) (RSHA VI), the political intelligence service of the SS.²⁶ While a small number of historians have begun to write women into intelligence history, with the majority of Second World War studies concentrating on the agency and experience of female spies,²⁷ this article will provide examples of how a different group of women — those not actually employed in intelligence work — shared the same covert space as operatives to whom they happened to be married. Intelligence work was predominately a male occupation due to a “very long standing and ill-founded prejudice against the employment of women as agents.”²⁸ Women were seen to be a useful part of their spy husbands’ world providing cover and

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26. Katrin Paehler, *The Third Reich’s Intelligence Service: The Career of Walter Schellenberg* (Cambridge, 2017), 227-230; idem, “Gender and Nazi Espionage: Hildegard Beetz, the Ciano Affair, and Female Agency,” in Corinna Peniston-Bird and Emma Vickers, eds., *Gender and the Second World War: The Lessons of War* (London, 2017), 73-87. For other works on the subject of Hildegard Beetz, see: Richard W. Cutler, “Three Careers, Three Names: Hildegard Beetz, Talented Spy,” *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 22, no. 3: 515-535.
27. A growing body of work on SOE female agents exists. See: Sarah Helm, *A Life in Secrets: Vera Atkins and the Missing Agents of WWII* (New York, 2005); Deirdre Osborne, “‘I Do Not Know about Politics or Governments ... I Am a Housewife’: The Female Secret Agent and the Male War Machine in Occupied France (1942–5),” *Women: A Cultural Review* 17, no. 1 (2006): 42-64. Historians remain fascinated with the female codebreakers of Bletchley Park and have noted the number of marriages that emerged from the stressful secret environment of such wartime sites; see: Sinclair McKay, *The Secret Life of Bletchley Park: The WWII Codebreaking Centre and the Men and Women Who Worked There* (London, 2010); Tessa Dunlop, *The Bletchley Girls: War, Secrecy, Love and Loss: The Women of Bletchley Park Tell Their Story* (London, 2015); Michael Smith, *The Debs of Bletchley Park and Other Stories* (London, 2015).
28. Report on the work of MS (recruitment and operation of agents) during the Second World War, KV 4/227, The National Archives (TNA). Maxwell Knight championed the use of women as agents, arguing that a potential recruit should not be penalised because of their gender, but selected on their positive attributes.

support, but very rarely was this process of heteronormativity reversed. Spy wives were far more numerous than spy husbands. The heterosexual marital relationship served as an important bridge between the covert and overt worlds, as intelligence organisations extended the umbrella of official secrecy to marital spouses who mostly bought into the code of silence and associated security restrictions.²⁹ Spy wives certainly merit the long overdue attention of historians, because without their support many male intelligence officers and agents would never have been able to fulfil their secret roles or execute their secret missions.

Keepers of Secrets

From the early modern period to that of the Cold War,³⁰ women who were married to spies, agent provocateurs, codebreakers, and whistleblowers were all keepers of secrets, and by extension protected the interests of the powerful “secret state”. However, these women were burdened with the impact that such a world had on their marital and family relations. While some wives enjoyed the perks that came with being married to a spy, others undoubtedly felt

29. Other wartime spy spouses and dependents such as girlfriends, mistresses, male lovers, parents, and children are groups which also require further scholarly attention. See, for example, Adrian O’Sullivan’s depiction of the anger and inconsolable grief of Maurice Bowra, the eminent Oxford don, when he learned of his long-time partner Adrian Bishop’s death while on secret service with SOE in the Middle East, in: Adrian O’Sullivan, *The Baghdad Set: Iraq through the Eyes of British Intelligence, 1941-45* (London, 2019), 94.

30. A small number of works on CIA wives exists. See for example: Karen L. Chiao and Mariellen B. O’Brien, *Spies’ Wives: Stories of CIA Families Abroad* (Berkeley, CA, 2001). A number of wives have penned memoirs; see: Janice Cowan, *A Spy’s Wife: The Moscow Memoirs of a Canadian Who Witnessed the End of the Cold War* (Toronto, 2006); Bina C. Kiyonaga, *My Spy: Memoir of a CIA Wife* (New York, 2001). The author married Joe Kiyonaga (a Hawaiian of Japanese heritage) in 1947.

pressure. For example, Elizabeth Elliott (née Holberton), the wife and former secretary of MI6 officer Nicholas Elliott, certainly felt the stress of the constant wartime dinner parties and embassy receptions, alongside the numerous relocations overseas. Yet, she assisted in inter-governmental relations and supported other wives who did not fare so well. Her friend Aileen Furse, second wife of the infamous Soviet penetration agent Kim Philby, was wracked by anxiety induced by an underlying mental illness and her excessive drinking, as well as her husband's infidelity. She soon became a liability to both her husband and British intelligence. Aileen and Kim's marriage was constantly tested to the limits during the war and after. Post-war, stress on the marriage doubled when news broke of the possibility that Kim was the "Third Man" of the Cambridge spies. As Philby's brother-officer Nicholas Elliott wrote in his memoir: "It is highly likely that [Aileen] ultimately had suspicions about her husband's treachery but was too loving and loyal to express them."³¹ While her husband lived with a mistress in 1951, Aileen (living in Crowborough [East Sussex] at the time with their children) was forced to take a job as a cook in Eaton Square, which was marginally nearer to where the Elliotts lived in Wilton Park (Buckinghamshire).³² Aileen would spend her off-duty hours with Elizabeth, continuing a friendship born of the wartime friendship between their husbands.

Both women were aware (either fully in the case of Elizabeth, or suspiciously in the case of Aileen) of the exact nature of their husbands' wartime profession. There was an assumption of trust that an agent's spouse would not reveal the nature of his true wartime role. The state expected wives to maintain complete secrecy. Trust was seen by certain wartime intelligence organisations to be so essential that they saw no need for robust security

31. Nicholas Elliott, *Never Judge a Man by His Umbrella* (Salisbury, 1991), 186.

32. *Ibid.*

precautions. Evidence of this can be found in an amusing conversation that Nicholas Elliott had in 1944 with the newly appointed MI6 head of security, who questioned Elliot as to how much his family knew about his work. Elliot explained that his wife knew what he did, because she used to be his secretary, and his mother knew as a matter of course. When asked if his father knew, Elliot said he did indeed, because “C” had told him in the bar at White’s that his son was a spy!³³

This conversation raises questions about the social construction of secret relationships. In the case of the wartime British secret services (MI5, MI6, and SOE), no formal regulations existed to manage secrecy between an officer or agent and his wife. It simply came down to trust. Whether an operative fully disclosed his true occupational identity to his wife or whether the wife simply guessed it was left to chance. It was also accepted by the intelligence services that their single male officers might marry their female secretaries, as Elliot did, in a sense effectively marrying within the “family” business. Of course, potential wives of foreign nationality had to be vetted. On the other hand, British nationals from the “right background” or from “good families” were strongly endorsed.³⁴

In the case of the German intelligence services, there was a significant difference between the way in which such matters were handled by the generally conservative officer corps of the Abwehr as opposed to the ideologically race-based SS foreign intelligence service, RSHA VI. Not unlike the British intelligence services, and notwithstanding the rise to power of the largely *petit-bourgeois* and working-class Nazis, social class still meant something in the mid-20th century among German military intelligence officers. Like officers

33. Nicholas Elliott, *With My Little Eye: Observations along the Way* (Norwich, 1993), 17-18.

34. See: Tammy M. Proctor, “Family Ties in the Making of Modern Intelligence,” *Journal of Social History* 39, no. 2 (2005): 451-466.

in the British secret services, many were well-connected, from “good” (even aristocratic) families, and they tended to select women of equal social standing to be their wives. Members of the SS, on the other hand, were driven by ideology. Under Himmler’s SS marriage decree of 31 December 1931, before receiving the required permission to marry, both prospective partners had to submit to a rigorous vetting procedure administered by the SS Rasse- und Siedlungshauptamt (SS Race and Settlement Directorate [RuSHA]) to ensure racial purity and that good Nazis married good Nazis.³⁵ In the absence of any objective study, it is anyone’s guess whether either approach to partner choice had any significant effect on security.

Naturally, on both sides, there were wives who were not trusted with the secret knowledge that their husbands were spies. This may have been a strategic decision on the part of their husbands’ employers, or it may have been the husbands’ tactical choice. Some women were promised marriage which never materialised, as their potential husbands chose to make them part of their cover identity, having no desire to marry. There is the case of Gabriela Lázsló, a Hungarian dancer who, after meeting Hans Christian von Kotze in Rio de Janeiro in 1941, left her partner. Von Kotze was an Abwehr agent posing as a representative of the Ministry of Economics. His mission was to establish a transmitter and relay station in Sao Paulo, after which he would travel to Canada using a different identity to spy there.³⁶ The

35. See: “Die Ehefrauen” [The Wives] in *Generation des Unbedingten: Das Führungskorps des Reichssicherheitshauptamtes* (Hamburg, 2003), 190-203.

36. For an account of von Kotze’s activities as an agent of the Abwehr in Brazil, see: Stanley E. Hilton, *Hitler’s Secret War in South America 1933-45: German Military Espionage and Allied Counterespionage in Brazil* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1999). This is the American edition of the book first published as *Suástica sobre o Brasil: a história da espionagem alemã no Brasil, 1939-1944* (Rio de Janeiro, 1977).

two met at the Cassino Assyrio, after which Lázsló became his companion. Von Kotze funded their flat and gregarious lifestyle. He later promised to marry her, but it remained an empty offer.³⁷ In a wartime deposition, Lázsló recalled how von Kotze would spend large sums of money in the casinos, but she never asked where the money came from. She assumed his story was true. Lázsló noted that several people visited von Kotze including a man named “Werner”, with whom he spoke German.³⁸ She had assumed they were discussing business deals. Lázsló “never noticed anything suspicious between the two of them.”³⁹ There is no record of how Gabriela Lázsló felt, when she became aware of her future husband’s espionage work, and that she had played a part in his cover identity. One can only imagine the emotional rollercoaster that accompanied such news, but it does raise questions concerning the methods von Kotze used to conceal his true identity which led to Lázsló’s dependence on the relationship and her reduced power within it.

“Invisible” Agency: Locating the Evidence

Although the subject of “spy wives” during the Second World War is not well documented in the secondary literature, it is possible to obtain information about their lives. Memoirs penned by wives themselves are rare but nonetheless do exist.⁴⁰ However, in order to locate them and

37. Ibid., 111.

38. Ibid., 107.

39. Gabriela Lázsló, deposition, 28 June 1943, TSN file 4007, volume 1 (TSN – Tribunal de Segurança Nacional [and Arquivo do]), cited in Hilton, *Hitler’s Secret War*, 107.

40. Betty Chapman and Ronald L. Bonewitz, *Mrs Zigzag: The Extraordinary Life of a Secret Agent’s Wife* (Stroud, 2013). This remains one of the few memoirs authored by a spy’s wife. However, Betty did not marry Eddie Chapman (alias Agent ZIGZAG) until after the war, yet their relationship began during the war and reveals some interesting insights into pre-marital life as Chapman’s girlfriend.

retrieve their experiences, historians are reliant upon scattered sources, reading between the lines of their husband's memoirs, and upon records that have somehow broken the barrier of secrecy in connection with a particular operation, action, event, or person. In the case of official records compiled by intelligence organisations, it is apparent that policies of secrecy have been inconsistently and selectively applied. Richard Aldrich has suggested that the diversity of such records has not only allowed relatively unimportant documents to be preserved, but has also permitted important secret documents to be "massaged" in a way that favours the preservation of government interests.⁴¹

It is within the unintentional silences that historians can begin to piece together the supporting or damaging role played by wives. Mark Seaman provides an example of this within his introduction to Tommy Harris's wartime report on the GARBO (Juan Pujol García) case.⁴² Seaman notes how Harris's report credits GARBO's wife, Araceli, with taking a proactive approach to her husband's recruitment as a spy, by securing an interview with the British Embassy in Spain in January 1941.⁴³ However, when reading her husband's memoir, one will find no such evidence of her supportive role, as "Pujol omits her participation from his memoirs (perhaps as a result of the couple's later estrangement), stating that he made the first approach himself."⁴⁴

41. Richard J. Aldrich, *The Hidden Hand: Britain, America and Cold War Secret Intelligence* (Woodstock, NY, 2003), 6.

42. Tomás Harris, *GARBO: The Spy Who Saved D-Day* (Toronto, 2004). This work takes the form of a transcribed wartime report compiled by Tommy Harris, an officer of MI5, which, in close cooperation with Section V of MI6, ran the network of double-cross agents. The main GARBO files can be found at KV 2/39-42, KV 2/63-71, and KV 2/101-102, TNA.

43. *Ibid.*, 10.

44. *Ibid.*

When confronted with such lacunae, professional intelligence historians have a duty to interrogate the records intensively, employing focussed sets of questions to extract diverse information, which will vary depending on whether a wife knew her husband was a spy, or not. We need to discover precisely what types of support “knowing” wives provided their husbands with, such as the protection of cover, the recruitment and entertainment of personnel and contacts, cipher work (encryption and decryption), communications (“cutout” and courier functions), finance and logistics, and even emotional support — very challenging to research and analyse. With wives “in the dark”, we need to ascertain how they coped with such behaviours as the husband’s unexplained absences, lies, or furtiveness. In all cases, questions must be asked about such purely domestic issues as the management of secrecy or even criminality vis-à-vis family or friends, and the effects of such extreme circumstances as defection, job loss, injury, or death. The list of questions connected to the personal wartime experiences of “spy wives” is theoretically limitless. However, the carefully selected case studies in this article represent an attempt to explore just a few of the above lines of enquiry and to further excavate the “spyscape” of the Second World War.

Married to a Spy

1. Full Disclosure

In a general sense, knowing was the norm. Wives who knew they were married to men employed by the secret services had either worked it out themselves, or the husbands had disclosed to them at least partially the true nature of their wartime work. However, the level of information known varied among couples, dependent on husbands’ complete trust in their wives’ ability to keep secrets hidden. Many a wife even helped in the husband’s covert work by hosting potential agents and assets, often in the family home. For example, Nicholas Elliott’s wife played an important part in the defection of Abwehr officer Erich Vermehren,

which took place in their Istanbul apartment. In many instances, husbands imparted only selective details without revealing operational details, leaving some wives feeling isolated during lengthy periods of operational absence. For example, one of the British intelligence officers captured during the 1939 Venlo incident,⁴⁵ Captain Sigismund Payne Best, has described how, on the morning of the operation (9 November), his wife May was not up, but that he spoke to her before leaving the house about how he might not be back for dinner, and that she was not to wait for him after 7.30 pm. His wife had told him not to hurry back, as he drove too fast, which made her nervous. “I have a bridge party here this afternoon,” she said, “and it will be better if you have dinner out; I shall be much happier if I know you are driving carefully.”⁴⁶ Little did May Best know that she would not see her husband again until after his release from a Nazi concentration camp at the end of the war.

Some agent-husbands married more than once. Post-war, first, second and third wives would sometimes become aware *post facto* of a husband’s secret past when they helped him write his memoirs. For example, Gayle Cairncross met John Cairncross in 1982 and supported him as news broke in 1990 that he was the fifth man of the Cambridge Five.⁴⁷ However, his first wife, Gabriella Cairncross (née Oppenheim), also lived with the revelation.

45. A successful covert ambush mounted against British intelligence on the Dutch-German border by German Sicherheitsdienst (SS Security Service [SD]) counterintelligence forces, specifically RSHA IV E under Walter Schellenberg. Two MI6 officers were captured and imprisoned, causing a serious setback for British intelligence. David Kahn, *Hitler’s Spies: German Military Intelligence in World War II* (Cambridge, MA, 2000), 257-259; Keith Jeffery, *The Secret History of MI6* (New York, 2010), 382-386.

46. S. Payne Best, *The Venlo Incident: A True Story of Double-Dealing, Captivity, and a Murderous Nazi Plot* (London, 2009), 15. Originally published in 1950.

47. Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky, *KGB: The Inside Story of Its Foreign Operations from Lenin to Gorbachev* (New York, 1990). This book named Cairncross as the ‘fifth man’.

Even though she had been separated from her husband since the 1960s, Gabriella had remained married to John until 1995. It was his second wife, Gayle, who diligently edited his memoir drafts and is commended in the preface by her brother-in-law, Sir Alec Cairncross, for her tenacity in getting the book published.⁴⁸ Other wives bore the legacy of their husband's secret wartime pursuits as a burden. Kim Philby's fourth wife, Eleanor, endured the hardships of her husband's defection to the Soviets during the 1960s and wrote about her experiences of joining Kim in Russia.⁴⁹

Other "spy couples" married later in life. While not always an iron-clad guarantee of marital bliss, such maturity usually implied relative ease of communication between husband and wife, a concomitant awareness of the boundaries between covert and manifest spaces and roles, and a shared acceptance of the "need-to-know" principle, leading to the application of a realistic sliding-scale of disclosure. An example would be the wartime marriage between the already distinguished archaeologist Seton Lloyd (aged 44) of SOE and the already well-known artist Ulrica "Hydie" Hyde (aged 33), then serving as a long-distance transport driver with the Royal Army Service Corps (RASC). As Hydie Lloyd was far too busy driving huge Army lorries across the deserts and mountains between Cairo and Tehran, which she continued to do after the wedding, followed by a driving job with Army Welfare in Baghdad, she played no part in Lloyd's clandestine work as an SOE propaganda officer. However, the level of disclosure in their relationship was sufficiently functional to allow them to use the covert space of SOE headquarters in a Baghdad mansion as their marital home. Thus Hydie

48. John Cairncross, *The Enigma Spy: The Story of the Man Who Changed the Course of World War Two* (London, 1997), vii.

49. Eleanor Philby, *Kim Philby: The Spy I Married* (London, 1968).

was not simply aware of her husband's covert role; she was admitted into the inner operational sanctum of SOE itself. Or, as Lloyd put it: "joining the fireside circle."⁵⁰

Some agent-husbands married before the war, and their wives played a knowing part in their pre-war espionage work. Had it not been for a Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) counter-intelligence operation led by special agent Leon Turrou in 1938 to identify and arrest active Nazi spies in the United States of America, Ignatz Griebel would most likely have still been in play when America joined the war in 1942. Griebel, implicated in a Nazi spy ring with Gustave Rumrich,⁵¹ fled to Germany before he could be subpoenaed by the FBI to appear before a federal grand jury. "On the evening of 9-10 May 1938, he drove with his wife to Pier 86, boarded the *Bremen* alone without a ticket and ducked into a hiding place when 'all ashore that's going ashore' calls were heard."⁵² He was welcomed back in Nazi Germany, but his wife, Maria Glanz Griebel, was arrested in connection with her husband's espionage charges. FBI agent Turrou published a book about the operation in 1939 entitled *The Nazi Spy Conspiracy in America*, in which he devoted an entire chapter to Maria Griebel, writing: "Going back on Griebel's career, we find women playing a prominent role."⁵³

50. Seton Lloyd, *The Interval: A Life in Near Eastern Archaeology* (Faringdon, 1986), 96-105. See also: Adrian O'Sullivan, *The Baghdad Set: Iraq through the Eyes of British Intelligence, 1941-45* (London, 2019), 249.

51. For a reliable overview of Nazi espionage operations in America, see: Hans L. Trefousse, "Failure of German Intelligence in the United States, 1935-1945," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 42, no. 1 (1955): 84-100.

52. Peter Duffy, *Double Agent: The First Hero of World War II and How the FBI Outwitted and Destroyed a Nazi Spy Ring* (New York, 2014), 42.

53. Leon G. Turrou, *The Nazi Spy Conspiracy in America* (London, 1939), 211.

Turrou noted the many conversations he had with Maria, commenting that she was a driven woman who wanted her husband to succeed. Maria had met her husband during the First World War, when she had nursed him through a bullet wound. While he was recovering at home, they corresponded. However, just before the end of the war, Maria was captured by Italian forces and held in a camp until the armistice. She then joined Griehl in Munich, where he was studying medicine. According to Turrou, she arrived in America in 1922, where she worked long hours as a nurse, to pay for Griehl's travel to America. He finally arrived in 1925, and they married shortly after. Maria continued to support Griehl through his internship and for a year's English-language tuition. After he qualified, Maria even bought him a medical practice. However, her marital devotion did not stop his womanising, which led to the failure of the practice. As a result, the Griehls moved to New York and opened an office in Yorkville, where a colony of ethnic Germans resided. Both Maria and her husband participated in local pro-Nazi *Amerikadeutscher Volksbund* (German American Bund) activities.⁵⁴ In such cases, the success of an agent was determined by a wife who had a clear idea of what she wanted, and how she was going to achieve it.

2. Household Finances

While some wives funded a "needy" husband's career route before the outbreak of war, those married to active agents during the war received financial support from the relevant intelligence service, whereas those less fortunate had to "make ends meet" by whatever means possible. Assessing MI6 and SOE intelligence operations in North Africa, Keith Jeffery notes that in September 1941 an Egyptian Jew who had served in the Italian colonial

54. *Ibid.*, 212.

army and was keen to fight the Fascist regime was recruited in Cairo and brought to Malta.⁵⁵ “Dick Jones” went on to lead the most successful of the wartime Tunisian groups and, under his conditions of service, he was to be paid seventy-five Egyptian pounds per month (about £2,500 in modern values), of which E£60 was to be paid directly to his wife.⁵⁶ His files stated that, “in the event of [his] mission being successful and that [he would] return in person”, he would be paid E£1,000 (equivalent to £34,000), and “in the event [of his] death owing to enemy action whether due to being shot as an agent or whether due to any other enemy action”,⁵⁷ his wife would receive E£3,000. The wife of George Dasch, a German spy who led the failed Operation PASTORIUS in June 1942, did not fare so well. The operation, which utilised German-American returnees to sabotage American economic targets, was the brainchild of its chief saboteur, who was married to a US citizen named Rose Marie (née Guille), known to her husband as “Snooks”. George Dasch had moved to the United States in 1922. He was initially opposed to Nazism, but he changed his views in 1939 after a visit from his mother, who praised the party. This, combined with his unfortunate financial situation, further reinforced the attraction of Nazi Germany.⁵⁸ Through poor finances (for non-payment of rent), he forced Rose Marie to sell her beauty parlour and relocate to the Bronx.⁵⁹ Being married to a spy had financial implications, and it raises interesting social questions around the economics of espionage and the impact of irregular payments or regular wages of low amounts to husbands, and whether this was enough for an agent’s or intelligence officer’s

55. Keith Jeffery, *The Secret History of MI6* (New York, 2010), 429.

56. *Ibid.*

57. *Ibid.*, 430.

58. Michael Dobbs, *Saboteurs: The Nazi Raid on America* (New York, 2005), 38.

59. *Ibid.*, 37.

dependants to survive on. For instance, how damaging to his family was the impact of an agent husband's irregular and/or poor remuneration as a field operative? Did a transfer from a secure peacetime occupation to hush-hush war work mean a reduction in income that might adversely affect the welfare of dependants? Were intelligence officers' salaries geared to the needs of single men, or were they generally sufficient for married officers to support their families? Clearly, such questioning could prove especially useful to intelligence historians because it may inform future studies of service security and morale, and of the individual psychology and behaviour of operatives.

Generally speaking, the wives of intelligence officers — whether spies, spymasters, or spycatchers — fared better than those of intelligence agents. Being married to a government employee rather than a freelance agent normally meant regular remuneration, reimbursement of expenses, and even the promise of promotions and ultimately a pension. However, life as the wife of even an MI6 head-of-station could be financially stressful, as Anni Giffey discovered when her husband Brian was posted to Baghdad in January 1943, and she accompanied him. There, amidst galloping wartime inflation, while lodging in cramped quarters in an embassy official's bungalow, Anni Giffey struggled daily with the high cost of food, servants, and entertainment. "I do wish I could get some money somehow," Anni told her diary, "we are in such desperate need of it. Brian needs his suits, I need my teeth seen to and so it goes on and there is no money — it is really terrible." Her husband even became less than popular with embassy staff and others because he was considered "anti-social". The reality was that Baghdad was an expensive and intensely social posting, especially under diplomatic cover, so the Giffeys, who had a stable marriage and valued each other's company, wisely limited their social life to a few close friends. Nevertheless, the employment stability enjoyed by intelligence officers and their wives also meant that, when it came, the impact of job loss was more severe for officers' wives than for agents' wives, who were to

some extent inured to the impermanence of their freelancing husbands' assignments. So, when Giffey was dismissed from MI6 in February 1944, suddenly and unexpectedly, Anni Giffey wrote: "Brian got the sack today. We are to leave here in just over a month's time. I'm still quite dazed. We don't quite know what is going to happen to us in future — what Brian's future, or mine for that matter, activities will be. It all was presented in a very crude form and my dearest is so terribly hurt and unhappy ... I'm certain that he'll find another job and perhaps it is all for the best."⁶⁰

3. Wellbeing and Resilience

Of course, couples could find themselves in a poor financial state during long periods of operational absence. They also felt the impact of constant overseas relocations. Both circumstances could affect the emotional wellbeing of a wife. George Dasch worked tirelessly to obtain a German passport so that he could travel to Nazi Germany. When news came that he and his wife could depart from San Francisco immediately aboard a Japanese ship, there was one problem. His wife, Rose Marie, was gravely ill in hospital with an infected uterus and life-threatening blood clots. She was in no condition to travel. With a window of ten hours to decide, Dasch chose to sail without her, stating: "I thought of my wife in the hospital, and at the same time I also remembered the hell I had raised with the consulate for the chance of going home ... I reached a quick decision to sail." He then relied on his brother and sister-in-law "to go to Snooks at the hospital the next day and explain the

60. Tina Tamman, *Portrait of a Secret Agent Who Knew Kim Philby* (York, 2014), Chapter 9.

circumstances of my sudden departure.”⁶¹ There is no record of her words upon hearing the news!

The fellow-wife of another Operation PASTORIUS agent, Alma Neubauer, was also an American citizen. Unlike Rose Marie, Alma relocated to Nazi Germany with her husband, Hermann. They had met at the 1933 Chicago World’s Fair and were married in January 1940.⁶² That same year, Hermann Neubauer had decided to return to the Fatherland and fight, but Alma was completely against the move, despite her German origin.⁶³ After remaining in Chicago for a year alone, she eventually joined Neubauer in Berlin at Easter 1941. Alma spoke no German and struggled to adapt to German life. Frustrated, she felt that they should have stayed in America. “She felt as if she was being constantly watched. The police had kept on asking why she didn’t go to work, why she didn’t have a baby, and what her family did back in the United States. She was being treated like a criminal.”⁶⁴ With the launch of Operation PASTORIUS and the subsequent absence of her husband, Alma felt isolated in an alien country. After an emotional farewell, Neubauer told her that they might not meet again. They never had that chance, as he was executed in the United States on 8 August 1942. His love for his wife never waned, for in a letter penned just before his execution, he wrote: “So my Alma, chin up because I want you to be good and goodbye, until we may meet in a better world, may God bless you! I love you, your Hermann.”⁶⁵ Alma was thereafter effectively

61. Ibid., 38. Also: Dasch FBI Statement, FBI file 98-10288-1163, 19-24 June 1942, Record Group 65, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).

62. Dobbs, *Saboteurs*, 42.

63. Ibid., 40.

64. Ibid., 42.

65. Robert K. Elder, *Last Words of the Executed* (Chicago, 2010).

trapped in a country she did not want to be in, which provides evidence of the risk that wives took to support their agent-husbands.

Such alienation could have detrimental effects on the mental health of a wife, as well as on intelligence operations. According to a British intelligence report, Araceli Pujol, the wife of British double agent GARBO (Juan Pujol), experienced such severe homesickness that it “had driven her to behave at times as if she were unbalanced.”⁶⁶ The report describes Araceli as “a hysterical, spoilt and selfish woman. [But], she was, nevertheless, intelligent and astute and probably entered into her husband’s work because it was dangerous and exciting.”⁶⁷ Araceli was extremely reluctant to leave her family in Spain, but she finally arrived in England in the spring of 1942. Finding it difficult to adapt to the “English way of living,” it took several months to find her a home that she could run without interference from the intelligence services. During her husband’s detention at Camp 020,⁶⁸ where she too was later questioned, Araceli attempted to take her own life. She was found incoherent, sitting in the kitchen with all the gas taps turned on. “To avoid any risk of an accident arrangements were made for someone to stay the night at her house ... She pleaded that it was she who had been at fault and that if her husband could be pardoned she promised she would never again interfere with his work, or behave badly, or ask to return to Spain. She signed a statement to this effect.” In a later interview, Araceli had been weeping for hours and was extremely

66. A 300-page summary of the GARBO case (1941-1945) compiled by T. Harris, 21 November 1945, Appendix XXIX, 1 is at KV 2/42, TNA.

67. *Ibid.*

68. For an excellent recent study of the secret London district interrogation facility, see: Helen Fry, *The London Cage: The Secret History of Britain's World War II Interrogation Centre* (New Haven, CT, 2017).

nervous.⁶⁹ She had good reason to be, as towards the end of June 1943, in a desperate attempt to return home to Spain, she had threatened to reveal the secret that her husband was spying for the British intelligence services.⁷⁰ Not being able to deal with the invasion of marital privacy, alongside the causal effects of espionage work, such actions provide important evidence of the lengths these women would go to, to return “home”, consequently removing themselves from the third battlefield: the “spyscape”. Had Araceli Pujol revealed her husband’s true identity, this could have severely endangered the D-Day deception plans in which her husband played an important part. The outcome of a decisive battle could have been changed through the action of an agent’s wife. How different history might have been, had it been altered through the agency of one woman, who was only linked by marital status to the secret front.

4. Operational Female Agency

Within the clandestine world of wartime intelligence, the lives of both Allied and Axis agent wives very occasionally intersected. This could have been through the notional “bogus wives” created by husbands such as Juan Pujol, otherwise known as part of the GARBO cover network,⁷¹ or through defection, such as the most significant defection of the war, that of the three Abwehr officers — Erich Vermehren, Wilhelm Hamburger, and Karl Kleczkowski — in January-February 1944. These defections would prove to be the ultimate

69. Appendix XXIX, 5, KV 2/42, TNA.

70. Ibid., 2.

71. Wives of notional agents constructed by Juan Pujol provided cover enough to fool his German handlers. They even paid the notional widow of one agent by the name of William Maximilian Gerbers. See: Agent no. 2, “Gerbers”, KV 2/41, TNA.

catalyst for Hitler's dissolving the Abwehr later that year. In this instance, history was made through the agency of two Elizabeths — both the wives of intelligence officers — one German, the other English. Erich Vermehren was married to the former Countess Elizabeth von Plettenburg, 13 years his senior. As staunch Catholics and anti-Nazis, they were committed to removing Hitler from power. Before the war, their opposition activities had earned them a place on the Gestapo's watch list. In late 1943, Vermehren was deployed to the Abwehr outstation in Istanbul. "Officially, wives were not allowed to accompany their husbands on diplomatic postings, to discourage any possibility of defection. Elizabeth, already a marked woman, remained in Berlin, in effect held hostage."⁷² Once in Turkey, Vermehren approached British intelligence and on 27 December 1943 found himself dining with Nicholas Elliott and his wife Elizabeth. "The two men talked while Elizabeth Elliott served dinner, and they continued to talk through the night."⁷³ Vermehren "insisted he could not leave without his wife, who would certainly be arrested and probably killed if he defected. Elliott detected signs of instability in the young man: he coaxed and cajoled him; he summoned Elizabeth Elliott to stress the moral responsibility incumbent on Vermehren through his Catholic faith."⁷⁴ Vermehren flew back to Berlin and told his wife to prepare to leave for Turkey. Once in Istanbul, she would work at the German embassy where her cousin, Franz von Papen, was ambassador. Eventually, after a harrowing journey from Berlin, including two weeks' detention in Bulgaria, Elizabeth joined her husband in Istanbul. There they defected on 27 January 1944 and were safely in Cairo the following day.⁷⁵ Once they

72. Ben Macintyre, *A Spy among Friends: Kim Philby and the Great Betrayal* (London, 2014), 78.

73. *Ibid.*, 79.

74. *Ibid.*

75. *Ibid.*, 80.

reached London, they were debriefed by Nicholas Elliott.⁷⁶ “Elizabeth Vermehren furnished chapter and verse on the Catholic underground resistance in Germany.”⁷⁷

The wife of the Vermehrens’ MI6 point of contact, Elizabeth Elliott, began her relationship with her future husband as his secretary.⁷⁸ Once married, however, the couple could not escape the remit of the clandestine world which made it difficult for them to go on romantic trips, as they had to be within close range of MI6 Istanbul station at all times.⁷⁹ Elliott was then posted to Switzerland, while Elizabeth remained in England, as she awaited the arrival of their first child.⁸⁰ After the birth, as a new mother, Elizabeth had to cope with long-distance travel, maintaining her identity as a supportive domesticated wife upholding the patriotic wartime role of women within the separate gender spheres.⁸¹ Ever present on the fringe of the secret world, such women were denied full access, so that their husbands could position their wartime role as unique and superior, consigning their wives to reside in both worlds, and the space between.⁸²

5. Non-disclosure

The following final case study demonstrates the devastating impact of betrayal and lies within a marriage. In July 1942, Abwehr agent Herbert Karl Friedrich Bahr was arrested by

76. Ibid., 82.

77. Ibid.

78. Elliott, *Umbrella*, 115.

79. Ibid., 131.

80. Ibid., 141.

81. Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men’s Bodies, Britain, and the Great War* (Chicago, 1996), 12-13.

82. Cynthia Enloe, *Does Khaki Become You? The Militarization of Women’s Lives* (Boston, 1983), 15.

the FBI aboard a diplomatic ship that had docked in New York Harbour. Over a period of several days, news of his intended espionage spread like wildfire. As the press got hold of the story, those close to the German-born naturalised American quickly became aware of his treacherous activity. They included his wife Ruth Neeb Bahr, who had not seen him for four years since his departure from the United States in 1938. Herbert Bahr's FBI case file and the corresponding news reporting sheds an important light on his wife's revelation that he was a spy, and on how she responded to his arrest and subsequent trial and imprisonment. The couple had married on 9 June 1938 while Bahr was still a student at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, NY. The file reveals that the "subject's wife stated that she believed he was a Catholic and as she belonged to the Salvation Army she desired that the marriage be performed by the Mayor at North Troy but the subject would not do this so they were married by the Reverend Porightson of North Troy, NY."⁸³ They secured a marriage licence in Watervliet, and Ruth last heard from Bahr in July 1939. He had written to her upon his arrival in Germany, followed by a few more letters, but nothing since. According to his mother-in-law, Bahr wrote very little to Ruth, but she did receive a letter in July 1939 reassuring her that he would be back soon.⁸⁴ Internal FBI memoranda reveal that Bahr had never lived with his wife, but when she became pregnant by him, he was required to marry her before being allowed to graduate.⁸⁵

83. According to the FBI file compiled by L.L. Greely, 4 August 1942, p. 2, Special Agent Darwin D. Shatraw interviewed Bahr's wife, Ruth Neeb Bahr, at Watervliet, NY on 8 July 1942. Herbert Karl Friedrich Bahr, FBI Case File, Box 25, Location 230 86/11/06, Record Group 65, NARA.

84. Ibid.

85. Memorandum for Mr Ladd, 9 July 1942, FBI, US Department of Justice, Washington, DC, Herbert Karl Friedrich Bahr, FBI Case File, Box 25, Location 230 86/11/06, Record Group 65, NARA.

Such extreme cases show that wives who had no idea that their husbands were in fact spies could find themselves having suddenly to negotiate the blurred boundaries of privacy, secrecy, and marital status. In most cases, this came about when an agent-husband was arrested or exposed as a spy or double agent, and the consequences of such secrets being revealed were in some cases catastrophic for all those involved, though none suffered more than the wife, who had to deal with the ultimate marital betrayal of trust. Evidence of such revelations can be found in the press coverage that accompanied an agent's arrest or defection, which in certain cases was stage-managed by the intelligence services involved. Additionally, one had to reckon with the (propaganda) response from the other (enemy) side. Thankfully, however, such grim predicaments occurred infrequently in the secret world of Second World War espionage. As the examples in this study show, the overwhelming majority of "spy wives" cohabited routinely with husbands who had secret lives under a domestic regime based on "need-to-know," that permitted a negotiated level of disclosure and various degrees of involvement in the husband's secret activities. Perhaps not all of these women would have gone quite so far as the courageous wife of an Abwehr intelligence officer who crossed the high Zagros Mountains in the depths of winter, heavily disguised, guided by opium smugglers and riding a mule, to deliver a vital message from her husband to Abwehr headquarters in Berlin. "I intend to accompany my husband, even into captivity," she had once said, and shortly before leaving him to undertake her 3,500-kilometre odyssey, her last words voiced concern only for his welfare. "But can I leave you here alone like this?" she asked.⁸⁶

86. The anxious words of Gertrud Schulze-Holthus to her husband, Berthold (SABA), a major in Abwehr air intelligence (Abw I L), moments before beginning her epic, successful ordeal on her husband's behalf. Julius Berthold Schulze-Holthus, *Daybreak in Iran: A Story of the German Intelligence Service* (London,

Conclusion

This article has explored various aspects of the more or less peripheral existence of ‘spy wives’, mostly during the Second World War. Looking to the future, what are likely to prove the most source-rich and significant potential areas of research by intelligence historians seeking further clarification of the issues around dependency and risk in the secret world? Certainly one promising subject concerns not so much the social relationships and behaviours of secret operatives and their dependants while they were actively operational, but rather the attitude of their employers towards them, their partners, and their families after their activities had ended, whether happily or not. For instance, when Eleanor Philby left her husband Kim in Moscow for the last time in 1965, the Soviet Russians appear to have been genuinely concerned about her welfare. If she were ever in need of help, she was urged to go to the Russian Embassy wherever she might be: “Tell them who you are,” Eleanor was advised. “They will do everything they can for you.”⁸⁷ What needs to be established by further scholarly research is whether such paternalistic caring has been common policy among all or most clandestine services, to what extent a moral acceptance of indemnity has prevailed over any tendency to shield services legally from responsibility for dependants’ wellbeing, and whether any formal undertaking to provide security, protection, or compensation for

1954), 94, 119. Franz Mayr of RSHA VI, the senior SS subversion officer in Persia, once said that Gertrud was the most efficient and intelligent woman he had ever met, and one of the British security officers who interrogated Schulze-Holthus claimed that his wife was “of much better stuff” than her husband.

Interrogation Report No. 1, 27-28 March 1944, KV 2/1484, TNA; Commentary on the diary of Franz Mayr, 18 October 1943, KV 2/1478, TNA; Thistlethwaite to Bullard, 30 December 1954, GB165-0042-3/7, Middle East Centre Archive, St Antony’s College, Oxford (MECA).

87. Eleanor Philby, *Kim Philby: The Spy I Married* (London, 1968), 172-173.

operatives and their dependants against death, injury, damage, or loss has been explicitly included in the terms of the employment contract. Historically, human-intelligence operations have always been a risky business, and even in the digital age the need for human intelligence has manifestly not diminished, so who will in future bear the greatest risk: the state, the operative, or the dependants? It is to be hoped that this article may prove to be a catalyst for further historiographical enquiry into such contingencies.

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