

Women in Intelligence

The Hidden History of Two World Wars

By Dr Helen Fry

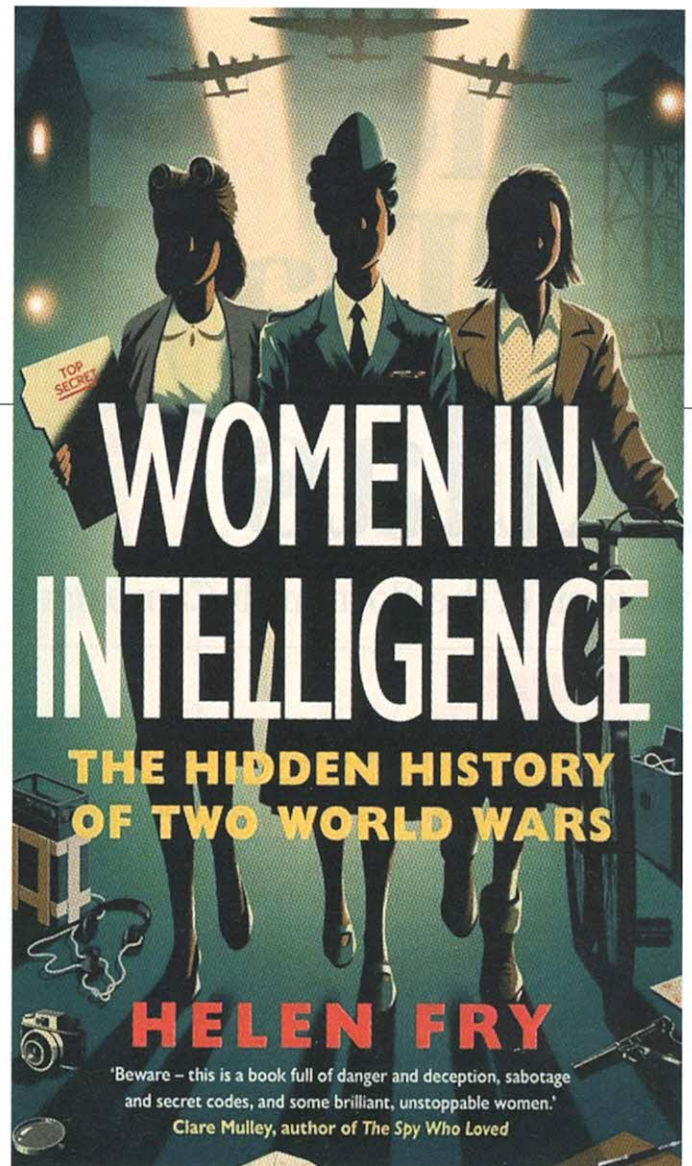
Dr Helen Fry has trawled through a raft of recently declassified files for this new book about the thousands of women involved in wartime espionage, Special Operations Executive (SOE) and codebreaking. It's yet another fascinating volume by the author of *Churchill's German Army*, *Spymaster*, *The Walls have Ears* and *MI9*.

The book starts with the women who joined spy networks carrying information out of France and Belgium during World War One, debunking the myth that they were all femme fatales like Mata Hari. It was more likely that knitted garments containing secret codes were flung over border fences or worn by female agents travelling back to Britain. Paper messages were hidden in shoe heels and loaves of bread, while rail networks and troop movements in Belgium were monitored by women. Fry also says newly released documents reveal that heroic British nurse Edith Cavell was not only a spy, but was the founder of an entire espionage network.

By the late 1920s more and more women were being given important jobs in MI5, such as barrister Jane Sissmore OBE, who became the first female officer in the security services. The idea that women from the lower classes could not work in intelligence because they had a propensity to gossip is also challenged. A sterling tribute is also paid to those quiet, mindful operatives – be they Oxbridge debutantes or hard-working secretaries – working in the shadows through the 1930s. Fry writes: "Women spies of 'M' Section helped neutralise the fascist threat in Britain in the 1930s to ensure the Nazis never got a foothold here in the Second World War."

And, of course, there is their role in that conflict both at home or working with resistance movements. In 1941, codebreaker Jane Hughes transcribed a message that pinpointed the position of *Bismarck*, steering the final hunt that sank the German battleship on May 27. Meanwhile, Romanian-born Vera Atkins was working in 'F' Section of the SOE and sent 470 agents into France, including Noor Inayat Khan, Violette Szabo, Odette Sansom, Christine Granville, Virginia Hall and Cecile Cornioley. Cornioley worked as a courier behind the lines and later commanded 3,000 maquisards.

Atkins was also a leading interrogator of captured high-ranking German officers. The prisoners were held at Trent Park or Latimer House and treated as hotel guests, as this 'gently, gently' treatment was a good way of generating reliable intelligence. After having been questioned by young female MI5 officers, the Germans would return to their rooms and



joked among themselves about how they had evaded revealing anything under interrogation. But it was an elaborate trick: the rooms were bugged and picked up their chit chat. When one officer became depressed on hearing about the heavy German defeat at Stalingrad, his comrade consoled him by saying "We still have Hitler's secret weapons", thus inadvertently revealing the V-weapons programmes.

We also learn of the decoding tasks carried out by the thousands of women including cryptologist Joan Clarke, deputy head of Bletchley Park's Hut 8, and those working in the 'Y' Service decryption centres throughout Britain. And who was the mysterious 'radio ham' Mrs Myler from North Devon and why was she awarded the British Empire Medal?

This is an exceptional book and full of interesting revelations, although you still suspect it may be just scraping the surface. As Dr Fry concludes: "Still so much of women's work is obscured by secrecy."

Reviewed by Melody Foreman

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