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CROSSING BORDERS
WOMEN AGENTS OF BRITAIN'S SPECIAL OPERATIONS EXECUTIVE (SOE)
IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR

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Patricia DelGiorno

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Patricia DelGiorno

We, the thesis committee for the above candidate for the
Master of Arts degree, hereby recommend
acceptance of this thesis.

Justin Omar Johnston – Thesis Advisor
Assistant Professor of English
Department of English

Jeffrey Santa Ana – Second Reader
Associate Professor of English
Department of English

This thesis is accepted by the Graduate School

Charles Taber
Dean of the Graduate School

Abstract

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This thesis will explore the experiences of Odette Sansom Churchill Hallowes, a Franco-British woman recruited as a secret agent during World War II by the Special Operations Executive (SOE), a branch of the British Foreign Office, to infiltrate German-occupied France for the purpose of assisting the French Resistance in disrupting vital German operations in the lead-up to Allied invasion of the continent. The exploration will address the highly gendered cultural, social and military borders that Sansom and other female SOE recruits crossed in order to carry out dangerous work as secret agents employed in clandestine subversive work behind enemy lines. It will also examine the price Sansom paid for her service in terms of her capture, torture and concentration camp incarceration, as well as her elevation to heroic status and her adoption by the British as an iconic symbol of Britain's valor and determined defense of freedom during the war, while

in the war's immediate aftermath, the British establishment's overwhelming initiative to re-embed women war workers in the kitchen and nursery and their marginalized pre-war existence.

A review of literature offers varying and, in some cases, contentious viewpoints by multiple scholars on Sansom's representations by others, as well as Sansom's representation of herself, to which the thesis will present alternative or opposing arguments.

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Section 1 - Thesis Introduction and Background

In 1940, during the second year of World War II, after Nazi forces had blitzkrieged their way through Europe, subjugating Poland, Czechoslovakia, Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium and France, the island of Britain stood alone and vulnerable, struggling to defend itself against the seemingly unstoppable Nazi juggernaut. Prime Minister Winston Churchill, realizing that the Nazis couldn't be defeated by conventional means alone, created a secret agency charged with the mission of infiltrating agents into German-occupied countries to organize, supply and expand the countries' resistance groups so that they might wreak havoc upon vital enemy operations. Called the Special Operations Executive, (hereinafter referred to as the "SOE") and mandated to "Set Europe Ablaze, the neophyte agency earned the designation "special" in three groundbreaking ways:

First, it was a top-secret organization, known only to those in government and the military with an absolute need to know. So tight was the security surrounding the agency that not until the end of the war did the full government or the public become aware of its existence.

Second, it was the first British agency especially created to use guerilla tactics against the enemy. Churchill's enthusiasm for these tactics was based on his experience of the effectiveness of irregular warfare waged by a relatively small, ill-equipped band of Boer farmers against the might of the British Army during the Boer Wars; and

Third, it was also the first British agency to recruit women for employment behind enemy lines. While unmarried British women had been drafted since 1941 to substitute for men in industry and war-related support activities, a rigid cultural taboo existed against sending them into combat zones. Indeed, British military regulations expressly forbade it. Moreover, the prevailing sentiment in Britain at the time was that the war was being fought to safeguard the nation and its women and children from the predations of the Nazi oppressor. To deliberately place women in harm's way, no matter the justifying cause, would have been anathema to most Britons.

SOE Organization

The SOE was divided into country sections, with each section having its own head. France (F section) received the bulk of British material support as well as the greatest number of agents (almost all of the female agents operated in France). Although the Director and other major players of the SOE French Section were headquartered at Baker Street, London, in France, SOE circuits or reseaux were broadly distributed throughout the country, with the nucleus of each circuit consisting of: 1) An organizer/leader, who recruited French resistants, identified sabotage targets, arranged arms and supply drops, usually a man, but in several instances a woman; 2) a courier who traveled between the organizer, the circuit's wireless operator, and its resistance groups; and 3) a wireless operator who transmitted Morse-coded messages to and from London.

Qualifications and Recruitment

Nearly all the French section women were amateurs at the outset, and markedly diverse in social station and background. They included housewives, teachers, shop girls, and, most surprisingly, an Indian princess. Several had served in the women's military auxiliaries, the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAFS) or the Women's Royal Navy Service (WRNS). And three of them were mothers of young children, who, in their mother's absence, would have to be entrusted to either relatives or boarding schools – a condition that factored painfully in the mothers' decisions to serve.

The threshold qualification for every potential agent was the ability to speak fluent French, to be acquainted with French culture and customs, and to have a French appearance– in other words to be able to pass as a native. Recruits meeting these criteria were often women of British citizenship who had lived in France, women who were raised in bilingual French/English households, or French women who had fled the Nazi invasion of their country. In the opinion of SOE Intelligence Officer, Vera Atkins, aside from language fluency, the most essential quality for an agent was courage. When asked post-war what the women agents had in common, she replied “Bravery. Bravery was what they had in common” (Helm, p.xxii). Obviously, a number of other qualities such as intelligence, resourcefulness and self-reliance , were also highly desirable, but none was so prized as courage. The Recruiting Officer, Capt. Selwyn Jepson, known throughout the agency as a ‘talent spotter’, believed that “women had a greater capacity for cool and lonely courage than men and that this would be of use in undercover work” (Foote, p. 42). Such ‘cool and lonely courage’ was essential for couriers and wireless operators, jobs generally assigned to women, in that these jobs

involved continuously moving about, which was much easier for women than men, who were subject to conscription and compulsory labor at munitions plants in Germany. Couriers traveled long distances by bicycle and train to find safe houses for other agents and drop zones for parachuted agents and supplies. They carried messages, wireless sets, money and sabotage materials and were in constant danger of interception by German soldiers and the Gestapo. Likewise, wireless operators, carrying their radio cases, had to change locations every few days in order to avoid detection of their signals by the German direction finder vans that prowled the streets of every French town and city.

Training

Recruits who passed the interview process were sent to training schools where they underwent arduous physical and psychological training, learned sabotage and bomb making techniques, gun and silent killing skills. With few exceptions, the training for women was the same as that for men. Specialized training was provided for those whose jobs required it. Because many agents were parachuted into France, all agents received jump training. A parachute packer at the training site who observed the jumps recalls that the women "were completely fearless ... One had the feeling they didn't expect to come back from France they had an inner strength and sheer determination which allowed them to do what was asked of them" (Escott, p. 18-19). While the male instructors complained of having to train women for a "man's job," they often put the women out first on the jumps, because they knew that the men would not hold back if a woman led the way.

The piece de resistance of training was a mock interrogation wherein an unsuspecting trainee was pulled from her bed in the middle of the night by SS-uniformed men, dragged into a darkened room, thrust roughly into a chair, surrounded by 'SS guards,' and with a spotlight trained on her face, the would-be agent was relentlessly hammered with questions about her background, her family, her occupation, her friends, all aimed at finding cracks in her assumed identity and her cover story. At dawn, the 'SS interrogators' concluded the session, resumed their roles as training officers, and reviewed the trainee's performance. The interrogation was so realistic and so intimidating that it left some women severely shaken, but its effectiveness was validated by one agent who said in her post-war debriefing that the lessons she learned from the mock interrogation saved her life when she later underwent the real thing in the field.

Section 2 -Thesis Points

1. The women deployed to France by the Special Operations Executive crossed a number of lines that before the advent of the Second World War were generally held to be sacrosanct, principally: Identity, gender, cultural, and military. Drawing on the work of Juliette Pattinson, my thesis will address how these border crossings by females violated traditional gender and cultural norms and how they have been represented in the works of multiple scholars and authors. Although I will reference several women agents to highlight specific points, the thesis will essentially focus on the experiences of, and controversies surrounding, one woman who came to personify the service of the SOE female agents, Odette Sansom. Since Odette changed surnames several times, throughout the thesis, I shall refer to her by her given name, Odette.

2. I shall also analyze the motivating factors that enabled Odette and other women to cross their first border, the leaving of home and family to undertake extremely dangerous, clandestine activities in Nazi-controlled areas in France, wherein the agent mortality rate was 50%, and the average length of time in the field for wireless operators before capture and/or death was six weeks, facts with which agents were made fully aware before their deployment.

3. Another area of examination will illustrate the price Odette paid for her service in terms of capture, torture, concentration camp incarceration, and, for eight other women agents death by execution or disease. While it is true that

male agents were subject to the same conditions and sufferings, the Nazis had special treatment for women captives. In his definitive work, entitled SOE in France, historian M.R.D Foot states “Some of the blackest passages in the black record of the nazi’s [sic] crimes cover their dealings with SOE’s women agents, who could say like Marie Hamilton in the ballad: ‘O little did my mother ken,/The day she cradled me, /The lands I was to travel in/Or the death I was to die!’” (Foot, p. 47).

Fifteen SOE women were captured by the Nazis, all of whom were sent to concentration camps (in itself a daily physical, psychological and spiritual torture). Of these, only three survived; one died of disease contracted in the camp, four were taken by the French, and seven were executed by the Nazis. All the captured were subjected to Heinrich Himmler’s full and final treatment: “The mere slaughter of the Fuhrer’s enemies was of no importance to him [Himmler]. They should die, certainly, but not before torture, indignity and interrogation had drained from them that last shred and scintilla of evidence which should lead to the arrest of others. Then, and only then, should the blessed release of death be granted them” (Foot, p. 373).

Section 3 – Odette Sansom – Nexus

Of the 39 women infiltrated by the Special Operations Executive (SOE) into France during the Second World War, one has dominated post-war renderings of the agents' exploits and taken center stage in the British public's imagination, Odette Sansom, code named 'Lise.' Beginning in 1949, with the publication of Jerrard Tickell's biography, Odette, and the production of a film of the same name, she has been the subject of countless journal and newspaper articles, radio and television programs, as well as featured prominently in other works about the SOE women.

While my thesis will examine Odette's experiences during her SOE service, it will also trace her transition from the culture and gender-bound role of a housewife and mother to the gender-hybridity of a secret agent who crosses multiple cultural, national and military lines. From the early days of the war through the Allied victory in 1945, Odette's experiences may be viewed as paralleling and encapsulating the universal dislocations and suffering engendered by the war, as well as the valor of those who served. A 29-year old French woman living in England, and mother of three young children, Odette flees the terror of the London Blitz to find safety in the bucolic English countryside of Somerset County. In 1942, however, compelled by the need to do something for the war effort and for the future of her children, she trains as a secret agent with the newly formed SOE and infiltrates into France where she assumes a number of different identities and roles as cover for her covert work

behind enemy lines. After her capture in 1943, she is tortured by the SS, condemned to death, imprisoned first in France, and then, as the Allies are closing in, relocated to the notorious women's concentration camp, Ravensbruck, where she is kept under hellish conditions in solitary confinement until the end of the war in 1945. Post-war she suffers physical problems and what in contemporary parlance would be termed post-traumatic stress disorder. Given the nature and variety of her wartime experiences, from the outset of the conflict to its conclusion, this one courageous woman serves as a nexus for much of the World War II narrative.

Section 4- Motivations

When the question, “why did you do it” is put to Pearl Witherington, an F-section agent who had served as a courier and ultimately a leader of her circuit, she replies, “intense anger,” anger at the Nazi brutality and injustices, and especially the occupation. (Witherington Cornioley, p.3). Many of the Anglo-French agents “loved both countries, and hated the thought of either under Hitler’s Germany; so they fought hard to make both of them free” (Foot, p. 50). For Violette Szabo, a British citizen, and mother of a two-year-old daughter, whose husband had been killed fighting the Germans at El-Alamein, that deep-seated anger is fueled by a desire for retribution. In France, when a male officer, concerned for her safety, urges her to return to England, she replies, “It is my job. My husband has been killed. I am going to get my own back somehow”(Pattinson, p. 42). Obviously, avenging her husband’s death is an incentive for Violette, but by working undercover for the SOE she is, in effect, crossing the gender divide, making his job her own in a desperate war that he can no longer fight but she can. Like him, Violette is motivated by the need to protect those things her husband died defending - country, home and the future of her two-year old daughter, Tania.

Odette Sansom is deeply concerned about the impact of the war on the future of her three young daughters. Invited to become an agent for the SOE, she initially refuses on the grounds that she cannot leave her children. “I’d like to do something. Though I was very happy in Somerset and I am grateful to every

blade of grass there, I know now that I was – and am – out of things. Almost everybody I know is doing something. But you must remember that I have three children and they need a lot of looking after. I might be able to do part-time work. Translations or something” (Tickell, p. 68). Odette wrestles with the dichotomous pull between “doing something” for the war effort and “looking after” her children. Her struggle is exacerbated by the indebtedness that she feels to England, which has offered her shelter and safety. Moreover, by virtue of Prime Minister Winston Churchill’s proclamation that England and France are no longer separate nations but one Franco-British Union, she now enjoys dual citizenship. But as a mother, she asks herself, ‘isn’t my primary duty to my children?’ These questions set up a tormenting tug-of-war between two competing loyalties, her children versus both her nations.

Odette receives a second invitation from the War Office, this time she meets with Captain Selwyn Jepson, the SOE Interviewer. He draws Odette out on her feelings about the war, in general, and about Germans, in particular. “I hate them” she says. “I mean that I hate Nazis. For the Germans, oddly enough, I have pity” (Tickell, p. 70). An odd distinction because, as Jepson points out, it was the Germans, not the Nazis, who killed her father during the First World War. “Yes,” she responds, “but they were driven then as they are driven now. I think the Germans are very obedient and very gullible. Their tragedy – and Europe’s is that they gladly allow themselves to be hoodwinked into believing evil to be good” (p. 71). Odette claims she is “out of things,” and while she may be unschooled in the latest political or military maneuverings, she exhibits a

profound understanding of the difference between the German people, whom she pities as a populace whose national psyche is controlled by unquestioning adherence to authority, and the Nazis, whom she views as a malignant evil, immune to considerations of conscience or humanity. She sees that Germans equate obedience with goodness; that as good German citizens, they willingly buy into the “Big Lies” churned out by the Nazi propaganda machine and happily don the mantle of their purported Aryan superiority, as well as enthusiastically support the ideological claim of Germany’s manifest European destiny.

Of course, many other factors play into the German people’s unchallenged acceptance of the Nazi regime, not the least of which is Hitler’s military buildup which salvages the German economy and restores its national pride after World War One’s humiliating defeat. Although some of these issues may have been beyond Odette’s ken, she clearly sees a broader moral picture - that the fatal flaw of the German people is three-fold: Their unquestioned obedience to higher authority, in this case, the totalitarian state; their abdication of personal moral values in favor of a state-decreed ‘morality;’ and their surrender of conscience to wholesale acceptance of their Fuhrer’s heinous racial decrees against the Jewish citizenry. It is the fatal flaw that enables them to turn “good” into “evil.” Moreover, Odette is also able to reduce the geopolitical concept of Nazi hegemonic ambitions to a local and more accessible level when she points out that their damned creed “make[s] men despoil other people’s fields and carry misery and fear wherever they go” (Tickell, p. 71). Not only do the Nazis despoil the fields of France, they also appropriate its every agricultural, industrial and

human resource for German benefit, leaving the French to penury, starvation, and enslavement.

She says she “pities” the German people and that “their tragedy is also Europe’s,” However, her use of the term “pity” does not connote a feeling of compassion, as it is generally understood. Rather it suggests a piteous contempt, what one feels for a people who cannot learn from their disastrous errors, which they seem doomed to repeat over and over, without regard for their catastrophic consequences. Odette likens the Germans to children whose innate need for a strong father/leader blinds them to the overwhelming immorality of his actions and deafens them to the cries of his victims. She cites the following example: After a recent shooting of a German officer in France, the Nazis retaliated by taking one hundred French hostages and shooting fifty of them. “I do hate Nazis,’ she says. But it’s not much good hating people just like that. I’m a woman and I can’t do anything about it” (p. 70-71). The Nazi savagery wrought on her innocent countrymen, her father’s death from a German bullet in WWI, and the influence of her grandfather’s stories of her father’s valor and Germany’s historic violence against its neighbors, fuels Odette’s hatred of the Nazis and their oppression of her people. Ironically, simultaneous with voicing her outrage, she realizes its futility, given her perceived inability to counter the evils she deplures. When Jepson offers her the opportunity to do something about it by working as an agent with the SOE, she demurs: “Captain Jepson, you must know that I am a very simple, ordinary woman. Believe me, I am not very intelligent or well informed. I do not know about politics or governments or

movements. . . I know little of the Germans – only that their acts and their minds have been deliberately made evil and not good in our world.... Frankly, I don't think I'm the right sort of person to undertake this work" (Tickell, p.75).

Odette's claim of being just a simple woman, unburdened by a surfeit of intelligence, is belied by the insightful observations and strong convictions she expresses throughout her meeting with Captain Jepson. It is more likely that she is overcome by what, to her mind, is the outrageousness of Jepson's proposal - a woman crossing enemy lines to act as an espionage agent - and so she takes refuge in the familiarity of her role as an "ordinary" housewife and mother, for whom such a daring endeavor is beyond imagination. It is not surprising that initially the idea of becoming a secret agent is unimaginable to Odette.

Consistent with pre-war cultural conventions and an inflexibly gendered society, boys, from the time they are in short pants, are raised with stories of men's derring-do, soldiers fighting for the realm, adventurers exploring new frontiers, spies outwitting the enemy, while role models for girls are generally depicted as nurturers, mothers, nurses, helpmates, as auxiliaries to, or appendages of men, a favorite novelistic construction being that of "the woman behind the great man."

Although she agonizes over her decision, Odette ultimately agrees to undertake the training, reasoning that she must do whatever she can to help save not only her own children, but also the other children of Europe afflicted by the war. Jerrard Tickell, in his biography, Odette, depicts her as tormented by the decision, balancing daughters, Françoise, Lilly and Marianne, "against all the

bewildered, homeless children of Europe. There were so many of them, already so many. Yet how many more would there be before this awful thunderstorm of war had passed” (Tickell, p. 79). In a personal testament given post-war, Odette states “I felt I could not let the war go by without lifting a finger to help save the future of the children (Imperial War Museum Sound Archive, Odette Sansom 9478). Thus, Odette comes to believe that motherhood, rather than acting as an impediment to combat service, instead represents the most compelling rationale for it. The belief that it is a duty to protect children from the ravages of war and to help defend or restore freedom to their countries is paramount not only for Odette but for the other SOE mothers as well.

Author Juliette Pattinson, after interviewing male and female agents post-war, points out the difference between their motives for becoming secret agents. Men, on the whole, cited patriotism as their reason, but not one man mentioned fatherhood as a factor. In contrast, the women cited patriotism **and family** (emphasis mine) as their motivation. It is this combination that impels them to navigate the most stubbornly entrenched and jealously guarded of gender borders - the masculine realm of combat. Based on her research, Pattinson concludes that motherhood did not automatically preclude women from combat but instead “could provide a major impetus for their involvement.” Although an argument can be made that women are by nature life-givers, not life-takers, they are, in protection of their children, notoriously ferocious. Pattinson also cites the work of Joanna Bourke, which argues that “although women may lack the ‘killer instinct’ that compels men to fight, many had a protective quality which enabled

them to kill to safeguard their young. Rather than preventing women from killing, the maternal instinct was considered to transform them into formidable killers” (Pattinson 43).

In training, Odette experiences a reawakening of her ‘Frenchness.’ “I started thinking I could be useful because I definitely felt I could disappear in France. After all, it was the country of my birth; I could mix with people well. I felt if I could work almost alone I would last forever” (Jones, p.82). Concomitant with the revitalization of her French identity is the rekindling of the strong sense of duty fostered by her grandfather after her father’s death a few weeks prior to the WWI armistice. Propheying that within 25 years, Germany would start another war, her grandfather enjoins Odette and her brother to always uphold the standards of duty and courage set by their father (Odette, sound recording, Imperial War Museum 9478). As she learns of the worsening situation in France, the wounding of her brother, and the increasing reprisals against French citizens, Odette grows more convinced of the rightness of her decision. Moreover, her meeting with Captain Jepson continues to resonate with her, his untempered expression of confidence in her abilities and his recognition of her singular understanding of the larger picture of the war contribute to a burgeoning sense of being specially “chosen” for this work, an inner conviction of being called for a mission which she cannot refuse. Implicit in her statement “I felt if I could work alone, I would last forever,” is her belief that in working alone, she is complete unto herself and possessed of an almost omnipotent indestructibility. Once made, her decision to go forward is firm. When Col. Buckmaster, Director

of French Section, suggests that she might want to reconsider, she unequivocally refuses the 'out' he offers.

Section 5 - In the Field and in Captivity

In preparation for the field, Odette makes the first of many identity changes. She leaves behind the persona of Odette Sansom, a 'simple housewife,' and steps into a new identity, that of a self-directed agent capable of operating in the hazardous precincts of occupied France. She also takes on a new name and life story as cover for her clandestine work, Mme. Odette Metayer, a widow, living in le Touquet, France, a name and cover she will change several times more during her time in France, the last and most important new identity being that of Mrs. Peter Churchill, a switch that will save her life. She becomes quite adept in performing her new roles, as do most of the other female agents. Eileen Didi Nearne, told in training that she was a good liar, uses it to life-saving effect when she is subjected to the bagnoire (in contemporary parlance, water-boarding) by the Gestapo. Caught with her wireless, she nonetheless manages to convince her captors that she is a simple French girl who learned Morse at her previous job at the Post Office and that she was transmitting coded messages, which she did not understand, for a businessman who paid her. "All sorts of things I pulled from my head. And the more I was lying, the more I wanted to ... In the training course they were quite right ... they said I would be a good liar and I would come out of it and I did" (Jones, p.280).

In France Odette makes contact with Peter Churchill (code name Raul), organizer for the Spindle Circuit, in Cannes. Although originally slated to organize a reseau in Auxerre, Odette (Lise) stays on with Churchill and his wireless operator, Adolphe Rabinowitz (Arnaud), to act as a courier for Spindle's

rapidly expanding resistance network, a role that suits her talents well.

According to an SOE Advisor at the Foreign Office, "Women were regarded as more suitable for the role of courier ... since they attracted less attention from the various security forces than did men, were cooler and more adept at talking their way out of trouble at check points, and indeed, could use their femininity to help them out of tight spots" (Pattinson, p. 137). This is borne out by Odette's interaction with German soldiers on numerous occasions. In one incident, after boarding a train from Marseilles to Toulouse, she struggles to lift a suitcase containing a wireless set to an overhead rack, when a passing German officer takes the case and places it for her, jokingly observing, "this is heavy enough to contain a radio," Odette responds with a shy smile and a softly murmured thank you (Tickell, p.190). Slipping easily between the guise of a feminine, hapless young woman and that of a whip-sharp agent, with an unerring instinct for danger, Odette is chameleon-like in her ability to assume whatever role is required by a given situation.

From the outset Odette is concerned about the lack of security on the part of the French resistants, whose carelessness compromises the entire circuit. In recounting her story to Liane Jones, she says, "I felt fear. I felt anything could happen anytime" (Odette q. Jones, p. 91). She claims her only compensation is the trusting and close relationship that she, Peter. and Arnaud develop. Because her courier duties require her to interact with a number of different people usually unknown to her, Odette's earlier conviction that she is sufficient unto herself and that she could last forever is shaken. Due to an ever- increasing presence of

Germans and informers in Cannes, and stepped-up arrests of agents and resistants, Peter moves his group to St. Jorioz, in the Haute Savoie, near the Swiss and Italian borders. In Jones's retelling of events, Odette's concern proves well founded because they are betrayed by two turncoat agents in league with a sergeant in the German Abwehr, resulting in the downfall not only of their circuit but also of at least three others and the arrest of approximately 300 resistants. Although Odette suspects both individuals early on, she is overridden by Peter, who is not convinced. Thus Odette and Peter Churchill are the first of the agents arrested in the Nazi sweep of the summer of 1943, but their radio operator, Arnaud remains at large.

During transit to Fresnes Prison in Paris, Odette and Peter are able to snatch a few minutes together and Odette concocts a story that they are married and that Peter is a distant relation of Winston Churchill, in the hope that they might be considered valuable hostages and spared execution. In order to save Peter, who has been brutally beaten, Odette casts herself as the major player in the circuit and gives her interrogators "a picture of herself as a dedicated resistant, who had been determined to come back to France to fight and who had persuaded a more cautious husband to come too" (Jones p. 297). Again, as when she decides to become an SOE agent, Odette acts in accordance with her notion of herself as a savior, imbued with the strength and the will to sacrifice herself, if necessary, in order to save her compatriots and to protect the integrity of their mission.

When she is summoned to Paris Gestapo Headquarters at 84 Avenue Foch for a more intensive interrogation (until this point, her questioning had been conducted by the Abwehr, whose role was strictly limited to intelligence gathering, not torture), she determines to tell them nothing and to continue to deflect attention from Peter to herself. "I knew I would not speak. Therefore I had no choice. I knew if they wanted to, the only thing was to kill me because I knew I wasn't going to speak. No, I didn't have confidence that I would survive it. I didn't have confidence in anything at all. I only had hope" (Odette, q. in Jones, p.289). Thus, Odette, having made the decision not to speak, internalizes that decision as non-negotiable, irrevocable. Her only choice in the matter lay in taking the decision, which once taken, is inviolable, not subject to further choice, even in the face of death. Odette refuses to respond to questions as to the whereabouts of Arnaud, her radio operator, and another valuable circuit organizer, Francis Cammaerts, or to the purpose of their mission. To each question, she replies, "I have nothing to say" (Odette q. Jones, p.298). Twice more she is asked the questions, twice more she refuses to speak. After the first refusal, her interrogator calls in a henchman who burns her shoulder and spine with a hot iron bar. After the second refusal, he takes out a pair of pliers and proceeds to pull out her toenails one by one. As he is about to start on her fingernails, an officer intervenes and stops the torture.

Later, Odette tells Jones that although she had been dizzy and faint with pain, she realizes that she had resisted and that she had come through:

You have to find a way. You have to learn... . I went from one moment to the other. I thought well, there must be a physical

point when the body must give up and so it's not in my hands. I will support as much as I can and perhaps they will win and that will be the end of my physical life but they will not – they will not win the rest. So it was a question of battling to have the strength to accept death” (Odette q. in Jones, p. 299).

In her statement, “there must be a physical point when the body must give up and so it's not in my hands,” Odette makes an observation that sustains her not only while she is undergoing torture, but also during the unimaginably dark days to come. She is able to make a sharp distinction between the materiality of the body, which, under sufficient duress, will falter and give way, a process not in her hands, and the ephemeral spirit, which is unattainable to the torturer, and is hers alone to control. Forged In this crucible is Odette's readiness to lose her life rather than betray her comrades or cede her resolve to the Nazi depravity. In this barbaric situation, Odette demonstrates the fallacy of the gendered notion that women are weak vessels, unable to withstand pain, excepting that of childbirth, which of course is their biological lot, with the fortitude and strength of men.

She also demonstrates an ability to step outside of a situation, and from an emotional remove, assess it, then act in accordance with that assessment. The ability to reason and act with emotional detachment is a highly valued trait, generally ascribed to men, but obviously Odette not only possesses it, but also employs it in the most harrowing of circumstances, thereby debunking the old saw that, “Men act with their heads, women with their hearts.” This ability is what Captain Jepson saw in her at the time of her interview; it is what enabled her to separate herself from the ‘here and now’ with her children in order to help assure

them a better future, and, under torture, it is what allows her to separate her physical body from her spiritual self so that she might endure. Returned to her cell in Fresnes, not knowing when another summons will come, she tries to prepare herself for the next ordeal. The second summons to 84 Avenue Foch, however, is not for the purpose of interrogation. One week later, in severe pain, shoeless and walking on her heels, she is brought before a panel of uniformed SS Officers, who talk among themselves in German, then formally notify her that she, Odette Churchill, has been condemned to death, not once, but twice: once for being a British agent, and once for being a French resistante. "...she suddenly wanted to laugh. It seemed so grotesquely absurd, all these men in uniforms telling her that she was to die twice" (Jones, p. 301). Though she is stunned, Odette also realizes that they actually believe she is Mrs. Peter Churchill. Fear does not set in until she is returned to her cell, now marked with a cross.

"And you don't get used to the fact that the door is going to open any time of day or night and you may be going through it again. So you spend all your time, as much as is possible, trying to be ready for it.... You have your great moment of almost despair if one day you will not be prepared enough" (Odette q. in Jones, 300). Despite the fact that she has withstood torture without breaking, and notwithstanding her readiness to lose her life, the prospect of undergoing torture again terrifies her. Even more terrifying, however, is the possibility that she may not be sufficiently prepared to hold out a second time. Or when the door opens again, it will be her executioners come to collect her. "When you are

condemned to death, you know very well that they are going to put an end to it because let's face it, they have the right to do so. So every day you prepare yourself for the ordeal" (Odette q. Jones, p. 303). It is surprising that Odette apparently accepts that it is "their right" to put an end to her, simply because they have gone through the motions of sentencing her. She never questions, even in her own mind, their "right" when clearly it not a right but simply the exercise of the absolute, unmitigated power to exterminate her whenever and however they wish, without benefit of a trial or an opportunity to defend herself, Throughout the occupation, the Germans have been operating on the premise that 'might makes right', murdering thousands at will with impunity, yet in this instance they attempt to put a legal cover on their illegal act by imposing a death sentence, without, however, bothering with the sentence's other legal necessity, a trial. As a corollary to this issue, during a post-war British war crimes proceeding wherein the commandant of the Natzweiler Concentration Camp and others are tried for executing four SOE women without trial, the Judge Advocate cites Article 30 of the Geneva Convention which provides, "that a spy, even when taken in the act, must not be punished without a previous trial..." (The Natzweiler Trial, p. 202,) In his summation, he also cites the illegality of Mrs. Odette Sansom's condemnation without trial at Ravensbruck.

How Odette prepares herself for her next ordeal is by attempting to sleep during the day, so that she can remain alert at night when they usually come, hoping to catch their prisoners tired and confused and more likely to divulge sought-after information. Moreover, she is determined to maintain her pride as a

woman and not be taken to her death “without my curls” (p.303). Using her shredded stockings as curlers, she rolls them into her hair everyday, and whenever she is removed from her cell, she carries her shoes, so that in the event she is to be executed, she can put them on, no matter how painful, because she will not go to her death without them. In May 1944, thirteen months after her capture, Odette is taken from Fresnes Prison, to Avenue Foch, and along with seven other SOE women, sent to Karlsruhe, a German criminal prison, where the women are kept in separate cells, awaiting further disposition. Two months later, Odette is moved to the notorious Ravensbruck, a concentration camp for women, under the command of Capt. Fritz Suhren, whose camp motto is, ‘Extermination through Work’. Odette is not put to work however. Suhren tells her that in retribution for her connection to Winston Churchill and for work that is contributing to the Allies victorious advance through France, she is to be specially punished. He orders her placed in an isolation cell in the dungeon punishment block, adjacent the crematorium and the room where women are beaten and executed.

Although she is not hands-on tortured again, her jailers raise and lower the temperature of her cell to suffocating highs and freezing lows, and she is continually subjected to the agonized screams of women being whipped and to the nauseating stench of the crematorium. Kept in absolute darkness, without exercise of any kind, fed only every other day, she sustains herself with thoughts of her girls. Because she had been stricken with a temporary blindness as a child, she draws on the strategies she used then to deal with it. In her mind's

eye she designs and constructs clothing for her daughters, choosing fabrics, colors and patterns, visualizing each stitch of every garment. She furnishes and decorates a new home for them, using all her rapidly diminishing faculties to hold on to her sanity and her life. The survival techniques she employs are a blend of the feminine and domestic aspects of her background with the mental toughness usually associated with masculinity.

A few months before the Allies break through Germany's last defenses, Odette has become gravely ill and is so near death that the Commandant, alarmed that he may lose his prize prisoner, orders her placed in an above-ground cell with access to air and light and given adequate food. Just days before Germany surrenders, Captain Suhren drives her to the American lines, where he is taken into custody and she commences her journey back to England, to physical and psychological recovery and to reconnection with her beloved daughters.

Section 6 – Review of the Literature and Response/Rebuttals

This section will provide the viewpoints of multiple scholars and critics about Odette, the woman, and her representation in written works and film, as well as my responses thereto.

Jerrard Tickell's 1949 biography, Odette, provides one of the first post-war accounts of the experiences of a female agent of the SOE, a dramatic and emotional rendering of Odette's transition from the domesticity of an ordinary housewife and mother to the highly dangerous role of a secret agent working with the resistance in occupied France. Using the voice of omniscient author, Tickell narrates the arrest of Odette and her organizer, Peter Churchill, her torture at the hands of the SS, and her harrowing 25 months imprisonment. Tickell's work and a film based on it electrify the British public. The fact that Odette and others like her, had violated the established gender norms of British culture, and indeed, of European culture, by eschewing the role of "woman keeping the home fires burning" in favor of "woman agent acting to defend her own" was not only shocking but also transfixing to the post-war British public. Moreover, what Odette endured at the hands of the Nazis without betraying her mission or her comrades, enshrines her as an instant heroine and propels the book to an instant best-seller. While initial critical responses to Tickell's work were generally favorable, female writers and more contemporary critics have offered contrasting views, several of which are discussed below:

In an article entitled, “ ‘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),” feminist Deidre Osborne takes exception to Tickell’s representation of Odette and his ascribing to her the above statement (also quoted herein). Osborne objects to what she characterizes as the male author’s ventriloquizing of his female subject, and his representation of her as “a figure who oscillates between a monumentalized ‘heroism’ and the constant assertion that she is ‘a very ordinary woman’, a veiled reminder, perhaps, that despite their dangerous wartime lives, if such women slot back into the domestic sphere after the war then other women too should be content with this expectation” (Osborne, p. 46). While this may indeed be the case, the fact remains, however, that Tickell didn’t invent the quote. Odette not only acknowledges the statement as her own, but she continues to describe herself as “just an ordinary woman,” whenever and to whomever she speaks, in interviews with female author, Liane Jones, in a personal statement recorded in the Imperial War Museum’s sound archives, as well as in various talks, public ceremonies, and interviews given throughout her lifetime.

Osborne also contends that if the retrospective male-dominated representations are to be believed, leading parts for heroines in the 1940’s theatre of war were “few and far between and an intriguing exception to expectations” (Osborne, p. 44). In this respect, for the male authors and auteurs, Odette comprises the perfect mix of the ‘exceptional’ and the ‘domestic.’ Clearly her performance in the war was exceptional, as evidenced by her 1946 award of

the George Cross, Britain's highest civilian award; and just as clearly, she identifies herself as an ordinary housewife, whose greatest desire post-war is to resume her domestic life with her children, which she, in fact, does. The fly in the ointment of the feminist argument is Odette herself, who keeps insisting on maintaining the stance of a simple, unassuming woman, despite all evidence to the contrary.

Putting aside for the moment Odette's self-description, it is true that post war, many male authors and journalists expressed incredulity that 'ordinary' women could be capable of the kind of courage and daring that enabled Odette and her SOE sisters to perform as they did. The fact that the male establishment found the women's exploits so astonishing is primarily owing to the pre-war social structures that confined women to domestic or helping roles, removed from any venue in which their talents and capabilities could be summoned, much less demonstrated. Yes, they may have lived perfectly ordinary lives before the war and before becoming secret agents, but when called upon to serve their country, they proved remarkable.

Before 1939 and the advent of the war, the rigidly gendered culture of the time held that man was the provider, the protector, and the warrior, whereas woman's 'natural outlet' was in the domestic sphere, her most important task being "to build a home into a 'landmark of security' for herself and her husband and within it to fulfill her destiny by creating a family" (Summerfield, p. 254). War, however, breached the notion of immutable gender roles, requiring interchangeability of male and female functions in order to mobilize the full

potential of the citizenry to defeat the enemy. Freeing men to fight at the front, women substituted for them on the farms, in the factories, and in the munitions plants. They grew food, built aircraft and tanks, made bombs, and drove ambulances, trucks and generals.

The roles of the SOE female agents were different, however; they participated directly in wartime activities hitherto considered the exclusive province of men. The iconoclastic SOE, acting as a gender-neutral agency, and operating in accordance with its principal organizing tenet - “go straight for the objective, across any social or military conventions that may get in the way,’ made ample military use of women both on the staff and in the field” (Foot, p. 47). Instead of acting in traditional female roles as auxiliaries supporting male military initiatives, the SOE women acted with full agency, doing highly dangerous work in German-occupied countries on equal footing with their male counterparts, and crossing gender, national and combat lines to defend their families and their homelands.

Osborne is quite right when she states that Tickell’s Odette oscillates between ‘monumentalized heroism’ and constant assertion that ‘she is an ordinary woman, and this oscillation is reflected in the popular perception of Odette. But again, Odette’s bi-polar persona is based on, and perpetuated by Odette herself. It must be admitted that such self-deprecation is paradoxical in light of her valorous actions in the field, her stoic withstanding of torture, and the fact she takes charge in so many critical situations. For instance, when she and Peter Churchill are arrested, she claims that she, not he, is the ‘leader’ of the

circuit; that she is the one who should be held responsible; and that if someone is to be shot, it should be she, not Peter. And later, it is Odette who devises the clever ploy to claim that they are married and that Peter is related to Winston Churchill, which undoubtedly serves to save both their lives when almost all other captured agents are executed. Unfortunately, although it saves her life, it also subjects her to special punishment as a British agent and a Churchill relative during her internment in Ravensbruck. It is noteworthy that while she suffers in solitary confinement, denied food, light, or human connection, subject to fluctuating extremes of heat and cold in her cell by sadistic guards, Peter is transferred to what might be termed a VIP section of the Prisoner of War Camp at Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp. He is given his own room with windows, a heat stove, and provided the same food as the guards, as well as the companionship of other men (Churchill, p. 162). What can explain the differences in their treatment? Both are British agents who contributed to the Allied advance, both are believed to be related to Prime Minister Winston Churchill (albeit in Odette's case, by marriage), both are being kept alive as potential hostages or bargaining chips. However, Odette is kept in conditions so draconian that she suffers from TB, dysentery, and other maladies that bring her near death in the months before liberation. Perhaps it is because she is a strong woman who has destabilized the Nazi view of womanhood by performing in a typically masculine role. Pattinson suggests that Nazi aggression against female captives may have been generated by the fact the women had transgressed the conventional gender boundaries firmly rooted in German ideology. Although

Pattinson posits this theory relative to Nazi sexual aggression against women, the same assertion might also be made for the punishment meted out to Odette absent any other rationale.

It is also noteworthy that male rage at the flouting of these conventional gender boundaries is not unique to Nazis. After liberation, French men also severely punished women they believed had transgressed sexual and social mores by “horizontal collaboration,” or sleeping with German soldiers in exchange for food and other necessities for themselves or their children. Such “collaboration” is completely understandable since the rations of the French citizens had been cut to near starvation levels and since the French citizenry primarily consisted of women, children, and the elderly, owing to the fact that almost all men between the ages of 16 and 60 either had been rounded up and sent to Germany or had fled to the hills to join the Maquis resistants. Punishing those who betrayed or denounced their countrymen (male or female) is one thing; the French did punish both men and women in that category. Punishing women who sold their bodies to save their children or themselves is another. In essence, the so-called crime of exchanging sex for life-sustaining commodities can be equated with the commercial exchanges many businessmen made with Germans from which they benefitted economically, yet most of these men went relatively unscathed and many even held respected positions in post-war France. It is clear that the women were “easy pickings” for the venting of male outrage. Although on the face of it, German male punishment of female “enemy” agents is totally different from French male punishment of females who “slept” with

German soldiers, the principle, nonetheless, is the same: Men, regardless of nationality, perceive themselves disempowered and betrayed by women who transgress expected female norms and such women are, therefore, subject to male retaliatory measures.

While Odette's actions to save Peter and her other compatriots can be attributed to her willingness to self-sacrifice for a greater good, a contention made elsewhere in this thesis, they can also be attributed to an almost instinctive impulse to lead. By claiming the male role of "leader," she subverts the gendered premise that leadership is specific to masculinity. Moreover, while the character traits of leadership and self-sacrifice are not incompatible with one another, they are, however, incompatible with their possessor's being deemed 'ordinary'. According to Jones, in all of her interactions with Odette, she has a clear picture of her "as she must have been in occupied France: determined, self-willed and quite indomitable" (Jones, 13). Given this apparently insoluble conundrum, "ordinary" versus "extraordinary," it may be constructive to look at the ordinary issue through a different lens. Perhaps Odette's insistence is based on her perception of herself, her capabilities and her actions as being normal to the situations she faced during the war. After all, what person, male or female, who has been adjudged a hero, actually acknowledges or owns that status. When queried about their heroic deeds, such people, almost without exception, assert that they were just doing their jobs, or doing what needed to be done, or doing the right thing. Moreover, women in that time, however great their accomplishments, were not acculturated to go about proclaiming them. The fact

that Odette indeed may be a so-called ordinary woman, in no way diminishes the qualities and capabilities that enabled her to perform as she did. Her ordinariness instead points to the fact that undoubtedly there were many other ordinary women in the realm also endowed with such qualities and capabilities, but who were never given the opportunity to use them in the manner afforded Odette and her sisters in the SOE. Obviously, language skills were the differentiating and eliminating factors between SOE women and many other women who may have possessed the same abilities and predilections. The real distinction in the term “ordinary” lies in who is using it, to whom it is applied, and for what purpose. Odette uses it as a self-descriptor of a woman who, aside from her wartime work, has lived an ordinary life and takes for granted the innate characteristics and qualities that made her a courageous agent. She does not see them as exceptional or heroic, just part of who she is. For her male narrators, however, use of the term ordinary when applied to women connotes something entirely different.

As Osborne points out, the fact that the women agents “radically subverted contemporary expectations of feminine behavior in the extremity of wartime conditions problematized how they were to be accounted for in the restoration of peacetime norms” (Osborne, p.44). This dilemma for the dominant male culture is demonstrated by the contradictory ways in which it deals with it. On the one hand, the male authors and commentators emphasize the exceptionalism of Odette and other women agents, and in so doing suggest that they are a breed apart, one endowed with special qualities that enabled them to

engage in activities both unnatural to and unachievable by the average normal woman. On the other hand, a number of male journalists trivialize the agents by describing them in stereotypical and demeaning terms, such as those employed in a Sunday Express Newspaper Article: “The interesting thing about these girls is that they are not hearty and horsey young women with masculine chins. They are pretty young girls who would look demure and sweet in crinoline” (q. in Pattinson, p. 4). The writer begins with the point that the “interesting thing about these girls” is their feminine appearance. He is clearly surprised that they don’t look masculine or animalistic or ugly, implying that only thoroughly masculinized or defeminized women would be interested in, or capable of, participating in war. Instead his description of them evokes images of charming young Alices in Wonderland, or Little Miss Muffets, childlike and sweet in their dainty dresses, out for an afternoon’s adventure from which they’ll return home at day’s end, with their crinolines still starched and unsoiled. At the same time, he is not so subtly reinforcing the notion that war, espionage, and the like, are natural and pre-ordained masculine arenas, not the playground of “girls.” The journalist’s infantilizing use of the word “girls,” and condescending comments on their demeanor and their appearance is but one very overt example of the reductivism at work in male portrayals of these courageous women.

Moreover, immediately post-war, government, industry and the male establishment, all of whom had trumpeted the contributions and skills of women during the conflict, were now in urgent accord that women employed in any aspect of the war effort, or in any endeavor in which they were substituting for

men, should leave these endeavors, make way for the return of the men, and resume their wifely, motherly, and domestic duties.

On another track, Elizabeth Kate Vigurs, in a 2011 doctoral thesis entitled, "The Women Agents of the Special Operations Executive F Section – Wartime Realities and Post-war Representations," is concerned with historical accuracy and undertakes the study and demythologization of several of the SOE women, primarily Odette Sansom and Violette Szabo, arguably two of the most famous of the female agents who "became national heroines after the war and the true stories and constructions ... became an integral part of the national identity and recovery after the war, giving hope in the dark, austere post-war years, as the Cold War began and life remained tough for the British public when they sought to rebuild their cities and lives" (Vigurs, p. 2). Vigurs therein acknowledges that in those grim days Britons needed to be reminded of why the war was fought and that the war was worth it. They also needed symbols to represent their wartime memory and to bolster their national pride; the heroines of the SOE filled that need.

Like Osborne, Vigurs also takes issue with Tickell's biography of Odette, although for different reasons. While Osborne criticizes the book in feminist terms as a silencing of Odette "and the male-authored appropriation of her experience, the underlying purpose of which is the reinforcement of female stereotypes and the post-war reinstatement of pre-war male/female gender roles" (Osborne, p. 48), Vigurs indicts Tickell's work from a historical perspective as a "fictionalized biography," intended "to excite rather than offer historical accuracy,"

as well as calculated to appeal to a wider audience that would include women as well as the male readers ordinarily attracted to an espionage tale. Although Vigurs acknowledges that Odette assisted in the writing by conveying her memories to Tickell, and that the 1949 book was written at a time when SOE's official files were closed and therefore, it would not have been possible "to relate a more archivally grounded set of narratives " (Vigurs, p.124), still she challenges a number of the representations in the book, the film, and of Odette herself, among them, Odette's depiction as a pure and saintly heroine, as well as her torture at the hands of the SS. Both the Tickell account and its filmic version are very circumspect in their treatment of the relationship between Odette and Peter Churchill, suggesting that while they might have had romantic feelings for one another, their relationship never devolves to the sexual. The fact that Odette was still technically married to Roy Sansom (although they already had been separated at the time she joined the SOE), in the conservative mind-set of the 1950's, an adulterous 'heroine' would have been decidedly unacceptable to the British public. To give the lie to the depiction of Odette as an unwaveringly chaste woman, Vigurs points to accounts from other agents stating that Odette and Peter were indeed lovers, and were, in fact, sharing the same bedroom when they were captured. Moreover, according to Vigurs, in the post-war years, Odette was assiduous in ensuring "that a good clean-cut image of herself was portrayed at all costs" (Vigurs, p. 139).

To a contemporary audience, the need to maintain such a non-sexualized image may appear ludicrous, but it must be remembered that immediately post-

war, British society wanted nothing more desperately than a return to its former norms and mores, one of which held that women should be chaste, however hypocritical that notion might have been. Though the war had loosened sexual strictures for women, peace snapped them tightly back into place, so it is not surprising, that Odette, who, after all, had three young daughters and had become something of a female standard bearer, would want to present herself as 'above reproach.' Here again, in addition to Tickell's use of language signifiers to covertly urge women's reinstatement to pre-war gender standards, as Osborne claims, Odette herself promotes such reinstatement by her own unquestioning acceptance of them. Two years post-war, Odette and Peter Churchill, who also survives the war, actually do marry, and they become a much sought after celebrity couple. Their ever-growing celebrity and what Vigurs claims is Odette's deliberate seeking of it while at the same time asserting her desire for privacy is another of the contradictions at play in perceptions of Odette. According to Professor Foot, the couple's increasing fame can be attributed to Peter Churchill's and Col. Maurice Buckmaster's desire for publicity coupled with the strength of Odette's personality, representing, perhaps, yet another male appropriation of Odette and her story.

However, for Vigurs, the most controversial and contentious aspect in Odette, and the film based on it, is that of Odette's torture by the SS. She points out that in the first edition of SOE in France, Professor Foot states,

Stories of torture come from the prurient imaginations of authors anxious to make their books sell, apparently with one exception, the story that Mrs. Sansom had all her toenails pulled out at the Avenue Foch. She did return from Germany with some

of her toenails missing, unfortunately her experiences in Ravensbruck had induced in her a state of nervous tension so severe that she had considerable difficulty for many months in distinguishing fantasy and reality, and it is likely enough that she got the two confused in trying to give her honest account of what she had been through (Foot q. in Vigur's, p. 130).

Odette unequivocally and publicly refutes this account, claiming that Foot never interviewed her and that if he had questions about her torture, he should have addressed them to her before publishing his book, whereupon she threatens suit. Ultimately, the matter is resolved and Foot replaces the offending statement in the next edition of his book with the following language:

Terrible things were done to Mrs. Sansom in the Avenue Foch, including burning her near the shoulder-blade. Those tortures also were wholly useless, as is proved by the survival of Rabinovich and Cammaerts ... and Mrs. Sansom's heroic silence received the exceptional distinction of a George Cross, of which she was the sole surviving woman holder" (Foot, p. 379).

It must be acknowledged that throughout an exhaustively researched thesis, Vigurs adopts a balanced approach, citing reports, documents and testimonials that both substantiate and refute various of the post-war constructs of the SOE women she profiles. Many of the contradictions she discovers can easily be attributed to the "fog of war," and conflicting and confused memories of surviving witnesses to, or participants in, a given event, a fact that Vigurs readily concedes. As to the Odette torture issue, however, after a lengthy presentation of material and discussion pro and con, Vigurs contends "the evidence to support the fact that she was tortured is mixed and at best unreliable" (Vigurs, p. 126). Obviously, Vigurs is not just contesting the veracity of the torture scenes depicted in the Tickell book or the film, but more importantly, the credibility of Odette,

herself. Writing in 2008, Vigurs did not have an opportunity to test her theories directly with Odette, who died in March, 1995, but Liane Jones, who wrote in 1990, and spent countless hours interviewing Odette in person, by letters and phone, recounts the particulars of Odette's capture, torture and internment just as they were put forth by the real and the textual Odette. Vigurs acknowledges the Jones account, but dismisses it as anecdotal because it is based solely on Odette's testimony, absent substantiating evidence (although it is not clear what she might consider substantiating evidence) and because in the course of writing her book, Jones befriends Odette and so her "opinion of Odette is tinged with sympathy rather than objectivity" (Vigurs, p.117).

Vigurs also cites the fact that Odette's personnel file containing her post-war debriefing or 'interrogation' makes no mention of the toenail ripping torture. In fact, the last pages of Odette's file are inexplicably missing, and although Vigurs acknowledges that fact, she cannot adequately account for it. Odette later tells Jones that in her debriefing interrogation, she not only recounted her torture, but also provided a statement indicting two SOE figures who had been working with the Germans and were responsible for not only her and Peter's arrest, but also for untold numbers of other agents and resisters as well (Jones, p. 302). In his history of SOE, Foot writes that in early 1946, a fire broke out at Baker Street and destroyed almost all of SOE files, among them "several files of particular interest to security, about how various agents had come to be arrested" (Foot, p. 396). Although this fire has been described in several accounts as mysterious, given the damaging information contained in both Odette's debriefing

and the destroyed SOE files, perhaps the missing pages and the Baker Street fire are not so mysterious after all. This conclusion is also suggested in works by Elizabeth Nicholas and Jean Overton-Fuller, to which further reference is made subsequently.

Vigurs is at pains to cite her sources, some of which support Odette and Tickell's version, including statements from Jones and Penny Starns, who also wrote about Odette, which Vigurs discounts as unverifiable. Negating sources, which Vigurs accepts as credible, include the opinions of some other agents (who had no way of knowing what Odette endured and who may have been motivated by envy about Odette's singular celebrity) and an article alluding to a statement from Father Paul Steinhardt, the German chaplain at Fresnes Prison, who had visited Odette on several occasions, that he did not recall the injuries to her feet. Nonetheless, the article goes on to confirm the fact that Odette was indeed tortured. Moreover, a number of credible authors who have written about Odette, Juliette Pattinson among them, who have done their own research, include the torture incident in their narratives. In addition, the citation for Odette's George Cross award also references it. In her conclusion, however, Vigurs posits that the sources do not back up Odette's claims. But, it must be contended, neither do they disprove it. In taking on the Odette story, Vigurs sets out two principal objectives - determining its historical accuracy and demythologizing the cultish and folkloric representations of her that over the years have built upon themselves. And it must be admitted that she has certainly done a vast amount of research, raised very compelling questions, and

shaken the foundations of the pedestal upon which Odette has been placed. Nonetheless, dismantling some of the legend that surrounds Odette does not necessarily give us the truth of the woman who crossed rigid gender and cultural barriers, made incredible sacrifices, and endured the unimaginable for the sake of her children, her fellow agents, and her two countries at a time when Europe and the world were teetering on the edge of a second Dark Ages.

Despite the challenges to historical accuracy (Vigurs) and the claim of male appropriation and subversion of the female voice (Osborne), a case can be made that were it not for the Tickell book, and the production of the film based on it, the heroism of not only Odette, but also of all the SOE women might never have come to public notice. The fact that the book and the film enjoyed phenomenal success in Great Britain and that the attendant publicity rocketed Odette to nationwide celebrity served to put the SOE women on the World War II map, generating the interest of reporters, journalists, filmmakers and other writers, and making Odette a household name.

Liane Jones, in *A Quiet Courage*, talks of being brought up on stories about Odette and Violette Szabo, tales that painted them as 'pure and gallant' heroines, but neither the books nor the films contained the "reflection and insights" she sought. "Both books, significantly I felt, were written by men. I felt sure that if the women themselves had told their stories, I should have read something quite different" (Jones p.7). Determined to tell that different story, Jones sets about researching and writing what it was like to be a woman agent working undercover with the resistance in France. She profiles 37 women

agents, but focuses on six who were still available for interview. Assisting her in the writing are four SOE women, one of whom is Odette, who tell their stories in great detail. Jones's resulting portrait of Odette is more thoughtful, analytical and movingly drawn than Tickell's work, but, as stated above, corroborates the salient biographical details of Odette's SOE experiences as narrated by Tickell. It also goes much further, researching and reporting more extensively on the work of Odette, Peter Churchill, Arnaud and the resisters involved in the Spindle Circuit, as well as the complex set of circumstances and double dealings that resulted in its downfall. (see discussion under Nicholas).

At least ten other female-authored works about the SOE women, and the workings of the SOE itself, have been published throughout the post-war years, some, unfortunately, are now out of print, but the death of 89-year-old SOE agent Eileen Didi Nearne in 2010 has triggered a resurgence of interest in the women and a reprinting of some of the older material as well as the production of new works, including one in 2013 by Susan Ottaway on the Nearne sisters, Eileen (called Didi) and Jacqueline, who were not only sisters, but also fellow agents. Entitled, Sisters, Secrets and Sacrifice, this latest work recounts the facts of Didi's arrest, torture and concentration camp experience, which closely mirrors that of Odette, except that Didi, who never admitted to being a British agent and maintained her French cover throughout her captivity, was incarcerated in the main camp at Ravensbruck, and managed to escape into the arms of the advancing Americans.

Two other works, Death Be Not Proud, by Elizabeth Nicholas, and Noor un nisa Inayat Khan (Madeleine), by Jean Overton-Fuller, uncover incompetence and failures within the London Office of the SOE and, more importantly, suggest deliberate betrayals by MI6 the Intelligence Section of the British Foreign Office, which led to the capture and death of seven women agents.

In Death Be Not Proud, Nicholas writes about her investigation into the death of her girlhood friend, agent Diana Rowland, at the hands of the SS at Natzweiler Concentration Camp in July of 1944. Upon reading Tickell's Odette, Nicholas says she got her "first glimpse of what Diana Rowden's work had been" (Nicholas, p. 31). Although she felt it was written simply as a success story, "a tribute to one courageous woman" (p.31), Nicholas's principal criticism of Odette is that it gives "no inkling of the cold and dreadful world of subterfuge and deception, treachery and counter-treachery" in which the agent really lives, "a world in which many strange and devious forces are inextricably interlocked, so that no man may know with certainty where truth may lie" (p. 31), the world that Nicholas subsequently undertakes to explore in Death Be Not Proud. Nonetheless, Nicholas gleans vital information from the work, namely, that Diana Rowden was one of a group of seven other captured women agents who, along with Odette, had been brought from Fresnes Prison to 84 Avenue Foch, before being sent to Karlsruhe Prison at the German border, and then on to various German concentration camps for execution. Moreover, Nicholas says she was provoked into thought about the women who accompanied Odette to Karlsruhe and about the last months of Diana's life. What Nicholas learns serves as the

springboard for her own probe, not only into the circumstances of her friend's execution, but also into the machinations of the British War Office and the German Security Forces, as well as the nefarious forces at play within the British Intelligence Service (SIS) and the SOE. The allegations of Fuller and Nicholas in their respective works against some highly placed individuals in both agencies caused such a furor in Parliament and the public that the then-Prime Minister Harold Macmillan commissioned Professor M.R.D. Foot to undertake a thorough study of the workings of the SOE operations in France, which resulted in the history, SOE in France, now considered the source document for writers, researchers and other historians interested in the SOE French operations.

These various works have provided a variety of viewpoints of Odette and her representations, especially those offered by Osborne and Vigurs. Osborne valorizes Odette, acknowledging the courage she and her SOE comrades displayed at a time when women and their capabilities were generally devalued by the culture. She also decries the usurpation of her story by males writers eager to re-marginalize all the women who had proved their mettle in the war, whether behind enemy lines or on the home front, and send them back to the kitchens and the nurseries, with a condescending pat on the head and a patronizingly stated "well done." Vigurs, on the other hand, strives to minimize Odette, reducing her larger-than-life image to that of an 'ordinary woman,' who had some extraordinary experiences. Indeed, her expressed intent is to deconstruct the myths that have built up not just around Odette but other SOE women as well. However, in Odette's case, it is clear that her aim is not simply

to deconstruct a myth, but also to discredit the testimonies of the woman herself. No irrefutable evidence has been offered either way, but as Vigurs herself admits, the preponderance of authors who wrote about her, readers who read about her, and the British populace believe in the authenticity of Odette's version. Perhaps, as Vigurs suggests, it is simply the case that people want to believe it. But after reading and reviewing a good deal of the same, but admittedly not all, the material available to Vigurs, Odette's version seems the most credible to the writer of this thesis.

Nonetheless, despite their varying viewpoints, the continuing series of works that have dealt with Odette and the other SOE female agents who served and sacrificed during the most cataclysmic years in European history, ensure that this coterie of valiant sisters are accorded their rightful place in the anthology of World War Two.

Section 7 - Conclusion

Through the examination of the wartime activities of Odette and other SOE women, my thesis demonstrates that in overcoming existing gender, cultural, and military barriers, Odette and her comrades not only succeeded in subverting Nazi operations in France, they also destabilized gendered notions of male exclusivity in prosecuting combat-related clandestine operations, as well as conventional perceptions of female frailty in need of male protection. In the post-war discourse, however, as Osborne asserts, the reinstatement of female subordination in the gender hierarchy was undertaken by means of male appropriation and shaping of the female agents' stories. Odette, however, defies easy replacement and remains somewhat enigmatic. Although she is depicted in apparently contradictory constructions as both an ordinary and an exceptional woman, it is instead the case, as posited in this thesis, that she offers an integrated embodiment of both characterizations, as well as an incorporation of both feminine and masculine characteristics and capabilities, absent the need for an arbitrary and uncrossable line inscribed between the two. In addition, as previously discussed, given the breadth and depth of Odette's exploits and experiences, she also serves as the personification of women's World War II narrative in Great Britain.

As noted earlier, England was in need of heroic figures to help ameliorate the pain of the terrible losses sustained during the war, both in terms of the horrendous loss of life, military and civilian, as well as the destruction of their

cities, from which they were not to recover until well into the next decade.

Although Odette became an iconic figure, and she and Peter were lionized as a heroic couple assisting in that amelioration, the continuing emphasis on their wartime experiences and its attendant celebrity took a toll on their marriage.

While Odette wanted to get on with her life, Peter remained fixed in the war years. She recounts to Jones:

Sadly enough it was the war that broke up Peter Churchill and me. I loved him very much and he loved me but we were so very different in the way that we thought about it. He did not want to leave it behind. The war had been for him the best part of his life ... Every time we sat in front of food, he would say, 'How marvelous it is to have this food.' And I would say, 'No, it's not marvelous, it's normal' (Jones, 343).

Odette does get on with her life, but she cannot leave the war completely behind either. She confesses to feeling lonely for "the feeling that it was," comparing herself to a person who has had a belief in God, but lost it (344). In this, she expresses the sentiments of many of the agents, that it was a very special time in their lives, of serving a cause greater than themselves, of sharing intense comradeship and loyalty, and of having touched something very special, no longer accessible to them in peacetime. Despite her sense of loss, Odette nonetheless achieves a balance between her domesticated and her heroicized selves. Living in a country cottage, she raises her daughters, keeps house, lectures, serves as Vice President of the First Aid Nurses Yeomanry (FANY), and participates in memorials for her fallen comrades. Every year, until the end of her life, she visits St. Paul's in London and lays a bouquet of violets at a memorial plaque inscribed with the names of all the women who did not come

back. Whatever statements she makes about the SOE, she says she makes in behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves “who did so much more than I.” Likewise, whatever tribute is paid to her, she accepts in their behalf. In the end, Odette not only serves as a symbol and a caretaker of the legacy of the SOE women, but also as a role model for young women, who aspire to move beyond prescribed female roles into a gender-neutral universe where anything is possible in any arena to the woman or man willing to work for it.

It is true that the hundreds of thousands of women who left their households to serve the war returned to them and were retrograded to their pre-war status, some reluctantly, but others, including the women agents, happily, anxious to marry, have children, reunite with family, lead normal lives, at least at first. While marriages and births soared in the immediate post-war years, so too did the number of divorces and separations. (Pattinson, p.188). Sadly, the liberation of the women war workers was for the duration only, and for the better part of the next two decades, the temporarily disrupted male and female gender and power lines were not only redrawn, but also heavily reinforced.

Nonetheless, the war had served as a catalyst for female empowerment and a latent driver of social change. By the late 1950's, women had become restive. The feminist genie that had been let out of the bottle in 1940, but stuffed back into it in 1945, burst forth again in the 1960's and '70's, to transformative effect. The second wave of the feminist movement gained traction in Britain and the United States and resulted in significant strides in securing women's rights in society, the workplace, education, and reproduction. This movement and these

gains may be justifiably claimed as the lasting cultural influence of the SOE women who fought with men behind enemy lines, as well as that of their other wartime sisters who performed men's jobs at the homefront, even if that influence is only finally legible in their daughters revolutionary spirit.

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