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Tammy M. Proctor, *Female Intelligence: Women and Espionage in the First World War*. New York and London: New York University Press, 2003. xvi + 205 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$26.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-8147-6693-5.

Review by Daniella Sarnoff, Xavier University.

The story that Tammy Proctor relates in her book on female intelligence workers is one nearly forgotten. While the names of some of these women may be familiar, Proctor has rescued most of the women for history from government documents, letters, and personal accounts. This is also a story that reveals larger truths about the history of women and gender during the First World War. The ambivalence with which female intelligence workers were viewed and the often conflicting presentation of these women as seducing harlots or sacrificing angels captures the tension and gender anxiety of the early twentieth century. As Tammy Proctor argues, female intelligence workers were almost never portrayed as they were in life and, indeed, after the war the stories of these women were retold and reformulated to society in order to confirm the “proper” role of women--if, of course, they were not immediately forgotten.

Proctor’s work is really a history of women in British intelligence work. While there are female actors in the history who were Belgian (Gabrielle Petit) or French (Louise de Bettignies) they were all women who were in one capacity or another working for British intelligence. It is the modernization of British intelligence in the early twentieth century that provides the framework for this study. Central to Proctor’s thesis is that women were an essential part of this transformation.

Proctor traces the story of British intelligence, briefly, back to the seventeenth century. But it was after the permanent creation of the British Secret Service Bureau, in 1909, that the work of women in intelligence became official, documented, and essential. Proctor’s research has uncovered the reality that between 1909 and 1919 more than 6,000 women served in military or civilian capacity as members of the British intelligence community (pp. 1-2). Most of these women worked in postal censorship, cryptography, intelligence gathering, or counterespionage. At a time when women could not vote or hold a civil service position if married, they were trusted with state secrets and national security.

However, at the same time that women were being entrusted with state secrets, they were also becoming suspect by the government. The British Defense of the Realm Act (DORA) of 1914 made clear the state’s uneasiness with women’s autonomy. DORA legislation had the potential to make all single women guilty of prostitution and of infecting British servicemen with venereal disease. Legislation directed at the control of women’s bodies was part of the government’s apparent fear those bodies could be a threat to the state and that “women were capable of infiltrating society and weakening from within through marriage, childbearing, and sexuality” (p. 33).

And so the stage was set for women and wartime intelligence work. On the one hand, women were given new responsibilities and considered the ultimate guardians of national continuity and exemplars of patriotic sacrifice. On the other hand, all women had the potential to undermine the work of the state and were not to be trusted. Their bodies had the capacity of reproducing the citizenry, or betraying the citizenry through the sexual seduction of male officials and officers. This is a story with two sides. If working for the Allies, the British viewed these women as patriots doing intelligence work. If working for the Germans, they were spies engaged in espionage.

One is convinced by Proctor’s argument that, in the British imagination, female espionage was connected to sexual perversity, though this argument could be buttressed by more specific examples. One convincing example was the 1918 libel trial of Noel Pemberton Billing versus Maud Allen. Billing was a member of Parliament and the publisher of right-wing journals. Within his newspaper he claimed to have discovered a “black book of sin” which was the purported list of 47,000 traitors and degenerates which the German government used to recruit highly placed spies. In one article “The Cult of the Clitoris” Billing argued that many on this traitorous list could be found attending

'Salome' starring the Canadian born dancer Maud Allen. Clearly, as Proctor argues, the article (the title alone!) as well as the reference to Wilde's previously banned play, linked foreign birth, enemy sympathy, homosexuality, and immorality (pp. 39-41).

The libel case connected the anxiety over the war with gender anxiety and a general spy panic that had been part of British history. And, indeed, all of these fears could be connected through women, whether Maud Allen or the many unnamed seductresses who were supposedly using their wiles to wrest state secrets from members of Parliament.

Proctor also examines the intelligence work of women behind enemy lines. Within the occupied territories there were many information and protection networks. One such network, La Dame Blanche, which operated in eastern and southern Belgium, as well as northern France, was funded and managed by the British War Office and, significantly, the agents were given soldier status--especially important for men who would want to avoid being "shirkers." The British Army accepted the soldier status of women as well as men (for service and later veteran's benefits) yet would not acknowledge the rank--as women often outranked men. The work of La Dame Blanche both challenged the usual feminized victimhood of Belgium and gave women control of an essential network in occupied areas (p.77). Proctor notes that women were specifically put in charge in order to guarantee the network's continuity in case of the capture of male agents. In this way La Dame Blanche is an example of British Intelligence taking advantage of the gendered assumption that intelligence was innately male and women would be less suspect. La Dame Blanche, especially Battalion III led by Laure Tandel, is also illustrative of the diversity of age present in the intelligence networks. Female participants ranged in age from sixteen to eighty-one, with 60 percent unmarried and 7 percent widowed (p. 81). Whole families participated in the network, which included train-watching to report on German movements, acting as couriers, or running safe-houses.

According to Proctor, women's work in La Dame Blanche was often motivated by a desire to protect the family (certainly an "acceptable" female motivation) as well as avenging the death of a male loved-one. It offered women excitement as well as "equal-footing" with men. This equal-footing also meant that if found and arrested by the Germans they would be sentenced to hard labor or, in some cases, to death. While the protection of family and female sacrifice was a noble goal for these women, they were not often remembered or memorialized--certainly as compared to female resisters in World War II. This lapse of memory, according to Proctor, as she cites Joanna Bourke, is because the female soldier-spies of World War I were perceived as devaluing the sacrifices of male counterparts (p. 98). Indeed, it was their very existence, their necessity, that indicated the failures of men and governments to protect women. That failure, as well as women's sometimes successes in stepping into those traditional male roles, is what added to the gender anxiety of the war years. The rewriting of these women's lives and actions after the war--emphasizing sacrifice and downplaying heroism--became instrumental in the task of gender "normalization." [1]

Other examples of female intelligence work are the "modern Joan of Arcs" who became known for their sacrifice for the nation. Women like Edith Cavell (a British nurse who organized an escape network for Allied soldiers and was executed by the Germans in 1915) and Louise de Bettignies (a French governess who ran an intelligence network) became the embodiment of selfless feminine patriotism. While none of these women were mothers, in the retelling of their stories they were rendered representatives of the motherhood of the nation.

These women "used their feminine invisibility...but also masculinized themselves by taking on the 'male' work of gathering information." However, as Proctor persuasively argues, "Death refeminized them" (p. 99). In war memorials and propaganda these heroic women were returned to the proper status of victims, violated by the aggression of invading German armies. Once again the fact of women's heroic work exposed men's inability to protect them. So, while female heroism was lauded as patriotic, the victimization (and hence passivity) of these women was also reasserted.

Given the challenge of fitting most women spies into the proper gender order after the war, perhaps it is not surprising that on the whole they were lost to history. One name, however, was not forgotten: Mata Hari. As Proctor notes, Mata Hari "fit perfectly the sexualized myth of women spies constructed in the years before and during the war" (p. 126). Mata Hari was a Dutch-born divorcée who became famous for her exotic dancing career and was eventually executed by the French for allegedly trafficking information to the GermanS. The Mata Hari story was the counternarrative to the sacrificing woman. Her's was also the narrative that remained (and remains) in popular

imagination. In fact, a picture of Mata Hari graces the cover of the book. This has the strange effect of undoing some of the impact of Proctor's argument. Even as one is convinced that the vast majority of spies were not "Mata Haris" but ordinary women attempting to do their bit for the country during wartime, in the end one is left forgetting all but a few of the names mentioned and remembering Mata Hari in her seducing exotic pose.

Proctor's work does restore female intelligence workers to the history of World War I and provides a thoughtful examination of the gendering of espionage during the war. She tries to give structure to often conflicting stories and rumors about these women. These rumors and stories were part of wartime propaganda and certainly each side exploited what they could, whether through the valorization of sacrificing women or the reports of the notorious betrayal of women. This duality--the categorization of "us" and "them"--was an aspect of wartime and the fact that women's actions, motivations, and bodies became interpreted based on this distinction was part of the war. Enemy spies were femmes fatales using their sexuality to destroy the state, and women working for the Allies were courageous women forced to sacrifice for the nation and ultimately victims of German aggression.

Beyond that, however, much of the reading and understanding of female espionage work is also a history of memory and commemoration. Which women were memorialized, how stories were officially retold and socially abridged is part of the larger context of women and gender history, but also a story of the interwar years. While Proctor's book tells us quite a bit about an interesting and important part of the war, it also has much to offer to our ongoing understanding of the recasting of gender roles between the wars, and the retelling of the war itself. Although information on French agents for Britain (such as Louise de Bettignies) or spies (such as Mata Hari) tried and executed by the French fills out a history of France and World War I, it is for this larger context of gender and war and memory that Proctor's book is useful for historians of France.

Women in intelligence work were remembered as sacrificing mothers--courageous victims who acted for love of their country--or seducing strumpets, cold and calculating, using their sexuality to betray and destroy. Real women who fit these descriptions were few and far between, and yet the attempt was made--both during and after the war--to categorize women in these simplified terms in order to recreate a gender order challenged during wartime.

NOTES

[1] Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-face Killing in Twentieth-Century Warfare* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

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