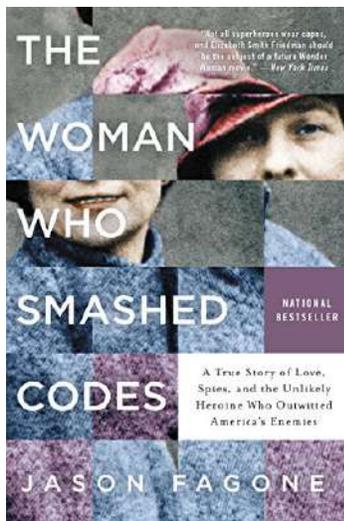


Female spies and saboteurs in World War II

For decades, the pivotal role many women played in codebreaking, espionage, and the Resistance in World War II went largely unappreciated. But with the advent of the twenty-first century, historians have begun bringing some of their extraordinary stories to light. In some cases, what they write reflects newly declassified files. But in others it's merely evidence that institutionalized sexism long downplayed the contributions by women in the [Special Operations Executive](#) (SOE), [Office of Strategic Services](#) (OSS), the [GRU](#), the US and British armed forces, [Resistance](#) movements across Europe, and at [Bletchley Park](#). The books listed below are part of that effort to amend the history of the war to more fully reflect what really happened.

These titles are arranged in alphabetical order by the authors' last names. Links lead to the full reviews on this website.

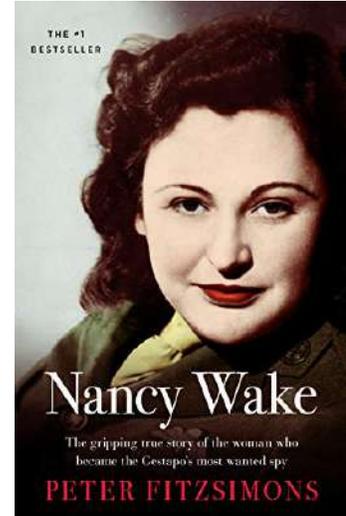


The Woman Who Smashed Codes: A True Story of Love, Spies, and the Unlikely Heroine Who Outwitted America's Enemies by Jason Fagone ([The woman codebreaker who caught gangsters and Nazi spies](#))

Working with recently declassified files from the World War II era as well as long-ignored archival records and contemporary press reports and interviews, journalist Jason Fagone has brought to light at last the astonishing story of Elizebeth Smith Friedman and her husband, William Friedman. The Friedmans may well have been the most important 20th-century American codebreakers, and quite possibly the best and most successful in the world.

Nancy Wake: The gripping true story of the woman who became the Gestapo's most wanted spy by Peter FitzSimmons
([A female WWII spy led thousands against the Nazis](#))

Recent years have seen a flood of new books belatedly highlighting the role of women in espionage in World War II. Despite rampant sexism and misogyny, women did indeed fill vital roles as spies and analysts in intelligence-gathering as well as partisan activities behind enemy lines. And few women played as prominent a part as a phenomenal Australian woman named [Nancy Wake](#) (1912-2011). Her exploits in France during the war have been the subject of at least five books as well as a feature film and a TV series. The best of the books, I've found, is [Peter FitzSimmons'](#) *Nancy Wake*, which appeared in 2011, the year of her death at the age of 98.

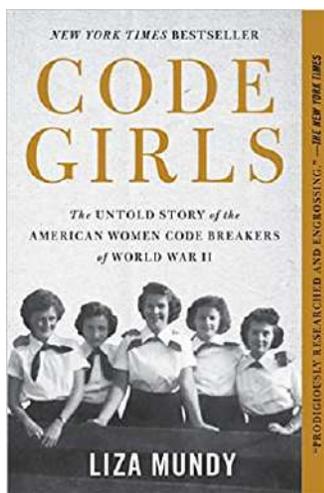


Code Name: Lise: The True Story of the Woman Who Became World War II's Most Highly Decorated Spy by Larry Loftis
([A woman was World War II's most highly decorated spy](#))

She was the most decorated spy in World War II of either gender. Her name was [Odette Sansom](#) (later Odette Hallowes). From 1942 to 1945, she served as an officer of Britain's [Special Operations Executive](#). From November 1942 to April 1943, she worked in southern France as a courier for an SOE network that delivered arms, money, and supplies to the French Resistance. Betrayed by the witless leader of a French network operating in the same area, she was arrested along with her leader and lover, Captain [Peter Churchill](#). She spent the rest of the war in prison, first in France and later at the notorious [Ravensbrück](#) concentration camp for women. And when it was all over, she emerged as the war's most highly decorated spy. Yet these bare-bones facts convey not a hint of the woman's almost superhuman courage, the subject of [Larry Loftis'](#) excellent portrait, *Code Name: Lise*.

[Agent Sonya: Moscow's Most Daring Wartime Spy by Ben MacIntyre \(The extraordinary Soviet spy who gave Stalin the bomb\)](#)

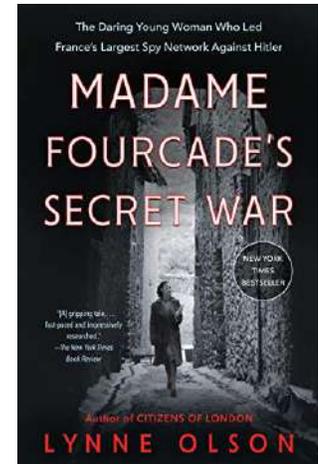
[Ben MacIntyre](#) is one of the most prolific authors of nonfiction books about espionage in the English language. Of the thirteen books he's written to date, nearly all are about spies, saboteurs, and partisans, and five of those books have been made into documentaries by the BBC. In his latest venture, MacIntyre tells the tale of an extraordinary Soviet spy in World War II, a German-Jewish Communist named [Ursula Kuczynski](#) (1907-2000). During her nearly two decades as an officer of [Soviet military intelligence](#), Kuczynski played a pivotal role in one of the most spectacular intelligence coups of the twentieth century. As a colonel in the Red Army working for what was later called the [GRU](#), she handled the agent who stole Britain's and America's most critical [atomic bomb secrets](#) for Josef Stalin. Her code name was "Sonya." MacIntyre's biography of her is endlessly fascinating.



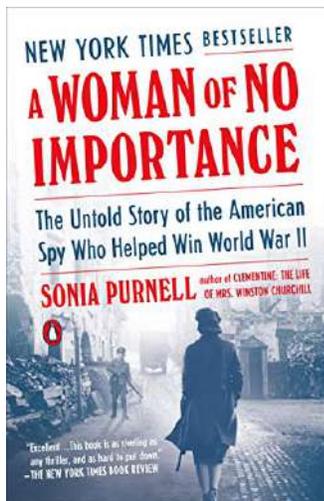
[Code Girls: The Untold Story of the American Women Code Breakers of World War II by Liza Mundy \(The amazing story of the American "Code Girls" who helped win World War II\)](#)

During World War II more than 10,000 women worked on cryptography for the US Army and Navy in Washington, DC. They were sworn to secrecy about their work, and to this day some of those who survive, now in their 90s, are still reluctant to talk about it. As Mundy reveals in *Code Girls*, there were in fact not two (the German Enigma and the Japanese Purple) but three breakthroughs in untangling Axis codes that were decisive, and most of those who worked on all three were women.

Madame Fourcade's Secret War: The Daring Young Woman Who Led France's Largest Spy Network Against Hitler by Lynne Olson ([The truth about the French Resistance, dug out of old records](#))



She led the largest French Resistance network against the Nazis for nearly five years. Three thousand agents answered to her, and they delivered intelligence to the British that helped the Allies win the war. Yet she has been virtually forgotten for decades, her courage and resourcefulness ignored by Charles De Gaulle and the French Communist Party, the dominant political forces in France for decades. Because she wasn't politically allied with either. And because she was a woman. Now a new biography belatedly restores her to the spotlight. It reads like a thriller. And it reveals long-hidden truths about the French Resistance.

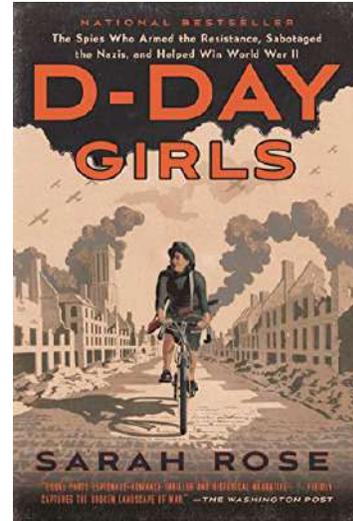


A Woman of No Importance: The Untold Story of the American Spy Who Helped Win World War II by Sonia Purnell ([The WWII American woman spy who kept the French Resistance alive](#))

Popular fiction abounds with superheroes. But it's not often at all that you'll come across a true-to-life story of a person who comes even close to the sort of over-the-top heroism that so many popular writers favor. However, the story of WWII American woman spy [Virginia Hall](#) (1906-82) fits that bill. In *A Woman of No Importance*, Sonia Purnell relates the woman's experience in World War II in compelling and often jaw-dropping detail. It's the best study I've ever read about the British [Special Operations Executive](#) (SOE), the American [Office of Strategic Services](#) (OSS), and the [French Resistance](#). I found it nearly impossible to put the book down.

D-Day Girls: The Spies Who Armed the Resistance, Sabotaged the Nazis, and Helped Win World War II by Sarah Rose ([The women who parachuted behind German lines and helped secure the Normandy landing](#))

D-Day Girls spotlights the British Special Operations Executive (SOE), the world's first large fighting force trained and organized to operate behind enemy lines. Author Sarah Rose pays special attention in *D-Day Girls* to a handful of women in the French Section (F Section) of the SOE. But throughout she puts their experiences in the larger context. "Women made up some two thousand of the approximately thirteen thousand employees of the Special Operations Executive . . . They were translators, radio operators, secretaries, drivers, and honeypots. Only eight were deployed as special agents in Autumn 1942, when SOE's first class of female trainees was seconded to France."



For further reading

You'll find reviews of many other books about World War II and espionage, both fiction and nonfiction, at the following:

- [5 top nonfiction books about World War II \(plus many runners-up\)](#)
- [The 10 best novels about World War II \(with 30+ runners-up\)](#)
- [The 10 top espionage novels reviewed on this site](#)
- [20 good nonfiction books about espionage](#)
- [The 10 most consequential events of World War II](#)

And you can always find my most popular reviews, and the most recent ones, plus a guide to this whole site, on the [Home Page](#).