

# Veiled in Shadows: The Role of Women as Spies in European and American Conflicts

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## Abstract

*This article examines the blatantly overlooked contributions and roles of women spies in influencing major conflict outcomes throughout history. It aims to highlight how women, leveraging societal perceptions of apathy and underestimation, became unique and priceless assets in the dark, shadowy world of national and international espionage, shaping political and military outcomes from ancient courts to modern wars. Employing a historical narrative approach, the article details examples of women employed as messengers, hostesses, disguised operatives, double agents, and code breakers, using innovative tools like invisible ink, laundry signals, and concealed messages to obtain and trade intelligence at great personal costs and sacrifices to life and limb without the need for any recognition, status, or rewards from their employers. Key examples include Mata Hari and Louise de Bettignies in World War I, Belle Boyd, and Pauline Cushman in the American Civil War, Anna Strong in the Revolutionary War, Charlotte de Sauve in the French Wars of Religion, supported by detailed case studies. Findings reveal that these 'Veiled Warriors' influenced the course of many pivotal events in both combat and non-combat situations despite facing harsh penalties and historical erasure*

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*due to prevalent and contemporary gender biases. The scope spans European and American conflicts, emphasising the power, influence, and reach of informal networks. The article ends with stressing the genderless nature of espionage, the strategic use of women in different social roles, and the urgent need for their recognition to complete and complement historical narratives of many battles and wars, their altered outcomes, and intelligence tradecraft as a whole.*

### **Introduction**

**E**spionage has long served as a decisive instrument in shaping political and military outcomes. While popular imagination associates intelligence work with covert male operatives, women have played significant yet frequently overlooked roles within clandestine networks across history.<sup>1</sup> While the image of a spy often brings about in the mind images of trenchcoats, encrypted messages, and cloak and dagger stories, a significantly large number of unknown men and women spies operated for centuries before the modern intelligence age began. Women, especially and uncharacteristically, have played an extraordinary and majorly overlooked role behind the shadows.<sup>2</sup> From ancient courts and unconventional battlefields to modern warfare of today, female spies have used their humour, allure, charm acumen, and valour to collect and communicate critical information that altered the course of kingdoms, wars, and nations. Who can forget the legendary Mata Hari.<sup>3</sup>

Despite yeoman service throughout the annals of history, women's contributions have been pushed to the sidelines or nearly forgotten in historical records. Often dismissed as circumstantial, or conveniently attributed to their male counterparts, societal biases of the times further rendered these women invisible, which paradoxically also became their greatest strategic asset in the world of intelligence and espionage, where lines were seldom clear and well-defined but always all but blurred.

Through carefully cultivated intelligence networks, they gathered and traded secrets, influenced critical treaty negotiations, prevented potential military disasters, and, at times, decisively shifted the balance of power in conflicts that shaped the modern

world. An examination of their activities reveals remarkable personal stories, innovative tradecraft methods, and a lasting impact on the craft of espionage itself, setting professional standards that, in some cases, remain unmatched even today.

The expanding field of intelligence studies has acknowledged, though not exhaustively explored, the contributions of women spies, as reflected in a growing body of scholarship and literature reviews on the subject. Consequently, merely chronicling the lives of well-known spies—an approach already undertaken in several historical accounts—may not necessarily constitute a novel contribution to the existing corpus of literature. Given that this work is intended as a research article, greater analytical value may lie in examining specific contributions, operational innovations, or the strategic significance of lesser-known female spies whose roles have remained underexplored in conventional historiography.

Espionage is the clandestine acquisition of intelligence, and it has always been a decisive factor in war and diplomacy for statesmen, bureaucrats, politicians, world leaders, military planners, strategists, tacticians, and soldiers alike in various measures—from the ordinary to the bizarre.<sup>4</sup> While spy-craft is synonymous with masculine involvement, women have operated in its obscurities for centuries, leveraging their unique roles in society and underrated status to become valuable assets.<sup>5</sup> From imperial courts and battlefield camps to revolutionary gatherings and civil war fortresses, women spies have helped shape geo-political currents at great personal risk.<sup>6</sup>

The role of women in espionage can be analysed through factors such as structural access, social mobility, and gender perceptions. In many historical societies, women's presence in domestic, social, and courtly environments placed them close to political and military decision-makers. These positions created informal intelligence networks that often complemented or substituted formal espionage structures before the emergence of modern intelligence agencies.

Women often operated within social environments such as royal courts, salons, military camps, and elite gatherings where political and military leaders interacted informally. Their roles as hostesses, companions, attendants, or entertainers enabled them to observe conversations, gather intelligence, and build informal information networks without raising suspicion.

### **Perception about Women in 'The Business'**

Societal norms have often viewed women as passive, submissive, diminutive, and apolitical individuals, unsuited to the brutalities of war or the trickery of a murky and shadowy intelligence world.<sup>7</sup> Ironically, it was this very perception that made women the most ideal and perfect candidates for spy-craft. Being underestimated or ignored, sidelined, and unassuming in all male-dominated political and military circles, women could manoeuvre through spaces unnoticed, using innocence as a suitable cover-story or pretext.

This contradiction, however, was a double-edged sword. While it allowed women to access male circles, it also meant that all their hard work, risk to life and limb, etc., slipped into shadows of history, folklore, or only word of mouth accounts, and their contributions rarely got recorded, credited, or remembered.<sup>8</sup> Many heroic women were only celebrated posthumously or revealed by historians peeling back the layers of official, unofficial, verbal, or experiential narratives.<sup>9</sup>

Traditionally, women were rarely seen as serious participants in political or military discourses, which naturally made them the first choice as excellent spies, given the cultural blindness of the times to their existence. This allowed them to be welcomed into otherwise forbidden private spaces, move freely in privileged and domestic settings with the least amount or account of any suspicion being aroused. Prominent military and political leaders often overlooked their presence, unaware of the keen ears, and intellect of maids, mistresses, family, nurses, dinner companions, or even wives.

However, when discovered, women spies were treated more harshly than men, branded as seductresses, traitors, or even worse.<sup>10</sup> Public trials and executions of women like Mata Hari reflected a serious discomfort, with women challenging strict gender norms through treasonous intelligence tradecraft.

### **Motivation**

Women engaged in espionage for motivations, largely like those of men, including patriotism, ideology, revenge, financial gain, coercion, personal relationships, or simply survival in hostile environments. Some volunteered for intelligence work, while others

were drawn into it by circumstances or social connections. In certain cases, courtesans and noblewomen deliberately used their romantic or social access to influential individuals to obtain sensitive information. By leveraging charm, wit, and interpersonal relationships, they were able to extract secrets and transmit intelligence that served the objectives of the networks or causes they supported.<sup>11</sup>

### **Major Roles in Shaping Geopolitical Events**

Women often also disguised themselves as men infiltrating enemy lines; posed as civilians, merchants, or nurses to move through checkpoints without raising suspicion.<sup>12</sup> Women also operated as double agents, feeding misinformation to enemy forces or sabotaging plans from within. They used their charm to manipulate powerful men to access confidential information movements or dispositions. In social circles, women listened, observed, and relayed valuable conversations. As wives, as courtesans, or as entertainers, they had access to high-ranking officials for intelligence gathering in a subtle but powerful manner.

Through the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries, women skilled in linguistics interpreted and intercepted communications or translated foreign intelligence.<sup>13</sup> Linguistically and analytically gifted women broke enemy codes or created their own laying important groundwork for the later crop of female cryptanalysts.<sup>14</sup>

From an intelligence studies perspective, these activities can be categorised into several operational functions, commonly associated with clandestine networks:

- **Human Intelligence Collection.** Women frequently collected information through interpersonal contact with political leaders, military officers, diplomats, or administrative officials. This included overheard conversations, observation of troop movements, and insight into political deliberations.
- **Courier and Communication Roles.** In the absence of secure communication technologies, women served as couriers transporting written or memorised intelligence across contested territories. Their perceived non-combatant status often allowed them to pass through checkpoints or military zones with comparatively less scrutiny.

- **Influence and Social Penetration Operations.** Women operating within elite social circles could shape perceptions, extract confidential information, or influence political relationships. Such operations relied less on covert infiltration and more on social engineering and interpersonal manipulation.
- **Counter-Intelligence and Deception.** Some female operatives acted as double agents or conduits for misinformation, deliberately feeding inaccurate intelligence to opposing forces. These activities demonstrated that women were not merely passive collectors of information but were sometimes engaged in active strategic deception.

Understanding these roles highlights that female espionage activities formed part of a broader informal intelligence ecosystem that supplemented official military intelligence structures.

### **Notable Examples**

**Mata Hari (Margaretha Geertruida Zelle, 1876–1917).** Mata Hari embodied the epitome of the female spy—suave, sharp, polished, and debonair. A Dutch exotic dancer who was executed by the French for espionage during World War I (WWI), she spied for Germany.<sup>15</sup> Continuous French failures at Nivelle, massive strikes, and Great Mutinies in the spring of 1917 took the country perilously close to collapsing from war exhaustion. Having one German spy to blame for everything that went wrong with the war was convenient for the French government, and Mata Hari, thus, became the perfect scapegoat. Her famous last words before her execution by firing squad on 15 Oct 1917 were, “*Je suis prête* (I am ready)”.

**Belle Boyd (1844–1900).** At age of 17, Belle Boyd began spying for the Confederacy by flirting with Union officers and gathering tactical and strategic military information. She famously rode through enemy lines and under fire to deliver intelligence that allegedly helped General Stonewall Jackson win the Battle of Front Royal.<sup>16</sup> In 1862, while in Virginia, she overheard Union plans through a hotel room knothole, ran through active gunfire, without thinking much about her safety, to ensure delivery of vital information to Confederate General Stonewall Jackson. She, thus, helped secure a decisive victory.

**Pauline Cushman (1833–1893).** A Union spy during the Civil War, she posed as a Confederate sympathiser and gathered critical intelligence, operating behind enemy lines, eventually getting captured, sentenced to death but eventually saved by Union forces.<sup>17</sup> She became a national heroine and was decorated with the title 'Major of Calvary' for her espionage work. She was later famously known as Miss 'Major' Pauline Cushman, also labelled 'Spy of the Cumberland' and 'The greatest heroine of the age'. Ferdinand Sarmiento, a friend of Cushman, wrote *The Life of Pauline Cushman: The Celebrated Union Spy and Scout*, exaggeratingly detailing her time as a spy.

**Anna Strong (1740–1812).** A member of the Culper Spy Ring during the American Revolutionary War, she innovatively signalled messages using laundry hung in coded patterns. Her work helped General George Washington's army avoid British ambushes.<sup>18</sup> The Spy Ring achieved more than any other intelligence network during the war. They uncovered British plans to ambush the French Army, uncovered information about secret negotiations to surrender the American fort at West Point, in return for money and a command in the British Army, among many other exploits, spanning several crucial years of the American Revolutionary War. Listed and honoured as a patriot, Anna Strong is still remembered as a courageous member of the Spy Ring.

**Charlotte de Sauve (1551–1617).** She was a French noblewoman and courtier, also a member of Queen Mother Catherine de' Medici's 'Flying Squadron', spying for Catherine de' Medici during the Wars of Religion. The Flying Squadron was a group of beautiful female spies and informants recruited to seduce important men at court and extract information to pass on to the Queen Mother. A noblewoman and mistress to multiple high-ranking men, including the Duke of Alençon and King Henry of Navarre, Charlotte seduced and manipulated many powerful men to gain intelligence for the House of Valois.<sup>19</sup>

**Louise de Bettignies (1880–1918).** She was a French secret agent who spied on the Germans for the British during WWI, using the pseudonym, Alice Dubois. Her intelligence network covered much of German-occupied France, providing key intelligence before her capture and death in prison.<sup>20</sup> Captured in 1915, she died from maltreatment and was posthumously honoured

by both France and Britain.<sup>21</sup> She was awarded the Cross of the Legion of Honour, the *Croix de Guerre* (Cross of War) (1914-18) with palm, and the British Military Medal, and was made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire.

**Unnamed Operatives in Napoleon's Europe.** Women—especially courtesans and salon hostesses—were commonly used by both Napoleonic and British agents to pass military and political secrets, though many remained anonymous.<sup>22</sup>

### **Methods and Tools of Early Espionage**

Women developed innovative ways to transmit and conceal intelligence, their methods reflecting creativity, innovation, and constraints of their time:

- Invisible ink and needlework codes in embroidery.
- Secret messages in food or books.
- Body concealment using corsets, wigs, or hollowed-out shoes.
- Use of lullabies or poetry to pass coded information.
- Laundry hanging in particular or specific patterns and combinations to signal messages to sympathisers of the cause.<sup>23</sup>

These techniques illustrate the adaptive nature of early intelligence tradecraft. Prior to the development of modern cryptographic systems and secure communications, espionage relied heavily on physical concealment, coded symbolism, and improvised signalling systems. Women operating in domestic environments often possessed advantages in this domain, as everyday household objects—clothing, food containers, embroidery, and laundry—could be repurposed as covert communication tools without attracting suspicion. Such practices highlight the ingenuity of intelligence actors working within technological constraints and demonstrate how espionage historically evolved through innovation at the operational level rather than formal institutional design.

### **Challenges Faced**

Female spies navigated dual dangers—enemy forces and their own societies. When caught, they faced torture, death, or public shaming often getting hyper-sexualised or accused of moral corruption. Even successful operatives were rarely rewarded, many fading into oblivion, their contributions dismissed as inadvertent or circumstantial.<sup>24</sup>

### **Impact on Geopolitical Events**

While individual acts of espionage rarely determine the outcome of wars in isolation, intelligence activities contribute cumulatively to strategic awareness and operational planning. Information gathered by informal agents can provide early warning of enemy intentions, reveal vulnerabilities in military deployments, or expose diplomatic manoeuvres. In this sense, the activities of women spies should be understood not only as isolated anecdotes but as part of the broader intelligence architecture supporting military decision making. Their contributions frequently enhanced situational awareness improved operational timing, and occasionally disrupted enemy plans, thereby, influencing the strategic environment in which campaigns unfolded.

Without a shadow of doubt, women's intelligence work shifted the course of wars—Anna Strong's signals helped prevent British ambushes while Belle Boyd influenced Confederate battle strategies.<sup>25</sup> Louise de Bettignies' network enabled Allied advances in WWI.<sup>26</sup> There are many examples, but all cannot be quoted. Even when individual acts were not decisive, the cumulative effect of these contributions enhanced strategic planning, disrupted enemy operations, shaped alliances, and decidedly changed outcomes.

### **Lessons Drawn**

The limited documentation of women spies reflects the biases of historical chroniclers and institutions that frequently overlooked their contributions. Many operatives received little recognition during their lifetimes, and several were acknowledged only decades or centuries later when historians re-examined intelligence archives and informal accounts.

The unstructured networks of women—domestic, social, or romantic—proved equally, and sometimes, more effective as formal spy structures or organisational hierarchy. Historians and institutions need to actively salvage these stories of silent, unrewarded, unrecognised, and veiled warriors to complete the record of warfare and statecraft adorned with the efforts of these known, unknown, and unsung warrior princesses of spy-craft and give them their rightfully earned place in the annals of espionage that changed the course of many endings.<sup>27</sup>

### **Implications for Intelligence Studies**

The historical role of women in espionage highlights that intelligence effectiveness often depends more on social access, trust networks, and cultural positioning than on advanced technology. It also underscores the importance of informal intelligence networks, which frequently complement or substitute formal state intelligence structures. Furthermore, examining women spies expands understanding of the gender dimensions of intelligence work, demonstrating that diversity in skills, perspectives, and social engagement has long contributed to successful intelligence operations. Recognising these contributions enriches intelligence historiography and improves understanding of how intelligence systems evolve across political and social contexts.

### **Conclusion**

Across European and American conflicts, women played significant yet frequently unacknowledged roles within intelligence networks. Operating as couriers, informants, double agents, and code specialists, they contributed to strategic awareness and operational success in ways that often remained hidden within official records.

Recognising these contributions expands the historiography of intelligence and highlights the enduring importance of informal networks, social access, and human ingenuity in espionage. The legacy of these veiled warriors continues to influence the evolution of intelligence work in the modern era.

### **Endnotes**

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- <sup>3</sup> Sylvia Moynihan, *Mata Hari: The True Story*, (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1986).
- <sup>4</sup> Hastings, *The Secret War*.
- <sup>5</sup> Cook, *Declassified Lives*.
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- <sup>7</sup> Cook, *Declassified Lives*.
- <sup>8</sup> Julie Wheelwright, *Amazons and Military Maids: Women Who Dressed as Men in Pursuit of Life, Liberty and Happiness*, (London: Pandora Press, 1989).
- <sup>9</sup> Cook, *Declassified Lives*.
- <sup>10</sup> Moynihan, *Mata Hari*.
- <sup>11</sup> Elizabeth P. McIntosh, *Sisterhood of Spies: The Women of the OSS*, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1998).
- <sup>12</sup> Wheelwright, *Amazons and Military Maids*.
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- <sup>14</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>15</sup> Moynihan, *Mata Hari*.
- <sup>16</sup> Belle Boyd, *Belle Boyd in Camp and Prison*, (London: Saunders, Otley & Co., 1865).
- <sup>17</sup> George Cary Eggleston, *A Rebel's Recollections*, (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1875).
- <sup>18</sup> David Hackett Fischer, *Washington's Spies: The Story of America's First Spy Ring*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2006).
- <sup>19</sup> Leonie Frieda, *Catherine de Medici: Renaissance Queen of France*, (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2003).
- <sup>20</sup> Stephen Howarth, *Undercover: The Men and Women of the Special Operations Executive*, (London: Routledge, 1980).
- <sup>21</sup> Howarth, *Undercover*.
- <sup>22</sup> National Archives (UK), "Espionage and Women in Early Modern Europe", accessed 10 Jan 2025, <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk>
- <sup>23</sup> Fischer, *Washington's Spies*.
- <sup>24</sup> Cook, *Declassified Lives*.
- <sup>25</sup> Fischer, *Washington's Spies*.
- <sup>26</sup> Howarth, *Undercover*.
- <sup>27</sup> Cook, *Declassified Lives*; McIntosh, *Sisterhood of Spies*.