

A Dim View of Women

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Excerpts from a correspondent's interview with a prewar European intelligence chief, who says he takes --

Chef de Renseignements

As agents, mind you. Personally, I'm quite fond of women, and attracted sometimes by their very faults. But as the officer responsible for supplying my government with foreign intelligence, I had to regard them as unreliable and insecure elements in the organization, to be used only when all circumstances chanced to be favorable or when I had no choice.

An agent should be calm, unostentatious, and reticent. Women are emotional, vain, loquacious. They fall in love easily and without discrimination. They are impatient with the strict requirements of security measures. They withstand hardships poorly. Moreover, they tend to become even less capable physically and less responsible mentally for several days out of every month.

I'm talking about European women, of course. American women may be quite different, for all I know.

Wives and mothers are out, anyhow; they're tied down. And what can you do with the career girls? They hardly ever work themselves up into important enough jobs in a target enterprise to become primary sources of information on it. There used to be simple little duties like counting boxcars or military uniforms -- observational reporting in general -- they could do, but nowadays you have technical devices to take care of this sort of thing.

Oh, they can be couriers. The only completely successful woman agent I

ever had, as far as I can remember, was a courier. She was a laborer's wife, and had a baby. They were Germans. They lived on our side of the border, but he worked over in Germany. She used to walk across with the baby to take him his lunch and things. We paid her to pick up messages from a drop and bring them back. She put them in the baby's diaper, and the customs guard never bothered her. This went on for almost a year until the source on the other side dried up. She was my outstanding woman agent.

There was another courier, a young and pretty one, who had a legitimate reason for going to Dresden regularly. We used her to bring reports from an important source there. She wasn't expensive, either, as the attractive ones are likely to be. She carried the messages through customs inspection in a private female hiding-place. But she lasted less than three months; her nerves collapsed completely and I had to release her.

Then there are the clerks and secretaries. They seem logical enough as agents, and no doubt they sometimes work out. But let me tell you about two sad experiences, one of my own and one another service had, to illustrate the dangers. In the early years of the Nazi regime the German War Ministry used to recruit its secretaries from the families of the old nobility, long since impoverished. The intelligence service in an adjacent country -- I had some liaison connections with it -- looked these girls over carefully and spotted two that might be open to persuasion. It took plenty of cultivating and too much money, but they finally agreed to make an extra copy of everything they typed and deliver it to a cut-out.

Well, the first delivery was the last one. One of the girls ran right downtown with her pay for it and bought a fine fur coat. She told her surprised mother that her boss the Colonel had awarded her a big bonus for overtime work. Next day the mother telephoned the Colonel, an old social acquaintance, to say how pleased and grateful she was. Naturally there was an investigation. The girls were arrested and forced to confess. They were executed, with Nazi delicacy, with an axe. Maybe the case officer had been lax in his security admonitions; more likely the girl just couldn't resist. You know how women are.

Or do you? The other secretary case may shock you; I still shudder about it. After Hitler came to power one of the most important things we could do was penetrate the Nazi and front organizations in our country

that were working to subvert us. One of my talent-spotters put us onto a "Volkdeutsch" secretary in the local Nazi headquarters. Before long she agreed to cooperate, and for reasonable pay. She started work immediately, delivering copies of everything she typed. She was very conscientious, as Germans usually are, and soon became a valuable source of information on the whole subversive movement. All went well for some months.

Then her case officer brought a letter she'd insisted be delivered to the chief. It was a very long one, giving the history of her love life in lurid and unnecessary detail. From the time she was a teenager, it seems, she had been ugly and fat. Men had not been interested in her, so she began to take care of her own sexual needs. Eventually she had to spend a year in a sanitarium to be cured of her onanism. The cure was successful, all right, but she emerged a nymphomaniac. Now when desire came upon her she was unable to control herself.

"I am now in your service," she wrote. "You should have the greatest interest in my reliability. If you do not want me to get mixed up with the wrong kind of people you will have to keep my hunger satisfied. Otherwise I cannot guarantee that in my weak moments I would not divulge my connection with you to an unauthorized person, of which there are many in this office."

What could I do? The information she supplied was too important to the nation's security to think of getting rid of her. I called several of my bachelor officers together, explained the situation in strictly professional terms, and instructed them to alternate in taking care of her. It was hardship duty -- she was not only unattractive but terribly demanding -- but it saved the day. She continued to work for us until the Germans overran the country. Later I heard that she was discovered by the Gestapo and executed.

You can see why I'm not sold on using females for jobs that men can do. If you're thinking about them as lures for target males it's even worse. That kind of business belongs to the world of paperbacks and movie thrillers, mostly. Even the celebrated Mata Hari, however titillating her story, got no important information for the German Abwehr; she scarcely deserved her execution. And the other famous female Abwehr agent in the first world war, Mademoiselle Docteur, was no real woman but an Amazon. She ended in a Swiss lunatic asylum.

Think of the requirements for mounting a secure operation with a woman's charms as lure. First of all you have a lot of investigating to do to determine whether the target male is susceptible to this sort of thing. Then the woman has to be young and beautiful to be effective. Then she has to be reliable. Then she has to be without moral scruples. The lack of moral scruple prejudices her reliability; in a man it would often be enough to disqualify him as a reliable agent. This contradiction is the reason such operations boomerang, and not seldom.

Choosing the right case officer is a delicate matter, too. Once we found out that a divorcee in one of the provinces bordering Germany, a woman in her thirties and quite attractive, was the mistress of a Reichswehr major and frequently went into Germany to visit him. A local case officer was instructed to work on her and try to develop the promising potential operation. The beginnings were very satisfactory: the woman agreed, after some hesitation, to collaborate. Then suddenly the case officer's reports became unencouraging and vague. I sent a man to investigate, and it turned out that the case officer had fallen in love with her and was so jealous of the major that he wouldn't let her go to see him. Anything can happen with a woman.

The most expensive and least productive agent I ever had was one of these lure-women. She had all the qualifications. She had been a society beauty, and in middle age she was still attractive. She freely dispensed her bodily charms to all comers. Without scruple, she was capable of anything; blackmail she considered an innocent little joke. She spoke eight languages fluently, and she could get along in a couple of others. She had been married to an ambassador. After her husband was killed in an auto accident she soon was in financial trouble; but her connections were good. One day I received an order from the Prime Minister to employ her at an outrageous salary. I sent her to work with a group of people I had in Denmark. She never produced a thing. I couldn't fire her, but the German occupation of Denmark finally took her off my hands.

When it became obvious that my own country was in mortal danger from the Germans, hundreds of people came to us to ask if they could help. A lot of these were young girls, some even in their teens. Their patriotic motivation was touching; but they had no experience, even in the layman's world, and their concept of intelligence work came straight from the spy novels. My personnel people would let them down as gently as possible. But one they brought to me, I knew who she was. Daughter

of a rich and prominent family, she couldn't have been the sixteen that she claimed, hardly more than fourteen. She was wearing an expensive fur coat. I asked her what she thought she could do for us. She could do plenty, she said, because she could offer something a man can't. I asked whether her mother knew about all this, and when she admitted she didn't I telephoned for her to come and pick her daughter up. It turned out the mother didn't know about the fur coat, either, or the boy friend that had given it to her. We started quite a little social scandal that day.

So you can say that my experiences with women in intelligence have been neither good nor inspiring. There are times when women can be used, but these are a matter of infrequent lucky chance. A successful woman operation is the exception. You have to remember that the woman who accepts the role of lure must have some moral or mental defect and so brings a built-in hazard to the operation.

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