



FEMALE CONTRIBUTION TO INTELLIGENCE IN CORRELATION WITH THE PRINCIPLE OF GENDER EQUALITY AND EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

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The female contribution to the world of espionage and Intelligence had to struggle for acknowledgement in an environment traditionally dominated by men. Today, integrating women into the Intelligence agencies and creating mixt groups of operatives and analysts is an ideological imperative, in line with the principle of gender equality, equity, and equal opportunities, as part of the human dimension of security. The motivation for choosing the topic lies in the fact that ignoring female agents' warnings has caused wars and humanitarian catastrophes.

This article entails three research questions: "Is there a difference between the professional quality of women in the field of Intelligence compared to that of men?"; "What features make women working in the world of espionage unique and irreplaceable?"; "How does the Intelligence Community treat female employees from the gender equality and equal opportunities point of view?" The purpose of these questions is not only to raise the issue of gender (in)equality in Intelligence services, but, above all, to raise awareness among security institutions of the need to have both men and women employed in Intelligence.

The main objective of this research work is to provide an analysis of the application of the principle of gender equality and equal opportunities to women working in the world of espionage. The second objective is to present the perception of civil society, the media, and Intelligence institutions, such as OSS, CIA, NKGB,

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MI5, MOSSAD, and the former Romanian security service ('Securitate' from the Communist times) of female contribution to espionage from a gender perspective. This research offers not only a general perspective on equality between women and men, but also a specific one, oriented towards the presence of women in Romanian, American, Soviet, Israeli, and British Intelligence operations and towards the way in which the integration of women is an indicator of the level of equality achieved within military institutions and alike.

In order to achieve the established objectives, the research employs the qualitative research method of discourse and content analysis, as well as the case study method. The sources of documentation are specialized works in the field of Intelligence that discuss gender equality and equal opportunities.

Keywords: *gender equality and equal opportunities in Intelligence; female contribution to Intelligence; Maria Tănase; Martha Bibescu; CIA; NKGB; MI5; MOSSAD.*

Introduction

Women have always influenced the world of Intelligence. By marginalizing the female contribution to the field of espionage, damage is caused on an international scale that is difficult to quantify. Not only many of women's achievements remain unknown and unrecognized, but also the lessons, the methods and the successes that the Intelligence environment would benefit from.

This article, whose research topic lies at the intersection of security studies and gender studies, aims to analyze how the principle of gender equality, equity and equal opportunities (Di Bella et al. 2023) is applied to women spies in Romania, the USA, The Soviet Union, the United Kingdom and Israel, using a time frame that begins from the Industrial Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century and focuses on the twentieth century and the dawn of the twenty-first century. A string of examples is given, both from Romania as well as from the Western world, in order to illustrate successful tales of women working either as spies or analysts, in order to further the greater good of their employing agency or country.

Let us begin by offering some examples of women with notable contributions in Intelligence throughout the ages, in various contexts. One of the first spies acknowledged by the Western world was the English writer Aphra Behn, sent by Charles II in 1666 to Antwerp to persuade a Dutch spy to become a double agent for the English monarchy. Later, within the American context, Elizabeth Van Lew formed a huge network of spies for the Union during the American Civil War, infiltrating the home of Confederate President Davis Jefferson through the assistance of an enslaved person. Working for the North as well, Harriet Tubman managed an



operation to exfiltrate enslaved individuals from the South through the underground railroad network (McIntosh 2009). In the twentieth century, Josephine Baker used musical scores to transmit messages written in invisible ink outside Paris, messages useful to the Allies in North Africa during World War II. Many British women serving in the Special Operations Executive (SOE) ran shelters, interacted with agents and parachuted into occupied France, with at least twelve of them dying in concentration camps. American-born Virginia Hall, posing as a journalist in occupied France, built a network of agents, arousing the suspicions of the Gestapo and, eventually, crossing the Pyrenees on her escape, her wooden leg resulting from a hunting accident posing no hindrance to her efforts. Anthropologist Cora Du Bois, who was working for the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the forerunner of the CIA, mapped fortifications along the shores of possible amphibious landings in the South Pacific, also using information gathered from missionaries and sailors. The courageous missions of the American Intelligence Agency – the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) – during World War II have become history, but the contributions made by the 4,000 women – including Marlene Dietrich and Julia Child, who served in the OSS – remain unfamiliar to the general public. To highlight their efforts, McIntosh, an OSS and CIA veteran, draws on her own testimonies and interviews with more than one hundred OSS women who served in diverse operations worldwide (McIntosh 2009).

The fact that women have always made a substantial contribution to Intelligence has not automatically led to their recognition or reward. Journalist and historian Liza Mundy admits in “The Sisterhood: The Secret History of the Women of the CIA” that women in the CIA were used, without necessarily being rewarded (Woodward 2023).

1. The Evolution of Gender Equality and Equal Opportunities in Romanian Civil and Military Society

Women have been involved in Intelligence long before the concept of gender equality was defined. This study focuses on analyzing the status of women working in espionage, identifying how the OSS, CIA, NKGB, MI5, MOSSAD, and the Romanian security institutions, including the media, have perceived female contribution to espionage operations from a gendered perspective. The research offers not only a general perspective on equality in rights for both men and women, but also a specific one, oriented towards the presence of women in Romanian, American, Soviet, Israeli and British Intelligence, and towards the way in which the integration of women is an indicator of the degree of achieving equity in this type of institutions.

The principle of gender equality, equity and equal opportunities, a principle largely debated in Springer’s “Measuring Gender Equality: A Multidisciplinary Analysis of Some EU Countries” (2023) is part of the human dimension of security. Security refers not only to political or military stability, but also points to respecting



human rights, lack of discrimination and equal opportunities for both men and women, in order to assure inclusive institutions. Women and men have qualities which cannot be brought to light at their true value but by working together; likewise, their respective limitations cannot be exceeded by working separately. Although in the last century, equality of opportunities for both women and men has experienced encouraging developments, the inequalities that still exist in security institutions raise concerns.

Internal audits should ascertain the degree of inclusion and professional satisfaction of women in the field, without transforming gender equality into an end in itself. The main objective is to avoid increasing resentment, especially at a time when complaints are being filed by women working in the military institutions, as many sources claim (Beale 2021; Preston 2023; Davies, Sabbagh, Mason 2023; Davis 2023; DoD 2025). As an illustration, fifty-four women working for the CIA in the past decade have confessed to being victims of misconduct and sexual assault by colleagues. Although they reported to their superiors, they were warned not to address to law enforcement, with the threat that doing so could jeopardize their careers within the agency. Since January 2023, however, at least three women have addressed the House Intelligence Committee, arguing that the agency discourages women from filling complaints of sexual abuse (Lippman 2023).

Objectification of women, harassment and a sexualized undercurrent have not escaped the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst in the UK. December 2023 marked two years since the government's response to the wide-ranging parliamentary inquiry into the lives of women in the Royal Navy, Army and Royal Air Force. More than 4,000 serving women, reservists, veterans and active personnel provided testimony before the House of Commons Defence Subcommittee, chaired by Sarah Atherton, a former soldier and Conservative MP, about misogyny, discrimination, intimidation, harassment and criminal behavior, sexual assault, gang rape, sex for favors, abuse of power by commanding officers, much of which had gone unreported due to fear of repercussions on their careers (Roberts 2023).

In 2012, the Romanian Minister of Internal Affairs, Radu Stroe, published the results of an internal investigation about harassment and discrimination against women within the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA), concluding that "We cannot speak of a phenomenon of discrimination or harassment at work in the structures of the Ministry of Internal Affairs" (A.A.S. - R.S. 2013). The assessment found a maximum of ten cases of possible harassment among 6,200 women interviewed, with the remaining women, up to a total of 8,800 employed by the MIA, not responding to the questionnaires. The investigation followed the scandal that broke out in December 2012, when policewoman Melania Renghea from the Balș Police stabbed her former superior, Gheorghe Barbu, in the abdomen several times, the woman claiming that the policeman had raped her. Within other structures of the Ministry of



Interior, such as the Border Police, the Inspectorate for Emergency Situations, and the Romanian Gendarmerie, there were no complaints regarding acts of harassment or discrimination among female employees (A.A.S. - R.S. 2013).

Romanian feminist literature addresses topics such as feminist theories, the history of Romanian feminism, gender and politics, gender and the media. Some examples we consider worthy to mention are the doctoral thesis entitled “Gender, the Politics of Equal Opportunities and International Security. Case Study: the Visual and Aesthetic Construction of Romania’s Participation in Operation Resolute Support Mission from a Gender Perspective” authored by PhD Candidate Novăcescu Elena, coordinated by Professor PhD Adrian Liviu Ivan from Babeș-Bolyai University and by Professor PhD Mihaela Miroiu, from the National School of Political and Administrative Sciences (Novăcescu 2021), the works of Ștefania Mihăilescu on the history of Romanian feminism (Mihăilescu 2002), the studies of Mihaela Miroiu on feminist political theories, gender policies in the communist and post-communist eras, but also the efforts through which women in Romania have tried to access “democratic citizenship” (Miroiu 2004) and, last, but not least, Oana Băluță highlighting that women are either unrepresented in the media or portrayed to correspond to gender stereotypes (Băluță 2015, 105–119). Also, the status and impact of women in military institutions is addressed by Cristina Rădoi, who presents a feminist perspective on war (Rădoi 2011).

With the new momentum brought by the Industrial Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century, women tried to obtain economic and political rights equal to those of men. The women’s emancipation movement in the Romanian Lands at the beginning of the nineteenth century was in line with those of the feminist movements in the United Kingdom, France, and the USA. The principles of equality from the French Revolution of 1789 were adopted by the Romanian society, and during the interwar period they experienced an unprecedented spread (Mihăilescu 2006). The 1948 Constitution, although adopted during the Communist era, proclaimed the equality of women and men, even though the violation of this principle was not legally sanctioned. It is stated by the 16th article of the 1991 Romanian Constitution, revised in 2003, that “(1) Citizens are equal before the law and public authorities, without privileges and without discrimination; (2) No one is above the law; (3) Public functions and dignities, civil or military, may be held, under the conditions of the law, by persons who have Romanian citizenship and reside in the country. The Romanian State guarantees equal opportunities between women and men for the holding of these functions and dignities” (The Constitution of Romania 2003). Mihaela Miroiu explains feminist political theories such as socialist and Marxist feminism, liberal feminism, ecofeminism, communitarian and radical feminism, in her work “The Road to Autonomy” (Miroiu 2004), also referring to the evolution of feminism and gender relations during the Communist era. “Birth of Democratic



Citizenship. Women and Power in Modern Romania” (Bucur and Miroiu 2018), co-authored by Maria Bucur and Mihaela Miroiu, reveals that although attempts were made to achieve democratic citizenship by Romanian women between 1945 and 2010, men still set the direction of the country’s political, economic and social development, while achieving gender equality not being a priority on their agenda.

Regarding the relationship between gender and the media, Oana Băluță notes in her work “Gender, politics and media: stereotyped representations. How do we draw the line?” (Băluță 2015, 105–119), that more importance is given to women’s appearance than to their actions. “Mass-media about genders” (Grünberg 2005) examines the way women and femininity are described by the Romanian media, the female role being mostly complementary in contrast to the political world, which was considered the prerogative of men. In her doctoral thesis *Defense and war from a feminist perspective. Case study: the impact of women in Romanian military institutions*, Cristina Rădoi emphasizes the obligation of military institutions to integrate women’s interests and needs into their policies and regulations. However, perceptions of male Romanian military personnel in the Land Forces suggest that women are better suited to office work, unlike women’s opinion that they can perform any role in the armed forces (Novăcescu 2021). The low number of women in the military, coupled with men’s cultural perceptions of gender equality, do not provide them with the opportunity to make significant changes in the system.

Complementary to the academic voices mentioned above, data from 2024 show that 78% of Romanian women believed that too few women were involved in politics, while 75% believed that a greater political presence would help reduce discrimination. In the same year, women accounted for only 22% of parliamentarians, and only two women held positions as county council presidents in 2024 (Centrul Filia 2025). Following the elections of December 1, 2024, women made up only 21% of elected members of Parliament, below the European average of 25%. Of the 101 women, most came from the PSD (Social Democratic Party) and AUR (Alliance for the Unity of Romanians) parties, while the PNL (National Liberal Party) was represented in Parliament by only nine women. The project initiated by Alina Gorghiu (Minister of Justice and former PNL president), along with other colleagues, according to which women should occupy 33% of eligible seats in the elections, received a vote in the Senate in May 2022, but is still awaiting a vote in the Chamber of Deputies in 2025 (Bularcă, Roșu 2025). In 2023, the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) reported that Romania ranked second to last in terms of women’s political power and last in terms of gender equality. The report “Representation of Women in Romanian Politics”, published in 2021 by Friedrich of Naumann Foundation, Expert Forum and Women in Politics, assessed a growth of the presence of women in the Romanian Parliament from 0.8% in the first legislature after the 1989 Revolution, when the Romanian Senate included only one female senator) to 19% after the



2020 elections (Bularcă, Roșu 2025). However, in 2021, Romania ranked second to last, after Cyprus, in terms of the number of women elected to the European Parliament. In October 2023, 56 non-governmental organizations and academics requested the Parliament's Legal Committee to respect gender quotas on candidate lists for parliamentary elections, not only to correct historical inequalities regarding women's political representation, but also for the progress of the political decision-making process, ensured by the diversity of experiences, reasoning, innovation – the prerogative of both genders (Bularcă, Roșu 2025).

Over time, policies have been adopted to regulate gender equality, but the goals have not automatically meant that these policies were effectively implemented. The communist regime in Romania promoted equality in treatment rather than gender equality, as it did not prioritize the specific needs of the two genders, demanding identical treatment for both women and men. Following the Romanian Revolution of 1989, respect for women's rights and gender equality became mandatory due to accession negotiations to the European Union and NATO.

Making a reference to the EU, Articles 2 and 3 of the Treaty of Amsterdam of 1997 (EUR-Lex - 11997D 1997, 1–144), imposed gender equality at the level of all organizational processes, as part of the Community acquis. The EU *Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025* aims to: “eliminate gender-based violence, eliminate gender inequalities in the labor market, achieve equal participation in different economic sectors, achieving gender balance in decision-making and politics” (European Commission 2020). Following Resolution 1325 Women, Peace and Security, adopted by the United Nations Security Council on 30th of October 2000, which recognized the importance of the presence of women in security institutions (United Nations Security Council 2000), NATO has also included women in its operations.

However, Lana Obradovic notes that, in Italy, women represented only 3.9% of the Armed Forces in 2016 (Obradovic 2016, 3). Other interesting facts from this study, conducted nearly ten years ago, show that Turkey only allowed women to hold non-commissioned officer or officer positions, usually only in the medical or administrative units, that France, Denmark, and Belgium did not provide gender consultants, while Greece established the position of Minister of Defence for Gender Equality in 2004 (Obradovic 2016).

In Romania, after 1990, the “Statute of Military Personnel” was revised, guaranteeing women in the Romanian Armed Forces equal rights with men regarding access to public positions, whether military or civilian, and not prohibiting their eligibility for high-level appointments. Interest in gender equality within military and security institutions crystallized in 2001, when recruitment of female personnel into the armed forces resumed and an attempt was made to revise the organizational charts to balance the representation of men and women. Since 2017, women have gained unrestricted access to higher military education institutions, however they



are not considered suitable for a military career (Novăcescu 2021). Romania lacks specific programs for the recruitment and retention of women in the military services and, along with Poland, demonstrates the lowest level of commitment to achieving gender equality in the Armed Forces (Obradovic 2016).

It is important to remember that Maria Tănase, nicknamed “The Master Bird” by Nicolae Iorga, was an artist who made significant contributions to the country through exchanges of critical intelligence with American diplomats and French agents before and during World War II. Despite this, the *Securitate* did not even acknowledge her the title of “singer”, but the pejorative label “the Jay” (Iamandi 2019). Also, there is worth mentioning a series of notable actions of the artist: she refused to become an informant for the German Abwehr, the military Intelligence Service of the Wehrmacht, according to data from the Romanian Special Intelligence Service, just as she refused the Governor of Istanbul, Sulfi Kidar, when he proposed her to stay in Turkey, offering her the title of honorary citizen, a permanent commitment to Radio Ankara, a villa on the island of Buyuk-Ada, and a research position at the Ethnographic Institute in Istanbul; and also Ben Smith, the world’s leading aluminum magnate, who was in love with her and wanted to take her to the United States. Nevertheless, none of these actions earned her the gratitude of the *Securitate*. In File I 157076, vol. 1, f. 10-12, currently in the CNSAS (National Council for the Study of Security Archives), she is portrayed as “a hardworking element, ready to help anyone in need, without any ideological training, [...] loves and respects her job. She has an impulsive character, is quarrelsome and not very fair in financial matters, with a lot of personality, unstable. [She] has an excessive personality, lacks consistency, is undisciplined; she is not a friend of our regime and [...] is not sincerely attached to the working class, although she knows it and lived among it in her childhood. She is ready for any self-sacrifice towards friends, for whom she gives her last penny. [...] even when she was sick, she sang [...]. From a professional point of view, she has declined, however she still has a great public appeal/.../ she can still be used, considering that in production she is correct and necessary, being, with all her weaknesses, the best folklore singer”, according to Coman Ion, director of the Capital’s Variety Theatre (Iamandi 2019).

According to historian Cristian Troncotă, Maria Tănase was not an intelligence agent, but a liaison and influence agent (Popescu 2007). Another historian, Mihai Pelin discovered that in 1941, when Maria accompanied Grigore Dinicu’s orchestra in Turkey, she declined a position at London Radio offered by Alfred de Chastelain, head of the South-East European branch of British espionage, who had worked in Romania for 14 years (Popescu 2007). Maria Tănase was involved in espionage and information exchange, documented by the aforementioned Mihai Pelin in his book “A Century of Espionage, Counter-Espionage and Political Police” (2003). In the late 1930s, Tănase had very close relations with Maurice Negre, the Bucharest



correspondent of the Havas press agency and a member of the French special services. Historian Cristian Troncotă further argues that Maria Tănase helped Eugen Cristescu a lot in the period 1940-1945, by exchanging information with several American diplomats (Popescu 2007). The famous singer played an important role in World War II, serving as a liaison between Romanians and the British who worked to remove Romania from the alliance with Germany, like Martha Bibescu during World War I.

Novelist, poet, and memoirist, Martha Bibescu wrote under the pseudonym Lucile Decaux no less than 40 volumes, and was nicknamed by Ghislain de Diesbach “la dernière orchidée” (The Last Orchid) (de Diesbach 1986). Considered by Francois Mauriac “the most admirable woman intelligence I know” (Popescu 2014), she became a member of the Royal Academy of French Language and Literature in Brussels in 1955. Mircea Eliade thought that she played an important role in the encounter between the cultures of Eastern and Western Europe (Popescu 2014). Her stunning beauty attracted numerous admirers, and she was courted by the Crown Prince of Germany and King Alfonso XIII of Spain. Martha Bibescu also became involved in intelligence activities, her meeting with Christopher Birdwood Thomson, a British intelligence officer sent to Bucharest to convince Romania to enter the war as an ally of the Entente being decisive. In September 1915, the princess agreed to hide secret documents of the British Legation in the Posada castle, but within ten days the castle was set on fire by the Central Powers. Valentin Bibescu, Martha’s husband, collaborated with Colonel Thomson in the destruction of oil wells from the Prahova Valley in 1916, so as not to fall under enemy control. During the German occupation of the same year, the princess ran a hospital in Bucharest established in the building of the Royal Romanian Automobile Club, belonging to her husband, who had taken refuge in Iași with the Moldavian front after the fall of Bucharest. In spite of her being a source of Intelligence for the Romanian Government besieged in Iași, because of her arrest by the occupation authorities, after the war, she faced the accusation of collaboration with the Germans and the Austro-Hungarians. However, the officers she cared for in the hospital during the German occupation defended her, and King Ferdinand himself publicly thanked her for her services to the country. Yet, women working in the CIA did not receive similar recognition for their services to the country.

2. CIA Heroines

Liza Mundy (Woodward 2023) makes the chronicle of three generations of CIA women - from the heroines of covert operations in the 1960s and 1970s, to the female analysts of the 1980s and 1990s, up until to the generation of women fighting in the war on terror. According to Mundy, all these eras share persistent discrimination,



sexism, a refusal to take their work and observations seriously, and, last but not least, crude misogyny. Lisa Mundy aims to convey a much deeper point of view than simply drawing attention to discrimination. By directing women from CIA into jobs that diminished their value and did not take their opinions seriously, American National security was harmed, such as the inadequate response before the 9/11 al-Qaeda attacks. However, Mundy argues that it was precisely the reassignment of women to lower-status roles that led to the transformation and improvement of the CIA's culture.

A small group of women at CIA headquarters were the first to notice and begin to track the jihadist group that would become al-Qaeda. The painstaking, but unglamorous jobs that involved data collection were assigned to women who were pejoratively called "vault women" or "ladies in sneakers" (Woodward 2023). These women analyzed vast amounts of data, including biographical information on politicians, scientists, foreign agents, and military commanders. They analyzed operations, tested the quality of sources, turned agents into double agents and managed them properly, a unique skill set to counterterrorism intelligence.

However, when the all-female unit began to warn of the danger in the late 1990s with reports detailing al-Qaeda's personnel, structure and financial flows, it was ignored. Their analysis revealed that al-Qaeda was planning to bomb a naval destroyer called USS *The Sullivans* on January 3, 2000, while the ship was anchored in the port of Aden, Yemen. The women were ridiculed by their colleagues when the attack did not take place; it was not until after September 11 that it was discovered that the attack plan really existed, but the suicide bombers had failed to install the grenade in the ship's hull, causing the malfunction to sink their own ship before it could reach the destroyer. Although women in the counterterrorism team have suffered a tarnished reputation, after the September 11 attacks, their expertise in counterterrorism has taken on a similar scope to human resource recruitment, with women becoming a much more important presence within the CIA (Woodward 2023).

Susan Gordon, the second-highest ranking official in the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, has said that the war on terror would have been a fiasco if the 9/11 attacks and the hunt for Osama Bin Laden had been conducted without the expertise of women. That doesn't mean women are better professionals, but their perspectives can make a difference. Observing the Abbottabad compound during the search for Osama bin Laden, aerial surveillance revealed laundry hanging on a line, which led to accurate estimates by female analysts of the number of adults and children in the terrorist's hideout.

The growing role of women in the CIA owes its success to the sacrifice and work of the agency's early pioneers: the founding members of the Sisterhood. In the 1960s and 1970s, the CIA's clandestine operations abroad were the prerogative of men, but women began to complete the picture as well. We zoom in the story of



Lisa Manfull, a 1966 graduate of Brown University, a native Spanish and French speaker and the daughter of a diplomat who had lived in France, Vietnam and Mexico, wanted to work abroad as a spy, but she was not allowed to complete the training course for case officers. It was not until 10 years later that another chance arose, when she applied for the training program and completed it in first place. After other 10 years, she was appointed head of the Latin American Division. A woman's entry into the all-male fiefdom did not go unpunished, being ostracized and ignored. More so, according to Michael Sulich, the head of the clandestine service, she was "treated like garbage" (Woodward 2023). Exhausted, divorced and in failing health, Manfull Harper retired. Fortunately, she was recalled to the agency in 2000 to contribute to the CIA's counterterrorism team as an analyst on Bin Laden and al-Qaeda (Woodward 2023).

Another story belongs to Heidi August, who wanted to become a case officer herself. She applied to the CIA in 1968, but was only hired as a clerk in the map folding room. She then went to Libya, also as a clerk, during the coup d'état of Muammar Gaddafi. In 1974, in Cambodia, she was awarded a medal for meritorious service in emergency evacuation, which gave her the opportunity to take the case officer training course. She completed the course and later became a section chief. She served in Iraq and retired in December 2003 as a senior executive director (Woodward 2023).

As we move from the traumatic decades of Vietnam to Reagan's 1980s, the CIA analyst position was still reserved for men, but the trio of Barbara Sude, Cynthia Storer and Gina Bennet stood out for their expertise and skill. Barbara Sude, with a PhD in Near Eastern Studies from Princeton University, needed more than a decade in an off-campus support unit before obtaining a position as an analyst at CIA headquarters. Cynthia Storer joined the CIA in the mid-1980s, becoming an analyst at CIA headquarters after three years and being assigned to Afghanistan. Gina Bennett, a 1988 graduate of the University of Virginia with a double major in foreign policy and economics and a minor in religion, applied unsuccessfully to the CIA, being hired at the State Department as a typist (after passing a typing test where she was required to wear a skirt). Promoted to the State Department's intelligence analysis unit, she wrote the first warning about Osama bin Laden in 1993 and was admitted to the CIA in 1997 as a counterterrorism analyst. The three women formed the al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden Task Force in the 1990s. Jennifer Matthews, the newest member of the group, had started at the CIA as an imagery analyst, tracking money, communications, travel patterns, and terrorist affiliations. Matthews spent fifteen years tracking bin Laden. In 2010, she took over as head of the CIA base in Khost, Afghanistan, getting a job as an analyst at CIA headquarters. Cynthia Storer joined the CIA in the mid-1980s, reaching the CIA headquarters after three years as an analyst and being assigned to Afghanistan, providing information



on drone strikes in Pakistan, when she and six other CIA colleagues were killed in a suicide bombing.

In the late 1990s, even after the establishment of the Counterterrorism Center (CTC), the office was still considered a professional dead end, with a reputation for “women in sneakers” frugal resources, and a small staff. The fact that only women were working on al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden diminished the credibility of the threat they posed. Thus, their warnings about the attack on the USS Cole, the African embassy bombings, 9/11 and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were ignored. The intelligence community’s pre-9/11 failures were due to the fact that the warnings of the women of The Sisterhood were ignored because their bosses saw them as “a bunch of chicks”. (Woodward 2023). The Israeli Defence and Intelligence was taken by surprise by the Hamas attack on October 7, 2023, among the causes being the dismissive attitude of male commanders towards the work of female intelligence officers, who had warned about Hamas in the weeks before the attack (Cuddy 2024).

3. Not just *Honey Traps*¹...

Despite the differences between Americans and Russians, American and Soviet media consistently reduced spies to their sexuality and gender roles, in an attempt to maintain control over increasingly independent women (Fusick).

The Soviets saw sexuality and emotions as weaknesses in spies, while Americans saw emotions only as a weakness and sexuality as a weapon. Nevertheless, concern for the emotions and sexuality of female spies was present in both cases.

American stereotypes of spies were abundantly fed by spy novels and magazines, as well as popular movies in the first half of the 20th century. During the third and fourth decades of the last century, the espionage press depicted the strong male spy alongside a helpless young woman in need of support, thus building upon the medieval figures of the armoured knight saving the lady in distress. Therefore, women were frequently depicted either powerless or traitorous, whereas women in the communist male vision hated men and felt nothing (Olmsted 2004, 79, apud Fusick).

These stereotypes served to shape the portrayal of Elizabeth Bentley and Judith Coplon by the American press. In 1945, Elizabeth Bentley, the “Red Queen Spy”, entered the FBI’s Washington D.C. office wearing a plain floral dress, her aim being to provide Intelligence that filled a 115-page file (Sulick 2012, 185, apud

¹ A.N.: “Honey trapping” involves obtaining information through sexual or romantic relationships, for political (espionage) or economic purposes. The aggressor (usually female, but not exclusively) seeks to involve the target in a false relationship (with or without physical contact) in order to manipulate the target into providing information. Subsequently, after being photographed or recorded, the victim is blackmailed into acting according to the aggressor’s instructions, otherwise the photos and recordings will be made public (Chalastras 2024).



Fusick), claiming to have run an extensive Soviet espionage network in the United States. The “Red Queen Spy” provided the FBI with enough information to disrupt Soviet operations for several years, but because she had no documents to prove it, her network was saved from arrest. Another spy, Judith Coplon, was arrested for stealing American information in 1949, drawing media attention (Sulick 2012, 211-214, apud Fusick).

Coplon and Bentley were psychologically portrayed by both American lawyers and prosecutors and their Soviet handlers, allowing us to compare them as spies. Bentley and Coplon contrast because Bentley turned herself in, while Coplon was caught red-handed. Although Judith Coplon tried to use the media image of female spies to avoid conviction, her endeavour proved to be in vain.

Elizabeth Bentley, a graduate of Vassar College, was an independent woman with anti-fascist leanings that turned into communist sympathies (Sulick 2012, 185-186, apud Fusick). Bentley entered the world of espionage as a courier, but she acquired more and more responsibility as she confirmed. Jacob Golos was her liaison to the NKGB until his death in 1943, when her devotion began to waver (Sulick 2012, 188, apud Fusick). Elizabeth Bentley’s epic story appeared in the press in July 1948, before her testimony at the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HCUA), popularly known as the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). The article described her as a “striking blonde”, a description far from the truth, as she was a middle-aged brunette (Frank and Mockridge 1948, apud Fusick). Elizabeth Bentley’s sexualization to fit the image of the female spy, played by the blonde Marlene Dietrich in the 1931 film *Dishonored* (von Sternberg 1931, apud Fusick), along with her love story with Jacob Golos, reported by the press to highlight her capacity for deep feelings and justify her espionage, transformed her into a “self-proclaimed agent for a network of Communist spies” (Knowles 1948, apud Fusick) as her physical appearance was discovered to be common. The *New York Times* described her as “middle-aged” rather than a sexy young woman (Knowles 1948, apud Fusick). Elizabeth Bentley did not fit the public’s image of how a spy should look like or behave. When newspapers could not transform her into an alluring presence, they began to portray her as mentally unstable, in an attempt to exploit the subject and keep readers’ interest alive.

Also, in the Soviet files *Vassiliev*, she underwent a transformation from “an intelligent, sensitive, and mild-mannered woman” (Vassiliev White Notebook #2 2009, 1, apud Fusick), when she was under the control of Jacob Golos, to “an unbalanced and erratic personality” (Vassiliev White Notebook #2 2009, 5-6, apud Fusick), when she was her own master. After Golos’ death, her contacts changed their narrative, describing her as “exactly the kind of person who shouldn’t be involved in this group, let alone controlling it” (Vassiliev White Notebook #2 2009, 18, apud Fusick). Soviet agents wanted to create the impression that Elizabeth was only acting



rationally under the guidance of a man, worried that a woman could wield so much power. Her drinking prior to a meeting with “Vadim” in September 1945 automatically made her a “foreign element” and a new enemy (Vassiliev White Notebook #2 2009, 23-24, apud Fusick). Fearing the disruption of the network, Bentley’s Soviet agents decided that the only solution was to marry her in order to prevent her from reacting negatively to loneliness (Vassiliev White Notebook #2 2009, 8, 15, apud Fusick). The solution to Elizabeth’s possible rebellion was a combination of male control by her spy husband and sexual liberation (Vassiliev White Notebook #2, 2009, 8, apud Fusick). Soviet intelligence agents viewed women as irrational, impulsive creatures who could not control their sexual impulses and needed a strong man’s hand. The pages dedicated to Elizabeth Bentley’s love life demonstrate that the Soviets, as much as the Americans, were concerned with the romantic side of female spies (Vassiliev White Notebook #2, 2009, 12, apud Fusick).

On the other hand, Judith Coplon was no stranger to the American press either. A graduate of Barnard College with notable results, her position in the Foreign Agents Registration Section of the Justice Department in Washington DC in 1945 gave her access to FBI information on Soviets operating in the US and American communist leaders, sparking the NKGB’s interest in recruiting her. Bentley’s defection caused irreparable damage to the NKGB’s carefully constructed espionage network over a decade, as the Soviet service needed to quickly regroup by recruiting new agents, and not just any agents, but those with access to FBI information spies (Vassiliev White Notebook #2 2009, 211, apud Fusick). Judith Coplon perfectly fit the profile sought, but after many years, she raised FBI suspicions following a mention of her transfer to Washington D.C. At the beginning of 1949, a fabricated FBI document containing information that a spy in Soviet service would have had difficulty resisting transfer was placed at her disposal. On March 4, 1949, Judith Coplon fell into the trap and went to New York to hand over the documents to her Russian contact, Vladimir Gubichev (Vassiliev White Notebook #2 2009, 213, apud Fusick). The FBI arrested her because she was carrying the sensitive documents, but her defense argued that Coplon had met with Gubichev for romantic reasons, not to transfer American secrets (Blinkley 1949, apud Fusick). For two decades, with two trials, two convictions, two sentences, and not a single day in prison (Sulick, 214, apud Fusick), the public’s attention remained focused on her.

Judith Coplon fit the stereotype of the American press regarding the physical appearance and behavior of a spy, while being sexualized and demonized. In the early months of the case’s media coverage, Coplon was depicted as having “sensual eyes” and “straight white teeth that shone when she smiled” (London 1949, apud Fusick). Towards the end of the trial, a reporter noted that “her blouse was quite thin, inadequate to hide her figure when she sat forward, as she frequently did” (Brinkley 1949, apud Fusick). The journalistic language in her case relied on her gender and



sexuality to describe her as a *femme fatale* spy. But the information that appeared in the press on June 22, 1949, about Coplon's relationship with Howard Shapiro being consummated at the same time as her relationship with Vladimir Gubichev (Brinkley 1949, apud Fusick) was a fatal blow to Coplon's defense, which was based on the fact that Coplon had given information to Gubichev not as a result of treason, but because she had fallen in love.

When Shapiro made their relationship public, Coplon angrily denied it (Associated Press 1949, apud Fusick). The press transformed her into a hysterical, vindictive, insane figure. Following the guilty verdict on July 1, 1949, and Judith's lack of reaction, the press described her "unwavering to the end" (Associated Press 1949, apud Fusick). The public had formed the belief that Judith Coplon was spying for the Soviet Union, and the press was quick to build on this belief, going through three phases in which she was described either as an attractive spy or as a woman dominated by emotions, culminating in the image of an insensitive communist.

Soviet documents depicted her as "a serious, modest, attentive young woman, ideologically close" to the Soviets (Fusick). Attentive to Coplon's love life, as they were to Bentley's, Soviet agents sought to have Judith marry a spy as dedicated to communism as she was. The Soviets considered sexuality and emotions to be the hot spots for female spies, while the Americans saw emotions as a vulnerability and sexuality as a means to an end. The sexuality and feelings of female spies were at the heart of the concerns of both camps.

The 1931 film "Dishonored" featured the female spy who used sex to obtain information from men (von Sternberg, 1931, apud Fusick), while the 1940 MGM film "Ninotchka" featured the cold and emotionally intangible Soviet agent who could only become human through love and capitalism (Lubitsch, 1940, apud Fusick). American stereotypes of spies who were highly effective through sex appeal created distrust of intelligent, emotionless women and influenced perceptions of Bentley and Coplon.

The Soviet view of Bentley and Coplon stems from deep-rooted stereotypes. Although in 1930, 1.6 million women were recruited by the Communist Party to fill the Soviet Union's labor shortage (Lubitsch 1940, 209, apud Fusick), they never received management positions or stable, well-paid jobs, citing "family responsibilities, poor education, and physical weakness" (Lubitsch, 1940, 213, apud Fusick). The NKGB emphasized the backroom skills of its agents.

American stereotypes came from another source. Six million women took over the jobs of men mobilized on the battlefields of World War II, managing to fulfill their tasks with flying colors (Olmsted 2004, 80), which led to the reaction of men to restrict the feminine roles again to the domestic sphere when they returned from the front, for fear of losing their jobs to women, and their ascendancy over them. In the book "The Feminine Mystique", Betty Friedan writes that women were indoctrinated



not to yearn for college, career or political rights, for they would become undesirable to men, so that by 1958, the percentage of female students had plummeted to 35% from 47% in 1920 (Friedan 1963, 18) and 68% of women in the 1950s had dropped out of college to get married (Friedan 1963, 16). The reduction of educated spies like Bentley and Coplon to the destitute status of sexualized women in need of a lover's control reassured the male view that their dominance was not in danger.

Coplon attempted to use American stereotypes in her defense, claiming to love Vladimir Gubichev to evade conviction, and Elizabeth Bentley's story, which involved a similar love affair between an American spy and a Soviet superior, also served her well. Using the Cold War era "domestic isolation" of women in the home and boudoir to win their case in court was a compromise for an educated and sexually independent woman, but a necessary one.

4. Why are Women Better Spies?

Maseena Ziegler believes that women are born spies, not made spies (Ziegler 2012), and seem to have an additional DNA sequence that gives them intuition and a very fine, antenna-like perception, which offers them an advantage over men. Men are technically inclined and are good at handling gadgets, but women excel at successfully multitasking, according to statements by Tamir Pardo, the head of Mossad, to the Israeli publication *Lady Globes*. He believes that women are better actresses, perfect for playing different roles, and can keep their egos in check to carry out their tasks, unlike men. The female ability to decipher situations, understand the terrain and perceive space cannot be contested. The idea that the best spies are men, propagated by film characters such as *James Bond* and *Jason Bourne*, and that women only contribute to the world of espionage in the form of honey traps – their characters bearing suggestive names like *Pussy Galore* and *Strawberry Fields* – is contradicted by the reality on the ground. Women excel not only in intellectual capacity, but also in courage, an aspect highlighted by former Mossad chief Tamir Pardo (Ziegler 2012). Simon Cohen noticed that the vast majority of Israeli instructors were women; intrigued by the choice of women for this job, he found that men react positively to a female instructor, being motivated to learn better.

One of the CIA's secrets is that women are the best recruiters of foreign agents, according to Lindsay Moran (Ziegler 2012), trained at the CIA's "Farm" famous for survival and surveillance techniques, and posted to Eastern Europe to recruit agents who would relay information back to the CIA. People skills, street IQ that outweighs physical strength, a nurturing instinct, and being good listeners are the qualities that make women top recruiters. Women socialize, make friends and read people easily, scanning their motivations and weaknesses by default. Identifying and evaluating sources is second nature to women. In addition, women are always



looking for security and the security of their environment, which is why they are always on the lookout for potentially dangerous situations and suspicious people. Scanning the environment to identify hazards is the quintessence of survival and a testament to intelligence that surpasses physical fitness to fight the enemy, because avoiding confrontation by preempting it is always preferable to fighting in the field, which comes with not only casualties or material losses, but also with the disclosure of suppliers. Maternal instinct is necessary in managing sources that must be protected from any threats, often protected against themselves. Women come naturally to listen to the grievances and pains of sources, while men need hours of training on how to listen and obtain information. And last but not least, female recruiters benefit from cover in cases where they meet a man at night in a hotel, in a car or restaurant, because a woman is always suspected of having an affair, while a recruiter's meetings with men in the same situations would not enjoy a similar alibi (Ziegler 2012). An MI5 report highlights that female spies, if not overly sexual, are more effective secret agents, as they obtain more information than men when they resist the temptation to have sexual relations with the enemy (Bowcott 2004). Maxwell Knight, an MI5 agent responsible for infiltrating communist and fascist organizations in Britain during World War II, addressed the issue of equal opportunities, arguing that the reluctance to recruit women is unfounded, because in the history of espionage and counter-espionage, the largest number of important coups d'état have been carried out by women. His experience in MI5 contradicted the bias that women are more indiscreet than men, that they would act more under the influence of emotions than reason and that sexuality would be a destabilizing factor in their work. (Bowcott 2004). MS, Knight's department of MI5, investigated hundreds of cases and found that those guilty of *faux pas* (missteps) were overwhelmingly men. Male vanity makes them susceptible to indiscretion, in the desire to gain the admiration of their peers or to conquer a woman; ladies, on the other hand, are vain about dresses and appearance, but not about gaining admiration by committing indiscretions. Neither men nor women should be recruited if they are overly emotional or if they demonstrate too much appetite for sex, traits that are not exclusively feminine. Normality and balance must characterize Intelligence agents, neither oversexualized, as their mental processes will be dominated by desire, nor undersexualized, as they will not be mentally alert enough, and their other faculties will suffer (Bowcott 2004).

A smart female agent uses her power of attraction judiciously, gaining a man's trust by expressing a moderate amount of sympathy, which an undersexed woman fails to do. But Mata-Hari's methods are equally unprofitable, since, in Knight's opinion, agents obtain most information by avoiding giving in to the man's conquering impulses. A man who is physically, but superficially interested in a woman will quickly lose interest once intimacy has been achieved, whereas if he is



bound to the woman by her qualities, and not just by physical attraction, the couple will last longer. Although there was a risk that an agent could fall in love with an enemy, he had not encountered any such case in his 20 years of experience. Knight worked for the British Fascist Party in the early 1920s, before being admitted to MI5. His best agents were Olga Grey, who infiltrated a Soviet espionage network, and was bent on obtaining British weapons plans, and Joan Miller, his secretary and second wife, who infiltrated the “Righteousness Club” and dismantled a German spy ring. Miller’s memoirs were published posthumously under the title “One Girl’s War: Personal Exploits in MI5’s Most Secret Station” (Bowcott 2004). The most effective method of gathering information, according to Knight, was to provide an agent with a secretary position in the targeted organization, since “no other person has the same opportunity to obtain information covering such a wide range as a clerk or secretary” (Bowcott 2004).

Conclusions

The “Daughters of Eve” made a contribution to Intelligence that was often disregarded, despised, trivialized and mocked, although if their warnings had been taken seriously, the 9/11 attack or the Hamas attack on the 7th of October 2022, could have been avoided. Osama bin Laden was caught after decades of effort by female analysts within the CIA, pejoratively called “women in sneakers” or “ladies in the vault”. Female artistic personalities from Romania such as Maria Tănase or Martha Bibescu were agents of influence and liaison who remained not only in the history of their country of origin, but also in the European history. The most important and numerous coups d’état were carried out by female spies, because, according to MI5, women do not commit indiscretions, as men do out of a desire to impress. The sexualization and objectification of women in Intelligence is an attempt to diminish their personal power and deny their analytical and intuitive qualities. The secret front of espionage is a field in which women also excel as agent-recruiters, for their natural inclination to listen and comfort, as well as to decipher characters and determine sources to collaborate. Honey traps is a soothing reduction of women to the male imaginary, when the prospect of a comprehensive feminine vision can be considered threatening to male hegemony, instead of recognizing that feminine approaches come to enrich and complete the masculine vision, which leads to closing the circle and achieving perfection.

The research design proposed here would be useful for internal audits of Intelligence services. The limits of these audits would consist of the possible concealed answers, for fear of disclosing information that could harm the speaker. Surveys, focus groups and questionnaires should be carried out within each institution, and the measures taken as a result of them should not be just formal responses



or initiatives with presentable, yet ineffective wording. Adopting a normative framework regarding the integration of women in Intelligence is not sufficient for the efficient and sustainable achievement of gender equality at the level of security institutions. Female spies continue to be described according to gender stereotypes, invalidating their work. Eliminating gender inequalities and taking into account female and male particularities continues to represent a challenge for today's society. The perception that women's role consists of taking care of the family and home persists in the collective mind, with traditional gender norms having to be overcome by both sexes.

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