

Representing Nazi Crimes in post-Second World War Life-Writing

Abstract: As the concept of the ‘Home Front’ reflected, the war against Nazism was conceived in Britain as a collective endeavour, and in biographical accounts of wartime experience, this collective aspect is held in tension with the individuating details of the protagonist’s own war. When the story told involves extreme danger, hardship, or even torture, questions of authenticity become increasingly pressing. This essay captures a particular moment in the ongoing construction of the British narrative of the Second World War, addressing how authors of biographies of female Special Operations Executive agents attempted to encompass Nazi atrocities within narratives that are principally intended to laud the heroism of individuals who had direct and in some cases prolonged contact with the Nazis during the conflict. I will consider the strategies employed by authors to give credibility to what might seem to be unbelievable events, a process complicated by the fact that these authors are in most cases writing after the death of their subject, and I will ask how such atypical stories might fit into existing narratives, however fragmented these might be, of the war.

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As the concept of the 'Home Front' indicates, the war against Nazi Germany was conceived in Britain as a collective endeavour, but this did not mean that the heroism of particular individuals was ignored in popular discourse. Biographical and autobiographical accounts of war experience aimed at a general readership preceded official histories which demanded more thoroughgoing research and planning. This is perhaps not surprising given the war's scope and scale, but it means that, when biographers and autobiographers desired to present the war as a group endeavour, this had to be held in tension with the individuating details of the subject's own war. The singling out of individual stories can become problematic from an historiographic perspective when it serves to overshadow or diminish the scope of the events that are being represented. Mark Rawlinson has suggested that narratives of 'heroic individualism', drawing as they do on existing tropes, are prone to leech away the political realities of the war and exert too strong an influence on 'the postwar conception of the ethical universe in which the war took place.'¹ To an extent, biographies of female Special Operations Executive agents that appeared in the postwar period might be seen as perpetuating this rhetoric of 'heroic individualism' while at the same time, perhaps paradoxically given the nature of the activities they describe, reinforcing the 'back to home and duty' ideology that prevailed during these years. Women such as Odette Sansom and Violette Szabo undertook highly dangerous work, performing a traditionally masculine martial role to an extent not required of women on active service in other forces; but in many postwar representations, they are nevertheless shown to retain their femininity and continue, even in extremis, to embody hegemonic ideals of the feminine.² Thus narratives with an ostensible focus on an individual both engage with and, in some cases, help to perpetuate, these sorts of wider cultural beliefs and expectations.

Texts such as Jerrard Tickell's *Odette: The Story of a British Agent* (1949) and R. J. Minney's *Carve her Name with Pride: The Story of Violette Szabo G.C.* (1956) have been criticised by M. R. D. Foot, author of the official history of SOE, published in 1968, as 'good thrillers, but bad history',³ and historian Mark Seaman concurs, commenting of *Odette* that 'at times the book reads like a novel'.⁴ In these comparisons, the fictive realm is constructed as unreliable and inauthentic: it has no place in an account of historical events. Tickell's and Minney's biographies, though sometimes bracketed together by Foot and others, differ greatly in tone and approach, these differences arising at least in part from the fact that Minney's subject, Violette Szabo, did not survive the war. Foot's and Seaman's dismissal of the fictional downplays the extent to which the techniques associated with fiction, such as figurative language, may enrich historical or biographical writing, but, whether or not these texts may be judged 'good', that is, reliable, history, they can nevertheless be highly revealing of the temper of the period when they were produced. Focusing on the sections of these and other texts that describe the time the agents spent in Nazi captivity, I will argue that their supposedly fictive aspects are symptomatic of attempts to describe historical events that are only partially understood and indeed, at the times these texts were published, only partially accessible via official sources. Attributing thoughts, feelings, even dialogue to their subjects may not strike historians as good practice, but for these biographers, this is a legitimate means of creating a coherent account of their subject's behaviour, and of bridging the gaps in the historical record. Narrative coherence, centred on character, substitutes for historical accuracy.

Odette and *Carve her Name* were both filmed (in 1950 and 1958 respectively) and received paperback reissues by the publisher Pan, which, during the late 1940s and into the 1950s, developed a popular list of reprints of war-related texts with striking

illustrated covers. Jean Overton Fuller's *Madeleine* (1952), the biography of Noor Inayat Khan, another agent who died in Nazi captivity, also appeared as a Pan volume, revised and renamed *Born for Sacrifice* (1957), but along with Elizabeth Nicholas's exploration of the fate of the agent Diana Rowden, *Death be Not Proud* (1958) Fuller's text takes a radically different approach to the problem of representing events that are either undocumented or have no surviving witnesses. Broadly speaking where Tickell and Minney take a 'fictionalising' route, smoothing over narrative gaps in such a way as to render them almost invisible to the reader, Fuller and Nicholas insert themselves as researchers into their narratives, describing the problems they encounter in the course of their investigations. These choices have an impact on both content and form. Tickell and Minney are less inclined to critique systems, focusing as they do on individuals' motives and actions. Their wartime activities are the reason for these individuals becoming the subjects of biographies, but Minney's *Carve her Name* and Tickell's *Odette* de-emphasise the collective aspects of the war and therefore depoliticise their narratives. Although both Fuller, in *Madeleine*, and Nicholas, in *Death be not Proud*, set out to trace the story of an individual, in each case the research leads to the exposure of the complexities and indeed deficiencies of SOE as an organisation. In their vacillations between consideration of these agents as individuals and their contextualisation within groups of different kinds, these texts engage variously with wider debates of the period about agency, responsibility and the relationship between the individual and the collective in wartime and after.

For Fuller and Nicholas in particular, an important part of the quest to uncover the wartime activities of their subjects is a desire to find out how they died. Considered by their captors to have committed espionage, some agents, including all those discussed here, were sent, following capture, to concentration camps. This means that each author must, in his or her narrative, pass into the concentrationary realm, itself only partially

understood at the time when they were writing. British attempts at discovering the fate of agents who had fallen into German hands during the war intersected with investigations into what were broadly termed ‘Nazi crimes’, and as the complex process of prosecuting individuals for war crimes got underway, the torture and murder of British agents were among the charges laid. As Donald Bloxham has shown, however, the desire to undertake prosecutions was tempered by a wish to get them over and done with as swiftly as possible and to begin the process of establishing good postwar relations with Germany. Tribunals were organised within each of the Allied zones of occupation and, with some exceptions, related to events that had taken place on that particular territory: the women’s concentration camp, Ravensbrück, was in the Soviet zone, but some of its personnel were prosecuted by the British, because British prisoners, including Odette Sansom, had been held there.⁵ Bloxham notes that the desire to prosecute those responsible for the executions of the Stalag Luft III escapers (who were recaptured after the so-called ‘Great Escape’) was one factor in the prolongation of the British tribunal process and sees this as representative of the extent to which ‘[m]ost of the little interest [...] regarding the trials shown by the British public was on matters relating directly to Britain.’⁶ Despite the shocking images of death camps and concentration camps that were shown in cinemas and widely circulated in the press in Britain, it was the prisoner of war camp, as exemplified by Stalag Luft III, that held a more prominent place in the British cultural imagination.⁷ All four authors, then, have to address the issue of how the fate of an individual in the grip of a barely comprehensible system can be represented within the narrative frameworks available to them. Further, and more problematically, Minney, Fuller and Nicholas face the challenge of incorporating into their narratives their subjects’ deaths.

Bearing Witness?

Foot and Seaman's concerns about crossing the boundary between the construction of an engaging historical narrative and 'fictionalisation' are acknowledged in the Foreword provided by former SOE-F-section recruiting officer Selwyn Jepson to Fuller's *Madeleine*, where he notes the author's 'painstaking and successful efforts to avoid the taint of fiction'.¹⁰ Fuller describes her researches as having been hampered by a lack of assistance from the War Office, leading her to resort to 'methods which would grace a detective story',¹¹ a reference to her interviewing of witnesses and footslogging around England and France. (Jepson had first-hand knowledge of the 'taint of fiction', having established himself as a successful writer of detective novels in the interwar years; detective fiction was another genre in which Pan Books had a successful list.) There may appear to be a contradiction between Jepson's and Fuller's characterisations of her work, but there is evidently a distinction being made between content, which Jepson refers to, and form, or indeed research method – the latter in fact dictates the former – as described by Fuller. Foregrounding the silences, evasions, unanswered letters and dead ends that she encounters during her search for what happened to her friend Noor Inayat Khan serves not to diminish the credibility of Fuller's account, I would argue, but rather to increase it; her reliability is reinforced even as the gaps in her knowledge are exposed.

However, Foot takes issue with 'passages in quotation marks' which he feels 'render' the 'authenticity' of certain scenes 'doubtful'.¹² For instance, Fuller reports what she was told by another agent who noticed that Khan carried around an exercise book containing messages she had sent to London:

'That is a very dangerous document,' he said. 'Anybody into whose hands it should fall would be able to work out your code from it.'

'I know,' she said. 'That is why I carry it about with me everywhere.'

‘But this means that if the Germans capture you, they capture this on you!’

‘Yes, but there is nothing I can do about that.’¹³

This is Fuller’s rendering of a conversation that has been reported to her by a third party, perhaps in ‘I said, she said’ form. While quotation marks are usually a sign guaranteeing that the material within is a direct record of speech, Foot’s argument is that, within the context of what purports to be a truthful account, they are in fact a sign of falsity: who can remember the detail of a conversation years after the event? Of course what matters is not the exact wording but the substance; according to this account, Khan was carrying round with her a highly compromising document, a mistake Rita Kramer attributes to her misunderstanding of the term ‘file’. Kramer suspects that Khan might have been told in training to:

‘[B]e extremely careful in the filing of your messages.’ Evidently she was unfamiliar with the use of ‘filing’ in the sense in which a journalist ‘files’ – that is ‘sends’ – a story, and thought she was meant to keep them in some sort of filing system.¹⁴

Fuller has already acknowledged that some of those in training with Khan did not believe she was a suitable person to be sent undercover, and raised their concerns with Vera Atkins,¹⁵ the F-section intelligence officer who ‘coordinated the preparation of more than four hundred secret agents who were to be dropped into France’ over the course of the war.¹⁶ Fuller’s investigation was itself prompted, in part, by her disbelief that her gentle, spiritual friend could have been chosen to undertake such work. Such concerns are largely overshadowed by Khan’s refusal to give anything away to her captors, a staunchness which seems to guarantee the rightness of the decision to send her, albeit that this can only be demonstrated when she has in fact, to some extent, failed by being captured. The conversation Fuller ‘records’ about the messages may or may not be an exact transcript,

but in any case exposes not certainty but uncertainty because Fuller can offer no convincing explanation for Khan's apparently dangerous behaviour.

Fuller's introduction of herself into this narrative as both an acquaintance of Khan and an investigating author, a double role that is also foregrounded, through similar means, by Elizabeth Nicholas when she decides to find out what happened to her old school friend Diana Rowden, can be characterised as an attempt to answer a question that has long concerned those engaged in work on the representation of the Holocaust: who has the right to speak, and on behalf of whom? If, as Primo Levi maintains, the 'survivors [...] are not the true witnesses',¹⁷ then how can the fate of those who did not return be articulated? Fuller seems to cast herself as, in Dominick LaCapra's term, a 'secondary witness',¹⁸ one who undertakes 'critical work' to transform the 'primary memory' of those who 'initially had the relevant experiences' into 'secondary memory', to be imparted 'to others who have not themselves lived through the experience or events in question.'¹⁹ Fuller charges herself with constructing a narrative of Khan's life through interviews with those who knew her, even those involved in her interrogation, but she is not a neutral vessel through which this information passes, and she foregrounds the practical and emotional difficulties of her 'critical work'. There is a danger here of the focus of the narrative being shifted from its ostensible subject – Khan – to its narrator, but through this technique Fuller can acknowledge the distance between Khan's experience and her own, and by extension the readers', rather than this distance being foreclosed. In this way she avoids appropriating Khan's experience, achieving instead an effect approaching what LaCapra calls 'empathic unsettlement',²⁰ refusing to smooth over difficulties or dissonances in the account and avoiding the imposition of a false sense of completion on the narrative.

Such foreclosure of the distance between narrator and subject is in fact more of a danger in third person accounts, as focalization can create a misleading sense of proximity to the events narrated. When R. J. Minney describes the capture of Violette Szabo by an officer from an SS Panzer Division following an armed stand-off, events initially appear to be described from the perspective of another agent, Anastasie (René Dufour), who managed to escape and hid under a woodpile in a farmyard, with the help of the farm's inhabitants:

They brought her, hot and dishevelled, to the heap of logs under which Anastasie was hidden and stood within a pace of him. [...] A young officer, eyeing Violette with admiration, said: 'I like your spirit. You put up a wonderful fight – right up to the end.' Then, motioning to his men to let go her arms, he took out his cigarette-case, selected one for her and stuck it between her lips. [...] Her eyes blazing with fury, she said: 'You dirty cowards. You filthy German swine. I don't want your cigarettes –' and with that, leaning forward, she spat full in the young officer's face.²¹

While the challenge to Khan about the notebook is material in that it seems to expose a mistake on her part, the purpose of this focalisation is to reinforce Szabo's status as defiant to the extent of recklessness; the German officer also acts true to stereotype. Having had his 'gentlemanly' offer so rudely rejected, '[h]is eyes narrowed [...]' Then suddenly he threw back his head and laughed. "All right," he said. "Take her away."²² There is, as Foot might argue, 'novelisation' here, inasmuch as a third-person and apparently omniscient narrator attributes thoughts, feelings and actions to protagonists, basing these descriptions principally on imagination rather than observation. Notably, Minney evokes the sentiments not just of Szabo but of the 'German' (throughout the narrative he more often refers to Germans than to Nazis, itself a weighted choice). On the one hand, the implication is that even after being insulted by her, the German admires her

spirit; on the other, he is offered, if only momentarily, as an object of identification for the reader, as his actions are more precisely described than hers in this incident. The focalizing presence of Anastasie under the woodpile is soon abandoned; in fact Dufour, who joined the French army at the end of the war, was killed in Indo-China in 1946, and, although he produced a written account of Szabo's capture for the head of his resistance group, postwar recollections of the inhabitants of the farm are likely to be Minney's main source for this incident. Nevertheless, this moment echoes the perpetrator-victim-bystander triangulation that, in the wake of Raul Hilberg's work, is often seen to structure Holocaust narratives: the bystander position may, on the surface, seem to be the least ethically problematic for the reader to adopt, but can instead 'reinforce the tendency to see [the Holocaust] in Manichean terms', offering support for 'the rather complacent assumption that few of us will become perpetrators' and reinforcing our 'optimism that we will not become victims' either.²³ Like Minney himself, the reader vacillates between two seemingly impossible points of identification: the peerless Szabo and the cruel German, retreating finally to the only apparent neutrality of the bystander.

Minney is also explicitly assisting in the transformation of Szabo into a mythic figure: as his Introduction notes, Szabo was a 'humble' individual with 'no discernible talents', with a 'haunting beauty' which she 'did not exploit', who nevertheless had 'qualities, noticeable only to a few, which, in a moment of crisis and peril, made her resolute, fearless, unresponsive under agonising torture, so that in Britain's proud story she has her place as a heroine.'²⁴ There is no question of his being an account which contests this perception of Szabo; nor, indeed, does Fuller downplay the beauty or bravery of her own subject, Noor Inayat Khan. The key difference is that Fuller's chosen narrative technique does provide her with space to question the organisational methods of SOE and indeed postwar information management: the reason she embarks on her 'detective'-like quest

for individual testimony about Khan is the paucity of the official record. Her book about Khan in fact raised more questions than it answered for Fuller and led to her writing a series of books, each based on the loose ends of the previous one, uncovering possible double agents and questioning official intransigence. Minney and, to an extent, Tickell focus on individual testimony because their interest lies precisely and squarely on the individual. The agents' involvement in SOE necessitates their actions and creates the circumstances of their dire predicaments, but it is the depoliticised, even to an extent decontextualised 'human story' that is the focus of their biographies. By contrast, Fuller, and indeed Nicholas, use their self-referential accounts to interrogate this style of life-writing.

Prolepsis and the anticipation of horror

In another respect, the lives of these women are very precisely contextualised by Minney and Tickell. Both textual and paratextual material indicates to the reader how the narrative will end; that is, whether the subject will survive. Public knowledge of the fates of these women was first awakened by newspaper reports of the trials of those believed responsible, or of the award of honours: Odette Sansom in particular became well-enough known to be referred to by only her first name in newspaper headlines. (There was also an element of convenience in this as she was born Odette Brailly, married Roy Sansom in 1931, divorced him after the war to marry Peter Churchill in 1947, eventually separated from Churchill, remarried, and ended her life as Odette Hallowses.) Even for those who did not approach these texts with existing knowledge of their subjects' fates, jacket copy would often reveal what to expect: 'Violette Szabo. London shop assistant who became a secret agent, was captured and shot by the Gestapo, and was the only British-born girl to be awarded the George Cross. "She was the bravest of us all" said Odette Churchill,

G.C.’’²⁵ But the narratives themselves make no virtue of suspense where the fate of the subject is concerned; not only in prefaces and opening chapters but in some cases throughout, prolepsis is used to ensure that the reader understands what the eventual consequences of particular decisions, on the part of the agents or of others, will be. In *Carve her Name*, following her capture, Szabo is taken from Fresnes prison by van: ‘She knew where she was being taken, for they had talked of it in England. It was to the Avenue Foch where the Gestapo did their harsher questioning, aided by the persuasive refinements of torture.’²⁶ The purpose of the (unprovable) attribution of this knowledge to Szabo is both to reinforce that she embarked on her mission fully understanding what the consequences might be, but also to indicate her preparedness, and by extension, to prepare the reader, for what is to come. In the event, Minney gives only hints, introducing a gap in his narrative, presumably to protect the reader, but actually licensing horrible imaginings:

As the questioning proceeded and she still proved recalcitrant, implements of torture were produced and each was hold up before her. The inquisitor said: ‘Will you answer now?’ and, just as defiantly as when she was a child, she replied: ‘I won’t. I *won’t*.’ The young German then gave the sign. There followed the most atrocious torture.

She winced and bit her lips. Her face was contorted in horrible agony. But still [...] she repeated, almost inaudibly: ‘I won’t. I *won’t*.’²⁷

The paragraph break is important here: it is in the gap between the paragraphs that the torture occurs, but the reader sees only its consequences, or at least, its consequences are legible in Szabo’s face. Notably, Minney does not attempt to describe, from Szabo’s perspective how it *felt* to be tortured: both the narrator and therefore the reader are observing, spectating, and an attempt is made to foreclose the possibility of a dangerous identification with the perpetrator by the agentless nature of the statement: ‘There

followed the most atrocious torture.’ The bystander position is again adopted as apparently less problematic than the position of either perpetrator or victim.²⁸

Minney ends his account with Szabo’s George Cross citation, a document described by Elizabeth Nicholas as ‘giving in detail a description of events that never in fact took place’,²⁹ but which in *Carve her Name* stands as an official guarantee of the trustworthiness of the text itself. Tickell opens *Odette* with a description of the Ravensbrück trial, his chapter culminating in Odette’s confirmation of her identity when she takes to the stand. Thus the narrative which follows, beginning with Sansom’s family background, is framed by the validatory force of courtroom witness testimony. Of course, her evidence did not consist of her recounting her whole history in the detail which Tickell does, but in using the courtroom as a frame, Tickell authenticates his account. Testimony is here shorn of its subjectivity, or, more precisely, its potential unreliability. Sansom’s physical presence in the courtroom is important because her body itself testifies to her resilience under torture. (The back cover of the Pan paperback does not pull its punches in describing what, infamously, happened to her in captivity: ‘The Gestapo put certain questions to her; she had nothing to say, even after they had pulled out all her toenails.’³⁰) She embodies survival: ‘Her face, pale in the strong light, was small-featured, delicate and oddly child-like. Her eyes were bright. A mass of dark hair swept upwards from her forehead, almost concealing the slanting beret, and fell thick upon her shoulders.’³¹ Despite what she has endured, her essential femininity, signified by her ‘child-like’ face and luxuriant hair, is essentially undamaged. Positioned at this early point in the narrative, this is a guarantee for the reader that Sansom will emerge from her ordeal, and, having kept silent under torture, will eventually, in the safe confines of the courtroom, be able to speak about what she has endured.

Tickell's penchant for what now seem like horribly inappropriate images in his descriptions of, in particular, events that take place while Odette Sansom is in Nazi captivity, emerges early on in *Odette*. During the account of the trial, the organisation and running of Ravensbrück is explained, including the process of *Selektion*, the identification of those who would be gassed, which is described by Tickell as a 'fiendish Folies Bergères'.³² This is an allusion apparently justified by his description of the women's attempts to make themselves appear younger and healthier prior to the *Selektion* itself; this tactic is depicted in the film *Schindler's List* (1993), where women pinch or rub blood onto their cheeks to mimic a 'healthy glow'. Tickell's analogy points to the fact that in each case, men are looking and women being looked at, but the comparison is nevertheless shocking because it brings into conjunction two things – a Parisian nightclub that has become a metonym for a particular kind of illicit entertainment and the choosing of individuals to undergo death by gassing – that seem utterly incomparable. The ethical problems of comparing the concentration camps with anything and indeed of using figurative language to describe them at all are now familiar, and even in early representations, an emphasis on indescribability and the paucity of existing comparators were characteristic. Barbie Zelizer quotes a news editor's comment on task facing the media as information about the camps emerged: 'In the presence of these German horror camps, language breaks down.'³³ Tickell, writing at a distance from the events he is describing, seems determined to resist such a breaking down of language, albeit that the results now seem distasteful. His choice of the image of the Folies Bergères sexualises the process he describes, but it is not impossible that this is precisely the point. Tickell (perhaps) attempts to indicate that, for the Nazis, this process was akin to looking at women in a nightclub; looked at this way, the choice of analogy seems (marginally) more explicable, but it underlines the difficulty that Tickell, like Minney, has in establishing a

consistent narrative voice and perspective, a difficulty that refracts the nature of the events described. His use of the phrase ‘fiendish Folies Bergères’ is in fact embedded in a sentence that attempts to evoke the women prisoners’ emotions: ‘those who were forced to take part in this fiendish Folies Bergères were fully conscious of its dread purpose.’³⁴ In this context, the implication is that the women might have conceived the selection in this light, itself both improbable and unprovable. This image, then, disjunctive as it is, stands as a sign of the difficulties of representation that it precisely attempts to solve.

Odette Sansom herself was not subject to the *Selektion* process, as although she was kept prisoner at Ravensbrück, she was in solitary confinement for most of her captivity. Tickell does not elaborate on the fact that Odette Sansom, contrary to SOE regulations, was having an affair with Peter Churchill, the organiser of her circuit, prior to her capture; she married him after the war, once she had divorced her first husband, who disappears early on and without explanation from the narrative of *Odette*. After being captured, she decided to pretend that she was married to Churchill and that he was related to Winston Churchill, a tactic which meant she was considered to have some exchange value. This pretence, which involved Odette foreshadowing her actual postwar marriage to Peter Churchill as well as adopting a further false identity on top of the one that had been constructed for her by F-section, did not however save her from torture prior to her incarceration at Ravensbrück.

Whereas Minney is reticent in his account of Szabo’s treatment, Tickell does not draw a veil over what happened to Odette. He is also describing events that have been recounted to him by a living witness, indeed, a survivor:

A man knelt at her feet. He was a young man, under thirty, very good-looking in a dark Mediterranean handsomeness, and he glanced up at her with blind, brown eyes. He did not see her as a woman but only as a living, sensitive adjunct to her naked

foot. His impersonality was terrifying. [...] Then, with a slow, muscular drag, he began to pull. A semi-circle of blood started to the quick, oozed over the skin, flooded after the retreating nail.³⁶

When all her toe-nails have been removed, we are told: ‘Odette gazed incredulously at the bloody furnace of her feet and at the red litter on the floor, litter of a diabolical chiropody.’³⁷ This latter phrase stands out, like ‘fiendish Folies Bergères’, on account of its inaptness: chiropody has mundane, even suburban connotations that are hard to dispel, even by the word ‘diabolical’; the phrase has the ring of bathos. And yet what is described here is abject and horrific, albeit that, like the description of Szabo’s torture, it conceals more than it reveals, and its point of view wavers. The handsomeness of the torturer is framed as being observed from the victim’s point of view: how incongruous that a handsome man should be a torturer, and that he should be oblivious to his victim as a sexual being. Yet his ‘impersonality’, his detachment from his task, seems echoed in the description of the removal of the first nail, which is described as though being coolly observed rather than felt. The purpose here could be to emphasise the victim’s shocked detachment from the reality of what is happening; when, after she still refuses to answer questions, the procedure is repeated, more emotive language is used: ‘The enclosing flesh ripped and yielded in agonizing pain as the nail was dragged out.’³⁸ Even here, though, the ‘agonizing pain’ is not attributed directly to Odette, a tactic which echoes Minney’s impersonal statement: ‘There followed the most atrocious torture.’ In both instances, torture seems to float free of both perpetrator and victim: the problem of where the narrator can or should be positioned, a problem that is fundamentally linked to notions of trustworthiness and reliability, seems insoluble.³⁹

‘Quest’ narratives and the search for evidence

In Minney's and Tickell's accounts of Szabo's and Sansom's experiences, prolepsis is used to situate the narrator as a figure of authority. Fuller's use of foreshadowing in her Preface to *Madeleine*, which largely serves to describe her own investigative technique, is less explicit, although her subject is referred to in the past tense, and the description of the summer of 1943, leading up to Khan's capture, as 'fateful' provides the reader with clues.⁴⁰ Later, Yvonne Beekman and Cecily Lefort, other agents who train with Khan, are described as 'doomed to die.'⁴¹ Elizabeth Nicholas, the most polemical of the authors under consideration here, chooses for the title of her book about Diana Rowden and her associates a quotation from John Donne which itself foregrounds mortality, but also bluntly explains, at the start of her prologue, the purpose of her narrative: 'This is a book about seven women who served with the French Section of the Special Operations Executive, were captured by the Germans, and put to death in a manner shameful to their captors, yet ennobled by the courage with which it was endured.'⁴² This final clause, and Nicholas's title, might seem to make her liable to be bracketed alongside Minney and Tickell as dealing in novelisation or fictionalisation, although Nicholas's relative bluntness here in fact indicates a desire to distance herself from those earlier examples, a desire that is made explicit early on in *Death be not Proud*: 'reading some books about, or by those who survived, I have been astonished by the facility they reveal for retaining in the memory, over long periods of years, great slabs of detailed dialogue [...] I have felt it best not to be lured into the entrancing glades of semi-fiction; I have recorded nothing in this book as having happened unless it were repeated to me as first-hand-evidence.'⁴³ It would be easy enough to be cynical about Nicholas's faith in 'first-hand-evidence', but her comments indicate not only a contemporary awareness of the deficiencies of accounts such as Tickell's but also their incredible resilience. (Her book did not get a paperback run.) Nicholas accuses Tickell of 'facetiousness', and observes that *Odette* 'was written in

a style that suggested it was fiction; it simply reeked of the cops and robbers approach to subversive activity.⁴⁴ With regard to this latter accusation, it is notable that Nicholas, like Fuller, is aware of the danger of such a binary approach and points, albeit implicitly, towards both the problems and the responsibilities for writers who engage with these events.

Some of Nicholas's comments about *Odette* echo the kind of criticism levelled at Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl*, first published in Britain in 1954 by Vallentine Mitchell and also issued as a Pan paperback, in 1958. In their focus on the experience of sequestration, both texts present the war and the Holocaust aslant, rather than face-on. Just as the diary has become an iconic text of the Holocaust despite being an account of an atypical experience, so *Odette*, in Nicholas's view, is taken to be the representative text of SOE's F-section despite its lack of attention to the

subterfuge and deception [...] the errors, the confusions and the betrayals [...] The story revealed was uncomplicated; it was [...] the story of one woman, and no attempt was made to disentangle the strings that had manipulated her life and led her, ultimately, to the grotesque and mediaeval horrors of Ravensbrück.⁴⁵

As Nicholas makes clear from the outset, her initial investigation into the life of her former schoolfriend Diana Rowden leads to what is essentially a group biography; she cannot write about Rowden without exploring the fates of those who went to France, worked with and died alongside her; indeed, Nicholas was the first to identify the Frenchwoman Sonia Olschanezky as one of those who was executed with Rowden at Natzweiler.⁴⁶

Nicholas aimed to offer not just a corrective to *Odette*, but also a contextualisation of information about Rowden and her fellow agents that was already in the public domain. In the first chapter of her *Death be not Proud*, she quotes newspaper articles, published

trial reports and even the inscription on the FANY memorial, unveiled in May 1948 in Knightsbridge. Each of these texts is found by Nicholas to be deficient or problematic: one newspaper report cited indicates that Rowden was ‘burned alive in [the] crematorium at Natzweiler’, and these words ‘still had the power to shock almost beyond endurance.’⁴⁷ As Nicholas soon established, the women were given lethal injections and were unlikely to have been conscious when they were taken to the crematorium.⁴⁸ For various reasons, despite her desire to know more being piqued, Nicholas does not begin a concerted investigation into the fate of Rowden and the other women until 1955. She recalls reading an article, at this time, about the release of the film *The Dam Busters*, in which the author suggested ‘that it was, perhaps, inopportune to remind the Germans of disaster [...] Too much, I thought, was being forgotten too quickly; to forgive was one thing, to forget another.’⁴⁹ Nicholas is not setting the war as represented by the ‘dam busters’ raids, a technologized, masculine enterprise, as a counter to the war of women on active service: however compromised their memorializations might be, the women have been remembered. Rather, she brackets both these aspects of the conduct of the war together; both are still worthy of attention and remembrance, and she is critical of those who would kick over the traces. She could not have known, at this point in her researches, that the full-scale biographical and filmic commemoration of Szabo was yet to come.

The transcripts of the Natzweiler Trial provide Nicholas with a full account of the circumstances of Rowden’s last days and her narrative therefore focuses on attempting to retrace her friend’s steps in France, interviewing those who had contact with her during this period. Jean Fuller’s biography of Khan proceeds in a similar fashion; the same trial transcript in which Rowden’s death is described also mentions ‘Nora Baker’, a name by which Khan was known, as having been taken from a civilian prison at Karlsruhe to Dachau for execution in July 1944.⁵⁰ While at Karlsruhe, Khan was kept ‘in chains by

day and by night, in solitary confinement’,⁵¹ or so Fuller learns from an interview with the former prison governor, Wilhelm Krauss. Fearful of defying the Gestapo, Krauss claims that he nevertheless eventually decided to ease the conditions of Khan’s captivity: ‘It is impossible to tell how long she was kept completely chained [...] That the conditions of her detention were gradually eased emerged from the statements of all my informants, though they naturally do not tally in every detail.’⁵² This brisk, almost business-like tone is typical of Fuller, who never resorts to the shock tactics of Tickell.

Although Fuller does indicate to the reader when she feels her ‘informants’ are prevaricating, she adopts a deliberately objective-seeming stance. Shortly after recounting the nature of Khan’s imprisonment at Karlsruhe, and in search of more information about Khan’s final hours, she decides to contact ‘a certain Wassmer’, a Gestapo clerk, who transported both Rowden and Khan from prison to Natzweiler and Dachau respectively. The account she receives from Wassmer forms the short final chapter of the biography. Fuller hesitates to contact Wassmer, who, she reflects, with little discernible irony, ‘must be weary of interrogations’, and, when she finally writes to him, her ‘hope of receiving a reply was not very great.’⁵³ However, she soon receives a reply, the ‘obvious sincerity’ of which she ‘finds touching: it was clear that he was anxious to help me as best he could to complete my picture of Noor, and to show that her wonderful bravery had not failed her at this time.’⁵⁴ Fuller’s kid-gloves attitude towards a former Gestapo official might seem peculiar, but throughout the text, Fuller reserves judgement on individuals who she believes can help her with her quest. Her place, it seems, is not to pass judgements on what was done or not done. Rather, her focus is on gleaning as much information as she can from whatever source, to write ‘impartially’ and not ‘against the Germans – or for them.’⁵⁵ Wassmer can describe the final journey taken by Khan and her fellow prisoners, and tells Fuller that they ‘talked together in a very lively and spirited fashion’ but his

narrative ends once he has delivered the women to Dachau: ‘Later, official information was received in Karlsruhe that the women had been shot.’⁵⁶ This is the final sentence of the body of the text; it is followed by two appendices which transcribe Khan’s posthumous citations for the George Cross and the Croix de Guerre. The impersonal framing of the statement: ‘information was received’ is an indication that Fuller can go no further. Fuller is not willing to project emotions onto Khan, to imagine how she might have felt, or, to put it another way, to fictionalise her.

The starkness of Nicholas’s and Fuller’s accounts stand in contrast to Minney’s description of the final moments of Szabo’s life. Minney weaves together the testimony of a fellow prisoner of Szabo’s at Ravensbrück and the account gleaned from the camp’s second-in-command, Johann Schwarzhuber, by Vera Atkins. The commandant, Fritz Suhren, fled the camp by car taking Odette Sansom with him and attempted, unsuccessfully, to use her to bargain his way to freedom. Schwarzhuber’s account states: ‘The shooting was done [...] with a small-calibre gun through the back of the neck. [...] All three were brave and I was deeply moved. Suhren was also impressed by the bearing of these women. He was annoyed that the Gestapo did not themselves carry out these shootings.’⁵⁷ This final buck-passing remark could be intended to exculpate Suhren, but of course his annoyance does not go so far as condemning the fact that the executions are carried out at all, only that he has to take responsibility for them. Minney supplements this account with his own imaginative reconstruction of the execution, from the perspective of other prisoner-witnesses, but also of Szabo herself:

Violette, they say, was the last to be executed and had to suffer the agony of seeing her friends put to death, aware all the time that the same fate awaited her. She did not flinch. Her spirit was indomitable. Again and again in the past, when all seemed lost, she had fought her way out [...] Even in captivity she tried repeatedly to break away

so that, returning she could fight on. But now there seemed to be no way out at all.

[...] Lifting her head with haughty scorn, she walked the last few paces to her death.⁵⁸

Given how Minney has characterised Szabo throughout the narrative ('again and again [...] she had fought her way out') her 'haughty' raising of her head is a necessary culmination. The whole framing of Szabo's life has been gravitating towards this end. Her death is not the result of particular historical circumstance, but something less contingent: it is her fate. (In this regard, it seems ironic that the paperback reissue of *Madeleine* was retitled *Born for Sacrifice*; Fuller, while considering the events in Khan's early life that might have led her to enrol in SOE, sees her 'doom' as historically contingent.) The various documentary, eye-witness and other accounts that underpin *Carve her Name* are subsumed to a character study, as is made plain by the juxtaposition of these two descriptions of Szabo's death. Schwarzhuber describes the women as 'brave', but could himself be telling Atkins what he believes she wishes to hear.

Conclusion

Speaking in the 1970s, CB Townshend, who was then overseeing the SOE archives, commented that the material under his aegis consisted of 'the surviving files of a collection of files of which we have documentary evidence that at least 87% were destroyed in London between 1945 and 1950'.⁵⁹ The authors I have discussed here had varied experiences of working with official sources; Tickell was given assistance that Fuller, just a few years later, could only envy. It would be misleading to describe Fuller's and Nicholas's accounts as counter-narratives, as they were writing a number of years before the 'official' narrative of SOE's activities in France was produced, but both were evidently motivated not by a desire to produce hagiographies of women who were known personally to them, but to acknowledge the bravery of their actions and the horror of their

deaths without resorting to the hyperbole or shock-tactics that characterise Tickell's work in particular. Nicholas's and Fuller's refusal to attribute feelings or emotions to their subjects means that their narratives have gaps, but it also means that the particularity of what Khan, Rowden and others experienced is respected. These differing approaches prompt us to consider where the boundaries of biography as a genre lie, shading off as these texts do into fictionalising on the one hand and confronting the reader with gaps in the historical record on the other. Any biography might provoke questions about genre, but these questions become far more pressing in the context of war, when the personal and ideological importance placed on truth and authenticity are so much greater than in peacetime. In Nicholas's and Fuller's cases, not representing an event, or representing it as an absence, is chosen as more honest than either speculation or the elaboration of the testimony of often self-serving eyewitnesses. This is not so much a case of refusing to try to 'represent the unrepresentable' as an acknowledgement that even when it comes in the line of duty, one's death should remain one's own.

¹ Mark Rawlinson, 'This Other War: British Culture and the Holocaust', *Cambridge Quarterly*, 25.2 (1996), pp. 1-25, p. 11.

² Deirdre Osborne, "'I do not know about politics or governments . . . I am a housewife.': The Female Secret Agent and the Male War Machine in Occupied France (1942-5)", *Women: A Cultural Review*, 17.1 (2006), pp. 42-64, p. 51.

³ M. R. D. Foot, *SOE in France: An Account of the Work of the British Special Operations Executive in France 1940-1944* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1968), p. 453.

⁴ Mark Seaman, 'Good Thrillers, But Bad History: A review of Published works on the Special Operations Executive's work in France during the Second World War', in K. G. Robertson, ed. *War, Resistance and Intelligence: Essays in Honour of M. R. D. Foot* (London: Leo Cooper, 1999), pp. 119-33, p. 121.

⁵ Donald Bloxham, 'British War Crimes Trial Policy in Germany, 1945-1957: Implementation and Collapse', *Journal of British Studies*, 42.1 (2003), pp 91-118, p. 105.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

⁷ Rawlinson, pp.16-17.

¹⁰ Selwyn Jepson, 'Foreword', in Jean Overton Fuller, *Madeleine: The Story of Noor Inayat Khan George Cross, M. B. E., Croix de Guerre with Gold Star* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1952), pp. 7-8, p. 7.

¹¹ Fuller, p. 9.

¹² Foot, p. 339 n. 3.

¹³ Fuller, p. 127.

¹⁴ Rita Kramer, *Flames in the Field: The Story of Four SOE Agents in Occupied France* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996), p. 141-2.

¹⁵ Fuller, pp. 77-8.

¹⁶ Sarah Helm, *A Life in Secrets: The Story of Vera Atkins and the Lost Agents of SOE* (London: Abacus, 2006), p. xx.

¹⁷ Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved.*, trans by Raymond Rosenthal (London: Abacus, 1989), p. 63.

¹⁸ Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory After Auschwitz* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 21.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 20-1.

²⁰ Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), p. 41.

²¹ R. J. Minney, *Carve her Name with Pride: The Story of Violette Szabo G. C* (1956; London: Pan, 1958), pp. 147-8.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 148.

²³ Tony Kushner, “Pissing in the Wind?”: The Search for Nuance in the Study of Holocaust “Bystanders”, in David Cesarani and Paul S. Levine, eds., *‘Bystanders’ to the Holocaust: A Re-evaluation* (London: Frank Cass, 2002), pp. 57-76, p. 61, p. 60.

²⁴ Minney, p. 9.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, jacket blurb.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

²⁸ This description is further complicated by the fact that post-Minney accounts of Szabo’s experience maintain that, unlike Odette or Eileen Nearne, another F-section agent who survived Ravensbrück, Szabo was not in fact subject to torture. See Juliette Pattinson, *Behind Enemy Lines: Gender, Passing and the Special Operations Executive in the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 163. Osborne cites a claim, first made many years later by a former cellmate of Szabo’s, that Szabo was raped during her time in Ravensbrück. See Osborne, p. 52. Minney is referring to an earlier point in Szabo’s captivity.

²⁹ Elizabeth Nicholas, *Death be not Proud* (London: Cresset Press, 1958), p. 271.

³⁰ Jerrard Tickell, *Odette: The Story of a British Agent (Odette Churchill G. C. M. B. E.)* (1949; London: Pan, 1955), jacket blurb.

³¹ Tickell, p. 16.

³² Tickell, p. 15.

³³ Barbie Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory Through the Camera's Eye* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 85.

³⁴ Tickell, p. 15.

³⁶ Tickell, p. 223.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 223.

³⁹ In the first edition of *SOE in France*, Foot cast doubt on Odette Churchill's description of her torture, an accusation that culminated in damages being paid both to Churchill and to R. J. Minney, who Foot suggested was guilty of sensationalism in his description of Szabo's treatment by the Gestapo, and in the removal of the offending remarks from subsequent editions. See Christopher Moran, *Classified: Secrecy and the Secret State in Modern Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 307.

⁴⁰ Fuller, p. 10.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 70.

⁴² Nicholas, p. 13.

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 20-1.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 30.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 31.

⁴⁶ Kramer, p. 183.

⁴⁷ Nicholas, p. 29.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 71.

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 32-3.

⁵⁰ Fuller, p. 186.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 180.

⁵² Ibid., p. 181.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 187.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 9.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 187.

⁵⁷ Minney, p. 185.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 186.

⁵⁹ Qtd in Duncan Stuart, “‘Of Historical Interest Only’: The Origins and Vicissitudes of the SOE archive”, in Mark Seaman, ed., *Special Operations Executive: A New Instrument of War* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 217-29, p. 228.