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HISTORY MAGAZINE

These 5 female spies helped win World War II

Meet some of the women who risked their lives for the Allied cause—including renowned dancer Josephine Baker, who used her star power to help the French resistance.



U.S. troops march on the Champs-Élysées in 1944 Paris, with the Arc de Triomphe in the background.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BETTMANN / GETTY IMAGES

Victories in World War II weren't just achieved by men. A cohort of courageous women worked as spies and operatives in intelligence agencies around the world, risking their lives to seek out covert information that influenced the war's outcome. It was perilous work and there were real-life threats of being discovered including torture, detainment in concentration camps, and even death. Women persevered, however, believing that an Allied victory was the only option. Here are some of World War II's most famous spies who gave their all.

Josephine Baker

In the 1930s as racial segregation raged in the United States, African American Josephine Baker rose to stardom in Paris as an entertainer, dancer, and singer. She flitted between social circles, a fact noted by Captain Jacques Abtey, an intelligence officer for the French secret service. Two years after she obtained French citizenship, and as war loomed, he approached Baker in 1939 asking her to gather intel for the French. Despite the danger, she accepted the job readily. "France made me what I am," she said. "The people of Paris have given me everything. ... I am ready to give them my life."

Baker attended diplomatic parties at the Italian and French Embassies, listening in on those who might be Axis agents or French traitors. When German troops occupied Paris in 1940, she fled to the Vichy zone in southern France, where, under the guise of her performances, she continued to work secretly with Abtey for the resistance. In early 1941, they moved on to French North Africa. From there, she smuggled documents including photos hidden under her clothing and messages written in secret ink on sheet music to agents in Lisbon working for the resistance group Free French, which was led by General Charles de Gaulle. Baker was honored by the French during her lifetime for her wartime service with the Legion of Honor and the Croix de Guerre. In November 2021 she became the first Black woman to be inducted into the French Pantheon.





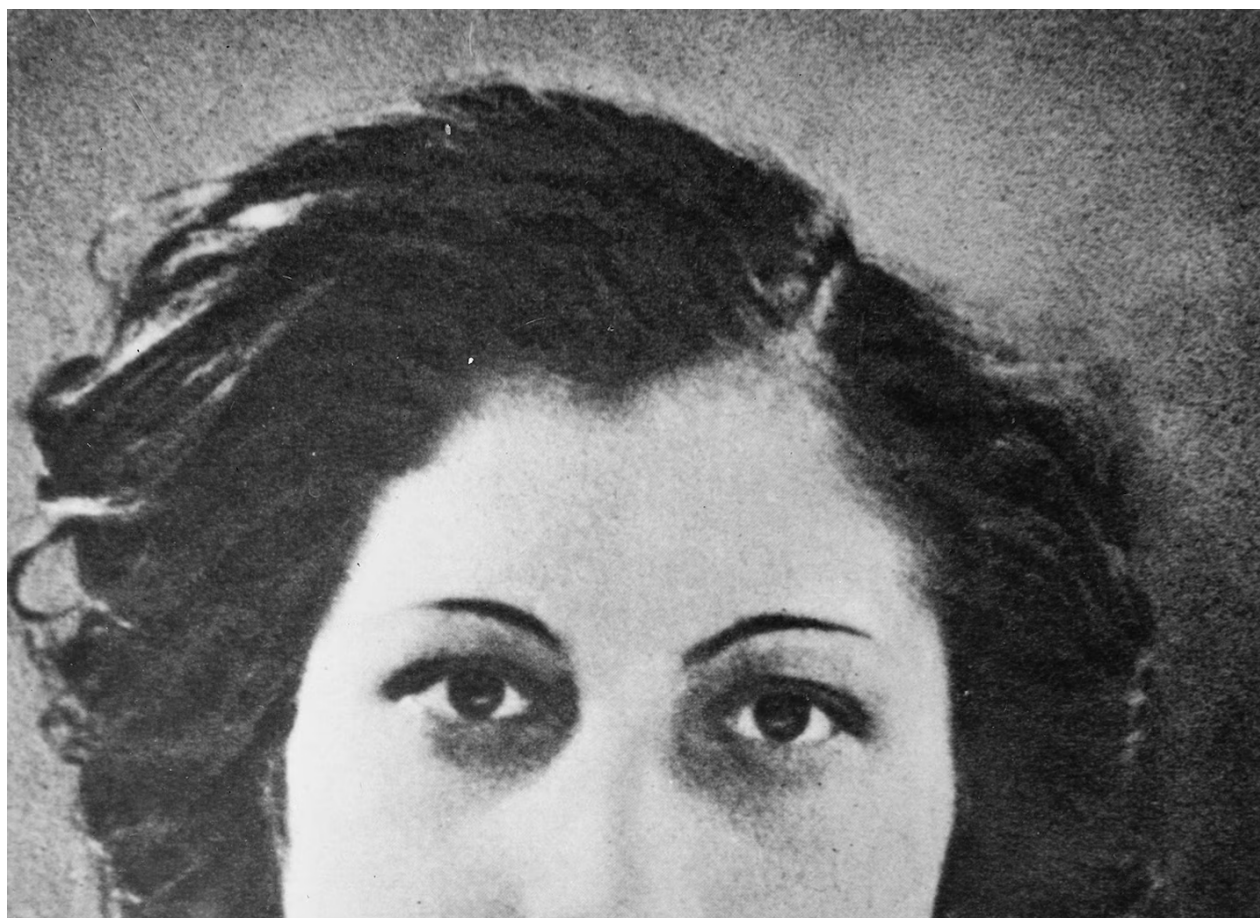
Josephine Baker was a dancer, singer, actress, and spy. Here, she performs at the *Folies Bergère* in Paris in about 1930.

PHOTOGRAPH BY POPPERFOTO/GETTY

Noor Inayat Khan

Earnest and soft-spoken, a descendant of Indian royalty who practiced nonviolence, Noor Inayat Khan was an accomplished musician and author of children's stories who was raised in England and France. She fled the German invasion of France in 1940 and settled with her American-born widowed mother in London, where she trained as a wireless radio operator. Her technical skill and fluent French brought her to the attention of Vera Atkins, who supervised female agents for Section F—the French section of Britain's Special Operations Executive (SOE), established by Prime Minister Winston Churchill to infiltrate German-occupied territory and “set Europe ablaze.”

Atkins sent Khan to France, where she eluded arrest by moving frequently from one hideout to another. By September 1943, she was the last SOE operator still transmitting to London from Paris. Khan was eventually betrayed by someone with knowledge of her operation. Seized in October, she was brutally interrogated and attempted escape. Her ordeal ended at Dachau, a concentration camp where she was executed in September 1944. As her executioner pressed a gun to the back of her head, reportedly her last word was “*liberté*.”





Noor Inayat Khan, an Assistant Section Officer and Special Operations Executive (SOE) agent during WWII, was executed at Dachau concentration camp in Germany on September 1944. Her last word was said to be "*liberté*."

PHOTOGRAPH BY IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM

Josefina Guerrero

Just before the Japanese occupied the Philippines in 1942, Josefina Guerrero contracted Hansen's disease (also known as leprosy). Her husband immediately left her, and she became estranged from their young daughter. As medical supplies became scarce and Guerrero's condition worsened, she decided to risk it all and become a spy for the Philippine resistance. The Japanese, known for their full body searches, did not search her as she passed through checkpoints due to her disease, which allowed her to transmit secret messages, enemy troop movements, vital supplies, and even weapons to the resistance and soldiers. She also mapped out Japanese fortifications and gun emplacements, used by the Americans on September 21, 1944, to destroy Japanese defenses in Manila harbor, imperative in recapturing the capital city. She went on to tape another map on her back and walk more than 25 miles to track down Americans and guide them through minefields on their advance to liberate Manila.

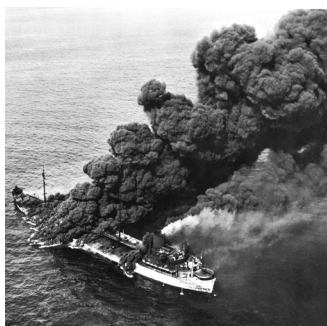
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After the war, Guerrero was confined to a leprosarium; an exposé she wrote to an American friend bared the horrendous conditions. In 1948, thanks to her report, the government worked to improve conditions at the leprosarium. Eventually, Guerrero was admitted to the U.S. to undergo a new treatment. She was the first foreigner with Hansen's disease to be granted a visa to the U.S. Her work contributed greatly to destigmatize leprosy.

Agnes Meyer Driscoll

In the annals of cryptology, there's little mention of one of the world's greatest cryptanalysts. Agnes Meyer Driscoll, a graduate of Ohio State University where she studied mathematics, music, physics, and foreign languages, enlisted with the U.S. Navy in 1918 during World War I as a chief yeoman, the highest possible rank for a woman of that era. She continued to work with the Navy after the war, helping to

develop codes, ciphers, and operating signals. As World War II loomed, Driscoll solved the high-level JN-25 code, used by the most secret Japanese naval communiqués. Though it was not fully exploitable by the time of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, it was used to provide advance warnings for future Japanese attacks, including Midway Island in June 1942. Known as "Miss Aggie" and "Madame X," she remained a leading cryptanalyst for the U.S. Navy until 1949, when she joined several national cryptologic agencies before retiring in 1959. In 2000, Driscoll was inducted into the national Security Agency's Hall of Honor.





Agnes Meyer Driscoll was a key American cryptanalyst during both world wars. She co-developed one of the U.S. Navy's cipher machines—the Communications Machine—which became a standard enciphering device for the Navy for most of the 1920s.

PHOTOGRAPH BY SCIENCE HISTORY IMAGES / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Andrée de Jongh

Nicknamed the Postman, Andrée “Dédée” de Jongh led the Comet Line (Le Réseau Comète), a secret network in occupied Belgium and France that whisked Allied soldiers and airmen who had been shot down in enemy territory to safety. She and her network provided civilian clothing and false identification papers, then led them to a series of safe houses and across the French-Spanish border in the Pyrenees. There, the British consular officials took charge and evacuated them by way of Gibraltar. The Comet Line rescued 800 Allied servicemen in total, with de Jongh personally leading dozens of trips on foot. One British airman she aided described her as a “frail young girl who appears twenty years, very pretty, pleasant, kind, cheerful, and simple.”

The Nazis eventually captured her, sending her to several concentration camps, including the infamous Ravensbrück. Although interrogated 21 times, she refused to reveal the names of her fellow resistance leaders or betray any of her comrades, including her father, who also was under suspicion. Her father was executed, but she survived, only because the Nazis underestimated the importance of this slight, young woman.





Dédée de Jongh organized the Comet Line with family members and helped downed Allied airmen in Belgium escape German-occupied territory.

PHOTOGRAPH BY IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM

Portions of this work have previously appeared in *World War II: The Spies and Secret Missions That Won the War*. Copyright © 2017 National Geographic Partners LLC. Available wherever books and magazines are sold.