

## **Moxie + Brains = America's First Female Foreign Intelligence Agent**

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**ANDREW HAMMOND:** Hi, and welcome to SpyCast from the secret files of the International spy Museum in Washington, DC. I'm Dr. Andrew Hammond, the museum's historian and curator. Every week, SpyCast brings you conversations with practitioners, authors and scholars who live in the world of global espionage. If you have any questions, comments, or concerns email us at [spycast@spymuseum.org](mailto:spycast@spymuseum.org). That's [spycast@spymuseum.org](mailto:spycast@spymuseum.org). I you like what you hear, and even if you don't, please take a minute to review us on iTunes or whatever platform you listen. We're always looking for ways to make SpyCast better and you can help.

So today I'm joined by Elizabeth Atwood who's written a fascinating new book, entitled "The Liberation of Marguerite Harrison: America's First Female Foreign Intelligence Agent."

I guess the most obvious question, Elizabeth, is how did you come across this? What led you to start researching the life of Marguerite Harrison?

**ELIZABETH ATWOOD:** Well, thank you, Andrew. I started to hear about Marguerite Harrison when I was a reporter at the Baltimore Sun. And, you know, she became sort of the folklore of the institution as, you know, most organizations will have a history of people who used to work there. And so, I had heard about her and we actually had a photograph of her on one of our conference room doors. So, there she was with her name, little biography that this was a journalist who had been a spy and had been twice held by the Russians.

And then some years ago, I moved from being a journalist to working Hood College in Frederick, Maryland, where I teach journalism. And I had the opportunity to take a sabbatical. And I thought I want to use this time to write the best story that I know that hasn't been written. And so, I thought about Marguerite Harrison.

**ANDREW HAMMOND:** Help our listeners understand a little bit more about who she was and where she was coming from.

**ELIZABETH ATWOOD:** Well, her background is, I think, critical to understanding her and her work in espionage. She was born in 1878, into this prominent Baltimore family. And in the end of the 19th century, it was not uncommon for American women to marry British royalty, or to make their way into European society. And her mother was very ambitious, and her mother had this idea that she was going to groom Marguerite to be the wife of a nobleman in Europe.

And so, she set about making sure she received the education to prepare her for that. They went to Europe every year. Marguerite became fluent in Italian, French, and German. She spent a semester at Radcliffe College before she ended up having an affair with her landlady son and her mother brought her home quite quickly from that. But her mother's ambition to get her to be ready to be the wife of a nobleman really was the groundwork that helped solidify her qualifications to be a spy.

She defied her mother and ended up marrying a Baltimore banker. And so, her life was very typical for a woman of her age and stature for a number of years. She had one child. She then was prominent in society; she would do all the things the society women would do. She would go to the card parties and the debutante balls and she of course hosted all these events in her estate.

She was living the life of a Baltimore socialite, and one of her most significant accomplishments at this time was, she actually helped found a children's hospital in Baltimore. That really became one of the most significant and important children hospitals in the country at that time and later on in the, in the 20th century. So that was her typical life.

But it all completely changed in 1915, when her husband suddenly died of a brain tumor. She could have gone back home to live with her father who certainly would have welcomed her to come back home. But she made up her mind that she was going to support herself and stay in her townhouse in Baltimore City and raise her son there. And so, she decided that she needed more money, and what she would do to earn the money, she would go to work at the Baltimore Sun, as a newspaper reporter. And the editor appointed her to be the society editor of the paper.

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And so, at first all she did was cover society news, then things started to change after World War I breaks out in Europe and her assignments start to change. She goes from covering society news and reviewing movies, music and plays to actually writing propaganda pieces for the Baltimore Sun. And there we start to see some changes in what may have been her first foray into espionage.

She does lots of stories about the immigrant community in Baltimore. Baltimore at that time had a very large immigrant community, a large German population in Baltimore. And it was at that time, although she doesn't recall this in her memoirs, but there are documents that show it was at that time, she started to give tips to the Justice Department about suspected German agents in Baltimore. And so, we start to see a change in what she is doing and what her role is.

And now we come to...World War I is nearly over in the summer of 1918, and she makes the decision that she will apply to be a foreign intelligence officer. And this was really rather astounding because she was almost 40 years old and had a 16-year-old son, when she made this decision. And so, she makes this plan that she's going to enter the foreign service.

And she first applies to the Office of Naval Intelligence. But the Office of Naval Intelligence turned down our application and said that she was not qualified because it did not hire women. And so, then she made up her mind to apply to the Military Intelligence Division, which was headed by Marlborough Churchill, who was a distant cousin of Winston Churchill and was a friend of her father-in-law, Joseph Ames. And so, with a family connection, and her father-in-law wrote a letter on her behalf, Marlborough Churchill decided to take a chance and hire Marguerite Harrison to work for the work for him in the Military Intelligence Division in September of 1918. And at that point, she became the first woman to go into the Foreign Intelligence Service.

There had been one more woman who was hired by the military intelligence to serve...to be a spy in America. Her name was Anna Kleinman, and she went on to become a prominent architect. But she was hired actually in the summer, in June of 1918, and she spied on suspected disloyal Americans in Philadelphia. But Marguerite was the first that was actually sent overseas.

**ANDREW HAMMOND:** Is there anyone else who is potentially a contender?

**ELIZABETH ATWOOD:** Sure, that's a great question because there are always been women spies, right. I mean we look back at, you know, Samson and Delilah, right. Women have always been spies.

And in our country, we can look at some really prominent Revolutionary War spies. Anna Smith Strong, you know, she was part of the Culper Ring that helped General George Washington. Lydia Barrington Darragh. She was a Quaker living in Philadelphia, and the British stayed in her hall and so she was able to overhear their conversations and deliver coded messages in, you know, I believe it was in the buttons of her son's jacket.

Certainly, they've been women working as spies in this country up in the in the Civil War, you know, we can point to examples of Harriet Tubman, Belle Boyd for the south, "Rebel Rose" Greenhow, she was in Washington DC.

So, there have been always women that would work as spies to give intelligence, particularly in wartime. The difference comes though, with the development of a professional spy agency. When World War I came about, at first, we didn't really have much of a spy service of any sort, intelligence services with any male or female.

In the army, Ralph Van Deman, particularly, was one of the forerunners of this. He had this idea that we needed to establish our own intelligence service within the Army. We could not just simply rely on getting our intelligence from our allies. And so that's where we see the creation of an American intelligence service with the Military Intelligence Division.

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You know, Tammy Proctor has done some great work on women spies in World War I, looking particularly in the British spies. The American attitudes toward women spies was very different than that of the Europeans. You know, Tammy Proctor points out that there were something like 6,000 women that were serving in the British intelligence community in World War I.

And yet, in the United States, we see very much of a reluctance to hire women. They thought that women would be, maybe, susceptible to falling in love with their targets. They thought that they could not be trusted to give

military reports. And so, there was this great reluctance to send women abroad as intelligence officers.

What Marguerite Harrison was able to do in her job interview, which took place in Baltimore...She told the officer that she was well past what she called the "foolish stage," so she was really well aware that the reputation that they...American men believed that the women would be falling in love with their targets. So, she acknowledged that straight up front that she was well beyond that. She was not going to be falling in love with her targets.

She insisted that she was qualified for this work because she knew Europe very well and she was fluent in three languages at that point. And she had the perfect cover story, and her editor at the Baltimore Sun had agreed to this plan. So, she had the whole thing planned out. And she was not going to be a spy, like Mata Hari, you know, which is the most typical World War I spy we think of, you know, where you have a woman who was seducing her targets and exchanging sex for secrets.

She was going to be a professional who was going to employ her languages, her knowledge of Europe, her experience as a journalist, and that was the way she was going to report on the events. And what her role was, was to give intelligence to the Americans who were negotiating the peace treaty in Versailles. So that was her role, and she was well qualified to do it.

**ANDREW HAMMOND:** Give us a sense of some of those first forays.

**ELIZABETH ATWOOD:** Sure. There's a little bit of a disagreement. There is what she says she did and what Ralph Van Deman says she did. At that point Ralph Van Deman was over in Paris, helping to work counterintelligence for the peace accords.

So, she says that her role was to go into Germany, and to report on the conditions on the ground, giving information to our negotiators about the sentiment in within Germany, and then other parts of Eastern Europe to help them be able to negotiate the peace treaty. And she mentions that when she arrived in Berlin, that would have been in January 1919, she recalls that there was fighting in the streets of Berlin between the communist-backed Spartacist movement and the government troops that were still trying to hang on, stay in control.

The reports that do survive will get written kind of like an economic reports on: this is what the factories are producing, this is what the food supplies look like, these are the comments I've heard people make. So, that's her account.

Van Deman gives a separate account. He says that her initial assignment was to keep a watch on the journalists who were sent to cover the peace accords. And at some point they got word that a cartoonist, Robert Miner, who was an American communist, was distributing propaganda in Germany trying to encourage the American troops to become dissatisfied and to support socialism and communism. And he says that when they got that report they then sent Marguerite Harrison to Germany to try to catch Robert Miner. And while she was there, she then came upon the whole Spartacist uprising and covered that as well. So, there's a little bit of a difference of opinion.

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**ANDREW HAMMOND:** And if you can tell everyone who Van Deman was. And also, who do you believe?

**ELIZABETH ATWOOD:** Well, Ralph Van Deman is credited with being the father of the Military Intelligence Division. It was his foresight that helped persuade the army officials and the Secretary of Defense to actually establish the division. At that point that he was succeeded by Marlboro Churchill and then went over to Europe. So, that was Ralph Van Deman. At the time she encounters him, he was the head of the counterintelligence while stationed in Paris, working on the counterintelligence for the peace accords.

I think that... what the record that she reported on Robert Miner, that is in the files at the National Archives, more closely aligns with her recollection, you know, that she says that she did in fact go into Germany at some point.

**ANDREW HAMMOND:** What are some of the big currents of history that Marguerite finds herself caught up in?

**ELIZABETH ATWOOD:** Of course, World War I has just come to an end, the monarchy is starting to crumble. We have now a real serious rise of communism and the United States is trying to figure out what it's going to do

in within this milieu of social and political changes. When I read some of the accounts of this time period, it almost reminded me of the upheavals we see today. You know, I came across one newspaper article that said, this should ring bells to the American readers, or listeners, that the...so there was a situation where they had to play the national anthem at this Victory Day parade and one of the socialists refuse to stand up. And so, an American sailor shot him. And you think gosh, we're still arguing 100 years later over whether you should stand up for the national anthem.

So, that was the kind of world that was going on there. And what does it mean to be an American? Who was an American? And it would be a few years later, well within two years later, we will start to see the rounding up of immigrants, the deportation of immigrants who are suspected of not being loyal to the in the United States. And so, that's the kind of world that she's operating in. She goes from now reporting on possible enemy agents who are German to possible enemy agents within the United States, and that's where her role starts to change in 1918 to 1920.

**ANDREW HAMMOND:** Give us a sense of what's happening to these reports that she's involved in. I mean, are they just one report among many or are they particularly influential?

**ELIZABETH ATWOOD:** One of the most important accounts of our espionage at this time was written by a reporter, Thomas Johnson. He called it "Our Secret War," and he recounted the American spy efforts in World War I. And he does not name Marguerite Harrison, but it's clear that he interviewed her when he wrote his book in 1929. He calls her "Agent Q" or "Number 8." Her code name was "Agent B" as in boy or Baltimore, which I think it may have been the connection. But he calls her "Agent Q" or "Number 8." And according to Johnson, her reports which were so important they went directly to Woodrow Wilson. I only found maybe three or four of these reports in her files.

But she also had a real knack, this is why I think her journalism skills come in, she has a real knack for observing and talking with people. So, in addition to these thick reports on you know statistics and data like that, she actually would talk to just about anybody she came across. Even her maid she would talk to. Some of these people she socialized with while she was in Berlin, she actually knew socially while she was in America. They had been parts of like top society. So, for example, General Hans von Bello, who had

commanded troops against the Argonne in 1918, his wife was an American that Marguerite had known. She was from Philadelphia. So, she struck up a friendship with his wife and then she socialized with this couple while they were in Germany. And, you know, Von Bello would tell her about, you know, how they were hoping to bring back the monarchy. So, it's very difficult to tell how important her reports are.

There's some estimates that when the war ended the Military Intelligence Division had 282 officers, some 29 sergeants, and a thousand civilians. Of course, she would have been included in the civilian count. Johnson's report says that there were no more than 25 women, but he says almost all the women were volunteers that we had recruited in Europe to provide reports to us. Just putting the pieces together, she was, I think, an important agent.

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The other reason I would draw that conclusion, is once that mission ended the men who were in charge in the Military Intelligence Division were anxious to put her back to work. And this was at a time when World War I ended the division substantially downsized, there were very few people left in it, and most of them were code breakers. And so, that tells me again that she was very well respected in what she had accomplished in Germany.

**ANDREW HAMMOND:** And for the intelligence reports, is it more akin to the journals of Lewis and Clark, where you're immersed in a daily reality or is it more like democracy in America?

**ELIZABETH ATWOOD:** I think it's both. I she has a lot of factual data that is just, you know, this is what it is, right. And yet she also brings in her own insights, a lot. And that's why I think the men respected that. So, she was not hesitant to give her opinion. She reflected on, you know, who she thought we could trust, who she thought was suspicious, and when she could, she would give her interpretations of the events and of the people she met. You see that come about a little bit more in the Russian reports, where she goes out a little bit more on the limb. Again, I only go on what I can find in the files, and in the Russian reports I see her being much more subjective, you know, much more giving her analysis of the people she met and the condition she had witnessed, as opposed to just concrete facts.

**ANDREW HAMMOND:** Do you think that's because she did not speak Russian, but she does speak German?

**ELIZABETH ATWOOD:** I think it's a combination. When she was in Germany, she was able to get the reports out in pretty much real time. And of course, she was fluent in German. In Russia, she did become fluent in Russian once she stayed there a while.

**ANDREW HAMMOND:** Once she's finished in Germany, we know that she ends up in Russia. So, talk us through how she ends up there? And I believe she ends up there a couple of times.

**ELIZABETH ATWOOD:** Our spy networks in Russia were in shambles at this point. So, we had this complete disaster of our intelligence service in Russia and we had no coherent Russian policy. We didn't know which way we should approach the Bolsheviks. And we also had this rising situation in of anarchy in the United States where you had a series of bombings. And so, there's this quite a huge concern about the effects of communism and Bolshevism and what should our response be to the Bolshevik Revolution.

So, Churchill makes this decision to send Marguerite Harrison to Russia. It appears that her assignment was twofold. Her first was to ascertain the viability of Lenin's government. Was this a government that was going to last? And second, what has happened to the American prisoners? They had a couple dozen Americans who were either being held in prison or being held in home detention, somehow captive, were not allowed to leave the country. And so, that appeared to be what her mission was.

She has one statement in her book that I think we need to keep in mind. She says that "If I succeeded, no one would ever know." And she said, "If I failed, I'd be repudiated by my government and perhaps lose my life." So, we have to understand that not all of her successes were publicized and even to this day, do we know all of the successes? Nevertheless, it was clear that this was a risky mission to send her into Russia, given what had happened to the other agents that were in prison or had fled. And the idea that she later would pretend that nobody had an idea that this was a risky mission was just ludicrous and it just doesn't uphold to the facts. And it's actually very typical of the way she kind of downplays a lot of her assignments and makes kind of this light-hearted banter about them.

So, in any case, Churchill decides to send her to Russia. And this is a big assignment and a very difficult assignment because she does not know the language. She only could pass as an American reporter who was going to Russia to try to write truthful and maybe even complimentary stories about the Bolshevik Revolution.

And yet, even this was risky because the Bolsheviks had already found out that there have been other spies that had done the same kind of ploy. They had done the same... pretended to be journalists and were in fact spies. But that was her only hope. And, again, the Baltimore Sun supported this plan, and gave her cover and credentials that she was a journalist, going into Russia.

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And all of this into the backdrop of the Russians already knew about this and they were not giving credentials to Western reporters unless they came from socialist newspapers. They were very sensitive about what was going on. There was an embargo of the West placed against Russia and so the Russians did not want to allow the Western media, Western press into Moscow or into Russia.

So, she develops this plan that she's just going to make it...she's going to get across into Russia by going across the front in Poland, which of course Russia is at war with Poland at that time. So, she makes her way into Poland. And there, she's told by Marlborough Churchill to stop that they have received word that it would be too dangerous for her to proceed. So, she's told to wait and hold on until they give her clearance to go ahead. So, she spends a number of weeks in the winter of 1919 in Poland and in Warsaw.

And there I will give a little bit of aside because it becomes important later. She is at a Red Cross dance where a nurse introduces her to this man weaning...American man in a Polish aviator's uniform and his name was Merian Cooper. And Merian Cooper, for those who may not recognize his name, I know you know his most famous movie, which is King Kong. And Merian Cooper was going to play a very important role in Margaret's life later on. But at that time, they just had a very quick meeting they dance together, exchange pleasantries, and then he went on to his battalion. He actually had raised an aviator battalion in Poland to help the Polish fight the Russians.

So, it was a couple weeks after that, that Marguerite finally gets clearance from Marlborough Churchill that she can proceed into Russia. She has hired a translator and they make their way by sled across no man's land into the Eastern Front of Russia near what is now Belarus.

I think the Russian army, the Reds were so shocked to get this American journalist coming across the border with another woman translator. I think they were so shocked by these two women who've made their way into Russia, they don't know what to do. And Marguerite bet on that. She bet they wouldn't kill her outright, although she had been warned that she'd be executed on the spot. But she bet that they wouldn't do it, and the gamble paid off. The army was so shocked. They were afraid to take any action against her and so, they just kept pressing her from one place to the next, up the chain of command until they sent her on to Moscow.

And there in Moscow, the Foreign Office says, what are you doing here? You know that you don't have permission to enter this country, that we've not given permission for the western newspapers to come into the country. But Marguerite, maybe following her governess's advice that it's better to be charming than smart, was able to charm them into letting her stay there.

Now, the other thing that she didn't know when they allow her to stay, was that they already knew she was a spy. They had been able to intercept a document that she had filed while she was actually on the ship going over to Russia.

She filed a report against a man named Julius Hecker, who was a YMCA worker, and he was a communist sympathizer, who was spreading propaganda in the United States. And while she was on the ship, she interviewed him and she pretended that she was also socialist or communist and that she was wanting to hear his tactics, because she was wanted to do the same thing once she returned to the United States. So, he told her everything he had done.

So, she filed that report when she got to Switzerland and that report that she filed in Switzerland was intercepted by the Russians and the Russians knew when she crossed the border that she was actually a spy. But she didn't know that at the time.

So, they allowed her to stay for a couple of weeks, and to her surprise they gave her permission to see reports that no Western journalist was allowed

to see. And somewhere around Good Friday of 1920, early April 1920, she is on her way back from the Foreign Office to her hotel, to the guesthouse where she stayed, and she's arrested in the street, and she is taken to Lubyanka prison.

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And in Lubyanka prison, there she is introduced to a man named Solomon Mogilevsky. He was a high official within the Chekhov, the extraordinary commission, and his role was to oversee foreigners and particularly recruit foreign spies in Moscow. And Mogilevsky says that he knows she is a spy. And she first calls his bluff and says, "I'm not a spy. How do you know I'm a spy?" because she'd found no reports at this point. But he pulls out of a briefcase the Hecker report that she had made against Julius Hecker while she was in Switzerland. And she realized that, you know, they had evidence against her.

And he says, you know, "I'll make a deal for you." Well, she first thought they would just expel her. But he says, "no we're not going to expel you, you know too much," and so that it becomes clear why she had been given all this information from the unedited reports from the Foreign Office. And he says, "I'll make a deal with you." He said, "We'll let you go, if you will report on foreigners in Moscow." And so, she says, "I accept." And so at that point. She becomes a double agent.

And so, from April until the end of October of 1920, she is trying to get reports out to the American officials, the American army officials, and at the same time give Mogilevsky routine reports on the foreigners who are living in Moscow. And this is of course a delicate balance that continued on until October where she knew that it was only a matter of time where Mogilevsky was going to get dissatisfied with her and realize that she was not giving him the kind of information that he wanted. But she was able to keep him off, you know, having her...arresting her until October, and then in October, they arrested her right on the eve of John Reed's funeral.

**ANDREW HAMMOND:** Am I right in thinking that she was also caught, because there was a mole inside the State Department?

**ELIZABETH ATWOOD:** That's an interesting story, too. The report came from the State Department, the mole apparently was in the Military

Intelligence Division, I believe is where it is. So, she files the report in Switzerland and then it's sent back to Churchill. And somehow...so it could have been somewhere within the in the counselor's office in the consulate in Switzerland, or in the military. And so, they tried to locate the person, but they never were able to determine who gave that report on Hecker. But Hecker had a lot of friends. Hecker was a socialist, he had a lot of friends in in Switzerland where there was a big socialist colony.

**ANDREW HAMMOND:** Ultimately, she gets released. But then the following year she ends up getting caught again. Is that right?

**ELIZABETH ATWOOD:** Okay, so she gets caught a couple times. So, she is caught in April of 1920, forced to become a double agent throughout that spring and summer.

One of the people that she betrays is a woman by the name of Stan Harding. And Stan Harding had been a woman that she had met in Germany, in Berlin. Stan Harding was a reporter for a British newspaper, but Marguerite Harrison also believed that Stan Harding was a British agent.

So, just as luck or not luck has it, that summer while Marguerite is in Russia, forced into being a double agent, Stan Harding, who is a socialist, decides to come to Russia to write about the Bolshevik Revolution and Lenin's government. And she's working actually on behalf of an American newspaper at the time. And so, she comes to Russia and Mogilevsky says, "A friend of yours has shown up, I want you to give me information about her." And Marguerite, at first, doesn't know who he is speaking about. And then he tells her that he's speaking about Stan Harding.

So, Stan Harding does enter Russia and is brought to the guesthouse where Marguerite is staying. And within hours, actually, named Solomon Mogilevsky, arrests her and puts her in Lubyanka. And Stan Harding later starts to believe that Marguerite Harrison has denounced her and reported that she is a British spy and that's why the Russians had arrested her. Stan Harding denied it the entire time. She said she never was an intelligence officer that she was a journalist, and that she had been unfairly denounced. She was held captive for five months in Lubyanka. She went on numerous hunger strikes; her health was really jeopardized. So, once she was released, she instituted a very hot, public campaign against Marguerite Harrison and

the American intelligence service blaming them for having put an innocent journalist in into Lubyanka.

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So, and back to your question about does Marguerite get arrested again? Yes. She is eventually released by the Russians for food aid, but it's been widely told that she was a spy. And she never publicly acknowledged it, but the rumors are all out there, and they're published. And so, you would think that she would no longer have a future within the intelligence service given at least the Russians know that she's a spy.

And yet, that spring, Marlborough Churchill sends her a note asking to meet her, and this is in April of 1922. Then we see Marlborough Churchill. He's no longer in charge of the Military Intelligence Division, he's now in the general staff stationed in New York. But he sends out letters to the consulates to the military attachés in Asia saying that Marguerite Harrison would be planning a trip to Asia. That summer she sets off for another trip, and she goes to Asia, and she ends up in the Far Eastern Republic.

And in the Far Eastern Republic, she enters it just the day after its government collapses, and is taken over by Soviet Russia, and there becomes folded into Soviet Russia. She's on the streets of Chita when she's arrested again at gunpoint and she is transported back to Moscow. This one is the most mysterious. The whole thing is mysterious I say it's like reading a John le Carré novel is to what she's up to. You could read it almost any way. You could say she's a communist, she's been trying to make her way back to Russia. You could say she's an idiot, she's a fool for even going to the Far Eastern Republic, which was dangerous, and she knew it would be. Or you could entertain the possibility that Marlborough Churchill had placed her on an assignment that was so sensitive that most American intelligence officials didn't know what she was up to.

Her father-in-law, once he learns that she's arrested again, you know, sends out a flurry of letters to his friends that are in the State Department and in the Army saying, "What's up? What's going on with her?" He ends up calling upon a distant cousin who was a major grain exporter who apparently was able to persuade the Russians to let her go.

I think that there's a possibility that as I said...there are three different possibilities: she's a red agent, she's an idiot, or Marlborough Churchill put her on an assignment that was very sensitive. I have no evidence of that and no facts of that, that's just me But I think that it might explain what Churchill was up to, and what he was trying to have her do.

**ANDREW HAMMOND:** And so, if there was not any evidence for that explanation, is there evidence for the other explanations? Well, I mean I guess a couple of questions here. So, we know for sure, I think I'm right in saying, we know for sure that she was a double agent or treated at the time. So, after she was released from Russia after that period, did her American spy masters know that she was a double agent in Russia?

**ELIZABETH ATWOOD:** Yes.

**ANDREW HAMMOND:** And after that, why would they ever trust her again?

**ELIZABETH ATWOOD:** And yet, there were reports within the files that I found. At least four reports that she made, given to the Army and the State Department on her observations that she saw when she was traveling through Asia. So, she was still giving reports officially or unofficially to the State Department and the Army while she was traveling through Asia.

**ANDREW HAMMOND:** I guess I was wondering, although she was still submitting these reports, where these unsolicited reports that she was just, this is what I've done in the past, here's what I think about Country X? Or does that prove that she continued to be a spy? Or does that prove that she continued to think that her voice is being heard in Washington?

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**ELIZABETH ATWOOD:** I think that's a great question. I think that it's possible that she was giving unsolicited reports. Yeah, it's sort of mysterious that she's traveling with military attachés while she's throughout Asia. They are asking her, at least according to her account, they asked her to give her reports. There's no payroll document that says, you know, she was getting paid by the Army, or the State Department. I don't know where the money is coming from, that's another mystery.

**ANDREW HAMMOND:** I wanted to circle back just for a second to Stan Harding. I find that relationship really fascinating.

**ELIZABETH ATWOOD:** So, let's talk about that a second. So, Marguerite Harrison in her autobiography, she writes about two instances where you might imagine that she might have attraction to women. I asked her granddaughter about it. In looking at all the evidence that's there, and I concluded that I don't think that Marguerite was lesbian or bisexual.

But the question, did she throw her under the bus? The answer is yes, she did. That is in the Russian files that I saw. In her Russian prison files, she did say that Stan Harding was a British agent and Mogilevsky writes in the report that she gave no worthwhile information, that's why he arrested her in October. He said she gave no information that was any worth, except to report on Stan Harding.

She denied it. She denied it forcefully when she came out of prison that she had betrayed Stan Harding. But the prison files show she did in fact, identify Stan Harding as a British agent. And she later says in the second file, the second imprisonment, that she did so because, not that she had concrete evidence but that she believed so based upon the things Stan Harding told her that she surmised that Stan Harding was a British agent.

**ANDREW HAMMOND:** Just to be clear, that was from a book *The Lady is a Spy* by Melanie King.

**ELIZABETH ATWOOD:** That's the challenge with her. Margaret Harrison is not a hero, and she's not always sympathetic character. She could be ruthless. She was egotistical, and she was not always truthful. She tended to admit, more than lie. The Stan Harding one was, I guess the exception. So, how do you reconcile it? It is, you know, that's the job of the historian, you know, you try to draw on all the sources you can.

So, you look at, you know, the files that are in the National Archives and in there you'll find her reports, her letters, her reports that other people have said about her. Then you know you, you're looking at the other biographies, the other accounts that have been written about her.

I interviewed her granddaughter, which was very interesting because although her granddaughter of course knew nothing about all the details of

the spying, she had real insights into what the woman was like as the elderly woman. And it was amazing how many of the character traits survived until the woman was in her 80s. I mean, you know, the strong-willed arrogant teenager survived as an old woman. Her granddaughter told me the story of her flirting with the husband of her...it would have been the in-laws; she was still a flirtatious debutante in her 80s. A lot of it she's into for herself and Stan Harding is an example of that.

She betrayed Stan Harding, to save herself to a large extent. But, yes, she was loyal to some. In some cases, she was extremely loyal. She never gave up. One of the British agents who was there, which is Francis McCollum, they pressed her hard to get her to say that he was a British agent, and she never did. She was faithful to Merian Cooper. She never betrayed Merian Cooper. And there was other evidence where she likes someone, she would never betray them, no matter the risk to her own life. She tended to betray the socialists and other people that she didn't like, I think.

**ANDREW HAMMOND:** Okay, so, that's why she betrayed Harding, because of her political beliefs?

**ELIZABETH ATWOOD:** I think so. I think that they gave her, that appeased her conscience enough. Yeah, I think this is, you know, of course, wrestling with what's the takeaway here? And, and I point out that she in many ways you would call her a failure, right.

She betrayed her a lot of her family members, you know. Certainly, her son that she kept leaving him. She abandoned him basically at a Swiss boarding school while she went to Russia. She certainly betrayed Stan Harding. There were other journalists that she betrayed as well. William Estes, apparently, she gave testimony to, who was another. He actually was another journalist spy, but she told the Russians that he was a spy, so that's a head scratcher as well.

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So yes, she's complicated. You think well, she was a very good agent, right? She got caught, over and over again, like twice at least the Russians caught her. And yet, I keep coming back to the statement that she said, "you know, you'll never know my successes, only my failures." And I think that there was some real success there.

And I think the most important success we should take away from her, is the precedent she sets, as a person who.... As a woman who was hired because of her intellect, her linguistic skills, her familiarity with the culture. And obviously, first of all, she succeeded well enough that they trusted her with important missions in Russia. They reached out to her again, in some way, although we don't fully understand how in Asia, and later in the Middle East, when she worked with Merian Cooper and Ernest Schoedsack to film the movie "Grass" which was a cover for a spy mission.

And, obviously, she did well enough that by the time World War II breaks out, thousands of women are hired by the OSS to work in jobs of as codebreakers, but also intelligence officers and analysts and spies. And so, I think that they were pleased enough with her work to know that she had made a real contribution. And that's where I think we have to take it away.

Personally, she's not always a very likable person, but I think that's true with a lot of spies. You know, a lot of spies are very egotistical, you know, especially the double agents, the idea that they'll never be caught, they're too smart. You know, they liked playing the game, the thrill of it. I think there was a lot of that with her. I think she loved the thrill of the game.

And you know what were the prospects for a woman in 1919? She did not see herself as a schoolteacher. She wasn't going to work in a shop. She tried that, once, briefly and hated it. She had the ego and the intelligence to believe that she could work in the intelligence service. She writes to Marlborough Churchill straight up and says, "If you can't use me as a foreign intelligence agent, I don't have any interest in doing anything else because that's where I'm qualified. And it's the only thing that would lure me away from the job that I'm doing now," which was of course, writing propaganda pieces for the Baltimore Sun. So, she straight up tells him, "If you're thinking about me as a secretary, forget it. I'm going to be an intelligence agent or nothing."

So, she had an ego. And I think that that was good. Though, I mean, you know, she was not always a nice person. Would I want to be friends with her? Probably not. But I appreciate the contribution she's made so that other women could follow in her footsteps. And years later, you know, we can see the women working for the OSS the CIA. And now of course we have a

woman who's heading up to CIA. And it started somewhere, and it started with Marguerite Harrison.

**ANDREW HAMMOND:** I think that's a good place to bring our, our conversation to a close. I have a couple of quick follow up questions, though, which may or may not make the cut. Number one, as a fellow reporter, was she any good at that?

**ELIZABETH ATWOOD:** She was a great writer. I love her accounts of...She had this really vivid account of where she goes off to cover an aviation camp in New York. And she gets into this airplane with the pilot and, you know, she tells of them taking off and all of a sudden the propeller stops and goes dead and her reaction was, "oh I'm in for a real thrill now." And the pilot manages to coast the plane to a landing. She gets out, the mechanic comes out, prepares the plane on the spot, she climbs back in, they take off again. They make this great landing at the hangar and she says, "The only thing is I just had oil splashed on my stockings."

And, you know, she's just such a great storyteller. Yeah, you have too...she a wonderful writer, wonderful storyteller. She's a very shrewd analyst. Her reports that she gave, the articles she wrote about Germany they really are like... She saw the street battles in Berlin, that really make you kind of call to mind Edward R. Murrow in London, years later, with the World War II, the Blitzkrieg.

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Today's journalists would frown upon what she did. You know, that is extremely dangerous to have a journalist working in foreign intelligence. And of course, the practice didn't end with World War I, it's continued up into modern times and the CIA finally has been called to task to stop it because it's extremely dangerous.

There's some thought that, in fact, Margaret Harrison's well publicized, you know stories and denouncing of Stan Harding actually helped to lead to the first newspaper code of ethics. So, as a journalist, I hated that she was working for intelligence services because it's very dangerous for any journalist to be doing that, dangerous for anyone who comes after them. But as a storyteller, I appreciate her writing, she's a great storyteller.

**ANDREW HAMMOND:** I guess the second follow up question was, is it true that she enjoyed tea with Queen Victoria and interviewed Leon Trotsky and Mustafa Ataturk?

**ELIZABETH ATWOOD:** So those connections are, you know, just her being part of society, right. So, as part of high society she... Well, first of all her father was a ship builder in Baltimore and he donated a ship to England as they fought the Boer War. And as part of the gratitude that they felt for his ship donation, they invited him, the whole family, to have tea with Queen Victoria at Queen Victoria's garden party. And the Ascot race, she was in the Royal box at the Ascot races and so on. So, it was in gratitude for his donations of the ship during the Boer War, hospital ship during the Boer War.

To Ataturk in the Middle East, she is, you know, reaching out making these connections as pretending to be a filmmaker and a journalist. So, she interviews Ataturk.

Trotsky, she says that she sees him at a courtyard in the Kremlin as she's leaving an exhibition there. And she rushes up to him and introduces herself as this American journalist and they speak a few words in French and he kisses her hand and wishes her pleasant stay. So yeah, those are...She's in some ways like the Forrest Gump of American espionage. She always seems to run into these famous people all around the world. You know, the Society of Women Geographers that she helped found later would include members like Margaret Mead and Amelia Earhart.

**ANDREW HAMMOND:** And I believe that Edith Wharton, the novelist, she was involved in the history of American intelligence...

**ELIZABETH ATWOOD:** Right.

**ANDREW HAMMOND:** ... in some way?

**ELIZABETH ATWOOD:** Yes, so the story goes that Ralph Van Deman, in trying to get the... because I believe it was Baker who was the Secretary of Defense at the time. He was dubious of whether we needed to have an intelligence service. He thought, you know, why do we need an intelligence service? We can rely on our allies to get the intelligence we need. And Van Deman thought it was very important that we have our own intelligence service. And so he had Edith Wharton give a tour....gave her a tour. And

while he had her ear he said, you know, we really need an intelligence service here. And I think Edith Wharton then took that message, I guess it was it to Wilson. I've forgotten the details. But Edith Wharton then passed that word up to the American officials, you really need your own intelligence service. And then Van Deman was able to use a woman to get him what he wanted, in that case.

**ANDREW HAMMOND:** And final question completely unrelated to the life of Marguerite Harrison. But as someone that worked for the Baltimore Sun, what do you think of "The Wire," especially season five where he works at the Baltimore Sun?

**ELIZABETH ATWOOD:** \*laughs\*

**ANDREW HAMMOND:** Where David Simon works at Baltimore Sun?

**ELIZABETH ATWOOD:** That's funny. I only said that that was David Simon getting back at Baltimore Sun. Yeah. David Simon, you know, he had his love-hate relationship with the Baltimore Sun and so there's a lot of inside jokes about that series about those episodes with the newspaper. He's making digs at the people he didn't like and he is including friendly comments about those he did. So, it's a lot of inside jokes with that show. But yeah, it's a great show. So, my little claim to fame that I briefly worked with David Simon at the Baltimore Sun.

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**ANDREW HAMMOND:** The International Spy Museum is a full 501(c)(3) nonprofit. If you want to donate to the museum, or if you're local and would like to volunteer at the museum, please visit our website [spy.museum.org](http://spy.museum.org) for more information.

*This SpyCast audio was transcribed by Gillian Rich on 12/13/20 for the International Spy Museum.*