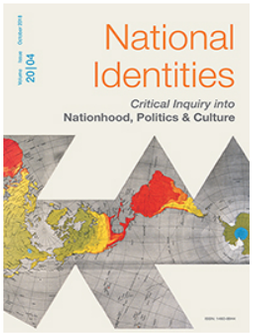

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'Passing unnoticed in a French crowd': The passing performances of British SOE agents in Occupied France

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This article examines the dissimulation, construction and assumption of national identities using as a case study male and female British agents who were infiltrated into Nazi-Occupied France during the Second World War. The British nationals recruited by the SOE's F section had, as a result of their upbringing, developed a French 'habitus' (linguistic skills, mannerisms and knowledge of customs) that enabled them to conceal their British paramilitary identities and 'pass' as French civilians. The article examines the diverse ways in which individuals attempted to construct French identities linguistically (through accent and use of vocabulary, slang and swear words), visually (through their physical appearance and clothing) and performatively (by behaving in particular ways).

Keywords: French identities; British identities; passing; habitus

Introduction

France, October 1942: a man clad in a dressing gown and a woman are embracing. This romantic scene taking place in a chateau near Lyons is disturbed by the arrival of a car. Yet things are not as they appear and the German counter-intelligence agents have not been fooled by the performance they have witnessed. They search the premises and then arrest the amorous couple. The man is Brian Stonehouse, a 24 year-old homosexual, who had been recruited and trained by a British organisation and infiltrated into Nazi-Occupied France to work as a wireless operator with the resistance. The woman, a 42 year-old courier called Blanche Charlet, is also a British agent. Stonehouse had been sending a radio transmission to Britain when a direction finding van picked up a signal indicating his location. They hid the radio in a lift shaft and quickly made the decision to pretend to be lovers. Stonehouse recollected: '[S]o we sat down and started kissing like mad, pretending we were having a thing' (IWM SA, 9852). He undertook a performance of heterosexuality to facilitate both his and Charlet's enactments as ordinary law-abiding French civilians. Stonehouse endeavoured to conceal the fact that he was British, a secret agent and a homosexual, thereby crossing a number of identity borders, including nationality, occupation and sexuality, in his attempt to distance himself from his clandestine identity.

The concept of 'passing' can be applied to explain Stonehouse's assumption of alternative identities. The term is used to refer to the process whereby individuals, who are assumed to have a fixed monolithic identity, attempt to appropriate the characteristics of the 'Other' and desire not to be recognised as different. 'The genealogy of the term *passing* in American history,' notes Elaine K. Ginsberg (1996,

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pp. 2–3), 'associates it with the discourse of racial difference and especially with the assumption of a fraudulent "white" identity by an individual culturally and legally defined as "Negro" or black by virtue of a percentage of African ancestry.' In this instance, enabled by 'white' physical features, black passing subjects cross a racial border in their assumption of a new identity, which attributes status and apparent opportunities. Nella Larson's 1929 novel *Passing* (1986) and the 1934 film *Imitation of Life* both centre on women's dissimulation of their black identities and their assumption of whiteness.

'Passing' has generated considerable interest in a range of disciplines which wrest the concept from a specifically American racial context and apply it to other aspects of a subject's identity, such as sexuality, gender, class and religion (Wald, 2000; Sanchez & Schlossberg, 2001; Kroeger, 2003; Camaiti Hostert, 2007). Researchers have used the concept in innovative ways. In the context of donor insemination practices at licensed fertility clinics in Britain, Caroline Jones (2005) examines some issues around bio-genetic continuity when using an unknown donor. She found that heterosexual and lesbian couples often chose donors who shared some of their characteristics, such as skin, eye and hair colour, so that they could later pass as a biological family. Debra Ferreday's (2009) analysis of web communities reveals that cyberspace offers considerable freedom to live out alternative identities – visual cues are absent online and thus individuals pass as unmarked subjects, liberated from gendered and racial identities. The term has also been applied to Jews who posed as Aryans during the Second World War in order to survive or to temporarily escape from a ghetto to find food or weapons (Weitzman, 1998; Einwohner, 2008). Subtle differences are highlighted according to the context in which passing occurs: it may be intentional in order to secure some reward, otherwise unobtainable, or it may be unintentional in that an individual may be misidentified or misread; irony may or may not be inherent; it may elicit pleasure or it may occasion trepidation; it may be successful in that there appears to be no difference between the subject of imitation and the passing subject, or it may fail, in which case a slippage is detected and the passing subject is exposed as an impostor.

The concept of 'passing' is applied here to explain the assumption of French civilian identities by secret agents like Stonehouse and Charlet who both belonged to a British paramilitary organisation called the 'Special Operations Executive'. The SOE was established on 1 July 1940 to wage unconventional warfare against the Nazis who with lightening speed had swept across most of Western Europe (Stafford, 1983; Foot 1984). It was tasked with infiltrating trained agents who would enlist, instruct and equip local civilians and conduct sabotage operations that hampered the German occupation. The British-run French branch of the organisation, known as 'F section' (Foot, 1966), disregarded the cultural taboo on female involvement in combat, which prevented women in the British auxiliary services – WAAF, WRNS and ATS – from active participation and began recruiting suitable female candidates from 1942. Charlet was the second woman to be sent to France. In total, F section infiltrated 39 women, who have been the subject of numerous popular histories (Gleeson, 1976; Jones, 1990; Escott, 1991; Kramer, 1995; Binney, 2002), and 441 men (Binney, 2005). Many of the agents held British nationality and thus they needed to be able to pass as French citizens in order to undertake their clandestine work without raising any additional suspicions.

Reflecting on the SOE's recruitment practices, Brian Stonehouse stated: '[T]hey were looking for British nationals who could pass as Frenchmen' (IWM SA, 9852). As we shall see, this entailed sounding, looking and behaving like ordinary French men and women. The decision to embody alternative identities is often interpreted as an individual response to particular circumstances. Yet in this context, agents undertook their false identities for the collective purpose of contributing to the defeat of Nazi Germany. The preparation for passing was subject to explicit observation, assessment and instruction and was not a solitary endeavour. This extensive preparation was because the agents would have to convince a suspicious 'Other' who was continually on its guard for imposters. Rather than just passing visually to an unsuspecting audience as in other contexts, agents had not only to look and sound authentic but also to 'prove' their assumed identities – their forged identity documents were frequently inspected and their cover stories often tested. The success of Stonehouse's and Charlet's enactments pivoted upon the evaluations of a reciprocating complicit audience. In this instance, their spectators did not validate their passing performances and they were arrested. Although most instances of passing that are exposed result in some loss of reputation or incur penalties, the performances of SOE agents entailed great risk. Agents had far more at stake than other passing subjects because discovery could lead to arrest, torture, lengthy incarceration in prisons, deportation to concentration camps and execution. Thus, the passing undertaken by British agents in France was unique with regards to their motivations, preparation, documentation, audience, risk and punishment.

This article draws extensively on personal testimonies including published autobiographies, interviews held at the Imperial War Museum's Sound Archive, transcripts of interviews conducted by media companies for various television documentaries, as well as personal correspondence and interviews that I conducted with surviving veterans. Official records at the National Archives have also been consulted. Analysis of both oral and written sources confirmed the salience of the concept of 'passing'. Agents composed accounts about their concealment of their British nationalities and their paramilitary status, their attempts at passing as French civilians assisted by forged documents and cover stories, and the attributes they possessed that made them ideal recruits for the organisation. This article explores the experiences of male and female British Francophiles like Stonehouse and Charlet who risked their lives to fight for the liberation of France. The agents' experiences of performing alternative identities raises important questions about the authorisation of clandestine identities and the way passing elucidates identities in the process of transformation, as well as provides insight into the construction, assumption and rejection of national identities, the boundaries that are erected between them and the anxiety provoked by the crossing of the barriers relevant to specific national identities.

'Speaking the French of a Frenchman': Passing linguistically

F section was not the only SOE branch operating in France: the Gaullist-led RF section was also active, employing only men, and later women, who were French nationals. This impacted upon the supply of potential recruits to the British-run F section as Maurice Buckmaster, its head, recalled: 'We were not allowed to recruit people with French passports, with French nationality. They had to go to de Gaulle

which meant that we had to find people of non-French nationality whose French was that of a French person. . . . I thought we'd never find English people whose French is good enough to let them pass as French people' (IWM SA, 9452). The recruitment practices of F section were structured around legal definitions of French citizenship. Thus, French women who had married British men could be recruited as they acquired British nationality upon marriage.[1] Yet they also circumvented the legal restrictions on employing native French citizens on several occasions, with F section personnel recruiting French nationals in France and North Africa, bringing them back to Britain for training without RF's knowledge.

Several of the agents were of mixed parentage, their British fathers having married French women following the First World War. They assumed the nationality of their fathers and were issued with British passports which precluded them from serving in RF section. With their mixed parentage, these British legal subjects of Anglo-French origin were considered ideal recruits, not least because of their language skills. It was, of course, crucial that agents were able to pass linguistically as French as Maurice Buckmaster (1952, pp. 26–7; see also IWM SA, 9452) noted: 'Language was, naturally, the first and vital hurdle. . . . We could not afford to jeopardize valuable agents through the inability of a colleague to speak the French of a Frenchman. It was necessary to exclude from the start all those candidates who failed to convince our examiners that they could be taken for Frenchmen by a Frenchman.' The organisation required individuals whose French was so fluent that they blurred the distinction between the French of a French national and that of a fluent foreigner.

For many agents, their ability to speak fluent French was a result of their cultural heritage: French was their first language and their childhood had been mainly spent in France. Bob Sheppard (interview, 2002), for example, stated: 'I spoke French like a Frenchman. . . . I could speak French and I knew France entirely. I not only spoke French, but I lived in France, went to school in France.' Recruits who had had a French upbringing and schooling had acquired comprehensive knowledge of the French language as children, knew slang and swear words (IWM SA, 9851) and often thought and dreamt in French (IWM SA, 16568). In other words, they had acquired a French 'habitus'. Pierre Bourdieu's concept refers to the unconscious 'taking in' of culturally-specific bodily dispositions, such as language, accent and manners. Bourdieu (1977) regards the family and schooling as crucial in the development of an appropriate habitus: young children observe adults' facial expressions, ways of using cutlery, modes of walking and styles of talking and imitate them so that over time they become instinctive.

It was not just children of Anglo-French marriages who acquired a French habitus. British nationals who spent significant periods of their childhood abroad also developed these instinctive dispositions. For example, from the age of three, Claire Everett (interview, 2002) lived with her Scottish mother on the Riviera, and Sydney Hudson (interview, 2002) was brought up in Switzerland and 'spoke French continuously. . . . I knew France quite well of course'. Their ability to speak colloquial, 'native' French was indicative of their acquisition of French habitus. It was so deep-rooted that when abruptly woken up by Security section staff during their training they instinctively spoke French. Sonya Butt (documentary transcript, 2002) recalled: 'They'd come into our room at night and wake us up, touch us on the

shoulder and see how we reacted.... I'd lived in France all my life so it wasn't difficult for me at all. But for some of the others it was.'

Not all British recruits, however, were equipped with a French linguistic habitus. Englishman Harry Rée noted: 'My French was far from colloquial' (IWM SA, 8720). 'I had an ordinary Englishman's French accent' (IWM SA, 8688). Similarly, Ben Cowburn (1960, pp. 67–8) recollected: 'Before the war, I did speak French with an English accent. In preparation for my trip I had practiced pronouncing the r's from the throat as the French generally do and my friends had said that I sounded just like a Frenchman from the eastern provinces.' Cowburn worked hard trying to improve his French accent but his efforts were not wholly successful: once based in France, three French nationals asked him whether he was British. Although both Rée and Cowburn had a good command of the French language and knowledge of French vocabulary and syntax, their pronunciation let slip their British national identities.

As there was a limited supply of French-speaking Britons who could pass as French in France, it was soon recognised that in order to meet the growing demand for suitable agents, the SOE would have to recruit from the colonies. F section recruited Indian national Noor Inayat Khan, who was brought up in Paris, and siblings Claude and Lise de Baissac, who were British subjects born and raised in the French-speaking colony of Mauritius. They had all developed a French habitus as a result of their upbringing and could easily pass linguistically. The F section also enlisted several French-speaking Canadian nationals. Having never visited the country, they did not have an intimate knowledge of France and its culture and some spoke French with a Canadian accent: 'All these Canadians had an awful accent in French, awful Canadian accent.... They had a seventeenth-century accent.... Nothing in common with any of the dialects, provincial accents, nothing to do with the French accent.... They stood out when they spoke French. From time to time, they would drop an American word for instance' (Maloubier, interview, 2002). The absence of a French habitus hampered these agents' attempts at passing; a fellow agent remarked: '[T]heir French was so faulty that they could never hope to pass themselves as Frenchmen' (cited in Maclaren, 1981, p. 50).

What of those who had learnt French later in life? Could they acquire a French habitus that would facilitate passing? Sociolinguist Ingrid Piller (2002) asserts that individuals who have learnt a language as an adult are unlikely to pass for native speakers. They might be able to sustain a convincing performance for a limited time, but an extended conversation will expose them eventually. Yet several of the agents, who had not come into contact with French culture as children but had moved to France as adults and had learnt to speak French as a second language, developed considerable linguistic expertise. Nancy Wake, for example, was a New Zealander by birth, who spent her childhood in Australia and thus had no French cultural inheritance. She moved to Paris in 1934 unable to speak the language. Over time, she began speaking French without an accent and learned typically French slang and swear words. Marriage to a Frenchman developed her linguistic proficiency: 'I have all the expressions of Provence because my French husband used to teach me what to say. He used to say "Nanny, now if that –, say –." He taught me those things so I could speak to them [French nationals]. He said "be careful with the French language". He taught me something' (interview, 1999). Wake's knowledge of regional colloquialisms suggested French nationality. Her performance of a French identity was further strengthened by her mannerisms, the result of studying the behaviour of

Parisian women and imitating them: 'I had to work at it. ... I started copying the way the French women presented themselves' (cited in Fitzsimons, 2002, p. 49). Thus, Wake incorporated into her habitus dispositions appropriate to France. Her imitation was so successful that she felt herself to be French: 'I had lived in the country so long I could think like them and feel instinctively how they would react to certain situations. In a nutshell, I was French, except by birth' (Wake, 1985, p. viii).

Although Bourdieu sees habitus as transmitted exclusively through the family and the education system, the example of Wake illustrates that habitus could be acquired in other ways – through employment, residence and marriage, for example. Individuals who were *not* French nationals and who had *not* been brought up in France as children could successfully work at acquiring a French habitus. Wake's references to instinctively 'feeling' French, to thinking as the French do and to reacting in a typically French manner were all indicators of a French habitus.

Analysis of the SOE files indicates that agents were given advice on passing linguistically during their training. They were reminded to: 'Avoid foreign words, tunes, manners, etc. Avoid slang which has developed among your countrymen in Britain. Avoid showing knowledge or expressing views acquired in Britain. Conform with all new conditions which have arisen, observe new customs and acquire the language which has developed in your country' (National Archives, HS 7/55). They were also advised to find out about 'new slang or colloquialisms brought about by war' (National Archives, HS 7/55). Agents needed to reposition themselves through avoidance of phrases which identified them as British (or indeed Canadian or Australian): their dissimulations of their 'original' identities were as crucial as their reproductions of French nationalities. In fact, their ability to mask their 'default' identities was arguably more important than their skill in assuming French personas and may even have enabled them to overcome any deficiencies in linguistic expertise. A successful agent might be presumed to be skilled in both the concealment of their 'original' identity and the construction of a French persona; yet as we have seen, some individuals were recruited who lacked a French linguistic habitus.

While most French nationals would be able to detect those who were foreigners, it was unlikely that ordinary German soldiers would have been able to. An agent's distinctive accent might only be detected when they engaged in conversation with perceptive, French-speaking German soldiers. In her study of second language learners, Ingrid Piller (2002) notes that passing is most easily achieved by not saying anything at all. By keeping quiet, individuals do not reveal an accent or incomplete knowledge of a language. Yet even individuals who converse with others may be able to sustain their performance for long enough and not be detected as an imposter. Passing does not necessarily involve a particularly high level of linguistic skill as people make assumptions based on the information they have and often excuse mistakes. Rusty Barret (1999, p. 318), in her work on African-American drag queens, notes 'audience assumptions and expectations may crucially help to co-construct a performance that successfully conveys a particular identity regardless of the accuracy of the linguistic performance when compared to the behaviour of "authentic" holders of the identity in question'. Indeed, several agents inadvertently slipped into speaking in English following their infiltration into France but were not exposed. Anne-Marie Walters (1947, p. 49), for example, said 'please' during her first bus journey, and Jacques Poirier (1995, p. 71) recalled: 'I made my first mistake at the station. I walked up to the guichet [ticket office] and said, in English, "A single to

Brive, please." "Que dites-vous?" ["What did you say?"], demanded the woman behind the window. I quickly pulled myself together. "Un billet pour Brive, s'il vous plaît, madame." ' These agents found it difficult to shed the customs appropriate to British habitus when they were in France. They were manifesting previous experience of acculturation by instinctively speaking in English, which suggests that habitus is durable, deep-rooted and once acquired, not readily displaced. However, Poirier was French and slipping into English suggests that his prolonged absence from France as he underwent training in Britain had challenged his 'original' 'native' identity. Thus, as with racial and gender passing, passing linguistically as a French national questions and destabilises the categories of 'native' and 'non-native' speaker. Yet passing as French did not just involve passing linguistically.

'Looking very French': Passing visually

A subject's appearance was critical as the success of passing relies on an 'Other' reading the body in certain ways. Passing is about specularity: what is seen and unseen, visible and invisible. SOE agents therefore had to pass visually as well as linguistically. Maurice Buckmaster (1952, p. 27), the F section head who asserted that agents had to be able to pass as French, noted that this 'applied to appearance as well as to speech'. He believed that appearance could be taken as a signifier of nationality, as did the recruiting officer, who noted whether interviewees' appearance visually aligned them with stereotypical 'French looks', enabling them to pass visually in France as French. Many of the agents who were Anglo-French felt that they conformed to the stereotype of the 'French' national having inherited culturally relevant characteristics from their French mothers. Dark hair, brown eyes, olive complexion and medium height were identified by several interviewees as indicators of a French nationality. Yvonne Baseden (interview, 1999) noted: 'I looked very French anyway, in those days particularly' and Robert Boiteux noted 'in France, I was [a] Frenchman. I was small, dark' (IWM SA, 9851). The visual signs that implied French nationality would not alone have recommended them to the recruiting officer, but in conjunction with their ability to speak 'native French', they were considered suitable.

It might be surmised that ambiguous bodies that did not fit the criteria of the stereotypical 'French appearance' were unlikely to be recruited as they would be viewed with more suspicion. However, this principle, like the criterion of speaking fluent and unaccented French, was not rigidly adhered to in the selection of recruits. Noor Inayat Khan was Indian and her skin colour undoubtedly made her visually distinctive in a predominantly white culture (see Shompa Lahiri's 2007 article in which she uses the concept of embodiment to examine the multiple ways in which Khan's race, gender and nationality were corporeally recognised and misrecognised), while the ginger hair and pale complexion of several British and Irish male agents would have made them conspicuous. Bob Sheppard (interview, 2002) asserted: 'The appearance was difficult because I looked too much like a young Englishman. I had beautiful blond wavy hair.' Brian Stonehouse felt that his height was problematic: 'I was much too tall for the average Frenchman of that period. . . . I should have been much shorter to be inconspicuous' (IWM SA, 9852). Francis Cammaerts was atypical at 6'5" tall, but he dismissed the idea that his height jeopardised his safety: '[H]eight, like accent, was enormously affected by the swarm of refugees you know,

the people from naturally "tall" countries like Scandinavia. But they didn't stand out. People didn't go round roasting someone because they were six inches taller than other people' (interview, 1999). Although they did not possess stereotypical 'French looks', they could still be recruited – if they spoke French like a French national then other people's perceptions of their accent were likely to override a striking appearance.

In addition to recruiting candidates whose appearance was considered typically British, a number of men and women were recruited by F section that, according to one veteran, 'were so obviously Jewish' (Baseden, interview, 1999). She felt that the SOE was endangering the lives of Jews who visually conformed to stereotypically Jewish appearance. As well as passing as French and as an ordinary citizen, they had to dissimulate their Jewishness. The notion that Jewishness is physically identifiable has been vigorously challenged. Sander L. Gilman (1982, p. xi), for example, asserts: 'The statement that someone "looks Jewish" ... reflects the visual stereotype which culture created for the "other" out of an arbitrary complex of features.' These stereotypes (rigid, fixed, oversimplified and sometimes pejorative evaluative descriptions) of the distinguishing physical characteristics of Jews solidify traits as fixed and immutable. Yet they are only very tenuously rooted in reality as is made evident by testimonies of Holocaust survivors with blond hair and blue eyes who successfully passed as 'Aryans' (Hahn Beer & Dworkin, 2000; Moszkiewiez, 1998; Altbeker Cyprys, 1997). Moreover, the stereotypical characteristics of Jewishness resembled closely the conventional traits of a 'French appearance' identified above, as Francis Cammaerts' debriefing interview makes evident: '[H]e was very often passed over by the Germans who would immediately pick up a small, dark and probably Jewish-looking man in the compartment' (National Archives, HS 6/568).

If passing involves the assembling and construction of visual signs that are designed to invoke very specific readings of the body, then those individuals who were visibly distinctive through their skin colour, hair colour, height or features could fail to pass as French nationals. However, this stereotypical classification is a rather unconvincing method of categorising individuals and suggests a fixing of difference in so-called 'national characteristics'. Visual signs clearly are not infallible markers of nationality: most obviously, agents who were *not* French but who possessed a stereotypically 'French appearance' could successfully pass as 'French natives'. Moreover, French nationals did not all look alike and to speak collectively of a 'French appearance' suggests a greater degree of uniformity than was the case.

Passing visually required more than simply possessing particular features, height, complexion and hair colour. In order to perfect their 'French appearance' before being infiltrated into France, agents had their British fillings replaced with gold, as used by French dentists, and their hair was 'cut specially' (Baseden, personal communication, 2000). For men, this might also include facial hair. Kenneth MacKenzie recalled: 'No other Frenchman at that time wore a moustache. I would be really advertising a British officer so I had to cut my moustache off. Very sad!' (IWM SA, 18154). Another prop in their performance of French nationality was clothing that was deemed suitable to both status and locale. Continental and English styles of clothing were quite dissimilar and so SOE seamstresses adapted 'British' clothes to European specifications, removing English labels and buttons and sewing in French ones and altering seams, collars, button holes and cuffs (Shrewsbury, interview, 1999).

It is quite remarkable how strongly national identity was signified by clothing in the 1940s. Although it was a superficial part of the performance through which they could easily be exposed, it did offer them some protection, not least because the visual is often taken as evidence of authenticity. The scopic effect of their 'French' appearance masked their national identity and was read as a reliable signifier of their civilian status. Failure to take account of national variations could cause a slippage to ensue between their identities. Odette Sansom, for example, recalled meeting in France a 'strange English' agent who had a pipe and wore a tweed jacket: '[H]e looked terribly English. The next day the whole village was saying, "have you seen the Englishman?" ' (*The Sunday Dispatch*, 1958). He was not the only agent to disregard the advice on passing given during the training. Cyril Watney recalled parachuting into France and being met on the landing ground by a fellow agent: 'They'd told us that we'd got to wear French clothes and look French. . . . And what was he like! He was dressed in plus-fours. I've never seen a Frenchman in plus-fours. . . . He'd got [on] the tie of the Royal Artillery' (interview, 2000). Their British national identities were visibly inscribed on their bodies, which prevented their passing as French.

'Living a different life': Passing performatively

Agents were advised to behave in a manner that did not draw attention to themselves as foreigners. During the training, agents were given instruction on how to effect passing by instructors who sought to alert agents to aspects of their behaviour that might expose their national identity. Brian Stonehouse, for example, was made aware of his distinctive gait: 'You'll have to alter the way you walk, it's much too English. If you're going to France, you have to walk like a Frenchman does' (Duesbury, interview, 1999). Ways of walking could, it was felt, help or hinder agents' passing. Agents were advised to find out about 'unprocurable articles (e.g. danger of ordering wrong drinks or cigarettes)' (National Archives, HS 7/55) and their table manners were observed to ascertain the degree of their familiarity with French customs and to discover whether they had any British mannerisms that might betray their identity. Derrick Duesbury recollected that Security section personnel 'watch[ed] how they used knives and forks. Whether they lift them like this, [mimes French manner] if they are going to France' (interview, 1999). This was because, as Harry Despaigne observed, 'the knife and fork are handled in different ways in France than they are in England . . . they cut their meat first and then change over' (IWM SA, 9925). Cyril Watney noted that table manners were culturally differentiated: 'If I'm drinking soup here in England, I'd put my soupspoon there and I'd drink the soup like that. But no, not in France. In France, you pick up the whole thing and knock it back. . . . There are lots of different things that you've got to know' (interview, 2000). Leaving a few leftovers on the plate and arranging knives and forks together in the typical British manner could expose a British national identity. Lectures were given on French cuisine and trips were arranged to French restaurants to give them an opportunity to practice French table manners. Yet some agents did display British table manners while in France. When making tea, Noor Inayat Khan began by pouring milk into a cup (Lahiri, 2007), while Yvonne Cormeau drank soup from the side of her spoon (National Archives, HS 6/568). In order to successfully pass as French nationals,

British agents had to demonstrate their French habitus by performing cultural practices which for ordinary French people would have been instinctive.

Yet passing is not simply about 'looking the part': it is about constructing and embodying different personas, acting out a way of life and performing particular identities which are appropriate to the locale in which one is based. As agent Francis Cammaerts noted: 'You were living a different life, that's to say you were a different person and you had to think of being a different person' (documentary transcript, 2000). Instruction in passing techniques was a key part of the training and agents were shown 'how to disguise one's own personality' (Poirier, 1995, p. 62) in order to be inconspicuous and maintain their cover. They were equipped with a number of forged documents, including identity cards, birth certificates, ration cards and travel permits, in their cover names. Agents prepared cover stories to bolster their performances if they were stopped and questioned. Henri Diacono noted: 'You had to invent a full story of your life. You had to learn the name of your false father, your false mother, where you were living before, where you had done your studies, where you have served your military time, all sorts of things you had to put into your head which would square with your identity, the identity papers you were going to be sent with' (documentary transcript, 2000). Agents had to behave in a manner that was consistent with their cover stories. Guido Zembsch-Schreve (1996, p. 95), for example, recalled: 'Anyone leading a double life of an agent must wear a cloak of normality and behave in keeping with his age.' Analysis of agents' retrospective constructions of their lifestyles in wartime France and on the ways in which they chose to pass emphasise their investments in particular kinds of gendered performances. They were not merely imitating French nationals, but were performing French masculinities and femininities, choosing from a repertoire of behaviours that which they deemed suitable to both their cover status and the region in which they were operating.

Some male agents remember trying to act in keeping with their cover as ordinary young bachelors by dining at black-market restaurants, associating with other men and frequenting nightclubs, theatres and cinemas. Paris-based André Watt, for example, played the part of a Parisian playboy so as not to draw attention to himself as an outsider (personal communication, 2003). Such behaviour might be seen to be associated with 'hegemonic masculinity', a specific configuration of gender practice that is culturally exalted (Connell, 1995). 'Womanising' was the most respected form of behaviour for young Frenchmen. Accordingly, several male agents bolstered their cover by having girlfriends. Being seen in public accompanied by a young woman was a way of passing. The gendered and heterosexual dynamics embodied in their performances were a crucial aspect of their success. Peter Churchill (1952, p. 151) remarked: 'There's no better cover to be had in this country than to be seen in the company of a girl … just the right sort of impression to give.' Guido Zembsch-Schreve (1996, p. 95) also believed that a woman 'was essential … to my façade' in order 'to put up a front … to maintain cover' (documentary transcript, 2000).

Not all male agents selected this strategy in order to pass, however. Others thought that frequenting black-market restaurants and nightclubs constituted a security risk. Instead, they pursued a strategy of avoiding such social contact and heterosexual relationships because they considered such engagements too risky. Roger Landes asserted: 'I am not like that to mix up pleasure and business' (interview, 1999) and Kenneth MacKenzie noted: 'Once I was over in France, I never

had any close relationships with any women at all. It was quite hard at times, admittedly, but that's one thing, there's a responsibility. I wouldn't take that risk' (IWM SA, 18154). He implies that although he had both the opportunity and desire to engage in heterosexual relationships, he recognised the necessity of foregoing these as they were potentially dangerous. Instead, he tried to be as inconspicuous as possible: 'Being rather ordinary myself, I sort of slipped everywhere. Nobody noticed me!' (IWM SA, 18154).

Passing strategies were individual choice assessments based on what each agent perceived offered the best chance of success. Every agent was an individual with different notions of security and each chose to pursue a lifestyle that suited their personalities and the locale in which they were operating. While living an extravagant lifestyle in Paris may not have been unduly dangerous as they could pass as ordinary Parisians doing their best to ignore the strictures of rationing and the occupation, it would have been inappropriate in a small town or rural village where their behaviour would have made them highly conspicuous. The diverse interpretations demonstrate the remarkable fluidity of what passed for passing.

What about the strategies of their female counterparts? The interviews conducted by Paula Schwartz, Margaret Collins Weitz and Margaret Rossiter with female French nationals who resisted have led them to conclude that women had certain advantages in undertaking clandestine activities (Schwartz, 1989; Weitz, 1986, 1995, 2000; Rossiter, 1986). As Schwartz (1989, p. 131) noted: '[T]hey had the best disguise: they were women!' Like their French Resistance counterparts, female British agents were able to exploit German soldiers' failure to recognise that women were involved in political activities. They often undertook specifically feminine performances by mobilising appropriate conduct and conventionally attractive appearance which usually made it possible for them to undertake their hazardous work while passing as French (Pattinson, 2004). Nancy Wake (1985, p. 134), for example, 'hop[ed] that I would pass for a housewife out shopping'. She used a particularly gendered cover story to enable her to undertake her resistance work. The feminine identification of her cover enabled her to conceal the military character of her clandestine tasks. The very fact that she was a woman undertaking domestic chores protected her from being read as a suspected 'terrorist'. Moreover, German soldiers were male and female agents frequently record deliberately performing femininity in their presence. Claire Everett recalled numerous occasions when she stimulated chivalrous behaviour from German soldiers, who unknowingly transported suitcases containing radio sets and weapons past checkpoints: 'I just sort of smiled and waved to them. All the time. Women could get by with a smile and do things that men couldn't and no matter what you had hidden in your handbag or your bicycle bag, if you had a nice smile, you know, just give them a little wink' (interview, 2002). For Everett, femininity was indeed the best disguise enabling her to avert discovery and to facilitate passing.

Other female agents, like their male colleagues, preferred to merge into the background and be less visible. Yvonne Baseden's understated displays of femininity included wearing a very casual, plain skirt and blouse, wearing no make-up and never styling her hair in order to avoid attention and be as inconspicuous as possible: 'The idea was to blend in somehow' (interview, 1999). Some female agents continually adapted their strategies to suit the specific circumstances in which they were working. Nancy Wake employed at different times almost every type of feminine appearance

to pass, including glamour, quotidian, lack of glamour, chic/urban and peasant/rural femininities. On one occasion, she decided to pass as a middle-aged peasant: 'I was ... looking like a real country bumpkin, wet hair pulled back tight, no make-up, an old-fashioned dress, and wearing a pair of the farmer's old boots. ... Our cart and the produce were inspected several times by the Germans ... they did not give me a second look' (Wake, 1985, pp. 132–3). Depending on whether she wanted to attract attention or to be comparatively invisible, Wake chose a particular mode from a repertoire of femininities. She was conscious that her passing was context-specific and that she had to be flexible by adapting her appearance, clothing and behaviour to the particular circumstances.

Female agents were aware that cities, towns and country villages had their own fashion variations and in order not to appear either over-dressed or unsuitably casual they had to adopt localised forms of femininity, as Anne-Marie Walters (1947, p. 52) makes clear: 'I discarded my beret, it was all right in a small town like Condom, but in Agen women wore high, complicated hair styles and even more complicated ear-rings.' Female agents also had to pay attention to the jewellery French women wore. Yvonne Cormeau, who arrived in France without any jewellery, noticed that 'every woman, even in the country districts, always wore a necklace or bracelet, or ornament of some kind' (National Archives, HS 6/568). She found a few small articles of jewellery to sustain her performance of rural French femininity. Yet when she was asked by her hosts to look after their cattle, the farmer's wife told her 'don't wear a watch. No woman who looks after cows would be able to afford a watch' (IWM SA, 7369). Female agents had to mobilise localised modes of femininity as their performances needed to be both regionally and class-specific. A further aspect to blending in was giving up smoking. In France, cigarettes were scarce and could only be found on the black-market at exorbitant prices. Anne-Marie Walters was warned by her organiser: 'Mind you never smoke in public: women smoke so little here that you would be picked out right away' (Walters, 1947, p. 35). In contrast to their male colleagues, women's strategies centred largely on appearance, but they differed from each other in their interpretations of which mode of feminine appearance to adopt.

It was not enough then that they merely sounded or, indeed looked, like French men and women: they had to act out a way of life and perform a particular identity they deemed offered the best chance of successfully passing. Such examples are a reminder that identity is not monolithic. Their displays of French nationality were simultaneously expressions of gender, class, age, sexuality and regional identities. Agents therefore crossed multiple identity barriers in their attempts to construct a French national identity.

The pressures of concealing various aspects of their identity provoked a great deal of anxiety, generated by the threat of exposure. Agents were conscious of the penalties of failing to pass and their testimonies are replete with recollections of their concerns that their 'true' national identity remained visible. In her introduction to *Passing: When People Can't Be Who They Are*, Brooke Kroeger (2003, p. 8) notes that passing never feels natural; the assumed identity always remains 'outside of themselves', like a 'second skin that never adheres'. Many agents recall feeling like this: Roger Landes had 'the feeling I had a board on me, "English parachutist" ' (documentary transcript, 2000); Anne-Marie Walters 'imagined I stuck out like a sore thumb.... It took me nearly three weeks to shake off this form of

self-consciousness and to get over the idea that I had "British agent" written all over my face' (Walters, 1947, p. 36); and Peter Churchill (1953, p. 180) recalled: 'You almost imagine that neon lights are blinking from your forehead and proclaiming, on and off, "Made in England".' They each invoke similar metaphors to indicate their feelings of markedness, sensing that their bodies could be viewed as a text upon which their British national identities were inscribed and that they could literally be read as British agents.

Agents were conscious that their performances required external ratification in order to be successful. Passing is never a solitary endeavour since it requires an individual to perform and an audience to observe and authenticate their passing. The success of each passing performance depends upon the evaluations of a reciprocating audience. Henri Diacono's recollection of his first attempt at passing in France demonstrates the way in which passing is dialogic:

> I looked at him [German soldier] the way he looked at me. ... I found that I wasn't something special. I was like all the other Frenchmen and I was very relaxed. ... My attitude was normal, people didn't think I was a spy, they just thought I was a fellow like the others. ... Knowing myself what I was and knowing that all the other people around me thought I was something else ... you're in quite a special position; all these people think I'm just a student, just a quiet fellow, and I'm something else. It is a sort of satisfaction. (documentary transcript, 2000)

Diacono scrutinised himself as if he was seeing through the eyes of both the German soldier and French civilians because he was conscious that his performance required an audience to validate his passing in order for it to be successful. He was reassured by the soldier's disinterest in him and derived considerable pleasure from manipulating other people's readings of his identity. As theorist Werner Sollers (1997, p. 253) notes: '[P]assing may even lead an individual who succeeds in it to a feeling of elation or exultation, an experience of living as a spy who crosses a significant boundary and sees the world anew from a changed vantage point heightened by the double consciousness of his subterfuge.'

The passing performances of F section agents were generally successful. There is no evidence to suggest that any of the seventeen women and over a hundred men who were captured had made an error that caused a slippage in their attempts at passing as French nationals which exposed their British paramilitary identities. Rather, they were captured as a result of poor security or bad luck, were betrayed or, like Brian Stonehouse, were discovered at their wireless sets. Following their capture, it might be presumed that individuals no longer needed to conceal the fact that they were British agents. Certainly, many discontinued their attempts to pass as French nationals, informing their interrogators of their British identity and their affiliation to a British organisation. Brian Stonehouse did not try to conceal his identity from his interrogators, informing them that he was a British officer. Odette Sansom also revealed her status as a British agent following her arrest in April 1943. However, she pretended that she was married to Peter Churchill, her organiser, and alleged that he was the British Prime Minister's nephew. Thus, Sansom courted danger for the greater protection that it might offer in the belief that the Germans would execute neither Churchill nor herself but rather use them as diplomatic prisoners who might later be exchanged for high-ranking Germans

who had been caught by the British. Her ruse was successful and both she and Churchill survived lengthy incarceration.

Several agents, however, recognised that their best chance of survival would be to hide their SOE identity and continue passing as French. Yvonne Baseden, who was arrested in June 1944, remembered: 'I implied that I was just another French Resistance worker with a group of people and I was helping them' (documentary transcript, 2000). The Gestapo were unable to prove that she was a British agent and she was deported as a French political prisoner. Upon arrival at Ravensbrück concentration camp, she was given a red triangle adorned with a black 'F' which marked her out as a French political prisoner, enabling her to continue passing. While her female colleagues who had been identified as British agents were either shot or given lethal injections, Baseden survived. She recognised that it was being 'part of a group of French women which probably saved me in the end' (interview, 1999).

Some agents who continued to pass following capture chose identities that were gender-specific. Male agents who were arrested while undertaking non-resistance acts could attempt to conceal their clandestine identities by pretending to be either French black-marketeers in the hope that they would shortly be released with a reprimand or British airmen in the belief that they would be transferred to a POW camp. Bob Sheppard, who was arrested with SOE agent Ted Zeff in March 1943 while crossing the Pyrenees, recalled: 'We pretended at once to be pilots of the Royal Air Force. Could only speak English. We didn't know anything. And it went on rather well with the German Army who arrested us' (interview, 2002). Paradoxically, his main concern was speaking French in his sleep. Interrogations by the Gestapo followed and a confession was extracted from Zeff under torture, at which point passing ceased to be an option for Sheppard as his paramilitary identity had been exposed. Upon arrival at Saarbrucken concentration camp, he was allocated a uniform and a red triangle inscribed with 'E' for Englander. A guard shouted to him during the morning roll-call 'Agh. You are the British officer?' (interview, 2002). Sheppard's badge, marking him out as British, made attempts at passing futile. That both he, Zeff and Stonehouse survived, while other men who were also exposed as SOE agents were executed, remained a mystery to him. Zeff's survival was particularly extraordinary given that he was Jewish: presumably he dissimulated his Jewishness.

Passing as British airmen or French black marketeers was inappropriate for female agents. The numerous examples of women undertaking performances of naivety and innocence following their arrest suggest that women themselves felt they had no other recourse than to act out a vacuous femininity. Blanche Charlet's tactics for concealing her British identity following her arrest in October 1942 were all clearly gendered: she concocted elaborate stories about lovers, feigned ignorance of the political consequences of her resistance and pretended to faint (National Archives, HS 6/568). Charlet was one of 52 inmates who escaped from Castres prison in September 1943 and returned to Britain. Although passing did not necessarily prevent them from being tortured and deported to concentration camps, their performances could save them from being identified as SOE agents and executed as 'foreign spies'. Of the 119 deported to camps, just 23 men and three women survived.

Conclusion

This article has examined the diverse ways in which French identities were constructed and performed by male and female British nationals who were operational behind enemy lines in France during the Second World War. It took considerable work, effort, time and careful planning to forge a French identity. In this context, passing was primarily a linguistic performance. It was intricately linked to the spoken language acquired, most often but not exclusively, during childhood. Being mis/taken as a French national also involved passing visually. An individual's appearance, in particular hair, skin and eye colour, height and clothing, were taken as signifiers of identity. Passing in occupied France also entailed corroborating new identities with forged documents and cover stories and because passing was a public performance agents had to behave in keeping with their new personas. For many agents, their upbringing had instilled in them, almost innately, the appropriate gestures and behaviours of the French national. While the family played an important role for many of the recruits in furnishing the attributes signifying possession of a French national identity, others acquired these characteristics as adults through the careful observation and imitation of French people. Such acquisition questions assumptions about identities being immutable, natural and real. Notions of the fixity of difference in national characteristics are undermined by individuals who 'sounded', 'looked' and 'behaved' like French nationals and possibly even identified as French, but did not possess French nationality. Such notions are especially troubled by those who neither looked nor behaved entirely like French nationals and yet still managed successfully to pass themselves off as such. In a time of total war, when national identities arguably become more fixed and the construction of the 'Other' is clearer and more inflexible, it is significant that so many constructions of the average were possible. In being accepted as French, these British (and Australian, Indian, Canadian) legal subjects reveal the instability of commonly accepted, socially endorsed stereotypical markers of national identity such as accent, appearance and mannerisms, and re-script the boundaries of national identity. National identities defy simplistic categorisations – they overlap, intersect, are fluid.

Note

1. The 1914 British Nationality and Status of Aliens Act stated that 'the wife of a British subject shall be deemed to be a British subject' (National Archives, LO 3/604; see Baldwin, 2001). It was not until 1 January 1949, following the passing of the British Nationality Act (1948), that British women were able to retain their nationality upon marriage to a foreigner (National Archives, CO 537/1210).

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