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## Women in the shadow war: gender, class and MI5 in the Second World War

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### ABSTRACT

During the Second World War, the women employed in Britain's secret Security Service (MI5) far outnumbered their male colleagues, with a ratio of twelve women for every five men. Their numbers grew rapidly over the course of the war and by 1941 stood at over 800. Despite the vast influx of female labour into the agency, attitudes towards the role of women in intelligence, be it as wartime workers or as secret agents, demonstrated remarkable continuity with those of the interwar period. Women were near universally restricted to subordinate roles; typically of clerical and secretarial nature in the case of office staff. Similarly, internal attitudes regarding those traits which produced the best agents and intelligence officers, shaped by wider understandings of both masculinity and social status, demonstrated considerable resilience. Drawing upon declassified official records, this article argues that MI5's wartime experiences did little to alter the agency's attitudes to gender.

### Introduction

On 18 November 1940, Jane Archer (nee Sissmore) the main expert on Soviet espionage for the Security Service, MI5, was ignominiously sacked. Invited to give 'frank criticism' to the acting Director General of the agency (Oswald Allen 'Jasper' Harker), the officer made the dangerous error of doing precisely that. Guy Liddell, the Director of B Division, MI5's counter-espionage section, wrote in his diaries that Archer had been dismissed for insubordination and that it was 'a very serious blow to us all'. Liddell added that she was 'completely on the wrong leg', but also noted that 'the incident should not have happened' and pondered what he might do to resolve the sorry state of affairs and rescue Archer. Ultimately, though Archer tendered an apology, supplemented with appeals on her behalf from Liddell to David Petrie (the only other figure sufficiently senior to challenge Harker), efforts to rescue the situation came to naught. Any challenge to the authority of the Director General's decision would have required Liddell's resignation—too high a price to pay.<sup>1</sup>

Thus (temporarily) ended the MI5 career of Jane Archer, one of only a handful of female intelligence officers employed by the agency at that time. Not even her exemplary record

and long service could save her. These achievements included the interrogation of the Soviet spy Walter Krivitsky, described by the official historian of MI5 as a 'model of its kind'. That same historian, Christopher Andrew, further notes that some evidence even suggests that after this episode, the agency adopted a policy which would prevent the further promotion of women to officer status.<sup>2</sup> Of course, that a woman was dismissed for challenging the authority of her male superior in wartime Britain is hardly surprising and that there were already few female officers in MI5 is even less so. However, over the course of the war, that situation began to change. While it has long been acknowledged that women played a role in MI5, typically as clerical staff, during the Second World War at least some women were to hold officer status (though not necessarily rank) within the confines of auxiliary roles. This article aims to outline the number of women working within MI5 and their function in the organisation, explore the gendered culture of the agency, and to place this secret organisation within the wider social context of wartime Britain. It demonstrates that from the foundation of the professionalised intelligence community in 1909 to the end of the Second World War, despite a massive expansion in the size of the female work force, MI5's perception and recruitment of women was marked by considerable continuity of attitude regarding the inappropriateness of women to operate at senior levels within the agency. This is not only an interesting insight into the culture of Britain's intelligence services, but is also a reflection of the continuity in attitudes towards women in wartime Britain more generally in the first half of the twentieth century.

Although there has been considerable interest in the world and history of spies and espionage, remarkably little scholarly investigation regarding the role of women in these agencies has been undertaken. Typically depicted as a male realm in popular culture, women, when present at all, are often awarded the role of the *femme fatale*.<sup>3</sup> For instance, in the ubiquitous James Bond franchise, women in the intelligence services tend to occupy two roles: as objects of sexual desire or secretaries, and in the case of Miss Moneypenny—both. In George Smiley's rather darker world of lies, secrets and cigarette smoke, women are largely absent from 'the Circus' (the name given by Le Carré to the Secret Intelligence Service or MI6). The major exception is Connie Sachs, a figure reminiscent in some ways of Jane Archer. Like Archer she was an expert on Soviet espionage and, again like Archer, lost her job when she fell victim to agency politics. However, where the fictional Sachs descended into a world of alcoholism, Archer's position was restored in 1946 following the departure of both Harker and Petrie. This marginalisation of women, in spy fiction and film, dates to the beginning of the twentieth century, which placed central emphasis on the gentleman spy, who, in fact, closely resembled the actual spies of the early British professional intelligence community.<sup>4</sup>

Professional historians, not least of whom, Christopher Andrew, the official historian of MI6 Keith Jeffrey, Thomas Hennessey and Claire Thomas, have presented rather more nuanced visions of the position of women in these agencies.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, their interest has still primarily revolved around the wider structures and operational activities of these agencies with women's contributions regarded as a peripheral concern. This omission, in some respects, might be explained by the fact that women are highly under-represented in intelligence studies, as Damien Van Puyvelde and Sean Curtis have recently shown.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, though scholarly interest in women and gender in the history of intelligence is limited, it is not entirely absent. In the context of Britain's secret world, Tammy

Proctor's work on female spies in the First World War represents an important intervention, as does Juliette Pattinson's analysis of female agents in the Special Operations Executive.<sup>7</sup> However, the greatest headway in exploring the role of women in Britain's intelligence services during the Second World War has come from popular writers and historians, as opposed to their colleagues in the academy. The work of women at Bletchley Park, in particular, has become far better known and understood in recent years.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, the Government Code and Cypher School (GC&CS) which was headquartered at Bletchley Park during the Second World War, is just one facet of Britain's intelligence community. As Pattinson has recently noted, in studies of intelligence 'women are rarely afforded much attention'.<sup>9</sup> The primary objective of this article, therefore, is to begin to remedy this situation and fill the lacuna in the field as it pertains to the role and place of women in MI5 during the Second World War.

In addition to shedding light on the role of gender in MI5, an analysis of the role of women in wartime intelligence work also provides an opportunity to revisit a protracted debate in the historiography of the Second World War concerning the long contested influence of the wartime emergency on the role and status of women in Britain. More generally, as Geoffrey G. Field notes in his recent major analysis of the British working classes in the Second World War, the central question 'what difference did the war make?' has been at the heart of 'just about every major study' of the war since the publication of Richard Titmuss' seminal 1950 study *Problems of Social Policy*.<sup>10</sup> Titmuss, of course, argued that the war did indeed have an impact on the development of British society and that it was profound.<sup>11</sup> Ultimately, Field himself agreed that the war did have a 'major role in shaping Britain's social and political development'.<sup>12</sup> Without rehearsing the familiar development of this historiography, it is worth reflecting on Sonya Rose's conclusion that the national 'pull to unity was haunted by the spectre of division and difference'.<sup>13</sup> MI5, in many respects, showcases the various contradictions in British society that have produced this complex and diverse historiography. Moreover, MI5 is a particularly interesting laboratory to test these kinds of question because of the added complicating factor of extreme secrecy, which was, of course, a ubiquitous concern for the agency and one taken to near unique levels in the already security conscious wartime Britain. The result was an organisation dominated by conservative perceptions of femininity and the role of women in a society that cherished the concept of gentlemanly masculinity, and which was also deeply suspicious of alien behaviour—a reflection of its very purpose. Overall, the masculine culture of the agency was remarkably resilient, yet on the other hand, the war did produce some perceptible qualified changes, particularly in terms of the vast numerical expansion of its staff—most of whom were women. The result was some, highly limited, opportunity for the advancement through the ranks of female employees to positions of responsibility. Before embarking on an analysis of MI5 during the Second World War, however, it is worth briefly exploring the development of the agency from its foundations in 1909.

## War and peace, 1909–1939

The modern-day British intelligence apparatus of organisations was created in 1909 with the founding of the Secret Service Bureau, an institution created by the Committee of Imperial Defence to fulfil a tripartite central mandate. These objectives were: first, 'to

serve as a screen between the Admiralty and War Office and foreign spies'; second, 'to send agents to various parts of Great Britain. ... with a view to ascertaining the nature and scope of the espionage that is being carried on by foreign agents'; and third, 'to act as an intermediate agent between the Admiralty and the War Office and a permanent foreign agent who should be established abroad, with the view of obtaining information in foreign countries'.<sup>14</sup> The bureau comprised of two branches: a home branch (H Branch), concerned with espionage within Great Britain and its colonies (MI5), and a foreign branch (F Branch), concerned with investigative espionage abroad (MI6).<sup>15</sup>

Meanwhile, the Admiralty and War Office both retained cryptanalytic departments tasked with reading the messages of foreign powers. In 1919, these two respective departments were merged to form GC&CS. The result was that at the beginning of the interwar period, the basic three-agency arrangement of Britain's intelligence services had emerged. These agencies were not unique in that they worked in secret or dealt with the production and dissemination of sometimes clandestine information. Other secret organisations were also to emerge during the Second World War, not least the Special Operations Executive (SOE) which conducted acts of sabotage in occupied Europe, and the Political Warfare Executive (PWE) which was engaged with the production and dissemination of black propaganda. Meanwhile, the service ministries in Whitehall, the Admiralty, the War Office and the Air Ministry, operated their own intelligence departments.

From the point of its creation in 1909, both branches of the Secret Service Bureau held a highly traditional gendered perspective when it came to recruitment and the allocation of work. Desirable male qualities included patriotism, assertiveness and loyalty, and recruits were required to demonstrate these popular preconceived masculine traits. Furthermore, respectable social connections, a military background, a good education and a quality family pedigree were all obligatory. Meanwhile, the intelligence community believed that women were ultimately incapable of performing intelligence work effectively thanks to widespread cultural assumptions concerning women's inability to command their emotions. In addition, feminine loyalties were regarded as too personal to be useful in espionage; as Tammy Proctor notes, 'it was inconceivable ... that respectable women would betray their families for reasons of national or political ideologies'.<sup>16</sup> These innate preconceptions regarding gender differences in loyalty to one's country and the particular model in mind when trawling for recruits for intelligence work mean that women were invariably investigated far more thoroughly.<sup>17</sup>

Primary emphasis was placed on nationality, class, education and military experience. For instance, the Sub-Committee assigned to form the Bureau advised that the leaders of the new organisation should be retired army and naval officers with a knowledge of foreign languages, as they would be best positioned to advise the War Office and Admiralty.<sup>18</sup> The two men in question were Major (later Colonel Sir) Vernon Kell and Captain Mansfield Smith Cumming whose appointments also demonstrated the importance of social pedigree as a key factor. Kell had a military education from Sandhurst, had been an interpreter for the army, was in possession of personal wealth, and had aristocratic family connections. Similarly, Cumming, who had had a military education at Dartmouth and spoke French, had personal wealth and was married to a Scottish heiress.<sup>19</sup> Once established, these recruitment trends continued throughout the pre-war years.<sup>20</sup>

However, even in this embryonic phase, women were already present within the intelligence community. The first woman to join H Branch was, in fact, only the third

individual to be recruited. Initially, H Branch was a lone operation staffed by Kell until, in 1910, he was provided with the service of a confidential clerk. As it happened the clerk had a daughter who was brought aboard the fledgling service to work as a typist.<sup>21</sup> Before long, a further three women had been engaged as secretaries and by the outbreak of the First World War, H Branch employed 'five [male] officers, three male clerks', who were supported by, 'three [female] secretaries and a [female] typist'.<sup>22</sup> Although these women performed solely clerical roles, they were required to have recommendations from the head of their school or university, or through family connections.<sup>23</sup> This, of course, reflected the wider attitudes and values of the civil service, which, on the one hand, valued meritocracy yet, on the other, operated an 'elite-preserving system of recruitment'.<sup>24</sup>

From the outset there was an unsurprising division of labour along gendered lines. Male officers performed the business of collecting and analysing intelligence, administrative duties were performed by male clerks, and secretarial work and typing was carried out by women. One department, the Registry, founded to collate data on 'enemy aliens' derived from the 1911 census and the police, became the central repository for information on suspects.<sup>25</sup> This section was staffed exclusively by women.<sup>26</sup> In 1920, MI5 produced a secret, anonymously authored, document detailing the history of female employment within the agency before and during the First World War. Interestingly, it was entitled 'Report on the Work of Women in MI5 of the Military Intelligence Directorate' on the third page of the document. However, the file itself was labelled slightly differently, denoting that it was a 'Report on Woman's [sic] Work'.<sup>27</sup> Though highly complimentary about its female employees, the vast majority of whom were engaged in the same types of clerical and auxiliary work conducted by MI5's first four female staff members, the association of this form of labour as women's work offers a meaningful insight into attitudes of the author.

The outbreak of the First World War necessitated a significant increase in female staff within H Branch as the volume of 'women's work' increased rapidly. By the end of the war, the agency's staff included 296 women and over its course had employed in excess of 650.<sup>28</sup> As a result, female personnel outnumbered men in MI5, staffing the Registry entirely.<sup>29</sup> Despite being large in number, these women were carefully selected, as the 1920 report on women's employment explained:

the qualifications which M.I.5 required in its women clerks and secretaries were intelligence, diligence and, above all, reticence. From the earliest days therefore, M.I.5 sought its clerks in the ranks of educated women, who should naturally be supposed to have inherited a code of honour, that is to say the women staff of M.I.5 consisted of gentlewomen who had enjoyed a good school, and in some cases a University education.<sup>30</sup>

During the First World War, Oxford and the London colleges were trawled for female recruits. However, as Christopher Andrew points out, this emphasis on the importance of a higher education did not extend to male recruits who were not required to have a university background until after the Second World War.<sup>31</sup> Despite their first class education, women were nevertheless restricted to clerical roles.<sup>32</sup> However, an exception to this was made for Miss A. W. Masterton who, although she was not given officer rank, became the first female financial controller in any government department, a direct reflection of her considerable competency.<sup>33</sup> Apparently registering surprise that a female secretary was capable of performing such high quality accountancy, the 1920 report on women's

work in MI5 concluded that the promotion of Miss Masterton was a 'very interesting episode'.<sup>34</sup> The report went on to discuss the respective characteristics held by men and women which largely predetermined their places within H Branch. One female clerk was successful because 'she was equipped' for the work by her:

peculiarly feminine characteristics, intuition and love of detail. By the possession of these two faculties she was a more efficient instrument for the work than the majority of men.

Men, the report added, 'as a rule neither have the patience, the interest in meticulous and tiresome detail, nor the intuition.' Masculine qualities, on the other hand, which the anonymous author believed to be possessed by only a few women in H Branch, included the 'power of organisation and decision and broad methods of work'. Of course, such work would not have been conducted by male officers anyway, but by male clerks. However, clerks were considered unfit for the job because they possessed 'lower social standing and fewer educational advantages', highlighting the acute prejudices within the agency surrounding social class as well as gender.<sup>35</sup>

After the First World War, MI5 was subjected to significant cutbacks and the majority of female staff recruited during wartime were dismissed.<sup>36</sup> Retrenchment continued throughout the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>37</sup> By 1929, with the reduction of internal divisions, women constituted two of the four A Division (which dealt with administration) section heads, but the role of female staff had changed little, and neither of these female section heads were allocated officer status.<sup>38</sup> Men, on the other hand, continued to enjoy superior roles and, just as in 1909, the traits of gentlemanly masculinity remained important, as the appointment of Major W. A. Phillips to the head of A Division in 1929 demonstrates. Phillips possessed a strong military background; he fought on the Western Front during the First World War and received an O.B.E. for his work as a Military Control Officer of ten English Channel ports. Moreover, his recreational pursuits included fishing, shooting and 'the field of sports in general'.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, B Division's (an investigative department) head, Jasper Harker, had spent fourteen years working for the police force in India, before eventually rising to become the Deputy Commissioner in Bombay.<sup>40</sup>

Within the wider context of the British intelligence community this was par for the course. As a result of its central mandate as a cryptanalysis unit, GC&CS primarily relied upon individuals with advanced academic training. Nevertheless, social status, unsullied British lineage, and a form of intellectual masculinity were the order of the day. One potential recruit despite possessing a degree in Classics from Cambridge University, a master of multiple languages including French, Modern Greek and Italian, and a background in the Officers' Training Corps, was nevertheless deemed an inappropriate choice. The fact that his father was Armenian proved an insurmountable hurdle to his appointment.<sup>41</sup> Another rejected nominee was initially described as being 'a very promising candidate', nevertheless, his history of 'nerve weakness' and youth ruined his candidacy.<sup>42</sup> The dismissal of these two individuals demonstrates how little was required for an otherwise high calibre candidate to be deemed inadequate. In these two instances, a fear of enemy aliens and the lack of a suitably 'stiff upper lip', took precedence over academic qualifications.

From 1909 to 1939, the recruitment of personnel to MI5 revolved heavily around gender, social class, education, military credentials and nationality. Male officers were



consistently required to be of good social stock, possess a classical education, have a military background and conform to the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity. That is, that these men reflected the 'culturally exalted' form of masculinity of their class and period.<sup>43</sup> Female candidates, on the other hand, had to meet higher educational standards and obtain a recommendation from a suitably socially respectable source. These practices were a continuation of the trend set by the initial employment of Kell and Cumming in 1909. Sonya Rose notes that the First World War showcased an aggressive and militaristic form of hegemonic masculinity which, in the wake of carnage of that conflict, dwindled during the interwar period. It was replaced by an 'anti-heroic masculinity' until the outbreak of the Second World War, which in turn prompted a new form of masculinity to emerge.<sup>44</sup> However, MI5's recruitment practices show only superficial evidence of this national redrawing of hegemonic masculine archetypes during the interwar period and Second World War; the adventurer, sportsman and military veteran continued to dominate the agency. In short, despite the national emergency posed by the Second World War and the vast expansion of the agency during that conflict, MI5's internal culture would continue to demonstrate remarkable continuity.

### Gender and recruitment in the Second World War

While available records on recruitment to MI5 from the Second World War are fragmentary, rendering it more difficult to reach a firm conclusion regarding the necessary expected qualities wartime candidates for the various roles within the agency were expected to possess, a clear pattern does nevertheless emerge. The emphasis on the masculine qualities required in the pre-Second World War period largely continued unabated and was instituted from the top of the organisation down. In 1940 Sir David Petrie was appointed as Director General and like his temporary predecessor, Harker, had previously built a lengthy career (for which he received a knighthood) in the Indian Imperial Police from 1900 to 1936. Specifically, he had worked in the Department of Criminal Intelligence, of which he became director in 1924.<sup>45</sup> Despite a Master's degree from Aberdeen University, Petrie appears not to have been the brightest of officers.<sup>46</sup> Ashton Roskill, a barrister recruited into the agency shortly after the outbreak of war, doubted if the new Director General possessed 'more than a B+ mind'.<sup>47</sup> Petrie did, however, strike a masculine and gentlemanly figure. The *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* describes Petrie as having been 'a powerfully built man, with a steady gaze, square jaw, and a military moustache, he was straightforward, firm, and decisive, combining a grasp of practical intelligence work with the skills of an unspectacular but effective leader'.<sup>48</sup> Clearly, the change of leadership in 1940, though placing greater emphasis on powers of organisation and management, did not mean taking a cut from radically different cloth. The Second World War did, however, bring about one important change; though still not a requirement, greater emphasis was placed on university education. The informal networks of these educational institutions, as well as the legal profession, proved ideal for the recruitment of those with the skills MI5 desired. Indeed, some officers would complain that draining Britain's national talent to such an extent was selfish and not in the national interest; it would have been better that some of these men should have been left to enter other essential wartime professions.<sup>49</sup>



The recruitment of agents, on the other hand, was viewed in a somewhat different light. Due to the nature of the role, in many cases recruits were selected based on circumstance, as opposed to background. Nevertheless, it was thought that each intelligence officer could pick one 'agent worthy' candidate from within his own circle of friends.<sup>50</sup> Maxwell Knight, reputed to be the model for James Bond, opined that the 'first consideration for choosing any agent, man or woman, should be that the individual in question be a normal, balanced person'.<sup>51</sup> Their gender, he contended, did not matter and he bemoaned 'the very long-standing and ill-founded prejudice against the employment of women as agents'.<sup>52</sup> However, his first set of wartime recruits did not entirely reflect this generous view that women made suitable agents. In fact, of his first recruits only one was a woman, the wife of one of the other new recruits. These recruits were: Mr J. Bingham, Captain H. C. Brocklehurst, Captain A. Gillison, Captain N. Gladstone and Mrs N. Gladstone. As well as the obvious military ties, both Brocklehurst and Captain Gladstone were fortunate enough to be bestowed with 'amazing' and 'immense' numbers of 'personal contacts'. Furthermore, Brocklehurst and Gillison possessed 'worldwide experience'. Bingham, despite having no military connections—having been rejected by the army as a result of poor eyesight—was a journalist, which gave him the relevant analytical qualifications for the task at hand. Mrs Gladstone had an abundance of contacts and Knight said of her recruitment:

When I first put this scheme forward, I felt that we should have to have the assistance of a woman, since experience had already shown me that there are many occasions where it is better for a woman rather than a man.<sup>53</sup>

Taken together, the various characteristics of the agents reveal a now familiar trend. These were well connected, educated, upper- and middle-class individuals who often had a history of military service.

Nevertheless, intelligence officers were still, however, hesitant to employ women, as they feared them too prone to the governance of their passions. In his oft quoted report on recruitment in his sub-section, Maxwell Knight recorded that the general view of female agents in MI5 was that they:

were less discreet than men: that they were ruled by their emotions, and not by their brains: that they rely on intuition rather than on reason; and that Sex [would] play an unsettling and dangerous role in their work.<sup>54</sup>

Though Knight himself warned against the use of 'over emotional' women, he conceded that the alleged female propensity for emotion could actually be useful:

On the other hand, the emotional make-up of a properly balanced woman can very often be utilised in investigation; and it is in fact that woman's intuition is sometimes amazingly helpful and amazingly correct has been well established; and given the right guiding hand, this ability can at times save an Intelligence Officer an enormous amount of trouble.<sup>55</sup>

Furthermore, female agents were seen to be susceptible to sexual desire. Knight advised that female recruits should be neither 'over-sexed nor under sexed', stating that he believed there was nothing 'more terrifying than for an officer to become landed with a woman-agent who suffers from an overdose of Sex'. Encouraging female agents to engage in sexual intercourse with their targets was to be avoided, because 'it is unfortunately the case that if a man is physically but casually interested in a woman, he will very speedily

lose his interest in her once his immediate object is attained'.<sup>56</sup> However, he argued that such a situation could be easily avoided by an officer paying 'particular attention to the types of men that the woman concerned likes or dislikes' when she was initially recruited.<sup>57</sup> This reluctance to employ an agent who posed a danger of being 'over sexed' might perhaps have influenced his decision to recruit the respectably married Mrs Gladstone.

Of course, it is important to not reductively overstate matters and not all agents conformed to Knight's rules for recruitment. For those agents recruited into B.1(A), the section dedicated to the 'Double Cross System', the restrictions of war and the need to seize opportunities overrode other factors such as social standing, connections and nationality. The central idea of Double Cross was simple; to identify German agents in Britain, to gain control of them, to learn what the Germans were planning, and to use the 'turned' agents to feed false information back to Berlin.<sup>58</sup> That being the case, the candidates were, in effect, supplied by the *Abwehr* (Germany's foreign intelligence service). As such, the kinds of trend outlined above, when intelligence officers had complete control over the selection process, obviously does not apply. That said, MI5 did however retain the ultimate decision of whether or not the work with these individuals. An instructive example of this is the case of the now famous Agent Garbo (Juan Pujol Garcia). A Spaniard from an impoverished family, Garbo certainly did not fit the mould of Knight's first four male recruits. His ability, willingness and skill in misinforming the enemy were profound, and quickly seized upon by MI5.<sup>59</sup> He played an integral part of the deception plan, Operation Fortitude, which contributed to the success of the Normandy landings on 6 June 1944 by providing false information to the Germans regarding the location of the invasion.<sup>60</sup>

Interestingly, some familiar character traits do nevertheless appear, particularly in the case of female agents—perhaps an indicator that some of MI5's preconceptions were shared by the *Abwehr*. As such, the types of women to participate as Double Cross agents tended to be worldly, well connected women who travelled in elite circles—often 'adventuresses'. This is particularly evident in the case of Agent Treasure (Nathalie Sergueiew), who was 'regarded as a character well suited to becoming a double agent'.<sup>61</sup> Agent Treasure was born to an elite family in Petrograd in 1912. Although her initial profession was as a nurse, in the 1930s she became a journalist in Berlin, where she was recruited by fellow journalist, Felix Dassel, to work for the German Secret Service.<sup>62</sup> Treasure was sent to Britain via Madrid, where she promptly offered to betray the Germans.<sup>63</sup> Once across the English Channel MI5 recruited her to work as a double agent. It was decided that a relative, who lived in England and worked as a lecturer at Oxford, should be interviewed to provide a reference for Treasure's character. Her cousin, Doctor Hill, stated that Treasure was 'somewhat of an adventuress; that she was an exceedingly clever girl, being both a successful artist and a journalist'.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, Treasure had been on a walking tour across Europe, on which she wrote articles about the various distinguished people to whom she had gained access via her family connections.<sup>65</sup>

Clearly in Treasure's case, independence, intelligence and courage appear to have been among MI5's target characteristics when recruiting agents. Another female agent, code-named Bronx, certainly fitted that mould. The daughter of a Peruvian diplomat, Elvira Concepcion Josefina Chaudoir had lived in France until 1939 when she departed for England. Once in London she promptly established herself within high society. In 1942

she was sent by MI6, via Lisbon, to Vichy France where she was to pass on secret messages to contacts there and she carried out this task 'to the best of her ability'.<sup>66</sup> While in France she was 'recruited' by German intelligence, and in exchange for regular payment, was tasked with spying on the British upon her return to England. Instead, she was transferred to MI5 and began work as a Double Cross agent.<sup>67</sup> In key respects Bronx displayed the usual characteristics of female agents. She came from a wealthy, educated background and travelled in high society, specifically its gambling circuits. She had multiple contacts including Lord Carnarvon, who further introduced her to Duff Cooper, the Earl of Marlborough, the manager of the American Club, and an individual 'very well in with Russian official circles' in Britain.<sup>68</sup> These kinds of contacts, with access to international information, were naturally of great interest to MI5.

Bronx was not, however, without her problems. She was evidently a gambling addict with debts accrued at the Hamilton Club approaching £1,000. Her monthly payments of around £100 from the *Abwehr*, borrowing from the bank, an allowance from her father, and generous monies from MI5 did not cover these expenses.<sup>69</sup> From MI5's perspective, Bronx was, as one internal memo described her, 'completely mercenary-minded, a "good-time girl" with no allegiance to anyone except herself'. These traits among other factors, limited her value for deception or counter-intelligence.<sup>70</sup> Another memorandum suggested that, although living with a man, had, at least at one time, held 'lesbian tendencies' and was 'intelligent but lazy'.<sup>71</sup> Indeed, somewhat foolishly, she publicly let slip her initial mission for MI6, which was rapidly reported to the authorities. This soon led to a flurry of correspondence as various different agencies, including MI5, Special Branch and the SOE attempted get to the bottom of who she worked for. Either through error or to keep their cards close to their chests, MI6's Kim Philby (himself working in secret for Moscow as a double agent) initially responded to these queries contending that Chaudoir was not employed by them.<sup>72</sup>

Clearly then, the trend of employing masculine, upper-class men, who were well-educated and had, in many cases, military ties, continued during the Second World War. Similarly, women were still recruited with caution and had to have a reliable recommendation. In terms of recruiting agents, albeit in the case of Double Cross partly out of MI5's hands, the women in question were independent, intelligent, and well connected. The reluctance of MI5 to utilise female agents was clearly diminished by the exigencies of war. This emphasis on recruiting well connected, exclusively educated men would of course come back to haunt MI5 and the wider intelligence community during the Cold War. It transpired that it was precisely these attitudes and preconceptions regarding the makings of a high calibre and trustworthy intelligence officer which facilitated the recruitment of the notorious Cambridge Five spy-ring, all of whom were recruited by the Soviet intelligence services while at Cambridge University. These men would go on, during the Second World War, to forge careers at the heart of Britain's secret community. Once in position they leaked highly classified and important intelligence secrets to Moscow.<sup>73</sup> The culture of the intelligence community, it is clear, reflected that of the mandarin and administrative class of the civil service, where the school and university tie ruled supreme. Indeed, some 50% of the administrative class were drawn from fee-paying or public schools and 85% had attended Oxbridge.<sup>74</sup>

## Gender, work and expansion

The Second World War saw MI5's staff numbers grow considerably and the vast majority of those new employees were women. The mass recruitment of women into the wartime agency in some respects followed wider trends within wartime Britain. As is well understood, the labour crisis prompted by the Second World War led to the number of women in the British workforce to increase by 2.25 million by 1943.<sup>75</sup> Indeed, in the context of the wider intelligence community, this reliance on female labour was dwarfed by that of GC&CS which employed approximately 6,750 women at Bletchley Park by December 1944.<sup>76</sup> MI6 also saw an increase in the number of female employees during the war years, though, as was largely the case in the other two agencies, they were employed only in 'subordinate roles'.<sup>77</sup> Similarly, in the United States America, the Office of Strategic Services (the predecessor of the Central Intelligence Agency) came to employ some 4,500 women.<sup>78</sup> The increase in MI5's female staff contingent should not, however, be viewed as a source of new opportunity for women in the agency. The agency's consistently prejudicial attitudes towards gender ensured that the types of role that women could obtain were highly limited to administrative and clerical work. These were, of course, forms of work with which women had become increasingly associated since the boom in the financial sector at the beginning of the century and its increased requirement for 'typewriters'.<sup>79</sup> Other information intensive organisations within British society, not least the civil service which saw a staggering 1,214% increase in female staff, also saw an expansion in the number of women staff they employed as a result of heightened wartime demands.<sup>80</sup>

In July 1939, MI5 was comprised of thirty-six officers, a secretarial and Registry staff of 133, and in September twenty-nine Security Control officers at ports.<sup>81</sup> The outbreak of war necessitated a rapid expansion of the agency to meet an explosion in demand for MI5's services. Unsurprisingly, during this period men occupied the vast majority of middle and senior managerial roles, such as those of department leaders, intelligence officers or agents. As noted, by contrast female staff were generally restricted to clerical roles as they had been since 1909; working as secretaries and typists, or in the Registry. For instance, as [Table 1](#) shows, of 360 officers within the agency in October 1943, 327 were male.<sup>82</sup> They were supported by forty-nine male clerical assistants, thirty-nine less senior women devoid of officer status, and 917 'Female others'—clerical staff and auxiliary rank and file.<sup>83</sup> The exclusion of women of officer status from intelligence roles suggests that during the Second World War women were still treated with caution, trusted far less than men and deemed unsuited to work which required advanced analytical skills and decision-making.

**Table 1.** MI5 Staff Numbers, August 1941–October 1943.

	Men				Women		
	Service Officers	Local Rank Officers	Civilian Officers	Clerical	Officers	Grade 1 and above	Others
Aug-41	80	49	177	48	21	30	801
Jan-42	95	55	175	51	23	32	877
Apr-42	95	58	178	51	27	33	907
Jul-42	94	61	175	53	31	35	880
Dec-42	103	62	168	51	34	38	867
Oct-43	109	65	153	49	33	39	829

Source: TNA, KV 4/156, Table—Functions: Summary of All.

Administrative staff lists from throughout the entire interwar period demonstrate that the positions of directors were consistently filled by male staff members while the heads of the agency's six divisions were predominantly military men.<sup>84</sup> Women, however, were excluded from these higher positions, even though they had the relevant experience. To return to the case of Jane Archer, she was recruited as a clerk in 1916 and was then promoted to head of the Registry in 1922. Despite working in MI5 for twenty-three years, she was never promoted above her middle tier role as an officer of a sub-section within a sub-division.<sup>85</sup> In the wider context of the British intelligence community as a whole, the typical route for a woman to reach officer status was via promotion to a position of seniority and responsibility over other women. Meanwhile, at GC&CS, with few exceptions, women were primarily restricted to clerical work and machine operation.<sup>86</sup> This was equally a consistent trend in the delegation of lower-ranking intelligence officers throughout the divisions of MI5 at this time. Whilst men were not only prevalent in the roles of division directors, they also made up all of the roles of sub-division directors, except for the Registry and Finance sub-divisions in A Division, and were again the majority of sub-section officers in 1939.<sup>87</sup>

The treatment of Archer is suggestive of the delegation of work to, and treatment of, women in MI5 at this time. Whilst Masterman wrote that personnel in MI5 during the war were 'a team of congenial people who worked together harmoniously and unselfishly, and among whom rank counted for little', this was clearly not true in Archer's case.<sup>88</sup> Moreover, as highlighted above, Christopher Andrew notes that 'No other woman was given officer rank for the remainder of the war, even if a substantial number performed officers' jobs'.<sup>89</sup> Furthermore, he suggests that fragmentary evidence indicates that, in the wake of Archer's sacking, a new regulation was implemented in 1941, which made it impossible for women to be promoted to officer rank in the future. Yet as the data in Table 1 demonstrates, the number of women described as 'officers' on MI5's books increased from twenty-one to thirty-three between August 1941 and October 1943. However, MI5's tables of the numbers of staff delegated across various departments of the agency (some data from which is compiled in Table 2), list these female employees (officers or otherwise) under the category of 'Female Clerical Assist[ant]s'. Clearly these

Table 2. Delegation of 'Female Officers'.

Section	Date					
	Aug-41	Jan-42	Apr-42	Jul-42	Dec-42	Oct-43
Director General Staff	–	–	–	–	1	2
Administration	–	–	–	–	–	–
Registry	–	–	–	–	–	–
Overseas Staff	–	–	–	–	–	2
Regional Staff	–	–	–	–	–	–
B: Counterespionage	7	7	9	11	12	10
C: Credentials	1	1	1	1	1	–
D.1, D.2, D.3 & D.C & D <sup>a</sup>	1	1	1	1	1	1
D.4 (Headquarters only)	–	1	2	2	2	–
E: Alien Control	5	5	6	7	7	5
F: Subversive Movements	7	8	8	9	10	12

TNA, KV 4/156, Five Tables on Women Staff.  
<sup>a</sup>Sub-sections of D Division, described as: 'Security in factories, firms and establishments, and liaison with the Service and Supply Departments, Security Control at sea and air ports and travel control.' TNA, KV 4/156, The Security Service [no date, document 14A].

‘officers’ were supervising the other women engaged in clerical or auxiliary roles.<sup>90</sup> Two apparent possibilities suggest themselves to resolve this contradiction. First, it appears entirely plausible that women were restricted from officer status in the male sphere of intelligence gathering and analysis. That is, they could not become *intelligence* officers. However, this did not preclude female staff from obtaining ‘officer’ roles in white collar ‘women’s work’. Second, and related to the first point, the women listed as ‘officers’ might not have held the formal status within the agency, but they did hold authority, engaged in work tantamount to that of an officer and the word was utilised for convenience.

Certainly, MI5 had a history of referring to women who had the role and responsibility of an officer but not the actual rank, as was the case of the management of Registry during the First World War.<sup>91</sup> Moreover, lists of section leaders in A Division, which included the Registry, in 1939 named female section and sub-section leaders whereas no female officers were listed in the Registry in tables from August 1941 and October 1943.<sup>92</sup> Rather than a wholesale purge of A Division’s middle management, it appears that the word ‘officer’ was utilised interchangeably to indicate status rather than rank.

As noted above, the majority of women were restricted to clerical roles, and as Table 3 shows the majority distributed around the various sections of the agency with the Registry absorbing the largest number. As there appear to be no personal files available on the clerical staff of MI5 during the war, what is known about the clerical workers can only be seen in staff lists and staff reviews. These summaries record, as Tables 1 and 3 indicate, male clerical staff performed only a fraction of this work. Meanwhile, after Petrie became MI5’s Director General, the female-dominated Registry was mechanised in order ‘to be’, as one staff member put it, ‘something like Ford’s factory where each worker had one job to do’.<sup>93</sup> This clear reference to Henry Ford’s car factories, in this instance, demonstrated a wartime shift to industrial management of information processing—data was placed onto a production line.<sup>94</sup> The result was that the staff endured a loss of responsibility, where, prior to 1940, they had enjoyed some degree of personal latitude in their work. Under Kell’s Directorship, the Registry staff required a specialised knowledge of their specific subject, especially those in positions of leadership; after its revamping this was diminished.

**Table 3.** Delegation of ‘Female Others’.

Section	Date					
	Aug-41	Jan-42	Apr-42	Jul-42	Dec-42	Oct-43
Director General Staff	13	11	10	15	21	22
Administration	42	44	52	54	75	347 <sup>a</sup>
Registry	362	372	391	362	315	
Overseas Staff	3	10	13	16	24	38
Regional Staff	54	55	56	55	57	48
B: Counterespionage	127	164	177	182	192	209
C: Credentials	28	30	31	32	31	17
D.1, D.2, D.3 & D.C & D	30	30	32	34	26	29
D.4 (Headquarters only)	24	29	24	22	26	25
E: Alien Control	80	80	75	65	60	51
F: Subversive Movements	48	52	46	43	40	43
Total	811	877	907	865	867	829

TNA, KV 4/156, Five Tables on Women Staff.

<sup>a</sup>The figures for the Registry and Administration are combined on the October 1943 table.



Moreover, the changes implemented under Petrie's Directorship also required that the heads of sections no longer dealt with disparate subjects, and responsibility for decisions regarding sorting and extracting information were transferred to officers within the relevant divisions. This meant that Registry staff were no longer required to have specialised knowledge<sup>95</sup> as they were now responsible for far simpler tasks, including filing and indexing.<sup>96</sup> The changes were clearly necessary given the situation. Prior to the outbreak of war the section had been understaffed and under-resourced, yet with the onset of war its workload increased far beyond its ability to manage.<sup>97</sup> However, the changes in responsibility also implied that the Registry staff were no longer to be trusted with such specialised tasks, which led to bitter complaints.<sup>98</sup> Of course, if viewed in another light, the collapse of the Registry is revelatory; the lack of interest shown in the Registry—'women's work'—by MI5's male elites, forced a minor industrial revolution within the agency when it was 'tested' by war. The result being that MI5 was indeed made more efficient and passed its test, but that women who were not responsible for the Registry's malaise saw their roles downgraded in the name of progress.

## Conclusion

This examination of the recruitment, role and perception of women in MI5, though primarily concerned with the Second World War, reveals results which tend to conform to the bulk of the scholarship to address the role of women in wartime Britain over the last three decades. Studies of women in Britain's wartime Home Front, broadly since the 1980s, have presented the war as a period which demonstrated considerable continuity with earlier developments in the century. Penny Summerfield contended in 1984 that, 'in spite of challenge and expectation', the war was characterised by familiar 'pre-war attitudes and practices towards women' and that this was 'considerable in the areas of both domestic work and paid employment'.<sup>99</sup> While the domestic duties of women in the intelligence services in wartime Britain has yet to be explored, such a study is beyond the scope of a single article. However, this study does confirm that, in the case of MI5, there was indeed little change with regards to attitudes towards gender, from its foundations in 1909 to 1945. Meanwhile, recruitment trends, which highlight the significance of nationality and social class, similarly tend to corroborate Sonya Rose's conclusion, that wartime efforts to promote national unity hid significant underlying tensions.<sup>100</sup>

Isolated from wider society by a thick veil of secrecy and fear of infiltration, this agency which from its creation, founded as it was by military men with ties to the aristocracy, reflected a rarefied form of early twentieth-century British hegemonic masculinity. Those women employed tended to be from elite backgrounds; gentlewomen with an elite education and good social connections, suggestive perhaps of a form of 'hegemonic femininity'; an idealised archetype of middle and upper-class womanhood. Juliette Pattinson, in her discussion of female SOE agents, utilises the term 'dominant femininity' and avoids the term 'hegemonic'. This is because the modes of feminine behaviour performed by SOE agents, operating behind enemy lines, were specifically designed to avoid arousing potentially fatal suspicion.<sup>101</sup> Such a qualification in the case of MI5 is unnecessary; the agency's female employees and agents were rarely, if ever, called upon to pass unnoticed in occupied Europe. Instead, MI5's ideal female employee was required to hold 'exalted' feminine traits; she needed to be capable, reliable and well educated. She was also of



sufficiently high social status that her patriotism and good character could be taken for granted, and, unlike Jane Archer, she showed proper deference to male authority. There was little impetus or opportunity for divergence from these established internal cultural norms over the first two decades of the agency's existence, in spite of the pressures of the First World War. Though the number of women employed by the agency did increase massively during that conflict, their roles were near universally restricted to auxiliary and clerical work. A very few women within MI5 did gain positions of authority, but that was, with the exception of perhaps only Jane Archer, restricted in the vast majority of cases to authority over other women conducting work deemed socially permissible for women. Even compared to GC&CS, the only British intelligence agency in the Second World War to have been systematically analysed in regards to gender, MI5's delegation of work to women was profoundly restrictive.

Interestingly, an examination of wartime MI5 provides an opportunity to revisit Arthur Marwick's familiar, if dated, 'Four Dimensions' thesis.<sup>102</sup> The war brought with it considerable disruption in the form of increased threats, real and perceived, to Britain's national security which saw a rapid expansion of MI5's workload. The major impact of this was to necessitate increased participation via a rapid expansion of MI5's workforce, primarily in the form of female staff, though the number of male officers also increased by an order of magnitude. Yet this increase in participation should not be viewed as change in the agency's managers' attitudes and perceptions of gender—female staff were limited to familiar 'women's work' primarily consisting of clerical, secretarial and auxiliary roles and access to the work of intelligence officers was highly limited, as it always had been. Indeed, if the treatment of Jane Archer and the reconfiguration of the Registry are indicative, the status of women in the wartime agency actually *declined* as a result of the war. MI5 might have modernised and passed the test of war, but in doing so there was little change in the psychological attitude towards women, gender, social class or nationality. In terms of the recruitment of female agents, some rare individuals like Maxwell Knight, who, despite wider agency attitudes, claimed to have always believed that women had an important part to play in secret work. Yet the acceptance of women in this masculine world was only tolerable if it conformed to established ideas regarding femininity and social status: female agents should be carefully chosen to ensure that they were not burdened by an emotional state of mind or be 'over-sexed'. Where they were useful, Knight concluded, lay in traditional feminine qualities such as the possession of 'women's intuition'. The challenge of war did not shake pre-existing understandings of masculinity, femininity and social status; it further confirmed them.

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82. Note that Andrew provides different figures suggesting a maximum number of wartime officers, in January 1943, amounted to a total of 334: *Ibid*.
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90. Five tables in TNA, KV 4/156, listing female staff statistics from August 1941 to December 1942, are entitled 'Female Clerical Assists'.
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102. That is, war, and in particular the two 'total wars' of the twentieth century, furthered social change through four distinct mechanisms. These were, first, 'destruction and disruption' which required major state intervention and, in the case of physical damage to infrastructure, mass rebuilding projects. Second, institutions and social apparatus were 'tested' by the demands of conflict. Those bodies which failed their tests were forced to adapt and improve or risk collapse. Third, wartime labour demands saw increased 'participation' in various roles and industries, by groups (women most notably) which had previously been underrepresented in those sectors and jobs. Fourth, war had a profound 'psychological'

impact on the British public; after all the bloodshed and suffering it was felt that a better society should emerge from the carnage: Arthur Marwick (1988) Introduction, in Arthur Marwick (Ed.) *Total War and Social Change* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), pp. xv–xvi.

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