

BOOK REVIEW

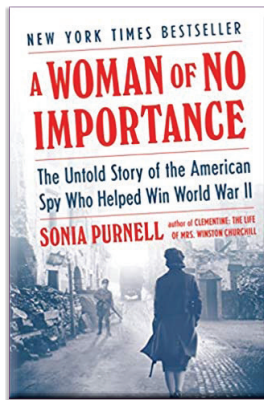
A Woman of No Importance

The Untold Story of the American Spy Who Helped Win World War II

Purnell S. *A Woman of No Importance: The Untold Story of the American Spy Who Helped Win World War II*. Viking; Illustrated edition (April 9, 2019); 368 pp; ISBN 978-0-7352-2531-2

Reviewed by Scott P. Graverson, PhD

This historical biography details the daring exploits of Virginia Hall, an American woman working in Europe during the beginning of World War II. The story takes the reader from the wealthy suburbs of Baltimore at the beginning of Virginia's life to the slums of Paris, where Virginia honed her spycraft, reporting on Nazi movements to MI6. The daughter of socialite parents, her family wished nothing than for Virginia to return to her roots, marry well, and have children. These familial desires could not be further from Virginia's interests. She dreamt of a diplomatic career that took her to exotic lands from a young age. After her commencement from George Washington University, Virginia accepted a position in the State Department in Poland.



As the Third Reich and Adolph Hitler came to power, this position gave her unique access to gather vital intelligence for Allied Forces in their bid to defeat the Nazi occupation. Virginia had to overcome ableism and sexism from both American and British intelligence agencies, having to prove her worth over and over again. As an amputee, her handlers believed her missing leg would hinder her ability to perform her duties; however, she used that unique characteristic to her advantage, quickly getting lost in the crowds of Paris – nobody believing an amputee to be a danger to the Third Reich. Eventually, this characteristic became her trademark and was well known to the Gestapo when they were hot on her trail.

The story details her larger-than-life exploits. The tale describes Virginia's successful attempt at breaking 12 comrades out of the infamous Pèrigueux prison in southwest France. The Nazis used this freezing and somber fortress with stinking dungeons to imprison 6 British and 6 French spies. When she was finally in the sights of the Gestapo, Virginia was forced to flee France on foot – crossing the Pyrénées Mountains at Mantet Pass, 6,000 feet above sea level in the dead of winter, walking on a prosthetic leg. Once in the safety of Spain, Virginia returned to Great Britain for a period of recuperation before rejoining the fight in France. She eventually earned great trust in the intelligence community and provided vital intelligence, which enabled the successful D-Day invasion on Omaha Beach.

Virginia was one of the first agents selected to work with General William "Wild Bill" Donovan in the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), laying the foundational groundwork for what is now the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Virginia was highly decorated for her actions, earning the Distinguished Service Cross, the French Croix de Guerre, and induction as a Member of the Order of the British Empire. In 2019, Virginia was inducted into the Commando Hall of Honor at the United States Special Operations Command.



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