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Beyond the Spooks: The Problem with the Narrator in Literary History

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Literary History

## **ABSTRACT**

The discrepancies between a biography about a decorated Soviet intelligence agent and the authenticated facts of her life illustrate the inherent difficulties and ethical dilemmas of researching intelligence history. Kitty Harris was among the few women named in the official history of Soviet Intelligence because of her role as double-agent Donald MacLean's controller and in running couriers from Mexico to Los Alamos in the late 1940s. Harris's biography written by the former KGB agent Igor Damaskin, presents an example of a source that is unreliable since the majority of sources on which it is based remain closed to public scrutiny. This paper explores the difficulties of constructing a scholarly literary history in the field of intelligence when both interview sources and official records prove more unreliable, and susceptible to bias, than other public domain sources and records.

## **KEYWORDS**

Literary history, intelligence journalism, Kitty Harris, Igor Damaskin, KGB, Mata Hari, NKVD, whistleblowers

## **INTRODUCTION**

‘Luckily, old secrets aren’t old; old secrets are history.’

Jill Lepore, *The New Yorker*, 24 June 2013

Everyone who writes about intelligence – hacks, novelists, literary journalists and academic historians – must confront the seductive powers of the espionage myth. In popular culture, an intelligence agent operates in the spaces ‘between’ – legal and illegal, public and private, and fact and fiction. The characters of a George Smiley, James Bond or Modesty Blaise are often confused with their real-life counterparts while the real, and often more mundane stories, go unrecorded. Former intelligence agents-turned-historians or novelists reinforce the myths, controlling the flow of information and protecting their reputations, or shaping stories to justify the institutions for which they work. As the CIA’s ‘entertainment industry liaison officer’ recently made clear, these popular stories are important to the intelligence agencies: ‘Hollywood is the only way that the public learns about the Agency’ (Jenkins 2012). While whistleblower Edward Snowden’s recent leaks about the NSA and its close British partner, GCHQ may soon take the shine off the glamour of intelligence gathering, the novelist John le Carré describes its enduring appeal. ‘[Spies] know their own legends and foster them, even believe them, and like actors they know the punter is watching them all the time’ (le Carré, 2013a). Moreover, the clandestine nature of spying – with its trade in information, cover stories, secret files and ‘classified’ documents – lends itself to these quasi-fictional representations. Their information is authoritative but not always reliable, creating a source of knowledge that demands trust from a potentially untrustworthy source (White, 2007).

Although this ethical dilemma applies to all branches of intelligence, there is a special case to be made for the representation of female agents. In popular and academic histories until recently, they have either been neglected, marginalized or discredited as either ‘honey traps’ or ‘spy courtesans’ whose role within intelligence history is inevitably sexualized (Miller, 2003; Proctor, 2003; White, 2004; Wheelwright, 1992). This is illustrated by the story of Kitty Harris, one of the few female NKVD agents to be decorated, whose career for Soviet intelligence spanned almost two decades. Harris was the subject of a Russian-language biography in 1999 that was translated into English two years later and of a drama-documentary for Canadian television in 2004.

In this paper, I will explore the particular ethical challenges facing the literary journalist when writing on the subject of intelligence, where information is notoriously hard to verify, by analyzing the biographical treatment of Harris. In the process, I hope to raise relevant questions for an

approach to the writing of history, using Norman Sims's definition of 'literary history' as a category of writing where journalism and history overlap (Sims, 2012).

Historians and journalists agree that intelligence sources may be difficult, even impossible, to confirm and Keeble argues that in this field, 'the focus of journalism shifts from objective, verifiable "facts" to myth: in effect, there is a crucial epistemological shift' (Keeble, 2004: 49). Others have identified a problem of political discourse in which facts or 'discernible reality' are now considered antiquated and spin doctors create what Garton Ash has called 'a neo-Orwellian world of manufactured reality' (Keeble, 2004: 49; Salmon, 2010: 126). Even when the source is verified, the literary historian faces the possibility of an additional ethical challenge, in the expectation of a favourable interpretation in exchange for access. As Trevor-Roper commented: 'When a historian relies mainly on sources which we cannot easily check, he challenges our confidence and forces us to ask critical questions. How reliable is the historical method? How sound is his judgment?' (in Dorril, 2010: 6).

I faced these problems directly when working as a co-producer and co-writer of the 2004 Canadian History Channel drama-documentary about Harris, *A Spy's Life: Kitty Harris*. On the surface, Harris (1900-1966) was a perfect subject for investigating myths about female spies. She was the child of Jewish Russian émigrés to Canada and until the 1995 release of the Venona files (Soviet messages decrypted by US and British intelligence in the 1940s), virtually unknown outside Russia.<sup>1</sup> After Harris was identified as the agent referred to in the traffic as ADA, a Russian biography of her was published, authored by retired KGB agent Igor Damaskin (Damaskin, 1999). Two years later, Geoffrey Elliot's English translation of *Kitty Harris: The Spy with the Seventeen Names*, was published in the UK.

Both versions added detail to an extraordinary intelligence career that spanned operations in China, the US, Germany, the USSR, Britain, France and Mexico. An early member of the Canadian Communist Party and the Industrial Workers of the World, Harris married Earl Browder, the president of the American CP, in 1923 and moved with him to Shanghai in 1927 where she worked for the Comintern (the international Communist organization founded in 1919). Later she was recruited by the NKVD<sup>2</sup> in New York, operated a safe house<sup>2</sup> in London where she worked with the British double-agent Donald MacLean, who became her lover, and later ran couriers to Los Alamos from Mexico. She was one of the few women given a KGB guard of honour after her death in 1966 (Damaskin with Elliot 2001; 230). Harris evaded detection by the FBI for four decades, but emerged into the light when the US government published the decrypted Venona files and she has

been mentioned in several subsequent biographies and Cold War histories (Haynes & Klehr 2000, Schechter & Schechter, 2002).

### *The Spy with the Seventeen Names*

The biography by Damaskin, based on ‘a thick file’ (Gordievsky, 2003) in Russia’s Foreign Intelligence Services archives, portrayed Harris as a loyal party worker, a passionate believer in the Communist cause and in the Soviet Union, the nation of her parents’ birth. According to Oleg Gordievsky, a former KGB agent and double-agent for British intelligence, the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (FSB) vetted Harris’ files before releasing them to Damaskin and allowed the book’s publication because it portrayed Soviet intelligence in a favourable light. ‘[G]ullible foreigners were probably the main target readership,’ Gordievsky commented in a *Spectator* review, ‘[G]iving as it does a picture of a Soviet agent who was loyal, conscientious and devoted to communism (Gordievsky, 2003).’ The Harris biography, he added, was among many that KGB Colonel Oleg Tsarev organised ‘to improve the image of the KGB abroad’ (Gordievsky, 2003).

Following the publication of the Harris biography, Damaskin agreed to act as a consultant on our drama-documentary, *A Spy’s Life: Kitty Harris*. In a series of interviews that I conducted with Damaskin in Moscow and London, and from our production team’s research into Harris’s life, however, significant discrepancies emerged between the biography as published and the evidence from primary documents. The manufactured elements in the English edition of Damaskin’s biography appeared to confirm Kitty Harris’s place among those female agents with a healthy sexual appetite, recruited because of a love interest (her marriage to Browder). In Harris’s case, Damaskin supplied her with a lover, Peter Skonetsky (Damaskin with Elliott 2002; 24; 28-30), who was identified as a member of the 1919 strike committee of the Industrial Workers of the World and a member of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) serving in the First World War. However, a search of CEF records at Library and Archives Canada finds no listing for a Peter Skonetsky; neither does this name yield anything in the records for provincial birth, death or marriage.

When I asked Damaskin about Skonetsky during an interview (Damaskin 2003), he admitted that Peter was a fictionalized character, included to provide Kitty with a romance. Another fiction concerned Kitty’s father Nathan: the biography claims that he died in Chicago in 1932, but the government of Manitoba’s statistical records show that he died on 1 March 1919.<sup>3</sup> Changing the date of Nathan Harris’s death is particularly egregious since Damaskin’s book includes scenes

between father and daughter – one complete with dialogue – up until 1932. A third example of the biography's unreliability can be found in a 'scene' where Harris is recruited into the NKVD by a friend, Harry Terras, in New York in 1931 (Damaskin with Elliot 2002: 82). Since Harris had already received training and political indoctrination to operate as a courier in China for the Comintern [in 1927], it would be, according to one historian, 'just daft' for her to ask Terras: 'Will it help Russia?' (Damaskin, 2003) Gordievsky laments the biography's absence of footnotes and the brevity of its bibliography, concluding: 'In reality, this is a novel about Soviet intelligence, despite the fact that all the characters are real' (Gordievsky, 2003).

How then can literary journalists measure the value of the information provided by experienced individuals, like Damaskin, who may be working to a hidden agenda or who even admit to their unreliability as a source? A starting point, as indicated above, may be to resist the 'espionage myth' – that one must trust the 'unreliable narrator' because of their experience and inside knowledge. The unreliability extends to the narrators contained within the official documentary record, as Damaskin himself acknowledged:

[A]rchives all over the world are founded on agents' evidence and those people can lie, can be wrong or just not correct on purpose. Any person who forms a document is a man with his subjective qualities and he [can] put into a document what he thinks is right and needed. After that, a document bears different amendments of different superiors who are also subjective and also such documents are usually formed in favour of different leaders (Damaskin 2003).

Lc Carré has captured on the page the psychology of this exchange, in which the intelligence agent offers revelations to a trusting 'punter'. As he writes:

Their power over you lies in letting you know a little bit, and implying they know a whole lot more; in reminding you of the perils they grapple with, day and night, while you lie in hoggish slumber in your bed. You must take us on trust, they are telling you; or else pay the price when the bomb goes off in the marketplace. (le Carré, 2013a)

The problem is that, mixed in with the mythologizing, there is also valuable information worthy of discovery that can genuinely shed light on historical events. How, then, to separate the fact from the fantasy?

*Whistleblowing and leaking*



Professor Richard J Aldrich, an expert on Cold War Intelligence, has claimed that given enough time to search thoroughly and to work laterally through unlikely files, ‘with enough coffee and cigarettes’, most subjects can be examined (in Dorril, 2010: 11). ‘The motto of these dedicated denizens of the archives is that there are no secrets, only lazy researchers’ (ibid). However, as Dorril points out, closed government files make the historian’s job infinitely more difficult and certainly literary journalists or documentarians working to a different time scale, may fall back on oral sources rather than undertaking their own primary research. In the case of *A Spy’s Life*, a request in June 2003 to view Kitty Harris’ intelligence files was denied by the SVR. I wrote to my co-producer on this subject, explaining that our only hope of accessing these documents was with Damaskin’s support because ‘he will know if there’s anything in the files that could compromise someone who is living . . . and that he will know how to interpret the files’ (author to Wheelwright, 2003). However, Damaskin was only granted limited access to the files in September and October 2003.

This scenario illustrates how researchers, therefore, find themselves reliant upon former agents who may have their own motives for providing access to privileged information. One category of narrator that deserves mention is that of the whistle-blower. Here, the source may be motivated to counter the mythology of the services in which he or she has served or to expose their former (or current) enemies. As Knightley (1986), Jenkins (2012), Miller (2003) and others have argued, the intelligence services in the US and Europe are huge empires that are adept at justifying their vast budgets by publicising their successes and minimizing their failures. Furthermore, many of these agencies, even within the same state, are competing against each other and factionalism leads to leaks, with one faction attempting to promote its interests over another. This is unproblematic until the information released threatens the elite in some significant way and then the full force of the law is thrown at the leaker (Campbell, 2011).

The actions of whistleblowers disillusioned or enraged with the institutions for which they labour have the potential to change the course of history as demonstrated by Daniel Ellsberg’s leaking of the Pentagon Papers in 1971, Philip Agee’s damning CIA expose in 1975 and Mordecai Vanunu’s revelations about the Israeli government’s nuclear arms programme in 1986 (Campbell, 2011). This practice of ‘leaking’ where covert sources pass sensitive or confidential information to a journalist is a time-honoured way for government and private sector employees to highlight malpractice. However, in our current age of IT ‘hyper-connectivity’, new information flows intersect with economic, political, social, and cultural force fields that hold ever-greater democratic potential. According to Pieterse (2012), ‘one of the frontiers is “liberation technology” which ranges from

hacking to whistleblowing, leaking and “clicktivism””. Pieterse argues that the real impact of WikiLeaks, the organization that disclosed 251,287 US embassy cables, was its confirmation and documentation of hegemonic operations, political complicity and war cries, changing their status from ‘allegations and hearsay to actionable offence or, at a minimum, information that carries political consequences’ (Pieterse, 2012: 1913). Furthermore, Shirky suggest that WikiLeaks represented a shift from hacking to leaking, or facilitating ‘insiders from large organisations to copy sensitive, confidential data and pass it on to the public domain while remaining anonymous’ (in Pieterse, 2012: 1919).

The revelations made in June 2013 by former NSA contractor Edward Snowden coincided with the trial of army private Chelsea Manning who was sentenced to a 35-year term for passing the US cables to WikiLeaks in 2010. These whistleblowers have paid a heavy price for their actions. Dinah Pokempner, general counsel of Human Rights Watch commented on what Snowden might expect in a US court: ‘While there is little doubt that Edward Snowden would have highly credible claims under international human rights standards for protection as a whistleblower, US law offers no protections for those who reveal to the public wrongdoing in the areas of national security or intelligence. His rights would not be protected, and he would not be able to count on this as a defence to criminal charges’ (MacAskill, 2010). These whistleblowers made public what they regarded as immoral, indecent or even undemocratic acts. The key difference between these disaffected secret warriors and their ‘official’ counterparts is that they operate outside of their institutions, often alone and at great personal risk. Their motives may be more transparent and, therefore, journalists place a greater level of trust in their testimony and data. However, we can also see from the examples of WikiLeaks and Snowden’s revelations that ‘hyper-connectivity’ has changed the volume, scale and global consequences of whistleblowing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Hyper-connectivity has transformed the landscape, but cases from the Cold War and even earlier periods can teach us about investigating the validity of intelligence sources for the purposes of literary journalism and historical writing. Just as thinking laterally about sources is important, so too is conducting what might be described as an ‘internal check’ of one’s own subjectivity. To avoid the romantic pull of plots from popular fiction, and indeed popular history, the literary journalist must first be aware of them. Furthermore, sensitivity to sources whose writing appears to conform to these popular tropes through their use of language, style, tone and plotting devices, may enable the investigator to better understand the function these stories serve. The military files related to the interrogation and prosecution of Margaretha Zelle MacLeod (1876-1917) – aka Mata Hari – offer one such example. In my deep archival research on this subject, I observed how her

French prosecutors often described her as Indian, Indonesian, or Jewish (she was a Dutch citizen from Leeuwarden and a Protestant). This loaded category of ‘foreigner’ served to reinforce Mata Hari’s status as an outsider and therefore, her public acceptability as a scapegoat for the French losses on the Western Front in 1917. In this case, the prosecutors also falsified evidence against her, building her into a femme fatale who was guilty of the ‘collective assassination’ of 50,000 men (in Wheelwright 1992, p. 88). Mata Hari embodied the French fears of independent women and foreigners that propagandists used to shore up a flagging sense of Gallic nationhood.

A study exploring how Mata Hari’s legend was created only became possible after the French military files related to her case were made public in 1984. By then, the mythology and its racist and gendered language about the ‘collective assassin’ had taken firm root. The first of many books about her case appeared in 1917, establishing the myth about Mata Hari as a ‘collective assassin’ that proved hard to shake. These early biographies based their claims on rumours, anecdotes and unattributed interviews while often conflating events<sup>4</sup> and implying that the narrator's authority stemmed from previous experience (most were male ex-intelligence or ex-military officers) and from access to ‘secret’ papers. French officer Emile Massard, later author of *Les espionnes à Paris* in 1922, used his credibility as an eyewitness at her court martial in 1917 when she was condemned to death and claimed to have consulted ‘Mata's dossier’. In his introduction he underlines its veracity, in an ironic echo of Gordievsky on Damaskin: ‘This book is not a novel, it is a document’ (Massard, 1922: 2).

Despite Massard’s plea of authenticity, the book contains purely fictional elements, including a description of Mata Hari as a volunteer nurse, seducing allied soldiers to gain military information. (Massard, 1922: 219) While the actual ‘Dossier Mata Hari’ lodged in the Service Historique de l’armée de Terre outside of Paris contains no evidence for this, Mata Hari's nursing role appeared in subsequent biographies (Newman, 1956: 63; Coulson, 1930a: 110). Massard encouraged his readers to believe the prosecution’s charge that her execution was justified as punishment for her national betrayal. The fabrication strayed into the territory of propaganda, ensuring that the myth of the treacherous female spy, popular in fiction and film before the First World War, would endure (Wheelwright, 1994; Darrow, 2000: 273). Although the guilt or innocence of Mata Hari is a complicated matter, there is no evidence in the French military files, nor anywhere else, that the famous ‘spy courtesan’ used her seductive charms to extract information from allied soldiers.

This approach, where the nuances of language and an understanding of the deep context in which images and ideas should be read, illustrates one way of resisting the spy mythology. What is

perhaps more difficult is judging how to evaluate sources that contain fictional elements. When challenged about the accuracy of Harris's biography Damaskin countered that its romantic elements did not invalidate its historical worth. Kitty, he claimed, should be read as a composite for the type of female agent who had laid down her life for an ideological cause and for her country. As Damaskin explained: 'until that moment [in his biography] when she joined Soviet intelligence [in 1931], well, it's a bit obscure . . . well, it would [have] an element of fantasy in it' (Damaskin 2003). When our interview moved to Harris's work for the Comintern in Shanghai after 1927, described in detail in the biography, he admitted that the intelligence archives yielded no 'specific records describing risks and all the hazards of those assignments' but that 'most likely [] she had been involved in risky situations' (Damaskin 2003).

Rabinowitz's attempt to formulate a reader-oriented criticism in the 1970s, reconceptualising Walter C. Booth's idea of the 'unreliable narrator' as one who tells lies, conceals and misjudges his/her narrative audience, may be helpful here (Rabinowitz, 1977). In an interview the literary journalist must evaluate both the accuracy of the information from the subject (the narrator) but also the mode in which it is delivered. If we recognize the performative element in an interview, we become sensitive to body language, pauses, gaps and silences which all indicate possible motives behind its delivery and therefore, to the trustworthiness of the subject. Rabinowitz makes an interesting point about a duality that may be especially relevant to the 'reading' of intelligence stories which, more than most works of non-fiction, slip between fiction and factual modes. Rabinowitz points out that readers of fiction hold the contradictory notions that in any proper reading, the events portrayed must be treated as simultaneously 'true' and 'untrue'. However, the greater the distance – geographical, cultural, chronological – between the author and his readers, the more difficult it is for the writer to bridge this gap (Rabinowitz, 1977: 125-126).

This same principle may operate for literary journalists writing for the medium of documentary television. As Elias has argued, 'Documentaries are constructs, yet they seek to reveal the real without mediation. Watching a documentary involves holding these two contradictory beliefs at once, a process of disavowal which is not terribly unusual in human behavior, but is inherently unstable' (in De Groot, 2009: 149). However, whether consumers of historical documentaries are concerned with the problem of narrative instability and the authenticity of sources is another matter. According to Eitzen, 'popular audiences of historical documentaries are not particularly interested either in the complexity of the past or in explaining it. What they want more than anything . . . is a powerful emotional experience' and practitioners of television history believe that coherence and a drive towards storytelling take priority over historiography (in De Groot, 2009: 152). In fact, the

discrepancies between the fictional elements of Damaskin's biography were not considered relevant to the narrative of *A Spy's Life* so that the viewer would know nothing of the narrator's unreliability (*A Spy's Life*, 2004).

There are other elements at work in these readings too. *The Spy with the Seventeen Names* often lacks the kind of specific detail about dates and locations but includes lengthy passages of dialogue between Harris and others, along with her inner thoughts, all of which are presented without attribution so are impossible to verify.<sup>5</sup> As Gordievsky points out, the lack of sources alone suggests only a partial disclosure of Harris's actual career and life (Gordievsky, 2003). Harris, portrayed as a heroine who sacrifices comfort, physical and emotional security for the greater cause, fits White's definition of female spy archetypes that appear in popular culture; Mata Hari is the 'spy courtesan' and Kitty Harris is the 'female professional' who ends up, by her very presence, raising questions about the 'great game' and the 'socio-political matrix' that are never resolved (White, 2007: 7).

A contextual reading is essential to understanding Damaskin's biography, or any other. The 'fantasy' elements in this purportedly factual account suggest that his Russian audience may well 'read' it as a form of romantic literature. 'I just fell in love with this woman,' Damaskin said in one interview. 'All her life she was serving our country. She never criticised our country though she was imprisoned here at some point and put into a mental asylum' (Damaskin 2003) Like a religious martyr, Harris's faith was tested when she was recalled to the Soviet Union in 1947 and subsequently detained in a psychiatric hospital until 1954. Damaskin's nostalgia for a vanished empire seems to reflect a trend that Marsh identifies in a recent survey of post-Soviet Russian literature where patriarchal and nation-patriotic values are reasserted. Contemporary Russian critics have interpreted these writings as an emotional response to the humiliation and injured narcissism of Russian men rendered powerless after the loss of their empire and the decline of their nation's 'Great Power' status (Marsh, 2013: 200). Indeed, it is possible to place Damaskin's version of Harris's story within the dominant traditional ideal of the pure-hearted Russian woman who will do anything, even serving a few years in a psychiatric hospital, to serve the nation's ideological cause.

As these examples demonstrate, the lesson for literary journalists in this field is to be alert to nuances of language, to compare accounts and to contextualise material, to think creatively about identifying sources and to be sensitive to those that appear to validate popular mythologies. The *reception* of myth-busting or revisionist readings of spy stories, not just their production, provides another dimension worth exploring in this context. Le Carré offers an intriguing example, in a comment made on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his novel *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold*. Ever

since its first publication in 1963, le Carré has described the work as fiction and has said that if it the British secret service would never have allowed a factual account. However, the mythology insisted on making its claims:

...the journalists of the time weren't having any of that. I was the British spy who had come out of the woodwork and told it how it really was, and anything I said to the contrary only enforced the myth. And since I was writing for a public hooked on Bond and desperate for the antidote, the myth stuck (le Carré, 2013 b).

Writing a month later, in response to Snowden's revelations, le Carré acknowledged his own possible complicity in this process: '[L]ike other writers in the field, I have contributed to the spy's mythological status, even if my characters are divided about the things they do. And sometimes I feel a bit shifty about that' (le Carré, 2013a). Le Carré fully admits that the intelligence services are prone to building their own legends, based as they are on concepts of secrecy where agents have access to powerful, even implosive, state secrets. But the process of myth making in biographies like Damaskin's is discernible to the careful reader, who reads between the lines that it is not so much a report on events as a romantic interpretation, a watery approximation of a life.

Reading an interview and an author's writing with an understanding of their declared and hidden subjectivity, including an awareness in intelligence history of its enduring mythologies, may help with the problem of interpretation. But it is also incumbent upon the literary historian to undertake his or her own internal checks to avoid suggesting that theirs is a more neutral, and therefore superior, narrative. As Novick has argued on the ethics of historical practice, there is a need for both a bedrock of commitment to rigorous factual accuracy while acknowledging that it can make no greater truth claims than poets or painters (Novick, 1998). However, there is a risk in assuming that if history is merely literature, then the truth of the matter is entirely relative (and of no consequence because it is just a story) and open to individual interpretation (Sims, 2012: 215). Damaskin's biography of a Soviet spy, where it appears unproblematic that scenes and characters are manufactured, illustrates this point very clearly.

### **Conclusion:**

As the biographies of Kitty Harris and Mata Hari illustrate, for the literary journalist engaged in a critical history of the intelligence services, it is important to understand the underlying myths and romantic literary conventions of their subjects. In this way, they may become more aware of how their own subjectivity may act as a guiding force in their (and other's) choice of subject, their identification of appropriate sources and their interpretation of historical data. These challenges

may lead them to find innovative ways of researching in areas previously regarded as impervious to serious intellectual exploration. While government and institutional records rarely give a complete picture, oral and secondary sources can add much to providing necessary context and immersive detail for the literary historian. However, since these sources cannot be taken at face value as they may be highly selective and written with a particular political agenda, they need to be interpreted within a context and against other authenticated material. The ‘fantasy’ elements contained in biographies about female agents such as Mata Hari and Kitty Harris, illustrate how central gender is to understanding the myth-making by the intelligence services. In Mata Hari’s case, her myth as a femme fatale not only enabled her French prosecutors to claim that they had executed a traitor but, by contrast, had defined the appropriate role for women during the war. Patriotic French women, maintaining the home front, could measure themselves in opposition to the shallow and glamorous image of the ‘spy-courtesan’. In post-Soviet Russia, Harris emerges in Damaskin’s biography as a romantic figure who sacrificed her life for the Communist cause and suggests a nostalgic longing for Stalin’s vanquished empire. Despite the challenges of the available printed and oral sources on intelligence, being alert to iconic images and emotive language – for example highly gendered romanticised elements such as the ‘honey-trap’ or the political martyr – may provide insights and offer alternative readings in a deeply contested field of study.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Venona was a long-running project involving US and British intelligence agencies in breaking the encrypted traffic of Soviet agencies, mostly during WW2. When the materials were released by the National Security Agency in 1995, Kitty Harris was among the Soviet agents who had until then only been identified by their code names. Her inclusion suggests her importance as an operative.

<sup>2</sup> The NKVD is the acronym for the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs that directly executed the power of the Communist Party between 1922-1954 and the forerunner of the KGB.

<sup>3</sup> For details of Nathan Harris's death, <http://vitalstats.gov.mb.ca/ListView.php> accessed 05/04/2013.

<sup>4</sup> For a comparison between the trials of Mata Hari and Lieutenant Dreyfus, see Darrow, M., (2000) *French Women and the First World War: War Stories of the Home Front*, Oxford: Berg, p. 269.

<sup>5</sup> Damaskin with Elliot, 2001, p. 28-29 describes Kitty's romance with Skonetsky, including her inner thoughts about their relationship; in chapter 4, p. 47-53, the authors give us the date of

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Harris's passport being issued for her journey to Shanghai but no information about what year she arrives, and throughout we have reproduced dialogue, such as p. 121, without references.