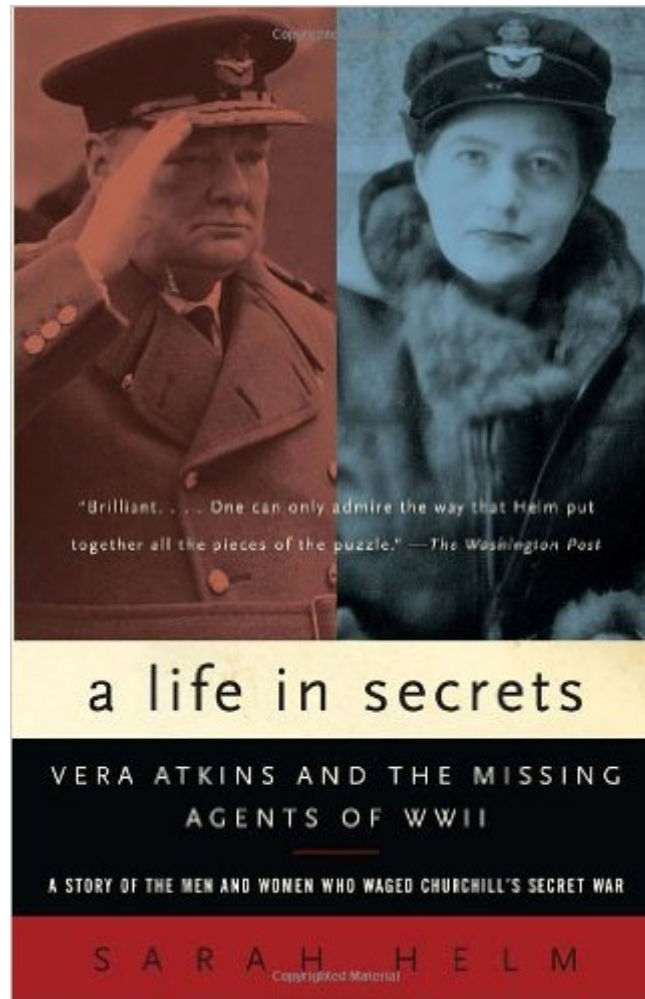


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A Life In Secrets: Vera Atkins And The Missing Agents Of WWII



Synopsis

From an award-winning journalist comes this real-life cloak-and-dagger tale of Vera Atkins, one of Britain's premiere secret agents during World War II. As the head of the French Section of the British Special Operations Executive, Vera Atkins recruited, trained, and mentored special operatives whose job was to organize and arm the resistance in Nazi-occupied France. After the war, Atkins courageously committed herself to a dangerous search for twelve of her most cherished women spies who had gone missing in action. Drawing on previously unavailable sources, Sarah Helm chronicles Atkins's extraordinary life and her singular journey through the chaos of post-war Europe. Brimming with intrigue, heroics, honor, and the horrors of war, *A Life in Secrets* is the story of a grand, elusive woman and a tour de force of investigative journalism.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

After the retreat from Dunkirk in 1940, Britain knew that it would be fighting again within Europe, but until an invasion could be made by regular forces, a secret war had to be waged. For this purpose the Special Operations Executive was formed, with the object of clandestine insertion of agents to oppose the advancement of the Nazis. It was a perilous assignment, and agents were told to expect a fifty-fifty chance of dying; as it turned out, they fared better, a 75% survival rate. The section of the SOE devoted to activities within France was the assignment of Vera Atkins, where she was staff officer to the head of the section. Atkins was devoted to the highly secret operation, and only recently have the truths about the work of the SOE (including its many failings) emerged. Atkins took many of the secrets to her grave when she died in 2000. Sarah Helm, an investigative reporter,

was able to interview her two years before her death. "She didn't tell me much," Helm says. "She never told anybody much." There was, however, quite a story, and it involved Atkins's personal secrets as well as military ones. In *A Life in Secrets: Vera Atkins and the Missing Agents of WWII* (Nan A. Talese / Doubleday), Helm has described her efforts to understand the secrets in a long and frustrating search for what made the brilliant and wary Atkins averse, beyond all callings of duty, to letting some secrets go. Part of the reason for Atkins's continuing secrecy is that much of what SOE did in the war was disastrous. These were amateurs, and they were playing a dangerous game within the confusion of war. There is no doubt that many of the agents dropped into France did exceptional duty that paid off (as Eisenhower acknowledged) when invasion by the allies started.

In "A Life in Secrets," Sarah Helm tells the riveting story of the courageous men and women of the British SOE, the Special Operations Executive, who, during World War II, were parachuted into France, and thence into the arms of the Gestapo. The author also delves into the life of the woman who sent them there, the enigmatic Vera Atkins, who, as a perfect spy, covered her traces so expertly--and so completely--that the biographer has been left with more questions than answers. Ms. Helm nevertheless engages the reader from the first page, beginning with the recruitment and subsequent departure of the seventeen women and seventeen men who were to serve as organizers, couriers, and wireless transmitter operators of resistance circuits in Nazi-occupied France. After stretching the tension to its limit, she breaks off that narrative thread and weaves in the story of Vera Atkins, who, even though she was a Romanian subject (and thus technically an enemy alien) at the beginning of the war, nevertheless, became a major protagonist in the SOE during the course of the conflict (She was naturalized as a British subject in 1944). By continually alternating the topic between the fate of the agents and the account of the formidable woman who persistently searched for them in bombed-out Germany after the war, Ms. Helm captivates the reader--who must relentlessly follow the increasingly horrific narrative, through the Ravensbrueck, Dachau, and Natzweiler concentration camps--from the first page to the last.

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