



A Life in Secrets: Vera Atkins and the Missing Agents of WWII

By Sarah Helm



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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.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. Vera Atkins (1908–2000) was the highest-ranking female official in the French section of a WWII British intelligence unit that aided the resistance. Atkins sent 400 agents into France, including 39 women she'd personally recruited and supervised. Many were caught by the Gestapo and subsequently disappeared and presumed dead. In 1945, after the war, Atkins, fiercely loyal to the memory of her missing agents, took it upon herself to spend a year interviewing concentration camp officials and survivors in order to piece together her agents' fates. Helm, a founding member of London's *Independent*, brilliantly reconstructs Atkins's harrowing detective work, shedding light in particular on the fate of missing agent Noor Inayat Khan, whose suitability for the job had been widely doubted. Helm's portrait of Atkins is acute, dwelling evocatively on her Romanian-Jewish origins and their social significance for Atkins within upper-crust British circles, and on Atkins's mysterious personal life. Drawing on interviews with relatives and friends of both Atkins and her agents, and on full access to Atkins's private papers, Helm has produced a memorable portrait of a woman who knowingly sent other women to their deaths and a searing history of female courage and suffering during WWII. (*On sale Aug. 22*)

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From [Booklist](#)

The Special Operations Executive (SOE), Winston Churchill's personal creation to subvert Nazidom, occupies a legendary but controversial place in World War II annals. This original investigative history by a British journalist allays none of the criticism of the SOE--it was a failure that cost hundreds of agents their lives--but vindicates the valor of SOE agents. Centering attention on a high-ranking SOE officer named Vera Atkins (1908-2000), Helm recounts a war-crimes inquiry Atkins conducted in the immediate aftermath of the war: Atkins sought information about the fates of about 100 agents she had sent into France. Atkins knew during the war that SOE's French operations had been compromised but not whether it was through treachery or lax security. Solid on the spycraft aspects of Atkins' quest, which identified a Nazi mole in SOE, Helm engrossingly narrates Atkins' hunt for the truth in furtive traces about her agents gleaned from Germans who had shunted them from capture to concentration camp. Carried off with consummate skill, Helm's report is also an inveigling portrait of Atkins' own secretive life. *Gilbert Taylor*

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Review

“Brilliant. . . . One can only admire the way that Helm put together all the pieces of the puzzle.” —*The Washington Post*

“Fascinating. . . . Compelling. . . . Gripping. . . . A stupendous job of reporting.” —*The New York Times*

“Helm's account is a chilling reminder of the ghastliness of WWII.” —*Entertainment Weekly*

“*A Life in Secrets* is a work of history that is at once a compelling thriller, an intriguing mystery, and a biography of bravery. . . . Better than *CSI* because it is all true and inspiring.” —Tina Brown

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Christopher Kennedy:

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Jennifer Lewis:

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