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Christine Granville: Beyond the Biography

Some people go above what is expected of them to achieve greatness. Christine Granville was one such person. Born Krystyna Skarbek, she became one of Britain's most successful spies during World War II, credited for the British Special Operations Executive's (SOE) increase in women recruits (Binney 4-5). During her life and work Granville accomplished much, most notably her work serving the British SOE in France, Hungary, and Poland. Yet this was not what Granville is remembered for. Christine Granville was an extraordinary female spy, whose own biography, *Christine: SOE Agent & Churchill's Favourite Spy* by Madeleine Masson, defined her life not by the accomplishments she should be honored for, but rather by the relationships she maintained with men.

While Christine Granville prior to the war displayed signs of future success, she was criticized for breaking the mold. As a child she was considered a tomboy, described as "utterly fearless," wanting only to follow her father's footsteps (Masson 8). Her mother disapproved of her boyish ways and wanted her daughter to grow up into a sophisticated woman, which resulted in Granville attending a boarding school in her youth. She however continued her mischievousness ways, which earned her a dismissal from school for her constant misbehavior. After Granville realized her dismissal would not result in her returning home, she began to take her studies seriously. At her next

school Granville learned to speak French fluently, became an experienced horseback rider, and was a top student in her class.

Even after school Granville was faulted for being different. As a teenager her friends elected her the 'Beauty Queen' of a local social charity affair. Because of this there was publicity, "which triggered off the suspicions that perhaps young Countess Christine Skarbek was a trifle 'fast'" (Masson 19). This would be the first example of Granville's relationships with men overshadowing her accomplishments. Rather than focusing on her talents and beauty, her purity was put to debate.

As she became a young woman her relationships began to take center stage. In her biography her actions were even 'justified,' as though a young woman interacting with men was something that should have made Granville feel ashamed. In her late teenage years she began to accept social invitations from those prominent in society, but only to "reassure [her father] as to the fact that his daughter was persona grata in the best salons in Warsaw" (Masson 21). According to her biography she began her social life, which included interludes with men, not because she wanted to, but to reassure her father she was well liked.

Very little was documented about Granville's young adult life. While her biography said she worked at a Fiat dealership that left her with dark spots on her lungs from the fumes, not much else was recorded. The only detailed activity described during this time was her relationship with a man named Adam, whose mother rejected her for being "a penniless divorcee" which was "a blow from which Christine took some time to recover" (Masson 25).

What historians lack in knowledge about Granville's professional activities they make up for in knowledge about her affairs. In 1930 Granville married her first husband, Gustaw Gettlich, only to divorce shortly after. Eight years later Granville married for a second time, this time to Jerzy Giżycki. Shortly after their wedding the couple moved to Africa. Here nearly all of Giżycki's professional activities were recorded, while the most Masson recorded about Granville's time was how much she despised housework. But with the outbreak of war Granville's history became more prominent. Both she and Giżycki were passionate patriots and decided to return to Europe. Granville soon got work for the British authorities, while Giżycki, unable to join the Polish army, decided to assist Finland with their war effort.

Some of the clearest examples of the focus on Granville's relationships to the detriment of her successes can be seen during her time in Poland. For her first mission, where she planned to ski into Poland via Zakopane in the Tatra Mountains, she faced increasing disbelief from those around her. One of the men important in Granville's life, Andrew Kowerski, later Andrew Kennedy, was quoted saying, "My dear girl, you must be joking. You, a girl, trying to get to Poland in this weather? You'll have to wait for the summer, and even then I doubt whether you will make it," while Jan Marusarz, the man who eventually assisted her, said, "You must be joking...How do you think a girl would survive such a trip?" (Masson 48-52) While Granville faced disbelief and blatant sexism at the idea of her attempting such a dangerous operation, she maintained confidence in her abilities and successfully completed her first mission.

Of Granville's first trip into Poland little was said of her actual accomplishments. While her biography spoke about life in Poland during this time, all that was stated about

Granville's mission was how "on this, her first trip, Christine spent five weeks in Poland" (Masson 57). While it was also mentioned how Kowerski was sent a postcard, nothing about the success or failure of her first mission was described.

Although Granville's first mission in Poland was overshadowed by her relationship with Kowerski, little does it compare to how her later missions in Poland were overshadowed. For these missions Granville worked closely with Count Wladyslaw Ledochowski, who went under the alias 'Jan Grodzicki.' Rather than focusing on Granville's mission and how it impacted the war effort in Poland, her relationship with Ledochowski and how it affected her relationship with Kowerski was highlighted. Granville was intimate with Ledochowski, as she was "stimulated by his undisguised admiration," and the night they spent together was in turn "was one [Ledochowski] would remember for the rest of his life" (Masson 74).

But Granville was also involved with Kowerski, so upon her return to Budapest Granville divulged to Kowerski her relationship with Ledochowski. It was stated that he was upset, but "so deep was his love for Christine that he accepted her rather lame explanation." Later, when she was to return to Poland on another mission with Ledochowski, her biography said, "Andrew had given his permission for Ledochowski to go with her" (Masson 75). It is difficult to see descriptions of Granville's missions overshadowed by a relationship with a man she had to get 'permission' from in order to serve during the war. By defining Granville in the eyes of her male counterparts what is important about her begins to get lost: her achievements. Nearly all of Granville's early achievements were omitted in favor of describing in detail a relationship with a man she was intimate with infrequently.

Little also was said of the assistance Granville gave to the war effort during her time in Hungary, the only description saying “Christine and Andrew were collecting, sifting and passing on a great deal of information to the British” (Masson 86). Granville’s only mentioned accomplishment during this time was when she and Kowerski were arrested by the Hungarian police and interrogated by the Germans. They were separated, and while Kowerski was being interrogated Granville was brainstorming their escape.

The duo was released thanks to Granville’s brilliance. Knowing she had just recovered from a cold and still looked ill, Granville bit her tongue to the point of drawing blood, which led the police to believe she was suffering from tuberculosis. She was rushed to a doctor where x-rays were taken of her lungs, revealing black spots. Although this was a result of gas exhaust from her time working at Fiat, the doctor believed it to be a sign of tuberculosis and told the Germans she needed to be released for bed rest. Granville demanded Kowerski accompany her, saving them both. While this was clearly an example of Granville’s quick thinking, more time in her biography was spent discussing Kowerski’s role. In fact Masson dedicated twice as many pages to his experience, even though Granville was the one who rescued them and engaged in anything other than interrogation (Masson 91-96, 97-99).

It was also implied that it was Granville’s fault they were arrested in the first place. Knowing how dangerous it would be to be arrested together, and knowing that the police typically made arrests at four o’clock in the morning, Kowerski had demanded they take turns waking up at three o’clock and leaving for their own apartment, for fear of being caught together. Kowerski “insisted that Christine get up and leave our flat at three a.m. as a practice run. She utterly refused to move. I insisted, but she refused” (Masson

89). Granville told Kowerski he should leave that night and she would go the next, but the next night they went out with friends and returned home late, so Granville did not leave as promised. That was the night the police came.

This was not the only example of Granville portrayed as a hindrance to Kowerski. After Hungary the duo went to Cairo, Egypt, where they were told that they were under suspicion. Why? Because of Granville, according to her biography. Granville was a fantastic spy, so good that it caused people to doubt if she were a double agent. She had secured transfer visas through Syria, which was considered an extraordinary feat. So extraordinary in fact, it was believed only German spies could obtain them. In addition, Granville and Kowerski were involved with The Musketeers, a group that had been infiltrated by the Germans.

Nothing was said however about the reasons Kowerski on his own was mistrusted. In a letter from Colin Gubbins to General Sikorski dated 17 June 1941 it was written that “General Kopanski is doubtful about Kowerski’s loyalty to the Polish cause, owing to the fact that Kowerski had not reported to General Kopanski for duty with the Brigade” (Binney 72). This shows that Kowerski was suspected for his own actions – not just for being associated with Granville, which was the impression her biography left. Rather than explaining Kowerski’s contributions to the suspicions held against the couple, Masson’s book frames it as though he was unable to work only because his association with Granville hurt his reputation.

Although little was stated about Granville’s time in Cairo, there was a sentence referencing some microfilms she had hidden, and had attempted to give to the British. “Christine still had some old microfilms hidden away, as well as some new ones showing

further concentrations of arms and ammunition on the Russian border” (Masson 132). Although it does not sound like much based on this single line, what Granville was holding was actually tremendously important: microfilms showing proof of Operation Barbarossa.

Operation Barbarossa had an enormous impact on the war. On June 22, 1941, Adolf Hitler decided to attack his allies, the Soviet Union. “Barbarossa was the crucial turning point in World War II, for its failure forced Nazi Germany to fight a two-front war against a coalition possessing immensely superior resources” (Murray). And because of Granville, the British had proof it was coming.

When Hitler’s troops invaded, Granville’s (and by association Kowerski’s) names were cleared. No German spy would have given up such valuable information, which could have potentially been used to prevent the enormous attack. Yet the possession of the microfilms, arguably one of the most valuable contributions Granville made during the war, was relegated to one sentence in her biography. Her biography even included ‘Churchill’s Favourite Spy’ in the title, an honor received because of Granville’s delivery of the microfilms (Horne). This was yet another example of a mission pushed aside to make room for details on her romances.

Granville’s time in France was no different, showing how her heroics are not only ignored for her relationship with Kowerski, but also with other men. While in France, Granville worked as a courier for Francis Cammaerts, who she knew as the code name ‘Roger.’ Her job was to “make contact with people sympathetic to [the British’s] cause.” At this Granville excelled, Cammaerts saying that “in seven or eight weeks, Christine met

all the people I had met in two years, and we had made contact with fifty or sixty centres” (Masson 187).

But while Granville’s biography focuses on her relationship with Cammaerts, how well she got on with the other male agents, and how much she enjoyed France, it failed to detail exactly what she was doing in France. Cammaerts commended her for her work, the biography noting “it had not taken [Cammaerts] long to discover how valuable an assistant she was. Not only had she the gift of tongues, but she knew how to keep her own counsel, and to carry out her work with the minimum of fuss,” but no specifics about her missions were stated (Masson 197). Granville even assisted during the famous Battle of Vercors, “the most famous last stand of the French Resistance” (Mulley, “Reliving”). Yet all she was accredited for in her biography was a handful of telegrams she sent requesting British assistance.

There was a time where Granville was in France while not working with Cammaerts. This period of time, though briefly described, was filled with great excitement. It featured stories of Granville riding a motorcycle through Italy and assisting local partisan groups. It described her passing through German lines in dangerous mountainous country, and taming vicious German dogs. Here it says how she talked her way out of capture twice, another time escaping only after threatening her capturers with a live grenade. Yet all these adventures that define Granville’s bravery, which show how quick-witted and courageous she was, are relegated to merely two pages in her biography. Granville was a strong woman, one that was able to handle herself extremely well in difficult situations. She was entrusted with many missions to help bring an end to World War II, missions her biography ignores.

Yet missions that include the men in her life are explained in great detail. One particular mission with Cammaerts was deeply analyzed. One day Cammaerts, Xan Fielding, and Commandant Sorenson were stopped by Gestapo officers and arrested after it was discovered they had lied about not knowing each other. Once Granville discovered they were to be executed she biked to the prison and demanded to speak to someone in charge. Posing as Cammaerts's wife and the niece of a British general, she was put in contact with Max Waem. She told him the Allies were coming shortly and mentioned how displeased they would be to find their men dead or imprisoned, so Waem exchanged the three men's lives for two million francs and the promise of his safety.

While descriptions of her other missions during her time in France were lacking or non-existent, an analysis of her relationship with Cammaerts was detailed. "Her affection for 'Roger' transcended everything except what she felt for Andrew. The sweetness and nobility of this man had opened new horizons in her mind, and she was grateful to him for his silent understanding of aspects of her own character which she revealed to no one else" (Masson 222). It is also important to note that Masson described Granville as being in love with Cammaerts. Although he was married and she was involved with Kowerski, she was portrayed as besotted by Cammaerts. It is important to consider whether Granville actually had deep feelings for Cammaerts, or whether Masson was uncomfortable portraying a woman having a sexual relationship with a man without love.

Even when out of service Granville's life was defined by her relationships with men, or lack thereof. When the war ended and Granville was demobilized in May 1945, she faced financial difficulties. She was given a month's pay, £100, and was promptly

forgotten about. Finding work after the war was difficult for Granville, and the jobs she did find she was frequently fired from.

Her biography states that she was depressed during this time, although there was little to support this sentiment. Granville was described as being “a complete fragmentation of her personality; the reality of ordinary life was so unsupportable and the battle-fatigue she felt so intense, that for a time she seemed to have lost the will to struggle back to the light.” Her friends however reported that “her sense of humour was unimpaired, and she entertained them with thumbnail sketches of the people she met in the course of her various jobs” (Masson 237). Granville’s depression was assumed because she worked menial jobs, which resulted in financial woes, and because she chose not to build a life with Kowerski.

Her biography does not pose an alternative theory, one where Granville was happy not being tied down, and enjoyed floating between jobs while having the opportunity to focus on seeing her friends and developing romances with new men. Granville was given the chance at financial security when she was bequeathed a London home upon an English friend’s death, but she turned it down. It seems odd that she would reject this security if that were what she truly wanted in life. It is implied that because Granville was living independently and following a different path than most, one that did not include a man, she must have been depressed.

During this time, Granville’s relationship with Michael Dunford was also highlighted. Granville was desperate for an escape from Europe, so when Dunford, an old friend, wrote to her and asked her to join him in Africa, she accepted. Little was said of what she did to occupy her time in Africa, except that she had passport difficulties when

she tried to apply for a stewardess job. Unsurprisingly the developing love triangle between Granville, Dunford, and Kowerski was deeply examined.

Kowerski decided after the war he was going to live in Germany, which infuriated Granville. She, residing in Africa, wrote Kowerski letters trying to convince him to join her. Kowerski, who did not want to live in the intense heat, refused. This resulted in Granville deepening her relationship with Dunford, although “Andrew was never far from her thoughts.” Dunford was in love with Granville, and as Kowerski continued to refuse to join Granville, he “sensed, for the first time, that Andrew’s hold over the woman he loved was weakening” (Masson 241). However, Kowerski’s ‘hold’ proved to be too strong. When he was injured in a car accident, Granville rushed to his side.

Here Granville was described as being content, happy, and serene, something she apparently lacked in her life when she was independent and not embroiled with two different men. Kowerski was even described as having a ‘hold’ over her, something that can easily be debated considering she had recently declined a proposal from him. Granville had shown throughout her entire life that no one had a hold on her, and that she was going to do what she wanted for either her country’s good or her own.

When Granville finally settled on a career, that of a stewardess, her life was still defined by a man. This time, it would be by the man who would end her life. After returning to Europe, Granville and Kowerski faced economic difficulties after they lost their savings in an Australian investment. Granville wanted to head to Australia to figure out what her next move should be, and to save money on her voyage she decided to work as a stewardess on a cruise line.

However, Granville had difficulties fitting in. Workers were required to wear their military decorations, which led to jealousy amongst her colleagues, especially the other men who never had the opportunity to acquire as many ribbons, and she was disliked for being a foreigner. She was however 'saved' thanks to Dennis Muldowney, a colleague who convinced the other workers to leave her alone. Muldowney and Granville became friends, as Granville was grateful for his help, and Muldowney was enchanted by her.

What exactly Muldowney and Granville were to each other is debated. Her biography states that "while Muldowney was congratulating himself on having secured the attention of a war heroine, who was the same time an attractive and charming woman with a sense of humour and a kind heart, she saw him plainly for what he was: another pathetic, scruffy, lame dog to add to her menagerie of seedy pets" (Masson 247). It was clear that while Granville spent time with Muldowney, she considered him lesser than her, one friend describing him as "a goblin" (Masson 249). Granville had many romantic partners, but she also had high standards for the men who she engaged with sexually. Therefore she would never consider lowering herself to Muldowney.

Yet in a more recent biography on Granville, Muldowney and Granville are said to have had a relationship. "According to him they were already lovers. She was, he said, 'the only woman who would meet his constant sexual demands'" and while she might not have been in love with him the way he was with her, "Christine did nothing to counter this impression" (Mulley 318). This brings into question why her original biography painted a distinctively different picture. While it could be that the information about her relationship was unknown at the time, it seems more likely that people close to Granville would want her remembered as only engaging in sexual activities with men she was in

love with or were respected, which was not the case with Muldowney. There was a fear Granville would be looked unfavorably on for having sex with the man who murdered her.

Muldowney's reasons for killing Granville were also shocking. At the site of her murder he was quoted as repeating over and over "I killed her because I loved her" (Masson 255). At his execution he had an even more chilling reasoning: "to kill is the final possession" (Masson 258). While there is horror when hearing Muldowney's final words, Muldowney unwittingly poses an important viewpoint about the way people perceive Granville, and her history: they wish to see her possessed by someone.

The desire to have Granville 'owned' or 'possessed' by someone was seen not only throughout her life, but also in the way she is remembered. Granville had incredible adventures, ones she independently and successfully completed, that are forgotten in favor of her relationships with men. She engaged in many relationships with men, but while Granville saw her main goal as fighting for Poland's freedom, she is remembered for the many relationships she engaged in, not for her efforts in the fight for Poland's freedom.

Granville was not portrayed as a strong, independent woman in history throughout her biography. While her accomplishments are many, her life was shown only through the eyes of the men she was linked to, men who she had to get 'permission' to go on missions from. Not only were these relationships the core focus in her history, every man she was attached to she was said to have formed an emotional bond with. Even men she infrequently slept with, such as Ledochowski, were said to have captured a piece of her

heart. While men were able to have sexual relations without feelings involved, the same was not true for women.

This was so apparent that even Granville's most important missions, for example her delivery of the Operation Barbarossa microfilms, were ignored in favor of a detailed look into her love life. The majority of the missions described involve the men she was linked to romantically. When a mission that did not feature a man was described, it usually showed Granville in a more feminine role, such as her having disguised an SOE map as a scarf or having seduced men for visas. Rather than showing her as a rough-and-tumble, knife-wielding, fighting for freedom spy, she was degraded to only a pawn in a man's war.

Part of this was a result of Kowerski and Cammaerts's involvement in the writing of Granville's biography. Both men had been members of The Panel to Protect the Memory of Christine Granville, a group dedicated to preserving Granville's history and reputation, effectively stopping multiple biographies and articles from being published. Granville's biography relied heavily on Kowerski and Cammaerts, with Kowerski spending "three months working with [Masson] in Bosham, dictating the tapes which formed its factual basis" (Masson 261). While Kowerski's testimony clearly gave insight into Granville's life, having been an intimate friend and lover, at times the biography relied too heavily on his word. A more recent biography on Granville states that while Masson's biography was helpful for providing Kowerski's perspective of Granville, he "wished to present her in what he considered a good, rather than necessarily true, light" (Mulley 348). Kowerski loved Granville, and wanted her to be remembered. But he

wished for her to be thought of in the same context he did: as the beautiful love of his life. Not as a formidable spy who engaged with many men on many missions.

Because of this, Christine Granville, while an amazing spy, was relegated to a supporting role in her own biography. The only time she was given time to truly shine was when the book focused on her love life. And while her relationships did indeed impact who she was, they were not what defined her. Christine Granville should be defined by her courage, her desire to see her country free, her brilliance, and her mystery. Christine Granville is an inspirational figure in history, one who accomplished amazing feats, and who deserves to be remembered as such.

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