

Vera Atkins, SOE - obituary

Vera Atkins, CBE (née Rosenberg; 16 June 1908 – 24 June 2000) was a Romanian-born British intelligence officer who worked in the French Section of the Special Operations Executive (SOE) from 1941 to 1945 during World War II.



VERA ATKINS, who has died aged 93, was the brilliant assistant to Colonel Maurice Buckmaster at the French section of the Special Operations Executive during the Second World War.

She was born Vera Maria Rosenberg in Romania on June 15 1907 and came with her parents to London in 1933, subsequently changing her surname. At the outbreak of the Second World War she joined the WAAF and soon went to work as a secretary at "F" Section, set up in 1940 to run covert operations and help the Resistance in German-occupied France.

Buckmaster, the head of the section, soon spotted her flair and made her an intelligence officer and his deputy. The two of them worked up to 18 hours a day at the section's headquarters at 64 Baker Street, and between them dispatched more than 400 agents - known as "Buckmasters" - across the Channel.

Vera Atkins helped to choose recruits - they had to be able to pass themselves off as French, as well as having guts and resourcefulness - briefed them on how to survive behind enemy lines, escorted them to the grass airstrip at Tempsford, Bedfordshire, and watched them leave at night in the cramped Lysander aircraft with their parachutes.

More than 100 agents never returned. A few were known to have been killed in action, but most were reported to have been arrested and some to have disappeared into Gestapo interrogation centres and concentration camps.

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Their roll of honour was second to none in the story of British wartime undercover operations and their stories inspired a legion of books and films. They faced horrific dangers. In July 1944, four women members of F Section, who had been captured separately, were taken to Natzweiler concentration camp in Alsace, given a stupefying injection and plunged straight into an oven. Others, such as Violette Szabo, were shot, while a few, such as Odette Churchill, suffered at the hands of the Gestapo but survived.

Buckmaster was later rather unfairly accused of having run an "amateurish" operation and incurring unnecessary loss of life. But Eisenhower credited the French section with shortening the war by six months. "It was," he said, "the equivalent of 15 Divisions."

There was no doubt however that both Buckmaster and Vera Atkins felt keenly the responsibility of having sent some agents to their deaths. After the war, Vera Atkins determined to find out what happened to each one. "I could not just abandon their memory," she recalled. But her project led her into immediate confrontation with the military establishment.

After an early post-war trip to Germany, she was told that the SOE was to be disbanded and could no longer sponsor her search. But she used a personal contact to gain a semi-official attachment to MI6 and returned to Germany. She spent most of the next year questioning concentration camp officials and going through records. "I was probably the only person who could do this," she explained. "You had to know every detail of the agents, names, code-names, every hair on their heads, to spot their tracks."

The confessions she obtained from Rudolf Hoess - the former commandant of Auschwitz - were later used as evidence during the Nuremberg Trials. She could later hardly bring herself to recall how Hoess had reacted to the suggestion that the deaths in the camp had perhaps amounted to 1,500,000. "Oh no," he retorted, as if he had been sadly misrepresented, "it was 2,345,000."

The results of her investigations would later form the basis of the roll of honour to the 104 dead (91 men and 13 women) of F Section on the memorial at Valençay in the Loire valley, which was opened in 1991. The memorial helped to heal a division that went back to the formation of F Section. General de Gaulle, setting up his Free French in London, was bitterly opposed to the F section agents on the grounds that they were Anglo-Saxons attempting to take command of the French Resistance - he wanted complete control and all the credit for their successes. On their side SOE agents harboured suspicions that some of their comrades were betrayed to the Germans in the interests of politics.

In later life, Vera Atkins was much involved in fostering Anglo-French relations and in keeping alive the spirit of the Resistance. In 1987 she was appointed a Commandant of the Légion d'honneur.

Vera Atkins had a tremendously warm personality. She was full of humour, indomitable courage and unstinting generosity.

Vera Atkins, born June 16 1908, died June 24 2000