Noor Inayat Khan from Women Heroes of WWII
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About the Author

Kathryn J. Atwood has written several historical books about heroic women. She also blogs on subjects such as the history of World War I and World War II, as well as the history of pop music. She has contributed to the Midwest Book Review, Women’s Independent Press, and many other publications.

BACKGROUND

In Nazi-occupied regions, local Resistance movements fought to protect victims of the occupying forces, and at the same time, damage or weaken the Nazis by any means possible. The British, Americans, and Soviets allied themselves to these movements by providing equipment and support.

1 Noor Inayat Khan, the daughter of an Indian-born father and an American mother, was born in Moscow, the capital city of Imperial Russia, on New Year’s Day, 1914. It was fitting that Noor should have been born within steps of the Kremlin, a building that had been built for the royal tsars of Russia. Her great-great-great-grandfather was the royal Tipu Sultan, called the Tiger of Mysore, a Muslim ruler who had fought bravely for his lands and people.

2 Noor grew up in France, just a few miles from Paris, where she lived in a house called Fazal Manzil, or the House of Blessings. There she learned music, art, and poetry. She also learned a great deal about Sufism, the religious and meditative philosophy that her father and his friends followed.

3 After graduating from the University of Sorbonne, Noor began to write and illustrate children’s stories. She was planning to create an illustrated children’s newspaper, which would be called
Bel Age—"the Beautiful Age"—when Hitler’s tanks rolled into Poland on September 1, 1939, and the whole world changed.

Noor abhorred Hitler’s anti-Semitic ideals and was determined to hinder him in some way. She joined the British Women’s Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF), an organization that provided support to the Royal Air Force (RAF). It was here that she was trained as a radio operator, communicating through a special type of radio by Morse code. After a while, Noor realized that she would not be content until she could be more directly involved in the battle against Hitler. What she didn’t realize was that she had already been noticed by an organization that was waging a very different type of war.

The Special Operations Executive, or the SOE, was a Resistance organization that sent its agents into many different Nazi-occupied countries to fight a secret but deadly war. There was always a need for a radio operator among the agents; that is, someone to transmit messages via Morse code from France to London. Noor was an excellent candidate for this type of work since she had already been trained in radio transmission. And because she was a native French speaker, she was perfect for work for the F (French)-Section of the SOE, the section that worked directly with Resistance workers in Nazi-occupied France.

Although Noor’s skills were impressive, some of her SOE instructors had serious doubts about her personality. She seemed very fragile, and she miserably failed her fake Gestapo interrogation in which she was woken in the middle of the night, splashed with cold water, and roughly questioned. She didn’t seem strong enough to withstand a real interrogation. What would happen if she was caught by actual Gestapo agents? Would she break under torture and give out important information?

Despite Noor’s apparent fragility, others in the SOE were certain she would be a good agent. And even those who doubted her knew that there was a desperate need for more radio operators in France. They really had no choice but to send her in. So Noor became the first female radio operator to be sent into Nazi-occupied France.

She chose to work out of Paris, a dangerous place for any member of the Resistance but especially for those doing radio work. Teams of Germans, many of them dressed in plain clothes, were using a device called a listening machine to locate and capture radio operators. The German teams worked out of vans that were disguised as laundry vans, bakers’ vans—anything to hide who they really were. Because the radio operators traveled from place to place to avoid being detected by the listening

1. anti-Semitic (AN tee suh MIHT ihk) hatred and prejudice against the Jewish people.
2. Gestapo (guh STAH poh) Nazi secret police.
teams, they had to carry their radios with them, which was very
dangerous: people were often stopped and searched by suspicious
Gestapo agents, especially on the busy streets of Paris.

Many of Noor’s new Parisian associates also thought that her
shy, naive personality seemed at odds with that of a successful
agent. But whatever doubts they may have had about Noor, they
soon had more pressing issues to worry about. Ten days after
Noor arrived in Paris, their whole circuit (Resistance group) fell
apart. Several agents had been arrested, and the information that
the Gestapo had found with them included names and, most
important, addresses of current French Resistance members.
Almost immediately, the Gestapo arrested hundreds of Resistance
workers including most of those involved with Noor’s circuit.
The SOE office in London, which found out about this catastrophe
from Noor’s radio transmissions, urgently asked her to return to
London for her own safety and told her that a plane would be sent
right away. She refused, believing that if she left, there wouldn’t
be a single radio operator left in Paris. All the others had been
arrested.

Officials at the SOE agreed, and when it was relatively safe
to resume operations, Noor began to transmit radio messages
again. Communication between the French Resistance, and the
SOE offices and French leader General Charles de Gaulle, both in
London, was absolutely critical at this time. The Allied invasion—
D-day—was less than one year away. Between July and October
1943, Noor sent and received messages that helped 30 Allied
airmen escape, arranged for four agents to obtain false identity
papers, pinpointed exact positions for airplane drops, helped
obtain weapons and money for members of the French Resistance,
and communicated the exact spot where the Nazis were hiding a
supply of torpedoes.

The Gestapo knew there was a radio operator in Paris, but for
months Noor successfully eluded them. They failed to track her
down because Noor was careful to transmit from many different
locations and because she was a very fast radio operator. She also
possessed a keen intuition that alerted her to the dangers of being
followed or the overtures of too-friendly strangers. Her fellow
agents knew that the Gestapo was closing in on Noor and urged
her return to London. But she was still hesitant to leave until the
SOE could send a replacement. Once she was assured that this
would happen, she would make plans to return to London.

One day when Noor opened her apartment door, a French man
named Pierre Cartaud, who was working for the Gestapo, was
there to meet her. A woman the Germans referred to as “Renée”
had contacted the Gestapo and agreed to betray a British agent she
knew into their hands if they would pay her 100,000 francs. They agreed.

If Cartaud thought it would be easy to arrest this slim, petite woman, he was very wrong. She fought him violently, clawing and biting at his wrists until he was bleeding heavily. Finally, he pulled out a gun and threatened to kill her while he made a phone call, asking for assistance. When help finally came, Cartaud was standing as far away from Noor as possible. She was taken by car to 84 Avenue Fochs, the Gestapo headquarters in Paris.

Housed in a cell in the headquarters, Noor was a difficult prisoner. She demanded the privilege of taking a bath and screamed at the guards when they wouldn’t allow her to close the door. The Gestapo agent in charge of interrogating Noor thought her request for a bath seemed suspicious, so he went into the bathroom next to hers and looked out the window. There was Noor, walking on the roof, trying to escape. He persuaded her to come in, telling her that a slip off the roof would mean certain death. She complied but was immediately angry with herself for doing so. She then refused, throughout an entire month of questioning, to betray her fellow resistance workers.

One day Noor decided to tap a Morse code message on the wall of her cell to see if she would get a response. She discovered that there were two SOE agents also imprisoned at the headquarters, and together they planned a daring escape. They managed to get a screwdriver and passed it between them until they had gotten all the bars of their cells loosened. Eventually they all reached the roof and were ready to let themselves down to the ground using some sheets they had tied together.

Suddenly Allied planes flew overhead, and the air-raid siren went off. Whenever that happened, the guards at 84 Avenue Fochs would rush to check that the prisoners were still in their cells. They also flashed searchlights all over the roof where Noor and her fellow spies were lying flat, hoping that no one would see them. Perhaps Noor and the others were not visible, but their cells were found empty. The escapees looked down the road and saw that it was closed off. Gestapo agents were everywhere. Desperate, they made one last attempt by swinging down by the sheets and crashing into a nearby house. The Gestapo burst in and captured them.

Back inside her cell at 84 Avenue Fochs, Noor scratched a V symbol (for victory) and an RAF symbol on her wall. She was asked to sign a promise that she would never try to escape again. She refused. It was her duty, she said, to try to escape if at all possible. A call was made to Berlin, the German capital: Noor was to be transferred to a high-security prison in Germany called Pforzheim.
The Pforzheim warden was ordered to keep Noor in solitary confinement, her feet and hands handcuffed and both sets of cuffs chained together. She became quite depressed but tried to encourage herself by meditating and thinking of her father. She and several female prisoners exchanged messages by scratching words onto the bottoms of their food bowls.

On September 11, 1944, after having been chained at Pforzheim for nearly 10 months, Noor scratched one final message on her bowl: “I am leaving.” She was taken from the prison that night and moved to Dachau with three other female British agents. They were all shot the next day and their bodies burned so that there would be no trace of them.

But Noor was not forgotten. France awarded her the Croix de Guerre (Cross of War), and Great Britain awarded her the George Cross, Great Britain’s highest award for courage shown somewhere other than on a battlefield. There are also many plaques and memorials in Germany and Great Britain dedicated to Noor and the other SOE agents who lost their lives during the war. Just outside of Fazal Manzil, Noor’s happy childhood home, is a plaque dedicated to Noor. And every Bastille Day, July 14, a military band plays outside the house in honor of the artistic, gentle woman who grew up there, a woman who turned out to be one of the most courageous agents of the SOE.

3. Dachau (DAH kow) Nazi concentration camp.