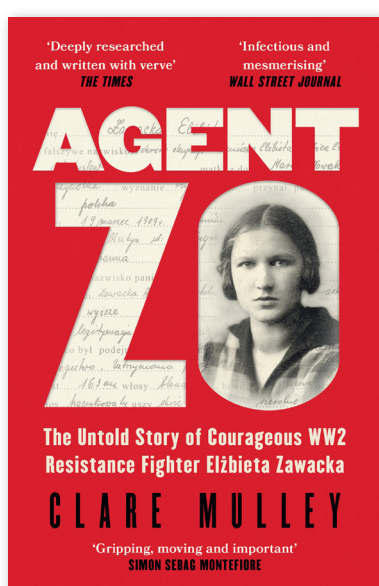


Agent Zo

The Untold Story of Courageous WW2 Resistance Fighter Elżbieta Zawacka

by Clare Mulley



PLOT SUMMARY

Agent Zo tells the incredible story of courageous resistance fighter Elżbieta Zawacka, sometimes known as Elizabeth Watson but more often as Zo. During the Second World War, Zo was the only woman to reach London as an emissary of the Polish Home Army command, before becoming the only female member of the Polish elite Special Forces, known as the 'Silent Unseen'. Following secret training in the British countryside, she also became the only woman to be parachuted back behind enemy lines into Nazi-occupied Poland. There, while being hunted by the Gestapo who arrested her entire family, she took a leading role in the largest organised act of defiance against Nazi Germany, the Warsaw Uprising, and in the liberation of her country.

After the war, Zo was demobbed as one of the most highly decorated women in Polish history. Yet the Soviet-backed post-war Communist regime not only imprisoned her, but also ensured that her remarkable story remained hidden for over forty years. Now, through new archival research and exclusive interviews with people who knew and fought alongside Zo, Clare Mulley brings this forgotten heroine back to life, transforming the way we see the history of women's agency in the Second World War.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

Mulley's meticulous biography of Zo is a work of herstory: reclaiming a part of women's history that is not his-story, and which has been consistently overlooked. In the book's epilogue, Mulley records Zo's own passion to have the collective female effort in war remembered. She was frustrated with the lack of acknowledgement of women's efforts in the war in all of the books she read on the subject by men:

'Men keep talking about their own participation', but the women's service is being passed over 'in silence' or 'stalled with sentimental or praising cliché'... The problem, Zo decided, was that historians were, with few exceptions, men who 'as a result of the age-old cultural

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“A masterfully written biography that brings Elżbieta’s incredible story to life in extraordinary detail.”

DR LEAH BROAD,
2025 JUDGE


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conditioning’ were generally unaware of ‘the quality of women’s contribution to any public activity’. As a result, ‘a partisan female soldier, a female officer, may seem something extraordinary, exceptional’ when really they were very commonplace. ‘Half of the nation’... were still being underestimated and overlooked’.

In a sense, then, Mulley’s book serves not only as a vehicle that tells the story of one remarkable woman, but a political document and action that re-shapes history and reminds us that the history that we think we know is usually incomplete, biased, and exclusionary. Zo was an extraordinary woman with a remarkable story, but Mulley’s book also continues to remind us of Zo’s own insistence that we remember her story was just one among many.

DISCUSSION POINTS

The memorial obelisk Zo organised to commemorate Polish women who fought for freedom, the memorial to the women who flew from RAF Tempsford and the mural dedicated to Zo on the side of the apartment block she lived in in Torun (images at the end of the second set of photos) are appropriately important, and commemorate both Zo and the women she fought alongside.

Statues and memorials are a key indicator of the values of the culture that they inhabit, and are a very obvious way of a country demonstrating who and what they think is important.

In 2018, the Public Monuments and Sculpture Association (PMSA) reported that of the 828 statues it recorded in the UK, 174 of them were female. However, named women rather than nameless female figures brought the figure down to just 80. Of these, 15 are allegorical, mythical or otherwise fictional and a number of the others are headless nameless nymphs or nameless women taking off their dresses. Many of the named women are royal – for example, Queen Victoria.

As our cultural values change and as we continue to examine patriarchal versions of history, should we be building more monuments and statues to the important women of our past? Or is there a better way to signal how much we value their contributions to our freedom and progress? How different would our society and the world be if women were afforded the same reverence in our history as ‘Great Men’?

QUESTIONS

What did you think about Sue Ryder – later of the charity the Sue Ryder Foundation – and her activities providing refuge for resistance fighters during the war? What about the fact that she was under surveillance by the Polish government because they suspected her of collecting spy information?

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Poland's proud history of female military service is inspiring in Mulley's book. How does it compare with what you understand about the extent women were allowed to be involved in WW2 in the UK?

Mulley notes that because Nazi Germany was so misogynistic in its philosophies about women, the German occupational forces were 'initially blind to the possibility that 'exceptionally deranged' women were playing an active role in the resistance. In what other ways did Zo use the Nazi's own philosophy against them?

NEXT STEPS

Use either the photograph of Zo's clothes brush with the removable back or the key with the secret storage space for microfilm as inspiration for a piece of writing. Write about a day in Zo's life where she had to use these items. What happened? What information was she transporting? Who did she give it to? How did she feel, knowing that if she were caught carrying that information, she would be arrested?

Alternatively, imagine that you are taking part in one of the sports days or dressing up activities the Silent Unseen took part in. Write a few diary entries, thinking about how you might have found some of the activities. Would you have thought they were silly or fun – a rare opportunity to take a break? Would Zo have been excited for her parachute training? Would she be annoyed at being the only woman in the Silent Unseen – perhaps quietly afraid or intimidated about what was ahead, or just raring to go?? ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Clare Mulley is an award-winning author and historian, mainly focused on female experience during the Second World War. As well as her own books, she has contributed to many others, reviews widely and has judged several book prizes. Clare is also a regular contributor to TV, radio and many podcasts. She is a recipient of the Polish cultural honour, the Bene Merito, and the *Daily Mail* Biographers Club Prize. She lives in Essex.



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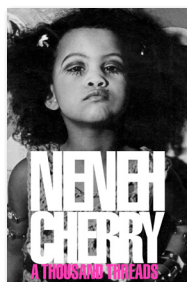
In *The Spy Who Loved: the secrets and lives of one of Britain's bravest wartime heroines*, Clare Mulley tells the story of Christine Granville, MI6's first female recruit and Winston Churchill's favourite spy.

In *The War We Won Apart: The Untold Story of Two Elite Agents Who Became One of the Most Decorated Couples of WWII*, Nahlah Ayed presents the untold story of two elite agents, one Canadian, one British, who became one of the most decorated couples of WWII.

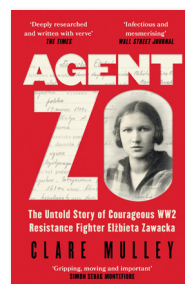
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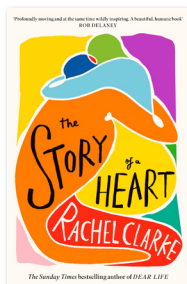
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