

Sophie de Schaepdrijver, *Gabrielle Petit: The Death and Life of a Female Spy in the First World War*.
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This is a remarkable book about a remarkable life – and how different interests in Belgian society sought to make use of it. Gabrielle Petit was a young Belgian woman executed for espionage by the Germans in 1916. Remembered for her heroic defiance at her trial and even at her execution, she became a symbol of Belgian nationalism that transcended the linguistic divide. Her image was used to rally a country devastated by war and demoralized by its treatment by the Allies at Versailles. Inevitably, large gaps appeared between myth and reality, but De Schaepdrijver demonstrates that the myth can teach us how Belgian society functioned then and how it changed in the decades after the war, becoming more culturally divided and less nationalistic.

The myth and reality of Gabrielle Petit's life overlap well enough when it came to her heroism in the face of the German occupation, which included the execution of innocent civilians, the destruction of several villages and towns, and the export of over a hundred thousand men for forced labor. However, her story fell victim to the need to create a national symbol to deal with complicated issues concerning the relationship between soldiers, civilian resisters, and those who collaborated. Eulogized by Cardinal Désiré-Joseph Mercier, another symbol of Belgian resistance, she was portrayed as a working-class girl who had nursed her soldier fiancé and remained resolutely religious, leading to comparisons with Jeanne d'Arc, who was canonized in 1920.

In reality Petit came from a bourgeois family that steadily slid down the social scale amidst many family troubles, leading to a long history of fractious relationships and Gabrielle being placed in an orphanage, with few opportunities to improve her life. Abandoned by much of her family and unable to pursue an education, she worked as a salesgirl while developing an outspoken personality at odds with the expected role of a woman in *fin de siècle* Belgium. Her engagement to an officer candidate in the Belgian army appears to have been ambivalent on her part, and her fiancé soon lost interest. But it was still important. On a trip to the Netherlands to visit her interned fiancé, she was recruited by British military intelligence services.

Both Belgians and Germans would exaggerate her espionage work, giving rise to the myth that she led a vast network of spies. Nevertheless, her work was significant. During her five and a half months of active work she managed to travel all over Belgium to obtain information about German military strength, which the Allies desperately needed because the static Western front made ordinary information gathering almost impossible. Unfortunately for Petit and others, the early Allied efforts were amateurish and penetrated by counterintelligence, leading to her arrest in February 1916. Ironically, this would lead to a far more effective Belgian-Allied espionage network, the *Dame Blanche*, but this was too late for Petit.

She was defiant even at her arrest, and for the most part remained so in prison, even refusing to appeal her death sentence. While the records of her trial did not survive, eyewitness testimony shows her remarkably courageous, even in the face of an unusually overbearing German prosecutor, and with no real legal counsel assistance. Petit defended her cause and attacked the German invasion, focusing on the atrocities and massacres perpetrated by the invading army. De Schaepdrijver hints that this may well have predetermined the outcome, the death penalty was not inevitable. No women had been executed since the uproar over Edith Cavell, and the police favored a lesser sentence. Edith Cavell was a British Red Cross nurse who enabled British prisoners to escape Belgium. An appeal for clemency was ultimately supported by the King of Spain as well as the head of the German Political Department, but Petit steadfastly refused to request a pardon. Much of what we know came from her friendship with German translator Otto Becker, to whom she wrote a fascinating letter making clear that it was the occupation, not all Germans, that she hated. The final refusal to reconsider the sentence shocked many, including Petit, but she refused the blindfold until the last possible moment and died in silence.

Initially she was little memorialized but all this changed with surprising rapidity at the war's end. Commemorations began in December 1918 – including one by an organized labor union which claimed her as one of its own. She was also named a national heroine by a patriotic league that attempted to mobilize dissatisfaction over Versailles. Her life was used as a lesson in patriotism and religiosity. A 1922 biography and the 1923 construction of her monument in Brussels coincided with her prison cell becoming a site for patriotic pilgrimages. Her memory was used to address the role of resisters and civilians in general, and even for reconciliation with

Germany. The carefully choreographed Royal ceremony of 1923 was the culmination of her status as a folk heroine. Her actual history played little role; neither of her biographers were even invited

Petit was not forgotten after this point. She would be a symbol of resistance during and immediately after the Nazi era, and there was a brief flare-up of interest in the 1960s, but her memory waned as the concept of national sacrifice declined. In the 1920s and 1930s she was used by a variety of political interests. Her memory was thrust into the Flemish-Walloon controversies over the ‘activists’ in Flanders who had worked with the Germans for autonomy, and also for women’s issues. During the Nazi era her importance was cited by resisters and oppressors. The relocation of her grave in 1964 was marked by a major ceremony. But after this point, amidst less interest in nationalism, and greater focus on linguistic division and social needs, her memory waned. By 1986 things had changed so much that her preserved prison cell was disposed of because the prison needed the space. Those who wanted to continue to revere her myth desired a patriotic moral narrative that is at odds with modern Belgian society.

This fine study brings together history, memory, myth, society, and politics, in an elegant package that ought to be required reading in Belgium today. Ultimately this book may be a more lasting monument to Gabrielle Petit than her Brussels statue. As De Schaepdrijver points out, Petit became more of a statue than a person. This leads to an interesting question as to what the actual result of all this was. In a sense the war may have briefly saved Petit herself, who was denied a decent career by the circumstances of her time and a marriage about which both were clearly ambivalent. The deliberate memorializations of Petit were successful, in the sense that they survived up to and beyond the Second World War, but the efforts to cast her in a lasting Joan of Arc-like image were doomed to failure as the political and religious climate changed. Her construction as heroine across both major linguistic regions could not survive the increasing fragmentation of the Belgian state. Making her cell a pilgrimage site is so obviously connected to the Catholicity of traditional Belgium that the decline of conventional religion inevitably has affected the image of the country’s secular saints, including Petit. But historical trends are not linear. With the crises upon which Belgium and Europe are entering, her story and myth may enter a new phase of relevance.

Hubert van Tuyll