

# **Was Nurse Edith Cavell betrayed by Britain?**

by

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Nurse Edith Cavell was born at Swardeston in Norfolk and was 49 years old when the First World War broke out. After an early career in England, in 1907 she had gone to Brussels to open a nursing school at 143-149 Rue de la Culture. Edith had returned to spend the summer of 1914 with her mother in College Road in Norwich and to visit friends; it was a particularly warm and pleasant summer, until the clouds of war began to gather over Europe in July. Nurse Cavell decided to return to Brussels, believing that she had a duty to her nurses, and that her expertise would be needed in the coming conflict. With disruption on trains and channel steamers, the journey took longer than usual, but Edith finally arrived back at the nursing school during the early hours of 3 August. The following day, Germany declared war on Belgium, following the refusal of King Albert to march through his country; at 11pm the same evening, Britain declared war on Germany.

Before the Germans entered Brussels on 20 August, Edith and her team of nurses in the Rue de la Culture had treated a steady stream of wounded Belgian and British troops, men who had become separated from their comrades as the Allied armies were driven back by the surge of German troops. Once the city was overrun and the front line moved westwards, the call upon her nursing skills lessened; although never more than a trickle, the hospital then turned to treating German soldiers.

With Brussels and much of Belgium now occupied by Germans, there remained a number of British, French and Belgian soldiers who had been forced into hiding in forests and deserted buildings; some were wounded, others had simply got lost. As they were discovered by farmers and foresters, and their plight became known, small groups of people formed with the aim of protecting, feeding and treating these strays, then to devise the means to get them across the border into neutral Holland. It was to such a group that Nurse Edith Cavell belonged.

In 1915 Edith Cavell was arrested by the Germans on suspicion of treason. She was tried before a Military Tribunal, along with several associates also allegedly involved in helping men to escape the occupied zone. By the time of her arrest, the escape network had extended its work to help able bodied Belgians who wished to escape for the sole purpose of joining their national army and to return to fight to regain their homeland. This extension was significant as it took Cavell's and the network's activities from the purely humane, tending to injured soldiers before helping them to return home, to a much more combative role, by increasing the fighting power of the Allies.

At her trial, Cavell admitted to these activities, though she maintained that her motive was simple humanity. As to numbers, she admitted, and the court accepted, that approaching 200 men had escaped with her help. At no time during the trial was there any suggestion that Cavell had been involved in espionage or intelligence gathering for the Allies. Nurse Edith Cavell was convicted, sentenced to death and executed by firing squad within the space of 48 hours.

The penalty was, despite being lawful under German military law, harsh, and the sentence was carried out with remarkable haste. The resulting, and justifiable, outrage at Cavell's treatment was seized upon by the British government, particularly its war propaganda department. With men such as Rudyard Kipling, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and John Buchan working in the department, it is clear that the value of propaganda was fully appreciated and exploited by the War Cabinet; in terms of propaganda value, Nurse Cavell's execution ranked above the sinking of the Lusitania, German 'atrocities' in Belgium, and the subsequent execution of Captain Fryatt.

Whilst there is no direct evidence that Edith Cavell was deliberately betrayed to German security agencies by British intelligence, the response of MI6 and the British Establishment to her capture is baffling. Not a finger was lifted to help or support her, to intercede or to seek clemency. Cavell was tried not for spying, but simply for helping men to escape from occupied territory and, whilst this was technically an offence that attracted the death penalty, it might surely be expected that representations would have been made on humanitarian grounds, at least for a reduction in the sentence to one of imprisonment. Not only were no British official statements made in support of Nurse Cavell, but it was acknowledged that the Germans were perfectly entitled to execute her. Sir Horace Rowland at the Foreign Office declared impotently that 'I am afraid it is likely to go hard for Miss Cavell. I am afraid we are powerless.' Perhaps the most unfathomable comment came from Lord Robert Cecil, under-secretary for foreign affairs: 'Any representation from us will do her more harm than good.' Quite what fate Lord Cecil thought could be worse than a firing squad is not recorded. Nurse Edith Cavell was executed alongside Philippe Baucq by firing squad at Saint Gilles prison on 12 October 1915.

The efficient German bureaucracy lost no time in publishing details of the tribunal's findings:

*'By its finding of the 9th of October, 1915, the war tribunal has pronounced the following sentences for treason committed during a state of war (for forwarding recruits to the enemy) :*

- 1. Philippe Baucq, architect, of Brussels.*
- 2. Louise Thuliez, professor at Lille.*
- 3. Edith Cavell, superintendent of a medical institute in Brussels.*
- 4. Louis Severin, chemist, of Brussels.*
- 5. Comtesse Jeanne de Belleville, of Montignies.*

*All five sentenced to death.*

6. *Herman Capiou, engineer, of Wasmes.*

7. *Mme. Ada Bodart, of Brussels.*

8. *Albert Libier, advocate, of Wasmes.*

9. *Georges Derveau, chemist, of Paturages*

*All four sentenced to fifteen years penal servitude.*

10. *Princess Maria de Croy, of Bellignies.*

*To ten years penal servitude.*

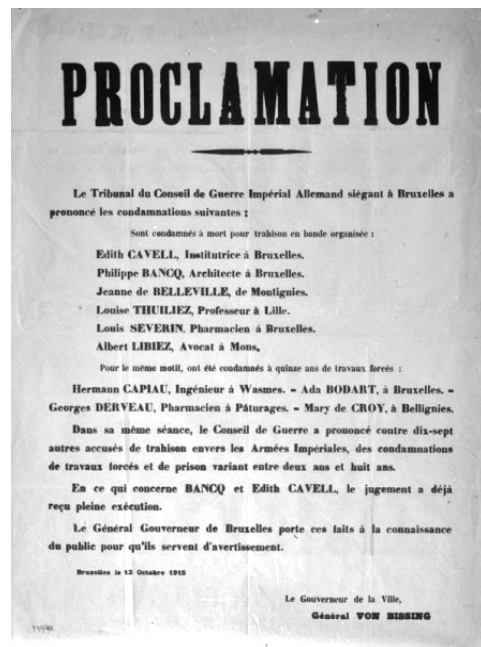
*Seventeen other accused persons were sentenced to penal servitude or imprisonment varying from two to eight years.*

*Eight other persons accused of treason committed during a state of war were acquitted.*

*The sentence passed against Baucq and Cavell has already been carried out.*

*Brussels, 12th of October, 1915. The General Government.*<sup>1</sup>

In the event, the executions of Edith Cavell and Philippe Baucq seemed to satisfy the need for blood, and the other three condemned had their sentences commuted to imprisonment.



It has been suggested that the motive of the British government for its inactivity was the anticipation of a propaganda coup if Germany went ahead with the execution. There was undoubtedly a world-wide furore at this latest example of German 'frightfulness', but was that the real reason for British inertia? Was Britain even in a position to do anything to help Nurse Cavell.

Those commentaries on the Cavell case which do highlight Britain's failure to act tend to focus on the diplomatic response. But, well before those final frenetic days of her trial, there had been an

<sup>1</sup> Belgium in Wartime, de Gomery, op. cit. p211 @

opportunity for direct action: a prison break. Planning for the rescue mission were under way when, for reasons never explained, SIS vetoed the plan.

Almost immediately after her arrest, one of Edith Cavell's associates, the Abbé de Longueville, determined that efforts must be made to free her. He approached French intelligence, the Deuxieme Bureau, knowing that they had previously been successful in springing their own agents from prison, including from Saint Giles in Brussels. The man the Abbé needed to speak to was Lieutenant Pierre Desgranges who agreed to organise Cavell's escape.<sup>2</sup> As plans were taking shape, out of the blue came a message that British intelligence had vetoed the operation. Desgranges received the following note, obtuse in the extreme, describing the Abbé de Longueville:

*August 31<sup>st</sup> 1915*

*Abbé de Longueville? I know him. He is a very honest man. Unfortunatley all his relations are at present employed by the other side in important activities. I have seen the Chief who thinks it would be a bad thing to go with an extension which would introduce new elements naturally untried. I can only approve his caution. At present all that is going forward must be jealously safeguarded, and new creations must stand on their own feet.<sup>3</sup>*

Whatever else the letter may have meant, it was clear that Desgranges was being ordered to drop the attempt to free Cavell; he believed that it signaled the fact that British intelligence had already planned the escape, and required neither assistance nor interference. When he learned of Edith Cavell's execution, and that there had been no British rescue attempt, Desgranges was philosophical. He had been told by his chief, Commandant Paul Wallner, that the British had balked at the estimated £1000 needed to mount the rescue operation, most of it for bribing guards and getting the nurse across the border, but he knew that was simply not true.<sup>4</sup> Far more had been spent on other, far less worthwhile, causes by the British. No, he concluded that the decision had been made in London that Cavell's sacrifice would have far greater propaganda value than her rescue or a commutation of her sentence could ever achieve. But could the reasons for British inaction have been even more calculating? Could she, instead of being simply left high and dry, have actually been betrayed by the British, specifically by SIS, more commonly known today as MI6?

When considering the possibility of the betrayal of Edith Cavell by British intelligence, something that seems unthinkable today, the comments of Captain Ferdinand Tuohy, who served in the Intelligence Corps during the First World War, provide an interesting starting point. Published in

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<sup>2</sup> His true name was Joseph Crozier and he related this incident in *In the Enemy's Country*, 1931, Hutchinson & Co, London. p136

<sup>3</sup> Crozier, op.cit., p138

<sup>4</sup> Rowan, op.cit, p554

1920, *The Secret Corps; a Tale of "Intelligence" on all Fronts*, was one of the first descriptions of what Tuohy called the 'war within a war' and 'a ruthless campaign of Brain versus Brain.'<sup>5</sup>

Captain Tuohy unleashed a damning assessment of the value of women as spies: 'Especially most women spies are fundamentally unreliable and few of them can ever have been trusted with real secrets. Women agents furthermore systematically exaggerated their reports, a common tendency with spies with women often from vanity, with men to get more money.' Turning to Edith Cavell, Tuohy said that 'It was a woman who gave away most of the French espionage system in Belgium in 1915, as a result of which sixty-six agents were arrested by the Germans and our allies rendered largely dependent on British Intelligence at a highly critical period. It would be idle now to trace the cause of this collapse other than to where it belongs to the trial of Miss Cavell, with its third degree revelations extracted by the Germans.' Pulling no punches, he described Edith Cavell as a 'traitress'.

Tuohy's attitude to women as agents in general, and to Edith Cavell in particular, is revealing not only of his own prejudices, but also as an indication of views generally held within the intelligence services at that time. Yet, if Cavell was no more than an angel of mercy, treating wounded men and helping them to escape from occupied territory, how was it that she could, let alone did, reveal the identities of so many French secret agents?

There has remained to this day a popular belief that Nurse Cavell was not involved in spying for Britain. Gill Bennett, the FCO Historian, writing on the centenary of Cavell's execution, states: 'There is no evidence to suggest she was working for any formal intelligence organisation, and she was not charged with espionage by the Germans.'<sup>6</sup> Had it been otherwise, and had she been tried for espionage by the Germans, her story would have been much different and, in particular, the propaganda value of her death would have been seriously undermined. For British intelligence, official involvement or interference in Cavell's trial or sentence created the unacceptable risk that she would be accused, or suspected, of spying. But surely, if Edith Cavell was not involved in espionage work for Britain, and her activities were limited to helping men to cross the border, such a risk would have been minimal. It was only if she had been an agent for British intelligence that the danger of discovery of that truth needed to be acknowledged.

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<sup>5</sup> Captain Ferdinand Tuohy. *The Secret Corps. A tale of 'Intelligence' on all Fronts*. John Murray, London, 1920. It seems remarkable that

<sup>6</sup> <https://history.blog.gov.uk/2015/10/12/whats-the-context-12-october-2015-the-execution-of-edith-cavell/>

Le Numéro 638... L'impartial 3<sup>e</sup> Feuille

**Blaise**... **D'un moment à l'autre**... **LA SITUATION DES ARMES BRÉSILIENNES**... **PÉTERSBOURG**... **LES FRANÇAIS EN ALGERIE**... **LES FRANÇAIS EN ALGERIE**... **LES FRANÇAIS EN ALGERIE**... **LES FRANÇAIS EN ALGERIE**...

**EDITH CAVELL,**  
THE ENGLISH RED CROSS NURSE.

Oh! I sing to-day of a Red Cross Nurse,  
Edith Cavell has passed to her Glory!  
She who tended the Sick and the Dying,  
Even Prussians—when Wounded and Gory!  
Yet these German Huns slew this woman so fair  
Whose only call was her Duty!  
For a Saint she lived—yea! a Martyr she Died,  
For England, her Home—and Beauty!

Where Camp fires burn near the Battlefields,  
Our Soldiers still see her Beckoning!  
They'll avenge her Death—and the German Host  
Shall have a long and Bitter Reckoning!  
Where God looks down from His Throne on High,  
It is He—shall Avenger this Crime!  
And the Deed of the Prussian shall branded be,  
It shall Ring through the Earth for all Time!

For a Sainly Woman has passed away  
And her quiet Meek Spirit fled!  
Whist Britain Calls for Vengeance to-Day,  
O'er these Memories of the Dead!  
And Peace shall Reign when we've Crushed the Hun,  
And the Power of the Devil we'll Slay!  
Whist the Martyrdom of our Red Cross Nurse,  
Edith Cavell—shall not Fade away!

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Tuohy's harsh judgment of Edith Cavell clearly suggests that she was involved in spying: he talks of her in that context, of her giving away secrets under torture, thus attributing to her knowledge that we would not expect if her activities were limited solely to helping escapees. Is there anything to support Tuohy's hyperbole? Was Edith Cavell really an agent for British intelligence?

There can be no doubt that, as the British, Belgian and French armies crumbled before the German onslaught of 1914, to have people willing to stay behind and gather intelligence was invaluable. Such agents had to be able to move and work openly in the occupied zone for maximum benefit; a nurse would be the perfect choice. Edith Cavell had a strong sense of patriotism coursing through her character, and she would have been easy prey for an SIS recruiter. It may be significant that, during the summer of 1914, Edith Cavell was back in England, spending time with her mother and friends. Despite all the signs that war was looming, she determined, or was persuaded, to return to the nursing school in Brussels, ostensibly because she believed that her nursing skills would soon be in demand. How difficult must it have been for an ordinary citizen to have arranged passage by boat and train from Norwich to Brussels at that time (she arrived back at the nursing school during the early hours of 3 August)? Not so difficult, of course, if the travel arrangements had been made by SIS.

In searching for the truth about Edith Cavell, it is unfortunate that the previously secret papers of MI5, now available on The National Archives website, reveal little, either because the Security Service was unaware of her work for SIS, or because any probative material has been 'weeded out'. Similarly, the TNA file of Gaston Quien, the man alleged to have been a German agent masquerading as a Belgian

soldier in need of Cavell's help, and who went on to betray her and her colleagues, contains little of interest in this context.

Is there any other firm evidence that Edith Cavell was involved in espionage? In a recent BBC television broadcast, former head of MI5, Dame Stella Rimington claimed to have uncovered 'for the first time', evidence of such involvement.<sup>7</sup> In fact, the information upon which this revelation was based, being the testimony and documents of Herman Capiiau, was fully described in 2013 by P.K. Hugo Leuders.<sup>8</sup> Capiiau worked with Edith Cavell, and was one of those convicted alongside her for facilitating the escape of Allied soldiers. His evidence shows that, when useful information was obtained about the Germans it was passed on to British intelligence. The impression given is that this was an ad hoc arrangement, supporting Gill Bennett's contention, above, that Cavell seems not to have been working for any 'formal' intelligence organisation. It is worth remembering that, both then and now, SIS agents were often engaged on informal terms.

The final piece of the jigsaw, revealing beyond doubt that Nurse Edith Cavell worked for SIS, was provided by the late M. R. D. Foot, the respected intelligence historian and a former intelligence officer. In 2002 Professor Foot wrote that Cavell's role was a secret 'which I have had to sit on for a generation: that Edith Cavell, shot by the Germans in Brussels in 1915 for helping scores of British soldiers to escape into Holland had, in fact, been an exceptionally well placed spy, despised by the Secret Service for having turned aside from her duty as a spy to perform a work of mercy.'<sup>9</sup>

## Conclusions

Two questions need to be answered: was Edith Cavell an agent for SIS, and was she betrayed by them? The evidence that she was an agent is, if not incontrovertible, very strong. In answering the second question, it is first necessary to ask: why would SIS wish to betray her? Professor Foot gives a clear answer to this point; Captain Tuohy's diatribe does likewise.<sup>10</sup> His condemnation of Cavell is to be found within two pages of his book reserved for an unrestrained attack on using women as agents or spies. The clear inference is that Cavell had become a liability and a security risk. The fact that, during interrogation, she gave up the names of many French agents might have been an unintended

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<sup>7</sup> *Secrets and Spies: the Untold Story of Edith Cavell*. BBC Radio 4. Broadcast date: 16 September 2015

<sup>8</sup> *EDITH'S WONDERLAND: IN MEMORIAM OF EDITH CAVELL † 12 OCTOBER 1915*

<sup>9</sup> MRD Foot in his review of Paul Routledge's *Public Servant, Secret Agent: the enigmatic life and violent death of Airey Neave*, TLS May 2002.

<sup>10</sup> Is it not curious that Tuohy was allowed to publish these allegations against Edith Cavell? During the war, she had been portrayed as a heroine and patriot, whose death at the hands of the Germans became the rallying cry for recruiting officers nationwide. In May 1919 her body was exhumed and brought back to Britain to great ceremony, a state funeral and reburial at Norwich Cathedral. Tuohy's denigrations came just a year later, in 1920. The government could easily have suppressed publication his book. Why did it not do so? The answer may be that publication served another propaganda purpose: keeping Germany in line. Well into the mid '20s there was a fear that Germany would refuse to observe the Versailles treaty, and care had to be taken not to emphasise German wartime 'frightfulness'. Having come in for much criticism during the war for its treatment of Nurse Cavell, Tuohy's presentation almost justified it. A similar situation arose in 1928 with the Government's banning of the film 'Dawn', the story of Edith Cavell and her execution, for fear that it would cause upset in Germany.

consequence of her betrayal. That Edith Cavell was betrayed to the Germans is generally accepted. There has always been doubt about Quien's role. Several other names have been put forward. Ultimately, SIS had the motive and the means to 'burn' her, to sell her out to the Germans.

Looked at in the light of the above analysis, the complete disinterest in organising or supporting the escape plan, the refusal to seek clemency, and the curious statements from the Foreign Office, all of which have been attributed, unconvincingly, to the aim of achieving a propaganda coup, make much more sense if Nurse Edith Cavell had been a British secret agent. By using her connections, resources and knowledge to help men escape from Belgium, instead of obtaining and transmitting intelligence to SIS, she had become an unacceptable liability.

**Dover, Kent.**  
**The Kent County Association**  
(ST. MARY'S SOCIETY).

*On Wednesday, May 14th, 1919, in Three Hours and Three Minutes*  
 AT THE CHURCH OF ST. MARY.

**A Peal of Grandsire Triples. 5040 changes.**

<b>Parker's Twelve-Part.</b> FREDERICK W. ELLIOTT, <i>Treble</i> CHARLES R. MILLWAY - - 2 RICHARD H. STEVENS - - 3 CHARLES TURNER - - 4	<b>Tenor 20 cwt.</b> HORACE WHITEHEAD - - 6 HERBERT J. SAUNDERS - - 6 GNR. W. WELLING, R.G.A. 7 CPL. G. A. GADFREY, R.E. <i>Tenor</i>
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Conducted by GNR. W. WELLING. First peal.

Rung with the bells deeply muffled with the exception of the tenor which was open at back stroke, in token of respect to Nurse Cavell, whose body arrived in Dover during the ringing, and rested in the town until the following morning.

The ringers of 1, 3, 4, 5 and 6 are ex-soldiers, the treble man having been eight months a prisoner in Germany.



**Edith Cavell's remains leaving Brussels for England 1919**



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