

Dictionary of National Biography

Khan, Noor-un-Nisa Inayat

(1914–1944)

- Deborah E. Van Seters
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Noor-un-Nisa Inayat Khan (1914–1944)

by unknown photographer

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Khan, Noor-un-Nisa Inayat (1914–1944), special operations officer, was born on 2 January 1914 in Moscow, the eldest of four children of Hazrat Inayat Khan (1882–1927), a Sufi religious teacher and musician, and his wife, Ora Ray Baker (1890–1949). Her father was descended from the last Mughal emperor of southern India, and her mother was American, of British descent. In the 1920s and 1930s the family, including Noor's two brothers, Vilayat and Hidayat, and her sister, Khair-un-Nisa, was settled in Suresne, France. By many accounts a very gentle, generous, and somewhat highly strung young woman, Noor spent the 1930s studying a range of subjects in Paris. In 1939 she published *Twenty Jataka Tales*, a collection of children's stories based on a cycle of legends about the Buddha.

After the family fled to England in 1940, Noor enlisted in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force and trained as a radio operator. In the autumn of 1942, she was discreetly approached by a member of the Special Operations Executive (SOE), a secret body which trained men and women to organize resistance groups and co-ordinate sabotage efforts in axis-occupied territory. Noor's knowledge of France and her fluency in French, along with her radio skills, were seen as highly valuable commodities in this context. During her SOE training some instructors questioned Noor Inayat Khan's suitability as an undercover agent, fearing that she was too emotional, impulsive, and nervous. However, she did have the support of key officers of the SOE's French (F) section, including Vera Atkins, who paid special attention to the women agents being sent to France.

Now codenamed Madeleine, Noor was flown into occupied France in June 1943, before her training as an agent was fully completed, to link up with a vast Paris-based network codenamed Prosper, which had been engaged in numerous activities ostensibly designed to prepare for an allied invasion. Unbeknown to Noor, however, the Prosper network had become badly compromised because of problems in both London and France. A deadly combination of carelessness, contradictory priorities, treachery, and sheer misfortune led to the destruction of the network in the spring of 1943. As the radio operator for an agent co-ordinating sabotage in an area south-west of Paris, Noor began making contacts, unaware of how deeply the Germans had penetrated the network. Soon after she arrived, Prosper began to disintegrate around her. Though hundreds of agents and resistance members were arrested throughout that summer, Noor managed to stay just ahead of German security services. In spite of the danger she continued to transmit regularly to SOE headquarters. Now the only radio operator left in Paris, she was especially valued, but her superiors in London were increasingly concerned for her safety and pressed her to return. This she refused to do until a replacement could be sent. Noor did make some serious mistakes over security. For example, she inexplicably saved all transmitted and received messages instead of destroying them. However, while this and other errors may have contributed to her fate, the larger disaster unfolding around her made her continued evasion of the Germans extremely unlikely even if she had been an experienced professional. She was arrested at her flat in October 1943. Interrogated at length, she refused to give any details of her work with SOE F section. In November, after two escape attempts from German security headquarters in Paris, she was sent to Pforzheim prison in Germany. In the meantime, the German security services were able to use Noor's captured radio, codes, and messages to deceive SOE headquarters into thinking she was still free.

On 10 September 1944 Noor was taken from Pforzheim to the prison at Karlsruhe, along with three other women from SOE F section. The following day, the women were put on a train for Dachau. On 12 or 13 September 1944 Noor Inayat Khan and her three colleagues were executed at Dachau. In recognition of her efforts and her sacrifice, Noor was awarded a number of

posthumous honours, including the French Croix de Guerre and the MBE and George Cross by the British government.

Noor's sex and her aristocratic Indian background, in combination with her dangerous work and tragic death during the war, have often led to her being portrayed in a highly romanticized manner, as the exotic, martyred 'Indian princess' secret agent. This simplistic rendering does not do justice either to the individual or to the experiences of the women agents of the SOE. Noor was part of a ground-breaking effort to train women as undercover operatives in a range of capacities in enemy-occupied territory. These women willingly abandoned contemporary perceptions about the proper roles for women and accepted the high risks of capture, torture, and death that all undercover agents faced. Through skill and luck many of them were able to make major contributions to local resistance efforts and many survived the war. Others were not as fortunate. Of the thirty-nine women SOE agents who served in France, Noor was one of thirteen who died in the performance of her duty. In spite of the terrifying circumstances she faced—for which she was perhaps not best suited or adequately trained—she acted with great determination and integrity and she courageously protected her colleagues and her organization to the end. Noor Inayat Khan stands as both an impressive example of an unusual and important aspect of women's contribution to the allied war effort, and a necessary reminder of the dark side of the too often glamorized world of espionage and covert action.

Sources

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Likenesses

- photograph, repro. in Overton Fuller, *Noor-un-Nisa Inayat Khan*, facing p. 240
- photograph, repro. in Jones, *Quiet courage*, facing p. 183
- photograph, NPG [\[see illus.\]](#)

External resources

- [Bibliography of British and Irish History](#)