

Readers Guide

Madame Fourcade's Secret War

In *Madame Fourcade's Secret War*, Lynne Olson tells the remarkable story of a thirty-one-year-old Frenchwoman and mother of two who in 1941 became leader of a vast Resistance intelligence organization in France—the only woman to emerge as a *chef de résistance* during World War II. Strong-willed, independent, and a lifelong rebel against her country's conservative, patriarchal society, Marie-Madeleine Fourcade was temperamentally made for the job.

The Gestapo pursued Fourcade and her network, called Alliance, relentlessly, capturing, torturing, and executing hundreds of her three thousand agents. Although Fourcade moved her headquarters every few weeks, constantly changing her hair color, clothing, and identity, she was captured twice by the Nazis. Both times she escaped, once by slipping naked through the bars of her jail cell—and continued to hold her network together even as it repeatedly threatened to crumble around her.

No other French spy network lasted as long or supplied as much crucial intelligence, including providing American and British military commanders with a 55-foot-long map of the beaches and roads on which the Allies would land on D-Day, showing every German gun emplacement, fortification, and beach obstacle along the Normandy coast.

Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. In the early and mid twentieth century, women in France were expected to confine themselves to their domestic roles as wives and mothers. Fourcade refused to go along with those restrictions. What was there about her background that prompted that rebellion?
2. Given France's patriarchal view of women, how do you explain the fact that a young woman like Fourcade could become the leader of a resistance network made up predominantly of men? Why do you think they accepted her leadership?
3. As a woman, did Fourcade operate any differently than male French resistance leaders?
4. Alliance and Fourcade worked very closely with MI6, the British government's intelligence agency, during the war. But MI6 had no idea of Fourcade's true identity for several months after she became the head of the network. Why did she initially keep that a secret?
5. Although the official name for Fourcade's network was Alliance, the Gestapo called it Noah's Ark. What was the reason for that?
6. There were many resistance networks operating in occupied France, but the work of Fourcade and Alliance was particularly important to the Allied cause. Why was that true?
7. When the war began, Fourcade had two young children whom she dearly loved. But she spent little time with them during the conflict, not seeing them for months, even years. After the war, she claimed that they had been "miraculously unaffected" by her separation from them. Do you believe that was true? Furthermore, do you think *she* actually believed it was true? If not, why would she say that?

8. Several years after the war ended, Fourcade was asked by an interviewer to describe herself. She replied that she was “the wife of an officer, the mother of a family, a member of no political party and a Catholic.” Why do you think she failed to mention that she had led the most important Allied intelligence network in occupied France?

9. In the last few decades, there have been floods of books and films about the French resistance. But despite the extraordinary achievements of Fourcade and Alliance, she and her network were largely unknown until this book was published. What were the reasons for that?

10. Many years after the war, an American journalist asked Jeannie Rousseau, one of Fourcade’s top operatives, why she risked her life to join Alliance. “It was a moral obligation to do what you are capable of doing,” Rousseau said. Then she added: “Resistance is a state of mind. We can exercise it at any moment.” What do you think she meant by that? What is that statement’s significance for today?

About the Author

Lynne Olson is a *New York Times* bestselling author of nine books of history, including *Madame Fourcade’s Secret War: The Daring Young Woman Who Led France’s Largest Spy Network Against the Nazis* and *Citizens of London: The Americans Who Stood with Britain in Its Darkest, Finest Hour*. Former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright has called her “our era’s foremost chronicler of World War II politics and diplomacy.”

Lynne lives in Washington, DC with her husband, Stanley Cloud, with whom she co-authored two books.