An elegant female spy who, through charm, intelligence, and physical courage, outfoxes the enemy is a romantic figure more at home in novels than diplomatic histories.¹ Such women inevitably thrive in the face of danger and survive the most degrading circumstances, a life few women led in the early decades of the twentieth century. Marguerite Harrison was an exception, an original American woman spy who was so outside the norms for women that at times her story tests credibility. A debutante from Baltimore born in 1879, she was raised in extraordinary wealth during the Gilded Age, educated by tutors at home, and mastered French and German like a native during summers in Europe.

True to the era, her good fortune dissipated in grand style. Her father, a shipping magnate, lost much of his wealth overnight, although he thoughtfully set aside an inheritance for her. Her husband died in 1915 when she was 36 years old, leaving her a widow with a teenage son and significant debts. To fill her bank account, she turned her mansion into a boarding house and found work as a reporter at The Baltimore Sun. Then she took stock. This was not the life for her. Seeking meaningful adventure, she applied for work overseas as a spy and after several rejections was accepted by the Military Intelligence Division of the US Army. She was hired and sent to Berlin to assess post-war Germany, arriving in 1919 as a spy under cover as a journalist. She packed her designer ensembles and left her son in the care of her mother-in-law.

That first assignment jump starts the incomparable adventures of Flirting with Danger: The Mysterious Life of Marguerite Harrison, Socialite Spy. Janet Wallach, an accomplished biographer, allows Harrison to tell her own story with her own distinctive point of view.² We learn how she insinuated herself into the highest ranks of Berlin society in the 1920s, becoming a fixture at the salon of Countess Hetta Treuberg, where she spied on Germans and visiting allies suspected of leaking classified information. It was a time, Wallach notes, when “spies, counterspies, and agents were thick as peas in Germany” (30).

Walter Rathenau, the great German industrialist and foreign minister, opened his soul to her as well as his illicit stash of American cigarettes. She took a day off to visit one of the city’s miserable tenements—the apartment of her maid’s sister—and ate near starvation rations of turnips and watery soup. Otherwise, she stuck to the smart set, eating ice cream at the Bristol Hotel and dancing at the Linden Cabaret to “Alexander’s Ragtime Band.”

¹ For example, the character Charlie in John Le Carre, The Little Drummer Girl (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983).
With sharp details like those from Harrison’s own memoirs, *Flirting With Danger* conjures the smoky, dangerous atmosphere of Weimar Germany and later the bleak horror of being held in the Soviet Union’s notorious Lubyanka prison.³ Wallach brings heft to all of those tales by anchoring them in the history and political nuances of bedeviled nations between the two world wars, ensuring that Harrison’s perceptive observations of diplomats and members of the secret police are windows into the dangerous diplomacy as well as intriguing episodes that fulfill the promised “mysterious” of the title.

Harrison’s unique talents blossomed when she was on assignment to the Soviet Union. She left America in October 1919 wearing a diamond broach and a belt with a thousand dollars’ worth of gold coins hidden around her waist. She topped the ensemble with a mink coat (82). A romantic, she had always been fond of Imperial Russia, if not the Soviet Union. “The spirit of Russia swirled through her dreams…. She embraced its soul in the novels of Tolstoy and Turgenev, the plays of Chekhov, and the poetry of Pushkin” (79). Once in Moscow she befriended Frank McCullagh, a British spy who worked undercover as a reporter for the *Manchester Guardian*. On one adventure the two crashed a private exhibition in the Kremlin. Among the dignitaries was Leon Trotsky, who was still the head of the Red Army. Harrison threaded her way across the crowd and introduced herself to him. He favored her with a bourgeois kiss on her hand, and then “politely dismissed her” (105).

While admiring Harrison’s intelligence and creativity as a spy, I could not help but think of Evan Gershkovich, the *Wall Street Journal* reporter who is currently imprisoned in Moscow after being falsely accused of being an American spy in March 2023.⁴ Under pressure, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) stopped using American journalists as cover in 1977, but left the lethal legacy that adds to the danger of being a US foreign correspondent.⁵

Harrison was eventually ratted out by an American mole and thrown into the Lubyanka prison. The description of the hardships that she shared with Soviet women are the most compelling in the book. They supported each other in a myriad of ways, creating games and sharing ersatz food and secrets. Years later she wrote that those friendships were “the most real thing in the world.” Yet within months Harrison was a wreck, “aching and feverish, weak from insufficient food and suffering from severe bronchitis; she could do little more than lie on the wood planks that served as her bed” (156). She was released in 1921 in a prisoner exchange, becoming famous in the United States as an innocent traveler who had been mistreated by the Soviet Union.

Harrison’s hunger for adventure was not dimmed. In May 1922 she accepted an assignment in Asia, and crossed the Pacific Ocean to collect intelligence on Japanese leaders. Unable to understand or speak the Japanese language, she came to the wild conclusion that the “Japanese are essentially inarticulate… They have never been able to freely express themselves to each other or to foreigners” (182). She arrived in Siberia in time to witness the Soviets take control of the disputed territory from the Japanese. Soviet officials re-arrested her and only granted her freedom in February 1923 when she was stricken with tuberculosis.

Once again, she recovered and was sent in October 1923 to Turkey to chronicle life in the Middle East after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. In Iraq she met Gertrude Bell, the great archeologist, diplomat, and spy.⁶ Bell left behind her impressions of Harrison, and they are riveting. Smart as well as enchanting, Harrison proved to be a grand raconteur, holding dinner guests “enthralled” with her tales, repeating her triumph the

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next night. “I have never had such an uproarious dinner,” said Bell, “But the tales she told us would make the hoariest official blush” (241).

This rare first-hand account of Harrison points to the disadvantages of relying so heavily on Harrison’s own words. She did write five well-regarded and well-written memoirs, particularly Marooned in Moscow, which described her imprisonment. Too often, we have only her uncorroborated word on dangerous episodes. There are scant direct quotations from the secret coded reports that she sent back to Washington, or the articles that she filed abroad for The Baltimore Sun. Wallach rarely mentions Harrison’s personal life. Harrison herself mentioned no romantic affairs during her time as a spy. She said that her son was “closer to me than anyone else in the world” yet was rarely with him (264).

Her final project involved the funding of an early and impressive documentary that followed the annual trek of the Bakhtiari, a nomadic tribe in modern day Khuzestan. It was filmed largely in 1924, and the director was Merian Cooper, who later made the movie King Kong. Harrison was the star, and dressed the part in pongee suits (217) as she rode pack animals through treacherous and often snowy mountains until they reached their summer feeding grounds, which lay 150 miles from the starting point.

Flirting With Danger places Marguerite Harrison in the pantheon of women who were so far ahead of the times that they have been forgotten. While she was not officially the first American woman spy—that was Virginia Hall, who was also from Baltimore and 27 years younger than Harrison—she certainly paved the way. Janet Wallach recovers Harrison and deftly shows how her daring and irrepressible spirit fueled her transformation from socialite to a remarkable spy.

Elizabeth Becker is best known for her expertise on Cambodia. She covered the war in that country for the Washington Post, then returned during the Khmer Rouge regime and had a rare interview with Pol Pot. Her history of that regime, When the War was Over: Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge Revolution (Public Affairs, 1998), has become a classic and she testified as an expert witness at the Khmer Rouge genocide tribunal. In decades as a journalist, she also was the Senior Foreign Editor for National Public Radio and a New York Times correspondent covering national security, economics, and foreign policy. She has won accolades from the Overseas Press Club, DuPont Columbia’s Awards, and was part the Times team that won the Pulitzer Prize for Public Service for coverage of 9/11. She is the author Overbooked: The Exploding Business of Travel and Tourism (Simon & Schuster, 2013), and most recently, You Don’t Belong Here: How Three Women Rewrote the Story of War (Public Affairs, 2021), which won Harvard’s Goldsmith Prize and the Sperber Prize.

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7 Harrison, Marooned in Moscow: The Story of an American Woman Imprisoned in Russia (New York: Doran, 1921).
8 For example, Elizabeth Becker, You Don’t Belong Here: How Three Women Rewrote the Story of War (New York: Public Affairs, 2021).