

# Celebrity spies, from Harry Houdini to Cary Grant to Julia Child

[washingtonpost.com/history/2023/10/22/celebrity-spies-houdini-fleming-baker](https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2023/10/22/celebrity-spies-houdini-fleming-baker)

October 22, 2023

Dancer and singer Josephine Baker, left, poses with French singer and actress Line Renaud, center, during the gala night of the Parisian cabaret Lido, on Dec. 13, 1973, in Paris. Baker worked as a spy during World War II, hiding notes in her underwear following flirtatious conversations with high-ranking Nazis. (AFP/Getty Images)

By Dave Kindy

October 22, 2023 at 7:00 a.m. EDT

During World War II, Josephine Baker regularly attended parties at embassies and consulates in occupied France, where she would flirt with high-ranking Nazi officials. Because of her celebrity as a dancer, actor and singer, the German men would swoon over her — and sometimes begin to divulge military secrets after being plied with alcohol.

Baker would later jot down notes and hide them where she hoped no one would find them: in her underwear. In her 1977 autobiography “[Josephine](#),” she wrote how those secrets were “snugly in place, secured by a safety pin,” so they could be carried past checkpoints and delivered to the French Resistance.

The American-born performer was one of surprisingly large number of celebrities involved in espionage during the 20th century, including escape artist Harry Houdini, baseball catcher Moe Berg, movie actress Marlene Dietrich, spy novelist Ian Fleming, chef Julia Child and Hollywood heartthrob Cary Grant.

## How the CIA's top-ranking woman beat the agency's men at their own game

“When it comes to spying, celebrities have the ability to hide in plain sight,” said Amanda Ohlke, director of adult education at the [International Spy Museum](#) in Washington, D.C. “They can get close to people, who usually want to talk to them because of their fame. They often find out things that real spies would have difficulty in learning.”

Baker, who was African American, moved to Paris in the 1920s to escape the racism she encountered at home. She became a huge star in France and was able to put that fame to good use once war erupted across Europe.



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“Josephine was charming and charismatic,” Ohlke said. After gathering intelligence from tipsy German officials, “she wrote secret notes in invisible ink on her sheet music and hid messages in her clothes.”

Following the war, Baker was honored for her volunteer spy work with the Resistance Medal from the French Committee of National Liberation and the Croix de Guerre from the French military. She was also named a Chevalier of the Légion d’honneur by Gen. Charles de Gaulle.

When not exciting audiences with his incredible escapes, Houdini dabbled in espionage. He was recruited by spy master William Melville, head of an intelligence section at the British War Office. As he performed in Germany and Russia in the years leading up to World War I, the magician took note of troop movements and military equipment, filing regular intelligence briefings with London.

“There was much for Houdini to report on,” wrote William Kalush and Larry Sloman in “The Secret Life of Houdini,” published in 2006. “One area of particular interest was heavier-than-air flying machines. Houdini took sharp notice of German progress in this area.”

One of the more unusual celebrity spies was Berg, a major league baseball player from 1923 to 1939. He was primarily a backup catcher, but excelled elsewhere: He spoke seven languages and had graduated magna cum laude from Princeton University.

During World War II, the retired catcher joined the Office of Strategic Services — predecessor of the CIA — and recruited foreign scientists to work in the United States. In 1942, his spy work nearly turned to assassination when he attended a lecture in Switzerland given by German physicist Werner Heisenberg, who worked on the Nazi nuclear weapons program.

“Moe Berg had orders to kill Heisenberg if he found out the Germans were close to developing an atomic bomb,” Ohlke said. “He learned they weren’t, so he didn’t have to go through with it.”

Germany’s most famous actress in Hollywood during the 1930s was Dietrich. When war blazed across Europe, she opposed the Nazi regime and sided with her adopted country, becoming a U.S. citizen in 1941. Though not technically a spy, Dietrich volunteered to help the OSS by producing propaganda radio programs broadcast to Axis countries.

Featured in those shows was Dietrich’s famous song “Lili Marlene,” which German soldiers were barred from listening to. After receiving many letters in protest, Nazi officials rescinded the order, and her song was played at the end of German broadcasts, according to the CIA website.

It's no secret that Fleming drew on his experiences in British Naval Intelligence during World War II to write his popular James Bond spy novels. But before becoming an author, Fleming concocted schemes that British commandos used to undermine the German war effort. One of his ideas – planting false plans on a dead body – was used to mislead the Nazis before the Allied invasion of Sicily in 1943.

Another plan may have been the basis for the disastrous Dieppe Raid in 1942, a hit-and-run attack on the French coast. According to historian David O'Keefe, Fleming devised the attack as cover for grabbing an Enigma – the Nazi's ultrasecret cryptography machine – from German naval offices in the French seaside town. But the mission failed, resulting in the deaths of nearly 1,000 British, Canadian and American commandos.

"There is no doubt concerning [Fleming's] central role in the Dieppe operation, right from its inception to its delivery," O'Keefe wrote in his 2020 book "One Day in August: Ian Fleming, Enigma and the Deadly Raid on Dieppe." "His inclusion as the anchor-man in the relay tasked to bring the pinched material home was an enormous, and in hindsight, irresponsible risk that one does not take unless the stakes are of the highest order."

Before she was famous, Child worked for the OSS during World War II. She assisted with research on a number of projects before taking on a bigger assignment: cooking up a recipe for shark repellent. Child created "cakes" of copper acetate mixed with black dye that smelled like dead sharks that scared off living ones.

"Child was more than just a secretary or file clerk," Ohlke said. "She worked directly for the chief of the OSS Registry."

Perhaps no celebrity spy has become as notorious as Grant. Two authors alleged the movie star worked for the FBI and British intelligence in helping ferret out Nazi sympathizers in Hollywood and others with possible connections to the German regime during World War II.

In the 1980 book "Errol Flynn: The Untold Story," Charles Higham wrote that Grant exposed Errol Flynn as a supposed Nazi agent. The author claimed to find government records implicating the film legend, though no one else has ever substantiated the claim. Some historians and Flynn's family have denied the accusation.

In 1980, The Washington Post reported that Flynn's former secretary believed her employer was a spy. Jane Chessis claimed she found letters from known Nazis in Flynn's files. When she heard about Higham's book, she remembered saying to her husband, "Oh, they finally found out about Flynn."

Grant also spied on Count Kurt von Haugwitz-Hardenberg-Reventlow, the German-born husband of heiress Barbara Woolworth Hutton, according to Marc Eliot's 2004 book "Cary Grant: A Biography." It's not known whether his surveillance turned up anything, but it did have another kind of success: The actor married Hutton in 1942 after she divorced the count.

Eliot alleged Grant served as a “volunteer” spy for J. Edgar Hoover during World War II and may have had to keep tabs on his wife. “There can be little doubt that Cary Grant was a special agent or contact for the FBI assigned prior to and during the war to spy on Barbara Hutton,” the author wrote, noting that Grant was never investigated by the FBI during the Red Scare of the 1950s despite a “known Communist connection” and may have been protected by Hoover.

While spy work can be dangerous, many celebrities and stars in the making wanted to do their part at a time of international crisis. “They were patriotic and were determined to help their country,” Ohlke said. “It was wartime, and they volunteered to do whatever they could to support the fight against the enemy.”

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