

Of What Value to the Allied War Effort in the Second World War was the Work of the Special Operations Executive?

Written by Oliver Lewis

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OLIVER LEWIS, DEC 3 2007

“Splendid, I shall research on subversive war” declared Major J. C. Holland in 1938 and through his ideas were born the commandos, the deception industry, the escape services and eventually the greater part of the Special Operations Executive (SOE)[1]. The SOE was a new secret service organisation formed by the British Government to coordinate subversion, paramilitary and irregular warfare through foreign resistance movements in territories occupied by the enemy in the Second World War.

The rapid creation of a new government department of such size and tasked with such a wide mandate declared to be of high strategic importance – in an unusually short time[2]– is indicative of the dire circumstances facing Britain in the summer of 1940, and of the value attached to the type of operation SOE was responsible for by HM Government. M. R. D. Foot, a significant scholar in the study of the organisation, characterised SOE’s work as one of “unorthodox coups... unexpected strokes of violence” carried out by irregular foreign forces “which exercise a startling effect on the enemy”[3]. Its purpose was to facilitate resistance against the occupying force by providing foreign resistance groups with the equipment, training and leadership necessary to successfully carry out irregular warfare; commonly violence in the form of sabotage and guerrilla war but also psychological, political and economic warfare. SOE was given a complex, nuanced mandate for prosecuting resistance and harassing the enemy. Formed by combining existing units – Section D from the Secret Intelligence Service, the War Office’s MI(R) and Sir Campbell Stuart’s black propaganda unit, Electra House – SOE was envisioned to play a pivotal strategic role in British policy by coordinating all subversion and resistance activities. Given the belief that *blitzkrieg* had been made possible by German fifth columnist “which had rotted away Germany’s intended victims from within”[4] Churchill, Lord Hankey, Dr. Dalton (SOE’s first Minister), and most of the British military and political establishment attached great importance to using irregular warfare to undermine Germany via its extensive occupied territories. Indeed, so substantial was perceived the value of organised resistance to the Allied war effort that it featured – until the United States entered into the war – as the third arm of stated British strategy. As MacKenzie documents, the British Chiefs of Staff thought “a British victory was possible on the basis of naval blockade, air bombardment and subversion”[5]. The Chiefs cited subversion and resistance “as of the highest importance” because “the only method of bringing about the downfall of Germany is by stimulating the seeds of revolt within the conquered territories”[6]. Until America entered the war, the British had no inclination (nor, arguably, the resources) to enter a land war against the more powerful *Wehrmacht*. It was intended that sabotage would wear down Germany while armed resistance groups fought a guerrilla war that would “so disperse and demoralise the German army that it could be destroyed by a relatively small British striking force”[7]. The Cabinet Paper of July 1940 which formed SOE’s charter, ironically the last political act of Chamberlain, asserted that “A new Organisation shall be established forthwith to coordinate all action by way of sabotage and subversion against the enemy overseas” and the general plan for irregular operations “was to be kept in step with the general strategic conduct of the war”[8]. General Gubbins, SOE’s last director affirms that SOE’s sabotage, paramilitary and guerrilla activities were of such value to the Allies that rather than the strategic equality that existed only on paper in 1940, by the end of the war SOE’s operations achieved actual strategic equality, with its activities “required to be tied in with the plans of the various supreme commanders, and their lower

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echelons where they affected, or would affect, the eventual operations of armies in the field in the various theatres of war”[9].

Any assessment of the value of the SOE to the Allied war effort must invariably recognise the continually changing character of its historiography, the past and present difficulty in mounting an objective academic inquiry into its work and briefly examine the body of existing scholarship. As Nigel West asserts, in the short seventy-one months of its existence SOE operated on a global basis[10]with, at the height of the war, over ten thousand personnel interacting with over one hundred thousand foreign resistance members throughout nineteen European countries, China, South America, Malaya and Africa. Its personnel numbered far more than its intelligence counterparts, MI5 and the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) and its operational mandate was far broader. However, while recognised as a form of ‘secret service’ the SOE lacked the enduring operational secrecy characteristic of MI5 and SIS because SOE was not engaged in a passive intelligence-gathering role but in paramilitary and subversive warfare which inevitably created a great deal of noise. Consequently, SOE’s activities were always in the public domain even if the specific part they played in resistance actions was not officially acknowledged for many decades. Moreover, unlike MI5 and SIS the Special Operations Executive was not in existence prior to the Second World War and was hastily disbanded in 1946 (which contributed to the difficulty of future scholarship). In this regard they differ from the security culture of the established members of the intelligence community in that their existence was widely known (resistance groups which interacted with the SOE would talk about them), knowledge of the operations they were involved in is widely available even if their specific role was not, and releasing the SOE archives cannot damage the future operational integrity of an organisation that no longer exists.

However, many scholars recognise that the history of the SOE will never be complete because files pertaining to its operations are lost, destroyed or simply never existed. The role of the SOE, in facilitating resistance operations in the occupied countries by supplying them with equipment, training them in irregular warfare and providing officers to direct their operations, is such that meticulous record-keeping was impossible and an operational liability. According to Stuart one must remember that until relatively recently the British intelligence community regarded records as “an aid to operations and of little interest from any other point of view”[11]. Characteristic of SOE’s attitude was Sir Douglas Dodds-Parker’s recognition that “by standing orders and sensible self-protection... records were minimal and destroyed as long as they were no longer of immediate use”[12]therefore details of specific operations in the various country stations are reliant on the subjective memoirs of individuals involved, if indeed any details do exist. Furthermore, the reliability of memoirs can be called into serious doubt given the penchant for publishing sensationalist ‘spy’ literature or the difficulty in recalling events from very many years ago; as Seaman asserted, memoirs can concentrate “upon drama at the expense of veracity”[13]which is supported by Maurice Buckmaster’s admission that “I do not claim that the incidents described in these pages are completely factually accurate”[14].

Similarly, the body of official records that are available to be relied upon is significantly lower than the records that were originally created. As West observed, SOE’s entire financial records and North African archives are missing[15], both key files from which one could have derived much of historical interest. Moreover, many files – although not as many as ‘mythology suggests’[16]– perished in a fire at SOE’s Baker Street headquarters in 1946. The role of SIS in SOE’s development is held to have been crucial and files that could aid the historian in piecing together the lost SOE material are likely to reside in the SIS archives, which pose a problem as SIS is “the only Second World War British secret service whose files have not seen the light of day”[17]. Moreover, SIS became the custodian of the SOE archive and therefore could exercise complete control[18]over the ‘weeding’ out, destruction and censoring of records. The existence of files can be extrapolated from other documentary evidence, therefore it is estimated that “at least 87%”[19]of the SOE archive was destroyed in London between 1945 and 1950. The Archives Section, which continued its work, under intense pressure to meet deadlines, for several years following SOE’s official liquidation, destroyed approximately one hundred tons of material: As Stuart states, “it is not recorded how carefully or systematically the weeding process was conducted” and the selection of files for destruction was “more by destruction of categories of material than by removal of redundant material from individual files”[20].

Why HM Government allowed the release of SOE material is an indication of the importance attached to its operations as a vital but under-publicised dimension of the Allied war effort, particularly in the latter stages of the Second World War. Murphy and Wylie agree that one of the principal motivations for releasing more information

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about SOE was so that its role was not forgotten and to stop others from taking “undue credit for resistance activity”[21]without a recognition of the high levels of support provided by the SOE. This was supported by Sir Edward Hale of the Cabinet Office’s historical section, who asserted that “the absence of any official information about the part played by S.O.E.... may prevent this country from obtaining the credit due to it for the help given to resistance”[22]. Furthermore, SOE’s deputy director, H. N. Spurborg emphasised that “the contribution which this country made to Resistance should not be overlooked or swamped by the propaganda of others”[23]which was supported by General Gubbins, Brigadier Brook and Brigadier Barry – all senior members of the SOE – who agreed that an official SOE history should be published to “help to remind our Allies of the indispensable role this country had played as a base for their indigenous resistance movements [and to] set our contribution in its proper place and perspective against the general background of the war”[24]. Seaman also speculates that it was Whitehall’s concern at the “lack of recognition in France of Britain’s contribution to the resistance and, equally, that the communist elements of the resistance were receiving a disproportional amount of credit”[25]that paved the way for a complete release of SOE archives. Consequently it is clear that members of SOE and senior members of HM Government attached a high level of importance to the release of formerly classified information which is indicative of the high value of SOE’s operations to the Allied war effort in the Second World War. Enabling a broader range of academics to access the records should help to illuminate a wider spectrum of Britain’s wartime activities[26]and provide a more complete account of many foreign resistance movement’s activities in their own country.

“SOE’s war”, according to Wylie, “must be judged in terms of its contribution to the national resistance movements in other countries”[27]and while existing archives are “unlikely to provide all that is required”[28]it nevertheless possible – by an examination of several of SOE’s key contributions – to ascertain its broad strategic value to the overall Allied war effort.

Of immeasurable value to the British, if not the Allied, war effort was SOE’s unparalleled success in acquiring foreign currency which was vital not only to its own operations, but also to SIS, the War Office, the Air Ministry and the Treasury[29]. Foreign currency was an important concern in the British war effort and supplies of the required denominations quickly declined and the Bank of England could not keep pace with demands issued by other government departments; by 1942 the Dealing and Accounts Office informed the War Office “that the day was rapidly approaching when we should be unable to execute their orders for unstamped guilder notes of low denominations”[30]. SOE’s financial arm, under John Venner, managed to supply SOE operations itself and, according to Murphy, emerged as “the department responsible for obtaining through devious means in neutral capitals... those currencies of which no stocks existed in this country and which could not be obtained through any normal channel”[31]. Moreover, Lord Selborne noted that by April 1944 SOE was Britain’s “principal procurer of foreign currency in the black markets of Europe and Asia... [and] over £1,700,000 worth of foreign currencies including 445,000,000 French francs in notes of small denominations”[32]had been handed over to the Bank of England. Further, an additional 700,000,000 francs had been obtained to support the Normandy landings. Therefore, SOE not only supported its own operations but fulfilled all the incredibly high demands for foreign currency of specific denominations made by every other government department. In this regard SOE’s financial operations elevates its value to the overall war effort by a significant magnitude; without SOE acquiring this currency many operations undertaken by the intelligence and armed services either would not be possible or would have a severely limited chance of success, including the escape prospects of many British officers.

Also attracting less attention was SOE’s activities in the neutral countries. While they strictly adhered to the Foreign Office’s policy of non-violence they did perform special operations that assisted in Britain’s procurement of key supplies and, according to Gubbins, focused on the “interdiction from these countries to Germany of essential ores as chrome and wolfram”[33]. Similarly, SOE officers in Spain played a substantial role in halting the flow of wolfram from Spain to Germany[34]. In Sweden SOE executed Operation RUBBLE; the hijacking of several British freighters caught in the port of Gothenburg, loaded with valuable ballbearings and scientific instruments, and their successful extraction into the waiting hands of the Royal Navy. Wilkinson declares RUBBLE “probably the most lucrative operation ever undertaken by SOE”. Further, Gubbins supports the proposition that SOE coordinated with the Ministry of Supply and the Board of Trade in supply procurement from the neutral countries[35]and other crucial acquisitions that lie outside the mainly intelligence-gathering role that SIS undertook. Therefore, in allowing SOE, with its proactive mandate, to operate within neutral countries could have been of lasting value to the Allied war

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effort, particularly in its role of denying Germany access to major industrial and scientific components.

SOE's Operation GUNNERSIDE in 1943 dealt a major blow to the Nazi scientific community's research toward an atomic bomb by conducting a successful raid on the German heavy water installations in Rjukan in Norway. Gubbins claims this "put paid to the German efforts to produce the atom bomb before their final defeat [and] was one of the most important individual actions of the war"[36], one which Wilkinson heralded as "perhaps SOE's most brilliant success"[37]. There is doubt as to whether the Nazis ever could have produced an atom bomb in time to win the war, nevertheless the raid was an astounding success that highlighted the potential of SOE and drew the personal congratulations of the Prime Minister. SOE had the resources, expertise and resistance networks required to carry out the type of precision action that regular forces could not; therefore its value to the war effort should not be assessed purely alongside the rather disappointing overall impact of foreign resistance groups.

In the re-invasion of Europe one British General called SOE his "front line troops"[38] and they played a crucial role in support of the Normandy landings which only they had the capabilities to perform. They were tasked by Eisenhower to execute more than one thousand attacks on German lines of communication and movement in the first week alone, of which over nine hundred targets were destroyed, putting "the whole enemy system into chaos"[39]. Moreover, following the breakout from the Normandy bridgehead SOE coordinated resistance groups in support of the regular forces, carrying out operations including the blowing of certain bridges and securing others for Allied use[40]. In this crucial phase of the war speed of movement and the rapid securing of key infrastructure was greatly assisted by SOE and the French resistance groups which it organised. Furthermore, Wilkinson points out that SOE's Station XIV, responsible for the forging of documents, supplied hundreds of sets of false papers for the resistance leading up to the Normandy landings and received unsolicited high praise from the head of the Free French Second Bureau; "who remarked in his memoirs that SOE's technical services were superior to those of the SIS"[41].

It was such support operations throughout the world, including substantial assistance to the resistance in Yugoslavia which led Foot to declare that "if it had not been for SOE we would never I think have heard much of Tito in Yugoslavia"[42] that secured SOE's position as a key constituent of Allied strategy. While it would never achieve the primacy expected from HM Government at its inception it did provide a wide range of invaluable services that undeniably made the war easier to win. In the latter stages of the war Gubbins documents how the British Chiefs of Staff "would consider nothing coming from foreign governments on [subversion and resistance] which had not passed through the sieve of SOE"[43] and that Eisenhower even rated SOE's contribution as important to his efforts; indeed, Eisenhower's secret negotiations for the surrender of Italy were conducted through an SOE detachment. M. R. D. Foot's asserts that SOE's record in France "is perfectly comparable with Bomber Command's" because it succeeded in "putting ninety factories completely out of production with total load of explosives that was less than that carried by one light bomber"[44]. In manpower SOE was less than a division of the British Army yet "showed a large military profit"[45]. This is perhaps indicative of the assessment one can make about SOE's value to the Allied war effort; it achieved a great deal given the severely limited resources with which it was provided, often accomplishing daring operations, in support of conventional strategic efforts, completely disproportionate to its strength and therefore a glowing example of irregular warfare. The Special Operations Executive did not win the war, mass European resistance did not rise up against Nazi Germany, but it was the chief protagonist in prosecuting many small, individual acts that greatly contributed to the Allies ultimate victory.

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[4]MacKenzie, op. cit., p. xix

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[10]West, N. (1992) *Secret War*. London: Hodder & Stroughton, p. 1

[11]Stuart, D. (2005) 'Of Historical Interest Only: The Origins and Vicissitudes of the SOE Archive'. *Intelligence & National Security* 20 (1), p. 25

[12]ibid., p. 16

[13]Seaman, M. (2005) 'A Glass Half Full – Some Thoughts on the Evolution of the Study of the Special Operations Executive'. *Intelligence & National Security* 20 (1), p. 32

[14]ibid.

[15]West, op. cit., p. 4

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[39]ibid., p. 97

[40]ibid.

[41]Wilkinson, op. cit., p. 115

[42]Foot, op. cit., p. 44

[43]Gubbins, op. cit., p. 90

[44]Foot, op. cit., p. 45

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