

S.O.E What! Gauging the Effectiveness of Britain's Clandestine War

Prepared For: Dr. P. Biddiscombe
Prepared By: Jeff Fitton
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We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender[...]

-Winston Churchill, House of Commons, June 1940

Ian Flemming's popular James Bond series cultivates a misconception among the general public about the true nature of espionage. The history of Britain's Special Operations Executive (SOE) seldom reveals stories of charming spymasters who dodge the bullets of inept guards to escape in climactic glory and save the world. For members of the SOE, danger was a real threat; their lifestyle was seldom glamorous. Indeed, the true life of a spy was "ninety percent boredom and ten percent fright."¹ However, like James Bond, members of the SOE managed several daring feats during the Second World War. Hastily assembled in the midst of Hitler's European conquests, the SOE's mission was to "set Europe ablaze" by providing resistance movements in occupied territories with financial and military aid to achieve liberation. The SOE did not achieve this broader strategic goal. However, the SOE can be considered a success in that it accomplished a variety of secondary aims that hindered the German war effort. The SOE successfully provided supplies to resisters; distracted the Axis Powers; trained men to attack the Nazis; sabotaged rails and infrastructure, and assassinated a key official. Many of these acts were accomplished with low manpower losses relative to conventional warfare. Thus, through their clandestine work, the SOE played an invaluable role in hindering the German war effort.

thesis

In 1939, the British mood was grim. On the heels of a depression and an earlier catastrophic war, the prospect of another battle with Germany was not enthusiastically received. Hitler's Blitzkrieg seemed to assure that all of Europe would soon be trampled by the jackboot. In 1938, anticipating German expansion, the British SIS had Major L.D. Grand research "secret offensives: how could enemies be attacked, otherwise than by the usual military means."² This would become the mandate of the SOE. By May 1940, the British were predicting the collapse of France. Indeed, if France fell, the Chiefs of Staff agreed that "the creation of widespread revolt in Germany's occupied territories [...] should be a major strategic objective."³ Similarly, by July 1940, in a letter to Lord Halifax, Dr. Hugh Dalton suggested that the SOE should employ "industrial and military sabotage, labour agitation and strikes, continuous propaganda, terrorist acts against traitors and German leaders, boycotts and riots"⁴ in order to defeat Germany. Indeed, the SOE hoped that "Axis rule would be unpopular, and that [Britain] could use this to [its] advantage"⁵. As the situation disintegrated in France, despair crept across Britain; Churchill asked his General Staff if "Britain could continue the war alone."⁶ The army replied in a memorandum that "the only other method of bringing about the downfall of Germany [was to stimulate] the seeds of revolt within conquered territories."⁷ Accordingly Britain, in its hour of desperation, prioritized subversive activities. Fomenting revolt was the main objective of the SOE; however, Churchill later explained that Britain needed "specially trained troops [...] who [could] develop a reign of terror, so that the lives of the German troops in occupied Europe be made an intense torment."⁸ Ultimately, in this goal, the SOE was most successful: sabotage and assassination did the

most damage to the German war effort. Colonel Buckmaster of the French division of the SOE captures the atmosphere of fear in which the SOE was forged when he explains that,

by the end of June 1940 there were no British troops under arms on the continent of Europe except Gibraltar [...] invasion of our homeland seemed imminent. Victory [...] seemed a far off mirage. What assets did we have? We had one very important asset, if we could find a way to use it – the unquenchable will of true patriots to resist against the German occupation.⁹

In 1940, Britain stood alone against Naziism. Since conventional warfare seemed ineffectual against Hitler, they had to resort to ungentlemanly combat if they hoped to win. In this time of hopelessness Britain was willing to invest in anything that could vaguely promise results: the SOE was one of those investments.

Several problems arise in an attempt to quantify whether the SOE was successful. First, inherent in its existence as secret agency, some of the history of the SOE may never be known. Second, some agents may have perished before news of their feats could be relayed. Third, as Colin Gubbins, one of the executive heads of the SOE, explained, the “SOE would be unable to claim credit for its principal success in a lifetime.”¹⁰ Fourth, posing further complication is the fact that many SOE files were destroyed in the postwar period during the “the great fire of Baker Street.”¹¹ Fifth, while many SOE files were declassified, some remain restricted. These restricted files may provide crucial evidence necessary to fully evaluate the SOE. Although some information remains obscured, the available documents can evaluate SOE’s activities because it accomplished many of its micro-goals.

Churchill ordered the SOE to “set Europe ablaze” by contacting and organizing resistance movements on the continent so that liberated countries could ally with a solitary Britain. Although there was no major uprising that resulted in the ejection of the Nazis from a European country, the SOE was a cost effective and relatively successful

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organization. One criticism of the SOE is that it took “equipment away from the army and [planes] away from the Royal Air Force”¹², which were in heavy demand during the war. Thus, a diversion of military and human resources from the army would require dividends to justify its allocation to the SOE. In manpower, the SOE, at its peak in the summer of 1944, had 13,200 personnel.¹³ This is a marginal number and would have been more beneficial in the SOE than in a regular division. 13,000 soldiers could have been killed in a few hours on the Eastern Front without making a difference. They were more valuable as agents for the SOE. Indeed, Napoleon’s maxim that “one spy in the right place is worth twenty thousand men in the field” applies to any criticism of the SOE pilfering valuable personnel who could have gone to the front. Moreover, the casualty rate among the SOE was not significant by the standards of the Second World War. Indeed, members of the SOE lived statistically longer than a “bomber crew [... who were] due to be shot down after their 25th mission, a lifespan of three months.”¹⁴ In addition, most SOE field agents were foreigners; without the SOE to train them, they might never have fought at all. However, a necessary caveat is that some sections of the SOE like the Dutch and French contingents did suffer large losses. In the Netherlands, between 1942 and 1943, “over fifty SOE Dutch agents were captured”¹⁵ after the Abwehr had captured an allied radio and used it to their advantage. This German coup was called the Nordpol--Englandspiel Operation. Similarly significant numbers of SOE agents were captured in France. Of the 470 agents in the French SOE, 117 were executed or died in prison during the war.¹⁶ Another 13 were caught and not killed.¹⁷ However, though there were some unnecessary losses in France and the Netherlands, these statistics are dwarfed by the numbers of men lost in conventional warfare. The relatively few men and women

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employed by the SOE were more valuable as saboteurs and organizers than frontline soldiers.

One of the most important activities undertaken by the SOE to hinder the German war effort was sabotage. However, the question remains, did the cost and effect of sabotage reap enough benefits so that it could be considered successful? Using French railways as a case study, the SOE appears to have been beneficial. The SOE provided the French Resistance with many supplies essential to partisan warfare, such as explosives. Between January and March 1944, "resistance saboteurs destroyed 808 locomotives"¹⁸; in contrast, during the same time frame, costly RAF aerial bombardments only destroyed 387 trains.¹⁹ Moreover, as historian E.H. Cookridge points out, many sabotage acts were never officially reported. As a result of sabotage, the Nazis were forced to import 20,000 German railwaymen to France²⁰, men who were needed in the Reich. Additionally, SS units were diverted from the front to guard rail lines and stations. Thus, compared to bomber attacks, saboteurs were cheaper and could efficiently derail the Nazis' plan for a smoothly operating railway system. Moreover, the acts of sabotage forced the Nazis to divert valuable troops and technicians to already conquered areas. In 1944, the battle on the Eastern Front was going poorly and Germany could have used these forces more efficiently there. Acts of sabotage also proved valuable "in delaying German reinforcements from reaching Normandy in June 1944."²¹ Because resisters had blown up tunnels, track, bridges and signalling systems, II Panzer Division in Toulouse took 16 days, instead of two, to reach Normandy.²² SOE sabotage complimented the conventional warfare at Normandy; consequently Allied forces successfully reclaimed the beach and lost fewer men than they might have if saboteurs had not delayed reinforcements.

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However, in the broader perspective the SOE did not have a bearing on the overall outcome in Normandy, but it prevented heavier Allied losses. The other main effect of sabotage is psychological: resisters could be proud of actions which helped boost morale.

In the face of great tyranny, any act of resistance is commendable. Finally, even Hitler lost valuable time thinking about the SOE. Historian MRD Foot explains that the Fuhrer “wasted about half an hour every midday at his routine commanders’ conference considering the last 24 hours’ Abwehr and SD reports on suspected SOE activities.”²³

Another benefit of SOE activity was that it diluted Germany’s frontline strength because it forced the Nazis to heavily garrison occupied countries. Yugoslavia and Norway both contained large divisions of German forces, which helped lower British, American and Russian casualties during the war. In fact, Eisenhower believed that the French Resistance “shortened the war by nine months”²⁴ because they tied up troops away from frontlines. However, his statement must be contextualized as part of postwar victory rhetoric and as a nod to a proud French Resistance who did not want to be told that their achievements were worthless. Britain’s support for Yugoslavian resistance reveals the SOE’s wartime strategy. The SOE was pragmatic and not tied to ideological affiliations. Initially the SOE backed the Chetniks led by General Mihailovic because they had “no knowledge of [...] Tito’s activities in 1941”.²⁵ However, when Enigma signals revealed that “Tito’s communist partisans were far more effective”²⁶, the SOE backed Tito instead of Mihailovic. The SOE was not bound to ideology: whoever could kill the most Germans was Britain’s favoured ally. Moreover, proof of Britain’s pragmatism over idealism was its opposite policy in Greece, where it backed the royalists.

this is the conventional wisdom, but each act has to be measured against its costs.

what about charges of communist influence among some SOE officers?

actually, the main recipient of SOE help, was a group of right-wing republicans

but this doesn't really wash because ELAS was more effective than EDES. Within SOE, it was the ideologues who won out over the pragmatists in this case.

In Yugoslavia, the SOE made its lofty goal of complete liberation subservient to any activity that would force the Nazis to leave 15 divisions and 100,000 pro-Axis local troops in Yugoslavia. During the conflict, the SOE supplied Tito with “76,000 tons of war stores, weapons, ammunition and rations”²⁷ and manpower resources. This is a minimal investment considering the cost of conventional mechanized warfare. For their investment, the British and Yugoslavs succeeded in tying up 15 German divisions at a time of logistical crises for the Nazis. However, the caveat remains that these German divisions were considered second-rate by German standards and may not have been valuable at the front. But, in a time when numbers mattered, these troops could have been used elsewhere had they not been forced to pacify a belligerent Yugoslavia. At the very least, they could have been used as labour in the booming Germany economy, chronically suffering from lack of workers. The events in Yugoslavia illustrate that Britain’s position was realistic: liberation was impossible, but forcing Hitler to spread his army thin ultimately worked to Allied advantage. Additionally, the actions in Yugoslavia reveal that British goals were selfish. Britain cared less for Yugoslav national liberation and more for keeping German troops tied up in territories where they could not hinder British offensives or cause higher Allied casualties.

In Norway, the SOE provided a backbone for the resistance movement. Through funding, training and supplying weaponry, the SOE was able to coordinate 33,000 Milorg resisters. From Norway, the SOE was able to supply valuable intelligence for military operations such as locating the Bismark. After SOE agents radioed the position of the Bismark to London it was eventually destroyed after a 1,700 mile chase. Though the

Bismark sank two British battleships, its eventual destruction was blow to German pride and a much publicized victory about which the British public could boast.

Most importantly, the strength of the Milorg combined with many acts of sabotage led General Jodl to inform Hitler that “380,000 troops must be kept in Norway”.²⁸ However, in reality there were “430,000 Wehrmacht, 90,000 Naval personnel, 60,000 Luftwaffe men, 6,000 SS and 12,000 Norwegian Hird poised against a population of 3 million.”²⁹ Significantly, these statistics are from November 1943 when Hitler desperately needed troops on the Eastern Front. As a striking frame of reference, France and the Low Countries were garrisoned with “50 Divisions facing the threat of allied invasion from the North and South [...and] with a populace 20 times more than Norway’s.”³⁰ Moreover, the Milorg also proved helpful in the Allied plan for post-war liberation. By the end of the war, the allies were relieved of the cost and burden of liberation, much like in Yugoslavia. Indeed, by the spring of 1945, the Milorg had entirely liberated Norway.³¹

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In both Yugoslavia and Norway, the SOE did not accomplish its goal of freeing the populace from the swastika. However, they were successful in their ancillary goals of providing hope and supplies to the resistance movement. Most importantly, Britain achieved its objective of tying up German forces in non-front areas to minimize Allied casualties. In both territories, the SOE invested minimal costs in comparison to other branches of the military’s investment in conventional warfare; it received the dividends of spreading the German army thin and wreaking havoc on enemy lines of communication. Searching for tangible results exposes a fundamental difficulty in evaluating the success of the SOE. It is difficult to quantify if holding up German forces

was valuable. This would require comparison to an alternate history where Germany was free of guerrilla harassment and could have deployed tied-up divisions elsewhere. The results would vary and could influence a decision on the value of clandestine warfare.

During the war the SOE's major coup was the assassination of a top Nazi official, Reinhard Heydrich. On the 27th of September, 1941, Heydrich became the Deputy Reichsprotektor of Czechoslovakia. At a speech to the German administration in Prague, he revealed that "racially valuable [parts] of Czechoslovakia [would] be Germanized while the rest [would be] sterilized or simply stood against a [firing] wall."³²

Understandably, in this atmosphere, Jan Kubis and Josef Gabcik, two former sergeants in the Czech army being trained by the SOE in Scotland, were eager to help their country.

After minimal SOE training, on December 28th, 1941, the two were parachuted near Prague with orders to assassinate Heydrich. On the May 27th, 1942, Heydrich was travelling from his country house to Prague. Gabcik stepped in front of Heydrich's car and tried to shoot him with a sub-machine gun, but the safety catch jammed.³³

Accordingly, Kubicz threw a grenade at the car. The resulting explosion wounded Heydrich, who died on June 4th, 1942. His death resulted from blood poisoning: his spleen was hit³⁴ and the "grenade fragments carried filth enough to kill him once imbedded [... because] Prague's wartime gutters were not clean."³⁵ First, this example illustrates the sometimes amateur character of the SOE due to short training periods.

Second, the SOE accomplished a great feat in assassinating a top Nazi official; the positive effect of Heydrich's death is that he was replaced by Ernst Kaltenbrunner, who was an ineffective leader of the RSHA compared with his predecessor. Yet, there were negative consequences to the assassination: the Nazis undertook extreme reprisals. The

town of Lidice was liquidated on June 11, 1942: "the male inhabitants [were] shot, the women taken to concentration camps [...] the buildings razed to the ground, the name of the community erased [...] and] the village of Lezaky [suffered] the same fate."³⁶

Moreover, rewards were offered for information about the assassins and they were eventually captured and killed in a gun battle at the Czech orthodox church of Saints Cyrill and Methodius in Prague. Seven resistance fighters were murdered, but they killed "14 SS men [and] wounded 21."³⁷ However, in total "10,000 people were put into concentration camps following the assassination and nearly 1,500 were executed."³⁸ Does the human cost justify the assassination? This is a difficult moral question to contemplate, especially since, pragmatically, the death of Heydrich may have saved countless lives.

But this is likely no consolation to those who died or were sent to the camps. Moreover, the disadvantage of Heydrich's death to SOE strategy was that the massive reprisal killings and internments quieted the populace and for the remainder of the war "Himmler had no more trouble with the Czechs."³⁹ Fortunately, the event could be used for Allied propaganda purposes: the Nazis could rightly be portrayed as savages, and "villages in several countries renamed themselves Lidice [...] to defy"⁴⁰ Naziism.

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until the
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Another major SOE success was the destruction of heavy water at the Norsk Hydroelectric plant in Norway. This sabotage suggests that secret operations are more cost effective and result-oriented than conventional military operations. In 1942, Churchill learned from SOE operatives that the Norsk Hydroelectric plant was producing heavy water, a requisite for the construction of atomic bombs. Unsure how advanced Nazi nuclear technology was at the time, Churchill was livid. He ordered the SOE to stop Germany from shipping heavy water back to the Reich, which led to Operation Swallow.

By February 1943, Norwegian SOE agents had penetrated the heavy water plant and successfully demolished “vital electrical apparatus”.⁴¹ The explosion damaged “the bases of all the electrolysis containers [which caused] half a ton of heavy water [to] run away.”⁴² No lives were sacrificed during the attack. Moreover, reprisals were not undertaken on the populace because the Nazis suspected it was the work of British or American operatives. Thus, it was a model operation. Unfortunately for the saboteurs, within “16 weeks, the plant was back in production.”⁴³ Accordingly, Allied bombing raids attacked the plant. These costly raids never severely damaged Norsk Hydro nor were they as effective as the cheaper sabotage expedition, making the SOE a better choice than conventional warfare, at least in this instance.

The effectiveness of the SOE was illustrated on February 20th 1944 when Knut Haukelid, a member of Operation Swallow, sank a Norwegian transport carrying 15,000 Litres of heavy water.⁴⁴ Although Norsk Hydro could only be momentarily shut down, the SOE would ensure that heavy water would not reach Germany. Thus, SOE operations were effective in stopping the flow of heavy water into Germany. Accordingly, historian E.H. Cookridge gives full credit to the SOE for delaying “German preparations for the manufacture of atomic bombs in 1943, and by depriving them of the vital supply [of heavy water] in 1944, foiled Hitler’s plan to use atomic rockets against Britain as a final desperate weapon.”⁴⁵ Historically speaking, this statement is hyperbolic: Hitler never had the capacity to launch atomic V-2 rockets, even as late as 1945. However, it is interesting to speculate whether the lack of heavy water for experimentation during the war was the main reason why Hitler was unable to create atomic weapons. If so, the SOE played an important role in winning the Second World War.

With no continental allies, a seemingly invincible enemy and little hope for victory, Britain turned to clandestine warfare to organize resistance and to help lead the Allies towards the destruction of the Reich. Against such a powerful totalitarian state, the SOE could not hope to achieve a swift national liberation in occupied countries; however, in the meantime, its acts of sabotage, assassinations and support for resistance had a tangible effect upon the positive outcome of the war. Without the harassment of resisters, the Nazis could have strengthened their military force on the frontlines. Also, they could have better exploited and administrated their new territories if the SOE not ruined railroads and infrastructure. The untold morale benefits of the SOE cannot be calculated, but valiant acts of patriotism should be included in any analysis of the effectiveness of the SOE on national psyches. By all accounts, the SOE was not as successful as Churchill had hoped, but the results it achieved in relation to costlier aerial bombardments and conventional warfare reveals that it did pay comparative dividends.

- A very judicious handling of the topic. Your judgements are carefully considered and I agree with most of your conclusions. As noted with the draft, this is also a very well written paper.

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