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BRITAIN AND EUROPEAN RESISTANCE, 1940-1945

A survey of the Special Operations
Executive, with documents

DAVID STAFFORD

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in association with
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In memory of my father

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Preface

This book is designed to provide a general overview of the activities of the Special Operations Executive as they concerned Europe during the Second World War. The study is focused at the policy-making level and is concerned primarily with demonstrating how SOE and its activities related to the strategic and diplomatic objectives of the British government. It is not, therefore, a compendium of SOE exploits in Europe, and the reader who seeks detailed accounts of individual SOE missions and agents, or indeed of such matters as SOE's clandestine currency operations or involvement in escape work, will look in vain. A multitude of postwar memoirs and reminiscences by SOE agents and others exists already, and it has been no part of my intent to compete with their many graphic and colourful accounts of SOE activities at the operational level. Nor is this book a comprehensive history of the full range of British relations with European resistance movements. Such a book needs to be written, but its scope would have to include, in addition to the activities of SOE, the propaganda activities of the Political Warfare Executive (PWE) and the BBC, as well as the intelligence and escape activities of other clandestine organisations such as SIS and MI9. It is probably true to say that the single most important link between Britain and occupied Europe in the Second World War was the BBC, and Britain's most important contribution to European resistance the simple fact of continuing to fight after Dunkirk, so that the history of SOE and Europe is no more than one small part in the total story of Britain and European resistance. On the other hand, the study is focused more broadly than on SOE alone. SOE was an anomaly, an executive agency with its own Minister. The Minister—especially Hugh Dalton—claimed the right to make his own policy, yet simultaneously SOE was instructed to confine itself to the *execution* of policy decisions made by others, in particular by the Chiefs of Staff and the Foreign

Office. As these in turn embodied 'short-term' strategic objectives and 'long-term' (that is postwar) foreign policy objectives, the debates over SOE policy often throw light upon the operational assumptions and the differing or even conflicting requirements of British strategy and diplomacy in the Second World War.

Recently, a distinguished historian writing in the *Times Literary Supplement* referred to the perils facing the historian who dared venture to deal with the 'Serbonian bog' of European wartime resistance. Much the same warning might be given to the historian rash enough to deal with SOE, whose task it was to execute plans of sabotage, subversion, and resistance in occupied Europe. I have certainly been made aware of the complexities, and as this book has been completed without access to any of the official SOE records, such as they may still be, the dangers are obvious. Much about SOE will remain unknown, and many of its secrets taken to the grave. There have been those kind enough to intimate that my energies might be better spent elsewhere than in attempting to reconstruct the story from incomplete records, and occasionally I have been aware of an implicit and understandable scepticism about the wisdom of a historian born after Pearl Harbour and the fall of Singapore writing about the subject at all. But a historian cannot accept that history should be written only by those who took part in it, and if we are to wait for the release of the SOE archives, the wait will be long, if not infinite. So far, no general survey of SOE policy in Europe of this kind has been published, and yet at perhaps no other time has the academic interest in clandestine operations and the Second World War been so great. An attempt to place SOE in context is needed, and if in producing what must of necessity be a general and provisional survey I have occasionally lost my footing, so be it.

An official history of SOE activities was published some fifteen years ago, and there have also been some valuable unofficial scholarly studies of SOE activities in the Balkans. I have made considerable use of these in places, as I have also of the official histories of Grand Strategy and British foreign policy. The former, especially, contain a fair amount of material relating to SOE, although the earlier published volumes reflect the circumspection about its activities common for the period of their publication, and they need to be supplemented by the archives. Some of the personal recollections of SOE members which have been published are also of value. Above all, however, I have been able to consult much of the 'raw material' through an examination of documents now available in the Public Record Office in London. This has been supplemented by documentary material available elsewhere,

and by the recollections of some of those involved in SOE. Limitations of time have unfortunately prevented me from incorporating into the text some relevant material about SOE which has appeared since this book was first published. None of it materially affects my general argument, however, and much of it has confirmed those sections of the book which stress the significance of SOE's exclusion from much valuable Ultra-derived intelligence.

I am only too conscious of the shortcomings of my sources, and of the limits imposed by them on this study. We all have selective memories, and discussions with participants about events which took place thirty to thirty-five years ago are bound to carry severe limitations. Churchill himself once observed that 'memories of the war may be vivid and live, but should never be trusted without verification', and Sir Llewellyn Woodward, the official historian of British foreign policy in the Second World War, once observed that 'the memories of persons who have held positions of power tend . . . to be unreliable . . . they nearly always exaggerate and antedate their own importance, forget the number of their mistakes, overrate their own foresight'. Nonetheless, interviews can, if used with care, add to the story, and they have proved useful to me on occasion. As far as the available documentary sources are concerned, a special word needs to be said. The sources mainly relied upon here are the files of the Prime Minister, Chiefs of Staff and related committees, and, to a lesser extent, the Foreign Office. At the best of times, documents have to be treated with scepticism and caution, and any historian who accepts them at their face value is in for trouble. However complete a documentary collection is, it represents only part of any story. People do not record all that they say or do, least of all in a bureaucracy, and what they do record is not necessarily an accurate representation of what they in fact do or say. Official documents such as the Chiefs of Staff or War Cabinet minutes are usually designed to record agreement and unanimity, and, literally, to paper over disagreements and disguise the influences at work in the decision-making process. In times of war, moreover, who would have committed defeatist thoughts to paper—who would have had time to do so if engaged in actually conducting it? The limitations of documents have always existed, but perhaps more so in the twentieth century than previously, and it makes the path of the contemporary historian particularly perilous. The speed and ease of oral communications means that major decisions are often made with no written record being left, save perhaps the *ex post facto* justification carefully drafted to bestow legitimacy and maintain order in the files. The historian, unless he gives up altogether, can only take the documen-

tary material as one item in the total body of evidence, compare it with all the rest, and reach a conclusion which on balance seems to make sense. With such a subject as SOE, all these problems are compounded by others. It was a secret organisation whose existence was not acknowledged until after the war, when it had already been wound up. The 'SOE archives' are still unavailable for public inspection, as are those of other secret agencies with which it often came into close contact, such as the Secret Intelligence Service. While some of its former members are willing to give their recollections, others are not. In the documentary sources which are available, this lack of consistency is also evident. SOE material found its inevitable way into the papers of the Chiefs of Staff, Foreign Office, and Prime Minister's Office, and before these were released for public inspection, an arbitrary hand removed some, but by no means all, of it. It appears to be assumed by many that because of this there is no point in looking through what has been released for information about SOE. This is not the case. Material removed from the minutes and memoranda of the Chiefs of Staff has in many cases not been removed from the papers of the Joint Planning Staff, thus rendering the 'weeding' exercise useless. The removal of papers in some volumes has been more thorough than in others, with the result that by careful cross-referencing the content of removed documents can in some cases easily be deduced. As a recent study of SOE in the Balkans has shown, moreover, large amounts of SOE-related material still remain embedded in the Foreign Office papers. Indeed, the removal of SOE material has been so imperfectly and arbitrarily done, with no apparent criterion underlying it, that one can only marvel at the collective mind responsible for it. Over ten years ago, when Bickham Sweet-Escott wrote the foreword to the excellent personal account of his SOE career, *Baker Street Irregular*, already held up for ten years by the official censor, he noted that those who still opposed its appearance 'must be sadly out of touch with what the public has been told about SOE and its work since 1945'. Now that material is available in the Public Record Office and participants are speaking more freely than ever before, one can only add that continued government secrecy about SOE matters perpetuates an absurdity. The obsession with secrecy is perhaps the true English disease. It pervades all levels of society, and is particularly acute in Whitehall. It is more, however, than simply an occupational disease of the bureaucracy. Malcolm Muggeridge, who served in the wartime Secret Intelligence Service, once noted that 'secrecy is as essential to [SIS] as vestments and incense to a Mass, or darkness to a spiritualist séance'. The cult of secrecy is one of the rituals

in a wider sociodrama whereby powerful and informal élite groups exercise and protect their influence in British society. Georg Simmel, the sociologist, pointed out that 'the purpose of secrecy is above all protection. Of all protective measures, the most radical is to make oneself invisible.' Secrecy is maintained less to secure the safety of the state than to protect those who rule it from the scrutiny of the ruled, and helps perpetuate the hierarchical structure of British society in the age of democracy. The secrecy surrounding SOE must long since have lost any 'rational' justification, at least if the evidence of documents which have clearly escaped the weeders by mistake is any guide. In the meantime, however, and until more liberal attitudes prevail, this volume might be of some use to those interested in the subject.

Many people have helped me one way or another in the course of my research. In particular, I wish to thank Ian Armour and Jeanne Cannizzo who helped considerably in the voluminous task of reviewing the various series of documents in the Public Record Office, and without whom the material could not have been covered. In addition, the latter lived intimately with the project for some five years, and has always given me every support I could have wished. Long may our partnership flourish. Others who have helped me at various times and in various ways over the last five years are: Phyllis Auty, Elisabeth Barker, John Cairns, Richard Clogg, F. W. Deakin, Josef Garlinski, the late Laurence Grand, the late Sir Colin Gubbins, Michael Howard, W. J. M. McKenzie, H. N. Sporborg, the late Bickham Sweet-Escott, the late George Taylor and Donald Watt. Theodore Zeldin and the Warden of St Antony's College provided me with the opportunity, as a Senior Associate Member of the College, to enjoy the ruminative and placid backwaters of Oxford where a substantial first draft of the book was prepared. Pierre Sorlin, my colleague at St Antony's, offered some acute comments at an early stage of the writing, and both for those and his friendship there I retain warm and grateful memories. Special thanks must go to James Joll, who encourage me at a difficult stage and whose support, interest, and comments have, as always, been positive and helpful. Finally, for the invaluable financial support without which the essential research visits to the United Kingdom would not have been possible, I wish to thank the Canada Council which provided me with both a Leave Fellowship and a Research Grant, the University of Victoria for a Faculty Research Grant, and the American Philosophical Society for a grant from the Penrose Fund. The secretarial staff of the Department of History at the University of Victoria must be thanked for their skill and patience in preparing the manuscript. Quotations from Crown

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David Stafford
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