"We Shall Fight in France": The Special Operations Executive in France

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ABSTRACT

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"We Shall Fight in France": The Special Operations Executive in France

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The Special Operations Executive (SOE) was a secret British organization founded in July 1940 with the objectives to organize and support sabotage and subversion against the Axis powers on the European continent. Their main goal was to provide auxiliary support for the Allied reinvasion of the continent. Analyzing contemporary memoirs, academic scholarship and SOE agents’ mission reports of operations in France concludes that the success and failure of SOE operations depended on their agents’ training and activities in the field. Whether it was establishing early resistance networks and partisan groups, executing a sabotage mission or avoiding arrest by conforming to typical gender behavior in a region, SOE agents provided the results needed in Whitehall to secure SOE’s existence. The Special Operations Executive provided Britain and French resisters with the psychological and material means to combat the Axis powers from within.

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INTRODUCTION

We did not ask why; we only knew this was what we must do. Let the historians seek more complex motivations if they wish, but they will not destroy the simple truth as we saw it.\(^1\)

--- Philippe de Vomécourt

The Special Operations Executive (SOE) was a secret British organization created in July 1940 to coordinate and support European resistance against the Germans. SOE operated in all theaters of war from Norway to Burma, but France became one of its most significant fields because of the advantage of its geographical proximity to Great Britain and its role as the eventual location for an Allied reinvassion of the continent. SOE specialized in subversive warfare; organizing and supplying networks of saboteurs to harass German units by disrupting their industrial production and communication lines. SOE also armed and supplied partisan units, known in France as the *Maquis*, to prepare for an armed uprising in coordination with an Allied invasion. The success of SOE operations depended on the performance of agents and resisters in the field as well as SOE’s coordination with Whitehall, British military services and Charles de Gaulle’s Free French organization in London. The British Chiefs of Staff specified what types of operations SOE was to perform through directives allotting objectives, supplies and means of transport. SOE’s relations with the Free French were often strained, but as General de Gaulle became the symbolic head of the French Resistance cooperation with the Free French provided moral and political legitimacy of SOE operations in the eyes of many French resisters. Coordination with the Free French also provided SOE with a substantial amount of man power. SOE agents’ experiences in France reflect these types

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of complex political and physical obstacles involved in creating a new force to mount special operations in a foreign country.

The Fall of France and evacuation of the British Expeditionary Force at Dunkirk in 1940 created the circumstances needed for the establishment of SOE. The British desired a secret organization different from the professionalized Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) which only specialized in intelligence gathering. Major-General Sir Colin Gubbins, in charge of SOE’s operations and training from November 1940 and its executive director from 1943, reminisced that in the desperate summer of 1940, “the War Cabinet was grasping at any straw that might appear to give some hope.” SOE provided Britain an opportunity to attack the Axis powers from within, using elements of surprise and mobility, some of the oldest and most advantageous tactics in warfare. Special operations rely on secrecy to get close to the enemy; high mobility requires small forces and light weapons, in addition to the ability to evaporate back into clandestine life after the mission is complete. Rarely is a special operations force large enough to hold the enemy’s position for an extended period of time. Sabotage targets for special operations usually constitute actual enemy troops and industrial and military complexes in the form of factories, arms depots, railways, and communication lines – all necessary elements in modern warfare. If successful, attacks on these targets damaged not only essential material, but also the enemy’s morale through constant harassment. One of the main

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objectives of the SOE was to physically and morally wear the enemy down so they were weaker when a large scale attack came from the regular Allied armed forces.

Success is not always guaranteed, as SOE’s unbalanced record demonstrates. Michael Foot, the official historian of SOE operations in France, has observed that special operations can easily go awry: “the dagger is always liable to slip in one’s hand and turn back and cut the man who wields it.” Unpredictable circumstances in the field contributed to SOE’s successes and failures. For example, an agent could not control where one would land in a blind parachute drop. He or she might land in the field of a farmer sympathetic to the Vichy government or the Germans, or one who was just plain scared to be involved. Michael Foot contends that along with sufficient training and common sense, an agent needed a little luck to challenge the unpredictable. He gives an example in a 1969 lecture on special operations. A female courier entered a safe house to find two Germans waiting for her. They were not sure that they had the right girl so they produced a pair of her shoes that they had confiscated. She tried them on, and luckily her feet were so swollen from constant travelling that her own shoes would not fit. She told the Germans she would have liked to have those shoes because they were so nice before they went on their way.

SOE also had to contend with being an inexperienced agency. Britain did have previous experience with irregular warfare, i.e., combating Irish rebels, Boer farmers, and T.E Lawrence’s actions against Middle Eastern Arabs during the First World War. In

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3 Foot, 22.
5 Foot, “Special Operations/2”, 46.
spite of this experience, the leaders of SOE argued there were no useful protocols, organizations, or records which laid out how a special operations agency should be led and performed before 1938. Consequently, SOE personnel developed their own methods of training, technology and organization based off two agencies. The first agency, MI(R), specialized in the research and development of irregular warfare. The second, Section D, executed similar tactics in German occupied and annexed countries.

Bickham Sweet-Escott, a member of SOE since its creation, remembered the confusion in the early days of Section D: “I do not think I was wholly to blame for the appalling mental confusion from which I suffered during the next few weeks. For there were no documents or files to study which would tell me what we were really supposed to be doing.” Additionally, Brigadier Colin Gubbins, a man destined to be the cornerstone of SOE, worked in the War Office’s MI(R) unit producing several pamphlets and reports from research throughout Nazi-occupied countries like Poland and Czechoslovakia. Pamphlets such as The Art of Guerilla Warfare, The Partisan Leader’s Handbook, and How to Use High Explosives were used in the early days of MI(R) and Section D, as well as the training of future SOE agents. Even though MI(R) and Section D had many potential plans of sabotage and subversion in Europe from 1938 to 1940, they could not accomplish large results before the Germans swept across Northern and Western Europe.

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8 Beevor, 13.
While SOE had the advantage of relying on Britain’s professionalized intelligence service, the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS), for tactical and logistical components, the two organizations did not get along.\(^9\) SOE’s charter designated that SOE could recruit staff from all military and Whitehall personnel, including the secret services. SIS also provided SOE with all cipher and communication services until 1942.\(^10\) Stewart Menzies, or “C” the head of SIS, welcomed the emergence of a separate organization dedicated to sabotage and subversive activities because he simply did not want to be involved in its work. He considered SOE amateurish and unprofessional. He argued the special operations would obstruct effective intelligence gathering.\(^11\) Intelligence collection demands a continuous level of secrecy, while special operations’ necessity for secrecy is sporadic. Special operations require the enemy to take notice of their actions, whether it is sabotage, subversive propaganda, or a small skirmish between partisans and soldiers. Furthermore, communication between SIS and SOE was a one way street. SOE’s reliance on SIS for communication and other technical services at the beginning of the war meant SIS had access to all of SOE’s plans. SIS did not reciprocate with any details of their work. SIS’s and SOE’s roles were finally distinguished in a 1944 report which designated that SIS pass on any information relevant to SOE activities, while maintaining SOE’s authority over resistance activities in Europe.\(^12\) Yet SIS still maintained their argument


that SOE was a nuisance throughout the war. Historians argue that C’s attitude stemmed from SOE’s creation. Winston Churchill removed Section D from SIS control in July without asking C’s approval. Section D agents and staff were no longer under SIS administration.

Early in June, leading Whitehall figures like Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden convened a meeting to discuss the state of British intelligence upon the suspected French collapse. Members of SIS, Section D and MI(R) attended. 13 In mid-June the French sought an armistice and the prime minister charged Alexander Cadogan, the permanent under-secretary of Foreign Affairs to inquire on “secret offensive action against the enemy, i.e sabotage, underground propaganda, and the organization of civil resistance, etc.” 14 In a report circulated on 28 June 1940 Cadogan recommended,

9. They [sabotage and subversion] should be concentrated under one control. They should probably be divorced from SIS, which is more concerned with intelligence, and has enough to do in that sphere, and placed under military authority as an operation of war.
10. If this is accepted, it might seem wise to amalgamate ‘D’ organization with MI(R), the whole thus coming under control of the DMI. If possible, the staff should be housed in the War Office. 15

Cadogan included that funding for such an organization should come from the Director of SIS who would also provide direction and experience. 16 Hugh Dalton, the Minister of Economic Warfare, protested Cadogan’s recommendations of the hierarchical structure of a subversive organization. He claimed that the Ministry of Economic Warfare would be

13 Seaman, 15.
14 Quoted in Seaman, 15.
15 Seaman, 15.
16 Seaman, 15.
more suited to support a “war from within” led by civilians and not soldiers, “regular soldiers are not men to stir up revolution, to create social chaos or to use all those ungentlemanly means of winning the war which come so easily to the Nazis.”\textsuperscript{17} Dalton’s enthusiasm for the irregular tactics, although argued persuasively, alarmed conservative members of Whitehall. Dalton wrote to Lord Halifax in July 1940 claiming, “We have got to organize movements in enemy-occupied territory comparable to the Sinn Fein movement in Ireland, to the Chinese Guerillas now operating against Japan, [and] to the Spanish Irregulars who played a notable part in Wellington’s campaign…”\textsuperscript{18} He continued to describe SOE’s intentions, “[SOE] must use many different methods, including industrial and military sabotage, labour agitation and strikes, continuous propaganda, terrorist acts against traitors and German leaders, boycotts and riots.”\textsuperscript{19} Propaganda in conjunction with industrial and military sabotage would provide the military with a “fourth arm.”\textsuperscript{20} After frequent and serious discussion between the Prime Minister and his cabinet, Dalton’s proposal won out. A meeting on 22 July marked the official creation of SOE. The War Cabinet approved a paper written by Neville Chamberlain describing SOE’s broad organization and objectives.\textsuperscript{21} It would be considered SOE’s founding charter; an organization established to coordinate sabotage

\textsuperscript{17} Seaman, 16. And Stafford, 24. \\
\textsuperscript{18} Foot, \textit{SOE in France}, 9. \\
\textsuperscript{19} Seaman, 16. \\
\textsuperscript{20} David Stafford, \textit{Britain and European Resistance} (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), 11. \\
\textsuperscript{21} Stafford, 26, and Foot. 10.
and subversion activities against the enemy. Dalton recorded in his diary it was the day that Churchill gave him the famous orders, “now set Europe ablaze.”

SOE was originally split into three sections. SO(1) was dedicated propaganda. SO(1) would later detach from SOE and form its own organization called the Political Warfare Executive. The second section SO(2) was the operations section and SO(3) dealt with planning. Sweet-Escott claims that SO(3)’s tasks were too widespread across the globe to function effectively and after a few months Whitehall dispersed its staff into other appropriate departments. SOE answered to the Chiefs of Staff and Defence Committee of the War Office, but the Ministry of Economic Warfare (MEW) headed its organization and daily functions, with its Minister as its head. The Chiefs of Staff would provide strategic directives to ensure SOE’s actions stayed in line with British strategy. The dispute over SOE’s official organization in the Whitehall bureaucracy foreshadows future conflicts between SOE, SIS, and the traditional military services. The decision to put SOE under the Ministry of Economic Warfare and not a traditional military service or Whitehall department like the Director of Military Intelligence or the Foreign Office caused apprehension of SOE’s credibility. The discussion over how much SOE would resemble a military service versus a civilian organization with paramilitary elements proved to be a continuous debate throughout the war. SOE survival depended on whose toes they did not step on and results from the field.

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22 Foot, *SOE in France*, 11.
23 Stafford, 36.
24 Sweet-Escott, 40-41.
25 Foot, 10.
The most difficult aspect of analyzing SOE is making sense of the relationships between the multitude of nationalities and political agendas associated with SOE’s activities. It was also large in size with 10,000 men and 3,200 women as agents and staff, along with the thousands of resisters recruited on the continent. Operations in France provide an excellent example of SOE’s objectives and struggles. The British envisioned that the French population would assist in the German defeat through internal resistance. In actual terms this meant sabotage on communication lines, railway traffic, building up “secret armies” that were conventional in organization, but clandestine until the appropriate action date. SOE sent approximately 800 agents into France to organize and support resistance circuits. Circuits were groups of clandestine personnel responsible for performing day-to-day functions like transporting messages, collecting armaments, providing escape lines, and creating resistance propaganda. France had six separate SOE sections. The two largest sections were the independent French section (F section) ran under Colonel Maurice Buckmaster and Charles de Gaulle’s SOE section (RF) which worked in coordination with the French Bureau Central de Renseignements et d’Action (BCRA) and SOE’s general staff. By the end of the war, all SOE French sections were under French control through the Etat-Major Forces Francaises de l’Interieur directed by General Pierre Koenig.

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26 Foot, 16.
27 All circuit names will be written in capitalized letters, example, PIMENTO circuit, while all agent’s field names will be in italics.
28 Foot, xxi.
29 Foot, 32-33, 339.
Relations between F and RF section were often strained. De Gaulle’s struggle to assert the autonomy of France while being dependent on British supplies rubbed officials in Whitehall the wrong way. De Gaulle also made attempts to consolidate all SOE French sections under his control. De Gaulle saw himself and his followers as distinctive from the governments-in-exile. He claimed that the French government which signed the armistice was illegitimate and the *legitimate* France continued the struggle under his direction as the Free French. Churchill recognized the moral importance of European Resistance. He supported de Gaulle’s efforts as in July 1940, and in January 1942 the British recognized the formal creation of “an organization with the object of securing unity in resisting the common enemy and ultimately achieving the liberation of France from the invader”; this organization became the French National Committee.\textsuperscript{30} Yet the British also stipulated that the main instrument of European resistance will be SOE and not de Gaulle’s Free French.\textsuperscript{31}

The de Gaulle-Churchill relationship was tenuous as Churchill continually struggled for American support and approval. The Americans, particularly President Franklin Roosevelt was not fond of de Gaulle. De Gaulle could offer little to the English war effort upon his arrival except a claim that France, under his direction, would not stop fighting. But the relationship persevered because it had a strong foundation in mutual principles of alleviating France from the Nazis and their collaborators. De Gaulle showed his loyalty to the Allied cause by recognizing the reciprocal link between England and France. After the British attack on the French fleet at Mers-el-Kelbir, Algeria in 1940 to

\textsuperscript{30} Quoted in Stafford, 72-73.
\textsuperscript{31} Stafford, 73.
prevent the Germans from requisitioning the ships, killing 1,250 French sailors, de Gaulle publicly announced to the French on British Radio that the episode was a tragedy, but that France must distinguish it as a defiant act against the Nazis and a step towards French victory.\(^{32}\) He then referred to the destiny of England and France, “…our two peoples – our two great peoples – are still linked together. Either they will both succumb, or they will triumph side by side.”\(^ {33}\)

De Gaulle’s swift actions to declare himself the representative of a still belligerent France made him stand out to the British. Yet it was not clear if de Gaulle could rally this effort within France and govern her after the smoke cleared. Even de Gaulle sought out France’s military elite such as General Weygand and other colonial generals to work under their services for establishing a Free France. There were few positive responses.\(^ {34}\) Only General Le Gentilhomme in Djibouti and General Catroux in Indochina accepted de Gaulle’s call to resistance, but they did not bring any of their troops and only agreed to serve under de Gaulle and not take command themselves.\(^ {35}\) The apprehension towards de Gaulle’s movement was due to his status in the Vichy government. The Vichy government declared de Gaulle a traitor, tried him in absentia, and sentenced him to death.\(^ {36}\) De Gaulle and those who joined him were outlaws of the country for which they were fighting. De Gaulle’s standing as a traitor in the eyes of Marshal Philippe Pétain, the


\(^{33}\) Berthon, 39.


\(^{36}\) Berthon, 40.
head of the French government after the Armistice, deterred many military personnel from joining the Free French cause in London.

In order to understand the atmosphere in which SOE agents and resisters operated, it is necessary to explain the political and military situation in France. The conditions of the Armistice between France and Germany were harsh. France had to pay 400 million francs a day for occupation costs as well as dedicate the majority of their industry to the German war effort.\(^{37}\) The most significant stipulation of the Armistice divided France into an occupied zone consisting of the northern half of France and the Atlantic coastal regions, and an unoccupied zone in the southern third ran by Marshal Philippe Pétain from the town of Vichy.\(^{38}\) This division limited SOE’s work in the unoccupied zone because the Foreign Office prohibited sabotage operations in the region until German occupation of the entire country in November 1942.\(^{39}\) The Vichy government took serious efforts to stomp out any dissidents in the unoccupied zone. Pétain and his second-in-command Pierre Laval progressively developed a policy of collaboration with the Nazis and created their own quasi-fascist government under the title “National Revolution”. Patriots thus, had two opponents to fight, the Germans and their own countrymen in Vichy. The Germans eventually occupied the entirety of France in November 1942 in response to the Allied invasion of North Africa.

After the fall of France in 1940, the choice to resist was not apparent. Several powers fought for the hearts and minds of the French citizens caught in the middle: the

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\(^{37}\) Paxton. 54.

\(^{38}\) The Unoccupied or “Free Zone” was commonly called the Vichy government.

Nazis in occupation, Pétain’s Vichy government, Charles de Gaulle’s Free French and his British ally. Vichy and the Germans progressively consolidated their objectives, while the Free French coordinated their efforts with British strategy, albeit not without serious conflicts. These pairings were not evident to anybody involved except a small number you chose their sides early. The division of France into an occupied zone and an unoccupied zone under a “free” French government in the South further compounded the issue. The French saw Philippe Pétain, the Marshal of France and victor of Verdun, as a national hero who would protect France from the Nazis onslaught, while General Charles de Gaulle was not a prominent figure in French society or a well-liked member of the French military before the war. In spring 1940, De Gaulle consistently pushed France’s Prime Minister Edouard Daladier to continue the struggle with the British. De Gaulle’s efforts proved futile and he went to London after Daladier resigned and the French government collapsed. Petain asked for an armistice on 17 June 1940 and created a new government at Vichy in the next month. On July 9, the remaining deputies and senators of the Third Republic voted to suspend the current French Constitution and granted the eighty-four year old Pétain dictatorial powers to create a new constitution and make all executive and legislative decisions except declaring war without the consent of the National Assembly.41

Displeasure with Pétain’s government turned to outright hatred in 1942 with the adoption of the Service du Travail Obligatoire, mandatory conscription for young men (and women) for work in Germany organized by Pierre Laval, Vichy’s deputy prime

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41 Paxton, 29-31, 33.
minister and legal successor to Pétain.\textsuperscript{42} Hundreds of young men fled to the countryside to join partisan units called the \textit{Maquis}. Furthermore, Germany’s response to the Allied invasion of North Africa led to the total occupation of France exposing all French citizens to Nazi rule and amplified resistance activity. The complete occupation also lifted the Foreign Office’s “ban on bangs” in the unoccupied zone for SOE circuits.\textsuperscript{43} Sabotage and subversive activities could now be legitimately performed under Allied coordination throughout all of France.

This thesis will analyze how SOE operated in France by examining agents’ experience on the ground. Agents had to contend with political divisions and logistical problems from London such as communication and supplying. The difficulties in France help highlight the troubles affecting SOE leaders in London who struggled to establish SOE as an efficient organization. Examining operations in France provides an internal look at wartime politics in Britain and France as well as the machinery and struggles of clandestine life.

Chapter one presents the historiography of SOE scholarship. While historians appreciate the sacrifice and service of SOE staff and agents, SOE’s military efficacy is often debated. This chapter does not attempt to add to this debate. Instead, it illustrates the evolution of Britain’s public recognition of SOE operations. SOE’s existence was known to the public immediately after the end of the Second World War. SIS incorporated the remnants of SOE after it closed its doors in 1946. Memoirs and biographies of staff and agents as well as public honors contributed to SOE’s unveiling.

\textsuperscript{42} Paxton, 28-29.
\textsuperscript{43} Foot, \textit{SOE in France}, 198.
Many of the biographies and memoirs sensationalized agents’ activities producing an incorrect representation of SOE’s work. The public’s attention centered on SOE’s women agents who provided narratives of intrigue and adventure. This was due not least to these women’s unconventional gendered behavior.

In the late 1950s, inquiries into SOE’s efficacy were brought to Parliament. Whitehall decided to publish an official history of SOE activities in France. They chose Michael Foot, an historian and professor at Manchester University. Foot’s publication, *SOE in France*, was a watershed moment for SOE history. The public finally had an unbiased and balanced account of some of SOE’s best (and worst) work. Historians continued their scholarship on SOE, diving into more thematic topics like SOE’s relationship with the Foreign Office, SIS, and the Royal Air Force using open Whitehall archives and foreign documents. Biographies and memoirs continued to be published, but authors now had respected monographs to explore. Historians researched SOE from its bureaucratic position in Whitehall and from its agents’ experiences in the field. Whitehall began to release SOE’s archives into the Public Records Office in 1993 which offered a new generation of historians and the interested public access to SOE’s history. The legacy of SOE has been skewed by the public’s demand for exceptional stories, but the publication of Michael Foot’s history as well as other historians’ efforts to understand SOE activities in Whitehall and in Europe reveals a comprehensive and balanced history of this remarkable organization.

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Chapter two analyzes SOE operations in France through the mission reports of Philippe de Vomécourt, an early French SOE agent who worked until the end of the war. Philippe’s reports exemplify the development of SOE activities in France. His efforts to organize resistance networks in France demonstrate the obstacles agents faced with political divisions in France as well as the logistical problems in coordinating action between headquarters and the field. Philippe was arrested at the end of 1942 and managed to escape in 1943. He returned to France in 1944 to discover a very different atmosphere. Resistance networks were deeply established and preparing for the most crucial mission of the Western front, the reinvasion of the continent. The Chiefs of Staff issued directions to delay and disperse German troops on their way to the Normandy front through sabotage and guerilla warfare. Philippe’s organization, like many others across France, stockpiled armaments and prepared to take action. Philippe’s experience represents the typical evolution of resistance organizations and the challenges SOE agents faced while in France.

Chapter three analyzes the role of gender behavior and relationships in SOE to describe how agents were trained and operated day-to-day in the field. Gender is used as an analytical tool instead of other themes like class or nationality because it effectively narrows the scope of explorations of SOE operations. Every agent dealt with performing specific gendered behavior for a given region or working with a member of the opposite sex. SOE agents used their gender to assimilate into French society and avoid suspicion. Both men and women had to adapt to local dress and behavior. Male agents performed typical French masculinities like public socializing, drinking and womanizing. Women
accentuated their sexuality to distract the enemy or downplayed their appearance to appear innocent. The relationship between male and female agents and resisters provide a detailed look at clandestine life. SOE trained men and women in similar exercises, but their missions were often gender biased. Women rarely had the chance to be trained as SOE circuit organizers and weapons and explosives experts. While in the field, however, situations were liable to change and some women attained leadership positions. In general, this was not a problem among resisters, but several SOE agents recounted difficulties. Analyzing the performances of and relationships between SOE’s men and women provides a detailed look at clandestine life in the French Resistance.

SOE’s legacy is a mixture of positive and negative perceptions. SOE struggled to be taken seriously in Whitehall, but their successes, particularly in support of the Allied forces in 1944, exceeded everyone’s expectations. This does not prove that SOE was an essential organization in British and then Allied strategy, but at the very least it was an innovative agency that exemplifies the intricate political, military and social relations between World War Two governments and their peoples.
CHAPTER 1: UNVEILING THE SECRETS OF THE SPECIAL OPERATIONS EXECUTIVE

The historical debate surrounding the military and psychological role of the Special Operations Executive and by extension the French Resistance in Allied strategy is a decades long debate with no conclusion in sight. Most likely this stems from the multitude of perspectives involved; nationality, political affiliation, class, and age permeate the discussion. Understanding SOE’s contributions to the Second World War requires an analysis of their operations. Since SOE was a secret organization, not many records survive to tell this tale. SOE destroyed or removed approximately eighty percent of its documents at the end of the war. Agent’s mission reports, personnel files, interrogations, departmental memos and reports from British and French sources piece together a complex history. Historians might not be able to agree on the efficacy of SOE, but understanding how it operated and the evolution of its legacy can be established because of the public’s interest in SOE activities.

David Stafford, one of the most well-known historians of SOE and the French Resistance contends that when SOE appeared in the early British historiography of the Second World War it came against allegations of its worth and efficiency. He describes three main perspectives taken by historians, the press and readers of SOE’s history. First, SOE was considered amateurish, naïve, and not aligned with Britain’s wartime strategy.

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or the professionalized secret services. SOE’s tactics were too radical, operationally and politically, referring to SOE’s willingness to work with communists in France, and in particular for their support of Greek and Yugoslav communist partisans during the war. Members of Whitehall and the secret services usually maintain this perspective. The second perspective originates from the countries in which SOE operated. Some resistance organizations were skeptical of a British organization offering their support, arguing that SOE was an avenue to push British political objectives on the continent. This argument was particularly popular in the anti-British climate of France after the attack at Mers-el-Kebir in Algeria in 1940. Many French resisters saw SOE as an extension of British imperialism. The last viewpoint is usually taken by former participants of SOE and the Resistance and is the only true positive outlook of SOE’s contributions. These proponents argue that SOE was efficient with the resources available to them and could have contributed more to the disruption of enemy forces if given a chance. The positive psychological effect of European Resistance is strongly upheld with this argument. For example, the participation of French soldiers and citizens in the liberation of their country gave France a respectable international standing in the post-war era.

Each viewpoint depends on a person’s national identity. The French used the Resistance as the foundation of their post-war governments in the decades after the Second World War. The British, who did not have to endure defeat and occupation, consider European resistance and organizations like SOE as auxiliary components to the more important traditional military services. The multiple attitudes towards SOE’s
history were either reinforced or challenged with the disclosure of SOE’s activities to the public in the decades after the Second World War.

There are several reasons for SOE’s unveiling. Mark Seaman contends that SOE was the least secret of Britain’s secret services.\(^{47}\) He is correct for several reasons. First, SOE had an ephemeral existence, officially closing its doors in 1946. The Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) absorbed its remnants. Second, its activities were inherently visible through acts of sabotage and the formation of hundreds of partisan units in France and across Europe.\(^{48}\) Informal recognition also came from the media throughout the war. Press clippings announced that British citizens parachuted into France to assist resistance activities, while the BBC relayed personal messages for resisters on the continent. Furthermore, the British government publicly awarded several SOE agents for their services immediately after the war, revealing that Britain was involved in European resistance. Third, members of SOE insisted on publicizing their efforts. Before the end of the war, members of SOE felt that a comprehensive record of its activities should be produced, if not for the immediate public, but for posterity. Before the close of the war, the Gaullist RF section’s internal history was written by one of its members H.H.A. Thackthwaite while R.A. Bourne-Paterson created a small record of F section’s accomplishments to show to post-war French representatives.\(^{49}\) Yet these histories were only produced for a government purposes. Sir Colin Gubbins, a constant leading figure in SOE throughout the war, wanted a complete public historical work on SOE’s

\(^{47}\) Stafford, 4.
\(^{49}\) Seaman, 29.
contributions to the Allied war effort. He chose William Mackenzie, an Oxford historian, Whitehall insider, but SOE outsider to chronicle SOE’s history.\textsuperscript{50} His work circulated in Whitehall, but was not published to the general public until 2000. SOE’s short-lived existence, informal and formal publicity and the efforts from former staff to record its history gradually exposed SOE’s activities.

The general public also had a hand in SOE’s disclosure. Former agents and staff began to publish their memoirs directly after the end of the war. Biographies of well-accomplished or martyred agents also hit the bookstand. Some of these, even if not particularly accurate, became widely popular. This popularity sparked a call for clarification of SOE activities in Europe beginning in the late 1950s with the publication of two books which questioned the effectiveness of SOE operations and its exploitation of agents.\textsuperscript{51} These narratives exacerbated the already established criticisms that SOE was amateurish, inefficient and not in step with British political and military objectives in Europe during the Second World War.\textsuperscript{52} MP Dame Irene Ward, who had only rudimentary knowledge about SOE, took up the cause of questioning Parliament about the organization.\textsuperscript{53} She struck a chord with the British government who was concerned about the misrepresentation and ill-recognition of British contributions to European resistance. In addition, communists throughout Europe claimed resistance as their own in order to legitimize their position in post-war society and Britain wanted to combat this

\textsuperscript{50} Seaman, 30.
\textsuperscript{52} David Stafford, \textit{Britain and European Resistance}, 4-6.
\textsuperscript{53} Dame Irene Ward previously wrote a book about the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry which supplied SOE with many of its women agents and staff.
communist propaganda. In the early 1960s, Parliament commissioned Michael Foot to write an official history of SOE and in 1966 Foot published *SOE in France*. Whitehall officials chose France because of its ample archives (in comparison to other sections’ records). SOE’s French sections also presented positive answers to questions of SOE’s effectiveness and their treatment of agents because the French Resistance contributed a large auxiliary role in the Allied reinvasion of the continent. Foot strove to write a balanced history of an agency that was sensationalized by its Whitehall quarrels and adventurous and frequently exaggerated activities. All subsequent work on the SOE in France is based on Foot’s proficient account.

Yet, Foot’s history did not fill the void of a general history of SOE’s work in all its fields of operations. Few historians have attempted this monumental task because of the vast geographical scope of SOE’s activities. The release of archives in 1993 gave historians an exponentially better grasp on the material, but many still have to contend with deciphering tangled webs of interdepartmental squabbles, international diplomacy between Britain and the governments-in-exile and confusing mission reports which often excluded crucial parts of information. Historians have therefore, chosen to use thematic approaches to writing SOE history. Monographs dedicated to SOE’s origins, bureaucratic standing in Whitehall, specific country sections, and relations with European resistance movements are numerous.

The historiography of the SOE follows a common historiographical trajectory. It is not a set model, but a practicable response to the establishment of secrecy and memory. Participants’ memoirs are often the first accounts to surface to the general public.
Although insightful for their personal connections to the narrative, historians often scrutinize memoirs and oral histories for their bias and historical inaccuracy. This is true of many early SOE memoirs and biographies published before Foot’s official history, and of course before the release of any official documents. Once a general interest is sparked, the public often demands more information on the subject. Historians and journalists produced biographies of specific agents and staff members, developing a cult of personalities. Finally, a controlled revealing of the subject takes place; in this case Whitehall’s commission of Foot’s official history. Other historians like E.H Cookridge and David Stafford took a lateral approach using resources from other Whitehall departments, foreign archives, or from former participants to fill in the blanks of their narratives. Yet, even after Foot’s history the British did not remove the veil of secrecy from their operational secret services. The official history of SOE in the Far East was not published until 1983. William Mackenzie’s in-house history of SOE, started in 1945 and completed in 1948, was not published until 2000. Even with all the interest and scholarship appearing about SOE, the British did not officially release the records until 1993. The past decades have seen an array of books on how SOE contributed to the war effort, their weapons and equipment, German penetration, and of course, more biographies and memoirs. Analyzing SOE operations in France demonstrates the organization’s literary path the best because it was the first to break ground.

The first written publications of SOE came in the form of memoirs and biographies of specific agents and officers. H.R. Kedward, a prominent historian of the French Resistance, said, “we inhabit a world where is history is regularly turned into
Some of the earliest representations of SOE and European Resistance constitute a cult of personalities that turned its history into a glorified memorial to individual participants devoid of historical context. The elements of personal literature published after the first decades of the war, particularly the biographies, tended to categorize SOE agents as infallible, fearless war heroes and heroines. Of course, not all memoirists and biographers classified their subjects in this hagiographical context and managed to portray the SOE, French Resistance, and its participants within its proper historical setting.

George Millar established the public record of SOE before the war came to an end with his memoir *Maquis*, published in 1945. Millar recounts his experiences as a SOE circuit organizer working with the *Maquis* in the department of Franche-Comté in eastern France. His enthusiasm was not met equally by some of the leading staff of SOE. Vera Atkins, the assistant and intelligence officer to Maurice Buckmaster, the head of F Section, wrote to Millar asking why he must write “a damned book.” She confessed it seemed that Millar was motivated by money. Millar pursued his project and eventually 70,000 hardbacks were published with the approval of the War Office. Charles de Gaulle praised Millar’s work as an accurate representation of the *Maquis* in France. De Gaulle added that the true story of the *Maquis* “is something that will become untrue, year by


55 Kedward, 135.

year…” De Gaulle and Millar recognized the urgency of documenting important events for posterity while they were fresh in the participants’ mind. Perhaps this sense of urgency was also felt by the War Office who cleared a number of memoirs and biographies for publication in the immediate years after the war. By the end of the 1950s, however, it was becoming increasingly difficult for former SOE agents and staff to obtain approval for their publications.

In 1946 the British government began publicly awarding former SOE agents. Wing Commander F.F.E Yeo-Thomas and Odette Sansom were given the George Cross. The press obsessed over their respective stories of secret activities in occupied France, yet no details were given about their official work with RF and F section of SOE. Yeo-Thomas’ story is almost unbelievable and exemplifies the suffering, yet courageous wartime hero that the public craved. He performed three trips to occupied France and on his final mission was captured, tortured, and deported to Buchenwald, managing to escape. He was caught again and survived until the Americans overran his camp. In 1952 his narrative would be published under the editor Bruce Marshall as the *The White Rabbit*, his former codename. Michael Foot deemed the book an authentic account in his bibliography for *SOE in France*.

Odette Sansom’s recognition and the subsequent publication of her biography *Odette* by Jerrod Tickell even more captivated the public’s attention. Sansom was a

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57 Seaman, “Good Thrillers, but Bad History”, 120.
courier for a large SOE circuit. The Gestapo arrested and tortured Sansom, but received no information and sent her to Germany.\(^6\) She survived Ravensbrück concentration camp because she spent the duration in solitary confinement. The Germans thought she was the niece of Winston Churchill. Sansom was the sole surviving woman recipient of the George Cross.\(^6\) SOE historians Mark Seaman, William Mackenzie and M.R.D Foot agree that Tickell’s biography embellished Sansom’s activities, but the public deeply sympathized with the young woman’s sacrifice and heroism.\(^6\) The women of F and RF section have an enduring appeal to historians, journalists and the interested public. Their activities would become commemorated in numerous films including *Odette* and *Carve her name with Pride*, a film about Violette Szabo’s activities and death. They reinforced the public obsession with SOE’s women agents, thirteen of which did not come home. Maurice Buckmaster even portrayed himself in Szabo’s film.\(^6\)

The fates of some of women agents are no less horrific than their male counterparts, but are celebrated with more fervor. Women participated in the war effort in multitude of tasks, but these women were exceptional for shattering the “combat taboo” associated with gender and warfare. Popular or inaccurate memoirs, biographies, and films throughout the decades after the Second World War neglected the historical context of SOE’s contributions to the war effort and focused on adventure and intrigue. Individual stories of courage, adventure, and sacrifice solidified SOE’s legacy. The “Odette Myth” based on Odette Sansom’s experiences in Tickell’s biography, portrays

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\(^6\) Foot, 379.

\(^6\) Foot, 379.


\(^6\) Seaman, “Good Thrillers, but Bad History”, 122.
agents as steely, heroic and infallible human beings. Many agents did possess these positive characteristics and deserve the credit, but this veneration distorts the historical representation. Many agents attest to mistakes, as some of their captures demonstrate, and admit to fear, nervousness and indifference. The actual experiences of SOE agents and staff connect them to the more realistic context of British strategy and European resistance during the Second World War. Their successes and failures present an accurate historical account.

The man who employed these agents was Maurice Buckmaster, head of F Section. He published two account of SOE in the 1950s. Buckmaster claimed that *Specially Employed* (1952) and *They Fought Alone* (1958) were not “factually accurate”.\(^{64}\) It is ironic that Buckmaster chose to publish accounts of SOE intended for drama and not historical fact when he was one of the foremost antagonists among the disgruntled veterans after Foot’s publication. He fervently criticized Foot for his inaccuracy in thirty-five pages of notes after reading *SOE in France*.\(^{65}\)

Bickham Sweet-Escott managed to produce a revealing, readable and accurate portrayal of his experiences in *Baker Street Irregular*. Sweet-Escott worked in Section D, an organization that was combined with two others in the business of clandestine warfare to create SOE in July 1940. He continued to work in SOE until its closure. He credits Dame Irene Ward, a member of Parliament, for its publication in 1965. Sweet-Escott’s

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manuscript was resolutely rejected by the War Office in 1954. He asked Hugh Dalton, the former head of the Ministry of Economic Warfare which was in charge of SOE, to take up his cause, yet, Dalton’s proposals were also rejected. In 1962 he wrote to Dame Irene Ward who had taken up the cause of clarifying SOE’s role in war a few years earlier. Her testimonies and questioning in Parliament led to a 1965 publication, albeit with certain censorship. Sweet-Escott’s objective was to present a balanced portrayal of SOE to the general public. He claimed that many people saw the former members of SOE as “not quite nice” and associated them with irresponsible young men, “crypto-communists”, and traitors. He also stated that the impact and effectiveness of SOE was not properly accessed because there was no official history. He only had to wait one more year before Foot published SOE in France.

Sweet-Escott explains that his book is not an attempt at a general history of SOE, but an account of his personal experiences. He consulted with many former colleagues and used his engagement books to clarify dates. Even with these unofficial sources, Sweet-Escott portrays the inner workings of SOE in an authentic fashion. He explains the confusion and organization of its beginnings without claiming pretentious knowledge demonstrating that even SOE’s top employees were deprived of basic information. The quarrels with SIS or “Z” as he was obliged to call it, are recounted without bitter undertones, but put into the historical context of the stress of wartime Britain. Sweet-Escott was an expert on the Balkans section of SOE, but takes time to explain SOE operations in other parts of Europe, Africa, and the Middle East.

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67 Sweet-Escott, 13-14.
In 1958 two books prompted the parliamentary and public questioning of SOE’s effectiveness, Elizabeth Nicholas’ *Death be Not Proud* and Jean Overton-Fuller’s *Double Webs*. These books shattered the image of SOE memoir literature which idealized the solidarity and objectives of its staff and agents. Nicholas argued that F section had deliberately used agents as bait in order to relieve the Allied armed forces from pressure. She also states that SOE failed to appropriately notify the next of kin of agents killed in the field. Nicholas did not bother to look into Vera Atkins personal post-war mission to discover the fate of SOE’s missing agents. Overton-Fuller exposed the disasters of suspected double agents in the PROSPER network to demonstrate the inefficiency of SOE in France. Nicholas’ and Overton-Fuller’s books sparked the interest of MP Dame Irene Ward who took a “cynical” view of SOE’s F section and the government’s inaction of setting the record straight. Ward pressured the government and Prime Minister Harold Macmillan to call for an objective account of SOE’s activities for the benefit of those formerly involved and the British public. Macmillan eventually commissioned Michael Foot in 1960 to write his seminal work. Christopher Murray argues that Dame Irene Ward’s contributions to the origins of *SOE in France* are significant, but are only part of the story. International interest in European resistance was a popular and controversial subject in the decades after the war. Britain was worried that their contribution to the effort which legitimized many European governments after the war,

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particularly in France, went unnoticed by their own historians and public. The Foreign
Office as early as 1945 exclaimed,

…it is getting more urgent both from the point of view of the America [sic] public, who have recently been told all about the exploits of the O.S.S [Office of Strategic Services], and from the point of view of continental opinion which is rapidly forgetting what we have done to help the Resistance.70

Furthermore, the Communist party in France called themselves “le parti de 75 000 fusillés” and claimed to embody the whole of French Resistance.71 To curb the communist propaganda during the tension of the Cold War, Whitehall wanted to reveal Britain’s active support for European Resistance during the war. Along with the demand for an objective history to properly commemorate those who served in clandestine work under SOE, Parliament used the threat of a communist interpretation of wartime resistance to justify the commission of SOE in France.

SOE in France was a watershed moment for the history of SOE and British secret services. Yet even with Parliament’s approval Foot met obstacles in obtaining full access to SOE’s archives. In Memories of an SOE Historian Foot recounts the stress and annoyance of not being able analyze certain documents because the advisor claimed they “did not exist”.72 This may have been a way to protect highly sensitive material or a legitimate claim because an estimated eight-seven percent of SOE documents were destroyed or weeded out by an unorganized attempt to reduce space between 1945 and

70 Quoted in Christopher Murray, Origins of SOE in France, 941.
1950. Furthermore, Foot was denied access to interview a large number of SOE veterans. Naturally former members of SOE were troubled that they were not consulted, indicating that the government did not feel it necessary to reveal their objectives of balancing SOE’s record to the actual participants. The secrecy surrounding Foot’s publication caused a controversy within the former SOE community. They argued that historical accuracy and inclusion of appropriate resources – themselves – were more important than an early publication. Foot defended his work in the introduction stating that he owed it the former participants, alive or dead, to produce a timely work to honor their memories.

Foot’s work became the archetype for subsequent scholarship. Foot separates the work into two sections, the origins and organization and the narrative. He structures these sections chronologically which is a practical organization due to the web of characters, locations, and events. This also shows that the creation and objectives of SOE ran parallel to British wartime strategy. By 1943, the Allies were on the offensive and SOE had emerged from its organizational stage and began to produce small victories. It is inconceivable to expect Foot to produce a detailed narrative of each operation, organization and every actor, no historian of the SOE or Resistance has been able to conquer that task. Foot successfully navigates important organizations, personalities, conflicts, successes, and disasters for the reader. Foot also indulges the fascination with

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75 Seaman, “Good Thrillers, but Bad History”, 128.
SOE’s women agents in a chart of each woman’s circuit, mission dates and fate.\textsuperscript{76} Instructive appendices, including an immense annotated bibliography, outline the current state of SOE and Resistance scholarship in the second edition published in 2004. It is an essential starting point for any researcher.

At the same time of Foot’s publication of \textit{SOE in France}, another historian E.H Cookridge had just sent his monograph of SOE to the press. \textit{Inside SOE} appeared in 1966, but did not receive the attention it might have gained if Foot’s history never emerged. Cookridge was not obligated to follow a strict course of research because it was not an official history and he did not have access to SOE’s official archives. Like many historians before and after Foot, he circumvented the British by using foreign archives. Cookridge extensively used the archives of the \textit{Etat-Major des Forces Françaises de l’Intérieur}, the French organization that coordinated all resistance activities after the Normandy invasion in 1944. He also found many copies of SOE material in American archives. Cookridge also relied on oral testimonies from former French and British agents and the staff of SOE and the Free French. Cookridge analyzed SOE as an entire organization. He did not write on one country section, but attempted a comprehensive study of the SOE in the European theater. It seems this attempt was somewhat in vain, because the vast majority of episodes from his work come from France and French North Africa. Foot does not list \textit{Inside SOE} in the bibliography of the 2004 second edition of \textit{SOE in France}. Scholarship on the historiography of SOE also rarely mentions

\textsuperscript{76} Foot, Appendix B, 414-418.
Cookridge’s work. Perhaps it was the fault of unfortunate timing that allowed his work to be overshadowed.

*SOE in France* divides the historiography of SOE into two distinct segments. Before its publication, scholarship focused on memoirs and sensationalized biographies of agents. Drama and adventure often surpassed historical accuracy and context. After *SOE in France*, previously unemphasized aspects of the organization began to be explored. Whitehall’s stance on the opening of SOE archives did not change, however. No other official histories of SOE sections were commissioned, not least due to the controversy that Foot’s work caused among veterans. Their stance would not change until the Waldegrave Initiative on Open Government in 1993. The bulk of the government’s World War Two archives were opened in 1972, but clandestine services’ records were held back. Some historians, like Cookridge, found ways to unearth SOE’s secrets from other British departments and foreign archives.

David Stafford most effectively embodied the new form of SOE literature. Stafford published *Britain and European Resistance 1940-1945, A survey of the Special Operations Executive, with Documents* in 1980.\(^77\) This was not an account of a courageous agent or a concentrated narrative of a specific country section. Stafford dealt with one of the main questions that arose from SOE’s existence; how did it fit into the Allied strategy? His work focused on British policy-making and how the strategic and diplomatic objectives of Whitehall played out in SOE. Stafford also analyzed SOE’s role with the Free French and American secret services. SOE’s relationship with the Free

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French is extremely important in understanding Britain and France’s joint struggle as well as their post-war relationship. The time consuming disagreements between SOE, SIS, the Chiefs of Staff, and the Air Ministry are displayed from the top down. Stafford relied on other departments’ released documents, particularly from Chiefs of Staff meetings. Even without access to SOE archives, Stafford meticulously recounts SOE’s existence from its humble beginnings in 1940 to its controversial closure in 1946. He also provides an array of outstanding documents to accompany the interested reader. Not surprisingly, he structures his work along the lines of Foot’s duel sections, beginning with the origins and objectives of SOE then turning to the chronological narrative, but not as a list of specific missions. He guides the reader through the changing aspects of Allied strategy and chooses SOE missions which best exemplify the strategy’s successes and failures. For example, as the Allies focused on the landings in Italy in 1943, the Chiefs of Staff instructed SOE to amplify their partisan activities in the Balkans and Greece to tie down Italian troops. SOE’s work in Southeastern Europe also provided the basis for a rudimentary deception plan; to mislead the Germans in thinking that the large scale invasion of the continent would take place in the Eastern Mediterranean. SOE then instructed the French *Maquis* and Resistance circuits to refrain from large scale operations in order to preserve their strength for the actual invasion of Northwestern Europe.

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78 Stafford, 1-2. Charles de Gaulle did not forget the support or slights from the British during the Second World War when he returned to power in the late 1950s.

79 Stafford, 105-106.
In addition, Stafford does not demonstrate personal bias because he represented the new generation of historians who were not personally involved in the war. Previous authors were from the war generation and experienced the war in various forms. Many took part in combat and the secret services, like Foot. *Britain and European Resistance* provided a fresh and equitable analysis of the most important contextualization of SOE, its role in the Allied strategy.

The 1980s saw a watershed in intelligence and clandestine services history. In 1979 F.H Hinsley published the first volume of his landmark history *British Intelligence in the Second World War.* In 1982, Christopher Andrews and David Dilks called upon historians to incorporate intelligence and clandestine services into their scholarship. They claimed that intelligence history was the “missing dimension” in contemporary British history. SOE was not designated an intelligence gathering service, but was often lumped into this genre. In fact, SIS often chastised SOE if they did obtain useful intelligence, which was often the case when agents are sent in undercover to infiltrate a society. The advent of this new “school” of historical analysis propelled historians to challenge Britain’s wall of official secrecy. Pressure from the public and dramatic controversies concerning “whistleblowers” forced Whitehall to amend their policies towards secrecy. Thus historians began to contextualize intelligence and clandestine operations into the traditional scholarship of the armed forces.


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an excellent example of the contextualization of resistance and special operations contribution to the larger Allied grand strategy. Funk argues that Foot’s work on France and other scholarship on the French Resistance concentrate on the preparations and missions leading up the 1944 invasions of France. Funk examines the role of special operations, including SOE work, and Resistance groups up to 1944, but dedicates half of his narrative to the coordination between special ops, resistance, and the Allied military campaigns to September 1944 when the American Seventh Army, with French military elements, liberated Lyon. Funk recognizes the limited geographical scope of his work, but suggests that highlighting the lesser known, and far less complicated southern French landings, sheds light on the total picture of the synchronization of internal resistance forces and traditional military campaigns in the Second World War.

In 2000, the British government allowed the publication of the in-house history of SOE written at the close of the war by William Mackenzie. Foot designates this book, which was his starting point to write *SOE in France* a “goldmine”. Mackenzie’s history covers all SOE’s European sections in great detail which is one reason it was literally kept under lock and key for decades. Unlike Foot who did not have clearance to interview leading figures and agents, Mackenzie interviewed almost all of SOE’s leading figures. Mackenzie also had unlimited access to SOE’s full archive in 1945 before the ruinous destruction of many of its documents. Mackenzie, a civil servant in the Air Ministry

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82 Funk, xiii.
84 Foot, xi.
during the Second World War stumbled into writing SOE’s history by a meeting at the Air Council with Col. Gubbins in 1945. Gubbins found out Mackenzie was a trained historian by profession and asked him to assume the task. There was no expectation of publication during Mackenzie’s research in the late 1940s, nor was there any prospect for the near future. Whitehall’s tradition of secrecy commanded its limited access in the decades after the war. The Foreign Office, each Service Ministry and the Cabinet Office received copies in order for future readers to understand SOE’s objectives and provide a model for running subversive tactics abroad. Official historians of the military services had access to Mackenzie’s work as well. Mackenzie himself was a bit more lax on the security. He kept a copy in his office for any interested eye to see in a glass front cabinet. He also allowed some of his senior staff at Oxford to read The Secret History of SOE. Foot immediately pushed for its publication upon reading it in the 1960s through a campaign of letter writing to various Cabinet secretaries, but a fruitful outcome did not emerge until 1998 when Sir Robin Butler allowed its release. Foot employed the same method, appealing to the government, as Dame Irene Ward used to prompt Whitehall to commission Mackenzie’s work. The 2000 publication differs from the originally circulated version which was not subject to any censorship by SOE or Whitehall. Michael Foot states that one large section was cut from its narrative along with some other minor changes, but Mackenzie’s history survived to be the indispensable foundation for a comprehensive study on SOE’s origins and activities.

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85 Mackenzie, xxiii.
86 Mackenzie, xvi.
87 Mackenzie, xiv.
The historiography of SOE has multiplied into hundreds of publications. On the continent, work on European Resistance, particularly in France, is almost a national obsession with local and regional organizations producing papers and scholarship on their fallen resisters and the memory of Resistance. The late French Resistance historian Henri Michel paved the way for French, British, and American scholars to embark on the complex history of European Resistance. SOE’s historiography straddles several genres including but not limited to, British World War II history, European Resistance, and secret service history. Contemporary historians in these fields analyze SOE through every type of lens imaginable. National and local histories of resistance and SOE’s work were standard, but since the 1980s contextualized histories are now abundant. Resistance movements are studied within the context of class, gender, and national memory. Gender relationships during the Second World War and in Resistance movements have been an emerging theme since the 1970s.\footnote{See Margaret Collins Weitz, \textit{Sisters in Resistance: How Women Fought to Free France, 1940-1945} (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1995), Marie Granet, \textit{Ceux de la Résistance} (1940-1944) (Paris: Editions de Minuit:1964), \textit{Behind Enemy Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars}, Margaret Randolph Higonnet et al. ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987).} The deep-rooted fascination with SOE’s women agents initiated this type of research. Publications in the form of biographies and memoirs discussed exceptional figures, but scholars had to read between the lines to develop a historical analysis of gender relationships and identity in the SOE. Juliette Pattison produced one of the first monographs that specifically analyze the role gender played in SOE’s training, operations, and historiography. She argues an agent’s success at “passing” as a French citizen often relied on how well they performed region-specific gender roles. The cult of personalities demonstrated by popular biographies and memoirs
still exists, but historians have put SOE and European Resistance in its proper historical context. Michael Foot’s official history and the opening of British archives allowed historians and prospective students to undertake their own research and not be subdued by the wall of secrecy surrounding the historical figures and events.

Does the process of SOE’s openness shed any light on the future of Britain’s other secret services? Historians of intelligence argue that the nature of SOE’s activities versus the role of intelligence is subject to different treatment. Special operations and intelligence are inherently linked under the umbrella of clandestine warfare; their results are similar, but their tactics and strategies are contradictory. National intelligence services are designed to remain secret under the auspices of covert infiltration and the continual deception of the enemy. To maintain this deception, intelligence gathering must maintain the upmost secrecy for long periods of time. Special ops also assimilate into enemy territory, but are inherently visible through the activities of subversion and sabotage. Whitehall’s policy towards SOE’s activities in respect to their relationship with SIS certainly demonstrates this theory. SIS always took priority in location and allocation of supplies over SOE. The British government felt SIS’s established intelligence work was more beneficial to the war effort than special operations. Although SOE collected intelligence for their own benefit and for the war effort in general, SIS made it clear that SOE was not to hinder their operations; they feared SOE’s unconventional and amateurish tactics would blow the cover of reliable intelligence networks. These two methods of clandestine warfare help define the Second World War and SOE was put in charge of sabotage and subversion, while SIS dealt with intelligence, such as the Ultra
operation. Yet both are now an essential part of the modern state and warfare. The British government is slowly opening the doors of secrecy to their secret services, but the passing of time is the only apparent oil to make this door swing open.

Historians and the public perceive the legacy of SOE as both negative and positive. The memoirs and biographies that sensationalized and severely criticized SOE’s activities skewed its historical representation. Memoirs, biographies and monographs that acknowledge both SOE’s shortcomings and successes provide a balanced history and legacy for future readers. The only way to present this balanced account is to examine how SOE operated in the field. The triumphs and failures SOE experienced on a bureaucratic and political level directly affected operational work in the field. An agent and his or her circuit could not initiate acts of sabotage without proper supplies. Furthermore, results from the field, either positive or negative reflected on SOE’s organization and planning. Although Whitehall maintained the importance of subversive action during the Second World War, SOE had to constantly prove they were capable of effective results. SOE agents work in France provided these results.
CHAPTER TWO: FIGHTING IN FRANCE: PERSPECTIVE FROM SOE AGENT

PHILIPPE DE VOMÉCOURT

The work of Philippe de Vomécourt, a French national recruited by SOE’s F section, exemplifies typical activities of SOE agents and resisters in France. Philippe’s brother Pierre, one of the first SOE agents dropped into France, recruited his brother to active service in March 1941. The Vichy police arrested and imprisoned Philippe before the Allied landing in North Africa in November 1942. He managed to escape on 3 January 1944 and reached England through Spain only to return to France on 17 April 1944. The period of his incarceration will therefore be examined through the continued work of his circuit and similar networks. The reports from his two missions demonstrate the obstacles SOE and their agents faced in their early stages of organization from 1940 to 1942 to their more productive stages in 1943 and 1944. Philippe and his circuit encountered problems of logistics in the field caused by organizational, political and physical divisions in London and in France.

Initiation and Development—1940 to 1942

The early stages of SOE involvement in France consisted of recruiting and organizing sympathetic citizens into small units. Agents’ efforts to organize resistance exhibit the psychological importance of clandestine organizations to a suppressed population. SOE not only provided material support, but moral support for anti-Nazi and anti-Vichy citizens who sought action. SOE’s early agents in France were either French

nationals or foreigners who were familiar with a specific region or had established
contacts in France. Agents recruited trusted friends who in turn recruited from their
friends. This was a dangerous task because the process often took place in person.
Denunciations and the recruitment of double agents, people working for Vichy or the
Nazis, were frequent.\(^\text{90}\) If an agent was new to an area or did not have personal contacts,
SOE would instruct them to contact an established SOE agent or leading resister upon
their arrival. Agents worked with a multitude of political and social ideologies. Agents
first had to insight a spirit of resistance into the local populations and select appropriate
members which called for political and moral rhetoric and security precautions.

The de Vomécourt brothers, Pierre and Philippe, were essential to F section’s
establishment in the early days of SOE. Michael Foot argues that the de Vomécourt
brothers introduced basic circuit structures and revealed logistical problems to the staff in
London. Pierre and Philippe “…set the argument on its legs’, so that people could see
what the real issues were and make up their minds how they should be tackled.”\(^\text{91}\)
Pierre’s mission was “to contact as many friendly elements as he could with a view to
laying the foundation for further activities.”\(^\text{92}\) Pierre ordered Philippe to begin searching
for and organizing sympathizers to resistance in order to create reception committees to

\(^{90}\) This danger was demonstrated by Pierre de Vomécourt’s interaction with Mathilde Carré, an
agent from the Interallié intelligence organization. The Gestapo recruited Carré as a double agent and she
was instrumental in the demise of several SOE circuits such as de Vomécourt’s AUTOGIRO and Francis
Suttill’s PROSPER network around Paris. De Vomécourt managed to turn her into a ‘treble agent’ and get
her to London so she could not cause any more danger. Mathilde Carré I was the cat (London: Souvenir
\(^{91}\) Michael Foot. SOE in France, 147.
receive supplies, arms, and men. Pierre was “to look after” the occupied zone from Paris, while designating Philippe to work in the unoccupied zone from Lyon.

Philippe’s mission report, typed by his SOE debriefing officer, repeatedly states that it is difficult to talk of an official organization under Philippe and Pierre’s control in 1941. The report, although written in 1945, specifically refrains from using administrative or military language that is seen in reports of activities from later years in the war. “Looking after” a region instead of “controlling” or “commanding” an organization demonstrates that SOE had no proper administrative plans for early groups in France. It was the agent’s task to develop organized circuits.

Philippe immediately began contacting current F section agents in the area through Virginia Hall, an American member of SOE agent based in Lyon. Hall lived openly in Lyon as an American journalist and was an inexhaustible agent despite the handicap of having a wooden foot. Hall used her apartment as a base for SOE leaders and resisters. Her knowledge of the political climate in the unoccupied zone was indispensable in the organizational stage of resistance. Her tasks included everything from establishing safe houses, making contact with sympathizers in the community, including the local gendarmerie, knowing who to bribe and distributing wireless sets and supplies. Philippe used her contacts along with his list of personal friends to begin his work. To explain their objectives Philippe told recruits that they were now agents of the

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94 Foot, 155.
95 Foot, 155.
British War Office and “their duty was to organise Resistance Groups to prepare for an eventual invasion.”

In his mission report Philippe stated that he now felt his method of recruiting personal friends was a mistake because they knew too much about him, where he had lived, where his wife lived, etc. The Vichy police arrested Philippe because one of his sub-agents knew his address. Philippe, as a French national, used his own identity papers on his first mission, but obtained a cover job as a train inspector which enabled him to travel without suspicion. Despite his close ties to his sub-agents, Philippe continued on with his work. He divided his region into sectors and designated two men from each sector to recruit teams for sabotage activities, while the rest were to be trained as partisans.

Although Philippe had a rudimentary plan for organization he found that resistance activities in the south were obstructed for two reasons. First, Philippe maintained it was difficult to find people willing to cooperate with him in the unoccupied zone because the population was not as concerned with the German threat as in the occupied North. They also viewed Marshal Pétain as a shield against further German occupation. Philippe contends that the Vichy police were anxious to stamp out all “troublemakers” in the region. He found more cooperation with the working class and

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aristocrats than from the middle class.\textsuperscript{101} Second, The Foreign Office hindered early operations by declaring that subversive activities in the unoccupied zone were prohibited.\textsuperscript{102}

This was the first conflict between SOE and the Foreign Office. It demonstrates that SOE’s policies were not strictly military in nature, but reflective of British foreign policy. Hugh Dalton had proposed in early 1940 that an infiltration of British agents into all French industrial zones to arouse an \textit{esprit de résistance} among the French, particularly among the working class population who controlled Germany’s transportation and industrial output in France.\textsuperscript{103} Tapping into the working class would provide SOE with greater opportunities for industrial sabotage. This obviously included areas in the south such as the ports of Marseille and Toulon. The proposal was cut down on the grounds that the Foreign Office was still working to woo the Vichy General Weygand who was the most sympathetic high-ranking official to the Allied cause. His sympathy was not overt, but merely demonstrated by not breaking off communication with London until the end of 1942.\textsuperscript{104} Weygand was the former commander of Allied troops in 1940 who strongly advised capitulation to the Germans. In December 1940 he briefly became Vice-Premier to Pétain as well as holding the positions of Foreign Minister and Délégué Général of North Africa. The British government did not want SOE activities in the unoccupied zone to offend the conservative and Pétainst commander because Whitehall still had feelers out on Vichy France through America’s diplomatic

\textsuperscript{101} HS 6/582, “Report A”, page 2.  
\textsuperscript{102} William Mackenzie, \textit{The Secret History of SOE}, 226.  
\textsuperscript{103} Stafford, \textit{Britain and European Resistance}, 29.  
\textsuperscript{104} Mackenzie, 283-284.
relations. The Foreign Office demanded SOE to steer clear of meddling in Vichy territory to preserve their chance of Vichy military support. The support never came, but SOE upheld the policy of “…no bangs without Foreign Office approval in the Zone Non-Occupée” until the hopes of Vichy support disappeared with total occupation of France in November 1942.

As Philippe observed in the unoccupied zone, conditions on the continent influenced the wavering opinions of support for SOE in London. The initial enthusiasm that members of the government felt in that desperate summer of 1940 began to fade with the realization of the circumstances in France. A report written by MI(R), the organization dedicated to the study of irregular warfare and later integrated into SOE, to the Chiefs of Staff assessed the prospects and attitudes of the European population who Britain hoped would aid them in defeat of Germany. It concluded that currently “none of the countries at present under enemy domination with the possible exception of Poland and Czechoslovakia [are] likely from its own resources to be in a position to initiate risings on any considerable scale.” For operations in France, the findings suggested that Britain should not simply wait for French opinion to turn against the Germans and their collaborators, but should use propaganda to “bring home to the French the fact that their only salvation lies in the ultimate victory of Great Britain, and that Germany is

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105 David Stafford, 39.
106 Mackenzie, 287.
107 Stafford, 43.
responsible for their condition.”

SOE’s long term goals looked promising. The report reinstated the importance of SOE’s work in the eyes of the British; that insurgent risings could only have a successful outcome under the control and support of the British. The Chiefs of Staff issued its first general directive to SOE on 25 November 1940. It laid out what would be the basis for all future SOE operations, the supply and organization of secret armies to aid in the reinvansion of the continent and the disruption of enemy operations through sabotage, which in turn, enhanced resistance morale. The Chiefs of Staff urged a low level of intensity on sabotage in France to decrease the chance of innocent casualties in German reprisals yet enough action to maintain morale and agitate the Germans.

The work of Philippe’s first organization, GAUTHIER, chosen from his field name, exemplified the type of activities the Chiefs of Staff’s broadly envisioned for their first directive. He recruited men to be trained to support a reivansion of the continent, while performing small acts of sabotage. Unfortunately, the impediments from the Foreign Office prohibited large sabotage actions, but in 1941 and 1942 the GAUTHIER circuit would have been unable to mount any significant actions. Most early sabotage successes took place in the occupied zone. Yet GAUTHIER, like his brother Pierre’s circuit AUTOGIRO near Paris, laid down the foundations for resistance activity in their

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108 Stafford, Documentary Appendices, Document 1 “Probable state of readiness and ability of certain countries to rise against the Nazi régime”, Report prepared by MI(R), forming appendix to the Chiefs of Staff Review of Future Strategy, 4 September 1940, COS (40) 683 in CAB 80/17, 213-218.

109 Stafford, Documentary Appendices, Document 2 “Subversive Activities in Relation to Strategy.” SOE’s first general directive from the Chiefs of Staff, 25 November 1940, COS (40)27(0) in CAB 80/56, 219-224.

respected region. Philippe’s experience also provided SOE with a detailed model of
organization and information when he escaped back to England in 1943.

An appendix to Philippe’s mission report is a diagram of the organizational
structure of the GAUTHIER circuit from 1941-1942. Philippe is designated as the
organizer and had contact with seven different geographical sectors labeled by city: Set,
Clermont-Ferrand, Marseilles, Lyon, Agen and Chateauroux. Each sector had a local
leader and a designated activity, either reception committee or sabotage team. The
diagram indicated Philippe had liaisons with Pierre de Vomécourt’s Paris organization
and to Jean Moulin, a representative of Charles de Gaulle’s Free French. Moulin mission
was to investigate and rally support for the Free French within the large resistance
organizations in France. Philippe’s base was in Lyon where Virginia Hall and two
wireless operators, sent to him after his first wireless operator’s arrest, coordinated
communication with London and throughout France. Philippe’s interaction with various
SOE and homegrown resistance organizations exemplifies the complex structure and
wide range of resistance activities that were developing in France in 1941 to 1942.
GAUTHIER circuit worked with three wireless operators throughout its existence, which
was rare for early organizations. Communication between France and London was
limited at this time; there was only one wireless set and operator in all of France in 1941.

This man was Commandant George Begué, known is France as George
Noble. All communication was passed through him and carried throughout France by

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111 HS 6/582, “Gauthier Circuit 1941-2”, Appendix A.
112 HS 6/582, “Gauthier Circuit 1941-2”, Appendix A.
113 Mackenzie, 249, and Foot, 147.
various couriers. Begué worked for five different circuits, including Pierre de Vomécourt’s AUTOGIRO circuit. The efficient BBC messages personnels which provided information on parachute drops and assignments to specific organizations had not yet been created, so Begué had a considerable amount of work. Begué actually suggested the elaborate BBC system to SOE officials and the system developed into an efficient method of communication. Begué was originally stationed in Chateauroux where he lived alone in a small hotel and occasionally changed location to Argenton or Roches. Philippe would often visit Begué in person to relay messages from his brother or to ask for supplies and money from London. Philippe’s mission report states that F section organizer Ben Cowburn, in charge of the successful TINKER circuit, stated that Begué “became the sole property of informant [de Vomécourt] and was jealously guarded by him.” Despite Philippe’s perceived ownership of Begué, the two were extremely successful in arranging drops of men, supplies and arms as well as pick-ups by Lysander aircrafts for SOE agents. The two men also looked out for each other. Begué had lax security precautions in the beginning, carrying his own wireless set to and from towns. This was an extremely dangerous task because operators could reveal secret codes and ciphers to German authorities if caught. Philippe “asked London to give strict orders that operators were not to carry their own sets.” Outside couriers, who had no knowledge of the codes, would carry operators’ sets which eliminated potential security risks. Together,

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115 Foot, 149.
Begué and his colleagues were learning correct protocol of clandestine life in France and developing new systems of communication with London.

Unfortunately Begué was arrested in September 1941 and imprisoned with several others important SOE leaders in Périgueux.\textsuperscript{119} They had the good luck to be transferred to a Vichy concentration camp farther north at Mauzac in 1942. Begué and four other circuit heads managed a famous escape from Mauzac with the help of Virginia Hall and Philippe de Vomécourt.\textsuperscript{120} Begué instructed his fellow prisoners to examine the master key of the prison. He contacted Virginia Hall who bribed a guard to produce a duplicate key and give it to Begué. In the early morning Begué unlocked all their cells and made their way, with their collaborator guard, to a lorry and driver on the outside of the camp.\textsuperscript{121} Hall and Philippe had arranged the bribe and transportation.\textsuperscript{122} Agents’ dedication to one another, sometimes risking their own security and lives to help a fellow agent, demonstrates the importance of individual agents. If a well-trained and proficient agent was arrested, it disrupted the entire circuit.

While Begué was imprisoned, Philippe sent messages to London via his brother Pierre who was in contact with Interallié, a Polish organization based in Paris. Enlarging a circuit’s communication was sometimes highly dangerous because of each circuit’s custom security precautions and organization. Luckily, Pierre and Philippe maintained the same management style for their respective circuits. Philippe and other organizers used couriers throughout the duration of the war. Couriers were usually young women.

\textsuperscript{120} Foot, 183.
\textsuperscript{121} Foot, 183.
\textsuperscript{122} Foot, 183.
who were not as suspect as men and thus, could deliver messages more frequently. Unfortunately, Pierre’s liaison with the Interallié organization would cause future problems. GAUTHIER would not receive another wireless operator, known as Celestin, until the spring of 1942.\textsuperscript{123}

Philippe’s main activities concerned transportation and communication. He organized reception committees to receive agents and supplies dropped by the RAF and assisted people and agents in crossing the demarcation line between the occupied and unoccupied zone. Passing from zone to zone was an elaborate ordeal. Philippe’s mission report describes the process of one particularly clever method. Philippe contacted sympathizers in the towns on either side of the demarcation line to establish safehouses. The “travelers” would make contact at the safehouse with a designated password.\textsuperscript{124} One contact Philippe maintained was a priest at Comery, located directly on the demarcation line. The priest required each traveler to supply two bottles of white wine for their crossing. When the priest had enough wine, he would invite the German Frontier Patrol to a party in his presbytery.\textsuperscript{125} While the party was going on the traveler(s) would wait in the nearby church. When the priest decided the Germans were quite drunk, he sent a boy to lead the traveler(s) across the line. Philippe recounts that the priest considered “that he served both God and his Country, since many people during the long and anxious wait in the church were inclined to say a few prayers to pass the time away.”\textsuperscript{126} Scenarios like

\textsuperscript{124}HS 6/582, “Report A”, page 3.
\textsuperscript{125}HS 6/582, “Report A”, page 3.
\textsuperscript{126}HS 6/582, “Report A”, page 4.
this demonstrate the importance of ingenuity in an agent’s clandestine life and the intricate cooperation between varieties of people.

Philippe also provided money and supplies to resistance networks that produce clandestine papers to circulate to the local population. Philippe worked with three large clandestine press organizations *Combat*, *Le Coq Enchaîné* and *Vengeance*.127 These papers spread propaganda against the Nazi and Vichy regimes. They also provided information from the BBC since Radio Paris, controlled by the Germans, provided little accurate information about Britain’s continued fight against the Nazis, conditions throughout occupied Europe, and General de Gaulle’s growing movement in London. Philippe also developed an information service where he recruited people who worked in telephone and telegram positions so that a steady flow of political information from Vichy and even the Gestapo which could be sent to London.128

Even by the end of 1941 GAUTHIER’s sabotage activities were minimal. Sabotage instructors were sent from London to train GAUTHIER men, but Philippe found them inefficient and impatient. He requested they be sent back, but his request was denied. Ironically, the two instructors were later arrested.129 Philippe also wrote pamphlets on industrial sabotage. *Piercy*, a sector leader in Lyon, organized their distribution among local industries and railway cloakrooms, leaving piles of them in the open for people to read or take, or by sending them to random addresses taken from the

Philippe had made contact with a team of dock workers in Sète, a small town on the Mediterranean coast, who would smash all the fruits and vegetables on railway wagons destined for Germany. GAUTHIER also had a small group who would put grit into the railway lubricant for train engines. Small activities did not accumulate into large scale sabotage of railways and factories until the Foreign Office lifted its ban on sabotage in November 1942. But, small actions provided practical work for resisters eager to take action, while forming a base for future operations.

Other organizations across France were performing larger sabotage operations such as the JOSPEHINE B mission. JOSPHINE B consisted of four Free French parachutists because F section had not yet finished training the appropriate agents. SOE had to ask permission from de Gaulle to use Free French men for most of their early operations. From the beginning of SOE’s existence de Gaulle was hostile to the idea of allowing French nationals to participate in F section missions because he thought all subversive operations in France should be under his control. Moreover, SOE did not share the details of their operations with de Gaulle, but simply asked him for men. The British were weary of conveying secret operation details to the Free French because of the leaked plans to the Vichy government upon the eve of the combined Free French and British naval assault at Dakar in 1940. The assault resulted in naval bombings between the British, Free French and Vichy military positions on the coast. The skirmish severely damaged de Gaulle’s and the Free French’s reputation in the eyes of the British.

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132 Foot, 206-207.
133 Foot, 139.
Despite his reservations, de Gaulle allowed his men to take part in JOSEPHINE B. On the night of 7 June 1941, the men managed to attach three-and-a-half-pound plastic charges with incendiary bombs to eight main transformers at the Pessac power station near Bordeaux.\(^{134}\) The exact placement of these charges destroyed six of the eight transformers, putting them out of commission for a year. Furthermore, the Germans attempted to run all of southwestern France’s electric power from another station which overpowered the system leading to constant fuse breaks which delayed industrial production from regional factories. As an added bonus to the agents, several German patrols were shot for not properly guarding the power station.\(^{135}\) No reprisals were taken out on the nearby communities except for a small fine. The success of JOSEPHINE B bolstered SOE’s reputation in London and confirmed that precision sabotage performed by SOE agents could cause serious damage to the enemy’s industrial production and morale.

Successes such as JOSEPHINE B brought positive attention to SOE in London, but small organizational success in the field more accurately reflected SOE’s status in Whitehall. The years of 1940 and 1941 were riddled with inter-government squabbles and compromises for SOE. In the summer of 1940 Whitehall viewed SOE as an essential organization to the success of British strategy concluding that an “attack from within” could upset the German economy and morale through sabotage and subversion. Dalton propagated the “detonator concept” – the establishment of secret armies to generate a

\(^{134}\) Foot, 144.  
\(^{135}\) Foot, 144.
mass uprising of the population in conjunction with a reinvasion of the continent.\textsuperscript{136}

Dalton and Churchill’s ambitions to “set Europe ablaze” were obstructed with apprehension from Whitehall and the traditional military services. SOE’s tumultuous beginnings can best be described in the words of Sir Colin Gubbins,

\begin{quote}
[T]he creation of a new and secret organization with such an all-embracing charter aroused suspicions and fear in Whitehall. At the best SOE was looked upon as an organization of harmless backroom lunatics which, it was hoped, would not develop into an active nuisance. At the worst, it was regarded as another confusing excrescence, protected from criticism by a veil of secrecy.\textsuperscript{137}
\end{quote}

This secrecy not only referred to the public’s ignorance of SOE’s existence, but SOE’s communications with other services in the British government. Whitehall labeled the nuclei of SOE, MI(R) and Section D, under a special intelligence section and thus SOE’s creation was kept under strict secrecy at the beginning of the war.\textsuperscript{138} SOE was not, however, an intelligence agency, but an operational organization. Furthermore, the traditional military services – Army, Air Force and Navy – were not properly briefed on SOE’s objectives. This obviously stirred up tension because SOE had to rely on them and SIS for personnel, armaments, transportation, and until 1942, communication.\textsuperscript{139} Many times these services did not know why their men and supplies were being taken away. These bureaucratic mishaps resulted in SOE not being taken seriously by the leaders of the regular forces like the Air Force, Admiralty or other high ranking politicians.

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\textsuperscript{136} Stafford, 60.
\textsuperscript{138} Gubbins, 104.
\textsuperscript{139} David Stafford, 38. SOE relied on SIS for its wireless communication from the field. This gave SIS the right to accept or reject any specific information.
\end{flushleft}
SOE developed a cheeky moniker in Whitehall, the “Baker Street Irregulars.”\(^{140}\) SOE adopted this sarcastic nickname with pride and continued with their work. Gubbins described the attitude towards SOE and SOE member’s resolute reaction,

Finally there was the inbred fear that our actions in delicate political situations would create boundless friction, diplomatic embroilments and disastrous crossing of lines with our secret intelligence and political warfare organization. So SOE went rather on its own.\(^{141}\)

Yet SOE could not avoid all disputes. SOE’s unconventional behavior led to full scale opposition from SIS who refused to work with SOE in occupied Europe. In December 1940, a meeting between the two organizations concluded in SIS objecting to SOE’s participation in raiding parties on the European coastline.\(^{142}\) They claimed SOE presence in these heavily occupied areas would interfere in their future operations. SIS clearly did not trust SOE security measures. SOE’s survival is due in a large part to Winston Churchill’s support.

Although not as constantly involved in SOE affairs as he was in SIS matters, Churchill held the final word on SOE’s existence. Churchill had always been enthusiastic and supportive to irregular warfare. He visited Cuba as a young man and witnessed the efforts of guerillas against the Spanish Army and personally experienced the consequences of irregular warfare in the Boer War.\(^{143}\) Churchill’s enthusiasm and experience helped create SOE in 1940, but he was not always available for constant surveillance. To remain knowledgeable of SOE’s affairs he appointed Desmond Morton,

\(^{140}\) Peter Wilkinson and Joan Bright Astley, *Gubbins and SOE* (London: Leo Cooper, 1993), 88.
\(^{141}\) Gubbins, “SOE and Regular and Irregular Warfare”, 85.
\(^{142}\) Stafford, 37.
his personal intelligence officer to act as liaison between him and SOE.\textsuperscript{144} Morton’s strong connections to SIS and intelligence work signified that Churchill held SOE’s special operations to the same importance as the more traditional intelligence branch. Yet, in Churchill’s perspective, SOE’s objectives in comparison to SIS’s capabilities encapsulated two different degrees of importance; one of the heart and one of the mind.\textsuperscript{145} Churchill had a romantic view of the potential of unconventional warfare based off his own experiences and enthusiasm. Yet, Churchill had also spent a lifetime working for traditional military services and fully understood that solid intelligence would provide indispensable information for the military success. This is demonstrated by SIS’s work on ‘Ultra’ which absorbed a significant amount of the Prime Minister’s time. Churchill became the head referee between SIS and SOE disputes. Despite his minimal interaction with SOE and requests from SIS’s head to shut it down, Churchill remained dedicated to SOE’s objectives of auxiliary support for the Allied invasion and its positive contribution to French morale. By 1944, Churchill had reduced SOE-SIS quarrels to an “inevitable feature of our affairs.”\textsuperscript{146}

SOE’s wrap sheet at the end of 1941 was not as impressive as its leaders hoped. By the end of 1941, it was indeed small groups of organizations with only twenty-one agents successfully deployed to France, thirteen locally recruited organizers, including Philippe de Vomécourt, and two wireless sets.\textsuperscript{147} There had been success in the

\textsuperscript{144} Stafford, “Churchill and SOE”, 49.
\textsuperscript{145} Stafford, “Churchill and SOE”, 54.
\textsuperscript{146} Stafford, “Churchill and SOE”, 58.
organization of SOE circuits under the de Vomécourt brothers, Virginia Hall and George Begué, the first wireless operator. Operation JOSPEHINE B proved that SOE could accomplish useful work in France if given the proper resources. The Free French and later Gaullist RF section had more agents trained and in France than F section, but they also had more recruits to choose from, picking up French nationals who had fled France before the Armistice and a large proportion of the evacuated French soldiers. F section had sent several agents into the Chateauroux region of France and made their first successful supply drop near Limoge.\footnote{Wilkinson and Astley, 85.} By the end of the year, Col. Gubbins felt agents sent in groups of three, an organizer, wireless operator, and courier/assistant, would produce better results. SOE needed more results to convince the skeptics in Whitehall that their efforts were worth the resources.

It was not until May 1942 that SOE received its second Chief of Staff Directive. The directive’s explicit detail reflected SOE’s objectives to conform to the projected Allied strategy. The Allies envisioned extensive air raids of north-west Europe and “a large-scale raid to bring about an air battle and/or the capture of a bridgehead in France…during the summer of 1942.”\footnote{Stafford, Britain and European Resistance, Documentary Appendices, Document 6 ‘S.O.E Collaboration in Operations on the Continent’. Chiefs of Staff directive of 12 May 1942, COS(42) 133(0) in CAB 80/62.} They also planned a reinvasion of Western Europe in the spring of 1943 in which SOE was to coordinate action by patriots at all levels.\footnote{Foot, 176.} The Chiefs of Staff clearly laid out the various levels under the heading “Co-operation During the Initial Assault”,
(a) Prevention of the arrival of enemy reinforcements by the interruption of road, rail and air transport.
(b) The interruption of enemy signal communications in and behind the battle area generally.
(c) Prevention of demolitions by the enemy
(d) Attacks on enemy aircraft and air personnel.
(e) Disorganization of enemy movements and rear services by the spreading of rumours.\textsuperscript{151}

The directive was more detailed than in 1941, but still did not specify objectives for each country section.\textsuperscript{152} Regardless, the perpetual task of organizing and equipping partisan units to support the invasion continued. SOE worked under this “invasion directive” until the success of Operation TORCH and delay on the invasion of Northwestern Europe rendered an invasion in 1943 obsolete. Yet, the 1942 directive was in step with the current Allied strategy.

SOE’s May 1942 directive was relayed to all circuits in France. GAUTHIER circuit prepared for an invasion by stockpiling arms they received from England. Philippe instructed his reception committees to create depots in inconspicuous fields or hay stacks until they could be transported to a more secure location, usually hidden in a safehouse.\textsuperscript{153} The men designated as partisans would wait until Philippe received orders from London to organize an attack or uprising. Philippe travelled throughout his region visiting various sector leaders under his cover as an Inspector of Railways. He chose public meeting places such as a hotel or café and limited their meeting to half an hour slots. If one of his members failed to show up, the meeting would take place at the same location and time the following week. Unfortunately, Philippe’s security precautions

\textsuperscript{151} Stafford, Documentary Appendices, Document 6.
\textsuperscript{152} Mackenzie, 408.
\textsuperscript{153} HS 6/582, “Report A”, page 5.
could not account for denunciations. In September and October 1942, GAUTHIER circuit experienced a series of arrests. The arrests stemmed from the work of an F section agent named Christophe who had arrived from London at one of Philippe’s reception fields. Philippe, Pierre and Begué had received him. Several of Philippe’s men were arrested at numerous rendez-vous scheduled by Christophe. Circuit arrests usually had a snowball effect as the Vichy or German police (usually called in depending on the situation) discovered evidence linking agents and resisters together. GAUTHIER’s arrests followed this pattern. In October, the Vichy police arrested Celestin, GAUTHIER’s wireless operator, which in turn led to the arrest of Aaron, the leader of one of the Lyon sabotage teams. The Vichy police told Aaron that if he did not give the names and addresses of Hess, the leader of the Marseilles sector, and Philippe, they would turn the case over to the German Abwehr. Aaron decided it was better that the men be arrested by the Vichy police instead of the Germans, which in hindsight was a good idea, because Philippe was able to escape from a French prison in 1944. Philippe, Hess, and two other sector leaders were arrested later that month.

Despite Philippe’s arrest, his groups were able to continue to develop due to his security measures. Philippe’s wife had buried all his documents in her garden and was able to pass this information on to the next in command. Piercy, the leader of another Lyon sabotage and reception team took charge of the circuit. GAUTHIER would eventually be absorbed into larger circuits in the area. Philippe was interrogated by the

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154 HS 6/582, “Report A”, page 8, Appendix A.
French police and convinced them to register his name as de Crevoisier, an older family name, to avoid recognition.\textsuperscript{157} The French police, who Philippe recalled were eager not to have him turned over to the Germans, labeled him a common criminal.\textsuperscript{158} After more than a year in prison, on 3 January 1944, Philippe and a handful of other prisoners distracted and overpowered their guards during roll call, stole their uniforms and guns, and marched out taking more prisoners with them. Fifty-four men escaped without any casualties.\textsuperscript{159} Philippe traveled north to find identity papers for the other men who escaped with him. After tedious work, he achieved his task and made his way over the Pyrenees to Spain and back to London. Philippe would return to France in 1944 when Resistance activities were at a much higher level of organization and action.

\textit{A string of success and failure – 1943}

In 1943, while Philippe was imprisoned, SOE circuits in France began to take more action. Several events led to amplified action. The Allied invasion of North Africa in November 1942 opened up the unoccupied zone to further resistance activities. The Foreign Office lifted its “ban on bangs” in Vichy territory while citizens also experienced German occupation for the first time. The \textit{Maquis} grew substantially due to the Vichy government’s implementation of the \textit{Service du Travail Obligatoire} (STO), the forced conscription for work in Germany. The STO led many young men to flee to the countryside and join \textit{Maquis} units. There were now a substantial amount of SOE circuits in France by the end of 1942. GAUTHIER circuit had been compromised with the arrest

\textsuperscript{159} HS 6/582, “Report A”, page 10.
of many of its leaders, but similar organizations continued to operate throughout France achieving considerable damage to German industrial production and communication.

The 1942 directive envisioned an invasion of the continent in 1943. The offensive in North Africa restructured this timeline. In March 1943, the Chiefs of Staff’s produced their directive to SOE. The directive established SOE’s place in the Allied strategy: “[y]ou are the authority responsible for co-ordinating sabotage and other subversive activities including the organization of Resistance Groups, and for providing advice and liaison on all matters in connection with Patriot Forces up to the time of their embodiment into the regular forces.” Furthermore, this article designated coordination with the General Staff of the Allied governments and the General Staffs of French authorities. This was the first time an SOE directive officially specified collaboration with the Free French. The directive reiterated SOE’s main objectives. Sabotage on industrial, communication and transportation targets should be “pursued with the upmost vigour…” with special attention against enemy shipping. SOE and Bomber Command also had to maintain close coordination in regards to sabotage while using bombings raids as a cover for operations. Unlike previous directives, the 1943 directive did indicate country section objectives and prioritized the European Theatre, with France and the Low Countries being third on the list after the Italian Islands and the Balkans. The Allies’ focus had shifted from Northwest Europe to the Mediterranean theatre to prepare for an

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invasion of Sicily and the Italian mainland.\textsuperscript{165} For the time being, France was again asked to maintain low-level sabotage activities with particular focus on shipping and transportation of material to the Mediterranean coast. Arming the \textit{Maquis} was also given priority.\textsuperscript{166} SOE circuits followed these orders with success while coordinating their operations with Bomber Command and the Free French.

The relationship between the Gaullist SOE section (RF) and the independent French section (F) grew with the British’s political support of de Gaulle. Yet, de Gaulle’s abrasive personality and assertion of authority constantly agitated the British. De Gaulle not only claimed to be the leader of French military forces, but the embodiment of France after the Armistice in 1940. His tumultuous rise to power relied on support from the British government and French population. The British officially solidified his status as the symbol of French Resistance on 28 June 1940, much before the French population accepted de Gaulle as a respected figure. But it was the French population who first supported his position as symbolic \textit{and} political leader of France while the British were weary of his political leadership capabilities.

By the end of 1942 the attitude towards de Gaulle’s status as sole leader of the French Resistance became fully appreciated by the British. This was largely due to the efforts of Jean Moulin, one of the most successful and respected agents to come out of SOE and the French Resistance. His arrival in London in late 1941 and subsequent decision to work for RF section was a defining success for both General de Gaulle and SOE. Moulin already had a spotless reputation as a patriot. He was a prefect for the

\textsuperscript{165} Stafford, 104.
\textsuperscript{166} Stafford, “Document 7”, 255.
department of the Eure-et-Loire until the Germans dismissed him in late 1940. He made his way to southern France recruiting and organizing patriots on his own. Moulin recognized the symbolic power of de Gaulle and strategic importance of working with the British. Upon arrival he met separately with de Gaulle, Col. Passy and leaders of SOE Colin Gubbins and Maurice Buckmaster; they were all highly impressed with his character and grasp of the importance of internal resistance. Moulin’s assignments were twofold; de Gaulle instated Moulin as the president of a military coordinating committee among the large Resistance organizations in Southern France. De Gaulle also made him delegate-general in France and charged him with the creation of the *Conseil National de la Résistance*, a political coordinating body that reached throughout the occupied and unoccupied zones. His mission was to contact the large Resistance groups to inquire on their support for de Gaulle and the Allied Command. By March 1943, Moulin was able to report that there was a complete allegiance to the Gaullist movement in all of the Resistance organization which he contacted.

A memo from Lord Selbourne, the new minister in charge of SOE, circulated within SOE, the Foreign Office, and the American Embassy in November described an attached declaration from eight large Resistance movements in France sent from the Free French Headquarters in Algiers. The organization, containing some of the largest movements like LIBERATION, COMBAT and FRANC-TIREUR addressed the letter to

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167 Foot, 164.
168 Foot, 206.
169 Foot, 164.
170 Foot, 165.
the governments of Britain and the United States.\textsuperscript{172} They congratulated the Allies on the liberation of North Africa and stated their willingness and impatience to participate in the battle for France. They confirmed their dedication to General de Gaulle, the “uncontested leader of the Resistance, who, now more than ever, has the backing of the entire nation behind him.”\textsuperscript{173} Organizations like the MOUVEMENT OUVRIER FRANCAIS, predicted in an earlier report on SOE’s relations with the Free French to never accept allegiance to the Gaullist movement, modified their stance by November 1942 to accept de Gaulle as the provisional leader of the Free French, now called Fighting France.

Moulin’s work bolstered the standing of the General de Gaulle in London by proving that the French Resistance could be effectively united without large scale political divisions under General de Gaulle. With de Gaulle’s eventual acceptance of the independent F section, cooperation between the RF and F section ran fairly smoothly for the duration of the war.

Even though SOE was gaining respect in France and in Whitehall in early 1943, relationships with some of the armed services did not disappear. The 1943 directive clearly stated that arming and supplying resisters was a top priority for SOE. This led to a dispute between Air Marshall Arthur Harris and SOE minister Lord Selbourne. Selbourne argued that Harris and his bombers could not win the war alone and that “a diversion of resources to SOE…might well produce a decisive turn to the military situation when the time came to invade Europe.”\textsuperscript{174} Yet Britain’s dependence on the RAF, bolstered by

\textsuperscript{172} HS 6/312. Author’s translation from original French.
\textsuperscript{173} HS 6/312.
\textsuperscript{174} Foot, 211.
positive results after its heroic performance during the Battle of Britain, trumped SOE’s needs throughout the war. Selbourne then took his argument to the Defence Committee in August arguing that resistance activities in Western Europe were thriving and without proper supplies these activities might be obstructed.\(^{175}\) He cited hundreds of unfulfilled air resupply requests in April through June 1943, nine-tenths of these missions pertaining to France.\(^{176}\) British Chief of the Air Staff Charles Portal recommended the solution was closer coordination between SOE and the Chiefs of Staff to work out transportation obstacles. SOE’s access to air transport would top out at a squadron shared with SIS and other special operations.\(^{177}\) The Joint Planning Staff recognized that SOE would be more effective against targets the bombers could not reach, but acts of sabotage and arming partisans were not considered as important as industrial and civilian bombings in the Allied strategy in the later years of the war.\(^{178}\)

One particular mission in Norway, perhaps the most significant SOE mission of the war, legitimized SOE operations in the eyes of Whitehall and the military services. In February, SOE destroyed the Norsk Hydro Plant which contained Germany’s stock of heavy water, perhaps preventing them from creating an atomic bomb.\(^{179}\) Bickham Sweet-Escott remarked, “[i]t was the classic proof of our contention that one aircraft which drops an intelligent and well-trained party can do more damage than a whole fleet of

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\(^{175}\) Foot, 211.
\(^{176}\) Foot, 211.
\(^{177}\) Foot, 66, 151.
\(^{178}\) Foot, 150.
\(^{179}\) Wilkinson and Bright Astley, *Gubbins and SOE*, 120.
bombers.”¹⁸⁰ Maurice Buckmaster also supported Sweet-Escott’s position in his book *They Fought Alone*, “…we were more accurate and less destructive than bombing…”¹⁸¹ SOE’s further proved their efficiency in France with a series of sabotage attacks led by some of SOE’s best men and women.

Operation ARMADA, led by RF agents, demonstrated SOE’s ability to pursue the official Allied strategy by sabotaging German shipping and transportation. The ARMADA team destroyed canals in northeastern France to completely stop the transportation of E-boats and miniature submarines coming from the North Sea to the Italian frontier.¹⁸² They also managed to sink several German barges carrying supplies to troops. As a bonus, the sabotage team attacked a cannon factory at Le Creusot. The British Admiralty wrote a letter of congratulations and thanks to the team.¹⁸³ This was the type of precision work in which SOE specialized.

Ben Cowburn’s TINKER circuit centered around Troyes specialized in railway sabotage. His teams of local resisters destroyed twelve rail engines at a locomotive house and six more a few months later.¹⁸⁴ One of the participants recalled that, “[t]he local population were quite delighted with all this business, as nobody had been put in jail for it.”¹⁸⁵ The population was also happy that the British did not turn to aerial bombings which could have resulted in many civilian deaths.

¹⁸¹ Maurice Buckmaster. *They Fought Alone*, 128.
¹⁸² Foot, 222.
¹⁸³ Foot, 223.
¹⁸⁴ Foot, 240.
¹⁸⁵ Foot, 242.
Another example is provided by Harry Rée, an F section agent operating near Dijon. Rée’s individual work SOE’s efficiency and ingenuity in industrial sabotage. Rée wanted to attack the Peugeot factory at Sochaux. The factory had been converted to produce German tank turrets and engine parts for the Luftwaffe. Rée understood that it was on the RAF’s target list, but was concerned about its proximity to a local community as the RAF had attempted a previous attack on the factory, but missed, killing hundreds of civilians. Rée decided to take a different approach. He phoned Monsieur Peugot and told him that the RAF was attempting another attack on his factory and it would be more efficient if Monsieur Peugot allowed him to sabotage it, avoiding total destruction and civilian casualties. Monsieur Peugot asked for confirmation of Rée’s credentials and the BBC promptly provided a *message personnel* to Monsieur Peugot a few nights later. Monsieur Peugot agreed to the plan. Rée instructed several sympathetic workers on how to operate the explosives who then positioned them in the most effective spots. The factory was out of service for the rest of the war.

SOE’s sabotage activities in 1943 made an impression on the German occupiers. SOE obtained a translated copy of a German report on economic activity for November 1943. The report states, “[t]he desperate situation of transport can be contributed to destruction and sabotage attempts of railway lines, locks, canals, hydro-electric installations, and high tension pylons.” The report lists a decrease in automobile,

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186 Foot, 256.
187 Foot, 256.
188 Foot, 256.
armament production and transportation via rail and water due to constant sabotage and air raids.\textsuperscript{190} Raw materials were also delayed transportation, particularly the movement of coal from the north to the south.\textsuperscript{191}

All of this success did not come without the loss of agents and resisters. Like the GAUTHIER circuit in 1942, a series of arrests swept through the entirety of France in 1943. This was in part due to the work of the German Abwehr who managed to penetrate a Dutch circuit and play back SOE wireless messages for over a year, resulting in the capture of dozens of agents. The infiltration filtered into France causing one of the most devastating series of arrests to the large PROSPER network around Paris.\textsuperscript{192}

Denunciations and double agents always loomed within SOE circuits. Pierre de Vomécourt’s AUTOGIRO circuit collapsed due to his contact with Mathilde Carré of the Interallié network. Carré caused severe damage to many circuits in Northern France due to her personal relationship with German intelligence colonel Hugo Bleicher.\textsuperscript{193} Bleicher charmed Carré into living with him and convinced her to provide information on her colleagues. Carré maintained that she was only trying to minimize the damage as Bleicher already had substantial information on the Paris circuits. In fact, Bleicher was bluffing. Pierre de Vomécourt managed to cease the damage and arranged for Carré to be sent to London where she was imprisoned. At the end of the war she was sent back to France and tried for treason.

\textsuperscript{190} HS 6/597, page 1-3.
\textsuperscript{191} HS 6/597, page 3.
\textsuperscript{192} See Chapter 3.
\textsuperscript{193} Mathilde Carré. \textit{I Was the Cat} (Paris: Minuit Editions, 1960).
In 1943, The Gestapo managed to arrest Jean Moulin along with several other prominent resisters at Caluire, a suburb of Lyon. Moulin died under torture without revealing any useful information to German authorities. The series of arrests that began in the summer of 1943 lasted until the start of 1944 causing the collapse of many circuits and the deportation and death of dozens of agents and resisters. In 1944, SOE dedicated itself to reestablishing organization in France in preparation for the Allied invasion of France.

*Justification – 1944*

Philippe de Vomécourt returned to France on 17 April 1944. He arrived at a crucial time in France; the Allies and French resisters were meticulously planning for the long awaited invasion.

Two days later the Joint Intelligence Sub-Committee issued a report on the “Appreciation of French Resistance” and circulated it to SOE in May.\(^1\) The report analyzes the effects of French Resistance up to April 1944 and its potential effectiveness on the D-Day invasions, “[d]ay to day activities are contributing to the weakening of the German war effort. However, the main value of resistance lies not so much in its day-to-day effects, as in the building up of the means to strike at D. Day.”\(^2\) The conclusions from the report continue, “[t]hus, from a military standpoint, resistance will yield a result which can be described as a bonus, as opposed to a certain fixed dividend.”\(^3\) The Joint Intelligence Sub-Committee understood the unpredictable circumstances of partisan

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\(^1\) Reel 8, HS 6/ 601, JIC (44) 159(0), MUS/854/694, 19 April 1944, Page 4
\(^3\) HS 6/601, page 4.
activities but maintained that the “[d]amange to the German effort in resisting our
penetration will be in proportion to the means in the hands of resisters and their ability to
withstand and evade German action to suppress them both direct and through
hostages.”

Therefore, the success of Resistance activities depended on their preparation and
supplies of arms. The report estimated that there were approximately 100,000 men armed
for partisan activities factoring in the deduction of arms and ammunition that were either
lost to German raids or deterioration. They also reported that the number of partisans
was much higher, but would be of no military value without proper arms. Supplying
the *Maquis* was extremely important if they Allies wanted a dispersal and delay of
German troops to the Normandy front. Furthermore, the report notes the potential
psychological effects on the French population and resisters,

> [t]he right propaganda will make the resisters feel they are part of the effort. Resistance will also be stimulated by the knowledge that there is complete agreement on policy and notion between the Allies and the F.C.N.L. [French Committee of National Liberation] and that orders given to resistance groups have the combined authority of General de Gaulle and the Allied High Command.

A month before The Allied High Command and Fighting France reorganized their
administrative structures. General de Gaulle created the *Forces Françaises de l’Intérieur*
(FFI). De Gaulle wanted to mold the *Maquis* into an interior army at just the right
moment to secure national unity and have Fighting France recognized as a strong

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contribution to Allied strategy.\textsuperscript{201} In May de Gaulle appointed General Koenig as commander of the FFI. De Gaulle’s efforts to consolidate all resistance activities under his command, but in coordination with the Allies, were eventually solidified with the creation of the \textit{Etat-Major des Forces Françaises de l’Interieur} (EMFFI). The creation of the EMFFI was not de Gaulle’s handy work however. The EMFFI was created right after D-Day, which de Gaulle only knew about twenty-four hours prior to the invasion. De Gaulle was in a foul mood because of his exclusion, but consented to its creation and the choice of General Koenig to lead the organization. EMFFI commanded all of SOE’s French sections as well as the French \textit{Bureau Central des Reseignements et d’Action} (BCRA) which supplied the same type of operations of SOE’s French section, but under sole French authority.\textsuperscript{202}

EMFFI answered to the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF). SHAEF\textsuperscript{203} began briefing SOE leaders in London on their directives for the eventual Allied invasions as early as August 1943.\textsuperscript{204} This was SOE’s most important stage because its entire existence was essentially based on their potential contribution to the Allied invasions. SHAEF’s objectives were very similar to the 1943 Chiefs of Staff directive. SOE was to emphasize sabotage on railways, locomotives, communication lines, factories, and power supplies in coordination with the Allied Air Forces. Guerilla activity, called into action as the Allies were opening a bridgehead, was meant to delay and divert enemy forces from the initial assault location. German sabotage would

\textsuperscript{201} Foot, \textit{SOE in France}, 318.
\textsuperscript{202} Foot, 339.
\textsuperscript{203} SHAEF previously functioned as COSSAC, Chiefs of Staff Supreme Allied Command.
\textsuperscript{204} Stafford, 153.
undoubtedly affect the Allies’ progression across France, so SHAEF also directed SOE to perform counter-sabotage actions against the retreating Germans.

Philippe de Vomécourt’s new mission in 1944 was to reestablish and “start circuits in the various Départments of the LOIRE region…”Philippe began to organize the many refractaires, or men who had joined the Maquis to avoid conscription in the STO, into small groups. Because of his previous arrest, Philippe took great care in developing two separate identities with corresponding papers while in London. Philippe managed several circuits throughout the Loire, Cher, and Sarthe departments. Each circuit had their own organizer, lieutenant, wireless operators and couriers. The creation of the position of lieutenant was in direct coordination with the restructuring of resistance activities into paramilitary units. The Maquis were organizing their men in military ranks to prepare for their amalgamation with regular French forces. Philippe decentralized his power, giving the designated Maquis leaders responsibility for recruitment, security precautions, and training. SOE had sent in several weapons instructors which traveled around the region teaching the newly recruited men. Philippe kept track of his circuits by letter boxes, which were designated locations, usually a café or shop, where the owner kept messages from the various circuit leaders for Philippe to pick up. Philippe also met with many of his resisters in person at a scheduled rendezvous. Couriers kept Philippe in contact with his wireless operators who provided

information from London. Circuits throughout France were organized in this manner to provide a level of consistency once the Allied invasion occurred.

Philippe’s circuits, together known as VENTROLIQUIST, strictly followed the orders to wait until word from SHAEF to begin military action. Philippe’s report states that he did not let his men “carry out guerilla warfare before the time was ripe. Sabotage was carried out on the railway lines, but no Maquis attacks.”209 Resisters kept all stores of arms and munitions in nearby woods or fields. In Philippe’s previous mission in 1941-1942, he instructed his resisters to keep all supplies in safehouses. By 1944, the Germans were more dedicated to finding partisan arms, often burning civilian houses when arms were found on a farm or neighborhood in reprisal.210 On the eve of D-Day VENTROLIQUIST was ready to attack.

Although Philippe did not report any problems in receiving supplies, many agents recounted severe logistical problems in arming their resisters, receiving appropriate supplies for military actions and proper training. Pearl Witherington, circuit leader of WRESTLER circuit just south of VENTROLIQUIST in the department of Indre complained about the quality of arms sent to her teams. Pearl’s own words best summarize her frustration with supply problems,

I cannot help feeling that the armament sent to my circuit was poor compared with the armament received in other circuits. The heaviest arms we received were the Bren fun and Bazooka, the latter in far too small a quantity. Stens were sent in considerable numbers, but the Sten is hardly a weapon for country fighting. Several accidents happened with the Sten going off on its own. It is difficult to

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train at short notice peasants who have never held a rifle or soon a machine-gun.\textsuperscript{211}

Pearl continued to explain the difficult situation,

The organization of the maquis was exceedingly difficult owing to the armament position. It was quite impossible at the beginning of June to give a definite figure of eventual maquisards, and we found ourselves with far more men [than] we ever expected. To make matters worse, we received absolutely nothing for one non-moon period and two moon periods.\textsuperscript{212}

Pearl also described problems with the quality of her wireless equipment, which did not operate in the rural conditions of her \textit{Maquis}, as well as insufficient funds to pay her men for their services and provide food and clothes.\textsuperscript{213} Despite these problems WRESTLER circuit achieved substantial successes in June 1944.

During the first week of June the BBC sent out individual messages to each large circuit in France. VENTROLIQUIST’s message on 1 June was “\textit{les sanglots longs des violins d’automne}” which instructed the sabotage teams to prepare for actions.\textsuperscript{214} On the evening of 5 June they received another message, “\textit{bercent mon Coeur d’une langeur monotone}” which commanded them to take action.\textsuperscript{215} All circuits received messages on these two dates. Resisters immediately went into action. Unfortunately Philippe’s interrogation report does not provided detailed information about his circuit’s actions on or following the D-Day invasions, but Pearl Witherington’s report on WRESTLER circuit’s activities provides a similar narrative because the two circuits worked together closely in the region. Philippe’s report notes that his \textit{Maquis} partially blocked the roads

\textsuperscript{211} Reel 4, HS 6/568, “Report by F/O. Pearl Cornioley (Witherington)”, page 6.
\textsuperscript{212} HS 6/568, page 6.
\textsuperscript{213} HS 6/568, page 6.
\textsuperscript{214} Foot, 341.
\textsuperscript{215} Foot, 341.
in his area and carried out sabotage on railway lines so that “no train was left running the LOIR et CHER” region.\textsuperscript{216} WRESTLER circuit in cooperation with SHIPWRIGHT circuit “secured no fewer than 800 interruptions of railway lines in the single department of the Indre during the month of June.”\textsuperscript{217} These circuits’ actions delayed an SS armored division on their way to the Normandy front for weeks because the main line from Toulouse into Paris which ran directly through their region was destroyed. VENTROLIQUIST, just north of WRESTLER, also played a large part in delaying the 2\textsuperscript{nd} SS Panzer division from making it up the Loire.\textsuperscript{218} SHAEF estimated that 3,000 railway cuts, in conjunction with aerial bombings occurred between 6-27 June.\textsuperscript{219}

SOE circuits pursued German troops pulling out of southwest France at the end of August. Resistance forces managed to corner approximately 100,000 troops near Limoges. The Germans refused to surrender to the French Maquis units and demanded to surrender to U.S troops. This greatly irritated the French partisans, who consisted of resisters from several SOE circuits including those of Pearl Witherington and Philippe de Vomécourt.\textsuperscript{220} Pearl described the frustration in her mission report under the section, “Effects of the terms of the Hun capitulation.”\textsuperscript{221} Where she describes the meeting between General Macon of the 83\textsuperscript{rd} Infantry Division and General Elster of the Wehrmacht,

\textsuperscript{216} HS 6/582, “Report B”, page 16.  
\textsuperscript{217} Foot, 342.  
\textsuperscript{218} Foot, 350.  
\textsuperscript{219} Stafford, 154-155.  
\textsuperscript{220} Foot, 363.  
\textsuperscript{221} HS 6/568, page 7.
General Macon was completely ignorant of the fact that the capitulation of the Germans was due to the F.F.I’s. The latter were completely ignored at the meeting and the Huns were allowed to proceed to the Loire fully armed. The Americans went so far as to ask the maquis to lend lorries for the transportation of those “gentlemen”, which was promptly refused.222

Pearl remembered that the Germans were given cigarettes, chocolates and oranges from the American Red Cross. Pearl, heavy with resentment, stated the American’s treatment of the FFI and subsequent behavior towards the surrendered Germans was a “heavy blow to F.F.I pride, and totally undeserved when it is considered that no Americans were anywhere near our circuit or further south” at the beginning of June.223

Despite this unfortunate incident, the Maquis in the region continued to support Allied troops. Philippe reported that he met General Patton at Le Mans and guaranteed that that the General’s right flank would be protected by Maquis groups to allow swift passage without providing a protective section.224 Hundreds, perhaps thousands of sabotage acts occurred throughout France on the eve of D-Day and the following months.

Not as many Maquis units were as successful as in the Loire valley. Perhaps the most infamous incident comes the Vercors, a great plateau southwest of Grenoble. Approximately 4,000 partisans, many unarmed and untrained, engaged the Germans for a month. Allied planes supported the beleaguered Maquis with one of the largest daylight airdrops of the war on Bastille Day 1944: 72 aircraft dropped 862 containers.225

The Vercors Maquis ultimately collapsed and dispersed throughout the countryside, when the

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Germans broke through their defenses with armored tanks, aerial bombings, and 14,000 troops surrounding the plateau. The Wehrmacht promptly swept through and decimated many villages on the 300 square mile plateau, killing, burning, and raping all in sight.\textsuperscript{226} Approximately 16\% of the 4,000 \textit{Maquis} troops lost their lives in the fight.\textsuperscript{227}

The Vercors \textit{Maquis} had jumped the gun on orders for a guerilla attack in the south. Resisters in the south were supposed to wait for further orders pending the Allied invasion from the South. The Vercors leaders were led to believe from both American and French agents that Operation DRAGOON would relieve their position after a couple weeks of fighting. DRAGOON, however, did not initiate until 15 August 1944. By this time the Wehrmacht realized that most of France was lost and prepared for withdraw up the Rhone valley. General Blaskowitz of Army Group G in southern France stated in July that “[t]he activity of bands in the rear of the Army Task Force has been allowed gradually to reach the point that control over a greater part of the area can no longer be assumed.”\textsuperscript{228}

The reasoning behind the launch of DRAGOON has been debated by many historians; the debate will not be continued here. DRAGOON did, however, have positive effects on French morale and allowed seven divisions of French troops to participate in the liberation of their country.\textsuperscript{229} SOE circuits played a large part in supporting the Allied advance up the Rhone valley. DRAGOON presented the highest level of coordination between the British, American, French armies and the thousands of resisters on the

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[{226}] Funk, 46, 55.
\item[{227}] Funk, 55.
\item[{228}] Quoted in Funk, 56.
\item[{229}] Foot, 363, Funk, 57.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
ground. The liberation of Lyon exemplifies this coordination. On 24 August the FTP (communists) began an uprising in the Villeurbanne section of the city, by the end of the month the non-communist FFI (coordinating resistance movements including SOE circuits) had encircled the city.\footnote{Funk, 239.} The French 1st Armored Division approached from the west via St.-Etienne.\footnote{Funk, 239.} The FFI decided to wait for the Allied regular forces before they entered the city. General Patch, for symbolic reasons, ordered that the FFI in conjunction with the French regular army, enter the city first, while the Americans pursued the Germany Nineteen Army north of Lyon.\footnote{Funk, 240.}

*Endgame*

The French Resistance, under the coordination of SOE and later the EMFFI, provided a larger bonus than expected by the Allies. First, despite their secondary status to the Allied Air forces, SOE accomplished a significant amount of damage to German industrial output and communications. As Michael Foot prudently states, “[a]nyone can see that bombers in those days could make bigger holes in the ground than agents could, but nobody sensible believes that big holes in the ground are necessarily of military value…”\footnote{Foot, 384.} Precision was SOE’s specialty, and they demonstrated this time and again, particularly in the spring and summer of 1944.\footnote{Foot provides a list of important industrial sabotage actions in Appendix G of *SOE in France*, pg 454-465. Second, Resistance forces tied up and delayed German troops who would have otherwise reinforced the Normandy front. When they did arrive, most units were disorganized and exhausted from constant harassment.

\footnote{Funk, 239.}
There is no precise record of SOE’s or the French Resistance’s contributions to the Allied war effort, but Michael Foot quotes a SHAEF report which concluded that “without the organization, communications, material, training, and leader which SOE supplied, … ‘resistance’ would have been of no military value.” Third, SOE’s contribution to French morale is incalculable. SOE allowed the French to take up arms and fight for the liberation of their country. Agents like Philippe de Vomécourt recognized the shared objectives of England and France. As a French citizen, he decided the best way to serve his country, was through working for SOE. Not all French nationals believed in this method, nor did they all have the opportunity, but in five years SOE had stretched its influence across all of France and managed to unite a substantial amount of resisters. Like the British government in June 1940, British and French citizens grasped at any means to continue the fight against the Nazis.

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235 Foot, 387.
CHAPTER THREE: UNGENTLEMANLY WARFARE: GENDER AND THE SPECIAL OPERATIONS EXECUTIVE

Gender played an extensive role in an agent’s recruitment, training and activity in the field. Analyzing the role of gender, in contrast to age, ethnicity or class, provides a consistent perspective to all agent’s activities, as each agent contended with performing a specific French gendered identity as a cover in contrast to agents’ and resisters’ diverse personal backgrounds. Thus, studying the gendered performances and relationships of SOE agents throughout their training and missions offers a focused examination of the inner workings of SOE operations.

Together SOE men and women prepared to be deployed to France where they would work with resisters of both sexes and of diverse origins. At its peak, the SOE consisted of 10,000 men and 3,200 women.236 F and RF section sent a combined fifty women into France. Thirteen of these women did not return home. SOE trained their agents to manipulate stereotypical gender behavior in order to persuade regular citizens and the enemy to accept their covert identities. In order to obtain the security and mobility to assimilate into enemy territory, agents had to perform the perceived gendered behavior for any given geographic or cultural area.237 Similar to the idea of subversive

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236 Foot, *SOE in France*, 16.
237 Juliette Pattinson borrowed this theory from Bob Connell who invoked the ideas of Antonio Gramsci’s discussion of “hegemony” in class relations. Connell states that “‘hegemonic masculinity’ is, then, a specific configuration of gender practice that is culturally exalted.” Pattison applies the idea hegemonic masculinity or femininity to SOE agents and resisters. *Behind Enemy Lines: Gender, passing, and the Special Operations Executive in the Second World War*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 114.
propaganda, agents and resisters consciously exploited their gender to control people’s perceptions; their gender became a useful weapon in clandestine life.

Scholarly research analyzing the role of gender in the SOE is an emerging field. Historians recognized SOE’s unconventional employment of women and wrote biographical narratives of exceptional women agents to fulfill the public’s fascination with their activities. But, a comprehensive look at the relationships between SOE’s men and women as well as their gendered performances is underdeveloped. Juliette Pattison is the one of the first historians to examine the role of gender in SOE’s recruitment, training, operations, and legacy. Pattinson strives to surpass exceptional biography, put men back into the gender analysis and demonstrate the transformative effects of clandestine warfare on feminine and masculine behavior. Other prominent SOE historians like Michael Foot, David Stafford, and Mark Seaman include women in their narratives, but skim over gendered behavior and relationships to focus on SOE’s organization, missions, and outcomes. Traditional approaches to SOE history are indispensable to uncovering SOE’s contribution to the Allied victory, but discounting agents’ gendered performances and the connection between SOE’s men and women ignores a large aspect of SOE’s history.

The historiography of the French Resistance by contrast is saturated with scholarship on gender in clandestine life. Similar to SOE, it began with biographical narratives of exceptional women, but developed into an analysis of gendered relationships between men and women in clandestine life. Historians like Margaret

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Collins Weitz, Margaret Rossiter, Paula Schwartz, and Dominique Veillon compare the similarities and differences between gender relationships in the French Resistance versus normal gender roles in pre-war and wartime French society. Women’s involvement in sabotage missions or partisan warfare contrasted greatly with Vichy and German ideals of passive, domesticated women. These historians sought to demonstrate women’s actions as clandestine combatants and highlight their contribution to their nation’s liberation. Women’s enfranchisement in France after the Second World War and subsequent women’s movement’s motivated historians to use gender as a legitimate tool of analysis in order to understand the activities of the French Resistance.

*Gender in the context of clandestine life and the Second World War*

In the field, SOE agents and their accomplices lived a double life; one in the public as a neutral citizen and the other as a clandestine resister. Agents accentuated gender stereotypes and changed their appearance according to local French custom. For example, behaving like a French peasant women or a Parisian storekeeper was essential to an agent’s and their circuit’s survival. Little details such as regional and gender smoking habits had to be followed. In rural southwest France George Starr the leader of one of SOE’s largest circuits WHEELRIGHT, debriefed the newly arrived Anne-Marie Walters, his 20-year old courier.239 He instructed her not to smoke in public as so few women smoked in that region. Furthermore, cigarettes were a luxury in wartime France. He also told her how to fix her hair and dress in regional styles. Men and women used hyper-masculine and feminine forms of gender behavior, or consciously accentuated

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gender stereotypes, to deter the enemy and shield them from arrest. Women accentuated their sexuality or innocence to escape suspicion, while men had to use infallible cover stories and perform regionally specific masculine behaviors like social drinking or womanizing. If an agent performed their clandestine identities well enough it would be hard to separate the SOE agent from their “fellow” French citizens.

SOE’s employment of both men and women demonstrates the effects of total war. Total war has a reciprocal relationship with gender. The effects of total war through civilian bombings and occupation allowed both men and women to feel a strong sense of belonging to the events of the Second World War. Yet, total war can only be achieved through the mobilization of citizens, enlisting men and women on the homefront and in paramilitary and combat roles. The Second World War fractured the traditional gender roles in warfare. By 1943 about 7.5 million British women worked for the war effort in full-time, part-time and voluntary positions.\textsuperscript{240} Despite these new paradigms, women have always been active participants in war; particularly when it came to clandestine activities. The female spy or secret agent has its roots in ancient history and continued into the modern world. Clandestine warfare secured women an active role in war. Their recruitment for intelligence or deceptive work was crucial because gender allowed them a high level of mobility. Furthermore, the secret nature of their activities provided a degree of acceptance in society; even though they participated in active roles of warfare they were not in uniform and therefore not breaking any traditional social mores.

\textsuperscript{240} Pattison, 11.
The First World War began to blur the established line defining gender roles in combat specifically. Women frequented the front line as nurses, ambulance drivers, and were sent behind enemy lines as secret agents and spies, as in previous wars. Women were no longer viewed simply as victims of war or the sole representations of peace. They were active participants. During the Second World War belligerent governments used women in these auxiliary roles, but amplified their actions as women became pilots and anti-aircraft gun operators. SOE took it a step farther in the realm of regular and irregular warfare. They trained both men and women in traditional military tactics like weapons handling, Morse code and wireless work and parachute training while preparing both sexes for irregular warfare with training in demolition work, hand-to-hand combat, silent killing, and deception techniques.

Yet gender analysis does not solely focus on women’s experiences. Perceptions of masculinity changed after the First World War. Men had to justify participating in the seemingly senseless killing of the trenches heightening the connection between patriotism and masculinity. Comradery among soldiers serving the same nation fused into an archetype of a heroic citizen soldier sacrificing his life for his country and fellow patriots. The brutality of trench warfare allowed men to project aggression on a positive level. George Mosse explains that “the sense of having the freedom ‘to be a man’ in the instrumentality of war was widely shared.” Yet it did not have to accumulate in extreme brutality as is the case of the new Fascist man of the interwar period.

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242 Mosse, 110.
Participation in war validated one’s masculinity; it could justify effeminate traits or jobs while still being perceived as a true man.  

Fascism amplified the connection between nationalism and masculinity. The Fascist man dedicated his person to his nation as a stern, disciplined, and violent male. They embraced a state of constant violence, the vestige of the brutality of the First World War, and used it to justify the cleansing of their new Fascist nations. Some of SOE’s male agents employed these Fascist ideals in the field in order to pass in the presence of Vichy sympathizers and German officers. After the war, agents who used these tactics had to prove their behavior was a cover to their real activities to avoid arrest or defamation in France. The secret atmosphere of Resistance life and SOE in Britain during the war did not allow many male SOE agents or staff to claim responsibility for their heroic and valuable contributions. In the post-war era the public revered male agents who were officially recognized for their services like their female counterparts, but many of their actions, in comparison to the highly observable efforts of a normal soldier, remained invisible. In the immediate post-war years many male agents were not able to publicly connect their masculinity to service of their nation.

Both men and women had to deal with changing notions of masculine and feminine behavior throughout the period of the two World Wars. The First World War disrupted traditional social mores and redefined men and women’s relationship to warfare. The Second World War further unbalanced conventional gender roles in warfare with the necessity for the entire population’s contributions to the war effort. The actions

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243 Mosse, 110.  
244 Mosse, 160.
of SOE’s men and women did not always correspond to the appropriate gender behavior, nor did they receive full recognition for their efforts in the aftermath of the war. Analyzing gender performances and relationships in an agent’s experience with training, operations in the field and the public’s perceptions of SOE provides a more comprehensive representation of SOE’s actions.

**Recruitment and Training**

Michael Foot, the official historian of SOE in France, states the members of SOE were as “diverse as their origins.” He continues, “SOE was ready to work with any man, woman or institution, Roman Catholic or Masonic… rationalist or chauvinist…stalinist or anarchist, gentile or Jew, that would help it beat the Nazis down.” There was no central recruiting program; SOE personnel approached agents mainly by personal references and filled their staff from existing military services, the Secret Intelligence Service known as MI6, First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (FANY), and Women’s Auxiliary Air Force. Their agents came from more colorful backgrounds, however. Some were from military services, but others were store clerks, businessmen, academics, and even charged criminals, anyone with extensive knowledge of French. The training program would sort out those not up to the task. Sewlyn Jepson, a novelist, was one of SOE’s top recruiters; he personally interviewed prospective agents at the Victoria Hotel in London. Jepson looked for a variety of characters and skills because SOE had to

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245 Foot, xxiii.
246 Foot, 16.
train organizers, saboteurs, couriers, wireless operators, and research and development personnel in the art of clandestine warfare.\textsuperscript{247}

Agents began their training with conventional military tactics like survival skills, map work, physical training, and weapon handling. They then moved on to more specialized activities like hand-to-hand combat, silent killing, disguise and security, and demolition work which cumulated in a 72-hour mock mission throughout the local villages. Further specializations for those adapt at highly specialized work like wireless telegraphy and explosives were also available. Specific operations required experts in manufacturing forged documents, a variety of ingenuous explosives, silent pistols and time pencils. SOE’s own research, development, and production stations developed these items.\textsuperscript{248} SOE’s training schools were often in remote parts of the United Kingdom where their activities could be kept out of the questioning eye of the public. Training was conducted in the language of their proposed destination, thus the most essential skill a candidate could possess was mastery of that language, in this case, French. Cover stories provided explanations for peculiar accents; agents could claim to be raised in Belgium, Switzerland, or French colonies. Passing with an English accent was more difficult.

SOE prepared their agents to use gender to their advantage and not let it hinder their objectives. One of the “masculinities” in which male agents performed was participating in heterosexual relationships and public socializing, particularly at cafés. To prepare male agents to maintain proper security while engaging in these behaviors SOE

\textsuperscript{247} Foot, 42.
officers encouraged them to relax and have a couple drinks at the canteen or local pub. Informers and SOE staff were present to analyze their sense of security in an inebriated state as students were constantly being evaluated. Officers also watched them while they slept to observe if they talked in their sleep and if so, in what language. Sexual relationships were also a main concern. SOE did not put anything past human desire, particularly when agents were required to immerse themselves into society and work with the opposite sex. SOE infiltrated a local prostitute into some of the extended practice missions. “Christine”, this recruited prostitute, seduced male agents at the local bars. She was of particular use with the sleep observations and attended some of the agents’ evaluations afterwards.

SOE staff trained both men and women to deal with German interrogation techniques. When they performed mock interrogations SOE staff wore German uniforms and spoke in the appropriate languages. Yet there was one difference in these mock interrogations for male agents. SOE staff had been informed that the Gestapo used female clerks to demoralize male agents by laughing and giggling during interrogations to undermine their sense of masculinity and break them down. SOE recruited FANYs to assist in this role-playing exercise. SOE wanted to prepared male agents to overcome any masculine pride under interrogation. Pattison notes that the use of female agent provocateurs to test agents’ susceptibility to sexual desire and pride was only preformed

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249 Pattinson, 55.
250 Pattinson, 54-55.
251 Pattinson, 72.
252 Pattinson, 71.
Women were not expected to engage in sexual affairs while in the field and received no training or advice on dealing with these situations. Despite SOE’s disregard for women’s sexual behavior, many women were involved in relationships in the field. Furthermore, there is no account of SOE staff preparing women to deal with gender specific interrogation problems like sexual assault.

Accounts of the equal treatment of men and women during training vary. Women and men were separated at times in the stages of training, but many agents like Anne-Marie Walters and Devereux Rochester note that their training consisted of small groups of both men and women. Rochester fondly remembers playing practical jokes on her officers with male colleagues and socializing in the canteen together. Both women and men experienced intense physical training and were expected to progress in obstacle courses, weapons training and hand-to-hand combat regardless of their sex. As the training course advanced a gendered division of labor became apparent. Agents were subject to specialized schooling and then chosen to proceed in a concentration according to their abilities. Women, although displaying frequent capabilities of leadership, were usually excluded from running their own circuits. SOE employed women extensively for courier activities because they raised less suspicion and could conceal material in feminine accessories like handbags and baby carriages. This was distinctly because of the social environment in France. By early 1942 idle men were suspicious in Occupied and Non-Occupied France. The Vichy government sponsored the Service du Travail

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253 Pattison, 73.
254 Devereaux Rochester, Full Moon to France. Nancy Wake: Codename the White Mouse White Mouse Film Production, 58 minutes, Wombat Film and Video, 1989, videocassette.
255 Devereaux Rochester, 188.
Obligatoire (STO), the forced recruitment of young Frenchmen for German labor. Many young men joined the Maquis to avoid recruitment and arrest. The Maquis began as groups of French partisan units lodged in the countryside, but the term later encompassed all of the French Forces of the Interior (FFI). Thus, women achieved a higher degree of mobility because of their gender and social conditions in France.

Wireless telegraphy (W/T) was also a primarily feminine appointment. The position of a wireless technician was very dangerous job. They were constantly on the move trying to avoid German detection units. They also depended solely on their own intellect, skills, and common sense due to their solitary work. If caught with their set, it was almost impossible to deny the charges. Post-war accounts from wireless operators often downplayed their heroic actions due to the perceived passivity of the position. Solitary actions, performed indoors, not in direct contact with the enemy, were considered less heroic and therefore more feminine than masculine. Additionally, many women were employed in this position because they had previous experience in auxiliary work from the WAAF or FANY-ATS. While the Special Training Schools prepared men for “active” work as organizers, sabotage instructors, and air liaisons, women prepared for more reserved positions like couriers or W/T operators. Although it seemed women stepped forward in operational roles, the gendered division of labor in warfare prevented their actions from being fully appreciated.

Very few women had the chance to train and/or rise to leadership roles. But, the unpredictable nature of SOE work in the field trumped training, skill and defined gender roles. Pearl Witherington’s mission was to be a courier for Maurice Southgate’s
STATIONER circuit, but became the circuit leader when the Gestapo arrested Southgate during the crucial month leading up to D-Day. When she arrived in September 1943 the circuit consisted of twenty men and by the end of the war she personally commanded 3,500 resistance fighters.\(^{256}\) SOE was progressive in their training courses and acceptance of women, but could not override all military traditions and social mores in traditional military culture. When Witherington received a civilian MBE (Member of the Order of the British Empire) instead of the recommended Military Cross since women were not eligible for this award, she returned the MBE stating that she had done nothing civil.\(^{257}\)

SOE’s recruitment and training staff were conscious of the advantages and disadvantages of employing both genders for their secret operations. SOE recruited women for their practical skills behind the scenes and in the field, but also because they knew women had a strategic advantage while in the field. Women were not perceived as combatants and were subject to less suspicion in enemy territory. Yet, some problems with the employment of men and women emerged; as in regular warfare personal relationships develop among trainees throughout months of intense instruction. For regular soldiers this comradery is beneficial to their morale, yet for clandestine agents, personal relationships could be extremely detrimental to their safety and success of their mission. When these personal relationships turned intimate as in the case of Odette Sansom and Peter Churchill damaging effects could easily develop.

*Operations in France: Gender Performances and Relationships*


\(^{257}\) Michael Foot, 48.
Once in France, agents had to adapt to countless situations. Their training provided them with basic knowledge and experience, but only their quick thinking and common sense could overcome a dangerous situation. On 18 October 1942, Hitler issued his “commando order” which dictated that all sabotage parties, in uniform or out of uniform, armed or unarmed, were to be “slaughtered to the last man” by the German troops who located them.\(^{258}\) SOE agents and resisters knew of these dangers. Therefore, concealing your true identity through appearance and behavior was the foundation of clandestine warfare. Both male and female agents conformed to gender stereotypes to pass as a French citizen, while others tried to complete their work without taking part in public life. Regardless, each agent had to decide what type of gendered behavior to perform based on their assignment, cover story, geographical location, and perception of security.

Agents’ cover stories depended on the jobs they were assigned to perform. An organizer of a circuit would be constantly traveling and meeting with numerous people on a daily basis, thus establishing an innocent public persona in the geographical area was essential. Wireless operators who worked in solitary environments could choose a more introverted personality. Agents received cover stories in London but often had to change or adapt them to their particular circumstances. Philippe de Vomécourt obtained a feasible cover story that was extremely advantageous to his clandestine work. Although a French national, he had to obtain a cover story that allowed him to travel frequently because he was a circuit organizer. Through his cousin he obtained “employment” as an

\(^{258}\) Quoted in Michael Foot, *SOE in France*, 169.
Inspector of Railways. De Vomécourt kept his real name and residence due to his solid cover story. The Gestapo even approved his papers which allowed him to travel freely day and night. His job was to inspect heavy goods trains and de Vomécourt could send useful intelligence to England on material transports and mark out sabotage targets. It was also essential for de Vomécourt to acquire papers which provided him an exclusion from work in Germany since he was of eligible age and not previously working for the German war effort in France. After arrest in 1942, imprisonment, and escape from France in early 1944, de Vomécourt made a second trip to France. He had to recreate a new French identity as he was well known to the Gestapo from his previous arrest. He obtained two sets of identity papers; the first designated him as a commercial representative of a company in Limoges. He used an aristocratic French name (containing the preposition “de”) and dressed accordingly. As de Vomécourt already came from an aristocratic background this was an easy performance for him. His second identity was that of a gamekeeper as hunting was a serious profession for a respected man in central France. He also thought the gamekeeper’s uniform would impress the Germans.

While in London de Vomécourt had a professional photo taken of himself, dressed as a gamekeeper, which he kept in his wallet. He visited a “make-up specialist”, maintained a fake mustache and steel-rimmed glasses for his various disguises. On one occasion in France, a boy informed him that his businessman cover was blown in a town he was approaching. He immediately changed into his gamekeeper’s uniform, mustache,

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and glasses and proceeded into the town unnoticed. The evolution of de Vomécourt’s identities demonstrates his adoption of a hyper-masculine performance. De Vomécourt was able to maintain security and continue his work as a circuit organizer by relying on respected masculine professions like an aristocratic businessman and a renowned hunter.

French males were expected to participate in heterosexual relationships and public pleasure seeking. Performing these masculine behaviors could be dangerous. Michael Foot suggests that agents who frequently socialized with each other were more susceptible to security risks. He claims that the downfall of the Paris PROSPER circuit, despite their bravery, was due to the “agents’ own incompetence and insecurity.” He continues that many of the leading figures frequented restaurants together and stayed in the same addresses. Francis Suttill, Andrée Borrel, and Gilbert Norman socialized in Montmartre nightclubs and played poker together in cafés at night. Suttill’s second-in-command, Armel Guerne, recalls that he first met Suttill and Borrel in a nightclub demonstrating the use of their Sten guns to an interested audience! Obviously this type of bravado was stupid and against all SOE training. Foot continues that PROSPER’s “desire for companionship with people who could share with them the secret of their identity and their mission” led to their untimely deaths. PROSPER’s agents abused conforming to typical social and gender behavior of regular Frenchmen and women and

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263 Foot, 275.
264 Foot, 275-276.
265 Pattison, 115.
266 Foot, 179.
267 Foot, 275-276.
paid the price for the excessive socializing. PROSPER circuit collapsed after heavy infiltration by German authorities in 1943-44.

If agents were conscious of the security precautions, they could engage in relationships to better assimilate into French society. Many male agents consciously sought out female companionship to conform to hegemonic masculine behavior.²⁶⁸ Peter Churchill remarked in his autobiography, “[t]here’s no better cover to be had in this country than to be seen in the company of a girl…just the right sort of impression to give.”²⁶⁹ Some male agents chose civilian women who did not know their actual work, while others chose the company of females from clandestine life. Both of these situations could be dangerous; people not involved in clandestine life could become suspicious of frequent absences or changes in behavior. Intimate “pillow talk” had to be carefully monitored by the agent. Agents had to keep calm nerves and a solid cover story. Like a physical weapon, if you were not careful handling the situation it could blow up in your face. Former lovers, suspicious of changing behavior or absences, denounced agents many times.

Although SOE trained men to deal with sexual situations, it does not mean SOE’s women agents were not involved in intimate relationships in the field. The opportunities were certainly available. In her documentary, Nancy Wake describes her relationship with the Maquis men she worked with in the Auvergne. She teasingly states that the terrain was not conducive to love affairs. If she happened to have an affair with one, she

²⁶⁸ Pattinson, 120.
²⁶⁹ Pattinson, 118.
would “have to accommodate the whole damn lot!”270 She laughs and then seriously adds that she was there to do work and not participate in whimsical love affairs. Mary Herbert, a courier for Claude de Baissac, gave birth to his child in 1943.271 She managed to keep this relationship a secret from German authorities when they arrested her. She wisely played the role of a mistreated housewife whose husband cheated on her and kicked her out when she was pregnant.272 Herbert’s situation demonstrates the compromising situations which arose from agents sexual affairs, but also displays the advantage of playing on gender roles like a scorned single mother to escape suspicion and gain sympathy. Heterosexual attractions among agents were sometimes extremely detrimental to an agent’s work. Odette Sansom and Peter Churchill, although instructed to avoid each other for security reasons, were arrested in the same apartment after staying the night together.273 They both survived concentration camps and married in 1947.

Christine Granville, one of SOE’s earliest and most well-trained agents had an ongoing affair with a fellow Polish resister throughout the war. It is reported that her attractiveness and charm were so distracting to many of her male colleagues that one agent tried to commit suicide by jumping into the Danube after she rejected him.274 Perhaps the anxiety of performing extremely stressful tasks and living a clandestine life compelled fellow agents to form intimate relationships. Certainly, these affairs could be

270 Nancy Wake: Codename the White Mouse White Mouse Film Production, 58 minutes, Wombat Film and Video, 1989, videocassette.
271 Pattison, 73.
273 Foot, 225-226.
highly dangerous and explains some of the apprehension felt in Whitehall of employing both sexes in delicate situations that called for complete security and prudence. The less agents knew about their colleagues saved them from betraying one another under torture if caught.

Besides performing hegemonic masculinities like heterosexual relationships and pleasure-seeking men were expected to act heroic in clandestine life reminiscent of the expectations of a normal soldier in combat. The myth of the constant heroic agent transferred to the memorialization of SOE as well. SOE agent Bob Starr was interned with W/T operator Noor Inyat Khan, a casualty of the ill-fated PROSPER network, in German SD headquarters in Paris. They planned an elaborate escape with a fellow French internee Captain Faye. All three managed to make it to the roof of the building, but were caught in a neighboring apartment because an air raid siren alerted the guards to their absence.275 When asked by Hans Josef Kieffer, the SD counter-espionage chief, why he had tried to escape Starr told him that if he did not have enough courage as a woman to try the evasion, life in post-war England would have been impossible for him.276 Starr later gave his word not to attempt another escape while Noor and Captain Faye refused. Starr’s reasoning for his escape and subsequent compliance with the enemy contradict the heroic model the public prescribed to SOE agents in the post-war era. Men were held to a higher heroic standard than women in combat because of the pre-war perceptions of the courageous citizen soldier or sacrificial patriot conceived after the First World War. Thus, when a male fell short of these expectations, society defiled their masculinity and

275 Binney, 178.
276 Binney, 179.
patriotism. Post-war Britain charged SOE agents and resisters like Bob Starr with treason, while the French provisional government purged, jailed or executed hundreds of suspected double agents.

Like their male counterparts female agents used a variety of methods to pass as Frenchwomen. Women enjoyed greater mobility in wartime France because Nazi and Vichy ideologies steadfastly perceived women as incapable of assuming combat or paramilitary roles. Different modes of feminine behavior and fashion were used to counter any suspicion. Women exploited gender stereotypes by accentuating their sexuality to distract the enemy or by downplaying their appearance to assimilate. Their performance depended on the susceptibility and ideology of their audience, be it a German officer or French collaborator. If the prospective audience did not accept her performance, she was likely to be arrested. Hundreds of agents and resisters did not succeed in persuading their audience and were sent to prisons or concentration camps. The risk was high for seemingly simple tasks in clandestine life. Paddy O’Sullivan recalls being stopped by two German Wehrmacht patrols while carrying her wireless set. W/T operators usually had couriers to transport their sets, so the courier, who had no knowledge of the codes, could not betray the information, even under torture. This was the first time Paddy transported her own set. When one of the Germans was about to open her suitcase containing the set, another German exclaimed that she looked like a genuine Fräulein; O’Sullivan did not look like the typical Frenchwomen with her red hair.

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O’Sullivan, thinking quick on her feet, told them her mother was German, but died when she was a baby. She chatted with them long enough in a mixture of German and Flemish to distract their inspection, using just enough flirtation. She even set up a date with one of them for the next day! Minute details like fashion could also blow an agent’s cover.

Women agents had to be conscious of regional dress in order to display their sexuality for positive results. Anne-Marie Walters recalls that she had to get rid of her provincial beret and styled her hair in the complicated manner of the urban women; she also had to go out and buy fashionable earrings.

Lucie Aubrac, a prominent member of the French Resistance, perfected the hyper-feminine performance in the famous episode where she organized her husband’s escape from jail. Raymond Aubrac had been arrested in the infamous round-up at Caluire which included Jean Moulin. Each day Lucie made her way to Gestapo Headquarters in Lyon dressed in her best suit and gloves and applied heavy lipstick. She brought chocolates or black market items to establish a relationship with Gestapo guards and turned on innocent charm. She claimed her husband was only her lover and that she was pregnant with their child (in fact she was pregnant with her second child). She claimed she needed to marry him for the honor of her family. By appearing as a damsel in distress she convinced the sinister “Butcher of Lyon”, Klaus Barbie, to arrange a quick ceremony before her husband’s execution. While her “lover” was being transported from his prison

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279 HS 6/579, page 5.
to the Gestapo offices, Aubrac and her group of armed resisters attacked the truck, killing the drivers, and released her husband and all the prisoners sent with him. Aubrac later gave birth to their child in London in 1944.

In contrast, downplaying one’s attractiveness also produced results. Mireille Garcin, a 16-year old courier for her cousin Jean, wore her old school uniform, put ribbons in her hair and carried old school books to look as innocent as possible. Little did Vichy police know that she concealed light weapons under dress and resistance propaganda in her school books. In rural areas, ordinary grey frocks were commonplace, so wearing expensive shoes or elaborate hairstyles would be noticeable.

SOE was mindful in providing men and women with the appropriate clothes. Agents sent back reports on fashion trends and rationing for SOE’s tailors. Yet errors did occur when information on the availability of new clothes and shoes were lacking. Francis Cammaerts, leader of the JOCKEY circuit, extensively criticizes SOE’s distribution of clothes in his mission report, “far too many town clothes were supplied and not enough for country life. Clothes were given on a definite pattern and often repeated. R/F and F section wore exactly the same kind of shoes, which were of a special colour and marking.” He states that the situation improved as the war progressed, but could have caused serious problems for SOE agents. The meticulous efforts of SOE staff and agents to conform to specific gender and regional characteristics exemplify the stressful nature of their activities in the field. Working with diverse groups of Frenchmen and women further exacerbated the anxiety of clandestine life.

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Inevitably, personality clashes, political ideologies, pride and gender prejudices led to many conflicts. Often times these were sorted out due to the urgency of their tasks, but bitterness lingered among some individuals and groups. Even though Pearl Witherington was designated as leader of a circuit after her organizer’s arrest and excelled in demolition work, the officer who debriefed her in London noted that, “the fact that informant was a woman was at times a handicap…The Clermont-Ferrand group would have preferred a man to instruct them.”

This officer’s observations were grounded in solid evidence. Pearl commanded her Maquis’ operations, but she had to find a complacent French officer to actually give the orders to the men.

France had not experienced the intensity of the women’s rights movement as Britain had in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Frenchwomen were not enfranchised after the First World War as in Britain and the United States because the First World War did not cause a fundamental change of the social mores that dictated woman’s place in the domestic sphere, particularly in rural areas of France.

Pearl’s status as a circuit leader was not lost on the Germans; they circulated her photo with a price on her head throughout her area of operations.

Lise de Baissac explains in her mission report for her second trip to France in spring 1944 that the leader of the PIMENTO circuit Tony Brooks was surprised at her

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284 Binney, 198.
285 Foot, 335.
arrival as she was not the person he expected.287 Her chilly welcome amplified into a serious problem when another member called “Julien” refused to work with her because he doubted her security procedures. He wrote a dubious letter about de Baissac’s character to London. De Baissac states that she was “in a black rage” and managed to transfer to her brother, Claude’s circuit after this episode. De Baissac concludes that the PIMENTO men were “military socialists” who were more concerned with politics than cooperation and that she did not fit into this atmosphere.288 She does not diminish the important work of the circuit, but suggests that their skepticism was due to her sex. She recalls hearing a member tell Brooks, “[s]he does not fit into our group…Maybe if she was 20 years old, but a grown woman with her own ideas and opinions?”289 The stress of gender relations in the field did not solely apply to French nationals. Other women had problems with their male SOE colleagues accepting their presence in active combat. Paddy O’Sullivan recalls that Major Teddy Mayer aka “Barthelemy” was enraged that SOE sent him a girl, and what’s more a girl who could not ride a bike!290 Yet, by the end of the war Mayer dedicated the circuit’s success to O’Sullivan’s efforts.

Gender and SOE’s legacy

SOE members began writing their memoirs and recording oral histories with the press and historians after the British shut down SOE in 1946. Since archival documents were not released to the public until 1993, the members of SOE and those people who

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289 HS 6/567, page 2. Author’s translation from original French.
chose to document their stories were in control of its legacy. A cult of personalities developed, focusing on individual stories instead of a comprehensive study of SOE in the context of Allied strategy. Public fascination with spies of all sorts, even though SOE’s goal was not intelligence collection, fueled an interest in the mysterious activities of these former agents. Women’s activities in SOE were highlighted in particular because of their untraditional actions and the proportion of women agents killed by the Nazis (13 out of 50), The death of such young and beautiful women created animosity in the 1950s with historians like Elizabeth Nicholas and Jean Overton Fuller claiming that SOE was ineffectually ran and deliberately sent agents to their death. In addition, several films based on women agents appeared after the war. Both of these films portray what Juliette Pattinson calls the “Odette legend”: an archetypal presentation of the female agent as a stone-cold figure unshaken by nerves and anxiety in the field. This archetype also portrayed the woman agent as sacrificial, giving up their lives or leaving their children for a greater good. Odette Sansom left her three daughters to participate in SOE work. She came home to them, while Violette Szabo, another popular agent, was murdered at Ravensbrück, leaving a young daughter orphaned at the end of the war. Producers of these films wanted to represent the women of SOE as equal to men in bravery and active action, but skewed the historical representation of both women and men by inferring that such a perfect agent was standard. Participants’ memoirs and oral histories conclude that many suffered from severe anxiety, fear and self-doubt in the field.

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292 Pattinson, 101.
293 Foot, 188.
SOE’s legacy is largely feminine; some of its most famous symbols and agents are females. In 2009, London unveiled a new monument to SOE. A bust of Violette Szabo dominates the top of this monument. In contrast to the memorialization of the First World War which focused on men’s sacrifice as heroic citizen soldiers; the actions of irregular warfare performed by the SOE and the French Resistance provided women a place in national memory, next to men as courageous combatants of the Second World War.

The end of the Second World War put an abrupt end to women’s direct involvement in warfare. Western nations would not see women’s involvement in warfare on the scale of the Second World War until the late twentieth-century. Post-war societies wanted a return to normal social behaviors and gender roles. As the men came home, the women had to leave the factories, anti-aircraft units, and radio stations. For SOE’s agents, male or female, it was hard to return to their post-war life. Those who survived experienced a different war than regular citizens and soldiers. Their war was one of secrecy. SOE men and women had to claim they fought Hitler from a desk in Whitehall, instead of the truth of commanding French partisans or risking one’s life everyday carrying incriminating messages. Unless publicly recognized for their actions, which many agents were, they were not allowed to discuss their activities with anyone. Some were cleared to write their memoirs, excluding some names and actions, but the majority of former SOE staff and agents kept quiet or waited until the strict security precautions lifted in the decades after the war. In France their deeds were less secret because the Resistance embodied France’s fight for liberation and became the justification for their
post-war governments. The French government and local communities publicly recognized many agents as heroes of the French Resistance. In the decades after the Second World War, SOE agents took part in memorial dedications or anniversaries of significant events of the French Resistance.

Agents’ use of gender as an advantageous tool in clandestine life exemplified the irregular nature of SOE operations in France. Resisters used untraditional methods to deceive the enemy and accomplish their missions. The legacy of SOE became heavily gendered with women gaining more notoriety than their male counterparts. The intrigue of female secret agents captured the imagination of the public, leading to spectacle biographies, press, and films. This sensationalism diminished SOE’s memory into a collection of exceptional biographies lacking historical context. A balanced analysis of gender relationships and behavior in SOE restores its original objectives to the forefront of its historical narrative and legacy. SOE was an organization which cooperated with people of diverse nationalities and origins to fight the Germans with any means necessary.
CONCLUSION

Philippe de Vomécourt returned to England in January 1945 to debrief SOE headquarters on his last mission. Like many of SOE’s circuits, the advancement of the Allied forces dismantled VENTROLIQUIST while French military units incorporated Maquis groups into their forces. SOE agents who survived the war began returning to England under the orders of General de Gaulle who had implemented a Gaullist administrative system as the Allies advanced across France.294 The Allies, not wanting to encumber their military progress with political squabbles in France, accepted de Gaulle’s appointments to restore order before the large communist resistance organization could seize power as it had in Yugoslavia and Greece.295 This is largely due to SOE’s agents’ perpetual promotion of democratic ideals throughout the war. In addition, SOE ultimately supported and cooperated with Fighting France and Charles de Gaulle, who became the ultimate symbol of a free and liberated France. De Gaulle had succeeded, against all odds, in persuading the Allies to accept his leadership and vision for post-war France.296

It was clear that SOE would not survive into the post-war world. Whitehall leaders in the Armed services, War Office, Foreign Office and SIS called for its incorporation into their organizations. In 1944, the Chiefs of Staff issued the Bland Report which established the future of SOE. Under the section of “Special Operations” the report conceded that no secret organization is allowed to operate abroad except under

294 Foot, 369-370.
295 Foot, 390 and Stafford, 208.
the control of SIS. Some of SOE’s leading personnel, all training and research facilities, tactical manuals and intelligence were incorporated into SIS. Yet, despite Whitehall’s decision to officially continue employment of special operations, the Bland Report argued that there was no need for such agencies in Europe; the Middle East was where special operations would be most useful. In October 1944, the threat from the Soviet Union was not as acute as it was in 1945. Keith Jeffrey, the official historian of SIS tries to put this assessment into context, “[f]or British decision-makers and perhaps the people also, part of the price of winning the war was the ostentatious rejection of those very military values and strengths which had largely made victory possible.”298 Jeffrey was not writing specifically about SOE, but rather the dismissal of new or unconventional organizations created during the Second World War. The post-war British government, particularly with Winston Churchill out of power, did not see the necessity in maintaining SOE as an independent agency.

France’s collapse and subsequent Armistice provided the context for SOE’s creation. SOE was formed partially out of desperation for action. While Whitehall, through the Chiefs of Staff and later SHAEF, dictated SOE’s objectives, it was the men and women who worked at Baker Street and the agents sent into France who defined what SOE was. SOE’s early performance in France was hindered by bureaucratic squabbles in Whitehall as well as the tedious task of building up support for resistance in France. SOE staff managed to establish a place for themselves within the Allied strategy,

298 Jeffrey, 616.
but it was largely through the accomplishments of their field agents and the cooperation of the population of the country in which it operated that SOE succeeded. Their energy, courage and resourcefulness along with their clumsiness and irresponsibility determined SOE’s reputation in London.

Philippe de Vomécourt was emblematic of the type of agent SOE recruited. Philippe was a French national, so he spoke French, understood the customs and landscape and had established contacts throughout the country. He and his brother, Pierre, were the perfect men for SOE’s early work in France. Philippe’s recruitment in the field, without official SOE training, exemplified the irregular tactics for which SOE was known. Philippe and his colleagues learned through experience and succeeded quite well in organizing the seeds of resistance in France. As the political and military situation in France changed, Philippe had to adapt his actions. Resistance activities became more prominent as French citizens in the unoccupied zone became disillusioned with the Vichy regime. The total occupation of France exposed citizens and agents to new dangers. Despite their best efforts, agents could not combat the unpredictable circumstances in the field. The German Abwher and Gestapo made extensive efforts to search out British agents and resisters and turn them into double agents by threatening their families and lives. Many agents were arrested, deported, and even died because of these denunciations and betrayals.

Philippe was fortunate enough to be arrested by sympathetic French policeman who kept him out German hands and most likely saved him from deportation. His colleague’s efforts to plan his escape resulted in success and Philippe was able to make
his way to England. There, he developed extensive security measures in the form of elaborate cover stories and disguises. He posed as an aristocratic businessman and respected gamekeeper, complete with fake mustache and costume. This hyper-masculine performance corresponded with the ideals of the local community who appreciated such masculine behavior allowing Philippe to assimilate into the community and better perform his tasks.

Women agents also conformed to appropriate gender behavior and appearances in France. Like their male counterparts, they used feminine performances to avoid suspicion. Women accentuated their sexuality, flirting with German and Vichy police, or acted as naïve bystanders to evade compromising situations. There were some discrepancies in the equal treatment of men and women in the field. SOE women such as Virginia Hall or Pearl Witherington who were in leadership positions encountered defiance from the men who they were supposed to lead. The women noted the conflicts to their superiors, but did not let it obstruct their missions.

Philippe returned to a different France in April 1944. Resistance activities, including sabotage and guerilla warfare, were well underway throughout France. Philippe’s immediate tasks were to organize reception committees to receive aerial drops of armaments and supplies and to prepare the local Maquis units to support the reinvasion of France. The French population had largely turned to the side of the Allies after the fall of the Vichy government and recognition of an imminent invasion. In general, the population respected SOE agents and their work. For many resisters SOE’s presence signified that they were not alone in the fight against the Nazis and for liberation.
Without the psychological and physical support of the Allies, via SOE, resistance in France would have been of little military value. The material assistance provided the tangible results that distressed citizens needed to see to inspire hope and determination. This was demonstrated many times, but particularly at the Vercors plateau. The *Maquis* were in a desperate situation, but the Bastille Day supply drop bolstered their confidence and allowed them to continue the fight despite knowing that it was an impossible victory. SOE was not merely an organization dedicated to the defeat of the Nazis, although that was its main objective. The cooperation between men and women in Britain and France demonstrates it was much more than a paramilitary organization. SOE, through its agents, supplied hope and morale to leaders in Whitehall and to average French citizens. Whitehall certainly debated the efficacy of SOE operations throughout the war, but the outcome of a liberated and non-communist France justified SOE existence. SOE was not *the* decisive component to Allied victory, but an important ingredient in the strategy which brought liberation and victory to France.
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