

Review Essay: Evaluating Resistance Operations in Western Europe during World War II

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The Resistance in Western Europe, 1940–1945

Olivier Wieviorka, translated from French by Jane Marie Todd (Columbia University Press, 2019), 488 pages.

Hidden Armies of the Second World War: World War II Resistance Movements

Patrick G. Zander (Praeger, 2017), 262 pages, maps, photos.

Contemporary Special Forces and intelligence communities in the United States and the United Kingdom trace their heritage to the rapid expansion of intelligence and special operations units during World War II. During the war, these units focused on deciphering codes, collecting vital tactical and strategic intelligence, deceiving the Axis powers, and managing resistance operations inside occupied Europe and SE Asia. Due to the sensitive nature of these operations and the continuity of many of the same operations into the Cold War, historians have had considerable difficulty in gaining access to primary source material on strategic and local campaigns in the European, China-Burma-India, and Pacific theaters of operations. Following the collapse of the USSR in 1991, more documents on US and UK support to resistance operations were declassified, and now, 75 years after the war, even more documents have been declassified. Historians have leapt at the opportunity for archival research on some of the greatest secrets of World War II and the early Cold War.

As more archival material became available, historians continued to debate the value of intelligence and special operations in the European theater of operations (ETO) with the recent publication of well-researched histories on the “war in the shadows.” Readers can choose reviews of grand strategy such as Max Hasting’s book, *The Secret War*; through a number of tactical discussions of special operations such as *Rogue Heroes* by Ben Macintyre and *The Ministry of Ungentlemanly Warfare* by Giles Milton, not to mention dozens of tales of intrepidity and sacrifice by the men and women of the Special Operations

Executive (SOE) and the Office of Strategic Service (OSS).

After the swift defeat of Allied armies by the German Wehrmacht in 1940, the United Kingdom was left alone facing a possible German invasion—unlikely though a worst-case possibility—and the far more likely scenario of a long-term German occupation of France, Belgium, Holland, Denmark and Norway. Prime Minister Churchill demanded both his military and secret service create units that would weaken German occupation. The military responded by creating small raiding forces called “assault forces” (and eventually known collectively as the Commandos) to raid German defenses in occupied Europe. British intelligence collection inside Europe remained the primary mission of the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS, or MI6). SIS also managed codebreaking efforts centered at Bletchley Park. The SOE, inside the Ministry of War Production, conducted sabotage and subversion operations inside Europe; and the Political Warfare Executive (PWE) conducted propaganda operations through radio and print media.

Even before the United States entered the war, the Coordinator of Information (COI) William Donovan began planning for a US-based organization that would manage all operations of the secret war: intelligence collection; sabotage and subversion; direct action raids; and propaganda, which Donovan called “morale operations”. Even before the OSS was officially sanctioned in June 1942, Donovan’s men and women had begun training in each of these missions. OSS would provide the first

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US ground force, Detachment 101, to fight in the China-Burma-India Theater. From 1942 until VE day, OSS field operators worked by, with, and through local resistance forces to defeat or weaken Axis forces.

A centerpiece of both SOE and OSS operations in the ETO was support to the European resistance. In what US military doctrine now labels “unconventional warfare” (UW), SOE and OSS operators were infiltrated by parachute or by sea to work with the resistance. These operators met with resistance groups, reported their strengths and weaknesses, provided supplies through clandestine parachute deliveries, and, as needed, provided military advice. As the invasion of Europe approached, these same men and women, augmented by British Special Forces, OSS Operational Groups, and joint allied Jedburgh teams helped synchronize resistance operations with Allied conventional forces. The Allied goal for the resistance from the beginning was to enhance the conventional force operations by creating havoc deep behind enemy lines. At least in the case of the invasion of France, General Eisenhower is said to have considered the French resistance critical to the establishment of the Normandy bridgehead and to its initial expansion into France.

Resistance Points of View

While it is certainly more exciting to read about the combat stories of SOE, OSS, and resistance forces inside occupied Europe, one point often ignored, or at least obscured, by stories of Anglo-American heroism is how the leaders of the resistance movements in each of the countries of occupied Europe felt about their situations and when, where, and how they decided to join forces with the Allies. Resistance forces were always interested in liberation from either the German occupation or the Fascist government in Italy. However, their most important challenge was to balance resistance and survival. As with most histories of intelligence operations, the story of the resistance is most often told by outsiders, agent handlers, or special operators training locals—not by actual agents committing espionage or resistance members living in the shadows.

There are many scholarly articles and books written in European languages about how the people of Europe felt about Nazi and Fascist occupation and what motivated them to accept occupation or resist it. In the last few years, there have been several English language studies

on this precise subject. For any practitioner of UW, these studies are absolutely critical. No matter how operators might think they are doing in supporting resistance operations, the actual metric for success has to include an honest discussion of what members of the resistance feel about the effort.

The two books featured in this review offer very different perspectives on resistance in Europe during World War II. *The Resistance in Western Europe, 1940–1945* by Olivier Wieviorka, translated from French by Jane Marie Todd, offers a strategic view. Wieviorka is a French scholar who in 2016 provided a superior understanding of the complexities of the French resistance in his work *The French Resistance*. In this new book, he provides insight into the decisionmaking of the national leaders of resistance movements throughout Europe.

Wieviorka demonstrates exceptional research skills in this effort. He has found, compiled, and translated documents in multiple European languages as well as key documents in the SOE and Whitehall documents at the British National Archives, documents that tell the story of support to the resistance movements. His perspective is not that of Washington or London, but that of the exiled European governments and the governments and leadership living inside Nazi occupied Europe. It should not be surprising that strategic requirements expressed in the White House, Whitehall, and the Allied high command in

Also discussed in this review:

Stewart W. Bentley Jr., *Orange Blood, Silver Wings: The Untold Story of the Dutch Resistance during Market-Garden* (Author House Publishing, 2007).

M.R.D. Foot, *SOE in France: An Account of the Work of the British Special Operations Executive in France, 1940–1944*, revised (Whitehall History Publishing, 2004).

Robert Gildea, *Fighters in the Shadows. A New History of the French Resistance* (Harvard University Press, 2015).

David Lampe, *Hitler's Savage Canary: A history of the Danish Resistance in World War II* (Skyhorse Publishing, 2014).

David Stafford, *Britain and European Resistance 1940-1945: A Survey of the Special Operations Executive, with Documents*, 2nd paperback ed. (Thistle Publishing, 2013).

Olivier Wieviorka, translated by Jane Marie Todd, *The French Resistance* (Harvard University Press, 2016).

London often were not in synch with the strategic necessities of political and military leaders focused on survival in occupied Europe. Equally obvious is that European governments at the end of the war and for many years later burnished the image of local resistance movements.

As Wieviorka says in his introduction,

In short, we must leave behind four oversimplifications: first the belief that omnipotent allies pulled the strings of internal resistance; second, the notion that these movements were able to develop effectively on their own; third, the idea that the need to destroy Nazism suddenly obliterated arguments based on self-interest; and fourth, the overestimation of the role of national factors in the common struggle. (5)

With these benchmarks stated, Wieviorka takes readers through a detailed discussion of the political aspects of UK and, eventually, US support to resistance movements, the political and historical context for the diverse nature of “resistance” in each of the occupied countries, and the complex relationship between the exiled leaders and the resistance leaders in occupied Europe. In every chapter, Wieviorka offers densely packed discussions of the strategic aspects of resistance from 1940 through the Allied liberation of each of the occupied countries in Western Europe.

While Wieviorka discusses the politics of resistance in each of the occupied countries, he spends the greatest effort in his discussion of the complex nature of French resistance groups and the exiled leader of the Free French, Gen. Charles de Gaulle. The author describes substantial tensions between the Free French exile organization and the resistance groups as early as 1942, especially the organized communist resistance groups operating throughout Nazi-occupied France. As the invasion of France approached, UK and US leaders reluctantly accepted the leadership of de Gaulle as spokesman for the resistance and allowed him greater access to propaganda broadcasts into France. Wieviorka writes that de Gaulle’s focus had always been on what France would look like after liberation rather than on the role of French resistance before D-Day. He demonstrates that other resistance groups were focused on conducting resistance operations that would weaken the Nazi hold on France well before D-Day. But de Gaulle, he writes,

believed that his countrymen . . . had to take an active part. In his mind, however, insurrection was to be as brief as possible and to occur in close correlation with the progress of the allied forces. The communists did not see things the same way. They were counting on a general insurrection, preceded by a vast movement of strikes that, they hoped, would allow them to accelerate the pace of liberation, to celebrate the role of the underground forces, and to welcome in the capacity of victors the Anglo-American liberators. (269)

The story of the French resistance—or as Robert Gildea prefers to call it “the resistance in France” in his book *Fighters in the Shadows*—was managed in the postwar environment by de Gaulle. Once he became the post-war French leader, de Gaulle made a clear effort to emphasize the role of Free French fighters to the detriment of other resistance groups whether they were simply independent companies or members of larger communist resistance groups in France. The political aspect of this tension was sufficiently challenging that the UK government refused to let M.R.D. Foot first publish his work on the French resistance, *SOE in France*, until 1966, at the end of de Gaulle’s term as president of France.

Every page of the book offers lessons for current and future planners of UW missions. This book makes it very clear that support to resistance operations in WWII is probably best understood as a game of three-dimensional chess. Every effort, regardless of the country or region had multiple, interlinked challenges. These included logistics demands by resistance movements versus Allied logistics limitations; conflicts among resistance commanders; conflicts between resistance commanders and special operators in the field; conflicts between special operators in the field and their commanders in the rear; and, finally, conflicts between the strategic postwar objectives of resistance leaders, and near-term campaign objectives of conventional military commanders.

It should be noted that Wieviorka’s book is not an easy read. It is a book for scholars and students of UW. Whether it is because of Wieviorka’s writing or the translation, it is a book that demands concentration. While the book follows the timeline of 1939–45, it often jumps from one country to another, from the field to special operations headquarters, and from those headquarters to the policymakers in London and Washington. There are

times when the density of the detail may require readers to keep notes just to follow the thread of the arguments. Finally, in a book that is this monumental in scope, it should be no surprise that there are some small errors. In an early discussion of UK operations in occupied Europe, Wieviorka conflates the origins of SIS and SOE operations under one story, when both SIS and UK MoD elements were involved in the creation of SOE. Further, Wieviorka assumes that propaganda efforts in the United States were the primary responsibility of the Office of War Information, when OSS Morale Operations Branch was in charge of disruptive/deceptive propaganda efforts similar to the UK PWE. These errors in no way detract from the importance of the work as a whole, however.

In contrast to Wieviorka's book, Zander's work focuses on tactical and operational aspects of the European resistance. The main characters of this work are not the political leaders of governments in exile or even resistance leaders. His work focuses on regional leaders and fighters. Also, he specifically notes that "resistance" in Europe was more than armed combat operations or sabotage. Zander underscores that resistance in occupied Europe often meant peaceful noncooperation, underground media, undermining productivity in war-related industries, espionage, assisting evading airmen and escapees from POW camps. After early chapters setting the stage for the Nazi occupation of Europe, Zander takes the reader through each of the occupied countries. Every chapter describes the level of Nazi occupation and the specifics of resistance operations in specific countries, ending with the defeat of Nazi forces and liberation by Allied forces.

This is not the first book to discuss the "on the ground" efforts of resistance movements. There are numerous works and dozens of memoirs focusing on resistance inside single countries of Nazi-occupied Europe. Wieviorka's and Gildea's books on the French resistance; David Lampe's work on the Danish resistance, and Stewart Bentley's book on the Dutch resistance during Operation Market-Garden are just a small sampling of research conducted in this century. What makes Zander's book especially worthwhile is that in one relatively slim volume, he has compiled excellent summaries of all of

the resistance operations against Axis powers in Europe, setting the scene immediately before the Nazi blitzkrieg and ending with the liberation of each of the countries involved. This provides in a single book an opportunity to understand the complex battlefield SOE and OSS operators faced.

The history of US and UK efforts to support the European resistance to Nazi occupation colored how their intelligence services and their special forces managed early Cold War operations against Soviet occupation of Eastern Europe. When the SIS, SOE, and OSS veterans of World War II addressed the challenge of the Cold War, they knew that it was possible to support resistance movements, even in the most repressive occupations. Early Cold War efforts focused on the same mix of propaganda broadcasts, internal subversion, and small-scale combat operations conducted by forces infiltrated behind the Iron Curtain. With the exception of some of the propaganda operations, these efforts were not successful in forcing a Soviet withdrawal or a change in the structure of the communist governments in Eastern Europe.

Based on detailed research conducted in the 21st century, we now know that the well-meaning efforts in the 1950s by the US and UK governments were based on a less-than-perfect understanding of the complex story of resistance operations in Europe from 1939 to 1945. Resistance to the Nazi occupiers in Europe meant many things to the people under occupation. On rare occasions when resistance groups worked in harmony, they were capable of harassment operations or strategic sabotage operations. These forced the Wehrmacht to commit armed forces in areas it would otherwise have better left to local collaborators. Those shifts in resources benefitted conventional Allied forces that were in direct combat with German and Italian forces. When the resistance operations were most successful, they often resulted in horrific Nazi reprisals. In the end, only the full force of the Allied conventional armies resulted in the liberation of Europe. These are lessons that modern practitioners of unconventional warfare and intelligence operations in denied areas must understand. For this reason alone, the books described in this review are essential reading.



Other Readings

1. Hastings, Max, *The Secret War: Spies, Ciphers, and Guerrillas, 1939-1945*. New York: Harper Perennial Publishers, 2017.
2. Macintyre, Ben, *Rogue Heroes: The History of the SAS, Britain's Secret Special Forces Unit that Sabotaged the Nazis and Changed the Nature of War*. Crown Books 2018.
3. Giles, Milton. *The Ministry of Ungentlemanly Warfare*. John Murray, 2018.
4. Recent works on individual fighters in the resistance include the following:
5. Paul Kix, *The Saboteur: The Aristocrat Who Became France's Most Daring Anti-Nazi Commando* (Collins Publishing, 2017)
6. Julius Rosenberg, *The Art of Resistance. My Four Years in the French Underground* (William Morrow, 2020)
7. Jonathan Ree, *A Schoolmaster's War. Harry Ree, British Agent in the French Resistance* (Yale University Press, 2020)
8. Tania Szabo, *Violette: The Mission of SOE Agent Violette Szabo, GC* (The History Press, 2019)



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