

The Saboteur: The Aristocrat Who Became France's Most Daring Anti-Nazi Commando

Paul Kix (HarperCollins, 2017), 304 pp., notes.

Reviewed by Leslie C.

Paul Kix's *The Saboteur: The Aristocrat Who Became France's Most Daring Anti-Nazi Commando*, is less than it appears on the surface. The author, a deputy editor at *ESPN: The Magazine*, has written on the career of Robert Jean Marie de la Rochefoucauld, who was just 16 years old when Germany defeated France in June 1940. La Rochefoucauld endured the German occupation of his family's estate, sharing their bomb-damaged chateau near Soissons with German officers before leaving for college in Paris. All the while, La Rochefoucauld secretly listened to Charles de Gaulle's BBC broadcasts to "eternal France," determined to join de Gaulle in London.

Denounced in a letter to the police intercepted by a sympathetic mailman, La Rochefoucauld fled Paris for neutral Spain. By then 19, he spent several months in a Spanish internment camp after which he was "recruited" for the Special Operations Executive (SOE) by British Ambassador Samuel Hoare, who had served as an intelligence officer in Petrograd during the First World War. Upon arrival in England, La Rochefoucauld underwent interrogation at the London Reception Center—a process lengthened by his lying about his identity. After he confessed, however, his examiners passed him because he came from "the right sort of family." Interestingly—though Kix does not notice it—this was the same British security service bias that later masked the Cambridge Five for so long.

La Rochefoucauld met de Gaulle in London to ask permission to join SOE, which appealed to him because of its assassination of Reinhard Heydrich and its sabotage of the Norsk Hydro plant. SOE, on Churchill's orders, was held separate from both the Defense Ministry and the established intelligence services, which resulted in petty bureaucratic jealousies. La Rochefoucauld nevertheless joined the R/F Branch, which was SOE's liaison with de Gaulle's Free French. Trained by W.E. Fairbairn and E.A. Sykes, among others, in the dark arts of clandestine warfare, La Rochefoucauld then went to a "finishing school" where he learned such skills as safecracking and resisting

interrogation. Seemingly absent from his preparation, however, was even rudimentary tradecraft.

In July 1943, La Rochefoucauld made his first jump into France, a country characterized by Michel Foucault as under "permanent, exhaustive, omnipresent surveillance." (87) His job: to train saboteurs for the Alliance Network. Unknown to La Rochefoucauld, the German Sicherheitsdienst (SD) and its collaborators in the French Milice had already broken up significant networks such as Scientist and Prosper and had recruited a double agent in the resistance cell Combat, which was part of Alliance. Hundreds of arrests followed, including that of La Rochefoucauld, who was captured in a barn. Accused of being a communist, he endured four months of interrogation and torture before being sentenced to death. He escaped from a truck en route to his execution and was ultimately exfiltrated to England by boat.

In May 1944, La Rochefoucauld parachuted back into France, charged with the sabotage of a munitions plant at Saint Medard en Jalles, near Bordeaux. He was captured almost immediately following a firefight, but he was rescued that same night by resistants from the Leon des Landes cell who attacked the kommandantur where he had been taken. La Rochefoucauld subsequently infiltrated the Saint Medard facility using another worker's altered ID and plastic explosives concealed in loaves of bread. He escaped following the explosions, but was arrested at a roadblock while bicycling away from Bordeaux.

Before his scheduled interrogation by Friedrich Wilhelm Dohse, the SD chief in Bordeaux who had broken up the Scientist ring and run an effective counter-insurgency effort against the resistance in Southwestern France, La Rochefoucauld faked a seizure, killed three guards, and walked out of prison. He escaped Bordeaux disguised as a nun with the assistance of resistance leader Roger Landes—who himself had escaped the Scientist purge—and passed the summer of 1944 in a series of occasional skirmishes and acts of sabotage. Kix offers few details about these activities, other than a description

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of the destruction of a Wehrmacht artillery casemate in the Gironde estuary. La Rochefoucauld's war ended when a mine shattered his knee. The Allies completed driving the Germans from France before he recovered from his injuries.

Why is Kix's work less than it appears? Part of it is that his sources are limited. Heavy reliance on La Rochefoucauld's memoir, an audio recording the old commando did long after the war, and contemporary interviews with family members, leavened by French military records also collated after the war (and which do not always square with his memoir) account for the anecdotal nature of the narrative and reveal its significant gaps. To his credit, Kix acknowledges this, and notes the major holes in the documentary evidence about La Rochefoucauld's service with SOE—no SOE case file for him has survived. However, the reader is not encouraged when Kix writes, "I interpreted what the facts . . . suggested", a "triangulation" of "facts" from multiple potentially problematic sources. (226)

Lost in this choppy retelling of commando audacity is a satisfactory accounting of the context—specifically, the occupied France in which these events occurred. Kix barely mentions the fractured nature of the resistance, nor its domination by communists, the right having been thoroughly discredited by the Vichy collaborationists.

La Rochefoucauld appears to have thrown his lot in with cells loyal to de Gaulle, but Kix does little to account for any of this. He offers an interesting pen portrait of Dohse, but since La Rochefoucauld never encountered Dohse, establishing him as the chief antagonist seems forced.

There is, however, no gainsaying La Rochefoucauld's courage, not to mention his determination to confound his adversaries and his sheer dumb luck in the face of appalling tradecraft in a too often fatal counterintelligence environment. Acts such as knocking on the door of known relatives in Paris while on the run after his first escape and inviting his parents to visit him there, will make any trained intelligence officer cringe. Distracting also are avoidable errors, such as Kix's reference to the 1,600-year old cathedral in Soissons—which would date it to 340 AD, an absurd notion—or his statement that the SD was the Gestapo, when in fact the SD and the Gestapo were separate departments of the Reich Main Security Office (RSHA). Partisans operating behind the lines in the American Civil War would be nonplussed by Kix's assertion that trains, railways, and bridges had been "the targets of saboteurs since T.E. Lawrence's day." (76)

The Saboteur is Kix's first book, and it is a game effort with an interesting—if incomplete—narrative based on imperfect sources. Readers should approach it with an understanding of these limitations.



The Reviewer: Leslie S. is a career CIA Directorate of Operations officer who has an interest in intelligence history.