

SOE In France by M. R. D. Foot. Book review by John A. Cross

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SOE IN FRANCE. *By M. R. D. Foot.* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office. 1966. 550 pp. 45/-.)

INSIDE SOE. *By E. H. Cookridge.* (London: Arthur Barker Ltd. 1966. 640 pp. 50/-.)

These books both deal with the role of the British Special Operations Executive in resistance activities against the German occupation during World War II.

SOE in France is written by a professional historian, on the initiative of the British government, and can be accepted as an official version of the events described. As the title implies, it is concerned only with France. *Inside SOE*, covering Scandinavia and the Low Countries as well as France, is a popularized account of some underground operations in occupied Europe associated in one way or another with SOE. The author has written other books purporting to recount the achievements of the British secret service, and British officials have denied that he had access to official material in preparing these. It is probable that this book also is based largely on press cuttings.

SOE in France contains an interesting and authentic (as opposed to

Inside SOE's rather garbled) description of the origins of SOE, its establishment as a separate agency of the British government under the Minister of Economic Warfare, and its relations with the Prime Minister¹ and the military chiefs of staff. Both books include commentary on the rollicking do-it-yourself atmosphere which to a certain degree characterized SOE's early development. *Inside SOE*, although generally given to tabloidese, conveys perhaps more colorfully than the official version an appreciation of the ingenuity, persistence, and determination with which the motley assortment of lawyers, bankers, merchants, advertising men, and professional soldiers who made up the SOE establishment set about, while England itself was threatened with invasion from across the Channel, to develop armed resistance to the Germans amidst the wreckage of conquered Europe. Both books make clear that the German onslaught in the West had not only destroyed all opposing military forces but effectively neutralized most British intelligence networks and clandestine resources. As far as Western Europe was concerned, SOE started from scratch.

Cookridge devotes approximately one-third of his 600 pages to events outside of France. He describes in considerable detail the North Pole episode, in which the Germans monitored and controlled substantially the entire British and Dutch underground organization in Holland for some two years. He offers no hitherto unpublished material, however, as far as this reviewer knows, with perhaps the exception of some rather vague allusions to possible Soviet involvement in this fantastic affair. His book also summarizes, in Sunday supplement fashion, the exploits of a number of Norwegian and Danish agents, saboteurs, and underground organizers. Here again, these sometimes heroic achievements, deserving as they are of recognition, are fairly well known. Nor is Cookridge's compendium by any means complete.

To the extent that the books are concerned with events in France, the official version is incomparably superior. Although both suffer from the difficulty of presenting with any coherence a running account of the labyrinthine activities of the multifarious and overlapping groups and subgroups which were simultaneously organizing and operating throughout France from 1940 until the liberation, *Inside SOE* is particularly repetitious and confusing. Moreover, it deals with only one aspect of SOE's French operations, those of the purely British-controlled "F" Section headed by Colonel Maurice Buckmaster, whose enigmatic personality, part schoolmaster, part salesman, has been the subject of much controversial and often acrimonious literature. Except for a rather

superficial account of Free French relations with the Anglo-Saxons and the intrigues of De Gaulle, Inside SOE explicitly abstains from any attempt to record the history of the "RF" Section, which was established by SOE to supply, support, and provide communications with Free French networks. It therefore omits any serious reference to some of the most exciting episodes of the French Resistance—the adventures and sufferings of Squadron Leader YeoThomas; the efforts of Jean Moulin, a towering and attractive personality, to organize the Gaullist Council of Resistance until his capture and death by torture at the hands of the Germans; or the exploits of the Armada group, cited as the most effective sabotage team ever to have operated in France.

The official book covers both F and RF Section activities and also those of other sections having compartmented responsibilities in France, including escape routes and relations with a Polish underground. Both books, while paying tribute to many instances of high courage and some of professional skill, describe at length the many appalling security lapses and operational fiascos which took place, differing only in magnitude from the North Pole case in Holland. Illustrative of these was the unhappy experience of an F Section W/T agent who had been apprehended by the Germans. Forced to continue transmitting under German control, he took care to omit his prescribed security check from his first outgoing message in order to alert his people that something was wrong. Back from SOE headquarters, however, came the question, "Why have you forgotten security check? Hereafter please include." The agent apparently wondered why he had too and thereafter, understandably, complied, much to the satisfaction of the Abwehr.

An American reading these books will inevitably ask, where were the Yanks? Neither book makes this clear, although the official version includes some acknowledgements of American participation in SOE operations which are reasonably accurate if not complete. Statements in both books reveal a degree of bias which gives pause for thought. The official version, for example, at one point suggests the question whether "the best brains in the American Armed Forces were available for Europe at all." And Cookridge refers to the moment when Field Marshall Montgomery accepted the unconditional surrender of Germany, ignoring at this point the existence of an American named Eisenhower. Elsewhere, however, he refers to Eisenhower's letter commending SOE as responsible for the support rendered to military operations by the French Resistance. In fact, Eisenhower's letter is addressed not to SOE but to a joint British-American organization known as Special Force

Headquarters. The communication itself reads in part as follows:

Before the combined staff of Special Force Headquarters disperses I wish to express my appreciation of its high achievements . . .

The combination of certain sections of your two organizations, first established as Special Force Headquarters under the joint command of Brigadier Mockler-Ferryman and Colonel Haskell (USA), was the means by which these resistance forces were so ably organized, supplied and directed.

Both books note the merger of appropriate elements of SOE and OSS for the purpose of supporting French resistance. Neither book appears to recognize, however, that this involved some considerable self-abnegation on the part of the Americans. If the British assumed and deserved credit for initial development and leadership in what was to become a joint enterprise, the Americans also deserve credit for loyally supporting and abiding by this arrangement, in spite of considerable incitement to occasional mutiny and their widespread dissatisfaction with what they came generally to regard as a British yoke. They had to remind themselves that a joint effort by an integrated headquarters was necessary to insure against the chaos and catastrophe which would have resulted from underground activity in Europe conducted independently by OSS and SOE.

If the Americans were often inadequate in senior positions of responsibility in the joint headquarters, the British, as often, were unresponsive, devious, or parochial. Brigadier Mockler-Ferryman, a professional soldier and head of the London Group of SOE, a man of perfect integrity and unusual charm and competence, treated his American colleagues and subordinates with unflinching courtesy and total cooperation. So did his immediate staff. At the country section level, however, the attitude towards Americans was impatient and not friendly, despite the demonstrable contribution of individual Americans such, for example, as Major William Grell, USMCR, who rendered invaluable service in connection with the briefing and dispatch of large numbers of agents. Moreover, it was clearly British policy to restrict American access to and influence over French and Scandinavian resistance groups to as little as possible.

SOE in France, the official book, characterizes the American contribution to the joint effort as follows:

In practice . . . fusion meant that American officers were introduced into many sections of SOE; their intelligence, enthusiasm, and originality made up for their lack of equipment, training, or experience. They kept what remained an essentially British organization lively; but on strictly French subjects—as opposed to French North African ones—their influence on policy was small till the summer of 1944. Dual control and equal responsibility were the principles; but in practice the British kept in the lead. The United States air forces made a decisive contribution in 1944 to SOE's effort in France, but none before . . . [pages 31-32].

This is not unfair; in certain respects it is in fact generous. As the reader of either book, however, is likely to get an inadequate impression of the scale of the American contribution to the support of resistance in Europe, it seems worth reciting a few facts. The first American agent, Lt. Floege, was parachuted into France on 13 June 1943. Lt. Victor Soscice, on a sabotage operation (later executed by the Germans) and Lt. Dennis Johnson, a W/T operator, were dispatched in August and October of 1943 respectively. American personnel were recruited throughout 1943 and assigned to staff positions throughout all echelons of the joint headquarters as well as to field operations. A group of American B-24 aircraft were assigned to the effort; large stocks of American weapons and equipment were procured (over strong British opposition) and a station to pack equipment for air delivery was established.

During 1944, 524 Americans served in France behind the enemy lines. Of these, 85 were agents and organizers and the balance Jedburghs and members of Operational Groups.² For what significance it may have, 26 DSC's, 38 Silver Stars, and 2 Navy Crosses were awarded to American citizens serving in an operational capacity with OSS in the European theater. American aircraft assigned to OSS operations flew 2,717 sorties between 1 January and 1 October 1944. During the winter and spring of 1943-44 the burden of flights into the heavily defended areas of Northern France and the Pas de Calais was carried primarily by American Liberators. In addition, U.S. air force personnel at the disposal of OSS carried out a substantial number of landing operations behind

enemy lines. In the first nine months of 1944 some 5,000 tons of American-packed equipment were dispatched to the field. During this period American packing stations actually packed twice as many containers for air delivery as their British counterparts. Flights during the summer to supply the resistance in Norway were thought too dangerous because of the long daylight hours until Col. Bernt Balchen of the American Air Forces undertook them on a regular basis in 1944 with a detachment of six Liberators. Further elaboration of the extent of the American contribution is not necessary. The point is that the effort was in fact joint. Parenthetically it should be noted that the record and both books are in total agreement concerning one American contribution, and that was the intrepid personality and conduct and outstanding performance of Virginia Hall.

As to whether the over-all effort was effective, both books conclude that it was. Both examine in considerable detail the specific contribution of French resistance to the German military defeat. Both assess the damage to the German war economy attributable to such sabotage operations as the destruction of the Peugeot tank turret and Dunlop tire factories. Both make it clear that General Eisenhower's appreciation, referred to above, of the military value of resistance activities was based on tangible achievements. These included: almost complete paralysis of the French railroad system for appreciable periods (950 out of 1050 planned railroad cuts were accomplished on 5 June 1944); imposition of delays of as much as three weeks on the movement of important German units to the Normandy beachhead; widespread diversion and demoralization of German forces; and the transmission to Allied military authorities of very significant amounts of tactical intelligence.

SOE in France suggests, rather tentatively, that resistance activities, synchronized as they were with military plans and operations, shortened the war by six months. It also credits SOE with a perhaps even more interesting, if unprovable, achievement—that of providing the French the trained and experienced cadres necessary to resist Communist encroachments and a possible takeover in the postwar years. Finally, the book claims what to some will appear a very mixed blessing bequeathed to posterity by SOE. "It was also thanks—inter alia—to much past help from SOE," says the author, "that this modern Cincinnatus [Charles de Gaulle] was waiting in the wings at Colombey-les-Deux-Eglises to take over in 1958."

SOE in France makes interesting, if occasionally confusing and

provocative, reading, and it will be a very useful reference for those concerned with World War II in Europe or with the problems and potentialities of organizing armed resistance in areas occupied by hostile forces. Inside SOE provides little of interest or use to anybody.

John A. Bross

SECRET AIR MISSIONS. *By Monro MacCloskey.* (New York: Richard Posler. 1966. 159 pp. \$3.78.)

This is a story of secret missions flown by an American air support squadron into occupied France and Italy during World War II, written by the squadron commander. It may have some appeal for former or prospective overflight pilots, and parts are of interest to the general reader; but it has little or nothing to offer today's intelligence officer. The supply drops it describes, into areas under the control of the resistance groups being supplied, were only half secret and quite different in concept from those in which not only the supply mission but the very existence of the operation supplied must not be suspected. The book's "secret" missions featured, for example:

Continued use of the same drop zones; Timed half-hour lighting of drop zones; Near-miss drops which came out all right but would have blown clandestine operations;

Precedence of support problems over operational security; Failure to apply the need-to-know principle among support personnel.

Bibliography

1 One of this reviewer's personal recollections of World War II in Europe is his arrival at Baker Street one morning to find the entire SOE headquarters in a paroxysm of frenzied activity. Inquiring the cause for all this busy anxiety, he was told of a communication concerning SOE just received by Lord Selwyn, then Minister of Economic Warfare, from the Prime Minister, which read in its entirety: "Pray let me know what you have done; what you are doing; and what you propose to do. W. C."

2 The Jedburghs were mixed U.S.-British-French teams of two officers and one radio operator each, sent in to help the Maquis with planning, supply, and communication. The OGS, all American, were organized in 15-man sections for paramilitary operations.

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