

**The Shadow War:  
European Resistance 1939-  
1945 by Henri Michel. Book  
review by Walter  
Pforzheimer**

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**THE SHADOW WAR: EUROPEAN RESISTANCE** 1939-1945. By *Henri Michel*. (Harper and Row, New York, 416 pp.)

This is the first publication in English of any major work by Professor Henri Michel.\* He is an indefatigable worker, with a lengthy list of titles to his credit, by himself or as editor or co-author, to say nothing of numerous periodical articles. Although he was not a member of the French Resistance himself, the bulk of his writing has been in the field of the World War II French Resistance with occasional forays into resistance movements in other European countries. This reviewer has known: Michel more than 15 years, a good portion of the more than 20 years that Michel has served as the Secretary General of the official French Comité d'Histoire de la Deuxième Guerre Mondiale. In this capacity: Michel has supervised a small staff, edited its monthly Bulletin, assembled at the Comité probably the major French library on the Resistance, and, more important, has brought together "les témoignages" — the eyewitness accounts of the activities of resisters throughout France, garnered in large measure while memories were still fresh enough to be checked and crosschecked.

In addition to all this, Professor Michel presented the general report to the meeting of the First International Conference on the History of the Resistance Movements held in Belgium in 1958, as well as a similar general report to the meeting of the Second International Conference in Italy in 1961. From 1958 onward, he has served as a member of the International Committee that has steered the activities of these Conferences. Withal, he has never been a popular figure among his colleagues, although he has tended to overwhelm some of them by the sheer amount of his work; nor is he one of America's greatest admirers.

The literature of Resistance in Europe in World War II started almost as soon as the war came to an end. It was largely comprised of volumes of derring-do; these still continue. Then came some good solid historical works, country by country, official and unofficial. Now we are also getting the literature of "thinkers," and in this category Michel does not shine, for he is basically a chronicler gone wrong.

The historians of the Soviet Union and the Bloc have always alleged that the West did not understand the true meaning of the Resistance but utilized it primarily for military and intelligence purposes. The Bloc points out that the purely military aspects of the Resistance were comparatively unimportant, because the occupied countries knew that they would be liberated by the might of the advancing Red Armies with, perhaps, some little additional help from the other Allies. The true activity of the Resistance, the Bloc continued, was a mass uprising of the peoples of the occupied countries, generally led by the Communist parties, with the purpose of liberating the occupied countries not only from the Germans but also from their prewar oppressive rulers, whom the West hoped to restore to power for the political and economic aggrandizement of Great Britain and the United States.

To the Western historian, it is obvious that the Resistance arose in Europe as a response to the German destruction of their homelands and institutions. The Resistance which developed represented various philosophies which ranged from the re-establishment of national traditions, and political and religious beliefs, to a search for a new Utopia. Michel stresses the Utopian to the disregard of the former view. His thinking, as represented in *The Shadow War*, has moved quite some distance since 1958, so that today he virtually embraces the Soviet position, although, to be fair to him, he is no Communist and there are elements of criticism of the Soviet view in his book. In private conversations with this reviewer, he has talked of Soviet and Bloc participants at the International Conferences as largely propagandists.

The subtitle of the American edition of Michel's book, "European Resistance," does him no favors. Both the English and the original French editions have the proper subtitle, "Resistance in Europe." This is a major distinction because there was no such thing as a "European Resistance." Michel himself finally makes this point, although it takes him to page 355 to say it. Almost without exception, there was no contact between resistance movements from one country of Europe to another. The major exception was in the field of evasion and escape, where "rat lines" and their contacts did cross some borders. To be sure, there were many similarities in resistance work from country to country, particularly those that were served by the British SOE and later the American OSS, but these were similarities in techniques such as air supply and communications, they did not make a cohesive European Resistance, nor was there any attempt made to produce such a thing. Michel tries in some measure to produce a European Resistance on the

basis of the common thoughts for post-war life that the individual resistance movements allegedly had. To some extent this produces a rather misleading text.

Not to his credit, Michel also tries to create a divisiveness between classes of participants, a divisiveness which appears much overdrawn in *The Shadow War*. Perhaps this highlights another one of Michel's weaknesses — a comparative lack of knowledge, for one who has studied the subject so long, of the resistance movements in European countries other than France.

It is not necessary in this review to go into the often retold origins of SOE and OSS. Suffice it to say that London became the capital of the exterior resistance, the major purpose of which, at least in the beginning, was military: the use of the internal resistance for intelligence and sabotage.

In his 1958 report to the First International Conference, Michel writes that "The systematic ignorance of the Americans regarding Resistance would be incomprehensible if it was not caused by their conception of war, which leaves little place for the human factor ..." He noted there that the OSS had "vast means and little experience." To be sure, OSS had to gather experience, but in *The Shadow War* Michel's anti-Americanism shines through when he states of the Americans and the OSS: "Not even belatedly did they co-operate much with the Resistance. The war the Resistance was waging was the very antithesis of the American concept of industrialized warfare." Yet wasn't it this industry which was able to bring much needed supplies and equipment to the Resistance? Michel continues: "U.S. agents or parachute teams lived divorced from the men of the Resistance whom they had come to help and had no understanding of the ideas, needs or aims of the men alongside whom they were fighting." I believe there are many veterans of OSS who will argue with this statement. It is only with reluctance that Michel admits in *The Shadow War* that by 1944 the United States had become the arsenal of the Resistance, but, he adds, in Central and Eastern Europe "they abandoned the Resistance to its fate." Michel has an ability to overlook many facts of history. There were both SOE and OSS liaison missions with the Yugoslavs, and once a proper base could be set up in Italy, there were American supplies for the Yugoslav Partisans. The Western Allies would have liked to have come to the support of the Polish Resistance when it rose in Warsaw. It was not a lack of will; it was Stalin's refusal to allow planes attempting to drop

supplies to the Warsaw Resistance to land in Russia to refuel that caused the problem. This meant that those planes had to fly the long haul from Italy to Warsaw and return non-stop, greatly reducing their ability to get through with meaningful loads. Michel has perhaps forgotten that it was Stalin himself who rejected General Eisenhower's offer to move from the American stopping point at Pilsen (the agreed on demarcation line) and come to the aid of the Resistance rising in Prague.

Michel does not seem to have any feeling or any great liking for the role of intelligence and its practitioners. That portion of his book which he devotes to what he calls "Movements and Circuits" is a bare 16 pages. In discussing the early exfiltration of personnel from occupied Europe, Michel writes that General de Gaulle "left by air"; that the French and British "helped young Poles to escape"; but when he writes of the escape of the great pre-war and wartime Chief of the Czech Intelligence Service, General Franticek Moravec, Michel writes that the latter "fled with his entire staff." This hardly does a service either to Moravec's memory or to the carefully handled operation by which the British brought Moravec and 10 members of his staff from Prague to London on the day that the Germans marched into Prague. In discussing what the British and Michel call "circuits" and we call "intelligence nets," Michel characterizes them as a "novel organization." The fact of the matter is that they are as old as history. He then notes that "The circuit was a military organization, under strict discipline, its activities severely circumscribed, forbidden to trespass outside the field allotted to it." To characterize these nets as purely a "military organization" is a little wide of the mark. Many of them were composed only of civilians. That the danger of their work might lead them to impose upon themselves a certain amount of internal discipline is a possibility. But those who have read Michael Foot's great volume, *SOE in France*, will remember many incidents where discipline broke down. In another *non sequitur* Michel writes of intelligence activities that "In fact, the entire life and attitudes of an occupied country had to be faithfully recorded — photographic aircraft were used for the same task, but they could only capture the outlines." There is no profundity in his conclusion that it is "extremely difficult to be dogmatic about the part played by the intelligence circuits in the success or failure of military operations." Michel's thoughts are even harder to explain in the one page he devotes to Soviet "circuits." It is Michel's view that the Soviet nets "seem to have differed" from the intelligence nets of the Western Allies on two main counts: "in the first place they followed the traditional pattern of small groups of highly-trained spies and, secondly, the aim of the circuits was conventional

military espionage." It is very difficult to see how this description of the Soviet intelligence nets would not be equally applicable to those of the West.

There are a few points which one should make in conclusion about *The Shadow War*. One of them is Michel's habit of thinking in terms of the Western Allies and the Soviet Union. However threadbare the alliance may have been at times, it was an alliance of the three powers, and it has to be thought of in those terms. In the many examples which Michel gives to illustrate his points, the vast majority are taken from the French Resistance, as if there were no other. In its thesis on the resistance in Europe it comes close to being revisionist. It is highly selective both in its thinking and its examples. Perhaps Michel points this out when he notes: "I make no attempt to give a *complete* account of the action of the Resistance ... I have confined myself to recounting and comparing certain actions which seemed of significance to my subject." Perhaps Michel would not have fallen off the deep end in his attempt to explain his theories of the politics of the Resistance from the standpoint of the resister, if he had followed the thesis of some other historians that in the deepest sense the Resistance was the moral conscience of the war preserving the beliefs in a free Europe. Lastly, this reviewer would be critical of Michel's bibliography, which is both thin and not very representative.

## Footnotes

\* *La Guerre de L'Ombre* (Grasset, Paris, 1970).

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