Intelligence and Covert Action

British experience in giving responsibility for psychological and paramilitary operations to an independent organization.

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After the failure at Cuba's Bay of Pigs a number of newspaper articles appeared in the United Kingdom suggesting that the Americans take lessons from the British, styled expert in the organization and conduct of paramilitary operations and other kinds of covert action. Some of these were reprinted or otherwise reflected, particularly on the subject of organization, in the American press, for example:

> When the Office of Strategic Services was organized in World War II, the British argued long and hard . . . that the two functions [intelligence and covert action] should be separated.... As far as the organization of intelligence is concerned, the British practice what they preach. Military Intelligence 6 has always been divorced from the Special Operations Executive, which acts on M.I. 6's information.[1]

> The British, who have had long experience in these matters, separate MI-6, their intelligence agency, from their special

> operations executive--and with good reason. An organization that is going to risk the lives of its operatives will give intelligence estimates a severely pragmatic appraisal, it is remarked. On the other hand, when the functions are combined, the confidence which the responsible officials feel in the intelligence impels them to rush into action.[2]

These preachments, like many others in the wake of the Cuban affair, were crystallized out of a lack of information. The facts are, first, that although the British special operations organization was independent of MI-6 from 1940 to the end of the war, MI-6 had the responsibility for these operations before that period and has had it since, and second, that the record of the wartime SOE, although it scored some brilliant successes, was over all not such as to inspire emulation. Some of its most conspicuous failures are directly traceable to its separation from MI-6 and the British counterintelligence agency, MI-5.

SOE Mission and Doctrine

At the beginning of the war MI-6, the Secret Intelligence Service charged with the collection of foreign intelligence not overtly obtainable, was also responsible for "special operations"--i.e., the planning and conduct of paramilitary activity and psychological warfare. The mushrooming importance of these specialties led to the creation in 1940 of a separate agency for them, the Special Operations Executive, under the new Ministry of Economic Warfare and "for all of its activities of a specifically military nature or which might bring military repercussions," operationally under the Chiefs of Staff .[3]

It was SOE's mission to influence public opinion abroad through covert propaganda and psychological warfare, to carry out sabotage, to organize and support guerrilla resistance, and to build up in German-occupied areas armed and trained forces to be held in reserve until Allied armies could begin their eventual assault. Major-General Gubbins, at one time Chief of SOE, explains:

> The British Commonwealth was on the defensive and it was

> clear that it would be years before invasion would be.possible; what could, however, be done in the meantime was to attack the enemy by unorthodox methods: attack his war potential wherever it was exposed and at least create some kind of running sore to drain his strength and disperse his forces and, finally, when invasion of the Continent did take place, to give the maximum of assistance to the forces of liberation.[4]

SOE realized that covert action such as sabotage, planned slowdowns, coup de main raids, and the creation of hidden arms-dumps called for very tight security. André Dewavrin, who used the alias "Colonel Passy" while working closely with the French section of SOE, has summarized the British concept:

> It is a matter of being sure that, on D Day, we have on hand, at given points in France, small armed groups provided with explosives and capable of carrying out destruction plans prepared by the Inter-Allied Staff. What we want is to have direct control of these groups and to give them the means of communicating directly with us, so that we can be assured that whatever orders we give them will be carried out immediately.

We also consider it important that these teams or small groups will be absolutely separate, one from the other, in order to avoid the danger which threatens and will continue to threaten a large resistance movement. It is important to know that an accident to one group will not bring about a chain reaction, leading to catastrophes which might extend throughout a large region or even the entire country.

Our groups are small, strictly local, and therefore easier to command and to lead than large movements which can never be ordered to carry out a destruction plan without going through a long and indefinite chain of command.[5]

Major-General Gubbins also notes SOE's concern for the safety of its operations and people:

> For over-riding reasons of operational security, the control of signals traffic and of the training and dispatching of personnel remained with SOE, and the teams in the field were organized as far as possible on the British model into water-tight compartments, each with its specific area and specific targets...[6]

But as SOE began to function abroad, it began to experience some of the chain-reaction catastrophes that Dewavrin describes the measures to forestall. It was soon evident that security demanded much more than a concept of compartmentation. Major-General Gubbins said, "The history of the building up of the secret armies in France, as in other Western European countries though to a lesser degree, was studded with sudden arrests of key men, with discovery of our W/T sets and setbacks of all kinds." [7] This admission is an understatement.

Catastrophes by Country

The most famous SOE disaster occurred in Holland, where some of the first agents parachuted in were picked up by German counterintelligence and forced to transmit to London faked reports and arrange for drops of supplies and other agents, who could then be arrested as they landed and their communications also taken over. This ghastly game went on for twenty months, in spite of several signs and express warnings that reached London alerting the SOE to the situation, until 54 agents had been arrested and all the operations they were supposed to be carrying out were frustrated. Forty-eight of the agents were eventually shot at Mauthausen.[8]

In Greece the first parachutists, a saboteur team, were to be dropped from three planes at a place where they could make contact with resistance leader Colonel Zervas. One of the planes failed to drop its men, and the other two dropped them in the wrong place on ground totally unsuited for parachute landings. Their equipment was scattered, their radio smashed beyond repair, and the local inhabitants had never heard of Colonel Zervas, who was many miles away.[9]

In Denmark, of the first two agents dropped one was killed when his parachute failed to open and the other lost all his equipment, including his radio. He could therefore not communicate with London to get instructions, and he had been given no alternative contacts or directions. A second team dropped later did manage to build up a resistance organization; but within six months its leader was killed, and the organization floundered and gradually broke down, leaving SOE without a Danish operation until 1943.[10]

In Belgium SOE and the Belgian Deuxième Section worked together to unify the resistance and shape a sabotage organization and a hidden army. In late April 1943 eight key underground leaders were instructed by letter to attend a joint conference in Liége. When they arrived, two were shot and the remainder arrested by the Gestapo, which had arranged the "conference." The following night fifty more were arrested. This mass roundup ended the hope of a unified organization.[11]

In France, where SOE operations were most intense, both the Gestapo and German military counterintelligence succeeded in penetrating and manipulating the nets. Through infiltration they located and seized dumps of arms and ammunition and entrapped a large number of SOE leaders, including Peter Churchill and "Prosper," leader of the resistance in Paris. Maurice Buckmaster, head of the SOE French section at headquarters, says that Prosper's net was "permeated with enemy agents." [12] More than one quarter of the 366 agents dropped during the war lost their lives. In mid-1943 a series of arrests rolled up almost all SOE operations in France and left in Paris, for example, only a single radio operator. [13]

Amateurs Against Professionals

What were the reasons for SOE's failures? Some of the causes could not have been corrected. It was not within SOE's power to alter the attitude of General de Gaulle, for example, toward British operations conducted in France, or to persuade the RAF to provide better air support. Some contamination spreading from traitors already encysted in foreign undergrounds was also unavoidable. But there were deeper reasons.

First of all, the SOE was an organization of amateurs. Unlike MI-5 and MI-6, both of which had a continuity of doctrine and of personnel, SOE was thrown together by picking up from the armed forces and from every walk of civilian life a large number of people who spoke some foreign language and who seemed, according to the intuitive feelings of the SOE chiefs, to be proper material. Psychologists were hired to assess candidates but were not told the purpose of the assessments, and according to Buckmaster the psychological findings were largely ignored. Above all, because Buckmaster and other chiefs were themselves chosen by equally random methods, there was nowhere in the newly formed service a solid core of experience, a cadre of professionalism in the conduct of the clandestine.

This initial weakness was compounded by the fact, pointed out by Sir Colin Gubbins in the lecture quoted above, that SOE conducted all of its own training. Candidates were trained in a variety of skills--parachute jumps, marksmanship, the employment of explosives for sabotage, etc. SOE was scrupulous in checking their language qualifications, their forged documents (although the quality of the forgeries was not uniformly high), their clothing and other personal possessions, and just about anything else that might betray them as undercover agents. It also taught them the distinguishing uniforms, insignia, and decorations of the Germans. But it could not teach them the organization, modus operandi, and psychology of the German intelligence and security services; and it did not call upon the MI-5 and MI-6 experts who did know the subject. The consequences of this shortcoming are evident in the German counterintelligence coups in France, Belgium, and Holland.

No available sources indicate that SOE maintained card files or other rosters of known and suspected German intelligence and security personnel or of their collaborators of other nationalities. Buckmaster does say that Scotland Yard was "at all times at our service and they were immediately helpful to us in a number of ways: not only did they provide us with a thorough account of the history of possible recruits to our work, but they also put at our disposal experts whose job it was to detect enemy agents in this country and who were therefore able to help us protect our own men against mistakes . . ." [14] But the help available from this organization for internal police work was necessarily limited.

In short, the root of SOE's difficulties was its lack of coordination with

the British espionage and counterintelligence services. A breach of distrust widened between MI-5 and MI-6 on the one hand and SOE on the other. It is an open secret that the senior services, acutely distrustful of SOE's counterintelligence competence, hesitated to provide the newcomer with sensitive security information because of fear that their own sources would be blown as a result. This wall between the clandestine services and the SOE meant that while the British program of covert action was afforded some rudimentary protection by passive security measures it lacked totally, or nearly totally, the essential advantages that counterintelligence might have supplied. Highly powered but without brakes, SOE was certain to suffer a series of smash-ups.

Peacetime Considerations

The British learned their lesson. At the end of the war the Foreign Office and the Chiefs of Staff agreed to return the responsibility for covert operations to the jurisdiction of the Secret Intelligence Service. There were three reasons for the change: to ensure that secret intelligence and special operations were the responsibility of a single organization under a single authority; to prevent duplication, wasted effort, crossing of operational wires, friction, and consequent insecurity; and to tailor the size of the covert action staff to the greatly reduced scale of peacetime needs. The peacetime condition also added a new factor which greatly increased the importance of consolidation.

The covert operations conducted during the war did not have to be unattributable. On the contrary; saboteurs, for example, in order to avoid precipitating reprisals on the local population, would leave behind evidence which tended to indicate that British agents were responsible.[15] Security and secrecy were important, but only tactically important. It was important that the Germans should not know the identities and homes of the resistance workers, but it never mattered at all that the Germans should know that the work was directed from England--indeed the B.B.C. acted as publicity agents for these resistance movements.

In time of peace the situation is quite different, for it is this strategic

security which is all-important. Because governments cannot acknowledge the fact that they are undertaking clandestine operations, there has been developed a whole new, delicate technique, the technique of nonattributability. A successful nonattributable operation is a long, tedious, touchy, and complicated affair which, the British recognized, not only requires background intelligence but, more importantly, cannot be undertaken except by experienced case officers.

Thus the SOE-SIS disharmony and its consequences led the British to a firm postwar conviction--that a single service should be responsible for all clandestine and covert activity undertaken by the nation.

1New York Times, 21 April 1961, from London correspondent Drew Middleton.

2 New York Times, 30 April 1961.

3 Major-General Sir Colin Gubbins, lecture, "Resistance Movements in the War," 28 January 1948, printed in the Journal of Royal United Service Institution, London, p. 211.

4 Ibid., pp. 210-211.

5 Translated from Colonel Passy's Souvenirs. 10 Duke St., Londres (le B.C.E.A.) (Monte Carlo, 1947), Vol. II, pp. 166-167.

6 Gubbins, op. cit., p. 213.

7 Ibid., p. 216.

8 See Herman J. Giskes' London Calling North Pole (New York, 1953).

9 Ronald Seth, The Undaunted: The Story of Resistance in Western Europe (London, 1956), p. 68.

10 Ibid., pp. 102-106.

11 Ibid., p. 271.

12 Maurice Buckmaster, They Fought Alone (London, 1958), p. 208.

13 This was Noor Inayat Khan, whose pathetic story is told in Jean Fuller's Madeleine (London, 1952). Jean Fuller's books about SOE women in France, together with Elizabeth Nicholas' Death Be Not Proud (London, 1958), precipitated a stir in Parliament on the question whether SOE was careless in its training and direction of staff agents.

14 Buckmaster, op. cit., p. 47.

15 Seth, op. cit., p. 47.

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