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# SOE: The Special Operations Executive 1940-1946

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ears but do not hear. His evidence, more relevant perhaps because more recent, does not differ very much from the lessons we should have learned from the Greeks. The blind Tiresias's prediction of the fall of kings and the prescient Cassandra's vision of the Fall of Troy foretold the pattern: the information is there but its significance is not perceived. It is the old problem of form and content: the detail, isolated because of misconceptions, does not fit into the accepted context or form. Our view of reality holds us in thrall.

This factor—the propensity of statesmen not to use the information which they receive—gives *Her Majesty's Secret Service* some of its drama. Knowing of the terrible events to come, we read with alarm Andrew's accounts of the mundane problems of finding an office, getting extra pounds, putting down rival organizations, sorting the mail, finding someone to read it, and then waiting for the knock on the door.

The reason that intelligence works so well as fiction is that it is the cutting edge of conventional reality. Intelligence deals with the perception of changes. It is a constant attack on conventional wisdom and usually an affront to the establishment. It demands decisions, sometimes of terrifying proportions—would you have wanted the watch on the night of December 7th?—from leaders usually struggling to maintain the *status quo*. That quality sets us up for the Greek tragedy that is history with its many blind Oedipuses slouching toward the oracle at Delphi. In

recounting the story, Christopher Andrew does not evoke the thundering fates of Sophocles nor the slapstick of Aristophanes, but there is a hint of both there, enough to amuse and appall.

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Foot, M.R.D. *SOE: The Special Operations Executive 1940-1946*. Frederick, Md.: University Publications of America, Inc., 1986. 280pp. \$24

By July 1940, Hitler's threatened Nazi domination of the European continent was becoming a horrifying reality. It was evident to the British that drastic measures would be needed to stop Hitler and one measure given serious consideration was unconventional warfare. In 1940 the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) was created for the express purpose of supporting and stimulating resistance in occupied countries. SOE's creators knew their actions could not have a decisive influence on the war's outcome, but their activities would surely play a valuable role through the diversion of Nazi resources.

Foot ably describes the creation and operation of one of several allied clandestine organizations. While the author did not serve in the SOE, his World War II experiences with the SAS brought him in contact with some of SOE's operations and agents. That experience has given him a perspective to write a factual and historical account of a small and

dedicated secret service organization that did its part in World War II in the face of overwhelming odds. Foot describes the circumstances, political turbulence, and decisions that went into the creation of the super secret SOE and guided its operations throughout its existence. He explores in detail the ways agents were recruited, trained, equipped, and controlled. The people that made up the SOE were ordinary people of uncommon valor from all walks of military and civilian life.

An agent had to live by his wits in an environment where even the slightest unconscious mistake could result in discovery and capture. Capture often meant imprisonment, torture, and death. Some agents "sold out" to the enemy, some held out valiantly until their deaths, and a few were able to maintain such a convincing cover story that they were released without it being discovered who they really were. Some operations succeeded, some failed, and some simply survived bureaucratic bungling. SOE experienced the same turmoils, rivalries, and suspicions that unconventional organizations cloaked in secrecy experience today.

The author strives to give the reader an appreciation of the dangers, frustrations, and triumphs experienced by this small group of brave volunteers. He also attempts to give broad insight into the creation and functioning of this fascinating organization that, in a way, is a forefather of today's covert intelligence agencies.

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Deavours, Cipher and Kruh, Louis.  
*Machine Cryptography and Modern Cryptanalysis*. Dedham, Mass.: Artech Hse., Inc., 1985. 256pp. \$56

Communications intelligence and code breaking have become such standard features of World War II historical analysis that the contemporary reader may be forgiven for assuming that this body of information was generally known shortly after the war's conclusion. In fact, the first allusion to the penetration of the German Enigma system appeared in the 1968 book, *The Philby Conspiracy*, and the full magnitude of this accomplishment did not become apparent until F. W. Winterbotham's book, *The Ultra Secret* was published in 1974. A number of books have been published since that time dealing with the military, political, and organizational aspects and the implications of these revelations.

The breaking of machine cyphers is first and foremost a scientific and intellectual achievement of the highest magnitude. In this book the authors have provided the technical reading public with a singular service; namely, a guided tour through one of the last great intellectual achievements executed by a single human mind or through a small team effort. Messrs. Deavours and Kruh have reconstructed and presented a highly readable form, the procedures which decoded the five principal mechanical and electromechanical code machine families. These procedures are presented in a step-by-step manner so that the interested reader can, with patience and