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SOE and its Contribution to the Allied War Effort during the Second World War

Founded in July 1940, the Special Operations Executive (SOE) was formed from three smaller intelligence groups: section D of the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS), the EH subdepartment of the Foreign Office, and the General Staff Research (GS/R) subdepartment of the War Office.¹ After the fall of France, Churchill instructed Hugh Dalton to form SOE in order to “set Europe ablaze.”² Dalton, the Minister of Economic Warfare, took to the task wholeheartedly. Dynamic yet abrasive, Dalton best served the agency with his “ambitious idea of what SOE could do in Europe and...belligerence of spirit attuned to the times.”³ In November 1940 Dalton recruited the equally ambitious Colin Gubbins, the organization’s future director, to serve as the SOE director of training and operations. Gubbins “organized in depth training for recruits in unarmed combat, firearms, sabotage equipment and camouflage materials.”⁴ Under the combined leadership of these two men, SOE contributed significantly to the Allied war effort in occupied Europe through espionage, sabotage, assassination and subversion.

Backed by Churchill, SOE was granted significant liberties, to the great displeasure of other government organizations. The British establishment had a negative view of the organization. Sir Stewart Menzies, head of the SIS, called the agency “amateur, dangerous and

¹ M.R.D. Foot, *SOE in France: An Account of the Work of the British Special Operations Executive in France 1940-1944* (London: Whitehall Publishing, 2004), xx.

² “The Secret British Organisation of the Second World War,” Imperial War Museums, accessed December 10, 2021, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/the-secret-british-organisation-of-the-second-world-war>.

³ David Stafford, *Britain and European Resistance, 1940-1945* (London: The Macmillan Press in association with St. Antony’s College, Oxford, 1980), 29.

⁴ Imperial War Museums, “The Secret British Organisation of the Second World War.”

bogus.”⁵ These remarks were unfounded and were based more in spite than in fact. SIS and other government agencies took poorly to SOE’s operational freedom and the ungentlemanly nature of its operations. While Britain was no stranger to sabotage and subversion, opponents of SOE disingenuously argued “that of course we had never done anything of the kind before... [an argument which showed that]... the educated classes had gotten out of touch with their own history.”⁶ The supposed novelty of SOE’s aims was used as a justification for its dangerous inexperience.

However, SOE’s critics could point to the inexperience of many of the organization’s employees as signs of its amateurism. As a teenager, Maggie Norris was hired to cut the hair of female agents who were returning from missions in France.⁷ Gwendoline Lees came from a civilian background and was hired as a member of the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry, a volunteer organization who notably provided medical care to soldiers in the First World War. She was later recruited to serve as a nurse to SOE while also operating key signals stations in England and Cairo.⁸ Similarly to Lees, Vera Atkins was a civilian who was initially hired to work as an SOE secretary. She was soon promoted to being an intelligence officer, a role in which Atkins was responsible for interviewing and briefing agents before sending them into the field.⁹ Despite their lack of experience with subversive operations prior to being hired, these three women proved

⁵ “Special Operations Executive,” National Army Museum, accessed December 3, 2021, <https://www.nam.ac.uk/explore/SOE>.

⁶ Michael R. D. Foot, “Was SOE Any Good?” *Journal of Contemporary History* 16, no. 1 (January 1981), 168. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/260622>.

⁷ Maggie Norris, interview by Andrew Norris, January 18, 2003. Audio. <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80033434>.

⁸ Gwendoline Lees, interview by Conrad Wood, IWM, January 16, 1990. Audio. <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80010858>.

⁹ Vera May Atkins, interview by Conrad Wood, IWM, January 6, 1987. Audio. <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80009338>.

their worth to SOE by either meeting, or in the case of Atkins, exceeding the expectations placed on them.

From the beginning, while facing these accusations of incompetence, SOE also had to contend with enemies within the British intelligence community. Its biggest rival was fellow intelligence organization SIS, who felt that the fledgling organization “threatened its monopoly of clandestine activity...moreover its spectacular actions could harass the quiet nature of intelligence gathering.”¹⁰ In addition to these valid concerns, SIS animosity towards SOE stemmed from jealousy. The main section of SOE was formerly section D of SIS. In 1940, the subsection split off, a fact “SIS never fully accepted.... its subsequent behavior only too often resembled that of an embittered spouse.”¹¹ This behavior included withholding relevant information from SOE and preventing “SOE by various means from operating at all by sea into Brittany out of Cornwall.”¹² Both of these actions further complicated SOE missions unnecessarily.

Despite its bitter rivalry with SIS, the two organizations were able to put aside their differences in Norway, allowing SOE to conduct important missions in the country. This was accomplished due to SIS intelligence gathering being given operational priority, thus allowing the agency to be less concerned over how SOE’s subversive operations would affect its own missions. As a result, there were “numerous examples of cooperation between the two organizations...they exchanged intelligence, shared clandestine radio stations and used the same

¹⁰ Ioannis Nioutsikos, “The Special Operations Executive in Greece: Operation Harling,” *Mars & Clio*, no. 37 (2013): 26.

¹¹ Foot, “Was SOE Any Good?”, 171.

¹² Foot, “Was SOE Any Good?”, 171.

fishing boats to transport agents into Norway...”¹³. The two competing agencies were encouraged to work together by the logistical difficulties, which included their lack of experience with the country’s language and the hazards of its harsh climate.¹⁴ However, this unprecedented cooperation did not mean that SIS gave SOE free reign. In Norway, SOE planned to focus on industrial sabotage, but “was somewhat limited by the overall SIS policy which put a ban on much activity on the west coast.”¹⁵ Nevertheless, despite these limitations on the scope and location of its undertakings, SOE was able to send “542 operatives...into Norway to carry out a range of activities including sabotage and subversion, training and arming the military resistance, forming guerrilla groups and assassination.”¹⁶ Of these activities, the heavy water sabotage was the most notable and impactful.

In 1939, Norway became a crucial theatre of operations for SOE once it became clear that the Germans were trying to gain control of the heavy water manufactured at Vemork’s Norsk Hydro. Having lost access to France’s supply of heavy water, Germany was desperate for a source of the precious commodity key to its efforts to create a nuclear bomb. In July 1942, Leif Tronstad, a former employee at the plant, brought forth intelligence that clearly demonstrated Germany’s nuclear ambitions in Norway. At Tronstad’s behest, the British government deemed that it “of the highest importance that the existing stocks of heavy water...at Norsk Hydro

¹³ Ian Herrington, “The SIS and SOE in Norway 1940-1945: Conflict or Cooperation?”, *War in History* 9, no. 1 (January 2002): 82.

¹⁴ Herrington, “The SIS and SOE in Norway 1940-1945: Conflict or Cooperation?”, 82-110.

¹⁵ Stafford, *Britain and European Resistance, 1940-1945*, 130.

¹⁶ Herrington, “The SIS and SOE in Norway 1940-1945: Conflict or Cooperation?”, 83.

works...should be destroyed, together with a plant essential for its production.”¹⁷ To accomplish these three SOE-led expeditions were sent out.

Operation Grouse was launched on October 18th, 1942, with the objectives of reporting on the weather conditions and state of German defenses at Vemork. On that same day, Germany announced that “all saboteurs, military and civilian alike were to be executed without a trial,”¹⁸ a fact that did not impede Grouse but would lead to the downfall of the following mission. With the data provided by Grouse, Operation Freshman went into Norway to destroy the current stocks of heavy water. The mission was particularly dangerous due to its novel approach. Juliette Desplat describes it as a mission that “was incredibly audacious and required extraordinary physical conditions and observation skills...nothing like it had ever been attempted before...it involved an approach by glider, a parachute, a demolition task and an entrance test...”¹⁹. However, despite the immense amount training and planning that went into the mission, the bomber and glider responsible transporting the agents were shot down. Those who survived the crash “were put into battle and wiped out to the last man.”²⁰

After the failure of Operation Freshman, the Germans significantly increased security at the Vemork plant. As the crew of Operation Grouse had remained in Norway undetected, it was instructed to continue gather intelligence and weather information for a new undertaking in Norway. Once the next mission, Operation Gunnerside, was ready to begin, the Grouse crew, renamed Swallow, would assist them in their duties. Gunnerside had the same objectives as

¹⁷ Juliette Desplat, “Audacious Raids: Operations Grouse, Freshman, Swallow and Gunnerside.” (lecture, The National Archives, September 4, 2020) <https://media.nationalarchives.gov.uk/index.php/audacious-raids-operations-grouse-freshman-swallow-and-gunnerside/>.

¹⁸ Desplat, “Audacious Raids: Operations Grouse, Freshman, Swallow and Gunnerside.”

¹⁹ Desplat, “Audacious Raids: Operations Grouse, Freshman, Swallow and Gunnerside.”

²⁰ Desplat, “Audacious Raids: Operations Grouse, Freshman, Swallow and Gunnerside.”

Freshman.²¹ To avoid another failure, in addition to undergoing extensive training, the agents were provided with extensive maps of the region and a well-thought-out escape route to Sweden. Joachim Rønneberg, who led Operation Gunnerside, was surprised by how detailed the maps were saying, “I do not think that any group sent into Europe was supplied with such good intelligence.”²² Superior intelligence and Rønneberg’s knowledge of his native Norway helped make Gunnerside a success.

Despite obstacles, such as weather delays and landing 25 kilometers off target, the Gunnerside agents made their way to the heavy water plant, successfully destroying it on February 17, 1943. Rønneberg and his crew were so effective that, to his surprise, “the Germans never had the faintest idea of what really happened”.²³ While the heavy water plant was eventually rebuilt, SOE deprived Germany from access to heavy water for several months.²⁴ The eventual success of SOE’s heavy water sabotage showed both its determination to aid the British war effort as well as its ability to work around the limitations set by its rivals.

While SIS did not always impede SOE’s actions, the Foreign Office proved to be a more persistent and significant rival to the fledging secret agency. It disapproved of the organization’s tendencies to “support resistance organisations regardless of their political affiliation...”²⁵ While the Foreign Office was concerned with protecting Britain's national image and advancing the

²¹ Desplat, “Audacious Raids: Operations Grouse, Freshman, Swallow and Gunnerside.”

²² Joachim Rønneberg, “Operation ‘Gunnerside’: Reminiscences of a Heavy Water Saboteur,” *Norwegian institute for Defence Studies* (1995): 14. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep20310.5>.

²³ Rønneberg, “Operation ‘Gunnerside’: Reminiscences of a Heavy Water Saboteur,” 15.

²⁴ By August 1943, the Germans had repaired the Vemork plant and resumed production of heavy water. However, in November that year, the United States bombarded the plant, causing significant casualties, but definitively destroying it. In February 1944, Knut Haukelid, an operative who stayed in Norway after Gunnerside, sunk a ferry carrying the last of Vemork’s heavy water, ending Germany’s access to the valuable commodity. See Desplat, “Audacious Raids: Operations Grouse, Freshman, Swallow and Gunnerside”.

²⁵ Nioutsikos, “The Special Operations Executive in Greece: Operation Harling,” 26.

country's political interests, SOE was willing to work with any group who could help lead an effective resistance movement. For example, at the beginning of the war, SOE worked with Dragoljub Mihailović's royalist Chetniks in Yugoslavia, who showed more promise than other resistance groups in the country. However, "growing Chetnik collaboration with the Axis against Tito [Mihailović's communist rival] finally led Britain to switch its support to the 'Partisans' in December 1943."²⁶ A similar issue also occurred Greece. During their various operations in Greece, SOE would work alongside both the National Democratic Greek League (EDES) and the Greek People's Liberation Army (ELAS), two bitter rivals who would later fight in a bloody civil war.²⁷

Due to such precedents, the Foreign Office believed SOE would prioritize working with groups who would best serve a resistance movement rather than with those whose interests best coincided with Britain's. As a result, it placed strict restrictions on SOE operations in Turkey, particularly due to the country's fragile political status. On one hand the Turkish government was "not very willing to co-operate with the Special Operations Executive so as to avoid provoking the Germans"²⁸, who many thought were on the verge of invading the Middle East through Turkey. On the other hand, Britain feared that too much SOE activity would alienate Turkey. While initially tasked with helping the SOE, Sir Hughe Knatchbull-Hugesson, the British Ambassador to Ankara, promptly cut off all ties to the subversive organization, saying it "would be quite impossible for me to have any connections with such activities and at the same time to remain responsible for good relations between our governments."²⁹

²⁶ "Special Operations Executive."

²⁷ Nioutsikos, "The Special Operations Executive in Greece: Operation Harling," 29.

²⁸ Süleyman Seydi, "The Activities of the Special Operations Executive in Turkey," *Middle Eastern Studies* 40, no. 4 (July 2004): 153. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4289932>.

²⁹ Seydi, "The Activities of the Special Operations Executive in Turkey," 156.

To mediate between these concerns, the Foreign Office decreed that “the role of SOE should be advisory and consultative and that it should not prepare demolition plans”³⁰ without the assent of the Foreign Office. To ensure that SOE could operate effectively without the meddling of Turkish authorities, agents installed sabotage equipment in Northern Syria and agreed to only enter Turkey “as part of a British force going to assist Turkey or if Turkey joined the Axis.”³¹ Furthermore, SOE operatives were restricted to bringing one suitcase worth of explosives into equipment. With these restrictions, SOE accomplished little in Turkey, aside from establishing a small “network of agents...in the event of a German invasion.”³²

Despite the government’s limitations and its distrust of the organization, SOE played a pivotal role in one of the most famous and crucial missions of the Second World War. By aiding the French resistance and sending elite Jedburgh teams, SOE made the legendary Operation Overlord possible. Prior to this, SOE had set up two major sections in France: F section and RF section. F section usually worked independently from Charles de Gaulle, a prominent general who controlled the Forces Françaises de l’Intérieur (FFI).³³ Consisting of primarily of non-French agents, F section’s primary goal was to “assist the advance of allied armies by specific demolitions.”³⁴ On the other hand, RF section worked in conjunction with Charles de Gaulle and was primarily preoccupied with supporting the maquis, an underground branch of the French resistance that operated in the south east.³⁵

³⁰ Seydi, “The Activities of the Special Operations Executive in Turkey,” 153-154.

³¹ Seydi, “The Activities of the Special Operations Executive in Turkey,” 154.

³² Seydi, “The Activities of the Special Operations Executive in Turkey,” 156.

³³ The Forces Françaises de l’Intérieur were members of the French resistance who were loyal to Charles de Gaulle, as opposed to his rivals who sought to control France after the end of the Nazi occupation. Under the direction of Marie-Pierre Koenig, the FFI would work alongside SOE during the lead up to on the day of D-Day. See M.R.D. Foot, *SOE in France: An Account of the Work of the British Special Operations Executive in France 1940-1944*, 318.

³⁴ Foot, *SOE in France: An Account of the Work of the British Special Operations Executive in France 1940-1944*, xxii.

³⁵ Foot, *SOE in France: An Account of the Work of the British Special Operations Executive in France 1940-1944*, xxiv.

Churchill had high hopes for the maquis, which he believed would be key to his Mediterranean strategy. He hoped the French resistance could impede the advance of German troops in the Rhone Valley, which would remove the need to divert troops from Italy and accelerate Sir Harold Alexander's invasion of Italy.³⁶ To this end, Churchill tentatively sent SOE members to provide weapons and supplies to the maquis and the French resistance.³⁷ This aid was increased when the British cabinet's fear of "another Tito-Mihailovič quarrel placed in their lap by SOE"³⁸ was alleviated by a January 1944 meeting between Churchill and representatives of the maquis. However, bad weather and the preferential allocation of resources for the Normandy landings over those in Provence meant the maquis did not receive sufficient support. By the end of February, "no more than 53 missions out of the 186 planned to the Maquis had succeeded..."³⁹ Due to this discouraging news and pressure from Allied commander, Churchill lost hope for his plan in Provence and Italy, instead switching his focus to Normandy.

On D-Day, SOE-trained Jedburgh teams were parachuted into France to pave the way for the Allied landings in Normandy and the smaller-scale landings in Provence. Jedburgh teams consisted of a French officer, an American or English officer, and a wireless operator, generally an American, English or French non-commissioned officer. Their goal was to "send back intelligence, organize supply drops to local resistance forces, and carry out any subversive operations that were available... such as bridge blowing, ambushes [and] harassing the enemy."⁴⁰ These objectives were met with brilliant success. One particularly noteworthy team

³⁶ Arthur L. Funk, "Churchill, Eisenhower, and the French Resistance," *Military Affairs* 45, no. 1 (1989): 29.

³⁷ Funk, "Churchill, Eisenhower, and the French Resistance," 30.

³⁸ Foot, *SOE in France: An Account of the Work of the British Special Operations Executive in France 1940-1944*, 312.

³⁹ Funk, "Churchill, Eisenhower, and the French Resistance," 32.

⁴⁰ Frederick Arthur Bailey, interview by Conrad Wood, IWM, December 11, 1990. Audio. <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80011495>.

“led hundreds of operations, making the railways and the large roads between Brive and Toulouse...practically unusable.”⁴¹ Another team harassed a retreating German force of 20,000 troops to such an extent that their commander was forced to surrender.⁴² Through subversion and stubborn harassment, Jedburgh teams were able to delay the progress of many German units, thus contributing greatly to D-Day’s eventual success.

While SOE was able to thrive amid France’s difficult political climate, international politics complicated SOE’s missions in Poland, a country initially viewed as vital to the resistance against Germany. Even before the Second World War and the creation of SOE, Major Collin Gubbins met with Colonel Guido Cano of the 2nd Bureau of Polish Intelligence Services to discuss “aspects of the potential anti-German guerrilla activity in the region in the event of war and Polish defeat”⁴³. This activity included the sabotage of the railways between Lwów and western Poland and the destruction of Polish oil fields. In the initial years following Germany’s invasion of Poland, British and Polish military and intelligence units worked well together. A 1941 SOE report was optimistic, saying that “the military possibilities of the organization inside Poland are most apparent...the existence of even 35,000 fully armed men is an obvious threat to the German lines of communication with the Russian front.”⁴⁴

By June 1942, however, SOE’s glowing opinion on Poland’s utility would drastically change. With the Soviet Union’s entry onto the side of the Allies, Britain now had to carefully consider its dealings with Poland. Relations between the Soviet Union and Poland were

⁴¹ A. Calmette, “Les Équipes Jedburgh dans la Bataille de France,” *Revue d’histoire de la Deuxième Guerre mondiale* 16, no. 61 (January 1966): 35-48. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25730024>.

⁴² Calmette, “Les Équipes Jedburgh dans la Bataille de France,” 35-48.

⁴³ Michael A. Peszke, “British Special Operations Executive Archives and Poland: An Analysis,” *The Polish Review* 42, no. 4 (1997): 433.

⁴⁴ Peszke, “British Special Operations Executive Archives and Poland: An Analysis,” 435.

incredibly poor, as on “5 March 1940...the leading committee of the Soviet Communist Party...officially ratified a decision taken by Stalin a few days earlier to execute about 15,000 Polish prisoners of war...”⁴⁵ While this certainly complicated relations amongst the three countries, Britain and SOE were able to navigate this difficult climate for a few years by ensuring allowing a large portion of the Polish resistance movement “to be independent of their direct control, unlike clandestine movements in most other German-occupied countries.”⁴⁶ Unfortunately, this strategy would only work for a few years. In April 1943, Joseph Goebbels, Germany’s propaganda minister, revealed the bodies from the 1940 massacre in the Katyn forest. His goal was to “complicate, if not split, the alliance between the Western Powers and their junior Polish ally...from their major wartime Soviet ally.”⁴⁷

This scheme certainly worked and forced Britain to placate the Soviet Union by including it in sabotage missions that the SOE performed alongside Polish agents. In addition, Britain withdrew its support for resistance groups led by individuals that the Soviet Union disapproved of. Instead of supporting and equipping the multiple groups, SOE only backed Stanislaw Mikolajczyk’s Peasant Party, in hopes that this would entice the Soviet Union to renew its diplomatic relations with Poland. Finally, Britain was “clearly unable, unwilling or uncaring to take a firm stance” on the issue of Polish independence, out of fear of antagonizing the Soviets.⁴⁸ This hurt both the potential effectiveness of SOE in Poland and the overall relationship Britain had with the country.

⁴⁵ George Sanford, “The Katyn Massacre and Polish-Soviet Relations, 1941-1943,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 41, no. 1 (January 2006): 95.

⁴⁶ Peszke, “British Special Operations Executive Archives and Poland: An Analysis,” 439.

⁴⁷ George Sanford, “The Katyn Massacre and Polish-Soviet Relations, 1941-1943,” 96.

⁴⁸ Peszke, “British Special Operations Executive Archives and Poland: An Analysis,” 440.

Additionally, local attitudes limited the effectiveness and extent of SOE operations in certain countries. A 1940 report to the Chief of Staff Review of Future Strategy indicated that Austria was not “ready or able to rise against Germany.”⁴⁹ However, Churchill viewed an Austrian resistance movement as the key to weakening Germany’s control of Central Europe. Consequently, in 1941, SOE began preparing to conduct missions in Austria with two principal purposes in mind: “to assist in the disintegration of the Third Reich by fostering the...separatist uprising in Austria; and...to bring about the ‘restoration of Austria as a national unit’ within the framework of a central European federation.”⁵⁰

To accomplish these lofty objectives, SOE contacted groups from all ends of the Austrian political spectrum, ranging from Social Democrats to Monarchists. Despite these efforts, the SOE’s plans for a significant resistance movement in Austria failed. Germany’s tight control over Austria contributed to this failure. In 1938, the Gestapo arrested the Station Chief of the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) headquarters in Vienna, leading to the dismantlement of its existing intelligence network. The new Station Chief did not have sufficient time to restore the network and obtain enough new intelligence before the SOE began its missions.⁵¹

While this was a major setback, the general attitude of the Austrian population played a more significant role in the SOE’s failure to accomplish its objectives in Austria. An Austrian resistance did emerge; however, it was far too passive and did not advance the British war effort. Moreover, as it represented only a minority of Austrians, SOE could not conduct successful

⁴⁹ Joint Planning Staff, “Special Operations Executive, 1941,” in *Britain and European Resistance, 1940-1945*, by David Stafford (London: The Macmillan Press in association with St. Antony’s College, Oxford, 1980), 214.

⁵⁰ Gerald Steinacher, “The Special Operations Executive (SOE) in Austria, 1940-1945,” *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 15 (2002): 211.

⁵¹ Steinacher, “The Special Operations Executive (SOE) in Austria, 1940-1945,” 211-221.

missions. Peter Wilkinson launched the Clowder Missions, which, like so many other SOE missions, depended on the support of the local guerrillas. As there were no such forces in Austria, Wilkinson's plan failed, as it relied on Josip Broz's Slovenian-speaking guerrillas who prioritized claiming land for Yugoslavia over advancing the interests of the Allied war effort.⁵²

In cases where the resistance sought to aid SOE and Austria, its members engaged in activities such as wearing the national colors and using the traditional Austrian greeting 'Grüß Gott' instead of 'Heil Hitler' rather than fomenting unrest or sabotaging strategically important infrastructure. Faced with these passive forms of resistance, SOE officials lost hope on Austria, resigning to the fact that "all that can be hoped for is a small degree of sabotage and possibly one or two coups-de-main."⁵³ Aside from liberating the city of Tyrol, nothing notable was accomplished by the Austrian resistance.

As in Austria, the people of Channel Islands did little to resist occupation. While they were the subject of unsuccessful SOE and commando raids, there were no major sabotage or resistance initiatives. Viewing them as strategically unimportant, Churchill did not order any large-scale liberation initiatives for the islands. These endeavors would have been useless, as British authorities quickly realized that the Islanders had neither the will nor the capacity to resist the German occupation force. As the Channel Islands were heavily fortified, "any damage would have had to be made good, with a small resultant drain on total German resources."⁵⁴ In addition to being exceedingly difficult, sabotage missions would have brought about extensive reprisals.

⁵² Steinacher, "The Special Operations Executive in Austria, 1940-1945," 211-221.

⁵³ Steinacher, "The Special Operations Executive in Austria, 1940-1945," 215.

⁵⁴ Charles Cruickshank, *The German Occupation of the Channel Islands* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 156.

Through a proclamation in July 1942, the Germans announced that “all inhabitants of the Channel Islands held in custody were liable to the death penalty in the event of sabotage against the occupying power.”⁵⁵ Fearing retaliation, the governments of Guernsey and the other islands begged their citizens to not engage in resistance or sabotage and encouraged them to instead follow a policy of passive cooperation. The islanders were justified to fear Nazi reprisals. Unfortunately, many locals were massacred after successful SOE missions. After being delayed by SOE and the French Resistance during Operation Jedburgh, the 2nd SS Panzer Division massacred the village of Oradour-sur-Glane, killing 642 French civilians.⁵⁶ While drastic, these reprisals were minor compared to those that followed the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich.

A high-ranking SS officer, Heydrich was appointed viceroy of Bohemia and Moravia, a western portion of German-occupied Czechoslovakia, in September 1942. Heydrich spearheaded the initiative to “murder 11 million Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe”⁵⁷ at the Wannsee Conference in January 1942. Upon arriving in his assigned province, he began planning its ethnic cleansing while also dismantling the Czech intelligence agency. As a result of his action hundreds “among the Czech intelligentsia were executed or sent to concentration camps”, destroying the country’s spy network and its contacts with Britain.⁵⁸ Following these tyrannical actions, Dr. Edvard Beneš, the leader of the London-based Czech government in exile, asked the British government for help.

⁵⁵ Cruickshank, *The German Occupation of the Channel Islands*, 156.

⁵⁶ “Special Operations Executive.”

⁵⁷ Milan Hauner, “Terrorism and Heroism: The Assassination of Reinhard Heydrich,” *World Policy Journal* 24, no. 2 (2007): 86. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40210095>.

⁵⁸ Hauner, “Terrorism and Heroism: The Assassination of Reinhard Heydrich,” 87.

While a previous report rated Czechoslovakia as the country with the lowest chance of supporting an effective resistance movement, SOE gladly came to Beneš' aid. It both equipped and trained two agents for the assassination of Heydrich. Amidst a series of errors, Josef Gabcík and Jan Kubiš were able to kill Heydrich. Hearing of the death of one of his best officers, Hitler was furious and "ordered the arrest and execution of 10,000 Czech hostages."⁵⁹ Hitler later changed halved this number, but his subordinates would carry out further atrocities. "The village of Lidice, near Prague, was set on fire and entirely leveled by the SS...Two hundred male inhabitants were shot on the spot, its female population sent to concentration camps and the children given to German families for adoption."⁶⁰

This heinous retaliation causes many to doubt whether the assassination was worth the cost. Indeed, the levels of devastation were unprecedented and instilled fear amongst occupied peoples. However, it is important to note that Heydrich had already caused the death of millions of Jews and was planning to send many more to concentration camps. As death was inevitable under Heydrich's reign, assassinating him likely limited the overall toll whilst also depriving Hitler of a key officer.⁶¹ From this perspective, the mission was an undeniable success.

Overall, through various missions across the continent, SOE was able to significantly contribute to the Allied war effort in occupied Europe. To accomplish this, SOE used subversion, sabotage, espionage, and assassination. While rivalries with other organizations, complex political intrigues, and unforeseen setbacks limited its potential contribution, SOE undeniably advanced the British cause.

⁵⁹ Hauner, "Terrorism and Heroism: The Assassination of Reinhard Heydrich," 85.

⁶⁰ Hauner, "Terrorism and Heroism: The Assassination of Reinhard Heydrich," 88.

⁶¹ Hauner, "Terrorism and Heroism: The Assassination of Reinhard Heydrich," 85-89