



The Shadow Saboteurs – Churchill's Secret War against Hitler

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Amazing. Very interesting and well written by a British historian - Giles Milton - very well documented. Some of the archives were only opened in 1978 or even more recently. The work opportunely completes what is already known about the British SOE (Special Operations Executive), and especially about the institutions of secret warfare that Winston Churchill set up in July 1939 with few means and for which he was the sole responsible.

The story, skillfully chronological, allows you to find your way around and narrates with a lot of humour (very English), and also a certain cynicism (very English). The story, skilfully told in chronological order, allows one to find one's way around and narrates with a lot of humour (very English), and also a certain cynicism (very English too), the adventures of espionage, sabotage, state murder and a silent war that often changed the course of the confrontations. One is astonished by the almost total absence of real military means in the United Kingdom in the face of the growing threat of Nazism, and by the gap between the official war and the war on the ground, its long preparations, its almost insurmountable obstacles and its daring.

At the beginning, in 1939, the do-it-yourself approach was total: few personnel, little money and little long-term perspective. Recruitment was very targeted, strange, and very badly regarded by the ministers and the army. Everything has to be invented: four men create the most efficient system of espionage, sabotage and guerrilla warfare of the Second World War, which even the Americans will envy: Colin Gubbins, the organizer-recruiter, Cecil Clarke, genius inventor of the Sticky bomb and the Limpet mine for destroying U-boats, Millis Jefferies and Stuart Macrae, specialists in sabotage commandos. Two "delightful gentlemen", Eric Sykes and William Fairbain, run a "school of silent murder" near a Scottish loch, where they teach Japanese strangulation, asphyxiating hold, double-edged stylus and other parlour or outdoor sports...

One learns a lot about explosives, the problems of ignition and detonators; Blaker's mortar (called "bombarde" at the beginning), then dewclaw mortar, are invented little by little from 1940 to be produced by tens of millions at the end of the war. The L-Delay igniter, the shaped charge grenades (hedgehogs), designed to pierce the strongest armour, enthused Churchill, who often came to witness the tests, encouraged research, found the money and silenced the generals hostile to "these dishonourable means".

The real triggering event was the fear of the invasion of England from May to September 1940, and also the terrible failure of the occupation of Norway. Several centres swarmed through the beautiful English countryside for the training of commandos and the manufacture of machines, including one only 11 kilometres from Bletchley Park, where Turing and his team fought with Enigma.

It took a year and a half for the human and equipment package to become truly effective: After a few limited actions, the first big success was the "escamotage" of the liner Duchessa d'Aosta and two other boats in Fernando Poo's harbour in West Africa, which provided Berlin with information on the Atlantic convoys. It was done in a few hours, without leaving any trace of the British origin of the company... Undeniable success. Then the big deal was to send saboteur commandos to Greece and Yugoslavia to block the rail convoys (30 per day) that supplied Rommel in Libya: the lack of ammunition and fuel was fatal to him. The assassination of Heydrich (the butcher of Prague) was prepared in London. The next big business was the hunting of U-boats in the Atlantic, a technique the Americans used in the Pacific against Japan. In 1943, the destruction of the Norsk Hydro plant in Norway definitively deprived the Reich of the atomic bomb. Very perilous, in conditions of near-survival of two small commandos, it was a complete success. Finally, the exploits in France, through a whole series of targeted sabotage, were the destruction of the Peugeot factory in Sochaux in November 1943 (with the complicity of Rodolphe Peugeot) and the multiple complications of the rebuilding of the factory, in June 44, of the Das Reich division to Normandy in seventeen days instead of three, which made it impossible to throw a large part of the Allied landing into the sea.

All this was accomplished by "heroes and heroines" who were completely anonymous and never breathed a word about what they had done during the war. Few medals, no official recognition, and rather mediocre salaries... Some were outspoken adventurers, or even real gangsters, but most were driven by a boundless patriotism and desire for victory. Just over 13,000 people (including 3,400 women) worked in one way or another for SOE and its offshoots. About one-third were refugees on British soil. Many lost their lives, often in appalling conditions when they parachuted in behind enemy lines.

Gilis Milton's account, however, has a few drawbacks: everything seems smooth and perfect, in a British perfection. Apart from the bickering with the regular army officers or a few ministers, there were never any internal conflicts, no leaks, no hostile infiltrations? Many of these very adventurous boys were from Cambridge or Oxford. Nothing about the Cambridge Communists, the famous "gang of four"? Yet Kim Philby was around, quoted several times (pages 124-25, 364, 367-68). The very pinchy "tone" without laughing makes this high-risk collective enterprise seem like a "game" between wild boys and slightly dizzy young women. During the preparation of the sabotage, it is pointed out that "...the best people to throw the incendiary grenades were undoubtedly the English, who had practised cricket for a long time". Little sympathy for the collateral damage, the terrifying reprisals for the attacks in Prague, Norway, Greece, France, when entire villages were razed to the ground and burned with their inhabitants. But action is the order of the day...

Unexpected consequences: the Fleming brothers, Paul and Ian, were part of these expeditions and learned about close combat: some of the James Bond adventures - especially the way to kill without noise and hassle - came directly from the schools of murder. Finally, it was James Turk, a brilliant engineer recruited by the Americans at Los Alamos, who solved the unsolvable problem of the The insoluble problem of firing the plutonium bomb - thanks to Millis Jeffries' "shaped charge" practice - was solved by James Turk, a brilliant engineer recruited by the Americans at Los Alamos, who launched it on Nagasaki in August 1944, ending the Pacific War.

In short, moments of history, big or small, that made us what we are now. Better than a novel...

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