

Setting Europe Ablaze

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by Louis Allen

The most surprising thing about Mr Foot's book¹ is that it is there. When one considers the scale of the official war histories, one volume for the momentous events of El Alamein and Tunisia, one volume for Normandy, one volume for Singapore, one for Mandalay, military operations involving the deployment of hundreds of thousands, sometimes millions of men over wide areas of the globe, with final strategic issues in the balance, it comes as rather a shock to find that the compass of one volume is also required for a branch of operations directly involving a force of British and French agents numbered merely in hundreds. The reason is quite simply that these operations have become the focus of at least as much interest and concern as any other single aspect of the war in Europe. There can have been few supposedly clandestine operations bathed in a brighter glow of publicity. The organisers and agents of Special Operations Executive have written about its activities in many countries, and it was high time someone dredged through the archives and at any rate *attempted* a balanced and neutral account of what happened after Winston Churchill set Hugh Dalton at the head of the organisation with the dramatic order: 'Set Europe ablaze!'

Mr Foot has worked under severe limitations. SOE controlled a good many activities in France, not all of which are fully covered by this book. He deliberately excludes the running of escape routes, and of the two sections which ran saboteurs into France, RF Section and F (French) Section, the latter is his real concern. Although it employed English agents as well as French, RF Section was responsible for working with de Gaulle and the Free French. F Section was concerned with stimulating subversive activities under purely British control, since it was felt there should be *some* organisation to prepare partisan risings when the time came to invade Europe, without having to pass through de Gaulle's hands first². With these reservations Mr Foot has written an absorbing though occasionally erratic book, under the most peculiar research conditions. The nature of the work of SOE made the keeping of records not only

¹M.R.D. Foot: *SOE in France* (xxvii + 550 p. H.M.S.O., 45s.)

²As might have been expected, Mr Foot's account of RF Section and the general relationship of SOE to the French Resistance has come under heavy fire in the French Press. *Le Nouvel Observateur* gave two full page spreads to André Dewavrin (i.e. Colonel Passy, de Gaulle's war-time head of intelligence) to attack the book. This is where a full exploration of Henri Michel's resistance archives might have saved Mr Foot from some odd judgments.

hazardous but at times positively undesirable. Mr Foot has used whatever war diaries and interrogation records were kept, but he has made, as he admits himself, almost no use of foreign archives and, for reasons which seem even less valid, had severely restricted access to former SOE staff and agents. 'Much importance was attached,' he writes, 'to keeping the author out of the way of interested parties.' Which, if you trust your author at all, must be one of the oddest ways of commissioning a historical work ever devised.

As might be expected, since his work was intended to act as a counterbalance to some of the more loaded publicity SOE has received, he is occasionally rather harsh with some agents – and even more so with those who have written up their adventures. But he seems to be unduly sceptical about what some of them suffered at the hands of the Gestapo or Sicherheitsdienst. Elsewhere in the book he does not hesitate to give an account of the gruesome tortures inflicted by the minions of these organisations on agents and members of the maquis (the account of the Vercors fiasco is terrifying). And his account of the beating to death of the valiant Prefect of Chartres, Jean Moulin, reveals that his torturer Barbié, the head of the Lyons Gestapo, is living happily in West Germany today. So it seems all the more curious that he should spend nearly a page of his narrative casting doubt on the reality of the tortures suffered by Odette Sansom. And although it may be amusing to refer to the Gestapo – at a remove of twenty years – as 'tiresome', it is a singularly inappropriate adjective in the circumstances. Idiosyncrasies of style of this kind are no doubt the price that must be paid for a living narrative by an historian who is not afraid to pass judgment, and presumably explains such language as 'the Vichy régime was supported by the bulk of the popish hierarchy, and had a strong popish flavour . . .' (p.135).

SOE in France is divided into two sections. The first deals with the structure of the organisation and its methods of working – origins, recruiting, training, communications, security, codes, ciphers etc.; the second with narratives of the work of teams sent into France. The organisational details will probably be of interest to very few. Training and communications, and the relation of the work of teams in the field to military developments elsewhere and political developments in France are, on the other hand, quite absorbing. Even more so are the accounts – set in perspective for the first time – of the penetration of various teams by German counter-espionage. Naturally enough, the most successful operators are those whose narrative is the least striking. Tony Brooks, for example, 'the youngest agent F section ever sent to France' ran the PIMENTO circuit of railway workers in southern France with conspicuous success for a period of close on three years with the result that from D-Day onwards main line rail traffic in southern France almost came to a standstill. His formula for success – and it worked even when parts

of his circuit were penetrated by the Gestapo – was firm security based on a system of cut-outs: sub-agents *could* not betray their superiors if caught.

Lack of security was the failure of the most tragic – and best known – circuit, that of Francis Suttill, or *Prosper* as he was known in the field. Of public-school and professional background, like many of SOE's staff (the virtues of the old-boy network are extolled in the usual terms – though with gratuitous detail – by Mr Foot), Suttill's Stonyhurst education seems to have overlaid his fluent French (he was born in Lille of a French mother in 1910) with a permanent English accent, and it was often safer for his courier to speak for him. Haphazard as it was, the language difficulty seems to have caused less casualties than might have been feared, though Mr Foot, without citing evidence, says Suttill could have passed for a Belgian, whereas Frenchmen closer to the events say his accent was obviously English. Suttill was dropped into France in October 1942 and it was not long before he had formed dozens of small groups between Paris and the Loire, about 10,000 men and women prepared to sabotage trains and petrol dumps in the belief that the allied invasion of Europe was near. Suttill seems to have shared their belief, and he returned from London in the summer of 1943 a very disillusioned man. He told his second in command, Arnel Guerne, that not only was the invasion postponed, but the network, he felt sure, had been penetrated by the Germans, who were to move against them soon. He was arrested on June 21st, 1943, and while under interrogation in Paris was shown all the correspondence which had passed between him and SOE HQ in Baker Street. Faced with this appalling discovery, Suttill, or one of his agents, seems to have made a pact with the Germans to deliver up the arms caches he and his circuit had made, to save the lives of his agents and their families; though of course they expected imprisonment. It was a difficult decision, and Suttill, whose bravery and loyalty were not – and are not – in question, must have realised it put him in a very tricky situation with his own people. He must have weighed lives against material, and, given the German demonstration of what they knew already, he may have thought he was only anticipating further German discoveries which would result in the death of his friends. Whatever the motivation, the crack-up of several members of the *Prosper* network caused havoc in the resistance movement, particularly in the Sologne area, and is remembered to this day. The Germans, needless to say, did not honour the agreement.

Mr Foot goes into great detail about the treachery and/or weakness which led to the penetration and downfall of the *Prosper* circuit. But he points out, and rightly, that the triumph this represented for the German security services was in itself deceptive. Many more circuits continued to flourish, many more were dropped into France before and after D-Day as a complement to the main allied invasion

forces. Which raises an interesting moral question. It's pretty clear that although a great deal of heroic courage was demanded of the agents of these circuits, who knew they were being dropped to certain danger, continual tension and possible torture at the hands of degenerate sadists; the same was also demanded of the many Frenchmen who risked not only their lives but the lives of their families as well when they joined SOE's circuits or concealed its agents. The question arises: had we the right to expect this of them? This in its turn raises the question of the efficiency of the organisation and its general effect on the course of the war.

Here Mr Foot makes what is, for one reader at any rate, his most startling and convincing claim. The total number of British agents dropped into France by this organisation during the war was around 1400. Over a comparable period, Bomber Command lost somewhere in the region of 55,000 men, and monopolised a far greater segment of British industrial output and manpower. Yet it seems clear – and Noble Frankland's recent work on the strategic bombing offensive demonstrates this – that until well into 1944, Bomber Command, apart from some specially trained crews, could not be sure of hitting anything smaller than a town, and consequently attacks were by and large aimed at town centres rather than at specific industrial installations. The ratio of expenditure of lives and aircraft to damage was extremely high – often unacceptably so. Mr Foot lists in an appendix French industrial installations damaged by SOE agents using 'plastic' explosive. Ninety-four such installations, covering all kinds of production, petrol, oil, ball-bearings, compressed air and so on, were put out of action for weeks or months and in some cases totally destroyed, but with an incomparably smaller loss of life than would have been involved in bombing raids. 'The most interesting thing about this list' writes Mr Foot, 'is that the total quantity of explosives used to produce all these many stoppages taken together was about 3,000 lb., considerably less than the load of a single light Mosquito bomber in 1944.' And the casualty rates were similarly disproportionately different: 'Bomber Command frequently lost in a night more men than F section lost in the entire war; once it lost in a night more people than F section ever sent to France . . .' It is a sobering thought.

No doubt all this applies to peripheral, occupied regions, where some degree of popular support could be relied on. There could not have been any question of a large, sustained SOE effort in Germany itself. But on French targets alone, it makes one wonder how many RAF and French lives might have been saved if SOE had not appeared merely as a disreputable cloak-and-dagger side-show but as an efficient instrument of war, and if the bomber barons had not had their way.