



*The Resistance in Western Europe, 1940–1945*, by Olivier Wieviorka.

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Writing any transnational history is a daunting task, given the languages and bodies of scholarship that must be considered. Hence, studies of the resistance during World War II are typically written within national silos. Historian Olivier Wieviorka (Univ. Paris-Saclay), having authored books on the Vichy regime, the French Resistance, the Normandy landings, and memory and the Second World War, is well qualified to produce a comparative study of the resistance in six Western European nations—Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, and Italy—in the Anglo-American, rather than Soviet, theater of the war.

The author makes good use of archival material, particularly at the National Archives in Kew and College Park, Maryland, but most of his information is drawn from secondary literature on occupation, resistance, liberation, propaganda, and foreign policy.

Wieviorka analyzes the trilateral relations between resistance movements in Europe, governments in exile in London, and Anglo-American supporters of resistance movements, chiefly Britain's Special Operations Executive (SOE) and, later, the US Office of Strategic Services (OSS), and their propaganda counterparts, the British Broadcasting Corporation and the Political Warfare Executive, and the US Office of War Information. He is clear-eyed about the heavy reliance of resistance organizations on external support: "National factors ... played a notable role in the *birth* of the resistance; in its *growth*, however, the Anglo-Americans' role was clearly preeminent" (4). Nevertheless, underground forces and governments in exile refused "to sacrifice their sovereignty on the altar of war" (59), even while accepting Allied aid.

Anyone writing a history of the resistance and its SOE supporters wrestles with the question of organization—chronological, geographic, or thematic?<sup>1</sup> Wieviorka proceeds chronologically and geographically, allowing specific themes to emerge naturally. He begins by describing how European resistance forces entered the Allied coalition, underscoring that the process was not inevitable. Many of these nations began the war as neutrals. The Belgian king, for instance, neither embraced the Allied cause nor went into exile. The Danish government was (albeit unenthusiastically) collaborationist. Italy began the war in the Axis camp, but Mussolini never succeeded in suppressing internal dissent to the extent that Hitler did. In 1943, Italy switched sides, but held the status only of a "cobelligerent," not a formal ally of the Anglo-Americans.

In 1940, Hugh Dalton, Britain's minister of economic warfare and a believer in international socialist solidarity, argued that the SOE and the resistance could achieve dramatic results through sabotage, propaganda, and economic tactics. In 1941, however, it became apparent that his vision was impractical. Instead, the SOE increasingly espoused the vision of Colin Gubbins, its eventual director, who sought to use resistance forces to support conventional military operations, thereby

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1. E.g., the in-house secret history *SOE: Special Operations Executive, 1940–1945* written by William Mackenzie in 1948 and published in 2000 (London: St Ermin's Pr) has mostly chronological divisions plus further geographic subdivisions. M.R.D. Foot's canonical *SOE: An Outline History of the Special Operations Executive, 1940–46* (Frederick, MD: U Pubs of America, 1985) is organized thematically.

integrating irregular warfare into the larger Allied grand strategy. Wieviorka highlights the Anglo-Americans' desire to avoid a premature rising of the resistance fighters, which would "end in a needless bloodbath" (33), without stifling the spirit of resistance altogether.

Between the German conquests of 1940 and Operation Overlord in 1944 came the hard work of forming, training, and equipping underground forces and developing coherent plans for their deployment, amid endless squabbles between (a) various resistance groups and their governments or representatives in London, (b) the Anglo-Americans and their allies, (c) the British and the Americans, and (d) the various agencies of the governments in question. Thus, for example,

In mid-1943, SOE faced a dual dilemma. If it set up its own organizations, it was assured of their obedience but had to deal with the scarcity of volunteers and the lack of results. If it supported existing groups, it benefited from roots in the community and potentially broader mobilization but ran the risk of having its instructions for action ignored, in favor of other objectives—political ones, for example. (140–41)

Charles de Gaulle is a leading actor in the book. He was among the most forceful and significant personalities of the period and his career epitomized the interactions between resistance movements, governments in exile, and Anglo-American backers. De Gaulle was, of course, committed to liberating France and achieving an Allied victory—but on his own terms, that is, with himself at the helm of a new government and with France's head held high. Thus, to the frustration of his Anglo-American colleagues, he accepted their aid but always maneuvered himself into advantageous positions. He strove, for example, to prevent the SOE and OSS from working directly with the French resistance. "De Gaulle wanted to lead the internal resistance, which, had it benefited from direct contact with London, would have slipped from his grasp" (145). To be fair, many leaders of governments in exile tried to do the same, though less skillfully.

On the lead-up to the Normandy landings, Wieviorka draws attention to a largely forgotten episode, Operation Vesuvius, the liberation of Corsica, which became a blueprint for the resistance's role in Operation Overlord. In 1943, the Anglo-Americans, busy with major operations in Italy, lacked the ships and other resources needed to liberate Corsica. Thus, responsibility for planning the effort fell to the SOE, in conjunction with the French. Partisans on the island were provided weapons via air drops and submarines. On the night of 12 September, a sub landed 109 elite French soldiers, to be followed by five hundred more in the coming days. Some ten thousand (mostly Communist) partisans collaborated with this handful of regulars to drive the Germans from the island; more precisely, they precipitated an orderly German withdrawal, since they never actually defeated the Germans in a battle. Allied strategists drew several lessons from this: partisans, though unreliable as infantrymen, could dependably conduct sabotage operations, provide information to conventional forces, and use their knowledge of the local terrain to act as guides. Moreover, SOE and OSS members on the ground observed that the Communists' "ardent desire to liberate their country prevailed over their wish for a new October Revolution" (266).

Wieviorka rightly avoids overgeneralizing about the contribution of the resistance to the war effort and dismisses outright rosy accounts of seamless Allied unity and endlessly successful operations. In fact, all three parties in this triangular drama often bickered with one another; agents were compromised, supply drops missed their targets, attacks went botched, and successes were exaggerated. As one OSS officer put it, "the effectiveness of [French resistance forces] was quite variable. In some of the mountain regions they were magnificent. In other places their value was nil" (320). And yet, Wieviorka still maintains that

The underground forces made an invaluable contribution in the area of intelligence. They played a not insignificant role in the liberation of Western Europe. They often delivered information useful to the Anglo-American troops, helped to locate the enemy forces, disrupted their movements, and, during the retreat, played a role in protecting vital installations from the Germans' avenging fury. In more isolated cases, the resistance assisted Allied airpower through the repatriation of crews downed in Europe. (386)

As for supporting the Normandy landings, he concludes that

On the whole, the resistance acquitted itself brilliantly in these missions. On D-Day there were more than a thousand disruptions of rail service, and that number jumped to three thousand between June 6 and 27. The resistance fighters destroyed 217 locomotives in June, 253 in July, and 188 in August—2,500 in all between April 1943 and August 1944. In short, SOE estimated, 50 percent of the identified targets had been destroyed, a low estimate, no doubt, given the shortage of confirmation reports. (316)

No less importantly, the resistance made an invaluable contribution by, as one SOE veteran put it, “extracting hope and human value from the misery of war. They cleared a space for civic decency and even progress in all the brutish squalor of those years.”<sup>2</sup>

Fears that resistance forces would settle political scores or ignore the orders of Allied leadership after the war proved unfounded. As an SOE report put it, “One of the most remarkable features of the campaign was the cooperation and good sense of the partisans under the guidance of [resistance leadership] and Allied Missions in maintaining law and order” (378).

So, does Olivier Wieviorka succeed in framing a unified narrative out of discrete national accounts? Yes, but only modestly. His story is often episodic, more a patchwork quilt than a tapestry. But creating a single integral narrative is the wrong standard here. Wieviorka repeatedly acknowledges the disparities among his six target nations, yet cogently establishes that comparable challenges faced the underground forces within each, not least the interdependence of resistance forces and their Allied supporters: “the Western resistance would have been powerless without Anglo-American aid; but the Allied secret services would have been blind without the cooperation of national resistance movements” (394).

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2. Basil Davidson, *Special Operations in Europe: Scenes from the anti-Nazi War* (London: Gollancz, 1980) 278, quoted in Wieviorka, 387.