

# The Special Operations Executive

The SOE was formed on 22nd July 1940 under the leadership of Hugh Dalton, Minister for Economic Warfare, by the amalgamation of three existing secret organisations.

Its purpose was to conduct reconnaissance, espionage and sabotage in Nazi occupied Europe. However as the war developed its coverage expanded to include occupied south-east Asia and to support resistance groups in these areas. The headquarters were based in Baker Street, London.

Nicknamed Churchill's Secret Army or Ministry of Ungentlemanly Warfare it also operated in neutral countries, making preparations in case these countries were attacked by the Axis Powers (Germany, Italy and Japan).

Many subsidiary organisations worked for the SOE, many being based in the Home Counties to the north and east of London. One group was involved in the development of radio transmitters to be used by agents in the field, including the Parasol which utilised new miniature valves reducing the weight of a radio set to only 9 lbs (4.1kg) so that it could be accommodated in an attache case. Another subsidiary developed weapons suitable for "irregular warfare". It was located at "The Firs", Whitchurch, in Buckinghamshire. This particular part of the SOE was nicknamed Churchill's Toyshop as a result of his interest in its work.

The SOE also had many branches overseas with autonomy to control their own activities, notably in Cairo, Algiers, Naples and New York. The latter was housed in the Rockefeller Centre.

SOE agents came from a variety of backgrounds worldwide. In the UK many were Oxbridge graduates, whilst abroad members were often recruited from those with the necessary language skills and an intimate knowledge of the country to which they were assigned. They included exiled or escaped members of their armed forces. The SOE was also prepared to defy current conventions when recruiting agents, thus it employed homosexuals, those with a criminal record, communists and even anti-British nationalists.

SOE activities included blowing up trains, bridges and factories, as well as fostering revolt and guerrilla warfare in enemy-occupied countries. Notable operations included the destruction of the Norsk Hydro Plant in Norway in 1943, which had been manufacturing “heavy water” for the Nazi atomic bomb programme. The SOE were also instrumental in the assassination of the leading Nazi Reinhard Heydrich in Prague, in an operation called Anthropoid.

In 1944, with an end to the war in sight, the future of the SOE was discussed in Whitehall. However it was not until 15 January 1946 that it was finally disbanded. Some branches and personnel of the SOE were incorporated into MI6.