

WESTERN EUROPE 1939–1945: RESISTANCE AND SOE

Training

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Courtesy of the [Imperial War Museum](#), London.

Extract from a film called "Now It Can Be Told" produced by the RAF Film Production Unit for the British Government in 1946 about the work of British agents during the war.

Transcript

Male agent: They had their own ideas about getting us fit. No smart drill movements or parade ground stuff. They wanted us to look like ordinary unhealthy civilians and yet be able to take a commando battle course in our stride! They seemed to take a delight in making us climb up things and then jump down or slide down!

Female agent: We were taught all about firearms, British and foreign.

Male agent: And how to use them in any emergency.

Female agent: We went on a thirty-mile walk across country with only a map and compass to guide us.

What is this source?

This film is a reconstruction showing the work of men and women who belonged to the Special Operations Executive in WW2. The SOE was set up to carry out missions in enemy territory. British agents working with the French Resistance are shown disrupting enemy communications in preparation for the Normandy landings.

The film was produced in 1946 by the RAF Film Production Unit and was paid for by the Central Office of Information.

What's the background to this source?

When the Germans overran most of Europe in 1939–40 there were still many people in the occupied lands who were prepared to resist them. The job of the SOE was to locate people who could resist the Germans and also send agents in to help the resistance movements.

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Resistance took many forms. Many resistance workers focused on collecting information about German activities, troop movements and weapon sites. Some took part in sabotage operations, destroying important factories and rail links. It was a very dangerous activity. Resisters risked being tortured and executed. There were often reprisals for acts of resistance as well.

It's worth knowing that...

Many of the 'British' agents were not British! Large numbers of people fled from the German advance in the early stages of the war and ended up in Britain. Some of these were recruited as agents to be sent back to their own countries because they spoke the language, they were familiar with those countries and they wanted to help their country.

The SOE was one of many organisations that carried out operations behind enemy lines. The SOE and other agencies also had to work closely with the RAF and Royal Navy, because agents were usually dropped in from planes or submarines.

What do we learn about SOE agents from this source

1. What training and equipment were they given?
2. What tasks did they carry as agents working in occupied France?
3. What type of people carried out this work?

Use this outline to plan your poster.