

WESTERN EUROPE 1939–1945: RESISTANCE AND SOE

More training and lectures for work in the field

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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: This really was a school. I mean we had lessons. The instructors were smooth university dons who had taken a course under "Pimpernel Smith" or "Raffles". They told us in the most gentlemanly manner how to organise our private lives as saboteurs, how to burgle a house, how to get out of handcuffs. They told us almost apologetically about 'lethal tablets', suicide pills, to be taken only as a last resort.

Female agent: We made notes about organisation and personal security.

Male agent: Learned how to recognise all ranks of the German services.

Female agent: Told how to use codes.

Male agent: How the BBC sent personal messages during the French news.

Female agent: The organisation of the Gestapo.

Male agent: Until our brains reeled under the load of information!

Male agent: At another school we were taught how to organise reception committees. That's local people who'd collect in a field the night the RAF were coming to parachute supplies.

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.

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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.

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.