Secret Alliances and Silent Sabotage: Q & A with Dr Tony Insall

Description

Main Image Credit: The Norwegian Resistance Museum | Norges Hjemmefrontmuseum

Editorâ??s note: This article is part of Project Maritime, which explores modern challenges and opportunities in the maritime dimension at the intersection of irregular warfare and strategic competition. We warmly invite your participation and engagement as we embark on this project. Please send submissions with the subject line â??Project Maritime Submissionâ?• and follow us on X (formerly Twitter) @proj_maritime.

Project Maritime had the pleasure of interviewing Dr. Tony Insall, Senior Visiting Research Fellow at Kingâ??s College London. Dr. Insallâ??s prolific scholarship examines the intersection of special operations, intelligence, and irregular warfare, including in his recent work, Secret Alliances: Special Operations and Intelligence in Norway 1940-1945 â?? The British Perspective*. His expertise spans Norway, Scandinavia, and the Nordic countries during the early Cold War, as well as 20th-century China, British foreign policy, and the origins of the Second World War.*

Q: Dr. Insall, thank you for sharing your insights with our readers. As a senior visiting research fellow at Kingâ??s College London focused on conflict and security, a retired diplomat, and author of multiple books and articles, we would like to pose some questions largely relating to your work: â??*Secret Alliances. Special Operations and Intelligence in Norway 1940-1945 â?? The British Perspective*.â?•

The Norwegian resistance movement during the Nazi occupation may be best known for Operation *Gunnerside* in 1943- the destruction of a heavy water plant to derail a Nazi atomic bomb. But Norwayâ??s resistance also featured a heavy maritime componentâ??including the famous â??Shetland Bus,â?• the tracking and attack of the German battleship *Tirpitz*, and British Secret Intelligence Serviceâ??s coastal watcher system.

Q: Can you set the stage for us in terms of the role of the British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) and the Special Operations Executive (SOE) in countering the German occupation in Norway?

T.E. Lawrence is one of the spiritual fathers of the Special Operations Executive (SOE) [ed. while SIS operated as the British intelligence service, SOE was purely focused on subversion and sabotage.] He is widely known for his observation, â??Irregular war was far more intellectual than a bayonet chargeâ?¦â?• But to this, he added, equally relevantly: â??â?¦far more exhausting than service in the comfortable initiative obedience of an ordered army. Guerillas must be allowed liberal workroom: in irregular war, of two men together, one was being wasted. Our ideal should be to make our battle a series of single combats, our ranks a happy alliance of agile commanders-]in-chief.â?• Or perhaps more simply: the smaller the better. Indeed, SOE stations usually comprised three agents, and SIS stations just two. By contrast, the only large SOE operation, involving 41 men, failed.

Most people believe that SIS and SOE had to start largely from scratch to develop resistance activities in the occupied countries of Western Europe when in reality some preparatory work had already been done. In 1936, Britain developed what we can call a â??think tank,â?• run by Lt. Colonel Jo Holland, to study the characteristics of guerilla warfare and to consider (in great secret) the possibility of providing British support for insurgency (i.e. resistance) in any country overrun by the German Army. This was kept secret because, at that stage, the British General Staff was expressly forbidden to hypothesize that an expeditionary force would be sent to the Continent. Given the sensitivity, Holland was ordered to carry out his research under the umbrella of the recently formed Section D of SIS, which was already beginning its own preparations for sabotage and subversive action in any occupied neutral countries.

Hollandâ??s reports attracted attention, and he was authorized to bring in two additional staff officersâ??one an expert on demolitions, and the other to lead with organization, recruitment, and training. Holland chose Colin Gubbins for the latter post. This was an excellent choice: Gubbins not only spoke French and Russian, but also had personal experience in the Bolshevik revolution in Russia and from the Sinn Fein campaign in Ireland. After the Nazi occupation of Prague in March 1939, section D was transferred to the Director-General of Military Intelligence and became known as MI(R). So, it was here that Gubbins, who was later to become the head of SOE, learned his trade.

Q: Gubbins ended up playing quite an impactful role in Norwayâ??can you say more?

Gubbins had an opportunity to develop his expertise further in the spring of 1940. Although the German invasion of Norway on April 9 took everyone by surprise, MI(R) had already undertaken some contingency planning for amphibious raids on Norwayâ??s western seaboard. Gubbins eventually settled on a plan to form small Independent Companies, which would be armed and equipped to operate in totally independent roles for periods of up to one month. When the Germans invaded Norway, Gubbins was put in command of a group of four such companies, known as *ScissorsForce*. They performed effectively and were among the few units to come out of the Norwegian campaign with

any credit. As a result, Gubbins was later posted to a senior role within the organization.

For their work in Norway, SOE and SIS used British staff who had significant Norwegian expertise (and often some Norwegian parentage). Both Eric Welsh, the SIS controlling officer for Norway who had worked for International Paint in Bergen for more than twenty years, and Frank Foley (who had been head of the SIS station in Berlin before Norway) were similarly well-informed. The early operations of both services, though, were fairly rudimentary. They needed time to work out their strategies and priorities as well as to recruit patriotic Norwegians to the cause.

Norway differed from most of the rest of occupied Europe in one characteristic. SIS sent no British officers there, and SOE sent only two. One of them, Jo Adamson, was captured soon after making a bad landing from a parachute descent, and the other was not involved in any significant operations. So, William Colbyâ??s achievement with Operation *Rype* [ed. an Office of Strategic Services (OSS) mission to sabotage rail lines and German logistics in the Norwegian mountains], in March/April 1945, was quite unique. After his OSS service, Colby later joined the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), where he became an influential Chief of Station during the Vietnam War, and ultimately served as CIA Director.

Q: How critical was the resistance in Norway to the larger conflict in Europe?

While France was always a vital focus for resistance activities, Norway was also extremely significant. Indeed, for much of the war, Hitler was concerned about the possibility of an Allied invasion somewhere on the long Norwegian coast.

Hitlerâ??s concerns were not entirely misplaced. It is well known that British Prime Minister Churchill frequently encouraged consideration of an invasion there â?? *Operation Jupiter*. The fact that it was much disliked by his senior generals, who considered it to be impractical, did not discourage him. Many members of the Norwegian resistance continued to harbor hopes of some sort of Allied operation to liberate their countryâ??a dream that the Allies did not discourage.

The scale of resistance efforts in Norway was significantâ??something made clear by the scale of weapons and equipment shipped and stockpiled there. SOEâ??s Operation *Archer/Heron* in northern Norway, received some twenty-four tons of such supplies in 1942. Aware of the potential for resistance, Hitler deployed 400,000 German troops in Norway, far outnumbering the countryâ??s 250,000 able-bodied male Norwegians.

As the war progressed, and the tide turned against the Nazi regime, resistance and sabotage continued to degrade the German war effort. After D-Day, the Norwegian resistance significantly

disrupted German attempts to move large numbers of troops to reinforce the army attempting to counter the Allied advance through Western Europe. An extensive series of attacks on railway lines and bridges helped to reduce these numbers. In July 1945, the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force estimated that resistance efforts had led to a reduction in the rate of these transfers from four divisions to less than one division per month. Supreme Allied Commander General Eisenhower specifically singled out these operations for praise in a letter he wrote to Gubbins at the end of the war, acknowledging SOEâ??s contributions.

There were plenty of other significant sabotage operations â?? particularly *Gunnerside*, which destroyed the heavy water plant at Vemork. While we now know that the Germans made the wrong choice in pursuing the heavy water route towards an atomic weapon, it doesnâ??t mean that those operations (particularly *Freshman* â?? the ill-fated predecessor to *Gunnerside*) were a waste of lives. Those aggressive actions helped persuade the Germans that their research was on the right track, which kept them from diverting to other, more productive lines of inquiry. Other highlights includ a range of activities that disrupted U-boat activities, particularly after they were moved to Norway from French bases following the Allied invasion. Huge quantities of fuel were destroyed, and a resourceful storekeeper blew up the torpedo store in Horten, destroying over 160 torpedoes and leaving the Germans with only five live ones in southeast Norway.

Hitherto, we have been considering the impact of sabotage operations, which was massive. But we should not overlook SISâ??s work in providing intelligence in Norway, the significance of which certainly matched SOEâ??s contribution.

Q: Can you say more about the role of land-based Norwegian resistance in countering German naval operations?

The prospect that Germany would operate heavy warships like the *Tirpitz* from Norway was a significant threat to Atlantic convoys and particularly to shipments of essential war materials to Russia. It had some unwelcome consequences. For example, when *Tirpitz* was reported to be leaving harbor to attack PQ17, a Murmansk-bound convoy, the British Admiralty unwisely ordered it to disperse. This left it more vulnerable to attack by German aircraft and submarines and led to the sinking of twenty-four out of thirty-seven vessels. *Tirpitz* was not involved in the attack and returned to harbor.

So, it was not surprising that Churchill was almost obsessed with the threat that *Tirpitz* posed to both Atlantic and Arctic convoys. The heavily armored battleship was nearly 300 yards long and weighed over 50,000 tons. It carried a more powerful range of armaments than any warship in the Royal Navy. By May of 1942, when *Tirpitz* had been joined by four heavy cruisers: *Hipper, LÃ¼tzow, Admiral Scheer* and *Prinz Eugen*, they represented an even larger menace to Allied shipping. The cruisers did

not remain constantly in Norwegian waters. However*, Tirpitzâ??by* its mere presenceâ??tied down significant elements of the Home Fleet which could have been used elsewhere.

British beaufighters
Reports from coast-watching SIS stations could lead to prompt responses such as this one by several RAF squadrons in January 1945, which sank several ships and badly damaged the rest in the convoy. Image Credit: foto.digitalarkivet.no

Naval intelligence reporting by Norwegian SIS agents was absolutely crucial. They operated coast-watching stations to gather information. Known as hermit stations because they were so isolated, these sites were located in exposed positions with demanding, often appalling, physical circumstances, where agents often stayed for long periods of up to six months.

At the end of the war, the head of Norwegian intelligence in London, Finn Nagell, claimed that SIS Norwegian agents provided reporting which to a greater or lesser extent contributed to the sinking of the *Bismarck, Scharnhorst* and *Tirpitz*, and also to the damage caused to the *Prinz Eugen, Hipper* and *Admiral Scheer*. It is worth noting the timeliness of these reports as well, some of which reached the Admiralty barely two hours after the observed passage of a warship. GCHQ [ed. Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) is the British counterpart to the United Statesâ?? National Security Agency (NSA)] could not outdo that achievement forty years later when it provided reporting on Argentine activities around the Falkland Islands.

Moreover, those agents provided reporting on the movement of merchant shipping. One agent alone was responsible for the sinking of twelve merchant ships during a six-month period. While we cannot be sure how much damage their reports contributed to or caused in total, it is safe to say that it was of the order of hundreds of thousands of tons. Taken together, this is a considerable achievement, unmatched by any other HUMINT intelligence operation in its contribution to the degradation of the German war effort.

Q: Are there any key lessons that military professionals and policy makers should take that are still applicable today? Particularly relating to maritime logistics/infiltration, etc.

In terms of relevant lessons from the Norwegian experience, two things stand out for me.

The first is communications security. Far too many agents were located and captured by the Germans because their radio transmissions were picked up by direction-finding stations. SOE was more aware of these risks and took some appropriate measures, such as encouraging their stations to move regularly. By contrast, SIS and their Norwegian colleagues were unwilling to acknowledge the danger

â?¦and they paid a heavy price, as their commanders acknowledged after the war. They lacked the imagination to estimate and try to assess the methods which the Germans might be using or developing against them. So, in terms of my first conclusion: ***always put yourself in the place of your enemy and use all the resources at your disposal to make your best estimate of what he might be trying to do to you.***

Secondly, ***the nature of your operations is always going to be affected by the terrain.*** The long Norwegian coastline makes surveillance harder, and â?? provided you are properly equipped â?? the mountainous and rugged nature of the country can make safe movement and operational activity rather easier. And while the weather in the North Sea and off the Norwegian coast was often fatal for the small fishing boats used in the early years of the occupation, it bears emphasizing that if you have suitable means for infiltration, such weather is going to be your friend. Moreover, those conditions provide an ideal environment for exercising and testing both your equipment and your abilities.

Q: Thereâ??s an apocryphal story about the first Norwegian Christmas tree in Trafalgar Square (and British naval intelligence). Can you say more?

Of course. In February 1942, two Norwegian SIS agents, Dagfinn Ulriksen and Atle Svardal returned to Britain after spending nearly six months manning the SIS coast-watching station â??*Eric,â?•* north of Bergen, living in a sheepfold without being able to wash or change their clothes. It was one of the first stations to provide a stream of valuable reporting on German naval activities and was much valued by the British Admiralty.

The Norwegian King Haakon heard of their return and asked for them to come down to London â?? exactly as they were. When he met the filthy and bedraggled pair, the King held his nose and said something which might be better imagined than translated â?? and then proceeded to question them keenly about their activities. This kind of gesture counted for a great deal among those working for the resistance. When Ulriksen returned to Norway in late 1943 to man another SIS station in the same area, he took advantage of a supply delivery by a Shetlands-based submarine chaser to send back a Christmas tree â?? which SIS was able to deliver to King Haakon on Christmas Eve. This symbolic gesture almost certainly planted the seed which led to the decision in 1947 by the city of Oslo to donate a Christmas tree every year to Britain in gratitude for wartime support.

Dr Tony Insall spent more than thirty years in the foreign service, working in Nigeria, Hong Kong, China and Malaysia before spending five years in Norway. He was also an editor for the FCO Historians and has published several books and articles mainly on Norwegian and Scandinavian history including The Brussels and North Atlantic Treaties, 1947-1949. He is the author of Secret Alliances: Special Operations and Intelligence in Norway 1940-1945, *(Biteback 2021) a comprehensive study of Anglo-*

Norwegian resistance cooperation during the Second World War. His most recent book is The Madness of Courage, (Biteback 2025) about his great uncle Gilbert Insall, a pilot in the Royal Flying Corps who is the only person to have both won a Victoria Cross and successfully escaped from a German prison camp during the First World War. Dr. Insall is a Senior Visiting Fellow in the Department of War Studies at Kingâ??s College London and a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society.

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