

The Western Union Clandestine Committee: Britain and the 'Gladio' networks

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In a previous article for *Lobster*,¹ I discussed the planning that took place during the Second World War to establish a stay-behind network in case the Axis powers invaded Great Britain. Thus far my coverage of the subject has extended only to the end of WWII but there is an overlap here as, even before the end of hostilities, planning had begun for the post-war stability of Europe. The two prominent Western powers of the time, Great Britain and the United States, believed that the Soviet Union would be their main opposing force.

In the immediate post-war period, networks which were intended as an underground resistance in the event of a Soviet invasion were established throughout mainland Europe. These were the 'Gladio'² stay-behind networks. I will not try to detail the circumstances in which these networks eventually came to light. An excellent primer for those to whom this is a new topic would be the books and articles by Professor Daniele Ganser.³

1 <<http://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/free/lobster71/lob71-were-doomed.pdf>>

2 I express the term as 'Gladio' (i.e. within quotation marks) because there were similar stay-behind cells all over Europe, but each had a different official name. The only network that was officially called Gladio was that in Italy but, as this was the first one to come to public notice in the early 1990s, the name became synonymous with all such European networks.

3 For example <<https://www.amazon.com/NATOs-Secret-Armies-Operation-Contemporary/dp/0714685003>> or the essay at <http://www.buergerwelle.de/assets/files/secret_warfare_and_natos_stay_behind_armies.htm?cultureKey=&q=pdf/secret_warfare_and_natos_stay_behind_armies.htm>. Ganser's claims have been met with criticism, not least because he cites the US Army's the top secret FM 30-31B, which describes 'internal stabilisation operations'. This is apparently a Soviet forgery. On which see <<http://cryptome.info/fm30-31b/FM30-31B.htm>>. Whatever the veracity of FM30-31B, Ganser's reference to it is only a minor part of his work and the general thesis stands.

The beginnings

What I am more interested in examining is the links between the United Kingdom and the establishment of – and the process of sustaining – the original stay-behind networks in that immediate post-war period. From the spring through to the autumn of 1944, post-war plans for the Special Operations Executive (SOE) were instigated. One figure who played a part in the preparations for what would become the 'Gladio' networks was British military intelligence officer (and future Conservative MP) officer Airey Neave. From late May of 1942, Neave was an officer in the 'escape and evasion' department MI9 and engaged in 'secret communications with Occupied Europe and the training of agents'.⁴

Towards the end of WWII Airey Neave transferred to a section of MI9 known as I.S.9(Z)⁵ and he used this official placement, as the assessor for the granting of awards and medals to MI9 agents (in the Dutch, French and Italian resistances), as a means to also covertly assess potential recruits for stay-behind networks.⁶

In his biography of Airey Neave, the author Paul Routledge quotes Dr. Stephen Dorril, who had provided research assistance for the book:

'European accounts of the stay-behind networks are fairly consistent in their claims that, before hostilities had ceased, networks were already tentatively being planned. Central to these activities were personnel from SOE and in particular from IS9. It is interesting to note the postings of senior IS9 officers and the setting up of "fronts" as the war wound down. These fronts acted as intelligence gathering and recruitment centres and provided cover for MI9 and MI6 officers. It has been suggested that it is through these centres that the

4 Paul Routledge, *Public Servant, Secret Agent: The Elusive Life and Violent Death of Airey Neave* (London: Fourth Estate, 2002) p. 125

5 See <<http://www.arcre.com/archive/mi9/is9>>, which is a transcription of the IS9 Historical Report in the National Archives record TNA WO 208/3242.

6 Routledge (see note 4) pp. 12-13

prototype stay-behind nets were recruited.⁷

Major-General Sir Colin Gubbins (the head of SOE during the final two years of WWII) was anxious that the sabotage networks which SOE had created should remain beyond the end of the war – and that they should so continue under his control and not that of SIS (MI6), who were attempting to instigate a turf war. Roundell Palmer (the 3rd Earl of Selborne), in his position as Minister for Economic Warfare, was the government Minister responsible for SOE and, like Gubbins, was extremely keen that SOE remain active in what was to become post-war Europe. Roundell Palmer twice drafted papers for the War Cabinet on this subject but was unable to win support. In spite of this – or perhaps precisely because of this – Palmer and Gubbins ensured that production of items for clandestine activities continued at close to the peak wartime rate, even though the war effort was already winding down. In doing this, and then despatching the products to the networks in Europe, I believe that they were attempting to create an economic case for the continuation of SOE. If so much money had been spent on equipment that was in place, there would be a weaker argument for disbanding SOE and replacing it with a purely SIS-staffed version.

Churchill himself may not have been a supporter of the campaign to keep SOE alive but like much of Whitehall, as soon as the eventual defeat of the Axis powers seemed assured his thoughts turned to dealing with the Soviets in the post-war era;⁸ and Churchill certainly viewed the Soviet empire as the next enemy.⁹

All is forgiven

⁷ Routledge (see note 4) p. 271

⁸ For summaries of Whitehall's wartime anti-Sovietism and preparations for the post-war era, see for example, Richard J. Aldrich, *The Hidden Hand: Britain, America and Cold War secret intelligence* (London: John Murray, 2001) chapter 2 or Stephen Dorril, *MI6: Fifty Years of Special Operations*, (London: Fourth Estate, 2000) chapter 1.

⁹ Churchill commissioned plans for a Western Allied invasion of Russia. See <<http://media.nationalarchives.gov.uk/index.php/operation-unthinkable-churchills-plan-world-war-three/>>.

Following the defeat of Nazi Germany, in the minds of the entrenched war-fighters who now expected Stalin to push Westwards, the former Nazi adversary transformed into the new friend (i.e. my enemy's enemy). Much information on the Soviet army would have been gleaned from captured high-ranking Nazi German officers. Many of these men were actually paid by the British to produce written testimonies regarding their service, with a particular emphasis on encounters with and/or knowledge of Soviet forces.¹⁰ This was in addition to the many hundreds of Nazis (both military and civilian) who were sequestered by the Americans under the umbrella of the now infamous Operation Paperclip. Both Klaus Barbie (the infamous 'Butcher of Lyon') and Reinhard Gehlen (Hitler's spy chief) were integral to the founding of several 'Gladio' networks through their connections to other ex-Nazis, some of whom were, like Barbie and Gehlen themselves, war criminals.¹¹

One interesting sideline that I have come across during my research for this article, is that a section of SOE known as Military Establishment 42¹² (ME42) was, amongst other tasks, instructed to obtain German papers and army uniforms that would be specifically for the use of agents in the post-war period. What is the likelihood that other units would have been formed and tasked with similar duties in other countries that were deemed as 'weak in the face of the Communist threat'?

The paranoid mindset prevalent in the Foreign Office at

¹⁰ Dorril, *MI6* (see note 8) p. 100.

¹¹ See pp. 63/4 of John L. Bebbler, 'Nazi Allies: The United States Recruitment of Nazis after World War II' in *Security and Intelligence Studies Journal*, Vol. 3 No. 1, Spring 2015. Apologist articles for this behaviour are still appearing today. See, for example, <<https://www.yahoo.com/news/reinhard-gehlen-friendly-enemy-080000213.html>>.

¹² Some details regarding ME42 are at <<http://www.arcre.com/archive/soe/soeme42>>. The commanding officer of ME42 was Major Ernest Henry van Maurik (24 August 1916 – 21 January 2012) and his *Daily Telegraph* obituary is at <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/military-obituaries/special-forces-obituaries/9104908/Ernest-van-Maurik.html>>. The Imperial War Museum list of papers on him at <<http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/1030012573>> shows an interesting career.

the time is perfectly reflected by the contents of the Bastions Paper, which was produced in the summer of 1948. Here it was stated that Greece was seen as the principal 'weak link' in the defence against Communism. If Greece were to fall to a Soviet advance, the paper suggested, then the Red Army would quickly spread not only westward and northward through Italy, Austria and Germany, but also eastwards into Turkey. All of those countries were later revealed to have had significant stay-behind networks.

Another development in 1948 was the signing of the Brussels Treaty, which tied Belgium, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Great Britain into a protective union. This preceded, and also partly led to, the NATO pact in 1949. These larger protective organisations necessitated some co-ordination of the stay-behind groups. Thus, in early 1949 the then head of SIS, 'C', Sir Stewart Menzies, instigated contact with other heads of European secret services, inviting them to join with Britain (and personnel from the US, who only acted as observers) in forming a Western Union Clandestine Committee.

The Foreign Office papers

During my initial research for this article I discovered a set of Foreign Office papers on the Western Union Clandestine Committee that were listed in the National Archives. These documents, with the reference FO 1093/396,¹³ were not available as they had been 'Retained by Department under Section 3.4' – which is a general catchall retention for documents deemed to still be sensitive after the expiration of the usual thirty year rule. Regardless of this, I made a Freedom of Information request to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office for access. This was successful and I have received a copy of the papers, with a few (very minor) details remaining redacted. I have appealed for the release of this additional information and am awaiting the results of that

¹³ See <<http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C13430565>> At the time of writing, there has been no change to this National Archives web listing. I expect this to be corrected over time, as the papers are properly placed within the archives at Kew.

review.

The released papers reveal that, late in 1949, one Nigel Bicknell (probably Squadron Leader Nigel Bicknell DSO DFC) wrote a memo to Sir Evelyn Shuckburgh (head of the department dealing with Western Europe) to the effect that the first meeting had taken place of the Western Union Clandestine Committee (hereafter WUCC).¹⁴ He also detailed how the 'C' of MI6 at the time (Sir Stewart Menzies) had exchanged correspondence with Air Chief Marshal Sir William Elliott regarding the subject. At the inaugural meeting 'C' had opened the proceedings by welcoming all those who were attending as representatives of their governments. In addition to the British, these nations were France, Holland and Belgium, with observers from the United States.¹⁵

Also mentioned in Bicknell's memo was Sir Gladwyn Jebb (later to serve as the UK's Ambassador to the UN and to Paris, and already a senior member of the FO's Russia Committee¹⁶). Jebb was keen that Sir Evelyn Shuckburgh be kept abreast of developments regarding the WUCC. With the agreement of 'C', Bicknell was to brief Shuckburgh in person, along both the 'War Planning expert' from SIS and the secretary of the WUCC. In this briefing, it was made clear that the WUCC was to be 'kept quite separate from the other Brussels Treaty machinery'. It had also already been decided that the committee would have a central British element in that the secretary would come from SIS (as they were one of 'C's assistants) although the chairmanship rotated through each participating country in turn.

14 Interestingly, the similarly named Western Union (Commanders-in-Chief) Committee a.k.a the WU(C-in-C) was a part of the Western Union Defence Organization and had already been in existence since the autumn of 1948. Perhaps the WU(C-in-C) provided useful cover for the WUCC in that alphabet soup of government committees?

15 The American observers would have been from the newly formed CIA but were also, very likely, veterans of the wartime Office of Strategic Services.

16 By the time that the WUCC was set up in late 1949, the Foreign Office Russia Committee had been in existence for three years and was chaired by Sir Gladwyn Jebb. This neatly ensured that there was coherence between the Russia Committee policy and that of the WUCC.

As NATO was still in its nascent days, there was some concern that the very nature of the WUCC's remit – 'operational clandestine activities' – would necessarily require it, for the time being at least, to be separated from the Western European Regional Group of the Atlantic Pact. It was later established that the WUCC would report to, and liaise with, the Western Union Chiefs of Staff, using Sir George Mallaby (who was Secretary General of the Western Union Defence Organisation) as its exclusive link. The Western Union Chiefs of Staff were based in London, so the WUCC was also based there and all meetings took place in London. George Gordon-Lennox (who would later rise to the rank of Lieutenant-General Sir George Gordon-Lennox) also seems to have been involved, as a hand-written note on the reverse of one of the earliest WUCC documents states that 'Colonel Gordon-Lennox and I will help you explain the objects of the committee to Sir G Jebb, if you think it absolutely necessary'.

As with any other high-level Governmental committee, the 'Terms of Reference' for the WUCC had to be clearly defined. This process was undertaken during the summer and autumn of 1949, and the paper records from this are also included in those released from reference FO 1093/396. If there were any remaining doubt as to the nature of the WUCC and its deliberations, and whether these did actually lead to the formation of the 'Gladio' networks, here are some direct quotes from those Terms of Reference:

'... to provide a focus for co-ordination between the Services charged with the conduct of clandestine activities in the five Western Union countries on the broad issues involved in war planning and the conduct of operations in war... to discuss and co-ordinate matters... relating to the preparations in peace and conduct in war of Special Operations and Secret Intelligence... In particular to ensure... the proper clandestine support of the Supreme Commander in Western Europe at the outbreak of war.'

At the first couple of meetings of the WUCC, the Chair was also the head of the British delegation. This was Major General

John Sinclair (later to succeed Menzies as 'C' of SIS and to become Sir John Sinclair ¹⁷). As it currently stands, the documents released to me by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) have the remaining names of the participants redacted. I am appealing against this redaction and will update if there is any eventual success in this matter. What is known, however, is that there was a ranking Commander from the British contingent; a Colonel and two Commandants from France; two Colonels and a third person of redacted rank from the Netherlands; a non-military participant from Belgium; two observers from the American States; and finally, the secretariat (of British nationality) were one non-military and a Major.

Also included in the papers released to me by the FCO are the minutes of the first and second meetings of the WUCC. In the minutes from the second meeting, it is recorded that:

'The Committee as he [Major General Sinclair] saw it, was essentially a body of voluntary members formed to discuss how best its member nations could combine such resources as they had available to put into the common pool toward a a joint allied plan for clandestine work in the defence of Western Europe in war.'

I believe that this, along with the 'Terms of Reference' for the WUCC mentioned above, confirms the connection between the WUCC and the stay-behind networks in Europe.

There was much effort to keep the Clandestine Committee genuinely clandestine. It is recorded in the minutes of the first meeting that:

'The CHAIRMAN proposed and IT WAS AGREED that:
(a) Both for reasons of security and in order to avoid

¹⁷ As 'C' Sinclair presided over some notable 'events', including the death while on active duty of Commander Lionel 'Buster' Crabb. See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/may/9/newsid_4741000/4741060.stm>. It has also more recently been revealed that Sinclair was responsible for a rather 'old-school colonial' defence of Kim Philby in 1955, when the yet-to-be-unmasked traitor was already under strong suspicion. See <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/defence/10552357/MI6-had-blind-faith-in-Kim-Philby-for-years-after-Soviet-agent-fears.html>>.

being committed too precisely at this stage, the meeting should recommend that the Western Union Clandestine Committee should not appear on any official chart of the Western Union Organisation.'

They certainly seemed to succeed in their attempts at extreme secrecy as the documented trail of information on British links to the 'Gladio' does seem to run dry for a number of years.

Continuing British support

Further details did emerge in the 1990s, including the publication of Michael Smith's *New Cloak, Old Dagger: How Britain's Spies Came in from the Cold*. A revelatory but seemingly widely ignored section of this book states that two ex-Royal Marine officers had attested to how they had been recruited by MI6 in the early fifties to set up arms caches and provide other such similar assistance for stay-behind groups in Europe.¹⁸

Former MI6 officer Anthony Cavendish wrote in his account of his years working clandestinely for HMG that, in 1950, he was the SIS War Planning Officer in Berlin, placing caches of radios, weapons and explosives – initially in the Grunewald forest to the west of Berlin. He states that '... the stay-behind network I was to manage had to be set up from scratch.' This Stay-Behind organisation was in the Russian zone in lower Austria.¹⁹

In the decades following the post-war years radio technology, in particular, improved and advanced at a

¹⁸ Michael Smith, *New Cloak, Old Dagger: How Britain's Spies Came in from the Cold* (London: Gollancz, 1996) p. 117. The two ex-Marines also get a mention in an AP sourced news item that appeared in a number of American (but seemingly no UK) newspapers in early July of 1995. See <<https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=336&dat=19950705&id=IKcpAAAIBAJ&sjid=BuwDAAAIBAJ&pg=6546,2451885&hl=en>>. The relevant part of this article are the two paragraphs starting from the bottom of the second column. *Lobster* was one of the few publications to spot that Smith had interviewed these British soldiers who worked with the Gladio networks. See the review of *New Cloak, Old Dagger* in *Lobster* 33, Summer 1997.

¹⁹ Anthony Cavendish, *Inside Intelligence* (London: Harper Collins, 1990) pp. 66 and 74

particularly fast rate. The changes that occurred in such clandestine radio communications equipment is covered by the extremely interesting Crypto Museum website.²⁰ Although most of the Gladio radio equipment was produced by manufacturers from the European mainland (such as Phillips in Holland and AEG Telefunken in Germany), British technicians from Her Majesty's Government Communications Centre (HMGCC²¹) developed the PRM-4150 set that was widely used for the decade between the end of the 1970s and the end of the 1980s. It was the first radio used by the Gladio networks that was fully digital and based on the 'five-figure-grouping' numbers system of encoding.²²

One of the primary 'on-the-ground' sources of intelligence on the Order of Battle and movements of Soviet forces, which would have given an early warning of any possible invasion, was the British Commander-in-Chief's Mission to the Soviet Forces in Germany (BRIXMIS).²³ Former 22 SAS soldier Ken Connor was a Warrant Officer in BRIXMIS in the mid-1980s, during the final phase of his service with UK Special Forces (UKSF) – although he was badged as Royal Signals whilst with BRIXMIS.²⁴ Copies of the Special Air Service Regimental journal *Mars and Minerva* that I have read often include accounts of previous military exercises that both the regular and territorial SAS regiments have undertaken in

20 See <<http://www.cryptomuseum.com/spy/gladio/index.htm>>.

21 Spookily (pun intended), HMGCC are currently based at Hanslope Park in Milton Keynes and the FCO documents I had released to me were despatched from the FCO's 'Knowledge Management Department' which is also to be found at – you guessed it – Hanslope Park.

22 As good a point to start for anyone who might want to read more about 'Numbers Stations' would be <<http://www.spynumbers.com/>> and the YouTube upload of a BBC Radio 4 programme at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wvr6o7fBcTY>>.

23 An official, and very dry account is at the Intelligence Corps Museum website at <<http://www.militaryintelligencemuseum.org/displays/displays-sections/?displayID=1>> A more entertaining read can be found at <<http://www.brixmis.co.uk/>>.

24 See note 41 on page 64 of *BRIXMIS in the 1980s: the Cold War's 'Great Game'* by Major General Peter Williams CMG OBE, downloadable from <http://kms2.isn.ethz.ch/serviceengine/Files/PHP/29544/ipublicationdocument_singledocument/cfc33b48-d4eb-4ad4-a253-fb9dec50d345/en/BRIXMIS_1980s.pdf>

Europe. It would seem an obvious option to me, that the participation of British Special Forces in these manoeuvres would have been used as a convenient means, when necessary, to service arms and equipment caches in the European countryside.

An article by the Belgium-based Associated Press reporter Raf Casert recounts how, in the early 1990s, some of the weapons that had been placed in the Gladio arms caches had disappeared, although the majority of the items seemingly remained intact.²⁵ Almost every Western European nation is identified in the AP story as having some form of arms dump. More recently Tony Gosling, writing for *Russia Today*, also recounted a similar tale of highly suspicious stockpiles of guns, etc., that had been found 'at Greylake nature reserve in the flood plains of the Somerset levels' by some teenage boys who had been fishing.²⁶

UK Special Forces and 'Gladio'

The Special Reconnaissance Squadron of the Royal Armoured Corps, which existed between 1962 and 1963 seems to have been an experiment on European stay-behind operations to see if a UKSF element would be useful. That one of the Territorial SAS regiments took over this role from the Special Reconnaissance Squadron when it was disbanded proves, to my mind, that the role was indeed considered vital but that it should be undertaken by more specialist forces.²⁷

Mainstream media coverage about the UKSF aspect of Gladio have been very rare, but Hugh O'Shaughnessy writing in the *Observer*²⁸ has noted how the networks in Belgium, Switzerland and Italy had all received British Special Forces

25 Raf Casert, 'Secret Gladio network planted weapons caches in NATO countries', Associated Press, 13 November 1990 at <<https://www.scribd.com/doc/202065045/Casert-Raf-Secret-Gladio-Network-Planted-Weapons-Caches-in-Nato-Countries-AP-Nov-13-1990>>.

26 See <<https://www.rt.com/op-edge/238393-ira-nato-uk-rifles-weapons/>>.

27 See <<https://paradata.org.uk/article/4335/related/10136>>.

28 Hugh O'Shaughnessy, 'GLADIO – Europe's best kept secret', *Observer*, 7 June 1992.

training either in their home countries or at bases on the UK mainland. In the BBC Timewatch documentaries on 'Gladio',²⁹ produced by American film maker Allan Francovich, the Italian navy captain Decimo Garau (a trainer for Italian Gladio members at Campo Marrargiu on Sardinia) states:

'I was in England for a week, at Poole, invited by the special forces [SBS]. I was there for a week and did some training with them. I did a parachute jump over the Channel. Did some training with them, I got on well with them. Then I was at Hereford [22 SAS], to plan and carry out an exercise with the SAS.'

Also in the Timewatch programmes, General Gerardo Serravalle, who was the commander of the Italian network from 1971-74, states that he undertook a training course run by British personnel. These were members of the 'English stay-behind', but he was not made aware if they were members of the military or intelligence communities. My guess would be that they were military, and members of one of the two Special Air Service Territorial Regiments (either 21 SAS or 23 SAS). Most interestingly, in respect to this TA SAS involvement, Paul Routledge's biography of Airey Neave, from which I have already quoted, further states that 'Neave was Officer Commanding Intelligence School 9 (TA) from 1949 to 1951' and that, 'IS9 later became 23 SAS Regiment, based in the Midlands, with a role to counter domestic subversion.'³⁰

Both the 21 and 23 regiments of the Special Air Service are Territorial Army volunteer regiments, with a south-north division of responsibilities. 21 SAS cover the southern half of Great Britain and have their Regimental HQ at the Regents

²⁹ Originally broadcast on UK television on BBC2 in three parts (Wednesdays 10, 17, and 24 June) in 1992 (during season 11 of the documentary strand 'Timewatch'), but available in one amalgamated video online on YouTube at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GGHXjO8wHsA>>.

³⁰ Routledge (see note 4) pp. 271 and 13-14. See also the very brief history of 23 SAS in the final paragraph of the *Birmingham Mail* news story (26 December 2008) 'SAS to march through Birmingham to receive freedom of city.' at <<http://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/local-news/sas-to-march-through-birmingham-to-receive-75447>>.

Park barracks on Albany Street in London, with additional regional centres in Hampshire and Cambridgeshire in England, and Gwent in Wales. 23 SAS are the northern regiment and their regimental HQ is in Birmingham, with the regional centres being in Dundee and Lanarkshire in Scotland, and West Yorkshire, Greater Manchester and Tyneside in England.³¹

Although the current tasking of the UKSF reserves for active duties within the United Kingdom will reflect much of that originally given to the Auxiliary Units, the advances in modern computer technology mean that there are new areas of expertise that need to be covered. Computer hacking, the injection of malware into systems and denial-of-service (DoS) and distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks against an invading – or occupying – force will all be an aspect of any resistance fighting.

Identifying serving members from any of the UKSF regiments can prove difficult. For those troops who die in the service of their country, it is a different matter. In early May 2008 James Thompson, a trooper with the 23 SAS territorial regiment, was killed by a IED explosion in Afghanistan. In his civilian life, he was a computer technician for the firm Corporate Document Services in Leeds.³²

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³¹ Details for contacting the various area commands for both 21 SAS and 23 SAS (along with those for the 63 UKSF Signals Squadron and the Special Boat Service [Reserve]) can be found on the UKSF recruitment section of the official British Army website at <<http://www.army.mod.uk/specialforces/30607.aspx>>.

³² See: <<http://www.specialforcesroh.com/showthread.php?18335-Thompson-James-Christopher>> and <<http://www.thejournal.co.uk/news/north-east-news/familys-tribute-hero-son-4494828>>. CDS has a large portfolio of Government, Police and Defence contracts, as detailed on its website <<http://cds.co.uk/>>.