

Review for TLS

Book TARGET ITALY THE SECRET WAR AGAINST MUSSOLINI, 1940-1943

Publisher FABER AND FABER

Author RODERICK BAILEY

Reviewer JAMES PETTIFER

By line James Pettifer teaches modern Balkan history at St Cross College, Oxford. He has recently published *The Kosova Liberation Army Underground War to Balkan Insurgency 1948-2001*, and *Albania and the Balkans Essays in honour of Sir Reginald Hibbert*.

In his first book, Roderick Bailey broke new ground with a comprehensive account of the Special Operations Executive (SOE) in World War II in Albania, *The Wildest Province: SOE in the Land of the Eagle*. This SOE Italy history was commissioned by the Cabinet Office, and has an 'official' identity the first book did not. The slow, winding and often blocked road of SOE historiography is well known. The appearance of M.R.D. Foot's study of SOE in France, no less than forty eight years ago in 1966 was followed by a long silence. There were

intractable problems in getting agreement in official London about how-or if- the history of secret organisations could be written. Although times have changed, and professional histories of agencies like MI5 and SIS exist, with SOE there are still important gaps.

Whitehall officials, including Dame Barbara Salt, an ex-SOE Italy operative herself, had begun to mull over an official history of SOE Italy as long ago as 1969 but nothing resulted.. The organisation had an awkward legacy. SOE always had its Whitehall enemies from the day Churchill set it up, on the MoD side from those who saw SOE as romantic adventurers hooked on irregular warfare, Byronic individualists unwilling to accept normal military discipline. On the FCO/SIS side it was a rival for influence with the War Cabinet.

There is also the issue of 'elitism'.. Ex-SOE names can read like a litany from the *Dictionary of National Biography*, with literary, academic and political illuminati like Paddy Leigh Fermor, Basil Davidson, Julian Amery, Fitzroy McLean and C.E.M. (Monty) Woodhouse only a few. They were often not good organisation men afterwards. Those like Nigel Clive who moved smoothly from underground work in Greece to a Cold War career in SIS or Alan Hare who went on to chair the *Financial Times* were uncommon.

Roderick Bailey is a fluent writer, with a fine eye for personalities, and this book is, apart from its solid professional virtues, a very good read. Time after time this reader thought 'so like a film' as recklessly brave Italians decided to commit to resistance. The nightmarish and brutal world of underground work against fascism in Italy is well covered as far as it connected with SOE but is sometimes a little thin on indigenous Italian resistance, and on the wider Italian political scene. Drama is ever present. As in Eric Ambler novels, suitcases full of explosives were hidden in crummy hotels, and secret assignations made on trains. It was a world far from the Geneva conventions, let alone the modern ICTY niceties.. SOE had no qualms about assassination as a political tool, but failed to produce a plausible plan to take

out Mussolini himself. Churchill's Swiss-based intelligence honcho Claude Dansey had begun to identify possible Italian targets as early as 1937. A great strength of the book is the use of oral interviews and Italian archival material, in contrast to earlier SOE histories which depend mostly on British documents.

The overall picture is of an organisation of extraordinarily brave people that could have achieved perhaps more before the Allied invasion than it actually did. Work with communists was not a problem, but Whitehall had little grasp of Italian realities where the Mafia was involved, and unlike the Americans OSS, could never decide clearly how to deal with them. In Sicily and the south that mattered. In its quixotic world, the FCO mostly felt the Mob didn't exist much anymore. In many places, they were actually a government-in-waiting. In pure military terms, SOE was only a small player in the allied orchestra, and had nothing to contribute to battles like Monte Cassino. Here, only heavy metal infantry, aircraft and artillery mattered.

On a personal note, my father was an Eighth Army tank officer and slogged for two years north up the 'boot', with a slightly jaundiced view of irregular soldiers who blew up useful bridges. In the Balkans, things were different. Except for part of the war in Greece, SOE had no allied army to relate to on the ground. A small SOE cadre could wield disproportionate political as well as military influence (gold, munitions to Tito, Hoxha, ELAS, etc). Italy was different. Perhaps this is why, nearly seventy years after SOE's dissolution, official histories of SOE Greece, SOE Yugoslavia and SOE Bulgaria are still awaited? Gold and guns bring difficult Balkan politics with them.

JP