



Secret Alliances: Special Operations and Intelligence in Norway 1940–1945—The British Perspective by Tony Insall.

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Although Norwegian authors have studied in detail the German occupation of Norway and the Norwegian resistance to it (1940–45), little has been written from a British perspective. Happily, notes Tony Insall (King’s College London) in his new book, that is changing with the recent release of materials to the National Archives in Kew. These documents concern the sabotage and subversion activities of the Special Operations Executive (SOE), and the work of the Government Code and Cypher School. In addition, some of this material touches on the role of the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS, or MI6), whose archives have not been released in Britain (yet are partially available in Norway). Together with material made available by the Russian intelligence service known as the NKVD (1934–46), newly accessible files, memoranda, and notes have enabled Insall to reappraise resistance activities in occupied Norway and British contributions to them. He has worked for more than thirty years in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, serving in Nigeria, Hong Kong, China, Malaysia and Norway. He has also published extensively.¹

Secret Alliances comprises fourteen chapters, enhanced by maps, endnotes, a select bibliography, and photographs of key personnel of the covert struggle within Norway over the course of war.

After the war, Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden, looking back on Anglo-Norwegian intelligence cooperation at a farewell lunch honoring the exiled Norwegian government, said that “we have had no allies, however powerful, with whom it has been a greater privilege to work than our friends in Norway” (1). The Norwegians could be forgiven for wondering at Eden’s remarks in light of their awkward relations with Britain during the initial phase of German occupation. They were disappointed at what they considered weak British support during the German invasion. Their collaboration going forward inevitably ran afoul of London’s priorities for the prosecution of war in an hour of maximum national peril.

It would not be easy for the Norwegians to resolve their main internal differences and to start to establish closer political and military relations with the British. Their initial numbers were small, and they lacked organisation. Moreover, on the military side, the British were looking not just to develop resistance operations, but also to retain control of them. So they preferred to recruit and train Norwegians themselves, with as little interference as possible. Their insistence on high levels of restrictive security also meant that they did not want to disclose in advance their plans for operations on the Norwegian mainland. (3)

Relations among the British agencies were strained by conflicts in their very nature. Sabotage by the SOE, especially when successful, provoked new security measures by the Germans. These

1. See, e.g., his (and Patrick Salmon’s) *Brussels and North Atlantic Treaties, 1948–49* (NY: Routledge 2015); *The Nordic Countries: From War to Cold War, 1944–1951* (id., 2011); and Haakon Lie, *Denis Healey and the Making of an Anglo-Norwegian Special Relationship, 1945–1951* (Bergen: Fagbokforlaget, 2010).

complicated intelligence gathering by the SIS—the one agency tasked with causing mayhem, the other with avoiding all attention (55–74). Luckily, incoherence of purpose on the British side was surpassed by initial clumsiness on the German side: the Abwehr’s rushed intelligence gathering approach to a possible British invasion of Norway was compounded by poor recruiting of agents (95–139). By virtue of patience in the trial-and-error learning typical of wartime, the British agencies forged good relations with the Norwegian resistance.

Insall devotes his best chapter to the dangerous work of SIS coast-watchers, who charted the movement of German warships in Norwegian waters—the most storied among them the sister battleships *Bismarck* and *Tirpitz*—along with the movement by commercial shipping of strategic minerals (213–49). Intelligence successes were often a product of joint efforts by British and Norwegian personnel in developing complementary skills. And, too, there were cases of dumb luck in having the right man in the right place at the right time. Henry Denham, the Royal Navy’s attaché in Stockholm, received information of operational value from Ragnvald Roscher Lund at the Norwegian legation; this was derived from Lund’s contacts in Swedish General Staff who had information on German naval activities. Lund’s report to Denham of the movement of *Bismarck* and *Prinz Eugen* to the North Atlantic led to *Bismarck*’s interception and destruction in May 1941 (143).

Chapter 9 is a case study of Anglo-Norwegian operations of potentially strategic significance. Specifically, it concerns several attempts to destroy the German heavy water plant in Vemork. Because at the time heavy water was thought to be critical to the production of nuclear weapons, London strove to thwart German research efforts in this regard. Operation Freshman (Nov. 1942) involved British commandos using Airspeed Horsa gliders. Calamitous bad luck caused the death or subsequent capture and execution of the entire commando force.

In February 1943, an alternative Operation, named Gunnerside, parachuted Norwegian SOE commandos into Norway for a rendezvous with survivors of the failed Operation Grouse (Oct. 1942). Owing to enhanced German security arrangements at Vemork, Gunnerside was a more daring operation. But it was brilliantly executed by a team that adapted well to logistical and tactical challenges and destroyed the plant’s inventory of heavy water while halting production for several months. Thereafter, the Norwegian resistance scuppered an attempt to move the remaining heavy water supply to Germany by sabotaging the vessel carrying it. Ironically, these operations may not have prevented Germany from producing a nuclear weapon, but they were doubly successful for the impression they likely created in Berlin:

At that time, the Allies did not have the information which could have enabled them to conclude that the German approach was wrong. They had no choice but to take whatever steps were available to stop or slow down German research and development of all potential secret weapons. Indeed, it might be argued that the continuing Allied attempts to disrupt the production of heavy water may have encouraged the Germans to think that they were on the right track, and not to consider diverting resources elsewhere into what might have proved to be a more profitable line of research. (285)

In short, *Secret Alliances* makes a valuable contribution to the literature of Anglo-Norwegian cooperation during World War II. It also provides a more general reflection on the vagaries of “actionable intelligence” in wartime, notwithstanding the courage and intelligence of those who act on it.