
**Reviewed by** Fred Coventry (Ohio University)

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**Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Ian Herrington’s *Special Operations in Norway: SOE and Resistance in World War II* focuses on the often understudied periphery of the exploits of the Special Operations Executive (SOE) in Europe. Using both British and, critically, Norwegian sources, Herrington illuminates the difficulties faced by SOE in coordinating and fomenting insurrection, resistance, and sabotage in occupied Europe while mollifying their frequently reluctant allies. Although his focus is on Norway specifically, Herrington highlights many of the problems and challenges faced by SOE across occupied Europe. Foremost among those challenges were resistance movements and allies who proved reluctant to take action that would damage their own country’s infrastructure or provoke reprisals against their countrymen and who resisted taking dramatic subversive action against the occupying Nazis without confidence that liberation was imminent. The confidence of potential and actual allies in occupied Europe often suffered from the difficulties SOE faced in supplying them with weapons and other equipment and in securing transport for men and materials when such were available.

In terms of organization, Herrington uses a topical rather than chronological framework. This is particularly useful for the type of history he has written, since his focus is less on field operations and more about the effect of working with various government, military, and paramilitary organizations within Norway and in exile in Britain. He begins, as one must, with a brief sketch of SOE’s creation and organization, then moves on to its mission and goals broadly and in Norway specifically. Each chapter thereafter is devoted to studying how SOE worked with the Norwegian government and military high command in exile, the stay-behind military resistance inside Norway, SOE’s interactions with other new intelligence and special operations organizations in Norway, SOE and established intelligence organizations in Norway, and the role of SOE and its partners during the liberation of Norway and the end of the war. This structure works well and has the added bonus of making this book easy to use as a reference for anyone working on one or more of these topics.

The biggest strength of *Special Operations in Norway* is how it highlights the challenges faced by SOE in Europe. Across the European theater, SOE faced challenges of supply, organization, and most especially coordination with the governments or militaries of the occupied countries in which they operated. Nowhere was this set of challenges more evident than in Norway, which had a government in exile, a military command attached to that exiled government, a military organization still active inside Norway, and a number of smaller resistance groups scattered across
the country. For a significant portion of the year, sea passage and air travel to Norway were extremely difficult, even impossible under some conditions. And of course, Allied war planners and politicians saw Norway as a secondary theater in the overall conflict, which meant it was a low priority for the diversion of resources, such as weapons, ammunition, demolitions equipment, and military transportation.

As Herrington rightly highlights again and again, the most constant and difficult task was coordinating operations with the Norwegian government in exile and its military command structure. As in France and elsewhere, officials and local resistance leaders alike feared mass punishments against civilians, a reasonable concern in Nazi-occupied territories. Likewise, they wanted as little damage done to their infrastructures as possible, since once the war was over they would need to restore their economies and have a functional railway and road system. These concerns frequently constrained SOE and prevented some of their more ambitious and destructive plans for sabotage and subversion from ever coming to fruition. While that was certainly to the advantage of the Norwegians and the French in their respective theaters of war, it also meant that SOE’s planners and operatives found themselves unable to live up to what they saw as the potential of their service. Herrington brings out those frustrations and SOE’s ultimate coming to grips with the realities of waging their secret war in a fraught political climate.

This is where the strength of the book’s topical structure pays off. In this case, he outlines SOE’s relations with several Norwegian military and governmental bodies, both in exile and in country. While it is an operational history of sorts, its focus remains on the more political and cooperative aspects of operations rather than on field operations. The reader gets a much better sense of how and why SOE’s operations unfolded as they did or failed to be carried out at all on occasion, because of the restraints placed on them by political necessities. Because Herrington has structured his book this way, the study does an excellent job of contrasting SOE and British military expectations against Norwegian authorities’ willingness to wage war on their own soil. Herrington draws out the contrasts between SOE and its Norwegian partners, the places in which they agreed, and all of the involved parties’ perspectives on one another’s roles in the wider conflict within Norway. Much of this reflects SOE operations in France and other parts of occupied Europe, where competing expectations and the mismatch between planning and capabilities often constrained SOE more than any particular failings within the organization itself.

Also included in the book is an appendix that details, as far as Herrington was able to tell, a comprehensive list of planned and executed SOE operations in Norway. While the book does not delve too deeply into many specific operations, this appendix makes it possible for future researchers to map out an approach for a more traditional operational history. The appendix gives the names, dates, and a brief summary of each operation and seems like an excellent jumping-off point for other historians who are investigating SOE in Norway or wider SOE operations in Europe.

Overall, Herrington’s book fills a gap in the historiography by tackling an often understudied theater of World War II, especially in terms of special operations, spying, and resistance. This study makes a good companion for other, broader works, such as M. R. D. Foot’s books on SOE and MI9, but might not be the best place to begin studying SOE, in Europe or in the wider conflict. As an adjunct to other scholarship in the subject, this book shines and provides a much-needed supplement to the established historiography on SOE and special operations in Europe during World War II. Anyone interested in the subject should include Special Operations in Norway as a part of their historiographic readings.
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