“Stay Behind”
A Clandestine Cold War Phenomenon

Olav Riste

Introduction

In the summer of 1940, alarmed by the prospect of a German attempt to invade the British Isles, Britain’s Chiefs of Staff prepared to organize, in advance, groups of armed fighters who would stay behind enemy lines and wage guerrilla warfare against the occupying forces if the invasion gave the Wehrmacht a foothold on British soil.

Although vague hints of that pioneering effort could be found in the literature as early as 1968, a book-length treatment of Britain’s wartime Stay Behind venture was not published until 2008. The author of the book, John Warwicker, a retired policeman, was not a trained historian, and the absence of footnotes makes it difficult to check his sources. Even so, the gist of his story seems plausible. He confirms that when Colonel Colin Gubbins returned in early June 1940 from his “rear guard” attempts to delay the advancing German forces during the Norwegian campaign, he was asked to set up an underground network of units “to Stay Behind the front line after German invasion, and emerge at night from secret, camouflaged hideouts fully equipped with arms and explosives.” Through raids and ambushes, they were “to create havoc and destruction among enemy supplies and communications.”

The basis for Gubbins’s remit, according to Warwicker, was a proposal to Winston Churchill’s War Cabinet on 17 June 1940 from the Chiefs of Staff, formulated by the MI(R) military intelligence service and approved by the commander-in-chief of Britain’s Home Forces, General Lord Ironside. A model already existed in the form of an “Observation Unit,” attached to XII Army Corps but destined to remain behind German lines. The new formations,

2. Ibid., p. 49.

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called Auxiliary Units but mostly referred to as Auxunits, were set up and trained from July through September 1940 in the southern and southeastern counties. Warwicker claims that by the autumn of 1940 the network had grown to nearly 3,500 men and women. A “Special Duties Section,” equipped with radio transmitters for intelligence duties, was also organized.

Gubbins’s “auxunits” can fairly claim to be the first example of a Stay Behind network of the sort discussed in this article: “Secret networks organized by a state in preparedness for resistance activities during an eventual enemy occupation.”3 In the historiography of the Cold War, Stay Behind, occasionally abbreviated as SB, has become the common shorthand expression for such groups or networks, although “occupation preparedness” would be a better description of the phenomenon. What, then, can the history of Stay Behind tell us about the Cold War? Perhaps the main thing is that “it illustrates, better than anything else, the great fear felt by the Western World of impending Soviet domination of Europe, as well as the determination in the countries concerned, that an occupation, should it occur, would be resisted in every possible way.”4 An important trigger for that fear was the Communist seizure of power in Czechoslovakia in February 1948. As Henry Kissinger recounts:

> The brutality of the Czech coup reawakened fears that the Soviets might sponsor other, similar takeovers—for example by fostering a communist coup d’état recognizing a new communist government and using military muscle to prop it up. Thus, in April 1948, several Western European countries formed the pact of Brussels—a defensive pact designed to repel any forcible attempts to topple democratic governments.”5

Stay Behind was, as far as we know, an exclusively European phenomenon, and its beginnings coincided with the origins of the Cold War. An earlier, similar network in northeastern Italy slightly predated the end of World War II. The sudden collapse of European Stay Behind, while coinciding with the end of the Cold War, had begun even before that.

### 1990: The “Gladio” Secret Exposed

Created and developed entirely out of the public view, the Stay Behind program was for more than forty years perhaps the best kept secret of the Cold War. The

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4. Ibid.
first official acknowledgment that a Stay Behind network of paramilitary and intelligence organizations had existed in Western Europe during the Cold War came in August 1990 when Italian Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti revealed the program during a parliamentary debate on terrorism in Italy, causing a media sensation. With the vaguely threatening codename “Gladio”—sword—the network was supposed to facilitate preparations to combat a Soviet-bloc invasion of Western Europe. Andreotti’s statement gave few details, and a subsequent commission of inquiry and the release of previously secret documents left more questions than answers. In the following months and years Andreotti’s revelation gave rise to a series of published books and articles, with the result that the subject became overlaid with unverifiable stories told by individuals claiming to have inside knowledge. The name “Gladio” soon came to signify dark conspiracy theories involving most countries of Western Europe and pointing at the secret intelligence services of the member-states of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), above all the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), which was supposedly out to destroy any slightly leftist political group or movement. In the words of the French historian Gérard Arboit,

Those publications, as it always happens when the topic is intelligence, profited from the sulphurous revelations propagated by the media a propos of deviations produced by the existence of those networks in Italy. To some extent the Italian model has even become that of a global conspiracy remote-controlled by the Atlantic Alliance.6

In 2005 this sinister image of the Stay Behind networks acquired the cachet of academic respectability when a Swiss historian, Daniele Ganser, published a book version of his “insigni cum laude” Ph.D. dissertation from Basel University.7 According to the publisher’s description, the book “tells the story of NATO’s secret anti-Communist stay-behind armies that were set up by the CIA and MI6 in all countries of Western Europe and that in some countries became tragically linked to right-wing terrorism.” The ultimate accolade cited on the back cover comes from Noam Chomsky: “This careful, thorough, and incisive study reveals for the first time the scale, grim history, and very threatening implications of the secret armies created by NATO.” The foreword to the book, by the highly regarded intelligence historian John Prados, confirms that the

“executive agents in the creation of the Stay Behind networks were the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) of the United States and the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS or MI6) of the United Kingdom.” Prados finds it especially upsetting to discover that Western Europe and the United States “collaborated in creating networks that took up terrorism.” In Ganser’s depiction, the Stay Behind networks, created by CIA and SIS, became nothing less than NATO’s covert armies, ready to resort to sabotage, terrorism, and assassinations if necessary to protect the established order.

Space constraints here preclude a full rebuttal of the many allegations contained in the more than 300 pages of Ganser’s book. On the pages where he quotes—or misquotes—bits of the motley flood of publications that serve as his sources, he makes no attempt to provide a critical assessment of his source material. Anything that has appeared in print, whether in books, newspapers, or interviews with individuals claiming inside information, seems to have been acceptable as evidence. Instead, I focus here on the two central premises of Ganser’s book: the origins of the Stay Behind networks and their relationship to NATO.8 I begin with a critical review of sources.

A Note on Sources

Even today, nearly 25 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the international history of Stay Behind during the Cold War has remained one of the secretive dark corners of Cold War history. With regard to Stay Behind networks organized in several member-states of NATO, and to some extent tentatively coordinated by the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE), historians’ enquiries to archival authorities in those institutions have proved futile. Nothing seems to have been preserved of any relevance to the organs known to have existed under NATO or SHAPE for the purpose of assisting or advising on the organization of Stay Behind groups or networks. Not even the names of those organs, such as the Clandestine Projects Committee (later renamed the Coordination and Planning Committee), the Allied Consultation and Coordination Groups (ACCG), and the Allied Coordination Committee (ACC), can be found in their files, making this one of those rare occasions when the shredders seem to have done their job to perfection. To the extent that archival sources on the history of Stay Behind do still exist, they are mostly off-limits in the repositories of the clandestine services of the

8. A third claim made by Ganser, that Stay Behind was linked with terrorist activities, has never been substantiated and has been dismissed by official inquiries and by reputable historians in the two countries—Italy and Belgium—where such links supposedly existed.
countries in which Stay Behind networks were set up, or in the archives of the CIA and SIS. Consequently, any effort to describe even the outlines of Stay Behind during the Cold War is a formidable task.

My own interest in and research on Stay Behind began when I was fortunate enough to be the first historian granted full and free access to the archives of the Norwegian Intelligence Service (NIS) up to 1970. In those files I found numerous documents pertaining to the Norwegian Stay Behind program as well as several highly classified documents reflecting the relationship between NIS and certain NATO/SHAPE entities. I was allowed to publish my findings in a chapter of my history of the NIS. Unfortunately, my subsequent attempts to establish the presence and availability of documentation in NATO and SHAPE archives have drawn a blank. In 2005 I tried a different approach to throw light on the origins and early history of Stay Behind: I invited intelligence historians from several countries to an informal workshop on Stay Behind, held on the margins of a larger conference in Oslo on “Intelligence in Waging the Cold War: NATO, the Warsaw Pact, and the Neutrals, 1949–1990,” organized by the Norwegian Institute for Defense Studies. One of the editors of the Journal of Strategic Studies subsequently approached me and my co-organizer of the workshop, Leopoldo Nuti, about producing a special issue on Stay Behind for the journal. But because only two other historians felt they had sufficient material to contribute articles—Charles Cogan on France and Dick Engelen on the Netherlands—we ended up publishing just a special section on the Stay Behind program.

In the meantime, Ganser’s book had appeared. In my harsh review of the book in Intelligence and National Security I stated that the story of Stay Behind in Ganser’s “optique” “becomes a story of a nefarious conspiratorial network, which more often than not was thoroughly infiltrated by extreme right-wing

9. The records of the Allied Coordination Committee (ACC) were apparently kept by the Belgian security services in their capacity as a kind of ACC secretariat, with microfilm copies given to the CIA and SIS (or MI6). After Andreotti revealed the program in 1990, the official records were apparently smuggled to London to circumvent an expected official investigation by the Belgian Senate.


11. In 2009, at a conference at NATO Headquarters on “NATO at 60—A Conference Exploring NATO’s Past through Its Archives,” I presented a paper titled “A Black Hole in the NATO Archives: Planning for Occupation Preparedness (Stay Behind).” However, the papers from that conference were never published. My subsequent correspondence with the chief historian and chief archivist at SHAPE were equally fruitless.

groups, and carried out terrorist actions.”\textsuperscript{13} Several years later, when I had the time to return to the subject of Stay Behind, I decided to focus on the two aspects of his book that were of wider import for the study of Cold War history: his allegation that the Stay Behind networks constituted “NATO’s Secret Armies” (the book’s title) and his claim in the introduction that Stay Behind “had been set up by the US secret service Central Intelligence Agency and the British Secret Intelligence Service (MI6 or SIS).”

\textbf{The Genesis of Cold War Stay-Behind Networks: Created by CIA and MI6?}

Early initiatives to establish Stay Behind networks in Europe date back to the first three or four years after the end of World War II. Most of these initiatives were concerned with what was sometimes referred to as the “frontline states”—the countries bordering on the Soviet Union or its East European allies. I do not deal here with two of the “frontline states”—Greece and Turkey—because Greece was in the throes of a civil war from 1944 to the end of 1948 and did not become a member of NATO until 1952, and because in Turkey SIS’s attempt to set up an element of Stay Behind in 1947 was spearheaded by Kim Philby, who presumably later betrayed it.\textsuperscript{14}

The countries in which British policymakers were most fearful of Soviet subversion attempts after 1945 were Austria and Germany (i.e., the portions of those countries that were under British or British-American occupation). That the British were pioneers in considering such containment ventures is explained by their wartime experience with the organization of the Special Operations Executive (SOE), established in 1940 to stimulate, assist, and provide guidance and leadership to paramilitary resistance groups in German-occupied Europe. In early 1945 an agreement between General Gubbins of SOE and Sir Stewart Menzies of SIS envisaged the merging of relevant sections of SOE with SIS.\textsuperscript{15} A formal report to that effect was accepted by the UK Chiefs of Staff at the end of August 1945, and SOE officially ceased to exist on 30 June 1946. In the meantime, however, some special operations continued


in Austria and Germany, carried out by SOE personnel but now under the aegis of a Special Operations Branch of SIS. The orders came from the British occupation authorities, who were concerned about resurgent Nazi diehards but also worried that the Soviet Union might try to sponsor Communist guerrillas in the British zones of occupation. Shortly after the war, some veteran leaders of SOE proposed to the Chiefs of Staff that skeleton elements of underground resistance ought to be formed in the British-occupied zones of Germany and Austria to head off a Soviet threat.

In October 1945 the British Chiefs of Staff issued a preliminary directive on long-term objectives for special operations, aiming principally at “the creation of a skeleton network capable of rapid expansion in case of war.”16 This was followed the next month by an SOE memorandum that, although specifically concerned with Austria, opens with a general outline of the work to be done.

1. Tasks of S.O.E. abroad have been agreed as follows:
   (a) To create an organisation capable of quick and effective expansion in time of war. This will necessitate maintenance of adequate clandestine contacts, collection of up-to-date information regarding potential objectives of the special types required for planning S.O.E. operations and preparation of adequate covert communications . . . .

2. In carrying out these tasks, S.O.E. have been directed to accord priority to those countries which are likely to be overrun in the earliest stages of conflict with Russia, but which are not, at present, under Russian domination.17

Germany and Austria were the main focus of the Chiefs of Staff directive, whereas other countries of Eastern Europe that were already occupied by the Soviet Union were for the time being excluded from clandestine operations. In 1946 and 1947 that exclusion was lifted, sometimes with disastrous consequences as in the case of Albania, where a major operation to create an anti-Communist resistance movement was betrayed by Philby.

In Western Europe, however, SIS, which at the time was firmly controlled by the Foreign Office, continued its more modest attempts to plan for resistance in countries at risk of Soviet subversive activities. Aside from intelligence collection, former SOE personnel in SIS’s “War Planning Directorate” also began to establish “Stay Behind parties for resistance work” in Germany and

17. Ibid., Doc. 8, p. 258.
The aim was to have roughly ten agents in each major town, ready to undertake sabotage work in the event of a Soviet push westward. But in other countries the Foreign Office would not accept such plans: “The recruitment of agents in any country for this kind of thing in peacetime would be ‘politically dangerous,’” wrote the chairman of the powerful Joint Intelligence Committee. All SIS was allowed to do was to establish a “sleeper unit” with about twenty officers based in London, but nothing should be done abroad. Insofar as MI6 created anything of the sort outside British-occupied areas, they were mere words on paper.

**U.S. Initiatives**

Compared to the British, U.S. officials were slow to begin preparing latent networks to resist a possible Soviet occupation. By all indications, U.S. involvement began with the issuance on 18 June 1948 of National Security Council (NSC) directive 10/2, which created the innocuously named Office of Special Projects (soon renamed the Office of Policy Coordination, or OPC) under the CIA. The directive bluntly stated that in view of the subversive activities of the USSR and the Communists, “the overt foreign activities of the US Government must be supplemented by covert operations.” Through NSC 10/2 the CIA took a major step into the area of covert operations, despite the serious reservations expressed by the CIA director. The scope of the agency’s covert operations was now to include economic warfare and “preventive direct action” such as sabotage, anti-sabotage, demolition, evacuation, aid to guerrillas and underground resistance movements, and support of anti-Communists in threatened countries. Frank G. Wisner was brought over from the State Department to head the OPC. On 29 October 1948 he presented to the CIA director a proposal for a wide range of activities, including the support of Stay Behind groups.

The United States envisaged its covert operations on a global scale, but in Western Europe the initial target was Germany. The CIA, like the SIS, saw Germany as the most likely place for Soviet subversion attempts. Moreover, in the U.S.-occupied zone of Germany U.S. policymakers already had

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19. Ibid., p. 80.
an organization ready and willing to cooperate. This was the network established by General Reinhard Gehlen, the former chief of the Abwehr, Nazi Germany’s counterintelligence agency. A former chief of the German Stay Behind, Volker Foertsch, explains: “In the Organization Gehlen S(tay)B(ehind)O(rganisation) was part of the organization under US patronage... Its mission was to collect and forward intelligence from behind enemy lines in enemy occupied territories plus search and rescue of grounded air force personnel and of other important persons.”

Local European Initiatives

The Netherlands

Of the countries that had suffered German occupation, the Netherlands appears to have been the first to begin planning for resistance in case of a future Soviet occupation. Two separate initiatives have come to light. One can be traced to Colonel J. M. Somers, the wartime chief of “Bureau Inlichtingen,” the Dutch military intelligence service in exile. At the end of the war, the chief of the Dutch General Staff had ordered Somers to disband his wartime organization, but unofficially Somers in 1945 was encouraged to begin recruiting several of his former agents for Stay Behind networks. The main task foreseen was the collection of intelligence. One of Somers’s first priorities was apparently to develop dependable radio sets for clandestine communication between headquarters in Britain and agents in the occupied territory. He also began to prepare a separate section for rescuing and repatriating downed aircrews, a mission that had been an important and successful part of the activities of Dutch wartime resistance.

In the summer of 1948 Somers moved to the Dutch East Indies as director of the Netherlands Forces Intelligence Service and transferred his homeland work to Captain Baron Van Lynden. For Stay Behind the main tasks were still the collection of intelligence and the organization of escape lines. During one of Van Lynden’s visits to London for consultations, presumably with SIS, he was both surprised and upset to learn that his Stay Behind unit was not the only such outfit in the Netherlands. After Van Lynden returned to Amsterdam, the chief of the Dutch General Staff put him in touch with Henk

22. E-mail communication from Volker Foertsch to Olav Riste, 5 March 2004.
Veeneklas, alias David van Eyck, who was running a Dutch organization for special operations that originated from the Dutch wartime counterpart of the British SOE. Van Eyck was in contact with Prince Bernhard, Crown Princess Juliana’s consort, and through him was put in touch with Louis Einthoven. Einthoven’s extensive network of contacts in high quarters included the prime minister, who commissioned Einthoven to set up “an organization that, in case of an eventual occupation, should be the nucleus of civil resistance in the Netherlands.”

Sabotage and preparing an underground press would be the initial tasks. Close collaboration with the British would be ensured through a Joint Planning Board chaired by the chief of the Dutch General Staff and including a representative of SIS.

**Belgium**

Although much is known about Stay Behind in Belgium from the report issued by a parliamentary investigative committee in 1990–1991, very little is known about the program’s origins. The suggestion is that with the early signs of a Cold War developing,

contacts were made by the security services and with the agreement of the Belgian political authorities, with the British and American security services, with the aim of close collaboration and to allow the Belgian Government, in case of an occupation of its territory, to emigrate to a secure location and to maintain secure contact with those who had stayed behind in the country.

A formal relationship was established when on 27 January 1949 Stewart Menzies, “C” of SIS, wrote to Belgian Prime Minister Paul-Henri Spaak that cooperation should be established “on the basis of traditions going back to the First World War and recently reaffirmed,” with a twofold aim:

a) The improvement of our information on the subject of Cominform and potential enemy activities in so far as they concern our two countries; and

b) The preparation of appropriate intelligence and action organizations in the event of war.

24. Ibid., p. 986.


26. Ibid., p. 17. The translations here and elsewhere are mine.

27.Ibid.
Spaak replied that close collaboration between the Belgian, British, and U.S. intelligence services would be highly desirable, and he suggested negotiations to that effect. The first outcome was the establishment in 1949 of a “Tripartite Meeting Belgium/Brussels.” The formal and high-level manner in which this arrangement came about appears to have given Belgium special status in the further development of multilateral European Stay Behind cooperation.

**France**

Almost no documentary sources are available about either the origin or the development of Stay Behind units in France. However, there are indications that already in 1947 certain veterans of the wartime Free French resistance had been asked by the internal security service to organize “a network for watchfulness and internal protection—a Stay Behind, as the Anglo-Saxons call it. In case of a Soviet invasion, impossible to resist in the prevailing sense at the time, they would move to North Africa by way of Spain, and there prepare for the re-conquest of the national territory.”

A similar initiative, under various codenames such as “Rose des Vents,” seems to have been organized by the head of the French foreign intelligence service (Service de Documentation Extérieure et de Contre-Espionnage, or SDECE) and his aide Leroy Finville:

> According to Finville, he was charged by the chief of the SDECE, Henri Ribiere, with resuscitating his World War II network in Brittany as a stay-behind network. This instruction came in the wake of the start of the Berlin blockade in June 1948. Ribiere said he was concerned about a possible Soviet invasion that would overrun France, and therefore such a network was necessary; and that, further, Finville should make contingency plans for removing the SDECE archives to Rabat, Morocco.

Because both of these initiatives predate the establishment of the CIA’s OPC (which was set up in September 1948), they obviously were not inspired or launched by the CIA.

How much those initiatives amounted to is uncertain. Charles Cogan, who served as station chief in Paris for the CIA in the 1980s, attributes the extreme secrecy of French Stay Behind to the national trauma of a great power’s

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28. Arboit, “Note Historique No. 17,” pp. 1–2. Arboit’s paper is wide-ranging but deals mostly with Luxembourg. Because the three Benelux countries worked closely together, and a separate Luxembourg Stay Behind organization did not come into being until the late 1950s, I do not discuss that network here.

humiliating wartime experience of defeat, occupation, and dependence on foreign powers for its liberation. The very existence of a French Stay Behind network was not publicly acknowledged until late 1990, after it had been dissolved in the wake of the Italian “Gladio” scandal.  

**Italy**

The origins of Italian Stay Behind are particularly complex, given the country’s position as first an ally of Nazi Germany and then part-occupied by the Wehrmacht, followed by internal political turmoil in the transition from war to peace. In the final months of the war, as Allied armies fought their way north, a civil conflict raged between the anti-Fascist partisans and Benito Mussolini’s last supporters of the Salò Republic. As Leopoldo Nuti explains:

> Then, once the fighting was over, an uncertain truce settled in while the institutional future of the country remained subject to much controversy: not only was the monarchy discredited for its cooperation with Fascism and likely to be replaced by a republic, but many partisans also talked openly of a “second phase” and of the impending social revolution that would complete the defeat of Fascism by radically reforming the Italian political system once and forever.  

The disparate factions in Italy had developed their own intelligence and underground action groups. But more important for this article was the first attempt by patriotic partisans to build a real Stay Behind organization in the northeastern part of Italy, in order to resist a possible Yugoslav takeover. All partisan formations in the region had officially been disbanded in June 1945, but in November the former Committee of National Liberation in the city of Gorizia set up a clandestine group of about 1,200 partisans, to be activated against any forcible annexation of the city by Yugoslavia. Shortly afterward former leaders of the resistance group “Osoppo” decided to reactivate their unit in the area for defense against Yugoslav incursions. In February 1947, after the signature of the Italian Peace Treaty, the resistance network, which by then numbered some 4,500 fighters, was officially recognized as an auxiliary unit by the Italian Army Staff. Against this official secret army, however, the Italian Communist Party was actively maintaining and expanding its own underground “apparato.” All these formations and networks were closely watched and in part penetrated by

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30. Ibid., p. 946.

U.S. and British intelligence services, especially by the CIA, which feared in 1948 that Italy was highly vulnerable to a Communist takeover.

Nevertheless, the birth of an official Italian Stay Behind organization did not come until late 1951 in response to an initiative by the head of Italian military intelligence, General Umberto Broccoli. He urged the creation of “a network capable of conducting stay-behind, to assist those forces that remained behind the lines during an invasion, and in general to provide intelligence on the areas occupied by the enemy.” Aware that U.S. officials were planning similar groups in northeastern Italy, he wanted to act quickly in order to forestall U.S. intervention and keep the future organization under Italy’s own control.\(^\text{32}\)

**Norway**

The basic idea behind a resistance network for a future enemy occupation came early to Norway’s defense minister, Jens Christian Hauge, who took up that post in 1945 after three years as chief of the country’s military resistance movement. Introducing his “Three Year Plan for the Rebuilding of the Armed Forces” in 1946, he declared that for a small country like Norway “a determination to fight on even after a military defeat and occupation was an essential part of the national preparedness.” In 1947 Colonel Vilhelm Evang, the chief of the Norwegian Intelligence Service, established contact with British SIS representatives who were said to be working on plans to prepare an underground army in other West European countries. Evang’s thinking went more in the direction of an intelligence and communications organization that would be in close contact with British intelligence and military authorities. At a meeting in London in 1948 the two sides decided to proceed further with an already existing network in Norway for the purpose of supplying intelligence and counterespionage information to an allied staff inside or outside the country.

In October 1948, however, Defense Minister Hauge went one step further and drew up a scheme for what he called “an FO 4 preparedness,” patterned on the section of Norway’s wartime defense command in exile in London that had been responsible for organizing military resistance and operations behind enemy lines. Sabotage and guerrilla action against objects of military importance temporarily occupied by an enemy were thus added to the tasks of such a Stay Behind network. Codenamed ROCAMBOLE, or ROC, this operational arm of Stay Behind was planned to have up to forty units of five

\(^{\text{32}}\) Ibid., p. 963.
men each in different parts of the country, equipped with radio sets, arms, and explosives stashed in hidden caches. Based on lessons from the wartime resistance, specialized intelligence networks, codenamed LINDUS, were kept strictly separate from ROC to avoid too many people knowing too much. In addition, a separate organization for Evasion and Escape, mainly for aircrews from downed allied warplanes, was formed under the codename TOM MIX.33

**Denmark**

Oddly, given the fairly close collaboration between the Norwegian and Danish intelligence services, very little is known about the origins of Denmark’s Stay Behind program. Peer Henrik Hansen has argued that it was formed in 1948 by two veterans of the Danish resistance movement who formed “a secret network that could fight Danish Communists in peacetime and Soviet invaders in any war.” They contacted an intelligence representative at the U.S. embassy “who gave them some documents about how to establish clandestine networks, form an intelligence service, and organize a resistance movement.”34 If this is indeed how the Danish units began, then Denmark should perhaps be subsumed under “US initiatives,” but until more is known about the program’s beginnings I have put it with the group of local initiatives. William Colby, the CIA veteran who later became director of the agency, claimed that he was instrumental in organizing Stay Behind in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway, but his assertions are at best exaggerated. By the time Colby became CIA station chief in Stockholm, Norwegian and apparently also Danish Stay Behind units were quite well established. In Sweden, Colby was more active, but the head of Sweden’s Secret Intelligence Service, Thede Palm, who was a central figure in Swedish Stay Behind, took a dislike to Colby and refused to cooperate with him.

**Sweden**

In Sweden, Prime Minister Tage Erlander in June 1949 established a committee charged with forming an underground resistance movement. It is not clear how much actual organizing was done.35 But Colonel Evang, the chief of NIS, had

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a close personal relationship with Thede Palm, the head of a Swedish secret intelligence organization. When they met in November 1949, Evang gave Palm some information about his activities in setting up resistance networks and his contacts with British and U.S. intelligence personnel. Palm noted that he was doing similar work, but slowly and carefully. Three types of activity were being prepared: intelligence, which was Palm’s own remit; sabotage; and moral/psychological preparations. The presumption was that the whole of Swedish territory would be occupied. Finance was no problem, and a lot of radio equipment had been procured. Palm agreed that a main base in England would be needed. Cooperation with the United States would also be necessary, but he had not yet met the right people—the current U.S. intelligence representative in Stockholm, he said, was “quite useless.” Palm’s organization was also taking care of intelligence reporting from Finland, with Finnish agents and radio operators based mostly in northern Finland.36

**Finland**

Finland was a special case. During World War II, Finland considered itself a co-belligerent of Germany, hoping to recover areas lost to the Soviet Union at the end of the Winter War of 1939–1940.37 By the summer of 1944, Finnish leaders begin to worry that the advancing Soviet forces would enter and occupy the whole of Finnish territory. Faced with this threat, the Finns sought a truce and then an armistice with the Soviet Union. An Allied Control Commission with representatives from the USSR, Britain, and the United States was set up to oversee the armistice, whose conditions included limiting the Finnish army to just 37,000 soldiers, down sharply from 500,000 during the Winter War.38

During demobilization of the wartime army, the headquarters of the new Finnish defense forces, intensely suspicious of the Soviet Union, tried to organize secret arms and equipment caches for a guerrilla army of 35,000 and to set up an intelligence network that could detect Soviet attempts to occupy Finland. But after some of the secret arms caches were accidentally exposed in May 1945, the Allied Control Commission ordered their removal

36. See the notes from the meeting in Norwegian Intelligence Service (NIS) Archives, Folder “Evang Papers,” PM 16.11.1949.


to central army depots. “That process lasted about two years, and after it the secret organization was destroyed, as well as the plans to have a guerilla army of circa 35,000 men in good readiness.”

39. On intelligence matters, however, Finland well into the 1950s had a surreptitious collaborative arrangement with Swedish and Norwegian intelligence to keep a watch on Soviet activities along the Finnish frontier. “In sum, during the Cold War Finland had good reasons to follow a doctrine which can be described as ‘Stay beside the conflicts—and be ready for national defense.’ It can be seen as a Finnish version of Stay Behind organization, or better a Finnish substitution for it.”

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**Net Evaluation**

These brief glimpses of the origins and early development of Stay Behind networks in Western Europe should suffice to underscore that, in most cases, the initiators acted out of specific national concerns, even fear—fear stemming from their military weakness in the wake of years of war and occupation and from the threat posed by the Soviet Union with its superior military strength and determination to extend its sphere of control to neighboring countries and territories. The individual European governments feared that their countries would once again be vulnerable to defeat and enemy occupation. This time they were determined to prepare as best they could, avoid the mistakes that had decimated their inexperienced wartime resistance groups, and seek assistance from allies willing and able to help. Networks like the ones that emerged, with patriotic volunteers willing to risk their lives if necessary, clearly could not have been “created” from abroad or overseas.

**NATO’s Secret Armies?**

In 1948 Great Britain, France, and the Benelux countries got together to form the Brussels Pact, perhaps better known as the Western European Union (WEU). The pact was intended as the embryo of a Western defense alliance in case the United States proved unwilling to associate itself with Western European security concerns. A Chiefs of Staff Committee and a Military Committee were established under the WEU in 1949 to begin defense planning. That same year, the participating countries set up what became the Western Union Clandestine Committee (WUCC), composed most likely of representatives of

40. Ibid., p. 2.
the intelligence services of the member-states. The few documents available in the British archives that refer to WUCC date from the years 1950 and 1951 and unfortunately do not shed much light on what matters the committee dealt with. They mostly reflect discussions on how to plan and establish lines of “Evasion and Escape” for WEU military personnel caught behind enemy lines in a future war, especially air crews, but also “important civilians.”

Of greater interest is a brief for Air Marshal William Elliot, the British representative to NATO’s highest military authority, the Standing Group. Referring to a document known as W.U. 82/51, which seems to have been a major WEU planning document, the brief highlights several points made by delegates to WUCC when discussing W.U. 82/51. One topic was special operations east of the Rhine, and the “question of a competent authority to give direction on targets in the event of Europe being occupied.” Delegates of the smaller countries had suggested this as a question that needed to be discussed, partly because SHAPE “might not constitute the appropriate authority at that stage.” This may have been part of a delaying tactic by the smaller countries. The brief for Air Marshal Elliot suggests that “the smaller nations can make little or no contribution to Special Operations east of the Rhine and therefore are more concerned with preparations against the possibility of their being again occupied.”

This suggests that special operations beyond those related to “Evasion and Escape” were by early 1951 under active consideration by the WEU and probably also by NATO’s highest military organ, the Standing Group. But from which quarter did this expansion of interest originate? The best lead seems to be a draft of a top-secret memorandum of unidentified institutional origin but initialed by “FGW”—presumably Frank G. Wisner, the head of the OPC. This five-page document discusses “the advantages and disadvantages of forming within the framework of the North Atlantic Treaty structure of a permanent Clandestine Committee, composed of representatives of the secret services of the member nations,” and then outlines “the broad scope and functions of such an organization.”

The memorandum begins by defining three groups of special operations: (1) activities normally involved in the event of war, such as resistance, sabotage,

41. These documents can be found in The National Archives of the United Kingdom (TNAUK), FO371/96420, WU 1195/1G (27 December 1950), WU 1195/2G (2 April 1951), and WU 1195/26G (2 April 1951).
42. Doc. W.U. 82/51 appears not to have survived.
43. See the initialed document in National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Subject Series INR1945–60, Box 1 Lot SSD 776. I am grateful to Cees Wiebes for providing me with a copy of this document.
and countersabotage, as well as evasion and escape; (2) activities undertaken in both peace and war, such as psychological warfare, “black” propaganda, unconventional economic warfare, and political action; and (3) clandestine activities on which security considerations made operational collaboration impracticable, such as espionage, counterespionage, and deception. The need for a North Atlantic Pact Clandestine Committee (NAPCC) had apparently already been suggested by British and French officials, and the extant strategic “Concept for the Defense of the North Atlantic Area”—a document known as DC.6—had a provision for “cooperation, in so far as is practicable, in planning for the conduct of psychological and other special operations.” The document suggests “it is now time for the United States to assume leadership in this matter, and since the US is not a member of the Western Union and hence does not take part in the WUCC, there is need for an NAPCC which in due course will absorb WUCC.”

However, the document warned that “serious obstacles exist which may hamper the functioning of a Clandestine Committee. Aside from questions of national policy, these stem from security policies, usages and peculiarities, shared by all clandestine services, including those of the United States.” Three essential preconditions therefore had to be met:

a. That participation in the Atlantic Pact Clandestine Committee does not in any way compromise or limit the right of independent action on the part of any member service.

b. That participation in the committee does not in any way preclude the maintenance of bilateral relationships both among the member services and with other services outside the framework of the Atlantic Pact.

c. That any member service shall be free to abstain from participation in any action or proposal of the committee with which it does not agree.

The listing of those preconditions is a crucial reminder that even an action-oriented person such as Wisner had to take into account that national intelligence services in Europe would be wary of collaborative ventures and outside interference unless such efforts were clearly in their own interest and under their control. A committee of representatives of national intelligence services, each jealously guarding its independence, could deliberate, discuss, and even exchange information. But it could never be directing, running, or commanding anything even remotely resembling “NATO’s Secret Armies.”

Wisner proposed that the NSC approve his suggestions, requested the Joint Chiefs of Staff to instruct the U.S. representative on NATO’s Standing Group accordingly, and asked the director of the CIA to convene a preliminary meeting in Washington, DC of the clandestine services involved. No details
have come to light about what happened to Wisner’s proposals, but at some time in 1950 the United States was given observer status in the WUCC. However, with the appointment of General Dwight D. Eisenhower as Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) and the establishment of SHAPE, the history of WUCC came to an end. In August 1951 SACEUR established an ad-hoc body known as the Clandestine Planning Committee (CPC) to plan special operations. Permanent members of the committee were the three powers that also constituted the Standing Group: the United States, the United Kingdom, and France. At roughly the same time a division for special operations, the Special Projects Branch, was set up at SHAPE.

The Norwegian Intelligence Service at that time was fully engaged in setting up elements of its occupation preparedness. Not until April 1952 did Evang receive a communication explaining the new arrangements at SHAPE. He was told that SACEUR had instructed CPC to make contact with national clandestine services and to inform them of the procedures envisaged for their relationship with CPC. The idea was that whenever their specific country’s national interests were involved, representatives of their service would be invited to meet with CPC. Evang, with characteristic caution, contacted his counterpart in Denmark in order to establish a common approach to questions that might be raised. They agreed to dispel any doubt that their Stay Behind networks were to be activated only “in the event of a total occupation or a static partial occupation of their national territories.” Probably suspecting that SHAPE was looking for elements that could be useful for the alliance, they would insist that using their organizations for what Evang called “normal fighting” was out of the question. Equally important, they agreed “that Stay Behind was first and foremost an instrument at the disposal of the national governments wherever they might happen to be . . . and that it is our job to see to it that it is the respective governments which, in the last resort, exercise control.”

What transpired at the meeting in Paris on 7 May 1952 is not known. But five months later, on 8 October, CPC produced a lengthy document titled “Final Draft: Delineation of Responsibilities of the Clandestine Services and of SACEUR on Clandestine Matters Including Pertinent Definitions and Organizations.” The document stated inter alia that in peacetime CPC would be responsible for coordination of plans and preparations and would

44. For further details on these matters, see Riste and Arnfinn Moland, “Strengt hemmelig”; and Riste, The Norwegian Intelligence Service 1945–1970.

be the contact point between SACEUR and national clandestine services. However, it added, “The planning of clandestine operations in response to SACEUR requirements, as well as resulting clandestine preparations, are the responsibility of the Allied Clandestine Services.” In wartime, preparations and operations remained the responsibility of the Allied Clandestine Services, under the coordination and general control of SACEUR. This, for the time being, seems to have satisfied NIS’s demand for exclusive national control of its Stay Behind network.

**Stay Behind in NATO’s Defense Strategy**

It is hardly necessary to explain why Stay Behind is never mentioned in NATO’s strategy documents. Any admission that the alliance expected most of Western Europe to be overrun and occupied by the enemy—an expectation that persisted until at least the early 1950s—would have had disastrous consequences for public morale if it had been revealed at the time. The mainstays of official strategy were therefore to build up NATO’s military strength “for later offensive operations”; to “attempt to hold the enemy’s advance as far to the east in Germany as possible”; and to rely on nuclear weapons as the ultimate deterrent. The only offensive means mentioned in early defense plans was an unspecified reference to “psychological operations.” The Medium Term Defense Plan of 1 July 1954 went further in calling on NATO to “insure that such guerilla operations as are practicable in war, in the rear of the enemy, are planned.” The 1954 plan was slightly more specific or hopeful in referring to plans “to delay and arrest the enemy advance” in Europe. For such purposes, “additional delay may be achieved by sabotage and subversive action provided suitable advance planning has been accomplished.”

Against that backdrop, SHAPE began planning under the codename “Retardation.” The resulting plans became part of the still mostly classified Emergency Defense Plans of SACEUR. The first such plan, from 1951, seems to have been dominated by somewhat depressing schemes for economic and military demolition operations designed to make the enemy’s advance toward and into NATO territory as difficult as possible. At some stage, possibly in the 1954 version, the plans came to include an Annex J devoted to “Unorthodox Warfare” (UW). The Emergency Defense Plan for NATO’s northern flank was to be worked out by the Allied Forces Northern Europe (AFNORTH), and in

46. Some might find a shade of optimism in the statement, in NATO document EDPNE 1-55, that “It has been agreed that a ‘scorched earth’ policy will not be adopted.”
November 1955 the commander-in-chief of AFNORTH (CINCNORTH) asked his Task Force Commander North Norway (TFCNN), a Norwegian general, to

A. Prepare and forward to CINCNORTH lists of areas in which “Stay Behind” forces should be organized.
B. Consider the possible employment of the clandestine services and unconventional military forces within their areas of interest, decide on possible targets for them, prepare suggestions for the type of U W force required, and forward the results of his considerations to CINCNORTH.

TFCNN’s reply, a seven-page document registered as Annex J to TFCNN JEDP 1-59, introduced his comments under A (“Stay Behind Forces”) as follows: “There is no official definition of this term known to this headquarters. As understood in this plan, ‘Stay Behind’ forces are forces supposed to stay passive during the regular fighting in an area and not begin operations till the enemy considers the area as being under control.” TFCNN’s only further comment on that subject was that Stay Behind forces would not be suitable for intelligence or sabotage in the sparsely populated county of Finnmark, but that the counties of Troms and Nordland might offer better opportunities. The rest of the document was devoted to unorthodox warfare, to be carried out by elements of the National Guard, the Maritime National Guard, and frogmen, “until special units for unorthodox warfare have been formed [to complement] regular forces which will go over to partisan activities when definite front lines no longer exist.”

It is not clear how the NIS director got his hands on this document, but he must have reacted strongly upon seeing the CINCNORTH apparently getting involved in Stay Behind planning. In meetings with U.S. and British intelligence officials, Evang “explained very clearly his view about the way AFNE tried to build up a resistance organization in his country.” The Norwegians arranged for U.S. and British services to investigate the matter, after which they and Evang would have a full discussion at the next CPC meeting. The investigation suggested that the TFCNN document in question should be seen as a “research activity” and that it was not intended for AFNE’s Special Branch to become involved in clandestine Stay Behind planning. The concept of unconventional military operations (UMO) was being reconsidered by SHAPE,

47. Annex J to TFCNN JEDP 1-59, 2 September 1959, in NATO Archives.
and the results, including clear definitions of what was Stay Behind and what were UMO, would be communicated to Evang through CPC channels.\(^{48}\)

This article is not the place to review subsequent permutations of the relationship between the NIS, CPC, and SHAPE’s Special Projects Branch.\(^{49}\) Suffice it to state here that almost every SHAPE document confirms that “in peace and war, command of clandestine resources of any NATO nation will be retained by that nation.”\(^{50}\) Evidently, NATO and SHAPE were keenly interested in bringing into play every possible instrument that could be of use in strengthening the defense of allied territory against enemy aggression, including unorthodox or unconventional means of warfare. But as we have seen from the initial proposals by OPC for “covert” or special operations, as well as from SHAPE documents setting out principles for relations with national clandestine services, the parties involved were well aware of the need to refrain from interference with those services beyond attempts at coordination and joint planning that was mutually advantageous.

Consultation and cooperation among Stay Behind organizations in NATO member-states improved in 1958 when an ACC was set up. Initially it comprised six countries—Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, France, Great Britain, and the United States. Eventually four more countries joined: West Germany, Italy, Denmark, and Norway.\(^{51}\) ACCGs were then established at SHAPE and in the two major regional commands: AFNORTH, with headquarters in Oslo; and Allied Forces Southern Europe (AFSOUTH), headquartered in Naples. However, Norwegian intelligence also cooperated closely with U.S. and British agencies through frequent tripartite meetings in Oslo or London.

For the 1970s and 1980s most of the history of Stay Behind in the NATO member-states belonging to the ACC remains shrouded in secrecy. Still, snippets of information based on credible sources suggest that the nature

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48. See the investigative report in the NIS Archive, from the British and U.S. Services to Evang, 19 August 1957, in NIS Archive, File 37.50 NOTATER.
50. See, for example, “SACEUR Basic Directive for Unorthodox Warfare,” in NIS Archives, Doc. SHAPE V-1-6.
51. “Senat de Belgique” p. 21. The organizational structure is not fully clear. Documents in the NIS Archive appear to suggest that ACC was a sort of superstructure with limited membership, whereas SHAPE and the two main commands—AFNORTH (Oslo) and Allied Forces Southern Europe (AFSOUTH; Naples)—each had a planning staff called an ACCG. Documents in the NIS archive suggest that Evang was unhappy about Norway’s exclusion from the ACCG SHAHF; insofar as that was where central planning was done. However, Norway, together with the United States, Britain, and Denmark, participated actively in ACCG AFNORTH.
of many of the Stay Behind networks underwent a major change: The “action” parts of their mission, and especially sabotage and other forms of paramilitary activities, were eliminated or at least strictly curtailed—or passed on to each country’s special forces. Belgium was one of the first to make this change. A Belgian parliamentary commission of investigation states that by around 1970 the government decided “definitively to abandon the sabotage mission,” and “the containers with explosives were dismantled.”  

In the Netherlands, roughly at the same time, officials decided that the “O” or operations section would thenceforth use sabotage only “as a means of supporting the efforts of psychological warfare. Explosives would be hidden in secret caches; they would only be used with explicit consent of the government-in-exile and only on a limited scale.” In West Germany, the Stay Behind networks did some training in “unconventional warfare” in the 1960s, “but in 1972 all materials and arms were returned to the B(undes)w(ehr).” Even in Italy, where the 1960s had seen the deployment of caches of arms, explosives, and supplies on a large scale, the decision was taken in 1972 to withdraw everything. The decision followed the accidental discovery of two of the caches. Norway was a latecomer to such changes, perhaps because of the country’s status as a frontline state bordering on the Soviet Union. But after the police searched the house of a ship owner in Oslo in 1978 on suspicion of harboring a considerable collection of arms, a decision was taken to withdraw all such caches. In 1982 the entire action branch of Norwegian Stay Behind, ROC, was disbanded.

These decisions and actions suggest that through the 1970s and 1980s the entire Stay Behind concept was about to come full circle, reaching back to the two original missions conceived by the Dutch and Norwegian pioneers of the concept: (1) intelligence work and (2) evasion and escape. Another sign of that change was the development, at massive expense, of an innovative and exceptionally rapid secret telecommunications network called “Harpoon,” designed to enable secure communication between Stay Behind intelligence agents in occupied countries and a main base station in the United Kingdom or even further afield. One feature did not change, however. Documents from the 1980s that I have been allowed to see reaffirm the independence of the ACC member countries’ networks from NATO’s command structures. “In

52. “Senat de Belgique,” p. 28.
peace and war, command of clandestine resources of any NATO nation will be retained by that nation.”

**Concluding Remarks**

A complete history of stay behind, or occupation preparedness, in the European member-states of NATO, will probably never be written. The main obstacle is the determination of the participants to maintain extreme secrecy about Stay Behind and its networks, a necessity that evidently did not end with the demise of the program after the “Gladio” affair. The fact that the documentary sources—to the extent they still exist—are lodged in the archives of the various countries’ intelligence services is another key obstacle. My attempt here to describe the genesis and development of the phenomenon, made possible in part through unique access to the archives of the Norwegian Intelligence Service, has been intended to dispel the fog of fanciful conspiracy theories in most of the literature on the topic. The incomplete documentary sources and the assiduous work of fellow historians have shown that the development of Stay Behind, far from being a product of external intelligence agencies with other interests in mind, is overwhelmingly attributable to the selfless efforts of patriots imbued with a desire to protect and defend their countries and their way of life from again being overrun by a foreign power. The networks that were set up, far from being controlled by the dominant powers of the Western alliance, retained in every way their independence and national control even as they cooperated with and received advice and assistance from allies.

The collapse in 1990–1991 of the Stay Behind organization was not quite the end of this phenomenon in Western Europe. Documents I have been allowed to see but not cite indicate that Italy, Luxembourg, and Belgium dissolved their Stay Behind organizations in December 1990 and January 1991. Germany followed suit but decided that the Harpoon communications arrangements would continue to exist for the time being. The United States and the United Kingdom then suggested that the whole matter be “put on ice” because of the Iraq–Kuwait crisis and the ensuing Gulf War, while leaving communications channels open. Then, in April 1991, the UK delegation invited the remaining members of the ACC—the Netherlands, Denmark, and Norway—to a meeting in London to discuss the situation. The three countries apparently agreed that they would remain members for the time being, but the Dutch subsequently closed down their entire operations section. By contrast, as the public record shows, Norway still maintains an intelligence network ready to come into action if the country is invaded by a foreign power. The statutes for
the NIS, enacted by parliament on 20 March 1998, state, “The Intelligence Service shall ensure the maintenance of a national capacity to collect and communicate information and intelligence to Norwegian authorities from a wholly or partially occupied Norway.”

As a long-time scholar of intelligence-gathering and operations, I have often been asked how the West European governments could have been so fearful of foreign occupation that they formed and maintained a Stay Behind network in the early post-1945 period and then continued the effort all the way to the 1990s. Why did the extended periods of a more equal “correlation of forces” during the second half of the Cold War, with the “balance of terror” and existence of a situation sometimes referred to as Mutual Assured Destruction, fail to persuade them that the feeling of defenselessness from the 1940s and 1950s had waned? The answer is that concerns did wane but did not disappear. Recurring crises like the Berlin Crises of 1960–1962, the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, the martial law crackdown in Poland in December 1981, and the surge of East-West tension in the early 1980s meant that feelings of greater security were still ephemeral. Even after the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, some officials were concerned that cashing in a “peace dividend” might be premature. In 2014 those concerns no longer seem fanciful. Russian incursions into Georgia in 2008, Russia’s occupation and annexation of Crimea in March 2014, and Moscow’s central role in fomenting violent rebellion in eastern Ukraine after the annexation of Crimea have sparked grave anxiety among some new NATO members, especially Poland and the Baltic countries, which want to strengthen allied defenses against Russian military power and expansionist moves. In effect, those states now feel the need for some of the same elements of reassurance that gave rise to the Stay Behind networks of the Cold War.