

NATO's Stay-Behind Networks. The Truth Regarding NATO's "Secret Armies"

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Global Research, April 24, 2017

French Center for Intelligence Research
(CF2R)

Region: [Europe](#), [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#), [Intelligence](#), [Terrorism](#)

Executive Summary

For the first time, research shall focus on NATO'S so-called "secret armies", and explain the notion of the Stay-Behind networks by shedding light on the architecture of cooperation that supported those networks. The study highlights the ongoing "criminalization" of the Stay-Behind networks since the 1990s, in part a result of the extreme confusion in public opinion about these structures established at the end of World War II, and the lack of knowledge of how NATO operates as well as its intelligence capabilities.

The difficulty in understanding the notion of the Stay-Behind networks results from the way revelations about the Italian network were released, leading to a series of press investigations that purported to show the collusion of these networks with the Italian far-right. Such a story was an attractive explanation, but it was far from the truth. Indeed, there never was any such collusion. In order to understand these clandestine structures, one must first take into account the geopolitical contingencies that existed at the end of the Second World War.

The Stay-Behind networks were first a solution that emerged from the lessons learnt by the European Chiefs of Staff during the conflict. Accordingly, a French-British model appeared in North Western Europe, aimed at intelligence work and the infiltration/exfiltration of agents, rather than any attempts at sabotage or guerrilla warfare. It was quite different from the networks developed by the Americans in Germany and Italy that were more action-oriented. An attempt to combine the two concepts was made by the Clandestine Planning Committee, a structure that brought together the intelligence services of NATO but it did not succeed; this failure invalidates somewhat the idea of "NATO's secret armies". Indeed, the states concerned found themselves in very different geographical situations and were confronted with specific national political contingencies.

They thus took action according to their means and their objectives, which restricted NATO-level coordination between the intelligence services involved in the Stay-Behind networks.

It was at the heart of the Western European Union (WEU) and not NATO that the intelligence services of Great Britain, France, Benelux and Scandinavia hid the existence of the Western Union Clandestine Committee. This body was not aimed at coordinating but rather supporting the establishment of Stay-Behind networks. The United States received a makeshift role, but they continued to run networks they had founded in Germany and Italy in their own way, that served US objectives. At the heart of NATO, they sought to turn the

Clandestine Committee into a coordination center, but the intelligence services of Northern and Western Europe in return presented an Allied Coordination Committee, aimed at exchanging best practices with regard to member state Stay-Behind networks.

Though they managed to preserve the initial concept that combined intelligence, infiltration/exfiltration and action, they however failed to stop NATO from developing a new concept, that of the Special Forces. This shift can be explained by the growing influence of the Americans within the integrated military organization and their desire to prepare the fight against the Warsaw Pact. But this evolution would not always be of concern for the United Kingdom, France, Benelux and the Scandinavian countries. These countries were to be impacted by the reduction in US funding for the Stay-Behind program as of 1965 and they would have to undergo the consequences of the revelations, first revealed by Soviet spies, then by the media, that would lead to the gross misunderstandings surrounding the Stay-Behind concept.

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