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The Puzzling Story of NATO's Secret Armies During the Cold War: Just What Were They Up to?

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After the Cold War had ended, then Italian prime minister Giulio Andreotti confirmed to the Italian Senate in August 1990 that Italy had had a secret stay-behind army, codenamed Gladio – the sword. A document dated 1 June 1959 from the Italian military secret service, SIFAR, revealed that SIFAR had been running the secret army with the support of NATO and in close collaboration with the US secret service, the CIA. Suggesting that the secret army might have linked up with right-wing organizations such as Ordine Nuovo and Avanguardia Nazionale to engage in domestic terror, the Italian Senate, amid public protests, decided in 1990 that Gladio was beyond democratic control and therefore had to be closed down.

During the 1990s, research into stay-behind armies progressed only very slowly, due to very limited access to primary documents. It was revealed, however, that stay-behind armies covered all of Western Europe and operated under different code names, such as Gladio in Italy, Absalon in Denmark, P26 in Switzerland, ROC in Norway, I&O in the Netherlands, and SDRA8 in Belgium. The so-called Allied Clandestine Committee (ACC) and the Clandestine Planning Committee (CPC), linked to NATO's Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE), coordinated the stay-behind networks on an international level. The last confirmed ACC meeting took place on 24 October 1990 in Brussels, chaired by the Belgian military secret service, the SGR.

According to the [SIFAR document of 1959](#) the secret stay-behind armies served a dual purpose during the Cold War: They were to prepare for a communist Soviet invasion and occupation of Western Europe, and – also in the absence of an invasion – for an “emergency situation.” The first purpose was clear: If there had been a Soviet invasion, the secret anti-communist armies would have operated behind enemy lines, strengthening and setting up local resistance movements in enemy held territory, evacuating pilots who had been shot down, and sabotaging supply lines and production centers of the occupation forces.

The second purpose, the preparation for an emergency situation, is more difficult to

understand and remains the subject of ongoing research. As this second purpose clearly did not relate to a foreign invasion, the emergency situation referred to is likely to have meant all domestic threats, most of which were of a civilian nature. During the Cold War, the national military secret services in the countries of Western Europe differed greatly in what they perceived to be an emergency situation. But there was agreement between the military secret services of the United States and of Western Europe that communist parties, and to some degree also socialist parties, had a real potential to weaken NATO from within and therefore represented a threat to the alliance. If they gained political strength and entered the executive, or, worse still, gained control of defense ministries, an emergency situation would result. The evidence now available suggests that in some countries the secret stay-behind armies linked up with right-wing terrorists and carried out terror attacks that were later wrongly blamed on the political left in order to discredit the communists and prevent them from assuming top executive positions.

Evidence suggests that recruitment and operations methods differed greatly from country to country. The research project into NATO's secret armies that is being undertaken by the [Center for Security Studies](#) at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH), Zurich, and is headed by myself, has collected and published the available country-specific evidence in the first English-language book on the topic, entitled *NATO's Secret Armies: Operation Gladio and Terrorism in Western Europe* (London and New York: Frank Cass [www.tandf.co.uk/books], 1 January 2005, 300 pages). In a second step, the project is working on gaining access to declassified primary documents, while encouraging discussion among NATO officials, secret services and military officials, and the international research community in order to clarify the strategy, training, and operations of the stay-behind armies.

Related Links

- [Daniele Ganser: "Terrorism in Western Europe: An Approach" \(This article, just published, provides details in support of the argument made above.\)](#)