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## Weekend Courses 2024-25

### Lesser-known stories of the Special Operations Executive

**Start date:** 22 November 2024      **End date:** 24 November 2024

**Venue:** Madingley Hall  
Madingley  
Cambridge  
CB23 8AQ

**Tutor:** Dr Peter Dixon      **Course Code:** 2425NRX010

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#### Tutor biography

Dr Peter Dixon has been a military officer, a peacebuilding practitioner, an International Relations academic and a nonfiction author. Since 2018, he has expanded his writing to include nonfiction books on special operations during the Second World War.

During his first career, in the Royal Air Force, he served as a transport pilot, trained student pilots at three University Air Squadrons (including as Officer Commanding Cambridge UAS) and taught Military Doctrine at the United States Air Force Academy, Colorado Springs. In his final two tours of duty, he served on the staff of the Royal College of Defence Studies, London, and contributed in the German Ministry of Defence, Berlin, to the formulation of German defence policy in the areas of international confidence building and mutual threat reduction. After leaving the RAF, he led a British peacebuilding NGO for over a decade, focusing on inclusive Track 1.5 dialogue processes, predominantly in Sudan and South Sudan. Currently, he serves as Course Director for ICE's Undergraduate Diploma in International Relations.

Dr Dixon obtained his BSc in Aeronautical Engineering from the University of Bristol and, in 1991, an MBA from the Open University Business School. He studied for the MSt in International Relations at the University of Cambridge in 2005-7 and continued his research, completing a PhD in 2015. His thesis examines barriers to cooperation between external interventions in civil wars.

Apart from books on more general aspects of war and peace, his publications include *Guardians of Churchill's Secret Army*, *Setting the Med Ablaze* and *Return to Vienna*, each of which focuses on a specific aspect of the Special Operations Executive.

**Summary of content:**

Many have heard of the brave men, and especially the courageous women, who served in the Special Operations Executive (SOE) in the Second World War (WW2). Names like Noor Inayat Khan and Violette Szabo have become famous through books, television programmes and even feature films. But the SOE story is a much larger one. In this course, we will use the stories of a few individuals to explore some of its lesser-known corners.

We will first investigate the wider events and developments that led to the formation of SOE, consider what might constitute a 'typical' agent (if such a person existed) and look at the forms undercover subversion might take. If they were to survive, those who worked in such conditions needed both training and support; we will examine both. Next, we will look beyond the field of operations usually associated with SOE, occupied France, and take a selective tour of some of the other areas of the world where SOE agents worked.

SOE was not always successful, far from it, but one area that saw some success was Scandinavia, and we will look in more detail at Denmark, Norway and Sweden. Wherever they served, though, agents existed in daily fear of capture, often through betrayal; we will examine the ways in which German and Italian countermeasures operated, often with devastating success. As the tables turned in the European war, Winston Churchill persuaded his American and Soviet allies that the 'soft underbelly' of the Axis powers was to be found in southern Europe. So our next goal will be to investigate some of the ways SOE supported the Mediterranean Campaign and the advance through Italy. Finally, we will look at some of the agents whose undercover efforts supported Allied operations into Germany and Austria, and then briefly consider SOE's achievements, its postwar fate and its lasting legacy.

**Aims:**

This course aims to:

- develop your understanding of the political and military complexities surrounding WW2 sabotage and subversion
- assess the contribution of irregular warfare to strategic success in warfare
- understand the difficulties facing the Special Operations Executive and the price paid by many of its officers and agents.

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## Course sessions

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### Friday

Please plan to arrive between 16:30 and 18:30. You can meet other course members in the Terrace Bar which opens at 18:15. Tea and coffee making facilities are available in the study bedrooms.

19:00	Dinner
<b>20:30 – 22:00</b>	<b>Beginnings</b>
22:00	Terrace Bar open for informal discussion

### Saturday

07:30	Breakfast (for residents only)
<b>09:00 – 10:30</b>	<b>Surviving undercover</b>
10:30	Coffee
<b>11:00 – 12:30</b>	<b>The whole world</b>
13:00	Lunch
14:00 – 16:00	Free time
16:00	Tea
<b>16:30 – 18:00</b>	<b>Scandinavian story</b>
18:00 – 18:30	Free time
18:30	Dinner
<b>20:00 – 21:30</b>	<b>Danger and betrayal</b>
21:30	Terrace Bar open for informal discussion

### Sunday

07:30	Breakfast (for residents only)
<b>09:00 – 10:30</b>	<b>The soft underbelly</b>
10:30	Coffee
<b>11:00 – 12:30</b>	<b>Endings</b>
12:45	Lunch

**The course will disperse after lunch**

**Presentation of the course:**

Delivery of the course will be via illustrated lectures and group discussions.

**Learning outcomes:**

As a result of the course, you will gain a greater understanding of the subject and you should be able to:

- position SOE operations in the overall context of Second World War history
- appreciate the conditions under which SOE agents operated and the dangers they faced
- understand the various motivations of SOE agents, the training they underwent and the systems that supported them
- appreciate the scope and breadth of SOE's global operations

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## Reading and resources list

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There are no compulsory readings for this course.

However, you may find the below recommended reading list of interest to supplement your course.

Ashdown, P, *Game of Spies: The secret agent, the traitor and the Nazi, Bordeaux 1942-1944* (William Collins 2016)

Atkin, M, *Section D for Destruction: forerunner of SOE* (Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword Military 2017)

Beevor, A, *The Second World War* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson 2012)

Dixon, P, *Guardians of Churchill's Secret Army: men of the Intelligence Corps in the Special Operations Executive* (London: Cloudhill Press 2018)

Dixon, P, *Setting the Med Ablaze: Churchill's Secret North African Base* (London: Cloudhill Press 2020)

Dixon, P, *Return to Vienna: The Special Operations Executive and the Rebirth of Austria*, (London: Cloudhill Press 2023)

Foot, M R D, *SOE: an outline history of the Special Operations Executive 1940 - 1946*, (London: The Bodley Head 2014)

Marks, L, *Between Silk and Cyanide: A Code-maker's War 1941-45* (Sutton 2007)

Stafford, D, *Secret Agent: The true story of the Special Operations Executive* (London: BBC 2000)

Stafford, D, *Mission Accomplished: SOE and Italy 1943-1945* (London: Bodley Head 2011)

Sweet-Escott, B, *Baker Street Irregular* (London: Methuen 1965)

West, N, *MI6: British Secret Intelligence Service Operations 1909-1945* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson 1983)

Wilkinson, P & Astley, J B, *Gubbins and SOE* (Barnsley, Pen & Sword Military 2010)

### Online resources:

BBC ([https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwtwo/soe\\_01.shtml](https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwtwo/soe_01.shtml))

Historic UK (<https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofBritain/The-Female-Spies-Of-SOE/>)

Imperial War Museums (<https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/soe-the-secret-british-organisation-of-the-second-world-war>)

Military Intelligence Museum (<https://www.militaryintelligencemuseum.org/special-operations-executive>)

National Archives (<https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C153>)

National Army Museum (<https://www.nam.ac.uk/explore/SOE>)

Secret WW2 Learning Network (<https://secret-ww2.net/>)

**Note:** Institute of Continuing Education (ICE) students are entitled to 20% discount on books published by Cambridge University Press (CUP) which are purchased at the Press bookshop, 1 Trinity Street, Cambridge (Mon-Sat 9am – 5:30pm, Sun 11am – 5pm). A letter or email confirming acceptance on to a current ICE course should be taken as evidence of enrolment.

*(Information correct as of April 2024)*