

Al Qaida has got nothing on this terror and mayhem

Nato's Secret Armies – Operation Gladio and terrorism in Western Europe: Daniele Ganser

Frank Cass, £22.99

IF EVER there was a misleading phrase it was the "Cold War". Relations between the superpowers were chilly but both sides kept themselves warm fighting proxy battles across the globe. In Europe, we may like to think that we largely escaped these engagements but Daniele Ganser's book shows this to be untrue. Indeed, he reminds us what a trail of tears for progressive forces in Europe the past half century has been.

Gladio was the name given to the Italian part of a super-secret resistance network set up by Nato which would come in to effect should the Red Army part the Iron Curtain. It consisted of small groups of highly-trained people who would operate in the rear of any invasion. They had access to the latest communications equipment and a network of arms caches to draw from.

Gladio was repeated in every other European country outside the Warsaw Pact, including

supposedly neutral countries such as Switzerland. Its existence was hinted at several times but remarkably stayed secret until 1990 when it was wound up. In hindsight, it should have been obvious that such a stay-behind organisation existed even if we did not have proof.

A clear lesson taken from the German blitzkrieg at the beginning of the Second World War was that, once a country was rolled over, there was little intelligence coming out of it on what the invaders were doing. Instead, the British had to go through the expensive and dangerous procedure of introducing agents into occupied territories. They weren't going to make that mistake again.

Britain developed its own stay-behind network set up after the fall of Dunkirk. I interviewed one of its members recently. He was a genial former airman from Somerset who spent a few happy months running rings around the local Home Guard practising for a German invasion. They had an arms dump in an old badgers' set and only knew one another by their first name.

The model of isolated groups, well resourced and motivated was taken as the template for the Nato operation. The name Gladio, a Roman short sword, was well chosen, because this was a double-edged affair. The most obvious people to

recruit to this network were people passionately opposed to communism. It was also obvious that such a network was useless if anything was revealed about it. Finally, if it was not to become blunt, it needed regular funding, training and equipment.

The result was an army of saboteurs operating without any meaningful oversight, and many with a visceral hatred of anything Left-wing. So, it was small wonder that Gladio operatives decided not to wait for any invasion, but put their irregular warfare skills to the test. The result was a litany of atrocities across the continent which al Qaida has come nowhere near matching.

Gladio personnel were involved in coups or coup attempts from Greece to Portugal. They shot supermarket staff in Belgium and blew up train stations in Italy. They killed Kurds and tortured Algerians. The places which appeared not to suffer from these marauders were those with the strongest democratic systems. However, even there, parliamentarians were stymied in their attempts to find out more about Gladio.

Ganser has done an effective job mining the available literature on Gladio. As he acknowledges, this was difficult considering much is still classified, few people would talk and he could "only" read five of the ten languages

spoken by operatives.

His book is only let down by some inept editing and stilted translation. Nevertheless, he has synthesised a clear account of what we can know about Gladio without being drawn into wilder conspiracy theories. The truth known so far is bad enough.

Pulling the strings behind this alliance of Cold War warriors were the British and the Americans. Other countries may have been kept in the dark and other armies sidelined on a need-to-know basis, but the CIA and MI6 kept close control. They provided the training and the weaponry.

And yet this has caused so little stir in Britain. When the Italian Prime Minister Andreotti revealed the existence of Gladio, everyone's attention was on Kuwait where Saddam Hussein had invaded the day before. Apart from some honourable journalistic exceptions, the scandal passed Britain by with barely a murmur.

This country had been intimately involved for 40 years in training groups linked with numerous killings barely a few hours' flight away. It had a home-grown network of agents and we know little about what did. Yet Parliament did not bark. It is not too late for it to do so.

Phil Chamberlain

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