

## Dr. Helen Fry | WWII Special Operations and Agents in the Balkans

- So, today we're going to look at what is actually a very tricky area of, I'm concentrating on the Second World War history of the Balkans, later I'll be touching on Albania as well, a very very complex history, which is the difficulties in terms of ethnic groups and minorities, and political situation incredibly entrenched, even before we get to the Second World War. And in the early part, Second World War, part of it was occupied by the Italians and part of it eventually controlled by Italians, part of it also occupied by Nazi Germany. And I'm going to look at it from the angle of the British intelligence services, of which I guess I don't know if any of you have googled online anything about special operations in the Balkans, but there is very very little. I did that this evening just to be curious actually about how much one can find out because, for me as a historian, it's been equally difficult to construct material from archives in our National Archives in London. It's still, and I will say this at the very beginning, for whatever reason, and I don't know exactly why, the whole area of the Balkans in the Second World War, and I'm not talking about contemporary times which is equally sensitive, but in the Second World War, incredibly sensitive. So many of the files have not been declassified, and I don't know exactly why. But, thankfully, from some of my research over the last couple of decades, I do have some interesting material to share with you. So it's from my research, from primary sources that are available those sketchy sources, but I think they'll give us a really important insight into this crucial area during the Second World War.

Next slide, please. So there would be a number of special forces groups that would try to penetrate into various Balkan countries. It was far from easy. One of them was a special operations executive. We know a lot about them from their operations in France. Some of you will have read about their sending of men and women secret agents into France, a lot of them captured the women ended up in Ravensbruck concentration camp. Many of them didn't survive, had horrific torture, and the men too were either executed straight away or sent to concentration camps. It was very very difficult, even in France, but even more so in the Balkans, and why the Balkans was so important, because somehow the Allies needed a number of ways, particularly as we'll see shortly into Austria. So Austria which is completely surrounded very very difficult to mount any operations, and generally in the Balkans and it's true for operations that they tried into Austria, and into Germany, some were done from neutral Sweden but also from the south to try and penetrate these areas, not only for sabotage, which of course, the Special Operations Executive is well known for the SOE. We've got a photograph there on the right of typical SOE sabotage blowing up train lines, and men and women were sent into these areas they were trained at various places around the United Kingdom for whatever operations they were going to mount, so

Special Operations Executive being one of the key that tried to get agents into the Balkans, incredibly difficult in the early part of the war.

Next slide, please. And it was complicated as we'll see by the different partisans and factions within the region, but one story that I did manage to work on Otto Hess was his original name. He came originally from Germany was a German Jewish refugee. And when he was in England after the outbreak of war he joined like so many refugees did he joined the Pioneer Corps, where he was digging for victory and wanting to make a difference actually to the war effort, this sense that this was his war, the German refugees told me those I interviewed that this was their war, and they wanted to fight proper. Well, Otto Hess was one of those early guys who volunteered to go into the Special Forces, and when he did so he changed his name to Peter Giles and he joined the Commandos, and he was amongst some of the earliest German refugees that were allowed into Special Forces, most of them are still at this point in the Pioneer Corps before they could transfer to fighting units, but Peter Giles became was attached trained with the Commandos from January, 42. So he was amongst the one of the first batch of refugee commandos or German speakers, or German Jewish that worked for, or part of what was known as three troop and three troop was only German speaking refugees that were trained in Wales and Scotland, and they were broken up into different groups, they were the only commander unit that did not serve together, they were broken up for special operations, wherever that was. And when I'm in special operations I mean with the Commandos, not with the SOE I could be careful, I guess with my language there, but he was one of the earliest to actually be attached to SIS the Secret Intelligence Service, what today we call MI6. Now, the fact that there is this blurred line between some of the operations behind enemy lines, where someone like Otto Hess could start out training with the Commandos, but then come under MI6, effectively, MI6 files are never released and some of you will have heard me say that before, but for those who haven't heard me say before the MI6 files are not available. So it becomes incredibly difficult to find out the exact nature of what Otto did for British intelligence. What we do know is that during 1944 he was dropped behind enemy lines into Yugoslavia, in what was codenamed Operation Beech, correct spelling as per the tree. If you Google Operation Beach you won't find anything at all online and there's nothing in the National Archives. It's probably a joint operation with the Special Operations Executive we're not totally sure, this is a murky history. Next slide, please. By 1944, of course, Yugoslavia would be, if you could drop agents into Yugoslavia to link up with the partisans, then they could be dropped elsewhere, from there they could go deeper into German-occupied territory such as Austria. So it was, Yugoslavia actually became very very important to work alongside the partisans, and the only thing we really know about Operation Beech is a kind of sketchy references here and there in some of the archives but no comprehensive file on exactly what the operation was. But so

his aim was to actually link up with Tito's partisans. Tito who later became the president of Yugoslavia after the war. Tito's partisans, the resistance fighters were communist. The problem in Yugoslavia was that there were also those that were, I suppose you call them like royalist, who would still kind of be almost pro, well I don't say pro-Nazi but the complicated situation between these two partisan groups that kind of fought each other, actually, but later it was believed that some of the pro-royalist partisans were actually secretly helping the Germans, and a number of our agents who were dropped into that area of Yugoslavia never made it back, they disappeared. And what's not clear and what's not clear with Otto's mission is that whether somehow it was bungled in the sense that when he was dropped, not bungled from this end but whether when he was dropped he was dropped to the wrong partisans, or whether he was brought up, whether you see the massive trust between agents and this particularly is true later in the war time, when we dropped agents and tried to get them into Austria, further up on the border particularly on the Austro-Hungarian, what was the Austro-Hungarian border, very very difficult because you could, the partisans didn't really trust anyone, and I'll come to how they knew if someone was genuine or not, in a moment, but it was all very very tricky and incredibly dangerous and he will have known that his chances of making it back could be quite slim, but he was prepared to put his life on the line for the country that had saved him. He does actually manage to link up with his emergency contact, and eventually, he's escorted to what is today part of Slovenia, and they're going to try to evacuate him to Italy. Next slide, please. But ultimately, they are captured. And what's come to light more recently through his daughter, I was in touch with his daughter over the last couple of decades, and she has petitioned for so long to get his file released, but nothing's been forthcoming. But what we did manage to find out that in the end and that when I started working on the story and I first wrote the story in one of my books, we believed, or the story that came back was that he had been picked up by the partisans who thought he was actually looking for the enemy, because his German accent, but in fact he was they were ambushed by a German patrol, 1st of October 1944 near Lekenik, and I think you can just try to find it on, I thought I'd put up a map where it is, but it's sort of more towards the northern border. And it is known that just age 23, he was taken to a nearby camp, and there he was executed. But you can see I've given you that map of what was originally Yugoslavia, of course, looking very very different today, but to bear in mind, a bit later we're going to talk about those islands of Brac and Hvar and this. You see those islands towards the south there. So bear that in mind, in terms of location. Yeah, I have put it there look at Lekenik in red. So that kind of area, very very difficult, almost impossible to escape, unless some of the partisans can smuggle you out, but the German patrols particularly along the coast was so tight. It's sometimes been asked, we'll see that Italy was important staging post into these countries that these special agents would often be flown from London, well outside London, so on the special air

bases, they'll be flown to Italy and from there will be dispatched dropped again into these countries, but northern Italy was incredibly difficult to pass into even getting into neutral Switzerland, so the Allies tended not to use those routes. The German patrols along there were particularly hefty, because it's kind of like the shortest route it's the obvious route, but the Germans thought we would try to infiltrate our agents. So we have to infiltrate our agents in other ways. So getting them into Yugoslavia proved incredibly tricky, incredibly dangerous, and obviously not by the shortest route.

Next slide, please. So he is Otto Hess, aka Peter Giles, is commemorated at the Grossbeck War Cemetery in Holland, and he was given the king's commendation for brave conduct that was granted to him posthumously. So an incredibly brave man who's changed his name, obviously to disguise his original German Jewish background, but incredibly brave man whose mission sadly ended there in failure. Next slide, please, And that will be so true of the Balkans. And into this area, we try to get some other special agents. They were known as MI9 agents, some of you will have heard me talk about MI9 before, broad talk on MI9. MI9 generally being that section secret service, British Secret Service, for escape and evasion. So getting allied airmen and soldiers back from behind enemy lines. But it had a very top-secret section within it, and this was known as Room 900, presumably because it was run from Room 900 in the War Office, that's often the way it worked. Or it was also sometimes known as Intelligence School 9, IS9, no idea why they were given these names but it was a top-secret section within MI9 that was not involved necessarily in escape and evasion. And what MI9 was doing was sending agents behind enemy lines in much the same way as a Special Operations Executive. Now they were not, as far as we can tell, these files have not been declassified. These special missions were by and large into the Balkans. The only files we have are around 2022 personal files very very slim in the National Archives of agents, men, and women, refugees largely from Germany or Hungary so Jewish refugees who didn't make it back from their missions. Now those reports are basically saying that, you know, sadly, as in the case of Antonia Hamilton, she doesn't come back. Notification is given to Teddy Kollek, who is the MI9 link in what was then Palestine and so very interesting character I'd like to do a bit more research on him, but he seems to be the liaison and the key intelligence link between MI9 in London, or just outside of London and their headquarters, and those Palestinian Jewish refugees that actually were taken up by the British services and became part of MI9, or in fact to be more precise part of the top secret section of MI9 and I've listed some of the women there. Incredibly brave, Hannah Szenes I'll come to her in a moment of course various ways to spell her name, Martha Martinovic, and Pouboura. These four women, I've worked on their very slim files, very very difficult to know exactly what they do, but we know they were dropped into the Balkans, and their files, even some 75-80 years later what their missions and intelligence missions are deemed so sensitive that their files have

not been declassified. I don't know of course whether there is anything in now from the Israeli side whether it be something in Israeli archives but certainly from the British side, they're being held back. Next slide, please. So if we take a look at Hannah Senesh for example, she's well known of course for her poetry. I'm not sure how many of you are aware of her background that she actually worked for this top-secret section of the British Secret Service. She was originally from Hungary. She had managed to escape to Palestine. And those, there are a number of German Jewish refugees who I've interviewed who did get to Palestine, but once there and I suppose in the relative safety, they wanted to fight and they wanted to do their bit. And they were recruited to the British forces, and because of their knowledge of the language, languages in the area but also because they knew the regions that they could be dropped back into, they were used for these special missions incredibly incredibly brave. So she was recruited by Zionist leaders and her code name was Minnie. So she was attacked or she was in uniform attached to the Women's Auxiliary Air Force, otherwise known as the WAF. And she was parachuted into Yugoslavia, with two male agents, and some accounts will call them parachutists. She was actually an MI9 agent. And so she's parachuted in around a week after D-Day in what was known as Operation Chicken One. When I worked through the MI9 files I found just one reference to Operation Chicken One. One very scant reference we have no idea what the aim of that mission was, except the only information we have is somewhere around the Black Sea. The likes of Hannah Senesh and others for MI9 or Intelligence Score 9, IS9, were actually mounting a rescue of Jews in that area of the Black Sea. I find that fascinating, and I really hope that those files can one day be declassified to understand what exactly they were doing. So they were doing an intelligence mission for the British, but they were also there on a rescue mission. And we don't know because she doesn't survive. We don't know if she and her team managed to get any Jews out through that area. She was arrested on the Hungarian border.

Next slide, please. And she's taken to Budapest where she has a pretty nasty time in prison, of course, but not before she manages to pass information to one of her colleagues that escapes from the prison, and says you must get this to the Allies, and he transmits her message to Cairo. Sadly, we don't know what was in the message. Again, whether that will ever come to light will be marvellous, But, you know, for me the bravery and for all that she's been through the horrific torture, and interrogations by the Gestapo. In her mind, she is so strong determined and brave, she's thinking, how can I help the Allies in prison? I mean a really really inspirational woman that gets this secret message out, and it's transmitted to the British intelligence headquarters in Cairo. She was actually shot, we know by the Gestapo on the sixth of November, 1944, and I'm aware that she is a huge heroine in Israel, and quite rightly she was amazing. And her official MI9 file that I've worked on just says it was a note to Teddy Kollek that, "She was killed by enemy action, whilst in the course of her

duties." Can we call her a female paratrooper? It's a very unusual term to assign to women. Her MI9 file says, that she was an aircraft woman, but why not? She certainly was a special agent, a paratrooper purpose of the mission, question mark I put there. We currently don't know, but I'd love to know more and hope that one day, we'll get an understanding of exactly what she and her colleagues have done. Next slide, please. But Martha Martinovic, she was originally from Czechoslovakia, again another brave woman, German, so just check Jewish refugee. She like Senesh joined The Women's Auxiliary Air Force, she joins early April '44, again as part of that top secret section of mi nine. She's missing and we don't know exactly what happened to her, and a message goes to Teddy Kollek that she is believed killed, and her death is finally given in September, 1945. It's quite late in the war before the Allies actually issue a death certificate for her. So, hopefully again we might know more about her work. Miss Poumboura, excuse me, she was actually on a secret mission to Nazi-occupied Greece. She actually made it to Athens where she was arrested. And what we ostensibly can guess, and it is really well no guess is probably the wrong word, make an educated hypothesis that what these, the women and the men that went into the special operations were hopefully linking up with resistance groups to form an underground resistance for when the Allies mount their liberation of these countries, but there would also be an element of their intelligence gathering duties, the likes of which we don't have privy to that. She's imprisoned actually Miss Poumboura in Greece, and then she's transferred to Italy, but she does not survive. Another brave Jewish refugee who contributed to the Allied cause. Next slide, please. But what about Yugoslavia itself? Just to give you a bit of backdrop to what is a very complex history. Everything was pretty much fine from a Yugoslavian perspective, until June, 1941. So it's overrun by German forces, but the situation changes. This interesting that there should be because a lot of the population in and there was a huge, strong faction that was communist and support this would support Russia. And that's fine, until the Germans decided to invade Russia in Operation Barbarossa in June, 1941. This shifts, not only the Allies contact with the British and eventually the Americans, of course, after Pearl Harbour, the link with the partisan, the fight now shifts, because the partisans now decide to fight against the occupying German forces, and they now decide to support the Allies. Primarily, Tito, we come back to Tito, who led the communist partisans. And it was an incredibly brutal, if you like guerrilla warfare. It's not really somewhere, I just take my hat off to those agents of ours that were dropped into these areas, you have some really intense defence and fighting. Weren't there to witness it, of course, but could we liken it to the resistance and defence of Ukraine today possibly, actually, you know this country this fight was fierce. And now, the partisans now that Russia, Germany has invaded Russia, the partisans have a new cause they are seeing themselves as the Liberation Army they're going to liberate Yugoslavia from German occupation. But the history of Yugoslavia could have been so very different. If Germany hadn't

invaded Russia in that June of 1941, and some of Hitler's own commanders and generals, including actually his deputy, Rudolph Hess. Rudolph has said directly to Hitler, "If you invade Russia we will lose the war it's the beginning of the end." And for all his madness, of course, Rudolph Hess was correct in that respect, but a lot of Hitler's generals did not support his invasion of Russia. And as we know, you can argue that it's the sort of beginning of the end for Germany, but now we've got the Allies wanting to make contact and support Tito's partisans. So, next slide, please. There'll be a number of special operations being dropped into this area with the partisans.

Next slide, please. So you can see I also put up this map primarily, so that you can kind of have a visual in your mind of what's coming. You'll see the position just to remind ourselves the map of course of that part of the country, part of the world looks very different today with Croatia and Serbia, but that's in green there Yugoslavia, almost shadowing, not quite completely the coast of Italy, down to Albania there and Greece. Now, all of this was occupied by the Germans. Next slide, please. I shall just go back one, sorry. So, Italy is occupied were largely run for the Germans by Mussolini until Mussolini, of course, is captured. And from 43 onwards when the Allies mount their invasion or liberation from Sicily first up through the coast of Italy it was a long battle up through Italy that would last until well into 1944, but '43, summer of '43 onwards the Allies have landed in the boot of Italy, and are going to make their way up and it takes a long time with intense battles, particularly around Monte Cassino. Once the Allies have got a foothold in Italy, and the further up they go eventually Rome. of course, liberated in June, 1944, and they start making their way towards Florence, once they've got those liberated areas, they can start sending agents flying them sending them by sea, our special agents into Italy and how they mount special bases into which they can have special operations into Yugoslavia, Albania, and ultimately Greece, so I hope that maps, giving you a helpful understanding. If you can get into Yugoslavia, and link up your special agents with the partisans, you can mount operations into Romania and Hungary, and particularly, Austria will come back to Austria because Austria was completely isolated in the wartime and we struggled, we did succeed ultimately in getting agents into Austria towards the end of the war. So in places where the Allies are hoping to liberate these countries. It's helpful if you can prepare the groundwork, if you can send your special agents in beforehand, prepare resistance groups, even secret supplies in hiding, and you have contacts and points once the Allies are landed, you know that you can have support of the populace or not you need to know this. Next slide, please. And one of those stories that I worked very closely with Colin Anson. He was a commando, German Jewish refugee, born in Frankfurt. He was actually part he had a history with the commandos before we make it to the Yugoslavian period, but I'm fast forwarding in his career he starts out in the Pioneer Corps. He's part of three troop, he is recruited later than Otto Hess. And he actually mounts, he's part of

the team of commandos that are going to mount raids into Brac and Hvar, those islands, and they're going to wreak havoc. And their base was on the island of this they managed to take that little island of this, and they are doing these raids, just a couple of days before D-Day. Of course, they themselves don't actually know they know there will be a D-Day, but they are not told that D-Day will be happening a couple of days later on the coast of Normandy in France. So the other end, our special forces are wreaking havoc, or trying to, in the Yugoslav islands of Brac and Hvar. And the reason that they wanted to make so much noise on the mountain tops and stuff was to draw the German forces to be looking towards that as a potential. They didn't know if it was an invasion force, actually, but to take them away from Tito's partisans, Tito himself was in hiding in the caves on the mainland.

Next slide, please. So it's very mountainous area, thank goodness they'd had their tough commando training in Scotland, and Colin said to me this quote from some eyewitness account of what he saw, "That Brac is a very mountainous island, and tough terrain when on foot, and they arrived at a small hamlet with a few houses. Couple came out and gave them water for their flasks," so they knew that there were some friendlies on the island. And later, sadly, he said "there was a rumour that they've actually been murdered for helping the allies, for helping the commanders in particular," and that wasn't unknown, the same thing happened in France with some of the SAS forces. The locals that helped them could actually pay with their lives. Next slide, please. So, as I said the purpose of the raid then is for these commanders to raise as much noise and dust, this is Colin's own words, "As possible to draw the Germans attention away from Tito, so that we could move him, keep him safe in the caves." Next slide, please. Because ultimately the Germans were on the hunt for Tito, and these commandos, this is a group of some of Colin's colleagues, they were, they found themselves under fire by one of the SS Divisions Prince Eugene was one of the fiercest, largest bulk of SS division in the Balkans, and they found themselves up against them, the Yugoslav local fascists, and some Nazi officers, Austrian Nazis as well. Colin describes them as a highly underestimated, a highly unpleasant group of individuals. We sat on the mountain tops with SS Prinz heading for us, a particularly hazardous time. But he took it in his stride when I interviewed him, but it was successful and that was fantastic because it did draw the attention away from Tito and Tito's hiding place, and Tito survives of course the war, as we know, and a notable thanks to those commandos. Next slide, please. So, the situation in Yugoslavia, gradually the partisans begin to take control. Two commandos Colin was attached to finally left this in September, 1944, they had expected this operation to be quite a short, sharp operation, but they were there for nearly three months, actually. In the end, and could never tell it was very very difficult to get intelligence out of Yugoslavia, about Yugoslavia, back to London for those planning these special raids, a bit different for France and other parts of Western Europe,



where the flow of intelligence was pretty successful and particularly, of course, via the codebreakers of Bletchley Park. Next slide, please. It's a beautiful part of the world, isn't it. Now if we come to Albania, it's an equally tricky situation. And from Yugoslavia from those islands, Colin was Colin Anson wasn't his original name, of course, he was Klaus Asher originally his commando unit were then tasked with landing on Albania. And it was now September '44, so late summer in terms of Albania what they hadn't anticipated was that they would encounter three to four weeks of literally monsoon weather. And before they don't go straight from Yugoslavia, they go back to a base in Italy in monopoly, there was a special forces base, Allied forces base in monopoly there on the far coast, not far from Rimini, and they are embarked for Albania from a naval base, for what he described and was told, don't worry chaps it's going to be short, sharp action, but this also lasted a month, far far longer than they'd anticipated and their aim was to capture a strategic port Sarande, we'll come to that now.

Next slide, please. There's a picture of our man Colin, so they made a landing in the bay north of Sarande. It was he says quite warm we're in tropical kit, but of course, once they landed the monsoons came. And you know he didn't, he didn't initially explained to me. But I worked out I said, hang on a minute Colin it took me quite a while to work, you know, several interviews he said, well we took Sarande in Albania. And when I interviewed him in more detail I said, "Well how long were you there he said, "Of course, it was raining for three weeks." So well how did you survive in Albania for three weeks it's something which he had blocked out of his memory. It was a tough time. And there are stories in his biography of how they literally had to sort of shelter under crevices of rock, and with very very primitive covering really like you would expect with Special Forces operations very very difficult territory. But what they discovered this time was not that the Germans were any danger from within Albania but it was actually, they were receiving shelling from Corfu, because Corfu, of course, is not far from the Albanian coast, at a point. Next slide, please. So very very tough time I hope I've chosen some images there that I hope give you a flavour of the terrain, you know, probably even more challenging for them than in Yugoslavia. He wasn't, of course, they have no cameras they did not take photographs themselves of these missions. They managed to advance after three weeks, through these ravines and managed to take some of the area before they finally went into the Port of Sarande. Next slide, please. And while during that three week period, they're not idle I mean he said, he slept for day after night after night soaking wet you learn how to keep warm, even being drenched with rain quite very very interesting. And that was part of their training, but they still had to go out they had to go out to find wood, they lit fires in the early morning tried to shelter in ravines so they wouldn't be the light wouldn't be seen by the enemy, but they were bombarded. Again, I've got a photograph there, it's a World War One photograph actually, but this is of an Austrian

howitzer which the Germans used in Albania, and Colin commented when the shells started coming down, it sounded like an express train. A very modest guy about what what he experienced, but I think he must have wondered, as did his colleagues whether they were ever going to get off the island of Albania, incredibly difficult, but they had a mission. Next slide, please. And that was to take the Port of Saranda. So, they finally entered the port, and they took some of the buildings including the local bank, no money to be seen but the local bank, and one of the first things they've done is to convert the counter was normally briefly exchange of money, etc and transactions converted it into a bar. The Germans had used it before they took it as an officer's mess. So, conveniently for them they found all this wonderful alcohol wine and liqueurs on shelves behind the bar. So, as he says the Marines weren't very far behind me and started coming in he said he hopped behind the bar and gave out drinks, but it's a very surreal situation because they're having to adapt to the situation. There were the Germans before they fled, left booby traps, everything could be trapped so they had to be very careful in entering buildings, not just to kind of charge in, open the doors because everything could be booby-trapped. So that was, it was still a very very dangerous time, but they actually, in the end, turned this bank stroke bar into a makeshift hospital behind enemy lines.

Next slide, please. So, finally, then they have captured this small port of Albanian port, beautifully pretty port, finally taken on 9th of October, 1944, finally totally liberated from any factions hiding in any of the buildings and places around there. The next stop I'm not going to go into detail was Corfu for him and Colin was literally, they sent him from Saranda in a one-man boat, a little patrol boat over to Corfu, and he was the first Allied soldier, a German-Jewish refugee, first Allied soldier who liberated Corfu, and he had such a welcome. Wonderful, wonderful stories about his liberation, involvement in the liberation of Corfu, and then, of course, with his men coming behind him. Next slide, please. So, if we contrast then to give us an idea of the kind of trickiness. The difference you could never tell and this was the problem I think for any of those special operations, the special forces going into parts of the Balkans, whether it's Yugoslavia, whether it's into other parts of around Hungary, Romania, the Albanian partisans, they were different, you couldn't automatically assume that they were going to be pro-allies, and Colin commented, "We've been used to Tito's partisans in Yugoslavia, and I'm reading it's really important distinction, "who were quite a disciplined and purposeful army. In Albania, when there was action we didn't see much of the partisans," it's interesting, isn't it. "After the action was over, they materialised from nowhere, they were not motivated in the same way as the Yugoslav partisans, doesn't mean of course that they were any less dangerous, in that if they thought you had come, you were an enemy agent undercover, your chances of survival were pretty slim." Next slide, please. Okay, so in the last part of the talk, I've got in the last 10 to 15 minutes I

just want to talk about the penetration of Austria, you can see the Drava River there I'm going to mention that shortly. So having done these special operations into Yugoslavia and they wouldn't by no means the only operations, MI6 would have had, presumably we don't know the files aren't declassified, but you get a sense that MI6 would have had its operations into Yugoslavia throughout the war time. You have the Special Operations Executive also sending agents in, you have the MI9 secret sections of MI9, the women that we saw including Hannah Senesh dropped into these regions. But towards the end of the war the Balkans become really important as a staging post from Italy into Austria and Hungary, because ultimately the Allies know whether it's the Russian army that's going to liberate. The key things we wanted to do the Allies wanted to get into southern Austria and take the strategic airfield of Zeltweg ahead of the Russians, the game is changing quite rapidly as we get into 1945. Already there's a realisation, at least 18 months beforehand is a realisation, the Russians, although there are allies at this point of a new threat, they are going to be a threat we're going to move into the Cold War. There is now a race, the special forces that go into these areas including those agents parachuted in from Italy into the Balkan area, ultimately, to get into Austria. Next slide, please. Because in Austria we want to get up a resistance groups.

Next slide, please. We have to penetrate Nazi-occupied Austria to drop or distribute propaganda literature to link up with the partisans there to link up with those resistance groups in Austria, but the way that we did that was actually to drop men. I don't know of any cases of women that were dropped as part of the Austrian mission. There may well be, but I haven't come across any. There was a group of Austrian Jewish refugees around 25 of them who were trained in England and ultimately they were dropped with other special agents as part of SOE from Italy into Yugoslavia, to link up with the partisans and to somehow cross into Austria, and as SOE they will be involved in sabotage, like I said at the beginning, but also to link up with the resistance. So they were to meet up the partisans but it was incredibly risky, because by now at this point in the war. The Germans are heavily defending areas they're trying to defend along the borders. The partisans are quite jumpy about who's coming in, and they had decided that these agents will be dropped in with blank documents. Heaven knows why they did this, but they drop them in with blank documents, which the partisans would fill in for security reasons, they would fill it in their fake documents that would change after a number of SOE agents were picked up by partisans accidentally, or kind of lost their lives because they thought to be German agents, but the first five men who were dropped in again about a week after D-Day, so all this is going on you've got all the pandemonium, and the advances after D-Day, but over this side, there is still a lot of action going on in the Balkans, but the first five men to be dropped didn't make it into Austria and they had to be evacuated. Next slide, please. And another group was dropped. Just a couple of days later, three of them

they became known as the temple group. I don't know where particular names were given to them by SOE but each of those groups will be three or four agents that would be dropped largely by Halifax aircraft. Often they were dropped in the wrong place, slightly at the wrong time so not all of the missions were successful. This one actually failed and again, they had to come back, and they did not make their full-scale sabotage they were supposed to, but by August, 1944 another group, again consisting of German, Austrian, Jewish refugees did drop, and they managed to do what I described as a full-scale sabotage. One of the female SOE officers wrote in a report about this mission, and I love this it's just the way it describes the mission about these agents and their sabotage. They had a very lively time up there and did some excellent work with the local partisans and then paving the way for the penetration of Austria by agents who are to follow later. So they are preparing the groundwork, and those agents that were going to Austria would hopefully penetrate quite deep and get as far as Graz or Innsbruck. I'm not sure that any of them got as far as Vienna. Next slide, please. The drops into Yugoslavia ahead of trying to pass into Austria were beset by difficulties. I've marked the Brenner Pass there. The Brenner Pass was not an option until very very late in the war, it was heavily defended by the Germans through most of the war. There were difficulties because SOE, unfortunately, did not get the aircraft and backup for when the agents were ready to go from Italy. The priority was given to the Poles and the Italians, and there was a constant struggle to get aircraft from the Allies to mount those drops from Italy into Yugoslavia. And as I've put there when the aircraft was finally available, there was bad weather, they could not drop in bad weather. So, SOE then shifted its policy in 1945 and decided not to drop to reception committees of partisans, but just to do blind drops, just to drop their agents out of aircraft. Next slide, please. A hugely hugely dangerous mission and this is the last part I want to talk about in my talk today. How many of you have heard of Operation Ice Cream. I love this. Yes, you'll know that for your quiz, your pub quiz, or your charity quiz or something, there was such a thing as Operation Ice Cream. And this was part of the main first party of emigres of Austrian Jewish refugees were dropped 30th of July 1944. And one of the key figures in that was Frederick Berliner his original name. He anglicised it to Michael O'Hara, he had some great English identity and papers. But he was dropped a bit too soon and he actually became separated from his colleagues and as he's descending, he's hearing with his parachute, he's hearing all this gunfire, and he suspects that his colleagues have actually been shot. And the fact they hadn't they did make it eventually back to Bolzano, you've got through northern Italy to a heavily defended area by the Germans quite quite incredible. But Michael O'Hara is on his own behind enemy lines now. And eventually, it takes him seven weeks, partly linking up with the partisans in Yugoslavia but he makes it through the German lines, because he's supposed to be penetrating from Yugoslavia into Austria, but he makes it back through the heavily defended German lines and walks across Italy, down to Rome, and links up with the Allies.

Next slide, please. And extraordinarily, he's not happy with being sent back to London, he wants to go in again, he has a mission that he didn't manage to fulfil the previous year, so 7th of February 1945 he is parachuted back into southern Austria, in a blind drop. So it means he's not going to be met by anyone he's just going to be dropped behind the lines, west of Graz, and these German, Austrian, well German because Austria was part of Germany, but these Austrian Jewish refugees, and there would be more that would come after O'Hara, were dropped into the Styria region. And that's where, near Graz there, and that's not far from the Zeltweg which is an aerodrome, and that airfield was strategic, it had to be taken, as I said earlier, ahead of the Russians, and his role was to prepare the missions that were coming after him. He had trained with other Austrian Jewish refugees and they were waiting for Italy, once he prepared the groundwork, sent messages back, they will be dropped in again on blind drops, but he was arrested finally by Gestapo patrols. He'd headed back towards Yugoslavia, managed to join the partisans, and he radioed SOE headquarters in Italy for extra supplies. Next slide, please. But ultimately, he doesn't make it back you remember I showed on the map the Drava River, which you needed to cross in Austria, to get back into Yugoslavia, he's there he's linked up with partisans who'd been working behind the lines, but they are ambushed, and he was arrested, and because his papers. I don't know why they were found to be compromising actually, but the German suspected him of being a spy, a special agent he would have been executed anyway, but they actually accused him of espionage. And that section of the SOE official history that I've worked on in the archive says, there is little doubt that he was shot by the SS in Maribor as a spy. The SS had some of the headquarters in what is today Maribor in Slovenia. When I first worked on his story that SOE history had not been declassified, and I interviewed some of his colleagues, one of whom did not go into action. He was waiting in Italy, Eric Sanders, Ignace Schwartz was his original name from Vienna. And Eric said to me he passed away last year at the age of 101 he said, "I was waiting in Italy for Michael O'Hara to come back. He never came back, never came back from his mission we had no idea what happened to him. It was said that he was shot by the SS, but we had no idea. And it was only in this last year when the files were declassified apart, sadly Eric had passed away, and I couldn't tell him. I finally found out what had happened to his colleague, Michael O'Hara, and that would have been important closure for him, but we now know that O'Hara was shot by the Gestapo as a spy. Next slide, please. So my kind of concluding comments on the Balkans today. I've put up a more modern map, I don't think the borders have changed since this map was printed. It does remain of course a very tricky area still today with I guess a lot of hidden political sentiments under the surface that's hope they don't erupt again, but a very very tricky and difficult area to mount special operations during the war time. But one final thing I want to say. We do pay tribute today to those women and men that risk their lives, some did make it

back. Some made it back from the Austrian mission in April, 1945, we pay tribute to them. But what was the legacy of that those special missions in Yugoslavia? Because British intelligence because the Special Operations Executive supported the partisans. This is really important because they support the partisans in the Second World War, Tito who became the new president in the Cold War, were actually guaranteed to stay neutral in the Cold War. So you can never be quite sure you have the current missions and operations, which have their purpose, but you can never quite know what's going to happen ahead, but in fact, the importance of these missions was not only to provide a presence, and the worst successes in spite of those failures and blows brave men and women who gave their lives, but it did mean their sacrifice meant that a grateful Yugoslavia under Tito remain neutral in the Cold War, how history could have been very different. Thank you.