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**Olav Riste. "‘Stay Behind’: A Clandestine Cold War Phenomenon." *Journal of Cold War Studies* 16:4 (Fall 2014): 35-59. DOI: 10.1162/JCWS\_a\_00515.**

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Introduction by **Leopoldo Nuti**, Roma Tre University

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When the Cold War was about to wind down, Italian Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti startled the members of the national Parliament – and many other people across Europe and in the U.S. – by revealing in a rather offhand tone the existence of a clandestine NATO “Stay Behind” network that had been successfully kept secret over the previous 40 years. No need to worry, he reassured his audience: the organization had been conceived to operate behind enemy lines in case of a Warsaw pact aggression, and now that the threat was gone, it was about to be dismantled soon. While the reasons behind Andreotti’s unexpected declaration will probably remain hard to assess for quite some time, it is a lot easier to imagine what kind of frenzy his statement whipped up. In the following months, a number of European Parliaments appointed their special committees to look into the matter, while the media went berserk with all sorts of fantastic conspiracy theories, particularly when some of the official inquiries confirmed the existence of the network. About a decade after Andreotti’s revelations, the furor resumed when a Swiss Ph.d., Daniele Ganser, turned his doctoral dissertation into a book, *NATO’s Secret Armies*, which attracted much attention for its vitriolic charges about the involvement of the Stay Behind (SB) network in lots of illegal activities – if not outright terrorism – in most Western European countries.<sup>1</sup>

At about this time Olav Riste, one of the most respected and senior historians of international relations in Western Europe, contacted me to discuss whether I might be interested in writing some sort of a joint rebuttal to Ganser’s book. There were some serious differences in the kind of documentary evidence we could use: Riste had been given full access to the archive of the Norwegian Intelligence Service while I could only rely on some of the documents released by the Italian parliamentary committees that had investigated the matter. Yet we shared the same intention: we wanted to look into the story and see what sense we could make of it by using as rigorous an approach as was possible. The result was a workshop which Riste organized in Norway and eventually a special issue of the *Journal of Strategic Studies* which

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<sup>1</sup> Daniele Ganser, *NATO’s Secret Armies: Operation GLADIO and Terrorism in Western Europe* (London: Routledge, 2005).

looked at the story of the Stay Behind network in France, Italy, the Netherlands, and Norway and tried to assess its impact without indulging in any hazardous speculations.<sup>2</sup>

Riste's current article in *Cold War Studies* is a most useful development of this earlier project. It greatly contributes to our understanding of the whole SB story, as it not only sums up the main results of the original *JSS* project in a very effective manner, but it also provides additional information which helps elucidating this complex issue even further. The whole SB network, Riste argues, was not the result of a master plan imposed by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) or the Secret Intelligence Service/Military Intelligence (SIS/MI6) on the recalcitrant Europeans. Consistently with the historical literature which in the past three decades has highlighted the dialectical dimensions of almost any aspects of Transatlantic relations, Riste shows that the eventual creation of the network was the result of a complex negotiation between the U.S., the UK, and a number of Western European countries, each one of which often had its own national agenda and its own rationale, to set up a clandestine group of agents meant to operate behind enemy lines. As a matter of fact, the idea of preparing for secret operations in case of a new enemy occupation of their territory was natural for those countries which had experienced the Nazi invasion and were worried about a future Soviet one. In almost every country in Western Europe and in Scandinavia, therefore, the military and the government thought about, and in some cases implemented, a number of initiatives which were conceived to contrast a future loss of national territory to an invader. The important thing, Riste notes, is that they in most cases they did so *before* being contacted by U.S. or UK operatives (58). Such steps covered the whole gamut of clandestine warfare and paramilitary activities: from the simple gathering of intelligence in an occupied territory to secret radio communications, exfiltration of prisoners or relevant political figures, sabotage, propaganda, and psychological warfare.

Obviously many of the people involved in the planning and implementing of these networks had also been involved in the resistance movements during World War II, and above all they had often been working hand in hand with the Allied secret services, be they SIS, Special Operations Executive (SOE), or Office of Strategic Services (OSS). Wartime contacts and channels, therefore, were often resuscitated, or in some cases they probably never broke down and continued seamlessly into the postwar era. Riste shows, however, that when the MI6 or the CIA began to discuss their own plans with Western European intelligence services, there were quite often very divergent perspectives on what the future SB organizations should do. Equally difficult was to decide to whom the SB groups should be responsible, as national intelligence services were adamant in insisting in retaining control of their own networks. Eventually, this tug of war ended with the inevitable compromise that "in peace and war, command of clandestine resources of any NATO nation will be retained by that nation" (56). NATO was basically given the more limited task of coordinating the activities of the national organizations, a task which was made easier by the creation of an Allied Coordinating Committee in 1958.

Riste plainly states that a large part of the story of the organization remains "shrouded in secrecy" for the 1970s and the 1980s (56). His own attempts to access NATO archives and find additional documentary evidence have been unsuccessful; other scholars have not been any luckier. Therefore, while he has been able to offer a persuasive narrative for the origins and the early steps of the network up until the early 1960s, for the later period he can only argue that the available evidence points at a number of similar

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<sup>2</sup> Leopoldo Nuti and Olav Riste (eds.), "Special Section: Preparing for a Soviet Occupation: The Strategy of 'Stay-Behind'," in *Journal of Strategic Studies* 30: 6 (2007), 929-1024.

## H-Diplo Article Review

attempts at scaling down the organization's activities in several countries. In Belgium, the Netherlands, West Germany and Italy many of the paramilitary missions were closed down, arms caches withdrawn, and the overall range of tasks for the SB units reduced to the basic ones of intelligence and exfiltration. Clearly this reversal leaves the door open to a number of different interpretations: were the units' missions cut down because of détente and the reduction of threat perceptions in the 1970s? Or were there other reasons, such as the fact that some of the secret weapons caches came close to being discovered – or were actually accidentally unearthed, as it happened in Italy? Were there any units that went astray and became involved in illegal activities? It may as well be that the original tug of war about how best to use the organization continued throughout its evolution. In the Italian case, for instance, there is some speculation that the U.S. tried to use the local SB for psy-ops in peacetime and not just for its original wartime duties, and that these demands were resisted by the Italian authorities.

Future research on the network's activities will not be easy unless NATO decides to open its own files on this issue, or unless there is a major opening in some national archive. Yet Olav Riste's work has already steered our understanding of the SB in a very different direction from the original wild speculations, debunking some of the least plausible. Thanks to his access to the Norwegian archives, but above all thanks to his rigorous methodological approach and his profound knowledge of the history of the Transatlantic relationship, Riste has provided us with a convincing explanation of how the network was created and of the fears and the perceptions that led to its establishment. His article for *Cold War Studies* is likely to remain the standard work on this topic for quite some time, adding one more important chapter to the history of NATO and the Cold War.

**Leopoldo Nuti** (Siena, 1958), is Professor of History of International Relations at Roma Tre University, Co-Director of the Nuclear Proliferation International History Project, and President of the Italian Society of International History. He has published extensively in Italian, English, and French on U.S.-Italian relations and Italian foreign and security policy. His latest books are *La sfida nucleare. La politica estera italiana e le armi nucleari, 1945-1991* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2008) [*The Nuclear Challenge: Italian Foreign Policy and Atomic Weapons, 1945-1991*] and, as a co-editor, *The Euromissiles Crisis and the End of the Cold War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

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