

Top Secret *By Philippa Werry*

Introduction

Enter the world of the SOE – the Special Operations Executive established to bring down Hitler in World War II. This text explores the life of secret agents in the war – their traits, their role, the equipment they used, and the dangers they faced on a daily level. It includes a profile of secret agent Violette Szabo.

Reason for reading

You could use this book with your students:

- as part of a wider unit on war
- to explore an extraordinary job.

Setting the scene

Draw on your students' prior knowledge. If necessary, introduce concepts or vocabulary to help them access the story. Also communicate the reason for reading.

- Brainstorm ideas about World War II. "When and where did World War II take place? Who was involved? Why did the war begin? What happened in it?" Also mind map ideas around secret agents. "What is a secret agent, or spy? What do secret agents do? What traits would a person need to be a secret agent? Would you like to be a secret agent? Why or why not?" Alternatively, you could elicit prior knowledge through a postbox or "think, pair, share" activity. Write key vocabulary on the board.
- Print Template A, the KWLH chart, from the back of this document. Alternatively, create a KWLH chart on the board. Have the students fill in the first two columns with what they know and want to know about World War II – or secret agents in particular. After reading, they can fill in the final two columns (what they learned and how they learned it).
- Introduce any vocabulary that your students may need to access the text. Refer to Worksheet 2 for a list of potentially unfamiliar words. You could carry out this activity before or after reading. (See "Taking a closer look – Exploring language".)
- Have your students quickly skim the text, especially the contents page, headings, and index, to get an idea of what information it covers. "Does anyone know what the SOE was? Let's read to find out more."

Getting stuck in

Choose the prompts that you feel your students need. Remind them to note any unfamiliar words and check for clues to the meanings in the text or images. The meanings of words in bold text are in the glossary at the back of the book.

- End page 3 – "What have you found out about how World War II began? Who was Hitler and what did he want?"
- End page 4 – "What does SOE stand for, and who set this organisation up?"
- End page 5 – "How did people become secret agents? What does 'recruited by word of mouth' mean? What does 'from all walks of life' mean? Who became secret agents? Does this surprise you? Why or why not?"

- End page 7 – “How does the list of traits on page 7 compare with what you thought before reading? Can you add any traits? What sort of life did agents have? Now that you’ve read this, how would you feel about being a secret agent?” Clarify any vocabulary as necessary, especially the difference between “behind enemy lines” and “behind the scenes”?
- End page 9 – “How difficult do you think it would be to forget your identity and take on a new one? Why do you say that? Did all people who trained to be agents actually become agents?” Check the students’ understandings of “some people were weeded out”.
- End page 11 – “What does ID stand for? Why do you think food was in short supply?”
- End page 13 – “Why did the SOE make clothes look old? What other ways can you think of to age clothes?”
- End page 17 – “What do you think of all these gadgets? Which do you think is the cleverest and why?”
- End page 19 – “What impressions do you get of the war from reading this? What does the information make you think and feel?”
- End page 21 – “What do you think of what Violette Szabo did and why?” Clarify any language as necessary, for example, “use all her wits”.
- End page 22 – “Do you agree with the final paragraph? Why or why not?” Clarify any vocabulary as necessary, for example, “the SOE was dissolved”. Also briefly clarify the references to the events in Japan and how they were connected with the other information so far – or have your students research this later.

Taking a closer look

Choose suggestions that suit your students and reason for reading.

Exploring ideas and opinions

- Ask for your students’ opinions of the text and encourage them to justify those opinions.
- Have the students complete Worksheet 1 (the three-level thinking guide) and discuss their responses in pairs, in small groups, or as a class.
- Discuss the role of the SOE in more detail, referring to the final paragraph to start off your discussion. “What impact do you think the SOE had? What do you think of the actions of the secret agents? Do you think their presence was positive? Necessary? Why or why not?”
- Revisit your list of traits of secret agents and develop it further.
- Have the students complete the KWLH chart with things they’ve learned about World War II and secret agents.

Exploring structure

- Explore how the text is structured, noticing the use of headings that identify the focus of each section. You could carry out a “treasure hunt” activity in which the students use features like the contents page and headings to scan for answers to questions you give them.

Exploring language

- Cut out the words and definitions from Worksheet 2 and muddle them up. Hand them out to individual students and have them find their correct “partner”.

- As an alternative to the above, divide the class into two groups and have them complete Worksheet 3a and Worksheet 3b respectively. This activity involves the students in creating the definitions, which they then use to test the other group.
- Your students could work in small groups to cluster vocabulary (from the worksheet, their earlier brainstorming, and/or the text) into sets of their choice, for example, war activities, equipment, places – or even nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs. They could also practise using the words in sentences.

Moving beyond the text

Choose activities that suit your students and reason for reading.

Writing

- Write a personal response to the text, considering what you learned from it and how it made you think and feel.

Debating

- Hold a class debate on a topic related to the text, for example, that war is a waste of lives, time, and money.

Research

- Research more about an aspect of World War II or the role of the SOE. For example, you could explore resistance groups, spying equipment, or the events in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in more detail, or you could profile another secret agent.

Art and design

- Design a gadget for a special agent.
- Experiment with ways to age clothes or money that aren't mentioned in the text.

WORKSHEET 1

Top Secret – Three-level thinking guide

- Level 1 – Reading on the lines (interpreting what the text says on a literal level)
- Level 2 – Reading between the lines (inferring, or interpreting what the text might mean)
- Level 3 – Reading beyond the lines (evaluating ideas by relating them to other knowledge)

Students write “agree” or “disagree” beside each statement and then discuss their responses in pairs, in groups, or as a class. The value of this activity lies in the discussion it generates as students justify their views. The activity is not intended as a test for comprehension.

LEVEL 1	Agree/disagree
People hoped that World War II would be the “War to End All Wars”.	
World War II began when Germany invaded Poland.	
SOE stands for Secret Operations Executive.	
The job of the SOE was to bring down England.	
Many people worked behind the scenes to support the secret agents.	
Training to be a secret agent took less than ten weeks.	
Secret agents had to take on a whole new identity.	
Secret agents drew maps from photos taken by planes.	
Ration cards allowed people to buy things in short supply.	
Secret agents used balloons to keep gadgets dry.	
Agents wrote secret information on edible notepaper.	
Secret agents captured by the Germans were put in prison.	
Violette Szabo was a French-speaking secret agent.	
Secret agents brought hope into the darkness of war.	

Sheet 1 of 2

LEVEL 2	Agree/disagree
Secret agents recommended other people to become agents.	
Secret agents were multilingual.	
Secret agents were people who liked being alone.	
Secret agents used real identification documents that they stole from people.	
Secret agents always wore old clothes.	
Agents used extraordinary methods to hide secret information.	
The SOE turned everyday items into sophisticated pieces of equipment.	
It was easy for the enemy to locate wireless radios.	
All secret agents committed suicide if they were captured.	
Secret agents needed to be very self-sufficient.	
LEVEL 3	Agree/disagree
Without the SOE, England would have lost World War II.	
Every country in the world became involved in World War II.	
Wars are a waste of lives, time, and money.	
World War III could never happen now.	

Sheet 2 of 2

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WORKSHEET 2

Top Secret – Match the meaning

Cut out the words and definitions, muddle them up, and have your students match them.

Word	Definition
engulfed	completely taken over, in the middle of
empire	a group of countries under the same ruler
alliance	an agreement to work together
invaded	entered (usually a country) with the plan of taking over
sabotage	deliberate damage or destruction
fluent	able to speak, read, and write a language well
occupied	taken over by another country
ration cards	cards used to get a set amount of essential supplies
counterfeit	fake but made to look like the real thing
smuggled	taken out of a country illegally
undercover	doing secret work, spying
refugees	people who have escaped from danger or trouble in their own country and cannot return there

Word	Definition
gadgets	small devices (often mechanical) used for particular tasks
edible	able to be eaten
detonator	a device that sets off an explosion
corrosive	able to destroy materials by chemical action
execute	to kill
resistance groups	secret groups that fight the rulers of a country, especially in an occupied country
interrogated	questioned in an aggressive way

Sheet 2 of 2

Note that some words above may have other meanings in other contexts.

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WORKSHEET 3a – GROUP A

Top Secret – Vocab swap

- Divide the class into two groups and give half Worksheet 3a and half Worksheet 3b.
- In the second column, each group writes definitions for the words in the first column. Where a word has more than one meaning, they may need to check the page listed.
- They then fold the first column out of sight and swap sheets with the other group.
- That group guesses the original word and writes it in the third column. They can go to the page listed if they need help. For an extra challenge, they can guess without referring to the page.
- You could make this a fun competition and give points for every correct word.

Word	Definition (Group A)	Word (Group B)
engulfed (p. 2)	(p. 2)	
alliance (p. 2)	(p. 2)	
sabotage (p. 4)	(p. 4)	
occupied (p. 8)	(p. 8)	
counterfeit (p. 11)	(p. 11)	
undercover (p. 12)	(p. 12)	
gadgets (p. 14)	(p. 14)	
detonator (p. 16)	(p. 16)	
execute (p. 19)	(p. 19)	
interrogated (p. 21)	(p. 21)	

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WORKSHEET 3b – GROUP B

Top Secret – Vocab swap

- Divide the class into two groups and give half Worksheet 3a and half Worksheet 3b.
- In the second column, each group writes definitions for the words in the first column. Where a word has more than one meaning, they may need to check the page listed.
- They then fold the first column out of sight and swap sheets with the other group.
- That group guesses the original word and writes it in the third column. They can go to the page listed if they need help. For an extra challenge, they can guess without referring to the page.
- You could make this a fun competition and give points for every correct word.

Word	Definition (Group B)	Word (Group B)
empire (p. 2)	(p. 2)	
invaded (p. 2)	(p. 2)	
fluent (p. 5)	(p. 5)	
ration cards (p. 11)	(p. 11)	
smuggled (p. 11)	(p. 11)	
refugees (p. 12)	(p. 12)	
edible (p. 15)	(p. 15)	
corrosive (p. 16)	(p. 16)	

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