

SIX: A History of Britain's Secret Intelligence Service—Part 1: Murder and Mayhem, 1909–1939

Michael Smith (London: Dialogue, 2010), 468 pp., endnotes, bibliography, photos, appendices, index.

Reviewed by Hayden Peake

By repute, the British Secret Intelligence Service is the oldest, most experienced, and most secret in the Western world. Today, according to former Chief of Secret Service (CSS), Sir Colin McColl, this not unhelpful “myth...of excellence and secrecy” surrounds the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS).^a Intelligence historians have addressed the question of British myth versus reality with considerable vigor. Building on the ground breaking work of Mildred Gladys Richings in her 1935 book, *Espionage: The Story of the Secret Service of the English Crown*,^b Christopher Andrew, in his 1986 book *Her Majesty's Secret Service*,^c examined the British intelligence record from the Victorian era to the late 20th century. He recognized that historical coverage of the subject was uneven. One reason, to Andrew's dismay, was that even though records from WW II had been released, many documents from earlier years remained classified “on the dotty grounds that intelligence gathering before the war must remain more secret than during the war.”^d The availability of primary sources has improved since Andrew made that complaint, and former British army intelligence officer Michael Smith has used them well in his history of the SIS from its 1909 origin to 1939.

Smith begins his story in the early 20th century when books like *The Invasion of 1910*, and *Spies of the Kaiser*; both by journalist William Le Queux, grossly exaggerated the threat of German espionage in Britain.^e Nevertheless, the result was a greatly aroused public at a time when Britain had no civilian organization to deal with the espionage threat whatever its magnitude. Why was a civilian organization needed? The War Office had only one overtaxed civilian intelligence

^a Colin McColl, BBC Radio 4 interview, 29 July 2009.

^b M. G. Richings, *Espionage: The Story of the Secret Service of the English Crown* (London: Hutchinson, 1935). Richings describes 600 years of espionage and security operations, ending in 1760.

^c Christopher Andrew, *Her Majesty's Secret Service: The Making of the British Intelligence Community* (New York: Viking, 1986)

^d Andrew, *Her Majesty's Secret Service*, xv.

^e William Le Queux, *The Invasion of 1910* (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1906); *Spies of the Kaiser* (London: Frank Cass, 1996); the first edition was published in 1909. See also Christopher Moran and Robert Johnson, “In the Service of Empire: Imperialism and the British Spy Thriller, 1901–1914” in *Studies in Intelligence* 54 no. 2 (June 2010) for an examination of the impact of these and other novels about espionage written during the period.

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officer who ran agents in Europe, (4) but couldn't attachés and diplomats supplement his efforts? Smith explains that although the War Office and the Admiralty both had small intelligence staffs that relied on diplomats and attachés, they were models of open source intelligence acquisition and did not want to change. When it came to espionage or any secret intelligence collection, they preferred to decline the honor. The military attaché in Brussels wrote, "I would never do any secret service work." When his counterpart in Berlin was tasked with collecting against his German hosts, he responded that "contact with the class of man...employed in this sort of work...and the measures to which we are obliged to resort are repulsive to me." (3)

Accepting this reality and recognizing the increasing public "spy fever," the Committee of Imperial Defence established a subcommittee to create an organization "that could handle such delicate matters and ensure government officials did not have to dirty their hands by dealing with spies." (7) Hence, in 1909, the independent Secret Service Bureau (SSB) was established with two branches, briefly housed together. The Domestic Branch, initially subordinated to the War Office, and later to the Home Office, eventually became MI5 and was publicly avowed though not publicized.^f The Foreign Branch was placed under the Admiralty but for cover purposes was designated MI1c, later MI6, the designation from which the book's title is taken. Officially called the SIS, its existence was neither avowed nor officially publicized.^g (57, 274–75) To preserve its anonymity, SIS imposed "a comprehensive ban on publication of exploits" by serving and retired officers.^h In practice the ban was selectively applied. More than 100 SIS officers and government officials have published memoirs in which they mentioned their secret service work, but only a few were prosecuted. Others resorted to thinly disguised fiction. The nonfiction accounts are as a rule narrowly focused and not well documented, but they leave no doubt that a secret intelligence service existed. Fiction is at best an imperfect mirror and readers are often left guessing. In *SIX*, Michael Smith takes a broad view, adding new stories, filling in details, using true names and dates, and perhaps most interesting, describing the reactions of government entities to the intelligence they received.

The book is roughly divided between the tenures of first two SIS chiefs of service, Captain Mansfield Smith-Cumming (1909–23) and Admiral Hugh Sinclair (1923–39). Smith addresses several recurrent issues that neither chief resolved completely. The most annoying and persistent were turf battles among elements of the Foreign Office and the War Office that clashed with "C," as the chief was called, over the SIS mission. Equally serious and frequent was an inadequate budget often, coupled with increased demands for collection. But the majority of the book deals with operations, their management and execution and their failures and successes.

^f Christopher Andrew, *Defend the Realm* (New York: Knopf, 2009), 28; see also Hamil Grant, *Spies and Secret Service* (London: Grant Richards, 1915), 138–46, for the statement released to the public regarding the establishment of the Security Service.

^g Andrew, *Defend the Realm*, 28. The SIS would not be officially avowed until 1992.

^h Nigel West (ed.), *The Faber Book of Espionage* (London: Faber & Faber, 1993), 3–4

The sophistication, geographical scope and audacity of the operations are remarkable, especially since Cumming, the first “C,” had no prior management or intelligence experience. Applying his intuition, writes Smith, Cumming selected officers, sent them behind enemy lines to “determine the situation” and they were often successful. Even more remarkable, the officers Cumming selected didn’t have experience in espionage either! The Paul Dukes operation in revolutionary Russia is a good example. (239ff.) Dukes was a concert pianist. Finally, while SIS didn’t provide any training for most of WW I—one learned on the job—written instructions were developed in the field and provided to agents during as the war progressed. (383–99)

While personally recruiting and handling officers and agents, C was also expanding operations world-wide. *SIX* documents a greater concentration of agents operating in Germany, other European nations, and the Middle East during WW I than previously revealed. In discussing these operations Smith shows that despite a genuine demand for intelligence, turf battles among military and civilian elements commanded at least as much attention as running operations.

Several agents and officers addressed in *SIX* have not been previously mentioned or were only briefly acknowledged in earlier intelligence literature. These include journalist Hector Bywater (32, 39); a naval order of battle expert code-named Walter Christmas; and author Arthur Ransome, who received minutes of meetings of the Bolshevik leadership from Trotsky’s secretary Yevginya Shel-pina—Ransome’s lover and later his wife. John Leather—cousin to Desmond Morton—a senior SIS officer and later an assistant to Churchill—was arrested, tried, and jailed by the French for espionage. Border control officer Harry Gruner gets less attention but is worth a place in history as the SIS officer who strip-searched Lenin at the Finnish-Russian border—looking for evidence of German support of the Bolsheviks. Gruner was later arrested and sentenced by the Cheka to be shot, a sentence not in fact carried out. (208)

During Cumming’s tenure, SIS was not only involved in intelligence collection. Smith recounts operations that would today be called covert action—the SIS role in the murder of the Russian monk, Rasputin, for example. (199ff) During the discussion, he raises the question of whether SIS officers have a “license to kill”; he quotes wartime officer Jack Lawson who said circumstances must decide. (160) More traditional assignments discussed include sabotage missions conducted by the *Nemesis* network out of Denmark and (124) the opening of German diplomatic bags on the Siberian Railway. (124)

When it comes to technical tradecraft, Smith shows how it was often developed on the job. Here too Cumming was involved—for example, in the search for an effective secret writing ink. Smith reveals some curious details concerning SIS’s response to a claim that semen is the best secret “ink,” though “it cannot be stored.” (65–66) *SIX* also looks at problems of agent communication, surveillance, recruitment techniques, and management of overseas stations. Cumming generally let the head of station (HOS) use his initiative without having to check with headquarters first. Author Compton Mackenzie, who was HOS in Greece and—viewed by Smith as something of a loose cannon—initiated what became

the SIS routine cover at embassies years later—the Passport Control Office (PCO). (171)

As WW I drew to a close and the Bolsheviks struggled for dominance, the attention of SIS shifted from Western Europe to Russia, and Smith describes the effect on SIS. Here we learn why Cumming recruited Sidney Reilly—“Ace of Spies”—despite reservations about his character: agents who could pass as Russian were in short supply. In the end, Reilly gets much better marks from Smith than from other writers. He quotes an anonymous former SIS officer who had worked with Riley who said that although Reilly was “written off by historians...[he] has been greatly underrated. He was a very, very good—a valuable agent...[a] more serious operator than the impression given by his myth.” (238) Smith also corrects the record concerning Reilly’s attempt to visit Lenin at the Kremlin: it never happened. (216)

SIX concludes with several chapters on SIS during the interwar period. It was a time of fiscal parsimony, staff reduction, mission review and a struggle to survive. The Admiralty and the War Office both pushed for a single intelligence service. Cumming rejected the idea as “utterly unworkable.” In the end he won and agreed to administrative subordination to the Foreign Office. (274) Despite the relative austerity, he went on to establish additional SIS offices throughout the world, offices that became key to the interwar operations Smith describes in considerable detail. At home Cumming reorganized geographically to fit the peacetime mission. He also continued the centuries-old practice of opening diplomatic mailbags, assigning the task to David Boyle in a new section. (280)

Then, in 1923, even as he was planning to retire, Mansfield Cumming died. The new C, Sinclair—the former director of naval intelligence—had been recommended by Cumming and continued—what became the tradition of using green ink and signing his name as “C.” *SIX* devotes significant attention to Sinclair’s initiatives, which began by his vigorously advocating a variation on the single intelligence service idea: he wanted MI5 and SIS consolidated, all under his control. He failed. (292–94) He was more successful in his push to strengthen station operations. He insisted on improved reporting to meet the increasing demands for intelligence on Germany, Russia, and, to a lesser extent, Japan. Smith tells of major successful efforts in collecting on the Soviet germ warfare program (296) and the German-Soviet relationship and in recruiting agents to report on the new Soviet government. (301ff)

All did not go smoothly, however, as the famous Zinoviev Letter incident illustrates. As Smith explains, SIS initially concluded that the letter advocated “armed revolution” and contained “strong incitement to contaminate the armed forces.” It was then forwarded to the Foreign Office with an endorsement stating that “the authenticity of the document is undoubted.” (306) Further investigation, however, revealed it was a fake and the Foreign Office was informed that SIS was “firmly convinced the actual thing was a forgery” as Moscow had maintained. (310) When the Foreign Office refused to believe that it was a fake, SIS reconsidered and reversed its position again. The episode did not enhance the reputation of SIS, but the organization persevered.

Smith describes several other equally embarrassing incidents, one of which resulted in a major change in the relationship of MI5 and SIS. In the 1920s, SIS was tracking Bolshevik agents in Britain. Some were connected with the All-Russian Cooperative Society (ARCOS), which was conducting espionage in Britain. SIS's own agents penetrated ARCOS and learned it possessed secret British documents. With confirming evidence collected "by the work of the GC&CS [Government Code and Cypher School] codebreakers," (315) SIS decided to raid ARCOS headquarters and get the evidence. Smith concludes the "raid itself was even more inept than the decisionmaking process that preceded it" and produced nothing. (319) The worst was yet to come. The politicians, intent on revealing Moscow's perfidy, made public the fact they had evidence obtained by decoding Moscow's cables. The Soviets switched to one-time-pads, a major setback for SIS. Finally, an infuriated SIS was forced to give up running agents in Britain to spy on foreign enterprises. The domestic security mission was moved to MI5, where it remains today.

These failures had additional consequences. For example, when genuine German war mobilization plans were acquired in 1929 by an agent in Berlin, the prime minister suppressed distribution of the information to avoid aggravating the political situation—appeasement was preferred. (360–1) Similarly, during the 1930s when the illegal clandestine military relationship between the Russians and the Germans was detected, the Foreign Office refused to act. Even worse, reports of German submarine and aircraft construction were ignored by the Admiralty and the Royal Air Force because the information contravened existing thinking. (364–65)

Despite these and other setbacks, SIS carried on. The PCO system was expanded and a network of nonofficial cover agents was created to supply intelligence. When Sinclair could not get funds for an expansion of the GC&CS, he bought its new headquarters at Bletchley Park with his own funds and approved contacts with France and Poland to improve codebreaking capability. In the late 1930s, recognizing that war was likely, Sinclair created a an organization charged with planning sabotage operations. Guy Burgess was recruited in December 1938, as was Kim Philby in June the following year. According to Smith's account, it was Burgess who "brought [Philby] in," (378) but Philby himself refuted that claim in a report submitted to the KGB.¹

Part 1 ends just before WW II begins. Smith has documented an SIS better prepared to meet the demands of war than "is commonly believed to [have been] the case." (382) What he has also demonstrated is that SIS had acquired extensive experience, some of which it would begin passing on to its American cousins as they prepared for WW II. But that story is left to be told in the forthcoming *Part 2*.



¹ See Genrikh Borovik, *The Philby Files: The Secret Life of the Master Spy – KGB Archives Revealed* (London: Little Brown, 1994), 162–63.