

Defend the Realm: The Authorized History of MI5

Christopher Andrew. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009. 1032 pp., including notes, bibliography, and index.

John Ehrman

I opened my copy of *Defend the Realm* with a sense of dread. With 865 pages of dense text, some 170 pages of notes and bibliography, and weighing in at more than three pounds, Christopher Andrew's authorized centennial history of the British Security Service promised to be the type of long, hard read one might expect of the usual official history.

But then something unexpected happened. After about 30 pages, I began to suspect that the book might not be as dull as I had feared. On page 62, as the first German spy was executed (shot at the Tower of London, but not before he had a chance to thank his British captors for their kind treatment of him), I realized that Andrew knows how to tell a good story. Another 20 pages and a few more executions and I was hooked. *Defend the Realm* turned out to be a terrific book, filled with fascinating spy stories, wonderfully eccentric characters, bureaucratic infighting, as well as shrewd insights into the development of one of the world's premier domestic security services. I could hardly put it down.

In addition to being a good read, *Defend the Realm* is an unprecedented intelligence history. For the 100th anniversary of its founding in 1909, the Security Service (or MI5 as it was long known) commissioned Andrew—one of the world's leading intelligence historians—to write a history of the service and gave him complete access to its archives. This included access to files on recent cases which, although Andrew could not use all of their contents in the book, still helped inform his overall judgments. To my knowledge, no other service ever has given an outsider such access, not to mention a promise not to censor the author's conclusions and opinions. For his part, Andrew supplemented his archival sources with previously published materials, documents from other archives, memoirs, and interviews with Security Service officers. As a result, *Defend the Realm* is an extraordinarily detailed book and, in all likelihood, will stand for many years, both as the authoritative account of the service as well as a unique example of intelligence service openness.

With an enormous amount of material and many threads in his story, the author easily could have drowned in the details. Andrew, however, avoided this trap, largely because of the way he organized *Defend the Realm*. He divides the service's history into six distinct periods—founding of the service, World War I, the interwar era, and so on, to the present—and marches through them. The sec-

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tion on each period begins with an overview of about 20 pages that presents the main themes and events—the growth and changing organization of the service, the evolution of its missions, relations with its political masters, and major intelligence cases and affairs—and then gives the details in the ensuing chapters. As a result, he reduces a massive history to bite-size, easily digestible pieces, while still following his themes and presenting all the information the reader needs.

American readers, it needs to be said, face some disadvantages in reading *Defend the Realm*. Andrew clearly wrote for a British audience and so assumes, for example, that his readers know why Ramsay MacDonald would naturally have been suspicious of the service or what the role of a permanent undersecretary is in the British bureaucracy. Similarly, Americans might tire of seeing characters introduced as “Major (later Major General Sir) William Thwaites,” wonder what is a lord president, or be unable to remember the differences between a QC, GCB, WPC, the TUC, and any number of other British acronyms that populate the pages. But those who remember Britain’s economic and political difficulties in the 1960s and 1970s will appreciate the contempt that drips from Andrew’s descriptions of Harold Wilson and James Callaghan, the two hapless Labour prime ministers of the period. Wilson, in particular, was prone to conspiracy theories and became increasingly paranoid with age. “One of his colleagues recalls standing next to [Wilson] in the lavatory at Number 10, and watching in some astonishment as the Prime Minister pointed to the electric light fitting and gestured to indicate that, because it might well be bugged, it was unsafe to mention anything confidential. During his last few months in office, Wilson appears rarely to have said anything in the lavatory without first turning on all the taps and gesturing at imaginary bugs in the ceiling.” I wonder if an official American intelligence history will ever contain such intimate anecdotes about a president.

Overall, Andrew portrays the Security Service as an extremely successful organization, one that has generally improved its performance and kept up with new threats as they have developed during its 100 years. Its greatest long-term achievement has been in countersubversion. Starting after World War I, the service began to monitor the activities of the Communist Party, gradually accumulating enormous files on its members, and then began watching fascists in the 1930s and, later, various leftwing sects and militant labor activists who were threatening the stability of the British state. The service managed to do this even though it did not have a formal definition of subversion until the Maxwell Fyfe Directive of 1952 and, moreover, was able to continue this mission until the 1990s with little political interference from the governments of the day. That it was able to do this even as it kept tabs on Labour MPs who might have been drifting too far to the left—“lost sheep,” as those too close to the communists were called—is a tribute to the professionalism of the service and the trust its leaders built with politicians. Among the service’s other successes, Andrew counts its extraordinary performance against German intelligence in both world wars, culminating with the control of Nazi espionage in Britain through the double-cross system; helping with the transition of British colonies to independence and then building intelligence relationships with the new governments; gradually restricting Soviet intelligence activity in Britain; and, after the end of the Cold War, transitioning into one of the world’s best counterterrorism services. It also has maintained good relations with the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS), which is a remarkable accomplishment for both.

Andrew does not give us an entirely triumphalist history, however, and he freely acknowledges the service's shortcomings and the overly long time it often has taken to recognize and address them. Among these were the service's many errors in the investigation of Kim Philby and the other Cambridge spies; allowing Peter Wright's long, groundless investigation of Sir Roger Hollis, MI5's director general from 1956 to 1965, as a suspected Soviet spy; and a complete lack of readiness to operate effectively in Northern Ireland at the start of the "Troubles" in 1969. "Though many MI5 staff had experience working in Africa, Asia and/or the West Indies, Ulster still seemed more alien territory than outposts of empire thousands of miles away," he observes. (Andrew notes further that the service was slow to understand the growth of international terrorism in the 1970s and 1980s.) The service's internal management, too, was haphazard for most of its first 100 years, and it was slow to institute formal training and professionalization of its officers.

Andrew also offers good accounts of external factors that affected the service's performance. Some, like the deep cuts that followed each world war and the end of the Cold War, are familiar stories for intelligence services in other countries, including the United States. Others, such as the perennial uncertainty about what constitutes subversion and a legitimate target for the service—a thorny problem in Britain, where industrial strikes, which were not normally considered a national security issue, began to threaten the stability of the state—are peculiar to its mission and political situation. Successive British governments also took decades to work out the roles and coordination of police forces, the Security Service, and SIS for dealing with Irish terrorism, a problem that seriously hampered Britain's overall effort and whose lessons should be studied carefully.

Another important point that Andrew makes is that the Security Service has accomplished much with only limited resources. It grew from a few hundred officers and staff in the late 1930s to fewer than 1,500 during the war, and then fell back to about 500; it did not return to its wartime staffing level until the mid-1960s and, even as it fought Irish terrorists, tracked Soviet intelligence, and monitored domestic subversives, still was under 2,500 in 1989. For much of its history, moreover, the service worked in shabby buildings scattered around London. Its officers and staff tended to stay for long careers, however, and developed a great deal of experience and cohesion—Andrew quotes a personnel officer as telling a new recruit that "one of the best things about working here is that the percentage of bastards is extremely low." There also appears to have been little bureaucratic empire building, perhaps because the limited resources discouraged spending on nonessential items. Even after 9/11 led to a rapid growth of the service, its chiefs still were careful to spread the expansion over a decade, to avoid driving down the overall experience level too much.

American readers will inevitably ask if the Security Service model of a small, watchful, and efficient domestic security service can be copied by the United States. The answer, I believe, is that it cannot. Until 1989, MI5 operated in a legal and political grey area, without statutory authority. Not only would such a situation not be tolerated in the United States but, in light of the unhappy history of sedition statutes in the United States, it is difficult to imagine civil liberties groups and Congress agreeing to set up a domestic intelligence agency with

the power to monitor internal threats and, by extension, to define when dissent crosses the line to become a threat. Similarly, the service gained many of its powers, including the authority to open mail and wiretap, through informal arrangements, and it largely operated with the trust of senior British politicians—themselves a small group, in which everyone knew everyone else. American politics, in contrast, is much more open and fluid, making such intimate arrangements virtually impossible. Moreover, the conditions of political trust under which the service has prospered simply do not exist in the United States today. Finally, MI5 was a London-based operation. A domestic service in the United States likely would open offices in almost every state and, certainly, in every major city; it soon would become much larger and bureaucratic than the British model.

Even if we cannot adopt the Security Service model, we still can learn much from its history. A review of this length cannot possibly do justice to *Defend the Realm*, but I guarantee that anyone who reads it will find it a fascinating and richly rewarding book.

