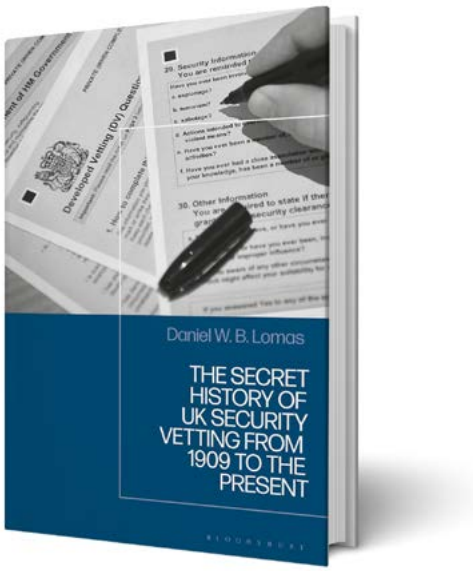
intelligence in public media

The Secret History of UK Security Vetting from 1909 to the Present

Reviewed by Katherina Gonzales



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Anyone who has endured national security-related vetting such as the American Single Scope Background Investigation (SSBI) or the British Developed Vetting (DV) process knows the particular dread of sitting across from a security officer who asks, in a tone calibrated to seem casual, about your finances, your relationships, and whether there is anything in your life that might make you vulnerable to compromise. It is an experience designed to be uncomfortable, but it's necessary. Nevertheless, very few who have sat in that chair likely considered where the process came from, or how the questions evolved from "Are you German?" in 1914 (the onset of World War I) to "What social media platforms do you use?" in 2024. As every cleared intelligence professional knows, your security officer will eventually ask: "Is there anything else you think we should know?" In the case of UK security vetting there is quite a lot, as it turns out. Daniel Lomas has spent a lot of time considering this process, and the result is the first comprehensive history of British security vetting, *The Secret History of UK Security Vetting from 1909 to the Present*.[a]

Lomas, an assistant professor of international relations at the University of Nottingham, who possesses deep expertise in British intelligence history, stakes out a middle position in a long-running UK historiographic debate. On one side, Lord Peter Hennessy famously argued that British security vetting had only modest

a. Lomas is also co-authoring a new history of the British Secret Intelligence Service (MI6). See his earlier work: *Intelligence, Security and the Attlee Governments, 1945–51: An Uneasy Relationship?* (Manchester University Press, 2017), nominated for the Royal Historical Society's Whitfield Prize; and with Christopher J. Murphy, *Intelligence and Espionage: Secrets and Spies* (Routledge, 2019).

impact on hiring, citing just 25 civil servants dismissed for security reasons by the early 1980s.[a] On the other, Mark Hollingsworth and Richard Norton-Taylor characterized the Thatcher era as an authoritarian apparatus that disrupted countless lives in something approaching "British McCarthyism."[b] Lomas rejects both extremes. His central thesis is that while the scope of UK screening was "much wider than others have acknowledged," Britain nonetheless passed the test articulated by American political scientist Werner Grunbaum in 1960: that vetting in a liberal democracy must balance state protection against "those traditional liberties essential to democratic government."[c] In Lomas's formulation: "There was, in short, no British McCarthyism" but also that the human and institutional tolls were far from negligible.

The book opens not with an expected spy scandal but with a murder. In March 2021, Wayne Couzens, a British police officer holding a Developed Vetting clearance through the Civil Nuclear Constabulary, abducted, raped, and killed Sarah Everard. In discussing the Angiolini Inquiry that investigated the case, Lomas accomplishes something methodologically important: He uncouples the vetting discussion from the spy narrative that has dominated the literature and reframes it as a question of personnel security in the broadest terms. This is also how contemporary insider-threat programs conceptualize the problem, equal parts suitability concerns and the potential for outside (and foreign) influences.

More traditional espionage-related issues are detailed in Lomas's discussion of UK vetting's genealogy dating back to the Germanophobia of Edwardian England. Fascinating discussions of William Le Queux's spy thrillers,[d] the "alien" registers built by MI5's first director general, Vernon Kell, and the wartime screening of more than 50,000 aliens on munitions work by 1918 constitute the first part of Lomas's book. The pivot from nationality to ideology arrives with the formation of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) in 1920, and Lomas describes interesting cases, such as Wilfred Foulston Vernon, a scientist at the Royal Aircraft Establishment fired in 1937 after MI5 identified him as a CPGB member, that establish for the author a recurring pattern in security screening: vetting driven by immediate threat, constrained by political culture, and implemented inconsistently.

Lomas argues persuasively that World War II was the decisive vetting catalyst for Great Britain. MI5 officer Jane Archer's debriefing of Soviet defector Walter Krivitsky, which revealed Foreign Office penetration by John Herbert King and pointed toward the as-yet-unidentified Cambridge Five spy ring, opens the wartime chapter with intelligence tradecraft that is all too familiar. The demands of total war—millions mobilized, scientists integrated into atomic research, sensitive facilities proliferating—forced the creation of a UK vetting apparatus unthinkable in peacetime. The Douglas Springhall case of 1943, in which a CPGB official obtained UK classified military information, accelerated checks across defense establishments and so-called "List X" contractor sites. Lomas demonstrates that wartime vetting laid the bureaucratic groundwork for everything that followed.

Igor Gouzenko's 1945 defection in Ottawa—Gouzenko was a Soviet military intelligence (GRU) officer who carried copies of telegrams revealing Soviet espionage networks in Canada—and the unmasking of British physicist Alan Nunn May as a Soviet spy frames Lomas's critical chapter on the Attlee government's "purge." Lomas's most important argument here is that the formal announcement of a government purge procedure in March 1948 was not a sudden break in vetting policies but a public acknowledgment of covert screening already underway since wartime. The defection of Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean to the Soviet Union in 1951 then drove the introduction of Positive Vetting (PV). PV expanded the scope of

a. Peter Hennessy, *The Secret State: Whitehall and the Cold War* (London: Allen Lane, 2002), 102–04.
b. Mark Hollingsworth and Richard Norton-Taylor, *Blacklist: The Inside Story of Political Vetting* (London: Hogarth Press, 1988).
c. Werner Grunbaum, "Loyalty and Security in Democratic States: A Comparative Analysis," *Western Political Quarterly* 13, no. 3 (September 1960): 643–60.
d. William Tufnell Le Queux (1864-1927) wrote more than 150 works of intrigue during his career as a journalist. *The Invasion of 1910* (1906) (later made into a silent film *If England Were Invaded* (1912) is often cited as a prime example of the Germanophobia of the time.

vetting from political affiliation to perceived societal "character defects" of the time: finances, alcohol, and homosexuality. Lomas shows that PV was not a knee-jerk response to US pressure brought on by McCarthyism, but a distinctly British solution. Lomas then examines MI5's historical internal debate over whether the service should subject its own officers to the process—ironic given that MI5 championed it for other sensitive government positions.

The book's most original chapter examines the intersection of vetting with race and nationality. Lomas found internal Foreign Office memo in which officials openly questioned the reliability of non-white applicants on explicitly racial grounds. One official argued that a candidate with a Chinese surname would be "susceptible to Chinese influence" by virtue of ethnicity alone, regardless of individual merit. Another memo dismissed Asian applicants as only "basically loyal to themselves and the Central Kingdom." Nationality rules in the British foreign affairs and defense offices, and intelligence agencies effectively barred candidates of Asian, African, and Caribbean descent from sensitive positions for decades after the UK Race Relations Acts of 1965 and 1968. This chapter further connects historical exclusion directly to the more recent UK's Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC) of Parliament's 2018 finding that agency vetting officers were disproportionately "white, male and middle-aged."[a] For any intelligence professional who has grappled with recruiting across ethnic and linguistic communities—which is to say, anyone serious about collecting against adversaries who operate within those communities—this chapter is essential reading.

Lomas's greatest evidentiary achievement in the book, however, is quantitative. The recovery of Negative Vetting (NV) statistics clearly demolishes the Hennessy narrative. NV was the baseline screening process in which applicants' names were checked against MI5's records and criminal databases without the applicant's knowledge—a covert process with no interview component, distinct from the more intrusive and thorough Positive Vetting. In 1967 alone, of 233,000 NV cases processed, 2,373 current officials were rejected and a further 3,790 applicants denied clearance. These numbers far exceed the "twenty-five dismissed" that dominated the previous historiography. UK Defence Vetting Agency figures from 2001 show a rejection rate of 0.2 percent of all checks—a small proportion, but applied to the enormous volume of screenings, the total impact on individuals and institutional culture was significant. For anyone involved in comparative personnel security analysis, these numbers are likely invaluable, if not as compelling as Lomas's case studies for the average reader.

The Thatcher and post-Cold War chapters navigate the unmasking of Soviet spy and talent-spotter Anthony Blunt, the Geoffrey Prime espionage case at GCHQ, the polygraph debate, the BBC vetting scandal (in which MI5 screened journalists through a discreet "Room 105" at Bush House), and the creation of the Counter Terrorist Check (CTC)—which Lomas argues was not a post-9/11 innovation but a formalization of "Irish checks" applied in Northern Ireland for decades. Lomas brings the story into the present by explaining the current UK National Security Vetting framework, which operates at three ascending levels: the CTC, Security Check (SC), and Developed Vetting (DV). Since 2017, these clearances have been administered by United Kingdom Security Vetting (UKSV), a centralized body under the Cabinet Office that consolidated screening previously handled separately by the Ministry of Defence and Foreign & Commonwealth Office. The conclusion reviews UKSV's operational failures as documented by the National Audit Office in 2018: catastrophic IT failures, massive backlogs, and a chronic inability to meet processing goals—problems that are painfully familiar to anyone who watched the US Office of Personnel Management struggle with its own clearance backlog in the 2010s.

There is, however, a gap at the center of this book—the absence of sustained comparative analysis with the United States. Lomas opens the door to this issue by making occasional references to US vetting—the 700,000-person clearance backlog, the Snowden (2013) and Teixeira (2023) leak cases, CIA

a. The Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament (UK), *Diversity and Inclusion in the UK Intelligence Community* (London: HMSO, July 2018).

Chief of Counterintelligence James Olson's observations about applicant quality—but never develops a systematic comparison. This is a missed opportunity. The US personnel security framework has undergone revolutionary change in the last decade, moving from periodic reinvestigation to continuous vetting under the Trusted Workforce 2.0 initiative.[a] A chapter-length comparison of the two allied systems—their shared DNA from Gouzenko and the Cambridge spies, their divergent views on the use of the polygraph, and their respective failures—would have elevated this book from an excellent national history to an even more useful Five Eyes comparative study.

Related to this gap is Lomas's silence on continuous evaluation and modern insider-threat detection. Lomas documents UKSV's "woeful record on aftercare" but does not engage with the technological and methodological developments—behavioral analytics, AI-assisted anomaly detection, automated financial monitoring—that are reshaping personnel security on both sides of the Atlantic. For a book published in 2025, the conclusion reads as if the future of vetting is primarily about processing forms faster, when most security entities have already moved toward persistent, data-driven monitoring.

These criticisms should not obscure the singular accomplishment of this book. Lomas has written something the insider threat professional needed: a meticulously sourced, historically comprehensive, and intellectually honest narrative on UK vetting evolution. For intelligence professionals and policymakers across the Five Eyes, this work is an essential starting point for understanding how the British government has screened its own people for over a century—and at what cost. Lomas's broader argument—that vetting is reactive, resistant to change, and structurally biased toward the threat of the moment rather than the threat of the future also resonates well beyond the British context. ■

a. The US continuous-vetting framework, mandated under the Trusted Workforce 2.0 initiative, replaced periodic reinvestigation with automated record checks across financial, criminal, and public records databases. See Office of the Director of National Intelligence, "Trusted Workforce 2.0" (2018).