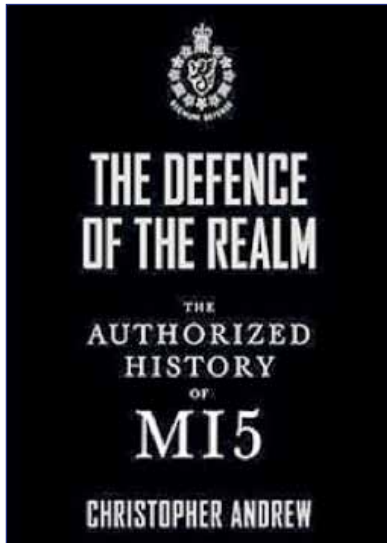


Book Review



Christopher Andrew, *The Defence of the Realm: The Authorized History of MI5*, New York, Penguin Books, 2010, 1033 pages

by **Kayson Wang**

Due to the sensitivity of intelligence services, information and history of these organisations are rarely revealed and shared amongst the public. But *The Defence of the Realm* is a rare example where an intelligence service opens up and allows its confidential information to be published. This is an extremely unique read for people who want to study and find out how the famous British Intelligence Service, MI5, was developed during the early 20th century and their different strategic approaches to modern wars since the 1900s. MI5 is the domestic arm of British intelligence as it is responsible for counter-intelligence, counter-subversion, counter-terrorism and security within the United Kingdom.¹

As people say, you can't judge a book by its cover. With over a thousand pages of pure text and very few pictures, this book might not seem very appealing or interesting. But note that the author of the book, Christopher Andrew, was the only historian in

the past 100 years to gain access to write about the history of the service. He received complete access of around 400,000 MI5 files and wrote the book as a memorial of the 100th anniversary of the service.² No other intelligence service has ever given an outsider such access, as well as being censor-free of the author's opinion and thoughts. As a result, *Defence of the Realm* is set to be a comprehensively interesting book and a pioneer of intelligence service readings. Andrew's project received major support from the service as MI5's Director-General, Jonathan Evans stated in the Foreword of the book "That openness, by supporting public confidence in us, helps us do our job of protecting national security." He also noted that, "[it] is the most recent and in many ways the most ambitious demonstration...of a commitment to be as open as we can about what we do."³

To avoid confusion and dullness, Andrew organised MI5's history into six chronological periods

— from the establishment of the service in 1909 all the way to the modern day 21st century's counter-terrorism, to make it easier to be read and understood. Each part of the book gives an overall description of the time period and emphasises relevant events and general themes of how MI5 operated. Andrew also discussed how MI5 had been changing constantly throughout the century, its improvements, organisation, structure and even downfalls or affairs that had ever struck the service.⁴

In the book, Andrew praised MI5 as an extremely successful organisation, and illustrated MI5 as a flexible community that constantly showed potential to improve in their performance as they were able to keep up to date with new threats and handle different situations efficiently and clinch victory for several major wars in the past century. For example after World War I (WWI), MI5 learned that intelligence was an essential factor in collecting information and anticipating different situations. They recruited batches of spies to monitor the activities of any party that might compromise the British state's security, such as the Communist Party after WWI and the Fascists during the 1930's. What MI5 was praised for was that they started from scratch with a 36-year old Captain called Vernon Kell. For

the first few months of MI5's establishment, they were based in the same room and struggled with minimal resources "to deal with espionage in this country (Britain)."⁵ Yet later, when the Committee of Imperial Defence started to emphasise intelligence after WWI, MI5 funding was greatly increased as they grew from a few hundred officers and staff in the late 1930's to roughly 1,500 during World War II (WWII), and then fell back to about 500 and reached its peak of 2,500 during The Troubles and the Cold War.⁶ The service's employees worked in shabby, abandoned buildings scattered around Britain in order to keep their privacy and operations under the table. Even today when environment and funding have been greatly improved and increased, the service still remains rather low profile, with luxurious buildings and massive spending prohibited within the service. Another thing Andrew complimented about the service was their emphasis on loyalty despite the hard times and lack of resources. He stressed that the service's employees and workers are all committed to remain in the service for a long time as the chemistry was always high throughout the service. According to Andrew, the service did "Defend the Realm" of Britain for the past 100 years.

The first major challenge to MI5 started in 1917 when WWI broke out. As wartime approached,

the British government became increasingly concerned with spy attacks. During that period, around 200,000 people were being investigated by the service and placed on the watch list by the service. It was an immense amount of work, as all the suspicious personnel were filed into MI5's file index and spy catching became very popular. This was the time when German spies were first categorised and referred to as 'Boche,' which meant German soldier. German spies were then separated into three smaller categories: AA, which meant Absolutely Anglicised, BA, which meant Boche-Anglo and BB which meant Bad Boche. In his book, Andrew had a comprehensive write up of how MI5 tackled the early days' lack of support and funding, and their transformation after numerous trials and errors to finally developing an efficient way of spy catching. Andrew wrote that in the early years, when the service was first formed, the task of spy catching was seen as a challenge and a kind of pride that both countries tried to hold on to and compete with, to see which country possessed more advanced elites.

The first German spy to be captured was Carl Lody, one of the first eleven German spies to be executed after WWI broke out. He was caught when MI5 started intercepting telegrams all over Britain, and they discovered Carl

Lody sending out letters written in German and in encrypted form. This was a huge step for the service as their methods proved to be both successful and effective.

Another notable period that was covered in the book was WWII. In the book, the period was described as the service's peak due to their advancements in technology and the maturity of manpower and organisation. After their experiences from WWI, the service was familiar with the methods of the Germans. As MI5 developed the Double-Cross System, the British were able to decrypt many of the German's wireless codes and intercepted a majority of the German spies who were attempting to sneak into Britain. In addition, the service actually turned many of these German spies into double agents and used them to feed false information back to their superiors. One of the most notable examples was Juan Pujol Garcia, codenamed *Garbo* by the British and *Arabel* by the Germans. Garcia, a Spaniard was originally recruited by the Germans. Eventually, however, he went over to help the Allies because he believed it was "for the good of humanity" after Hitler ordered the massacre of the Jews. Andrew described the transition of Garcia who slowly developed his own network of bogus spies which eventually became a key factor for the Allies to win the war. Before the Allies executed the now

famous Normandy Landing, Garcia's network was able to convince the Germans to shift their attention to Calais instead of Normandy, which resulted in the operation being successful as the Germans lost and took heavy casualties. This part of the book, was in my opinion, the best written—many letters between the MI5 spies and their handler's conversation were revealed here, which gave a different perspective of how we used to look at the history of WWII and the parts that we might have missed out on.

Throughout the book, Andrew not only showed the victorious and positive side of the service but its weaknesses as well. Although MI5 might have triumphed in many instances, Andrew also wrote and acknowledged the downfalls, shortcomings and weaknesses of the service. For example, Andrew wrote about the service's failure in their internal structure and lack of efficiency in their investigations. Sir Roger Hollis, MI5's Director-General from 1956-1965 was suspected of being a Soviet spy due to other double agents' interference. This caused an investigation on Hollis which took a long time and caused great problems inside the service, since the Director-General himself was suspected of treason. Another shortcoming that Andrew illustrated in the book was the Northern Irish conflict named "The Troubles" after 1960s, which

was a political conflict triggered by ethno-nationalism.⁷ In that event, the service had a lack of information of what was going on and by the time conflicts broke out, casualties were inflicted and the service had yet to set up operations to suppress the conflict. Andrew criticised MI5 staff for being unfamiliar with surrounding countries, for example, Ireland. But the service did eventually recover and slowly adapted to the growth of international terrorism as they developed various established means to prevent conflicts from breaking out.

Andrew not only referred to over 400,000 archives from the service, he also supplemented the archives with interviews of former Security Service personnel and through other literature and sources to validate his work. This showed that Andrew was meticulous, with the ability to write unbiased accounts of both the good and bad aspects of the service. Despite the openness that MI5 had provided, they still had to censor parts of their archive. The *Defence of the Realm* had been inspected by the service itself and other external departments to provide clearance for the book, hence explaining why most endnotes in the book are listed as "Security Service Archives." The Director-General of the service, Jonathan Evans, stated in the Foreword that information had been censored not

only for national security, but also “in a small number of cases, if its publication would be inappropriate for wider public interest reasons.”⁸ Therefore readers are to trust the information they read, as endnotes would not be able to provide the source of where the information came from.⁹

In the public’s perspective, MI5 will always be shrouded in mystery and cloaked with secrets and unsolved cases. In addition, MI5’s contributions during the war had been disclosed and revealed to the public. The service employees had taken a vow not to reveal any confidential information during their service, which leaves only rumours and myths of what the service is really about. That is why in conclusion, this is an extremely good and comprehensive collection of research into MI5, with its unique viewpoints backed by exclusive evidence from the service itself. I feel that the book will appeal to everyone who is interested in the history of the world wars, as well as those who are drawn by rumours and interests generated from spy wars.

Overall, Christopher Andrew gives a broad view of what MI5 is truly like, their transformation throughout the last century and the numerous events that had happened, since its establishment. From spy wars to its structure, this book makes a truly remarkable and wonderful read. 🌐

ENDNOTES

1. Christopher Andrew, *The Defence of the Realm: The Authorised History of the MI5* (New York: Penguin Books, 2010).
2. *Ibid.*, Preface.
3. *Ibid.*, Foreword.
4. *Ibid.*, 3.
5. *Ibid.*, 3.
6. *Ibid.*, Appendix 2.
7. *Ibid.*, 600-834.
8. *Ibid.*, xvi.
9. *Ibid.*, Foreword.