

**Chris Northcott. *MI5 at War 1909-1918: How MI5 Foiled the Spies of the Kaiser in the First World War*. Sussex: Tattered Flag Press, 2015. ISBN: 978-09-57-689282. Pp. 274. Paperback. £15.99.**

*MI5 at War* is Chris Northcott's first book, based on his doctoral dissertation, reworked and expanded. An independent scholar, he has taught Intelligence and Security Studies at the Universities of Salford and Bedfordshire and has contributed to the *International Journal of Intelligence and Counter-Intelligence*. His main thesis suggests that the key to understanding the birth and evolution of MI5 during the First World War comes with the distinction between 'preventive' and 'investigative' tasks which a proper counter-espionage organization needs to perform. Northcott claims this distinction still drives the contemporary MI5 to this day. (p. x)

The author makes regular reference to Christopher Andrew's work on the history of MI5.<sup>1</sup> For instance, he shares with the latter the idea that it is not the reality of the German threat as such that led to the creations of what will later be known as MI5, but rather its perception by the British public opinion, media and Government. This theme regularly appears throughout the book, as Northcott borrows Andrew's expression of 'spy mania'.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, the pattern of MI5's development is linked to the evolution of German threats; or rather, to the way Germany tried to adapt to the counter-intelligence efforts Britain would have displayed.

Northcott takes a chronological approach to the period he is investigating. As such, the book is divided into seven chapters. The first chapter deals with the genesis of the British counter-espionage machinery, the period between 1903 and 1911. The author states that rising tensions with Germany and perceived German threats, including in terms of espionage, were the driving factors which lead to the creation of a security service. (p. 4) A Sub-Committee on Foreign Espionage had acknowledged the

existence of a German naval espionage network in the UK which had no means available to assess and even less so to counter this threat in peacetime. Hence, the Secret Service Bureau (SSB) was created on 9 October 1909 as a joint initiative from the Admiralty and the War Office, and represented respectively by Mansfield Cumming and Vernon Kell. The latter would furthermore be appointed head of the Counter-Espionage Section of the SSB. This section – nicknamed 'the Bureau' – is the direct ancestor of MI5. (p. 1) Its mission was dual. First, it was to build cooperation with local police forces; and second, it was to set up a secret 'register of aliens'. (p. 28)

The second chapter studies the breakthrough between March 1911 and August 1914 which subsequently helped the 'Bureau' to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the hitherto reluctant British officials. This achievement came with the implementation of procedures more adapted to counter-intelligence information-gathering tools in periods of peacetime. One example emphasized by Northcott is the Home Office Warrant or 'HOW', that 'enabled the Bureau to penetrate much of the German network' between 1911 and 1914. (p. 37) Another example is the Official Secrets Act (OSA) 1911 (p. 40), which facilitated prosecution for cases of alleged espionage. It is here that the author also highlights a division of duties between a Preventive Branch and an Investigative Branch.

In the third chapter, Northcott focuses on the first five months of the First World War. A crucial stage in the evolution of the service, it was at the beginning of the Great War, on 5 August 1914, that the Bureau was officially recognized as part of the war effort, and subsequently was renamed MO5(g). Northcott then explains how the German spy network was dismantled by law-enforcement agencies all over Britain in the days following the outbreak of the conflict. The whole operation was

<sup>1</sup> Andrew, Christopher, *Her Majesty's Secret Service: The Making of the British Intelligence Community* (Penguin Books, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 177.

coordinated by the MO5(g), which was quite an achievement for a structure of merely twenty people at that time. Britain's counter-espionage capacities were enhanced in this period with new emergency powers, as the State adapted to wartime. For instance, the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA) was concerned with controlling sensitive information, whereas the Aliens Restriction Act (ARA) sought to establish control over movement of foreigners (and, potentially, enemy agents), and to regulate the residence of foreign nationals in areas judged as militarily or otherwise sensitive. Again, according to Northcott, it was the constant fear of German spies that nourished this new legislation. This chapter also highlights how the development of new threats drove the further development of MO5(g), towards hence the evolution of the Preventive Branch, the Investigative Branch, and the creation of a Record Branch.

The fourth chapter suggests that the year 1915 was the 'active period' in terms of German espionage in Britain. (p. 128) Northcott also reiterates that 'preventive', 'investigative' tasks, alongside 'records' were the core missions of MO5(g) –renamed MO5 on 11 August– and that any additional tasks would necessitate the creation of another Branch, as the MO5 was stretched to the limits. Hence the Port and Frontier Branch, which followed MO5, getting involved in border surveillance. (p. 136)

The fifth chapter sees the organization adopting in 1916 the designation under which it is still known nowadays, MI5. (p. 168) This follows the creation of a Directorate of Military Intelligence. With these developments as a background, Northcott discusses the new threats which occurred in 1916, as German espionage efforts tried to adapt to British counter intelligence defences and attempted to exploit any potential weaknesses. Again, MI5 successfully adapted, as proven by its development. A new Branch was created, dedicated to the threats posed by Germany within the British Colonial Empire. (p. 179)

The creation of the basic structure of MI5 was completed in 1917, Northcott explains in the sixth chapter, when a sixth Branch is created, concerned with 'Aliens' working on the war

effort in the UK. (p. 196) Furthermore, Northcott offers his view on the next step in MI5's development: the shift from counter-espionage to security intelligence, and examines the challenges on the path to this expansion of operations. (p. 214) Finally, the seventh chapter provides the reader with an overall synthesis, a conclusion, as well as some final thoughts and observations.

Northcott builds his theory by using a number of cases of espionage as illustration to demonstrate and underline their impact on MI5's development. This is made possible by constant reference to declassified documents (first and foremost the "KV1", heavily quoted in the book). One of Northcott's positions worth a separate mention, is his objection to the idea that counter-subversion played a part in MI5's development. (p. 191) The author attempts to analyse the evolution of MI5 during this key period through the scope of preventive and investigative roles, as these two key roles lie at the heart of counter-intelligence work. This original approach is precisely what makes this book a relevant contribution to intelligence studies, and a worthy addition to the works of Christopher Andrew and others.

However, this book does solicit criticism. Northcott points out that the existing literature is lacking in explaining the specific structural organisation of MI5, that is, the six branches mentioned above. (p. xviii) However, rather frustratingly, his own attempt to address this issue is problematic. His choice of a *historical* approach can perhaps be explained by a desire for clarity and simplicity in regards to the reader. The downside is that, contrary to what he promises in the beginning of his work, Northcott fails to go into a more coherent and sustained structural analysis, as the review of the branches themselves is spread out throughout the book, and settles for exploring - admittedly very engagingly- just the path which would ultimately lead to the resulting structural organization. The reader's expectations are thus only partially met.

Be that as it may, *MI5 at War 1909-1918* remains a very useful book for any scholar or student interested in the field of intelligence studies, and most particularly the study of

intelligence in war, not least because the book successfully demonstrates how analysing the organization's development in its early years is necessary for a better understanding of the contemporary MI5..

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