A note on sources

The raw material from which this study is fashioned has been drawn largely from the security files which MI5 kept on political refugees from the Third Reich during the 1930s and 1940s. Since 1999, a stream of files containing information gathered by MI5 on various individuals and organisations suspected of subversive activity, including those on German and Austrian refugees, have been released to the National Archives. At the time of writing, the Security Service has made available some 5,000 files; further files are being released at regular intervals. While these files represent a unique documentary source for the historian or the biographer, furnishing a hitherto missing dimension of social and political history, they also have some inherent limitations and pose certain pitfalls for the unwary.

For the academic researcher, these sources are sometimes less than satisfactory since they are manifestly incomplete and in some cases unreliable. Firstly, MI5 has released only a small proportion of the files it once held. Many others still remain closed, while far more have actually been destroyed. According to MI5’s own statement, between 1909 and the early 1970s more than 175,000 files were destroyed as ‘obsolete or because of major contrarions in the service’ (although some were microfilmed prior to destruction) while since the fall of Soviet Communism, a further 180,000 files have been destroyed. As to those which remain closed, MI5 does not always reveal which files have been ‘retained’, nor why. Requests for information about specific files may elicit the information that the file in question has been destroyed or that it ‘does not meet our current release criteria’. In other cases, requests for information are met with the standard response: ‘The Security Service is not a public authority subject to the Freedom of Information Act and we do not process requests for information of this nature.’ Nor does MI5 reveal the criteria used to decide which files may be released and which retained or – more seriously for the researcher – destroyed.

Moreover, there is no guarantee that even those files which have been released represent the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Most of the files have been ‘redacted’, in order to conceal certain names or events, and to
A note on sources

foreground others. (The names which have been blacked out are usually those of MI5 officers and agents, or those of their informants.) In places, there are obvious gaps in the records, where items have been removed, so that the content of certain files is incomplete and possibly misleading. This is so, for example, in the case of both Ernst Hermann Meyer and Engelbert Broda.

It is, of course, possible to fill some of the gaps through cross-posting; sometimes a copy of a document removed from one file comes to light in a different one, presumably having escaped the eye of the redactor there. A perhaps more reliable method has been to compare the records of MI5 to those of other sources, such as the Home Office or other official bodies. However, there are obvious difficulties inherent in cross-referencing, for example, between MI5 and Home Office files, since Home Office files on the same individuals are not always open to scrutiny and they too have been redacted, though not always in the same way.

Secondary sources

This lack of accessible information is partly the result of official policy, which binds former officers of the Security Service to lifelong silence – and in return guarantees their anonymity. The official policy of omertà has of course been breached in the past, most famously with the publication of Spycatcher by the disaffected MI5 officer Peter Wright. More recently, Stella Rimington published her autobiography, which included major sections on her work for MI5, particularly her period as (the first female) Director General between 1992 and 1996.

Official secrecy has not prevented the publication of various unauthorised histories, including two volumes by the intelligence expert Nigel West, covering respectively the years 1909–45 and 1945–72, the first of which, if only for the period it covers, is of obvious relevance to the present study. West – a prolific writer on intelligence matters – gives a splendidly cloak-and-dagger account of the ‘exploits’ of MI5, adopting the organisation’s own ethos to comment on its history. However, he has nothing to say about MI5 surveillance of German émigrés.

Winding forward to the present, it must be said that some of the characteristic features of MI5 in the 1930s and 1940s have now been modified. The 1989 Security Service Act marked an end to the days when, although MI5 officially existed, its operations did not. It is now a more open organisation, reflecting the prevailing expectation that institutions which are publicly funded should also be publicly accountable. While MI5 has inevitably protected the secrecy of current operations and continued to conceal the identity of officers and agents, a new spirit of (partial) openness is abroad. In 1992, Stella Rimington was named publicly as the new Director General
of MI5, the first time such an appointment had been officially acknowledged. Beginning in 1997, MI5 began to recruit through public advertising rather than through personal contacts and recommendations. It has also established a public website, which offers a well-manicured version of the organisation and its history.

As part of this new openness, from 1999 onwards the Service began to release some of its historical files to the National Archives, including policy and organisational files as well as some of the ‘personal files’ it held on suspects, a move which has made possible the present study. Consistent with this release of its early records, MI5 also released an official account of its early years, published in 1999. And most recently it has commissioned an official history of MI5, which appeared in 2009 to mark the centenary of the Service. The author of this work is the Cambridge historian and doyen of Intelligence Studies, Professor Christopher Andrew, handpicked as an academic expert who had already written extensively on the security services. Andrew and his team of researchers were given exclusive access to MI5’s entire archive, amounting to some 400,000 files. Unfortunately, when he cites the MI5 archive, which he does frequently and often copiously, his endnotes in every case refer only to ‘Security Service Archives’, so that the reader has no idea what kind of document he has drawn on. Moreover, as he alone has had this opportunity, nobody else can check the scope or accuracy of his references. In any case, Andrew’s account, comprising over 1,000 pages, makes no reference to the large-scale surveillance operations MI5 conducted against German and Austrian refugees.

The appearance of Andrew’s official history was preceded by ‘the unofficial history’ Spooks,7 the authors of which did not enjoy access to the MI5 archive, although they made extensive use of the documents already released to the National Archives. However, like the official history, Spooks makes no mention of the surveillance of German-speaking refugees, except for the atom spy Klaus Fuchs.

Professor Andrew’s ‘authorised history’ of MI5 was followed in 2010 by an equivalent volume commissioned by MI6 and written by Professor Keith Jeffery.8 This ‘independent and authoritative’ history of the Secret Intelligence Service covers the first forty years of the organisation (1909–49) and naturally contains many cross-references to MI5, though it too fails to mention the surveillance of German-speaking refugees. The possible reasons for these omissions have been discussed in our conclusion.

Notes

A note on sources


