

A Short History of the British Secret Intelligence Service, MI-6

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Mission: External Espionage Agency. Traditionally MI6 was concerned with such threats from foreign countries and organisations.

With the end of the Cold War, MI6's role has fundamentally changed and it now has many more potential targets. Terrorist groups, and so-called 'rogue' states, are now high profile targets. Networks of new agents will be required as intelligence 'needs' constantly shift. Industrial espionage, furthering British trade interests has moved into the area of national interest. Gathering intelligence on friendly governments, obtaining advanced knowledge of their negotiating positions or changes in alliances, are also now ever more important targets for MI6. The Intelligence Services Act 1994 formerly acknowledged its existence.

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The Russian Revolution in 1917 provided SIS with some of its more outlandish characters and operations. George Hill, Ernest Boyce, Paul Dukes and Augustus Agar who sank a Russian Battleship in the Baltic. Sidney Reilly and his attempt to assassinate Lenin and many of the Communist leadership. While in the end the operations were a valiant failure, it did create a reputation in Europe that SIS was the most dangerous and efficient intelligence service in the world. SIS was, in part, to survive on that reputation for many years. Following the end of the war the re-structuring of the intelligence community saw the Admiralty and War Office code-breaking sections combined as the Government Code & Cipher School in 1919 still under Admiralty control. However in 1922, GC & CS become a department of the Foreign Office and placed under the overall control of the Chief of the SIS in 1923. SIS, a de facto part of the Foreign Office, had gained control of the espionage services of both the Admiralty and the War Office in 1919 along with a new Military cover-name of MI-6. In 1920 the Foreign Office also ceded its monopoly on political intelligence to SIS which then formed its new Political Section in 1921. When the RAF finally became a service branch in its own right an Air intelligence Section was almost immediately formed within SIS in 1929. An Economic/Commercial Intelligence Section was formed in 1937 to work with the Special Liaison Section of the IIC/MEW's Intelligence Branch. Following the failure of the SIS attempt to absorb MI5 in 1925, a Counter-Espionage Section was formed to work with the Security Service.

During the 1920's and 1930's SIS was to concentrate on the Communist threat, often to the exclusion of the fascist threat from Germany, Italy and Spain or the growing Japanese

militarism. Denied a decent budget, SIS attempted to create a second far more secret intelligence network in Europe, the Z section. Its originator Claude Dansey had little difficulty in persuading 'C', Admiral Sinclair, that SIS officers normal cover abroad, Passport Control Officer at the Embassy was already well known to all their potential enemies. Although SIS made considerable use of willing journalists and journalistic cover for intelligence officers, this was no substitute for a permanent network. Unfortunately, seven years of operations were thrown away in one stupid incident at Venlo in the Netherlands in 1939. The officers leading the two supposedly separate groups were ordered to meet a representative of an anti-Nazi group, together.

The Germans turned out to Abwehr officers and captured the SIS officers and within months had rolled up both networks. When Germany finally invaded France and the Low Countries in May 1940, SIS was left without a single valuable network in occupied Europe. Apart from Sweden, Switzerland and Portugal SIS was blind to continental events. Fortunately for SIS, the new 'C' Stewart Menzies was to make extraordinary use of both his friendship with the Prime Minister, Churchill and the steady flow of Ultra decrypts of the German Enigma traffic. Without this, SIS may well have been disbanded and replaced by its wartime rival, SOE. By 1942 SIS had also formed a number of semi-autonomous overseas organizations including the major Inter-Service Liaison Departments for the Middle East ISLD(ME) and the Far East ISLD(FE). In late 1943 in an attempt to simplify operations four Regional Controllers were created to oversee groups of country sections.

As it was by 1944 SIS had still not recovered sufficiently to be a major intelligence source, without the Ultra material from Bletchley Park. Menzies was a master at using his political and social connections to win time and eventual survival for SIS, indeed so successful was he that in 1946 he persuaded the Labour Government to close down SOE and transfer its best staff and most promising operations to SIS. During this re-organization GC & CS became a separate organization as GCHQ, within the Foreign Office leaving SIS without its major source of intelligence. Apart from changes of personnel, facilities and intelligence targets, SIS has remained under the Foreign Office and retained its name. The resulting spy scandals of the late 1940's and early 1950's saw doubt cast on some of SIS's most respected officers, Philby, Brooman-White, Ellis and others.

Menzies retired in 1953 saddened and exhausted by over thirty-seven years in intelligence. His replacement, Maj. General John Sinclair allowed the service to be further tarnished not only by its inept handling of the Suez crisis, but also by its involvement in the Buster Crabb affair, when a diver disappeared while carrying out surveillance on a Soviet Cruiser in Portsmouth. Sinclair's reward was to be replaced by the head of MI5, Sir Dick White. From 1948 the VCSS had doubled as Director of Production and while Jack Easton was the ACSS in the early 1950's his position was amalgamated with that of the Director of Requirements, White later abolished the position of ACSS altogether and reintroduced the Directorate of Requirements. However this would eventually be merged with the Director of Productions to become the new

Director of Requirements & Production and later still the current Director of Operations, retaining the Deputy Chief rank.

The eventual decision to remove MI6 to 'south of the river' came as White gave into increasing pressure to control the service in the wake of Suez, Hungary, Philby and Blake. The advent of a Labour Government sealed their fate and indeed White used the period as an opportunity to modernize. The Service R sections were separated off while the remaining R sections became more closely integrated with the Production Sections(DP1/2/3/4). A new Directorate of Counter-Intelligence and Security was created to take over the Vetting, Personnel and R5 Sections, creating Regional CI Sections. Later this would be modified by Oldfield to create three Targeting and Counter-Intelligence Sections(TCI). The creation of a MOD -n 1963-64 also led to the creation of the DIS from the old JIB and the Service Intelligence Agencies, further diluting MI's influence. Cost cutting at the MOD would also reduce the numbers of Service MIO seconded to MI6.

In 1973 under the new CSS or 'C' Sir Maurice Oldfield operations were to strictly controlled and scrupulous in their adherence to the wishes of the Government. Oldfield's unique style brought a refreshing blast of fresh air through the corridors of Century House, the SIS multi-story glass and concrete headquarters in south London. SIS objectives were also widened to take account of the increasing demand for commercial intelligence, on the USA, Britain's European partners, Japan and the Middle East oil states in particular. A new Government organization, the Overseas Economic Intelligence Committee (OEIC) became a major customer for both SIS and its SIGINT partner GCHQ. Also during the early 1970's, SIS increasingly became involved in the convoluted politics of Northern Ireland. During the earliest years of the Ulster conflict, the British government favoured the use of SIS in the North of Ireland..

On the basis of countering the IRA bombing campaigns in Britain, MI5 pushed for a presence in the North and from 1973 onwards began to build an infrastructure in Ulster. From that time onwards, SIS has played only a minor role. However, that has still had a considerable political and intelligence significance. It was Michael Oatley , a senior SIS officer who acted as Mrs. Thatcher's direct link to the republican leadership during the 1981 hunger strike, apparently over the heads of MI5 and the Northern Ireland Office and later another SIS officer, Frank Steele established an important dialogue with Gerry Adams. SIS was also involved in later discussions with Sinn Fein representatives on arms decommissioning and ensuring a cease-fire. By the late 1970s, most MI6 agents had been taken over by RUC SB or MI5, and SIS itself had withdrawn from RUC and Army headquarters, although it retained an office at Stormont. SIS is thought to have an operational staff of about 25 in Ireland as a whole, split between the Stormont office, an office at Army HQ Lisburn and the British Embassy in Merrion Road, Dublin. (Between 1971 and 1977 MI6 in the province was run from a large house in Laneside).

However in 1972, SIS was to be deeply embarrassed by the Littlejohn incident, when two brothers operating as SIS agents in Ireland were arrested for freelance activities including armed bank robberies. They also claimed to have been given a list of leading IRA

members to assassinate. SIS emphatically denied any involvement and Oldfield went so far as to call a meeting of SIS staff to assure them that there was absolutely no truth in the allegations. SIS was soon to withdraw from the battle for control of British intelligence operations in the Province and the strong suspicions remains that the Littlejohn affair was somehow set up by the Security Service (MI5) to damage SIS's reputation. Oldfield was to suffer from a Security Service dirty tricks campaign some years later when appointed the Governments Security Co-ordinator for Northern Ireland in October 1979. It is widely believed that MI5 informed a number of friendly journalists that Oldfield was a homosexual and that his behaviour was a security risk.

SIS came out of the Falklands War, Gulf War and the Balkans conflicts throughout the 1980's and 1990's with an enhanced reputation. Trust in its internal security has been restored by the succession of major Soviet defectors and double agents who were happy to co-operate with the service. There was also a major change in the leadership during 1993-94 when McColl stayed on as C for an extra two years he effectively bypassed a whole generation of officers and a new younger management team of senior Directors took office under David Spedding. However, the new 'C' failed to complete the task of building a service fit for the 21st century and this task is hopefully being completed by Richard Dearlove, who also may have made more significant changes in direction as there are some insiders who were apparently distinctly unhappy about Speddings time in charge. The final act of coming out of the Shadows, becoming an 'established' Government department and its move to a new high profile Headquarters at Vauxhall Cross has markedly raised its image. SIS is probably now considered a trendy new employer for well-scrubbed young graduates. Whether of course this new generation of political correct and computer literate civil service recruits will prove capable of dealing with the increasingly dangerous and terrorist dominated intelligence environment of the twenty first century is very much open to question.

A historical review of the great changes in SIS organization charts the growth from the first formal restructuring after SIS came under the control of the Foreign Office; In 1921 it was made up simply of the G or Geographical Officers and the four Circulating Sections which provided liaison with the Foreign Office, Military MI-1C, later MI-6, Naval NI-1C and Air AI-1C from 1929.

By the late 1930's this had expanded to ten circulating sections with the original four renamed I, II, III and IV, and Section-V Counter Espionage, VI Industrial intelligence, VII Financial intelligence, VIII Communications, IX Ciphers and X Press .

Section-Z (Z Organization)

Created by Col Claude Dansey (later a DCSS) between 1934-36 as a parallel and entirely separate intelligence network in Europe in response to the fear that the PCO (Passport Control Officer) cover often taken by SIS officers had been compromised. Formally established in 1937 with headquarters at Bush House, Aldwych, London WC2. Section Z (with Dansey as Z-1) was in turn fatally compromised right at the beginning of the Second World War in September 1939 when it direct contravention of the basic rules of security in running two separate networks, the Head of Z in the Netherlands, Captain

Sigismund Payne-Best and the Head of the SIS Station Major Richard Stevens not only merged their operations but were captured by the Germans after being duped into a meeting at Venlo. The Germans were able to roll up BOTH networks with the help of information provided by the two SIS Officers under interrogation.

In the aftermath Section Z was officially re-absorbed into the main body of SIS, however it may have continued to operate for some years as a semi-autonomous section in neutral countries.

The G (G1/2/3/4) Officers who controlled operations were replaced by Production 'P' Sections (later rationalized under the DP Controllerates) and the old Circulating Sections were replaced by the Requirement 'R' Sections by 1941. The P Sections included;

P1 France

P1a French North Africa

P1b Non-Free French

P1c Free French (Liaison with BCRA)

P2 Iberia

P4 Italy

P5 Poland (Liaison with Fifth Bureau of AK or Home Army)

P6 German & Czech Liaison

P7 Belgium

P8 Netherlands

P9 Norway, Faroes & Iceland

P13 Baltic countries

P15 POW/MI9

P19 Photographic

Section D (Destruction)

Established by 1938 and was tasked with creating a sabotage and subversion capability.

Taken over on July 22nd 1940 and without the full agreement of SIS, by the MEW (Ministry of Economic Warfare) to form part of the new SOE along with the MI(R) and various other paramilitary sections.

SOE (Special Operations Executive)

This was the response made by Hugh Dalton, the Minister of EcW to Churchill's pressure for an immediate counter-offensive against the German occupation of Western Europe. SOE, effectively a temporary, wartime-only organization of doubtful value was run separately from SIS, though for much of the war relied heavily on the intelligence services communications network until the creation of STS-2 (Thame Park); STS53A (Grendon Underwood); STS53B (Poundon House); STS53C (Signal Hill-poundon, laste SIS/DWS closed laste 1990's); STS54 (Fawley Court, Henley) and STS53D (Belhaven House-Dunbar). Although it had limited successes in Norway (the destruction of Heavy Water facilities), Yugoslavia and the Far East (with TF-136) in particular, disasters such as the German Operation North Pole penetration of the SOE Dutch section and the German reprisals in the wake of the Heydrich assassination were of greater significance. Indeed by 1944 its military value was strictly limited and it was largely sidelined for the rest of the war. On 15th August 1945 SOE ceased to be separate organization from SIS

and the run down process began and in July 1946 the SOE was finally disbanded with many of its best officers, agents, some whole sections and a number of operations being transferred to SIS. Far from SOE disappearing however its absorption into the intelligence service had a significant and largely positive impact on the future organization and leadership of SIS itself.

Its first Headquarters was in the St Ermins Hotel, but moved to its permanent facilities at 64 Baker Street on 31st October 1940 with the cover name of Inter-Services Research Bureau (IRSB). Later added Norgeby House at no-83 and St Michael's House at no-82 Baker Street.

Along with a myriad of Training Establishments (known as STS-1, 2 etc) SOE was also to create a 'Cooler' for failed agents who could not be posted elsewhere until sensitive operations they had been trained for had been completed. This was at Inverlair Lodge, in Inverness-shire and was heavily guarded by the Cameron Highlanders. Both SOE and SIS were to make considerable use of its secure facilities.

The Chief Executive Officers (CD) were

Sir Frank Nelson July 1940 - May 1942

Sir Charles Hambro May 1942- September 1943

Maj-General Colin Gubbins September 1943 - June 1946.

MI9 Escape and Evasion organization - part of SIS. Headquartered at Wilton Park with a cover address of Room-900 of the War Office, it also had an office at 5 St James's Street.

SIS organization 1946 - The massive wartime changes and the absorption of SOE resulted in a structure that now included;

Directorate of Production with a

DP1 Controller Northern Area CAN Soviet Bloc and Scandinavia,
DP1 Controller Western Area CWA Spain, France and North Africa,
DP1 Controller Eastern Area CEA Germany, Switzerland and Austria
DP2 Controller Middle East CME,
DP3 Controller Far East CFE and
DP4 Controller London Station

Directorate of Requirements (Circulating Sections)

R1 Political,

R2 Military,

R3 Naval,

R4 Air,

R5 Counter Espionage (combing V & IX) - Combined with Inspectorate of Security and
PV Section in 1964 to form the powerful

Directorate of Counter-Intelligence and Security.

R6 Industrial,

R7 Wartime Scientific Intelligence, previously a sub-section of the Air Section (Section 11) became a full Section representing the needs of the Directorate of Scientific

Intelligence (at what would eventually become the MOD) and the JIC's Scientific and Technical Intelligence Committees. The original Financial role of R7 was taken over by the creation of a Directorate of Administration and Finance.

R8 GCHQ Liaison (Later RGC-Requirements Government Communications) and R9 Scientific Intelligence(merged with R7)

By 1968 this had been simplified to

DP1 Western Europe,

DP2 Middle East and Africa,

DP3 Far East and Americas and

DP4 London Station.

In 1978-79 the service finally merged the old Requirement and Production Directorates with its controller effectively the new Deputy Chief of the SIS, to create a somewhat more streamlined, at least on paper, structure; The six major Controllers were the

C1 London Station,

C2 Middle East,

C3 Far East,

C4 Western Hemisphere,

C5 Soviet Bloc and

C6 Africa.