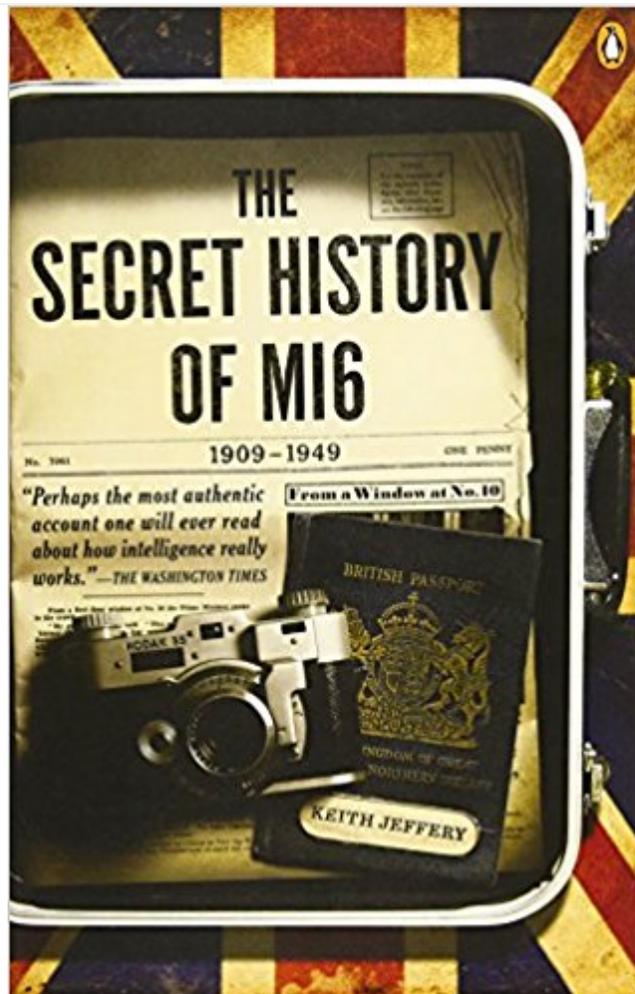


# {essays in history}

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## The Secret History of MI6



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## Reviewed Work(s)

*The Secret History of MI6*. By Keith Jeffrey (New York: The Penguin Press, 2010). Pp. 810. Cloth, \$39.95.

The British Secret Intelligence Service, commonly known as MI6, is one of the oldest foreign intelligence services in the world. Originally founded in 1909, it changed from an amateur organization into a professional service by the beginning of the Cold War. *The Secret History of MI6* was commissioned by John Scarlett during his tenure as Chief of the Secret Intelligence Service in recognition of the agency's centenary. The volume covers the first 40 years of the agency's history, from 1909 to 1949. As the author of the first official history of the Secret Intelligence Service, Keith Jeffrey was given unrivaled access to the agency's archives and was permitted to tell a complete story up to 1949. According to the foreword written by John Sawers, current Chief of the Secret Intelligence Service, the history of the service after 1949 is "still too sensitive to place in the public domain" (vii).

The early days of the service's history were filled with attempts by various government agencies to subsume portions or the entirety of the work of the service. A central theme of Jeffrey's work, the early history of MI6 is one of survival, with successive Chiefs, or "Cs," having to stave off attempts by other organizations to marginalize or subsume the service. MI6 also underwent turf battles more common to many intelligence organizations, particularly with the military and the Foreign Office. With many MI6 officers operating out of Embassies abroad, Foreign Office representatives became concerned regarding the focus of MI6 intelligence collection efforts, with political intelligence drawing particular ire, and the official cover accorded to MI6 officers as supposed members of the diplomatic corps. During World War I, the military attempted to subsume significant portions of MI6, only to see the organization receive protection from the Foreign Office. The inter-war years also saw MI6 fighting for survival, with a diminished budget but ever increasing customer demands and recriminations.

World War II also brought significant challenges, though this time with the new Special Operations Executive (SOE) organization. SOE was a predominately sabotage and covert action-oriented organization.

Throughout the war, SOE and MI6 competed for limited resources and limited agents in occupied countries. As SOE's and MI6's roles were different, the sharing of agents was not particularly effective and SOE operations could seriously impair MI6 objectives.

The early years of the service hinged to a large extent upon the personality of C, particularly up until the start of World War II. Mansfield Cumming, the first C, and Hugh Sinclair, his successor, were both able to see off successive attempts to minimize or remove SIS. By the start of World War II, SIS was able to establish itself as a premier intelligence organization capable of producing valuable intelligence for its customers. In fact, SIS was so highly regarded that in 1949, the service was able to successfully resist being placed under control of the Ministry of Defence, a plan put forward by Field Marshal Montgomery.

The service, which was not publicly acknowledged until the end of the Cold War, has a reputation for not releasing documents into the public domain. As such, Jeffrey's work is of significant contribution to the field, which supports and fills in gaps in Christopher Andrew's work, *Her Majesty's Secret Service*.<sup>[1]</sup> Jeffrey's sources include archival research from UK government organizations, Swedish, Norwegian, French, and U.S. records, as well as numerous private papers. The most surprising omission, however, is Jeffrey's lack of interviews with former SIS officers. He does use memoirs sparingly, acknowledging the serious historical issues that memoirs pose. An interesting issue Jeffrey encountered in his research is that SIS routinely destroyed documents, not for malicious reasons, but because of space concerns and that "the SIS attitude to archives was that they should be kept only if they served some clear operational purpose" (x). Jeffrey's work is a seminal work in the field of history regarding SIS. Masterfully written with an engaging narrative, it is the definitive work on this era in SIS's history.

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[1] Christopher Andrew, *Her Majesty's Secret Service: The Making of the British Intelligence Community* (New York: Viking, 1986).



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