Like intra-marital sex, historian Michael Howard observed in 1985, just about everyone knows that espionage activity goes on — and believes it's "extremely bad form" to ask about it.

"So far as official government policy is concerned, the British security and intelligence services do not exist. Enemy agents are found under gooseberry bushes and intelligence is brought by storks."

Things have changed. During the last three decades, Americans and Brits have learned a lot about the role of intelligence agencies in countering spying, subversion and terrorism. With the publication of "Defend the Realm," the British Security Service has taken a giant leap forward in making itself accountable to the public by de-mystifying its operations.

To mark the hundredth anniversary of its birth, MI5 granted Christopher Andrew — a professor of history at Cambridge University — virtually unrestricted access to its 20th-century files and limited access to 21st-century records. The result is a tour de force: a dazzlingly detailed account of the organization, its distinctive culture, agents and directors, and MI5's relationships with prime ministers and Cabinet officials.

"Defend the Realm," to be sure, is an authorized history. Andrew is not shy about showcasing the security service's successes. During World War I, he claims, MI5 rounded up all German spies "of any significance" and kept England free of sabotage. Recognizing, with Winston Churchill, that "in wartime, truth is so precious that she should always be attended by a bodyguard of lies," its FORTITUDE operation, "the greatest deception in the history of warfare," which established the fiction of an imminent attack on the Pas de Calais, made it possible for Allied troops to land on the shores of Normandy on D-Day.

Andrew is also remarkably candid. For decades, he acknowledges, the double agents known as "the Cambridge Five" — Anthony Blunt, Guy Burgess, John Cairncross, Donald Maclean and Kim Philby — provided so much classified material to Moscow that the KGB "sometimes had difficulty keeping up with it." During the Cold War, he adds, MI5 did not challenge "the passionately held but intellectually threadbare conspiracy theories" about communist subversion of a "disruptive minority" within its ranks. And, most importantly, Andrew insists that until recently, the Service has been reactive, concerning itself little, or not at all, with strategy.

Pointing to "the natural tendency" of elected officials to equate subversion with activities that threaten the policies of the government, Andrew suggests that politicians — and not intelligence experts — were responsible for the identification of trade union militants and peace activists as threats to security in the 1970s and '80s. When Margaret Thatcher demanded action to deal with these "wreckers," he points out, Sir Howard Smith, MI5's Director General, indicated that the Security Service charter of 1952 limited its role to internal and external dangers arising from espionage and sabotage and opposed any revisions to the directive. Andrew agrees that in "the heat of the day" intelligence agencies should stick to an "objective non-partisan approach."

This observation, of course, has profound implications for the CIA as well as MI5. As does the fundamental premise of "Defend the Realm": that a considerable amount of candor need not compromise national security or the effectiveness and safety of men and women in the field.

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Defend the realm
The Authorized History of MI5
Christopher Andrew
Alfred A. Knopf, $40