Secret Files in the United Kingdom's National Archives

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"There is an inevitable tension between the needs of national security and the wishes of historians", wrote Professor Christopher Andrew in the preface to his "authorized" history of MI5, the British domestic spy agency.[1] More broadly, it might well be argued that the degree and methods of a state's surveillance over its citizens goes to the heart of the type of society we have or aspire to. Applying that to New Zealand, does the nature and extent of state surveillance in civil society, through time, call into question our widely shared assumption that New Zealand is an open society characterised by justice and fairness to all its inhabitants – a country of civil liberties? It is, however, difficult to measure our historical levels and modes of state surveillance, for our security intelligence agencies have a more restrictive approach to releasing information than those of any other member of the "Five Eyes" international security alliance. We have to get most of our information from outside these agencies, including from overseas archival releases. In 2016 a digital release of security-related files in Britain held out promise for adding value to our understanding of the security intelligence history of New Zealand.[2]

The *Secret Files from World Wars to Cold War: Intelligence, Strategy and Diplomacy* database is a joint project of the United Kingdom's National Archives and the publishing firm Routledge, part of the Taylor & Francis Group. It provides access to selected British government secret intelligence and foreign policy files from the later nineteenth century to 1953, the majority from the 1930s and 1940s.[3] This is the second product of the Digital Resources Programme at Taylor & Francis, and the firm's first collaboration with The National Archives. The programme's purpose is "to develop online primary source collections for use in Higher Education teaching and research…by partnering with leading archives and libraries to digitize unique primary source collections".[4]

Ideas for new projects for the programme are developed by a Routledge team (headed by its Editorial Director, Digital Resources) which seeks inputs from academics. The *Secret Files* database originated from a

conversation the team had with Professor Matthew Jones (London School of Economics and Political Science, University of London), who mentioned the value of Foreign Office files (FO 1093) released in 2013 to academic research. The Editorial Director notes: "We then undertook a review of the material at The National Archives and built upon this core Series, identifying other Series at The National Archives that complemented and enhanced FO 1093." Selections from these various materials were carried out by the publishers after in-house research, discussions on contents and selection methods with an academic Editorial Board, and input from academic and archival focus groups in the United States and the United Kingdom. When selections were made, these were reviewed by the Editorial Board.[5]

In the pre-digital age, it goes without saying, accessing archival and newspaper sources was a temporally and spatially constrained endeavour. As A. N. L. Munby noted in 1960, many manuscript sources were virtually untouched by readers. A long-time Librarian of King's College, Cambridge, Munby was not too worried about this.[6] Reflecting a more leisurely scholarly age, he felt that all that was needed was to ensure that the future expansion of manuscript collections proceeded "on sound and scholarly lines" – although this "cannot be achieved without a good deal of thought from us all."[7] While digitisation addresses the issue of physical access (at least to selected material) and, to a lesser degree, that of time input (more especially if there are well designed finding aids), a "good deal of thought" is still needed about what topics or fields should get priority for digitisation and the selection criteria for material within the relevant collections.

In the world of security intelligence history, such issues are made more complex by the paucity of archives released into the public arena in the first place. A number of questions might be asked: Why were specific documents declassified by the originating authorities and released to the general public? On occasions when we have been given an answer to this, is the answer true (a particularly pertinent question in the area of state covert surveillance)? In the world of state security, can any releases be "innocent" of state instrumentalist intentions? Should everything "relevant" that has been declassified and deposited in an archive be digitised, avoiding a second sifting process with different selection criteria to that of declassification and release? But how would the boundaries of "relevance" be defined in the first instance, and who would patrol them? And how would such a huge digital product be financed? Where there are public-private partnerships in online archival projects, what are their ramifications? Can the profit imperative, for

example, be compatible with academic protocols and public interest? We will sketch out some thoughts on such issues, using the *Secret Files* database as an example, making particular reference to its coverage of New Zealand connections with the British intelligence community.

First of all, how important are the *Secret Files* both per se and in relation to their considerable cost? (Even most institutional purchasers would need to think hard before they made a commitment to buy). The database is described as "[s]panning four key twentieth century conflicts, with a spotlight on the Second World War", enabling "rich research into intelligence, foreign policy, international relations, and military history in the period of Appeasement, through the Second World War, and into the early Cold War." It is especially focused on the FO 1093 files, which originated in the Permanent Under-Secretary's Department at the Foreign Office (PUSD), "the point of liaison between the Foreign Office and the British intelligence establishment". An overview of the database promises "new insights into key moments of twentieth-century history".[8]

Is this a valid claim? The involvement of expert intelligence historians might give us some comfort here. A member of the editorial board, Professor Denis Smyth (University of Toronto), confirms that the PUSD files "contain many startling revelations about secret intelligence and covert operations" and, among other things, demonstrate the Foreign Office's considerable degree of "supervision" over the Secret Intelligence Service (MI6), Britain's external spy organisation.[9] As well as their historical significance, moreover, material in these and other released "secret files" may well have contemporary resonance. As one of the academics involved in their selection noted, "we can only learn about the importance of secret activity today by examining its past".[10]

However, the *Secret Files* tell us only about those parts of the past that the originating agencies of state want us to know. They are therefore censored – and, given the nature of their subject, far more heavily so than most releases. By means of comparison, while some 4000 paper files were released by MI5 to The National Archives over a dozen years from 1997, this constituted only one per cent of those held by the intelligence agency – if it was, indeed, that much, the amount being hard to estimate since many files are multi-volumed.[11] The official historian of the UK's Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC), Professor Michael Goodman, notes that while the majority of the material he used for his first volume had already been released to The National Archives, "a great number" of JIC Secretariat files and all of their "Confidential Annex volumes" remained out of the public purview.[12] Sometimes the reader of the *Secret Files* can work out which files have been held back from release. For example, a key

British intelligence report in 1947 refers to a "short note prepared by the New Zealand authorities" on their security intelligence arrangements, and references this as "Annexure F"; but this is not available in the database (unlike annexures A-D).[13] But often – as with releases of "Personal File" information by the New Zealand Security Intelligence Service – we do not know the full extent and nature of much of what has been held back.

We have of course no choice but to accept that what we have access to in the *Secret Files* has been governed by the requirements of the security agencies, but what can we conclude about the next level of sifting before e-publication? While the database was selected in consultation with experts on the Editorial Board and elsewhere, we do not know the nature of the interactions, how the final decision on each file was reached, whether all parties consulted were in harmony over the end product, and so forth. We can, however, have hopes of rapid access to the fruits of this collective labour, in-house indexers at Routledge having created "detailed and bespoke metadata at both the file and document level", holding out the prospect of "powerful content discoverability".[14] Searching is also assisted by the selection of ten key themes by which documents were "categorized and described".[15]

The reader can learn when located material was first made accessible to the public by using a "download citation" button that provides the date for accession to The National Archives. We can readily see, for example, that while the 2013 Foreign Office releases hold prominence in the *Secret Files*, others were in the public domain long before.[16] Among other things, this helps the reader both to gauge the significance to current scholarship of material found in the *Secret Files* and to assess the state of archival-based knowledge at the time previous books and articles were published. Thus, while the database includes the original texts and/or summaries of Ultra decrypts of enemy signals traffic (including references to New Zealand troops) delivered to Prime Minister Winston Churchill during World War II, it is useful to know that these have been available to historians and other readers at The National Archives since 1993.[17]

More broadly, Editorial Board members have provided introductory essays aimed at "contextualizing the primary material" and also produced other secondary work. Dr. Stephen Twigge, Head of Modern Collections at The National Archives, for example, has written "a description of the content, themes and topics" for each of the nine Series included in the *Secret Files*.[18] Such material provides a broad backdrop for references to New Zealand, which was a minor player in the British intelligence world and so does not feature prominently in the *Secret Files* – a factor perhaps magnified by the publisher's and its advisers' interests lying primarily in

the UK and, to a lesser degree, the United States.

Among the 16,838 documents contained in the 4,500 files of the database, however, a search for "New Zealand" uncovers 336 documents contained within 211 files, ranging from the very short to upwards of 150 pages.[19] Many of them have designations such as "Secret", "Top Secret", "Most Secret" or "Top Secret & Personal". They provide some significant information on the history of New Zealand security intelligence and its regional and international connections. It can be difficult, however, to assess the importance of a single item disconnected from its surrounding documentation by selection decisions or other human interventions in the past. Sometimes, on the other hand, a trail can be followed within the *Secret Files* which assists contextualisation. In 1937, for example, New Zealand argued that "a common policy" on the strategic importance of Pacific Islands should be considered at the forthcoming Imperial Conference. When pressed for details, it advocated a focus on "Naval bases, Air bases, Commercial Airways, Meteorology, Communications, Population and Administration, Activities of Japanese fishing craft, Review of Trade and Shipping".[20] Follow-up action recorded in the database provides context, including a report analysing such matters as food, water and population in Pacific territories which were considered to be of potential importance for both peacetime and wartime imperial opportunities.

But on other occasions – such as in 1940 when the British Treasury was asked to provide £1000 from Secret Service funds so that "a military mission to Australia under Lt. Col. J.C. Mawhood" could make "peculiar contacts in the Pacific" – there is no trail to follow in the database.[21] In such cases, broader knowledge of the world of international security connections is required (although such information is often scarce because of the dearth of sources and, relatedly, of secondary works). Knowledge of the early role of the JIC, for example, born as it was "out of the anxieties over the military rise of Nazi Germany", can help us contextualise other intelligence events in the late 1930s.[22] Its post-war activities too throw light on cold-war intelligence, including New Zealand's role in intelligence gathering and analysis. The JIC's Far East section, for example, graded intelligence allies in order of importance and reliability. New Zealand came next in line to the key strategic partner, Australia (with which it "worked hand in glove"); considered more reliable than countries such as South Africa and India, it was hence "allowed access to British JIC assessments".[23]

New Zealand's post-war appearances in the *Secret Files* often feature, moreover, the Joint Intelligence Bureau (JIB), established in 1945 by Major General Kenneth Strong to take over "the responsibilities of several

wartime intelligence organs", its functions later expanding to incorporate such matters as "atomic intelligence" (in 1957). As well as being "an important stepping stone in the movement to centralize military and military-relevant intelligence in Britain", it was designed to be at "the centre of an international network" of counterpart organisations.[24] Thus the *Secret Files* trace JIB efforts to establish offices and personnel in Australia and New Zealand, and contain information on espionage activities in this part of the world. There was said to be, for example, "[s]trong circumstantial evidence" that in 1946 New Zealander Ian Milner, an official in the Australian Department of External Affairs, had passed two British War Cabinet papers to the principal Soviet agent in Canberra.[25]

The *Secret Files* invite us, however, to take a broad perspective on intelligence, including issues of central interest to the UK and its allies that appear mundane compared to the work of MI5 and MI6. The JIB's interests were seen to lie primarily in economic intelligence, political intelligence "of the long-range type", topographical intelligence ("necessary to planning"), communications, ports and airfields, defences, telecommunications and that "vital strategic subject", oil.[26] The database also reminds us of post-war hopes for the future of the Commonwealth as a leading international player, and for New Zealand's aspirations within it. In 1948, for example, the Commonwealth's Advisory Committee on Defence Science was considering "utilising New Zealand resources of shales, coals and lignites" in the wider interests of the member countries.[27]

It was acknowledged, however, that "New Zealand could not undertake defence researches comparable in magnitude and extent to those in progress elsewhere in the Commonwealth", partly because of a "shortage of trained New Zealand scientists".[28] Sometimes, accordingly, the British (who had a Scientific Liaison Officer in New Zealand) provided assistance. For example, the "Canterbury Project", a radio meteorological investigation in the South Island in 1946-7, was followed up by UK facilitation of data analysis at a British research centre.[29] But British policy was to decentralise costs as much as possible within the Commonwealth, and the UK placed pressure upon the New Zealand government to fund as many projects as possible. In addition to considerable cooperation by New Zealand government and academic scientists, in 1948 the New Zealand military planned to spend an estimated £125,000 for defence science training "of value to the Commonwealth".[30] There were, too, a number of other post-war security pressures upon the New Zealand politicians, including UK efforts to persuade New Zealand to transfer

"human intelligence" functions from its Police Force to a stand-alone service – something which eventually occurred in 1956 with the establishment of the New Zealand Security Service.[31]

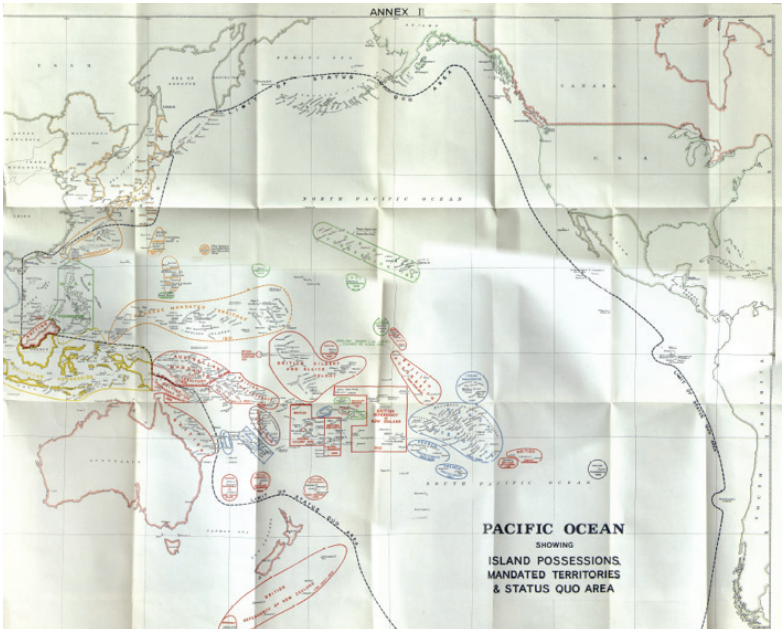
Such matters are not yet well covered in New Zealand historical literature. Access to the *Secret Files* will help researchers to gain a clearer and more complete – or, perhaps, less fuzzy and less incomplete – picture of our country's past role in the international "security community", even if we find little information to help us address questions relating to the nature and extent of state penetration of civil society. While much of the database has been available to consult in physical form in London for a number of years, then, digital access will undoubtedly be of assistance to historians of security and related matters – although they will need to take into account the sifting processes involved. The huge numbers of gaps in the *Secret Files* and, more broadly, in The National Archives, will no doubt tantalise some researchers to probe further: "absent files create… traces that continue to have agency and effect".[32] We can be reasonably sure, however, that few (if any) "absent files" concerning our security relationships with the UK and its allies will be released in the foreseeable future by New Zealand security agencies, since these systemically consult with their overseas counterparts over the declassification of mutually relevant files.[33] Meanwhile, the *Secret Files* provide some pieces of the jigsaw of international security intelligence cooperation, including that between the UK and New Zealand – even if it is a very large jigsaw and most of the pieces are missing.

Endnotes

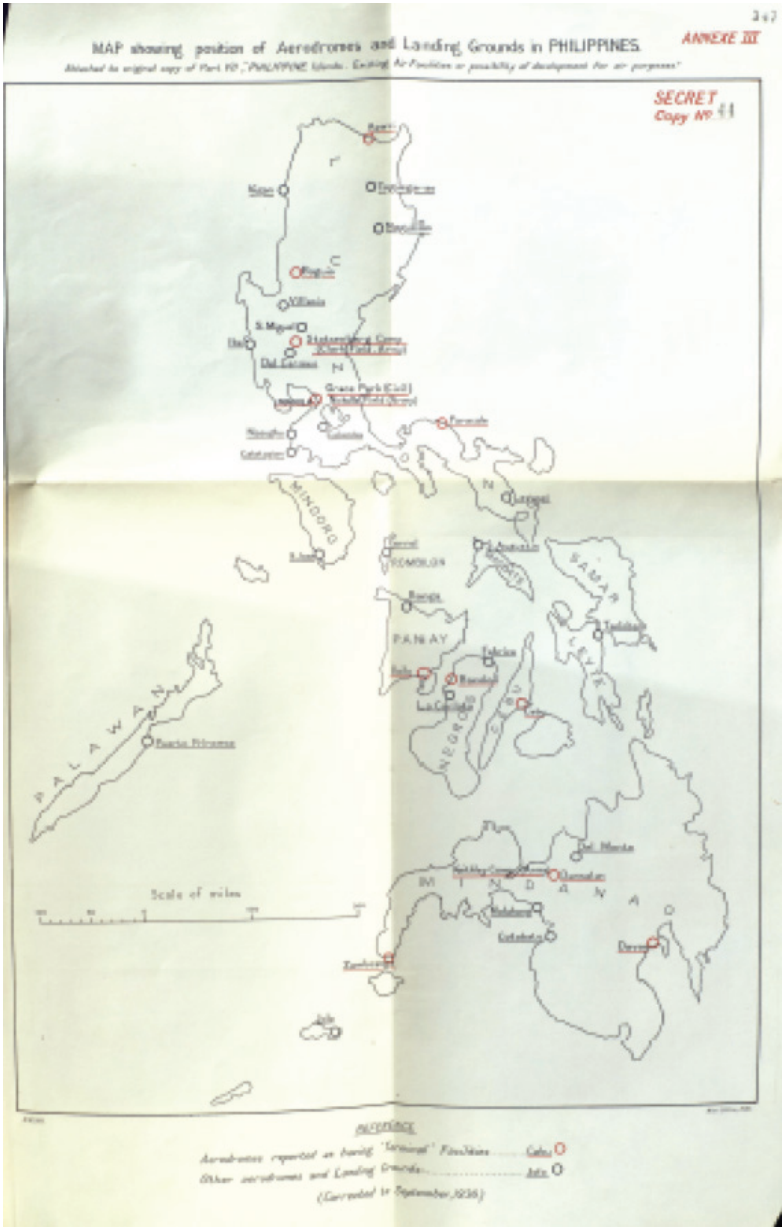
1. Andrew, Christopher, *The Defence of the Realm: The Authorized History of MI5*, London, 2009 (2010 ed.), p. xxi.
2. *Secret Files from World Wars to Cold War: Intelligence, Strategy and Diplomacy:* www.secretintelligencefiles.com. Archival references in this article are to this database.
3. http://www.secretintelligencefiles.com/Overview. The title of the database is somewhat misleading given that the collection dates back to 1873.
4. Personal communication, S. Phillips to E. Kelly, 28 February 2017.
5. This paragraph is based upon information in Phillips to Kelly, 28 February 2017.
6. Munby, A. N. L., *Essays and Papers*, London, 1977, p. 67.
7. Munby, *Essays and Papers*, p. 81.
8. Quotes in this paragraph are from: http://www.secretintelligencefiles.com/Overview
9. Personal Communication, D. Smyth to E. Kelly, 13 October 2016.
10. Glees, Anthony, 'The Impact of Intelligence on Policy', p.3: http://www.secretintelligencefiles.com/Overview/Subject-Essays/Anthony-Glees
11. Andrew, *Defence of the Realm*, pp. xxi-xxii.
12. Goodman, Michael S., *The Official History of the Joint Intelligence Committee*, Volume 1, London, 2014, p. 3.
13. CAB 176/14: Visit to Singapore, Australia and New Zealand by the Director Joint Intelligence Bureau, 5 February 1947, p.9.
14. Phillips to Kelly, 28 February 2017.
15. http://www.secretintelligencefiles.com/Overview/Methodology/Metadata: Metadata Field: Themes.
16. One example is CAB 56/2: Strategic Importance of the Pacific Islands. Telegrams to and from the Government of New Zealand, 10 March 1937 [made available in 1992].
17. HW1/2342: Government Code and Cypher School: Signals Intelligence Passed to the Prime Minister, Messages and Correspondence. This was drawn to our attention by Professor Smyth: Smyth to E. Kelly, 13 October 2016.
18. http://www.secretintelligencefiles.com/Overview/Series-Descriptions
19. A search for the word "Zealand" produces references to a higher number of documents because some of the documents refer to the "Danish islands of Zealand" (eg CAB 158/15: The Employment of the Soviet Armed Forces in Land

Campaigns in the Event of General War 1953-56, 25 June 1953 p.21). A search for "New Zealand" in inverted commas maximises search efforts in the database.

20. CAB 56/2: Strategic Importance of the Pacific Islands. Telegrams to and from the Government of New Zealand, pp.324-327.
21. CAB 301/4: War Office to The Treasury, 27 September 1940, Secret Service Funding: Defence Departments, p. 87. In the case of the Mawhood mission, the Security and Surveillance Project at the Stout Research Centre for New Zealand Studies is investigating its ramifications for New Zealand security intelligence history.
22. Goodman, *Joint Intelligence Committee*, p. 419.
23. Goodman, *Joint Intelligence Committee*, p. 219.
24. Dylan, Huw, 'The Joint Intelligence Bureau: (Not So) Secret Intelligence for the Post-War World', *Intelligence and National Security*, 27:1, 2012, p. 27. The JIB was absorbed into the new Defence Intelligence Staff when the Ministry of Defence was established in 1964, and was at the heart of the new organisation, which was itself headed by the JIB founding director Kenneth Strong. See Dylan, Huw, *Defence Intelligence and the Cold War: Britain's Joint Intelligence Bureau* 1945-1964, Oxford, 2014, for a full history; and for its emergence from JIC discussions, Goodman, *Joint Intelligence Committee*, pp. 165-167.
25. FO 1093/516: Australian Security: Percy Sillitoe to W. G. Hayter, 21 September 1948, p.38. See too McNeish, James, *The Dance of the Peacocks: New Zealanders in Exile in the Time of Hitler and Mao Tse Tung*, Auckland, 2003.
26. CAB 176/14: Visit to Singapore, Australia and New Zealand by the Director Joint Intelligence Bureau, 5 February 1947: Annexure A (CLS/5306/JIC: Minutes, South East Asia Topographical Committee, 6 January 1947), p. 2.
27. FO 1093/515: Advisory Committee on Defence Science: Papers for 1948: Oil Research Problems: Potential Sources of Liquid Fuels in New Zealand, 31 December, 1948, p. 4
28. FO 1093/515: Advisory Committee on Defence Science: Papers for 1948: Progress Report on Defence Research in New Zealand, 21st December 1948, p.20.
29. FO 1093/515: Advisory Committee on Defence Science: Papers for 1948: Progress Report on Defence Research in New Zealand, 21st December 1948, p. 24.
30. FO 1093/515; FO 1093/515: Advisory Committee on Defence Science: Papers for 1948: Progress Report on Defence Research in New Zealand, 21st December 1948, p. 20.
31. Butterworth, Susan. *More Than Law and Order: Policing a Changing Society 1945-1992*, Wellington, 2005, p.45.
32. Trundle, C., 'Searching for Culpability in the Archives: Commonwealth Nuclear Test Veterans Claims for Compensation', *History and Anthropology*, 22/4, 2011, p. 505.
33. See, for example, http://www.nzsis.govt.nz/archives/policy/



Map included in CAB 56/2, 7 May 1937: Strategic Importance of the Pacific Islands, Annex II.



Map included in CAB 56/2, 7 May 1937, Strategic Importance of the Pacific Islands, Annex III.