

Spies and Sparrows: ASIO and the Cold War

By Phillip Deery

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While the literature on intelligence agencies continues to expand, partly in response to civilians' growing awareness of the role the latter play in their lives, little is known about the effects intelligence has on the 'spies and sparrows' of the intelligence world. Phillip Deery has filled this gap by examining the lives of ordinary people who become 'extraordinary' once employed by intelligence agencies and the impact this has had on them and the people around them.



The book is captivating and brutally honest from the first sentence: *"How important is the work of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO)? It's so fucking necessary it's frightening"* (p. 1). This sentence highlights a significant turning point in 1965 when Australia was continuing to develop its arm in the intelligence world due to the overreaching power of the Communist Party. Deery explains that the term 'sparrow' comes from the name of an ASIO plan to insert a sparrow in every Communist Party branch in Australia. By 1972, over 500 sparrows were employed by ASIO across 120 branches within Australia: that operation turned many ordinary Australians into 'spies and sparrows'.

Deery examines the lives of eight people within the intelligence world. These are the scientist, the grouper, the doctor, the housewife, the defector, the airman, the migrant, and the sparrow. In doing so, Deery connects the ideological influences of the Cold War to the institutionalisation of the intelligence world and outlines how these influences changed the lives of spies and sparrows and their individual and collective worlds. The historical analysis of the people in Deery's book highlights the pressure and psychological torment that afflicts the spies and sparrows of ASIO. A Monash University student who was employed by ASIO stated that *"as time went on, my conscience started to get the better of me and the dilemma of being two people trapped me"* (p. 10). A Sydney University student who was recruited *"suffered a nervous breakdown in 1976 when he could no longer cope psychologically with the conflicts of a compartmentalised life"* (p. 10). It also

brought about constant fear of assassination not only for the ‘spies and sparrows’, but for the people they loved. The constant fear of being under threat deepened the emotional turmoil that is highlighted in each chapter. It is especially reflected in the story of Evdokia Petrov, when she points out “*I am existing now, not living*” (p. 121). Each chapter brings to light the psychological burden of the spies and sparrows of ASIO, and the damage that caused to their wellbeing and that of their loved ones.

Deery’s analysis highlights the reach of intelligence agencies’ surveillance, monitoring not just communists and suspected communists but also academics, scientists, journalists, the employed ‘spies and sparrows’, and many others who may have been perceived as potential security risks to Australia. This highlights ASIO’s power at the time, as anyone could be classified as a potential threat to national security.

In this way, *Spies and Sparrows* also sheds light on ASIO’s conduct during the Cold War, whereby an alleged desire to keep citizens safe often led to questionable tactics, especially concerning the blanket surveillance of Australia’s citizens. These concerns about the overreach of intelligence have not subsided at present, as civil society continues to voice its worries about legislation allowing ASIO’s unlimited access to the technological data-driven lives of society. In such an environment, Deery’s book provides valuable insight into the activities of intelligence agencies and underscores the toll they have often taken on citizens. In this regard, *Spies and Sparrows* offers a chance to reflect on the ethical challenges surrounding intelligence work, raising familiar questions about the need to balance security, privacy, and morality.

In conclusion, Deery’s book is extensively researched and provides an in-depth account of the historical underpinnings of ASIO and its role in the Cold War. This type of historical intelligence book can be used not only to understand the past but to work towards positive changes in the practices of the Australian Intelligence Community.

About the Reviewer

Samantha Jones is a Doctorate of Public Safety student at Charles Sturt University, analysing terrorist cells on an international scale. She has a Masters of Intelligence Analysis and Bachelor of Criminology, has previously worked in intelligence, and is an Adjunct Associate Lecturer in Intelligence and Security at Charles Sturt University.