

THE FIFTH COLUMN IN WORLD WAR II

*SUSPECTED
SUBVERSIVES IN
THE PACIFIC WAR
AND AUSTRALIA*

**ROBERT
LOEFFEL**



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**Suspected Subversives in the Pacific War
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Robert Loeffel

University of New South Wales, Australia

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Contents

<i>List of Plates</i>	vi
<i>Preface and Acknowledgements</i>	vii
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	x
Introduction	1
1 The Shape of Fear: Background to the Fifth Column Scare	15
2 Before the Storm: The Beginning of World War II	34
3 June 1940: The Fifth Column Triumphant	59
4 The War and the Fifth Column Arrive in Australia	87
5 Australia under Attack: The Fifth Column and the Pacific War	114
6 The Myth Continues: Lingering Fears and Prejudices	152
Conclusion	168
<i>Notes</i>	171
<i>Bibliography</i>	201
<i>Index</i>	212

Plates

- 1 Australian Secret Service breaks spy ring, *Courier-Mail*, 12 September 1939, p. 3
- 2 Nazi Party in South Australia & Australia
- 3 Betrayed Norway, *Courier-Mail*, 10 May 1940, p. 5
- 4 Title still *Australia's 5th Column*
- 5 Dunkirk Fifth Columnist *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 June 1940, p. 12
- 6 The Traitor Within *Courier-Mail*, 3 August 1940, p. 2
- 7 Australian Labor Party, Federal election advertisement, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 September 1940, p. 5
- 8 British Union of Fascists and Australian Fascist Movement
- 9 Fifth Column, *Western Mail*, 7 August 1941, p. 23
- 10 Keep Mum, She's Not So Dumb! 1942
- 11 Use the Fine Comb *Courier-Mail*, 21 March 1942, p. 4
- 12 Percy R. Stephensen, ca. 1934
- 13 Gossipers Are Traitors, *Examiner*, 9 March 1942, p. 1
- 14 In Custody, *The Mercury*, 26 May 1942, p. 1
- 15 Pte Dimitrevich Court Martial
- 16 Nazi Flag for Australia! *Sunday Times*, 9 January 1944, p. 5

Preface and Acknowledgements

In January 1942 a worried citizen from Ballarat in Victoria wrote to Australian Military Intelligence (MI) of his suspicions that a group of Fifth Columnists were deliberately undermining the war effort by causing discontent amongst the townspeople. He identified this suspicious group as the Victorian Police Department.¹ In July 1942 the Town Council of Wangaratta, also in Victoria, resolved that all neon advertising signs were to be disconnected as they feared that the flickering lights were being used by enemy agents to transmit messages in Morse code.² The Council wrote to the Prime Minister, suggesting that he make this an Australia-wide requirement.

In World War II the Fifth Column was the name given to Axis agents who carried out subversive work on the home fronts of Allied countries. Their mission was to undertake acts of sabotage, cause fear and confusion, and eventually assist in an enemy invasion. The term had been created during the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) and was a modern version of the story of the Trojan Horse. Whilst Britain and Canada all had the peak of their Fifth Column scares in 1940, in Australia this was not reached until early 1942. This happened when the emphasis on a German Fifth Column shifted towards fears of Japanese orchestrated subversion. The above examples offer insights into the kind of suspicions that the Fifth Column scare generated on the Australia home front in that period, as the gaze of suspicion turned on neighbours, colleagues and those in authority. The Fifth Column phenomenon is a revealing story about how society responds when placed under the stress of war.

In 1940 the Fifth Column was widely accepted as the reason for the Germans' military success. A search of British newspapers of that year shows that the terms *Blitzkrieg* and Fifth Column were given equal coverage. In Australian newspapers in the same period, almost twice as many articles cited the Fifth Column as opposed to *Blitzkrieg*. In the inter-war period, through film and popular literature, Australian society was fed colourful and exotic stories of spies and saboteurs and the devastating role they would play in the next war. In 1940, the succession of unsubstantiated stories created a snowball effect whereby the overarching theme of a pre-planned subversive network assisting the Germans took hold. For their part, the Allies contributed to the creation of this legend as a means of explaining the reason for their defeat.

In Australia's case, despite no evidence of a Fifth Column ever being discovered, the public developed suspicions of particular groups in society. Not surprisingly, some of this was directed against people of German or Italian descent or the admirers of fascism. Less likely suspects, as it was considered a Nazi device, were found in communists. Even stranger were those suspicions aimed at Jewish Australians, Jewish refugees, Jehovah's Witnesses and, most bizarrely of all, Aboriginal people.

In Australia, the Fifth Column became a direct threat in early 1941. The success of a number of German raiders operating off the Australian coast was discovered and the immediate assumption was that subversion had played a major role in their work. This led to attacks on particular groups, notably Jews and Jehovah's Witnesses. Later in the year, the commitment of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) in Greece further confirmed stories of the importance of the Fifth Column to the Axis war machine. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the beginning of the war in the Pacific reignited a scenario in which Fifth Columnists were credited with facilitating their spectacular military successes. In the initial phase of the Pacific War, Allied soldiers developed suspicions that many of the native inhabitants in Malaya, the Netherlands East Indies (NEI) and New Guinea were collaborating with the Japanese. In Australia, the immediate threat of Japanese invasion inspired a wave of rumours and suspicions that an array of subversives was undermining the home front.

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Abbreviations

ABC	Australian Broadcasting Commission
AFM	Australia First Movement
AIF	Australian Imperial Force
ALP	Australian Labor Party
ARP	Air Raid Precautions
AWM	Australian War Memorial
BEF	British Expeditionary Force
CIB	Commonwealth Investigation Branch
CPA	Communist Party of Australia
CP	Country Party
CPD	Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates
DVA	Department of Veterans Affairs Oral History interview
MI	Military Intelligence
NAA	National Archives of Australia
NANZ	National Archives of New Zealand
NAUK	The National Archives, United Kingdom
NEI	Netherlands East Indies
NLA	National Library of Australia
QSA	Queensland State Archives
RAAF	Royal Australian Air Force
RAN	Royal Australian Navy
RSL	Returned Services League
UAP	United Australia Party
VDC	Volunteer Defence Corps

Introduction

This so-called Fifth Column conveys nothing to me because it doesn't exist.¹

Adolf Hitler to American journalist
Karl von Wiegand, June 1940

This country [Australia] has one of the biggest Fifth Columns in the world.²

Smith's Weekly, 14 February 1942

Less than seven years ago Fifth Column was only a witticism on the lips of a Spanish general; today it has become, in the words of one writer, the great bugaboo of our age. Fifth Column has become, next to Blitzkrieg, the most firmly rooted addition of recent years to the English vocabulary.³

American Speech, February 1944

For the majority of World War II, Australia was beset by fears of a Fifth Column. Provoked by events in Europe and later in the Pacific, fears that an 'enemy within' existed on the home front gripped the public's imagination. After the triumph of the German offensive in Western Europe in June 1940 it was believed that Norway, Belgium, Holland and France had all been undermined by a highly organised, well-prepared secret army of subversives. This belief led to simultaneous public panics in the United Kingdom, United States, Canada, South Africa, New Zealand and Australia, as the authorities and public feared that they were being undermined by a Trojan Horse of saboteurs. In the Allied press these fears were fuelled by lurid stories of subversive work carried out by these agents during the German offensive. It was variously claimed they had assisted parachute troops, removed roadblocks, changed street signs,

shot troops in the back, directed bombing attacks, blown up bridges and defence installations, and sown dissent and rumour. These reports identified the Fifth Columnists as being civilians, both men and women, members of the military and social elites or government authorities and even nuns who 'needed a shave'. The colourful nature of these stories added to their appeal and prominence. In 1940, the words 'Fifth Column' were used more frequently than 'Blitzkrieg' in the Allied press to explain the Germans' military successes. What makes the Australian experience of the Fifth Column unique from events in Britain or Canada is that it did not fade away after 1940, but for various reasons was kept alive in the public consciousness throughout 1941, before being fiercely reignited in early 1942 with the start of the war with Japan. The latter scare had its peculiarities, as it was not anticipated that the Japanese themselves were the main threat but rather domestic traitors and enemy dupes. It was an example of this very scenario in March 1942 that saw the only arrests and convictions in Australia of alleged Fifth Column operatives.

Yet, for all the alarm the Fifth Column caused throughout the Allied world, it was never a genuine threat to any Allied home front. The entire Fifth Column scare was simply that: a scare. In the 1950s, Louis de Jong examined the claims that the Germans had received significant assistance from subversive elements during their military operations in Europe and the Mediterranean. He found that while some limited and uncoordinated Fifth Column help had occurred in countries with high ethnic German populations, on the whole its importance to the German war machine was grossly exaggerated. In the campaign in France, de Jong noted that not a single passage in German planning documents referred to a Fifth Column.⁴ In the Pacific, the Japanese Fifth Column was no more real. Pam Oliver argues that Japanese espionage was not prepared for war in 1941, as they had no intelligence networks in the Dutch, British or American colonies. Furthermore, she was only able to identify retroactive plans to enlist collaborators after invasions had occurred.⁵ However, as de Jong observed, context is everything: 'The historian, who, years after the event, when the danger has passed, can weigh up the pros and cons of certain actions in the tranquillity of his study – how easy things are for him compared to the statesman who [...] has to make decisions on which depended the welfare and woe of a whole community'.⁶ This book is not designed to make the authorities or public look foolish for overreacting to the fears of sabotage and subversives. Instead, it sets out to offer an account of their actions and to look at how these fears were created.

To the Allies, the Fifth Column represented a fear of ongoing subversive activities, such as acts of sabotage, communicating information to the enemy, undermining morale on the home front and so on. There was also an anxiety that, in the event of an invasion, a secret army would emerge, committing acts of sabotage or confusion in order to hinder defences. A mixture of both scenarios was credited with the success of the Germans in 1940. The Fifth Column also became a cover-all term for a range of supposed anti-war activities, such as those linked to the communist party, absenteeism from work, industrial strikes and so on. While many of these were attributed to Fifth Column activities at the time, this book will focus instead on what were considered acts of sabotage that had been directly co-ordinated by the Axis enemy.

Those who were suspected as being part of the Fifth Column changed as the war progressed. The objects of suspicion sometimes made little sense but instead reflected pre-existing prejudices in Australian society. Initially, these suspicions centred around two main groups: migrants from Germany and – after their home country entered the war in June 1940 – Italy, and those identified as admirers of fascism and communism. The explanation for Germany's rapid success in 1940 was that they had prepared for war years in advance, with the pre-war establishment of agents in Norway, Denmark and France. The feeling of vulnerability in Australia to a German or Italian Fifth Column was particularly strong due to the size of these populations and their concentrations in certain areas such as South Australia and North Queensland. In the five years prior to 1939, some 9000 Germans and 10,000 Italians had arrived in Australia. This was on top of the significant populations that already existed.⁷ In 1939, it was estimated that there were between 60,000 to 100,000 Australian-Germans in the country. The significant difference between German or Italian migrants who arrived before World War I and those who arrived before World War II was how many amongst them would be classed today as political refugees.

Many of the German and Italian migrants who arrived in Australia prior to World War I came for economic and lifestyle reasons, rather than fears of persecution for their race, religion or politics. It was a section of political refugees in the inter-war period that provided the basis for one of the more peculiar Fifth Column suspicions. As well as fears of Nazi agents planted in Australia, there was a suggestion that Jewish refugees and Jehovah's Witnesses were working for the Nazis. It was believed that some Jews were willing agents for the Nazis while others were coerced into joining the Fifth Column following threats to their relatives back home. Such ideas originated in a belief in the utter

preparedness of the Nazi Fifth Column and the exaggerated powers the Allies attributed to the Gestapo. It was the fear of the Fifth Column that influenced a revision of the internment policy of the government, altering public perceptions about the internal threat that Australia faced, and contributing to the policy shift towards mass internments during 1942. The last external enemies accused of Fifth Column activities were the Japanese. As mentioned earlier, it was clear that their numbers in Australia were so small that they could not have an extensive network of agents. Instead, the Japanese Fifth Column was linked to an array of helpers. In February 1942, social commentator William Goddard articulated this belief when he claimed that for years Italians had come to Australia with the express purpose of 'preparing the way for the Japanese'.⁸

Towards the end of 1940, despite the lack of evidence of any subversive activities on the Australian home front, the focus of Fifth Column suspicions grew wider in society. Other suspected Fifth Columnists were those of Australian or British birth who were accused of having fascist or communist sympathies. At the time, these potential Fifth Columnists were described by Sir Walter Murdoch as being a mixture of the 'half-baked and the hard boiled'.⁹ Despite Nazism as the obvious enemy, many in Australia felt a deep suspicion towards communists and much of the early rhetoric about who constituted the Fifth Column was directed against them. As a result, in the period before 22 June 1941, when Russia joined the Allies in the war against Germany, fears that communists were Fifth Columnists were common in Australian society. Strike action taken by miners from March 1940 onwards seemed to validate these concerns. For years, conservative government rhetoric had argued that there was an enemy within and now events in Europe appeared to prove that this analysis was correct. However, the axiom that communists were the Fifth Column was severely challenged when details emerged about what had happened in Western Europe in 1940. It was clear that communists had had very little to do with events in Norway, Belgium and France, and consequently they did not surface in the various puppet governments that followed the German occupations. It became unsound, on the evidence available, to say that communists were the Fifth Column. Instead, it was elements of the political right who had emerged as the real collaborators in Western Europe. As a result, and in opposition to the widespread belief that communists were the real Fifth Column, there developed in Australia a growing suspicion of fascist sympathisers and those characterised as the 'socially well-connected' members of society.

Before World War II, a number of individuals in Australia, from all walks of life, proclaimed their admiration for fascism. These included Australians of German descent, people from England and native-born Australians. In 1931 a secret group called the White Army launched an ill-fated coup in parts of country Victoria against the phantom threat of a communist revolution.¹⁰ The New Guard under Colonel Eric Campbell was the most prominent and numerically important group, which at its peak had 50,000 members. David Bird has argued that Australian fascists 'were never numerous' and were certainly 'without influence on the Australian political system'.¹¹ More unkindly, Andrew Moore has characterised them simply and collectively as a 'sad bunch'.¹² However, during 1940, and again in early 1942, some in this 'sad bunch' were feared as being part of the invasion plans of Nazi Germany or Imperial Japan. Certainly being considered politically irrelevant did not disqualify you from either collaborating with the Axis, or from being set up as a collaborationist leader, as exemplified by infamous 'Fifth Columnists' like Major Quisling in Norway, Anton Mussert in the Netherlands and Pierre Laval in France.¹³

Historiography of the Fifth Column

Fears in Australia of an 'enemy within' during wartime were not unusual. In World War I, Australia had its fair share of spy fears, both at home and amongst the fighting troops, and there were few limits to the types of rumours that could circulate. In 1918, the nation was enveloped in an 'aeroplane scare', with sightings of German aircraft purportedly operating over the skies of outback Australia.¹⁴ In World War II, initial Fifth Column fears were compounded by certain unique contextual and geographical conditions in Australia. The war with Germany had been going on since September 1939 and by April 1940 Australia had hardly engaged the enemy. This was in stark contrast to World War I, when the first Australian troops engaged the enemy in German New Guinea in November 1914, only a few months after the war began; by April 1915, they were fighting at Gallipoli. In comparison, by April 1940, only a relatively small number of Australian airmen were committed to battling the Nazi threat. A contemporary assessment from April 1940 characterised the Australian home front as suffering a form of boredom, as a result of an 'absence of spectacular warfare'.¹⁵ The need to seek out an enemy on the home front could be construed as an attempt to make up for this lack of action. Even towards the end of 1941, the war had still not touched the Australian home front in any significant way.¹⁶ When

the war finally did arrive in early 1942, most Australians had already heard of the might of the Fifth Column and were primed to believe the increasingly frenzied stories associated with it.

The spreading of stories and rumours on the home front was an important aspect of Fifth Column fears. This was exploited to some extent by the Axis in radio propaganda. Lawrence Soley, writing on the role of psychological propaganda in World War II, identified that the political situation in France in 1940 made it particularly susceptible to Fifth Column concerns. Soley argues that the French people had begun to distrust their government's own information to such a degree that they turned instead to stories and rumours for their news.¹⁷ In Britain, Fifth Column paranoia was fuelled by 'Lord Haw Haw' (William Joyce) in his propaganda broadcasts for the Germans. By mentioning mundane happenings, Joyce gave the impression that the Germans had intimate knowledge of the British home front through Fifth Columnists.¹⁸ In the Pacific War, although Japanese propaganda broadcasts focussed on Australia's isolation and abandonment by Britain, they also demonstrated knowledge of Allied military information and various events on the home front.¹⁹ Rumours, gossip and accusations circulated by members of the public fostered growing Fifth Column fears. These ranged from the arrest and execution of Australian military officers who had been found to be traitors, to stories of Japanese spies being arrested dressed as school girls. In this climate, even simple industrial accidents took on the appearance of something more sinister. Despite no confirmed acts of sabotage or treason ever being discovered in Australia, this proliferation of gossip gave the impression that a co-ordinated Fifth Column was actually at work. Suspicions were compounded by the dire situation in which Australia found itself after Japan entered the war in December 1941 and a general panic set in.²⁰ This book outlines the nature and strength of these rumours and the role they played in frightening the Australian population.

In general, historians have tended to downplay the role of subversion in Australia during World War II.²¹ Michael McKernan argued that fears of spies only resulted in a brief 'flurry of excitement' at the start of the war. He suggested that Australians were not susceptible to Fifth Column fears as people were 'reluctant to believe spy stories the second time around [after the experience of World War I]'.²² Similarly, others suggest that the whole Fifth Column threat was effectively dealt with at the start of the war. Paul Hasluck declared that the small numbers of arrests in September 1939 were considered by the military authorities to have 'effectively broken up' hostile organisations for the whole of the war.²³

In Australia, various setbacks in the war (especially in early 1942) led the general public to believe that the Fifth Column was widespread. It is clear that the authorities themselves were concerned that the potential threat was extensive, as demonstrated by investigations into and assessments of a variety of individuals and suspicions engendered against them. An examination of the Fifth Column scare contextualises the acknowledged period of panic that Australia experienced during the heady months of early 1942.

It is suspected that the Fifth Column scare in other Allied countries was a product of, and was encouraged by, the actions of various authorities. Richard Thurlow has suggested that in Britain the Fifth Column was actively created by the security services and the government to serve specific purposes.²⁴ These were the need for Britain to find scapegoats to explain their defeats and the desire of the security services to enhance their role and power by fuelling 'security mania'.²⁵ Further to this, others have claimed that the British used the idea of a Fifth Column as a means of influencing the United States to abandon its neutrality before December 1941.²⁶ In his assessment of the Fifth Column in America, Francis MacDonnell argues that the scare was brought about by a 'coalescence of forces needed to stir the public to a full-scale panic' and he hints at the manipulation of the public by the authorities: 'Without continuing evidence of a plot and without simultaneous reinforcement from politicians, law enforcement, and the media, conspiracy theories tend to lose their hold over the public rather quickly. America's experience with the Axis Fifth Column points out not only the slender evidence needed to start a scare, but the unusual circumstances to sustain one'.²⁷ This opens the question of the degree to which the Fifth Column was a creation of the authorities themselves rather than a spontaneous reaction amongst the public. In Australia such an assessment is interesting in light of the authorities' continued efforts to pursue an array of individuals who were suspected of being Nazi agents despite the fact that there was little basis in evidence. As foreigners were considered to be behind Fifth Column activities, it simply made sense to direct most official energy to rounding them up. However, during the panic, simplistic links were made and people with no sympathy for Nazism, such as Jews or Jehovah's Witnesses, or those from neutral countries, were also accused, resulting in 'incongruous groups' being 'lumped together'.²⁸

Margaret Bevege accounts for the Fifth Column phenomenon as being clearly linked to xenophobia and an internment policy which indicated that, 'Australians became overtly pro-British at the time'.²⁹ However, the findings of this book refute this claim to some extent. Fear of the

'other' and xenophobia certainly did play a role in the fears of refugees, but should not necessarily be equated with an increase in pro-British attitudes. In 1940 Prime Minister Robert Menzies identified anti-British attitudes as being part of the work of Fifth Columnists. Yet, there were definitely indications of an anti-British attitude in Australia, as the British government and its military and the British themselves were accused of being the Fifth Column. Kay Saunders argues that beneath Australia's experience of World War II an internal race war was being played out. She believed that 'Australians were fighting for and safeguarding a white, British-derived Australia. For those defined as the 'Other' – Aborigines, non-British migrants . . . – they had to be contained, and their ability to destroy white Australia nullified'.³⁰ The term Fifth Column shifted from identifying genuine threats of collaboration – those with fascist leanings or those 'well-connected' in society – to instead denoting a sort of racial bogeyman that masked subliminal accusations of disloyalty against those deemed as the 'other'.

The flexibility of the expression made it possible for more than racial enemies to be targeted for vilification and made objects of suspicion. For example, the main targets in the wake of the German raider scare of January 1941 were Jewish refugees and Jehovah's Witnesses. The Witnesses were already suspected as Fifth Columnists by the media and the population, but after the German raider activity, they were persecuted by the authorities. Inexplicably, Australian Aborigines were suspected of being Fifth Column agents, indoctrinated with Nazism by German missionaries. After December 1941, these suspicions evolved into a belief that they were in the pay of the Japanese. These fears were based on an appreciation of the value their bush skills would offer to an invading army, but were also an acknowledgement that they had no reason to be loyal to the Commonwealth of Australia. Looking at the roll call of those accused of being Fifth Columnists in Australia, it is clear that existing political, social or racial prejudices were vital in creating these suspicions. They show how the Fifth Column scare gained legitimacy by being associated with those who were already targeted and mistrusted by Australian society.

The Fifth Column played an important role amongst Australian servicemen. Glyn Pryor offers several alternate theories on its influence on the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) while it fought in France. He suggests that the huge level of confusion resulting from the German advance created conditions necessary for reliable news to end and 'rumour to *become* news'.³¹ Coupled with the fatigue of the troops and their increasing sense of isolation and abandonment, he believes that the Fifth Column was born in the low morale that lingered as the

weeks wore on and defeats continued.³² Similar conditions existed in the early campaigns of Australian troops in Greece and later Malaya and New Guinea, as the overwhelming numbers of the enemy and relentless military setbacks caused morale and accurate news to evaporate. In addition, as Mark Johnston identifies, the Fifth Column provided a means of describing the underhanded and deceitful tactics of the enemy.³³ Racism appears to have played an important part also. Pryor identifies the fear of subversion amongst the BEF as developing from a sense of indifference and suspicion towards the refugees who were clogging up the roads of retreat.³⁴ A similar situation is not hard to imagine amongst the Australian soldiers. Their suspicions of the foreigners they encountered could have outweighed the fact that many of these people were their Allies. An added factor for the Australians was that, after the experiences of the Allies in 1940, they were fully anticipating meeting the Axis Fifth Column in battle.

Origins and incarnations of the Fifth Column

The creation of a new term for a new conflict is not unusual in modern warfare. New weaponry or methods of operation become part of the popular vernacular as people are taught to adapt their modes of thinking and linguistic tools, in order to embrace the changes in how wars are fought. In many ways, these terms are simplifications, produced so that people can think they understand what is going on. The unique aspect of the Fifth Column term was that it was so ill-defined as to include and account for a range of activities and purposes. It was also unique, as it essentially replaced previous terms such as 'traitor' or 'spy' and was therefore a modern adaptation of a timeless practice. The Spanish Civil War can lay claim to the creation of the term 'Fifth Column' itself and, in a way, it was the ideal conflict for the creation of such an expression. Being a Civil War, fought along violently opposed political lines, it was often impossible to determine truly who was friend or foe.

The creation of the term is attributed to General Emilio Mola, a nationalist leader and one of General Franco's trusted lieutenants. During the Nationalists' drive to Madrid, Mola suggested, during a broadcast, that besides the four columns of army forces heading towards the city, they also had a 'fifth' column ready to strike with sabotage and similar actions within Madrid itself.³⁵ This term was first used in the Western press on 16 October 1936. These reported that, in reaction to Mola's broadcast, the Spanish Republican government had carried out a house-to-house search of Madrid and this had led to over 2000 arrests.³⁶

Thereafter, the 'Fifth Column' gained wide reportage around the World. On 21 October 1936, almost all the Australian capital city dailies carried a description of the Fifth Column in stories of the roundup of suspects in Madrid.³⁷ Subsequently, reports of more imprisonments and even executions of Fifth Columnists substantiated the belief that their movement was real.³⁸ However, unlike in 1940, when it was given most credit for helping the Germans to advance so rapidly, the sluggish offensives of the Nationalists in Spain did nothing to detract from the developing legend. Three years after it was first mentioned in the press, the Fifth Column was seen to play a role in the capture of the capital, with *The Times* declaring, 'How Madrid fell: big part played by Fifth Column'.³⁹

It did not take long for newspapers to infer that, like the Spanish Nationalists, the Nazis also had a Fifth Column. Two months before World War II began, *The Mail* observed that 'Hitler's "Fifth Column" is no longer a phrase, but a reality'.⁴⁰ No mention was made of a Nazi Fifth Column during Hitler's foreign policy successes in Austria and Czechoslovakia, but credit was definitely given afterwards.⁴¹ The significance attributed to the Fifth Column changed dramatically with the German attack on Norway on 9 April 1940. It confirmed beliefs that the Nazis had been planning their war for years and demonstrated their sinister and underhanded methods. The United Kingdom, United States, Canada and South Africa all endured Fifth Column scares beginning in May 1940. In Britain, with the threat of a Nazi invasion so close, and despite scant evidence that the Fifth Column actually existed, the hysteria over it grew to alarming proportions. In early May the British Chiefs of Staff Committee made clear their belief that the Fifth Column had been vital to German success. As far as the Committee was concerned the absence of the discovery of any subversive activity in Britain thus far merely highlighted the Fifth Column's 'level of secrecy' and 'reinforce[d]' the view that it was real: 'such activities will only take place as part of a prearranged military plan'.⁴² However, a far more sober appraisal was offered by the Home Secretary, Sir John Anderson, who compared the Fifth Column threat to Britain with its purported recent success in Holland. Anderson spoke to Sir Nevile Bland, a British diplomat in the Netherlands, to Dutch military officers and to the Dutch Minister of Justice, and came to the conclusion that the Fifth Column was not actually real. He surmised that while some assistance to the German forces was given by German residents in Holland, the Wehrmacht got little or no help from refugees or Dutch civilians. Anderson's report noted the vast differences between Holland and Britain, as Holland's borders with Germany had been open until the

war, whereas in Britain strict control over alien entry had been enforced since the end of World War I.⁴³

Despite the tone of the Home Secretary's description at the next War Cabinet meeting, the newly appointed British Prime Minister Winston Churchill felt that there was a need to further 'stiffen' measures already taken against possible subversion.⁴⁴ Yet, in spite of Churchill's view, the Home Secretary was determined to remain realistic about the threat. Before the next War Cabinet meeting, he approached MI5 for their assessment of the chances that home-grown British fascists (BUF – British Union of Fascists) were members of the Fifth Column. MI5 were unable to produce any evidence of such activities. They reported that British fascists were unlikely to have 'anything to do' with Fifth Column activities, noting that evidence pointed in the other direction, such as the recent pro-British instructions BUF leader Sir Oswald Mosley had given to the fascist press in Britain.⁴⁵ However, by the end of May, as the British Army began the Dunkirk evacuation, the level-headedness displayed by the Home Secretary was swamped in a tide of hysteria. On 28 May 1940, an inter-departmental Home Defence (Security) Executive was set up under Lord Swinton to deal exclusively with the Fifth Column.⁴⁶ A memorandum by the newly appointed Chief of the Imperial Staff, Sir John Dill, made clear his beliefs on the effectiveness of the Fifth Column. On 9 June 1940 he reported to a Chief of Staff Committee meeting that he was 'convinced that the potentialities of Fifth Column activities and the extent to which they have undoubtedly been developed necessitate their being regarded as an integral part of modern warfare'.⁴⁷ He identified an array of possible Fifth Columnists in Britain. Many of these were predictable (people of German background or British fascists), but he also identified Italians (even though Italy was not yet at war, nor had shown that it might possess a Fifth Column), members of the British Communist Party and the IRA. While Dill urged the immediate internment of all aliens, he also noted 'reliable' evidence which indicated that Fifth Column activities might arise from the internment camps themselves. Lastly, with regard to British-born Fifth Columnists, Dill recommended that if any were discovered they should simply be 'shot at once'.⁴⁸ It was decided at the Chief of Staff Committee meeting that Dill's memorandum was so disturbing that he was invited to present it personally to Churchill and the Home Defence Committee the following day.⁴⁹

For the British public, the grave situation, coupled with wild reportage by the media, created fear and panic. It was noted by the British Department of Information that, amongst the public, 'Fifth Column hysteria is

reaching dangerous proportions'.⁵⁰ This resulted in government action and led, by the end of June 1940, to the internment of 27,000 enemy aliens and 1335 British citizens identified as having fascist credentials. In the coming months more internments followed. The Fifth Column scare generated such a flood of reports from the public that the security services found it literally impossible to deal with. The official historian of British wartime intelligence concluded, 'MI5 was near to breaking down completely by the spring of 1940', and led to Churchill dismissing its chief, Sir Vernon Kell, on 11 June 1940, for 'not doing enough' to uncover the Fifth Column.⁵¹ Moves were made to locate the Fifth Column in Britain and the intelligence services did comb through the mountain of public information collected, yet all these efforts uncovered no substantiated subversive activity.

With a lack of concrete evidence, attention and suspicion then turned to known enemies as potential Fifth Columnists. Around mid-June 1940, British Intelligence looked to Ireland and the IRA as the real centres of the Fifth Column.⁵² However, again very little concrete information was discovered and only unspecific incidents were identified as representing subversive activities. In September 1940, it was suggested that German bombers were able to approach targets from higher altitudes because Fifth Columnists had placed pieces of polished metal on the ground as a signal to the aircraft.⁵³ The previous month, Churchill had told the House of Commons that great improvements had been made in dealing with the Fifth Column, but he also said he had 'always thought that it was exaggerated in these islands'.⁵⁴ After the likelihood of a German invasion of Britain subsided towards the end of 1940, fears of the Fifth Column faded away quickly also. By December 1940, MI5 had issued instructions that there had been 'no positive evidence' at all that the Germans were using the IRA as a Fifth Column.⁵⁵ This diminished fear of the Fifth Column was shared with English troops on campaign. In contrast, the experience of Australian troops was of encountering an overwhelming Fifth Column presence in Greece in April 1941, and in Malaya and Singapore in early 1942. As this experience was not one shared by their English counterparts, it seems that, after the heady days of 1940, the Fifth Column no longer served a purpose for the English authorities.

Despite not yet being at war, the United States also suffered a Fifth Column scare in 1940. The reality of German spies in America had been proven in June 1938, with the uncovering of a spy network in New York City. At the same time, the Dies Committee was formed to uncover alleged disloyalty and subversive activities on the part of US citizens and

organisations suspected of having communist or fascist ties. This, coupled with the American Nazi Party – a rally in February 1939 attracted 20,000 people – suggested that there were potential recruits for large-scale subversion in the US. In May 1940, President Roosevelt warned the American public about the dangers of the Fifth Column. Such efforts had the desired effect. A Gallup Poll of August 1940 found that 48 per cent of Americans believed at the time that their own communities had been infiltrated by Fifth Columnists while only 26 per cent believed their neighbourhoods were free of subversive forces.⁵⁶ These attitudes flourished in a country geographically removed from the war in Europe, and which itself was not at war. Unlike Australians, before Pearl Harbor the Americans had not always taken the threat of a Japanese Fifth Column seriously, but they certainly did afterwards.⁵⁷ A week after the Japanese attack the United States Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox described it as ‘the most effective Fifth Column work of the entire war [...] with the possible exception of Norway’.⁵⁸ The *Reader's Digest* claimed that the Japanese Fifth Column was ‘worse than the Germans’.⁵⁹ Rumours that the Japanese were planning to poison water supplies, blow up dams and guide bombers to destroy US cities became widespread. In February 1942 the US government reacted to community pressure and began a widespread internment policy against all Japanese in America, culminating in the detention of over 110,000 Japanese people by October that year. Yet, by the time of the American victory at Midway in June 1942, the Japanese Fifth Column panic was already past its peak.⁶⁰ In Australia, in contrast due to its geographical proximity to the war at this time, the Fifth Column scare was still alive and well.

In Canada, the Fifth Column fear was short but intense, lasting between May and June 1940. During that time, panic reached unprecedented proportions, and included everything from large public rallies to the creation of vigilante groups and violence against Italian and German businesses.⁶¹ Nevertheless, after June, Canadians went on with their wartime business and the term ‘Fifth Column’ completely disappeared from the pages of newspapers.⁶² In South Africa severe internment measures had begun early in January 1940, with around 1000 Germans and ‘pro-Nazis’ being interned.⁶³ With such measures already carried out, it was with some confidence that the South African Prime Minister General Jan Smuts declared that he had been ‘watching the Fifth Column for two years’.⁶⁴ Unlike Canada, in South Africa the Fifth Column continued to be a source of fear for some time. In January 1942, it was reported that 30 alleged Fifth Columnists were arrested after being caught with home-made bombs, grenades and lists of persons to be shot.⁶⁵ These