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.