

Siege on Sidney Street

Return Fire

2014

At the dawn of the 20th century, serfdom within the Russian empire was being abolished, and masses of rural inhabitants were being transformed into industrial labourers. It was a time of great discontent with the existing social order, with very pronounced class divides, and in 1905 revolt broke out against the Tsarist regime. What followed was a major crackdown against radicals, with many interrogations, torture, execution and terror. Many went into exile to escape.

Because of this, by the end of the decade, the British capital of London was described by Latvian historian Pauls Bankovskis as being “*swarming with armed-to-the-teeth anarchists who had come from all across Eastern Europe and who didn’t hold anything as holy*”.

The siege of Sidney Street is closely tied up with the folklore concerning “Peter the Painter”; one of many aliases of Latvian anarchist Janis Zhaklis. It’s actually debatable whether Janis was involved in either the siege or the events that directly provoked it. However, there’s only scant information about the individuals confirmed to be involved, and so a look at the background of Janis will help us gain a picture of the times.

“Peter the Painter”, so named in later life because of his work as a decorator as well as being an artist, was born in Latvia during 1883. During the events of 1905, he was a combatant of the Riga Fighting Organisation (of the Latvian Social Democracy party). In this group, he participated in the storming of Riga Central Prison (October 1905), the most modern prison of Tsarist Russia at the time, where hundreds of revolutionaries were executed inside those grim walls. Two of their imprisoned comrades were rescued from certain death in the raid. Months later in January 1906, he went on another expedition to attack the Secret Police Department of Riga inside the Main Police Directorate, again to liberate captured fighters. Six were freed; one of whom was Fritz Svaars, later supposed to be inside the besieged terrace on Sidney Street.

Janis then went to Finland, where he was part of an expropriation of the Helsinki Bank – most of the money going to revolutionary socialist organisation – and then headed to Germany to procure further arms. However, Janis was becoming disenchanted with Social Democrats, and attracted to anarchist ideas. When the Latvian Social Democracy party wanted to abandon armed struggle in favour of parliamentary discourse, he co-founded the anarchist-communist group ‘The Same – In Word and Deed!’ to continue the battle. After the group lost two members (Anna Caune and Karlis Krievin’s), killed by the police during a siege, Janis escaped abroad with Fritz and another fighter of the organisation known as Hartmanis or “Puika”, who was also part of the events to come in London.

It's known that Janis at least was involved in more travels (and expropriations) in the U.S.A., Switzerland and France, before arriving in England. **In the heady underworld of London, he founded an anarchist group 'Liesma' (or 'Flame' in English). A large part of the focus of the immigrants (anarchists, social democrats and others) was to raise funds; to send money to family or friends who had been left without a 'breadwinner' after the events of 1905, to buy arms, publish illegal literature, and transport them back to Latvia. A great many successful robberies were carried out to this end.** For example, one of the fighters who was later thought to be in the siege, Jazeps Sokolovs, worked in various jewellery shops. Every time he would leave his job for the next one, the previous shop would be expropriated – however the police were unable to prove a connection!

The trail of what became known as the gang which ended up in the Sidney Street confrontation can be picked up in two robberies which failed. The first, in January 1909 and of a factory pay-store in North London, was dubbed by the press as “the Tottenham Outrage”; culminating in a six-mile armed police chase across the Lea Valley. **The second and more deadly incident was December 16th 1910. The group had rented a house next-door to a jeweller's in the Houndsditch area of the City of London, and began breaking through the wall to access the store during the night.** However police were alerted due to the noise and turned up to investigate. The radicals opened fire to secure their escape, killing three officers and badly wounding two more. **To date this remains the heaviest casualties sustained by the Metropolitan Police in any single incident.** However, while trying to break out of the cul-de-sac, “Puika” was gripped by one of the policemen – the comrade wounded his assailant several times in the struggle and the others shot the cop down, but in the crossfire Puika was hit in the back by a friend's bullet. The gang then managed to carry Puika three-quarters of a mile to an East End flat, but he sadly died there the next day.

¹ Beyond our obvious reasons for contempt for any politician, there's a few choice facts to recall about this imperialist character who is lauded in British culture for his personality as war-time Prime Minister during the Second World Slaughter. During the same time period as the events in London, during what is known as 'The Great Unrest' he had the pits of striking miners in Yorkshire surrounded by machine-gun nests, ordered gunships up the Mersey, and two rioters were shot dead in Llanelli while blocking train lines. (Tellingly though, he was meant to be in favour of trade unions, declaring that there “wasn't enough of them”, presumably because they often offer a more easily-managed form of dispute than 'wildcat' strikes.)
In 1919, shortly after the horrors of trench warfare in the First World Slaughter, he declared his preference to use poison gas in Iraq (where Britain was fighting against a national independence movement) on Kurdish areas in order to test explosive and biological weapons under development; which was in fact carried out. Quote: “I am strongly in favour of using poisoned gas against uncivilised tribes [to] spread a lively terror”. He was also a fan of the early fascism of Italy under Mussolini, and an appeaser to the Spanish dictator Franco following his massacre of anarchist and communist revolutionaries. As far as the British Empire went, in 1937 he said of the Palestine Commission, “I do not agree that the dog in a manger has the final right to the manger even though he [sic] may have lain there for a very long time. I do not admit that right. I do not admit for instance, that a great wrong has been done to the Red Indians of America or the black people of Australia. I do not admit that a wrong has been done to these people by the fact that a stronger race, a higher-grade race, a more worldly wise race to put it that way, has come in and taken their place.” Concerning his 'stoic' conduct during the Second World Slaughter, “[w]hen in 1942 the popular Quit India Movement threatened to disrupt the war effort, it was brutally put down with public shootings and mass whippings, torturing of protesters and burning of villages, leading even bourgeois observers to make comparisons with 'Nazi dreadfulness'. When in 1943 food shortages began as a direct result of British scorched earth policies, the War Cabinet ignored the problem, refusing to stop ordering Indian food abroad in the interests of the war effort. The resulting man-made famine in Bengal may have accounted for as many as four million deaths.” Churchill's response was that “They'll reproduce themselves soon enough”, and he shed not a tear for the population that was “breeding like rabbits and being paid a million a day by us for doing nothing by us about the war”. If he indeed took a bullet through his hat during the Sidney Street siege, we only wish it had been lower.

Police discovered the flat and the body that day. On Puika's person was found a fake passport, 'Flame' documents, and instructions for electric detonation of explosives. Both Janis and Fritz had lived in the flat too. **There was a backlash against Eastern European refugees in the East End, and the police quickly rounded up several other Latvian anarchists or other revolutionaries, offering a seizable reward for the capture of named suspects described by the Daily Mirror as "*fiends in human shape*".** A fortnight later an informant familiar with the social scene told police that they knew where the last two or three wanted robbers were holed up – No.100 Sidney Street, in Stepney.

An armed police contingent surrounded the house on the night of January 2nd, 1911, and waited in the snow. At 3:30am on January 3rd, the police Detective Inspector (D.I.) got a neighbour to enter No.100 under the pretence of visiting the landlady about an ill partner, and all were secretly evacuated from the house except the unknown suspects who were asleep in the front room. Around dawn, the D.I. tried throwing pebbles against the window to wake them, but got no response. Then, as he was collecting more, gunfire broke out from the upper floor, and a sergeant was hit. The D.I. sheltered in the frozen gutter for a full half-hour before the shooting ceased, then ran for reinforcements.

It was clear very quickly that the anarchists in the house, with automatic pistols and plentiful ammunition, were much better armed than the Metropolitan Police force at that time, with their antiquated rifles. **The cops appealed to Scotland Yard for assistance, who in turn requested help from the Home Secretary; who at that time was Winston Churchill¹. Churchill dispatched a score of soldiers from the Tower of London to reinforce the two-hundred-strong police cordon, and himself arrived on the scene around midday to direct the operation.** At this point the battle had been raging for over four hours, and thousands of shots had been fired. The media were in attendance; in fact it was apparently one of the first cases of live news coverage, filmed by Pathé News. Eventually the police force swelled to at least 1,500, with a crowd of maybe twice that gathering to watch from the street and rooftops.

The assembled State forces were firing from windows on opposite house-blocks. A news report at the time about the 'desperadoes' of the gang alleged that "*it was curious proof of the deadly aim of the assassins that not one pane of glass was broken in the opposite windows; the bullets had all gone through the opening over the heads of the soldiers and policemen as they lay.*"

At Churchill's suggestion an artillery piece was brought to the scene to shell the anarchists out, as well as a military party of Royal Engineers to gain access to the house by digging an underground tunnel.

However in the end before either were deployed, **somehow a fire began inside the house under siege at around 1pm.** A journalist on a nearby rooftop claimed to see a gas jet burning on the first floor, leading them to allege that the fire may have been a plan intended as a diversion, so that the two anarchists could escape via the back of the house. Another speculation has been that a bullet may have hit a gas pipe, but to this day it seems unclear.

The smoke grew stronger, and, while gunfire continued from both sides, the flames began to envelop the house. By now the volleys from the alleged robbers was coming from the bottom floor alone. **Although the fire brigade were on the scene, Churchill (who claimed to have had a bullet pass through his top-hat on that day although leaving him unharmed, but this has been disputed) prevented them tackling the blaze.** "*No, let the buggers burn!*" he is reported to have said.

There are differing accounts of what happened next. In one story, around 2pm as the fire was gaining strength, there could be heard one or two final shots from the ground-floor of No.100 Sidney Street, and this was thought to be the anarchists taking their own lives. (At the time however the media reported that the two bodies were later found in the kitchen behind the house.) We quote from the second story: *“One gunman leaned out of the window, possibly to take breath, and he was shot in the head, then the other – a burning figure – climbed onto the window ledge, to a gasp of horror from the crowd of thousands. Within seconds, after a burst of shots, he fell backwards into the room, and quickly the fire consumed the house, as the roof and floors came crashing down amongst a roar of flames.”*

The bodies in the house when the fire brigade and police finally entered (actually one fire-fighter died after a side-wall collapsed in on five of them) were unidentifiable. It is on the landlady’s testimony alone that they were said to be the comrades Jazeps Sokolovs and Fritz Svaars.

Of the arrested immediately following the Houndsditch robbery, seven were put on trial in May 1911 (two women and five men). In the end only five went further than the initial process. However, to the embarrassment of the establishment, as it was claimed that there was four men and one woman involved in the robbery, if all the defendants were found guilty, therefore one of the dead men of Sidney Street would not have been involved. This was deemed to be potentially damaging to Churchill’s reputation and further career, and in the end due to lack of evidence all the defendants were set loose with little publicity. One of the two women initially accused, L’uba Milstein, give birth to her and Fritz Svaars’ child afterwards.

There was no sign of the so-called ‘leader’ Janis, “Peter the Painter”, despite him becoming the most wanted person in Britain from 1911. Some still believe that he was inside the house on Sidney Street, and escaped somehow. It was rumoured since that he escaped to Australia; or alternatively that a prisoner in a Siberian Gulag in the early 1950’s claimed to be “Peter” and knew a great deal of details about the events in London... Whichever way, Peter the Painter began quite a folk-hero around the East End of London and beyond – and the Mauser pistols wielded by the besieged anarchists on Sidney Street were allegedly nick-named “Peter the Painters” during the Irish insurrection and subsequent war for independence from British rule.

In other repercussions, the Metropolitan Police re-kitted themselves with more modern arms after having been essentially out-gunned by two or three opponents. **This was a lead into the spectacularisation of police operations as well, in collaboration with the mass media,** preceding the current era of dramatic journalism. Churchill also played on his front-line image to boost his popularity as a celebrity states-person.

In 2006, a social housing development was built on the corner of Sidney Street and Commercial Road, and was named Peter House and Painter House – to the severe annoyance of the local councillor and the Metropolitan Police Federation.

A thought in our minds for the fighters who burned themselves out while courageously reaching for the stars.

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