

Historical Notes

The use of troops during the 1984-85 miners' strike

Scott Newton

Witness Testimony

There have been persistent rumours, over the 40 years since the miners' strike of 1984-85, that the Thatcher Government deployed the Armed Forces against the strikers. So far, not one retired soldier has come forward to admit that this happened. Nor are there any revelations about this in the records relating to the Thatcher government which have been released into the National Archives. The Cabinet minutes and memoranda are not informative, with nothing to suggest that troops were actually used during the strike. But there was, as we shall see, a small committee of senior officials and Cabinet Ministers – known as 'MISC 101' – which discussed the possibility of using the military. This committee was chaired by Thatcher and it monitored the strike, developing policy in response to it.¹

However, we do have a few interesting pieces of witness testimony – i.e. people who saw things, rather than taking part themselves – which suggest military involvement in the strike. First of all, there are a number of second-hand accounts. Robin Ramsay has quoted some striking testimony from Peter Lane, a 'Former RAF Technician/Weapons Manager Trident Subs' in the current 'View from the Bridge'.² Several more individual recollections can be found in a 2016 article on *The Skwawkbox* blog. This includes the following tale, unsubstantiated (like them all) but quite credible:

Glynn Webb

My dad was a miner, I grew up literally and figuratively in the shadow of Cortonwood pit. My mum's brother was a corporal in the army at the time of the strike. He lost his stripes and earned a spell in the

¹ See 'The Miners' Strike (in part)', Margaret Thatcher's files as Prime Minister, 1984, at <<https://www.margaretthatcher.org/archive/1984PREM19>>. One reason that there isn't anything in the archives is because, as the Thatcher Foundation notes re MISC101, 'as little as possible found its way onto paper'.

² Robin Ramsay, 'Were troops used in the miners' strike?', in 'The View from the Bridge', *Lobster* 89 (2024).

glasshouse because he refused orders to come back to South Yorkshire posing as police to help break the strikes. As other commenters [sic] have said, this has always been common knowledge in our communities.³

Perhaps the most compelling of these stories are two episodes narrated by Tony Benn, in his diaries covering the 1980s. They are worth quoting at length:

1) *Friday 4 May 1984*

Keith Harris, a miner, drove me to Nottingham for a Euro-election meeting. He told me that one miner had gone to Felixstowe port in Suffolk to join the picket against the import of coal, and in the line of policemen he had seen his own son, who is in the Welsh Guards. I have heard so many stories of this kind that I am persuaded that this is what is happening because there just aren't that many police available to move about. The authorities must be using the army.⁴

2) *Tuesday 4 November 1986*

Caught the train to Chesterfield, and a ticket collector came up, . . . and asked if I was Tony Benn. When I said yes, he asked if I'd been involved in the miners' strike. I said I used to go on the picket line, and he said, 'Did you know the army was used, in police uniform?'

I told him we suspected it but were never able to prove it.

He said, 'I know because I was in the army until last year, and until the miners' strike I was at Catterick camp and we were regularly put into police uniform and sent on to the picket lines . . .'

I asked him how many men.

He replied, 'At Nottingham, of the sixty-four policemen in our group, sixty-one were soldiers and only three were regular policemen – an inspector, a sergeant and one bobby. We didn't wear any numbers, didn't get paid overtime as the police did, and were told not to make any arrests because the police would do all that.'

He said the soldiers used were from the Military Police, the SAS and the Green Jackets . . .

I told him he should write it all down before he forgot it. He said, 'There's the Official Secrets Act, and I would deny I ever said it if you told anyone' ⁵

³ <<https://skwawkbox.org/2016/11/08/exclusive-compilation-of-new-orgreave-evidence/>>

⁴ Tony Benn, *The End of An Era: Diaries 1980-90* (London: Arrow Books, 1994), p. 346.

⁵ Benn, *The End of An Era*, pp. 479-80.

It seems unlikely to me that all these tales could have been made up. All the same, probability does not equal hard evidence. So far, there seems to be just one example of this, which appeared in Robin Ramsay's piece in this journal on 'The British Gladio and the Murder of Sergeant Speed'.⁶ Here, testimony is first hand, coming from a Yorkshire businessman called Peter Sanderson, who had been recruited into the Civil Contingencies Cadre (CCC), a paramilitary force within the British Secret State, in 1977. By 1984-85 the CCC was preoccupied with the frustration and defeat of the miners' strike. Sanderson was still a member at that time and later told Ramsay that

Groups of unemployed Territorial Army men from Teesside would rendezvous at Sanderson's business, where they were given police uniforms to work on the picket lines and refreshments – tea and sandwiches.⁷

As Ramsay comments, 'The rumours of troops dressed as police were true: but in this instance they weren't regular army, they were unemployed Territorials.'⁸

On the record

At the moment, that seems to be the extent of any credible evidence concerning the use of the Army in the miners' strike. However, there are two further items of interest. First, in January 2014, *The Guardian* reported on government files from 1984 that had been newly released under the thirty years rule. These showed that Thatcher had made plans for the deployment of the Army if it looked as if the NUM was gaining the upper hand in the dispute. There were two specific contingencies which would, in Thatcher's view, justify the use of troops. One was the real possibility that a dock strike in solidarity with the miners would leave imports of food, fuel and raw materials stuck in the ports, leading to shortages of goods, panic buying and the disruption of industry. A dock strike did take place, in July 1984, with dockers coming out following the use of non-union labour to unload iron ore at the Immingham dock on the Humber. As a result Thatcher and her colleagues in MISC101 drew up plans for 'Operation Halberd', which involved the use of '2,800 troops in 13 specialist teams . . . to unload 1,000 tonnes a day at the docks.'⁹ It never

⁶ Robin Ramsay, 'The British Gladio and the Murder of Sergeant Speed', *Lobster* 81 (2021).

⁷ Ramsay (see note 6).

⁸ Ramsay (see note 6).

⁹ See Alan Travis, 'Thatcher had secret plan to use army at height of miners' strike', *The Guardian*, 3 January 2014 at <<https://shorturl.at/yB600>> or <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/jan/03/margaret-thatcher-secret-plan-army-miners-strike>>.

became necessary to implement Operation Halberd, however: the dock strike crumbled within twelve days. It collapsed the day after self-employed lorry drivers 'blockaded passenger ferries in Dover in protest at not being able to transport their goods'. Local shop stewards 'called off the action fearing violence'.¹⁰

The other contingency liable to trigger the intervention of the Army involved coal. The government wanted enough stockpiled to sustain the country throughout the winter – particularly to prevent any power cuts and/or restrictions on the length of the working week. If there were action in support of the miners by NUR and ASLEF (the railway workers and train drivers unions), involving the restriction and slowdown of coal and coke deliveries to the power stations, senior Ministers were concerned that the necessary stockpiles couldn't be maintained. A collapse in coal reserves was a nightmarish prospect for Thatcher since it recalled the fate of the Heath government in early 1974, when a 'three day week' had been introduced in response to a miners' strike. Ted Heath had then gone on to lose a General Election that had been fought on the issue of 'Who runs Britain?'. To avert a rerun of this disastrous scenario, the government developed plans to deploy '4,500 service drivers and 1,650 tipper lorries . . . capable of moving 100 kilotonnes a day of coal to the power stations'.¹¹ As it was, stocks never fell low enough to justify this move, although they might have done if the pit deputies' union, NACODS (National Association of Colliery Overmen, Deputies and Shotfirers), had come out in support of the NUM. NACODS was the union of the safety officers and pit deputies, and a strike by its members would have led to the closure of every pit in the country. Even the non-striking pits in Nottingham – whose continued working was essential to keeping the level of coal and coke stocks healthy – would have closed, as no pit could remain open without a deputy on site

In the autumn of 1984 NACODS members voted overwhelmingly in favour of strike action, following a provocative instruction from the National Coal Board (NCB) management that they should cross NUM picket lines. This brought the government and the NCB to the brink. However, the NACODS leadership were bought off by the offer of an independent review process being invoked prior to the closure of pits threatened by the NCB's drastic programme of economies. As events after the strike were to show, this concession on the part of the NCB and the government did not cost them anything. Their ultimate goal – the eradication of the coal industry from the UK – was still completed by the new

¹⁰ See 'Dockers Strike, 9 July 1984', at <<https://stories.workingclasshistory.com/article/10911/dockers-strike>>.

¹¹ See note 9.

millennium. The second item of interest is an official manual produced by the Ministry of Defence, *Operations in the UK: The Defence Contribution to Resilience*. This document is regularly updated; the version used in this article was published in 2007. It is, however, clear from reading this that many of the procedures identified go back many decades. For example, a 'Defence Council Order Mechanism' issued in February 1983 authorised the use of the armed forces on 'non-military tasks' of 'urgent national importance'.¹² This was over a year before the start of the strike although, as we now know, the government was already preparing for a showdown with the NUM.¹³ The 2007 edition of *Operations in the UK* defines the role of the armed services in these situations of 'urgent national importance' as 'providing either support to the management and sustainability of civil power operations, or the use of MOD facilities in connection with a civil power's operation'. One of the main 'civil power operations' discussed is 'Support to Police Public Order Operations'. The document admits that in 1984 support for the Police by the Armed Forces involved 'only' the provision of 'accommodation', a service which clearly falls under the heading of 'use of MOD facilities'.

The Orgreave Inquiry

All this falls short of proof that the Thatcher government used regular troops against the NUM during 1983-84. But it does amount to evidence that (i) plans existed to use the Army during the miners' strike; (ii) that the Army did provide logistical support to the civil powers in their struggle against the NUM; (iii) that troops from the Territorial Army (now called the Army Reserve) were dressed up as police and deployed on the picket lines. The TA/Army Reserve is not composed of current professional soldiers. Its members are officially regarded as civilians, even if they have recently retired from the Forces. Is this the loophole which provided the Thatcher government and its successors with cover against allegations that the Army was used against the miners? It seems a rather flimsy defence.¹⁴

¹² To be valid the Order had to be signed by two members of the Defence Council on the same day, at least one of whom had to be a Minister. See paragraph 306 (d), *Operations In The UK: The Defence Contribution to Resilience* (Shrivenham: Ministry of Defence Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre, 2007), pp. 3-1 and 3-2.

¹³ See Matt Foot and Morag Livingstone, *Charged. How The Police Try to Suppress Protest* (London: Verso, 2022), pp. 43ff; Seamus Milne, *The Enemy Within. The Secret War Against The Miners*, (London: Verso, 2004), pp. 7-9 and 15-19.

¹⁴ Army Reserve special forces (especially 21 SAS and 23 SAS) have regularly been used for the most deniable operations. One specific example was 'Operation Trojan Horse' in early August 1990, which inserted four-man TA SAS teams into Kuwait via a British Airways jet just after the Iraqi invasion began. See <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c87rl103r33o>>.

My thanks to Nick Must for this information.

It is worth recalling that when Amber Rudd, Home Secretary in 2016, considered the case for an official inquiry into the bitter and violent June 1984 Orgreave confrontation between the Police and the NUM, one of the reasons she gave for rejecting it was reported to be the possibility that it might 'slur the memory of Margaret Thatcher'.¹⁵ What would this 'slur' involve? The Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign (OTJC) recently suggested the following:

It is the belief of the OTJC that the rejection of an inquiry by Home Secretary Rudd in 2016 was a further cover up of the political interference that took place before and during the miners' strike. We believe this cover up includes the government's interference in operational policing, police financing, charging levels, and the courts. It also covers up the creation of a manual of paramilitary-style tactical options, a number of which were deployed for the first time at Orgreave.¹⁶

The 'manual' referred to was signed off by then Home Secretary William Whitelaw in January 1983. It was called *The Public Order Manual of Tactical Options and Related Matters*, and was drawn up to assist the police in public order operations. Its full contents have never been revealed, although some of its pages were released during the 1985 Orgreave Trial and subsequently placed in the House of Commons Library. These pages show that many of the tactics used against the miners at Orgreave (and in public order situations ever since) – for example, the use of 'snatch squads', beatings of strikers and bystanders with shields and truncheons and the deployment of charging mounted police – were set out in the *Public Order Manual*. The document itself was based not on police crowd control practice in the UK but in British colonies (most recently Hong Kong), a clear indication of how the authorities regarded their fellow British citizens.¹⁷

It may very well be that an inquiry into Orgreave would uncover Mrs Thatcher's role in the strategy and tactics of policing in the miners' strike. If so, this would show a clear contradiction of her claims at the time that the dispute was between the NCB and the NUM, with the government not involved. (Not

¹⁵ See David Conn, 'Campaigners rally on Battle of Orgreave anniversary as Labour promises inquiry', *The Guardian*, 15 June 2024 at <<https://shorturl.at/QUYUB>> or <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/article/2024/jun/15/campaigners-rally-on-battle-of-orgreave-anniversary-as-labour-promises-inquiry>>.

¹⁶ Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign, *40 Years On. The Case For An Inquiry*, paragraph 34, p. 13, downloadable at <<https://otjc.org.uk/orgreave-truth-and-justice-40-years-on-the-case-for-an-inquiry/>>.

¹⁷ The genesis of the *Manual* is discussed by Foot and Livingstone (see note 13), pp. 1-9. The Hong King connection is mentioned on p. 5.

that the exposure of this as a complete fiction would surprise many people.) Would this be enough to prevent an inquiry? Surely it is more likely that the real embarrassment for the Conservatives would be the revelation of how far the Secret State had become involved in the dispute. It ran covert operations against NUM members and on occasion committed murder.¹⁸ It used electronic surveillance by GCHQ and employed a network of spies and informers, some in the heart of the mining communities.¹⁹ These informers (whose identities would be at risk of exposure in an Inquiry) reported to MI5, Special Branch and the Police. They gathered information about the strikers' plans and helped the authorities to frustrate their picketing operations. All this would doubtless be supplemented by evidence showing the extent to which Thatcher and her Ministers intervened in the policing of the strike, and interfered with the judicial system to ensure the prosecution of as many miners as possible.²⁰ And maybe the last secret to be revealed would be the use against 'the enemy within' not just of the TA but (if the witness testimony reported by Tony Benn is found to be accurate) regular troops as well. All this may explain why we have not yet had an inquiry into Orgreave, and why, notwithstanding Labour's pledge that it would establish one if elected to power, we have heard very little about the subject since the recent General Election.

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¹⁸ Ramsay (see note 6)

¹⁹ This is all discussed in Milne (see note 13) esp. ch. 7.

²⁰ In Foot and Livingstone (see note 13) ch. 2.