

THE 'HOUNDSDITCH MURDERS': A MISCARRIAGE OF JUSTICE THAT LED TO MASS MURDER

Read by Bob Duffield
25 October 2010

Exactly 100 years ago this December three unarmed City of London policemen were murdered – literally gunned down in the street – by a gang of armed terrorists. Two other officers were shot and wounded.

Police Sgt Robert Bentley, Police Constable Walter Choate and Police Sgt Charles Tucker had disturbed the gang trying to rob a jewellery shop in Houndsditch.

This bloody carnage has gone down in the annals of our municipal history and directly led a few days later to the infamous Sidney Street siege.

The criminals were all revolutionaries who had found refuge in London from political repression in Russia, Latvia and other East European states.

At this time the East End of London was bursting with immigrants. Many were fleeing pogroms and in the three decades up to 1914 about 3 million Jews passed through Britain – with around 120,000 settling, most of them in an area defined by Cable Street in the South, the Great Eastern railway in the North, Jubilee Street in the East and Aldgate pump in the West. The density of people living in the Whitechapel area rose from 240 people per acre to more than 6,000 people. Many could not speak English and most worked 12-14 hours a day for a starvation wage in the 'needle trades'.

Many immigrants were highly politicised, having suffered imprisonment and torture during the Tsarist repressions that followed the assassination of Alexander 2nd in 1881. Between April 1881 and June 1882, 225,000 Jewish families fled Russia. The pogrom initiated by the new Tsar proposed killing one third, converting one third and expelling one third – 50 villages were burned to the ground in one province alone.

London became a haven for refugees and revolutionaries alike – a hotbed of terrorists of all persuasions. Add easy access to firearms to this socio-political mix and conditions became literally explosive.

In December 1905, for example, customs officers at Dover found 47 automatic pistols and 5,000 rounds of ammunition in the luggage of a Russian immigrant. Amazingly none of this haul was confiscated and he was allowed to bring it all into the country. It was easy to buy guns over the counter by falsifying purchase invoices. Guns cost as little as 16 shillings – and the maximum penalty for illegally buying guns was just £5.

The abortive Russian uprising in 1905 led to new pogroms at the hands of right wing counter-revolutionaries – and the numbers of Jews escaping the country rose to over 200,000 each year.

London was awash with spies and agents working for the Tsarist secret police – the Okhrana. Counter revolutionary elements even attempted to blacken the name of exiled political groups by