In London, one hundred years ago, on the weekday morning of 3 January, citizens awoke amidst “The Siege of Sidney Street.”

Well-armed Anarchists tried to rob a jeweler, murdered police who responded, and then disappeared within the city. Located in an apartment building after two weeks, they were now surrounded by Metropolitan Police massed on scene. And Home Office Minister Winston Churchill replied favorably to a request for an Army platoon from the Tower of London to support the cops.

Battle erupted that morning, and only the artillery of the Scotts Guards went un-used. Automatic pistols within the building competed with aimed rifle and pistol fire from outside for at least two hours. Either from bullets, or from breach of gas heat piping embedded in the building, the edifice ignited. Fire fighters waited expectantly. But the home minister, on the scene, supported the desire of the head of police and ruled the building should be permitted to burn.

The unleashing of martial force against terrorists within an English city can never be a happy event, and Churchill was among the many to offer evidence at an inquest two weeks later. Two criminals died within the building; if there were any others, they escaped. No one ever again saw their gang leader "Peter the Painter." None of the terrorists were British; all were aliens and Anarchists living in London. One or two may have been leftists of another stripe: gang member Jacob Peters would go on to become a principal figure in the Bolshevik secret police after 1917.

Such men had ignited an earlier downtown London outrage. A 1909 robbery turned into a shooting rampage through the city streets, block after block, until over twenty innocents were wounded. By the time this other Anarchist subgroup hid out at #100 Sidney Street, the city had had enough of them. By coincidence, the national government had appointed a "new sheriff" as well--war veteran and parliamentarian W. S. Churchill, age 36. His Home Office held authority over police and the fire brigades alike.
The counterterrorist operation on 3 January 1911 ended the gang's reign but included a mix of other results: one policeman shot early-on; a few wounded firemen, police and civilians; and the building wrecked (its owner demanded rebuilding at city expense).

This subjected all the decision-makers to close scrutiny, as in virtually all uses of force within a democracy. Many theater-goers hooted derisively as a new-fangled newsreel showed the scion of Blenheim Palace, moving in and out of cover, consulting with police and their commander. In the House of Commons, Arthur J. Balfour, Member for the City of London, pronounced: "I understand what the photographer was doing [in the danger zone], but why the Home Secretary?" Churchill had gone because the Home Office lacked information, and, he confessed, out of curiosity. Later he admitted in the book "Thoughts and Adventures" that he might have served better at his desk in the Home Office, staying clear of the on-scene commander.

On the other hand, the sins of many governments to that time had been to roll over in front of Anarchist rampages. Some states seemed immobile; others moved but slowly; little was offered to contain the violent international Anarchist movement. In pre-war World War One years, no less than six heads of state had been murdered by Anarchist "idealists." The militants seemed to come and go across national borders, settle or move on, with near-impunity. On principle, some countries reluctantly protected their fiery publications as free speech. Democracies, especially, were as slow to confine or strike these armed minorities as was, say, Japan facing the series of incidents involving Aum Shinrikyo, leading up to the sarin gas attack on subways near a government center. Churchill was himself a member of the Liberal Party which had pointedly declined to support a 1904 bill that would have made it easier to deport known radical aliens. The violence done to London from 1909 through 1911 would begin to shift his views to the right on the issue of non-citizens' rights.

A dozen other aspects of the Sidney Street siege draw our eye today.

Should citizens inform police of "suspicious" people, or is that uncivil meddling? American government of late has been awkward in advising citizens on this. Yet it appears a former landlord of one of the robbers quietly stepped forward to talk to police after the attempt to heist the jeweler's shop. Without his help, authorities might never have found the hideout on Sidney Street.

Does government pay rewards? Britain had offered 500 pounds sterling for these cop-killers. But bureaucracy would triumph over the brave informant. About five robbers
started this criminal case; three of them were identified in the reward offer; the landlord's
information concerned but one of them. As our civic-minded informant could only identify
one robber, he was given a paltry one-third of the reward money.

Was use of force justified? Using force displeases, and should. It is always dangerous.
But it was requisite. Churchill, the authorizing minister, was unusually reflective, already
author of books, and experienced with war on several continents. No relativist, he
believed profoundly in rule of law. In another context in 1926, Churchill gave a sound
answer to the common question after a political and violent act: "Terrorist or Freedom
Fighter?" Churchill said: "I decline utterly to be impartial as between the fire brigade and
the fire." The metaphor suits, when ideological gunmen match force with democracies'
security personnel.

Churchill's thoughts, on scene, included the prospect for use of a heavy metal shield,
something officers could have used to protect themselves as they advanced up the
stairs. Fire in the apartment later rendered this idea inappropriate, yet the minister
directly incorporated the notion when, as Lord of Admiralty, he pushed hard for
development and procurement of Britain's tank, soon used in World War One. His other
thoughts after embers on Sidney Street cooled included the necessity to arm police
better, and trials of new weapons commenced immediately.

Finally, how do such terrorist groups end? Sometimes--more often than social scientists
allow--terror groups expire due to limited use of state force. Two West Coast groups that
armed and barricaded themselves and refused to surrender--the Symbionese Liberation
Army and its ideological opposite The Order--expired in hails of SWAT bullets and tear
gas in 1975 and 1984 respectively. Actual military units or semi-militarized gendarmeries
have sometimes been needed, as by Canada (for early 1970s terrorism by the
Quebeois FLN), and France (for a 1994 hijacking by Algerians of GIA).

Lethal, idea-driven, fanatical, networked, international anarchism was prominent from
the late 1880s through the early 1920s. Their blooming was then somewhat dampened
down by the Bolshevik Revolution and World War One. But histories and memoirs of
that time make it clear that slow, steady, constructive and often-controversial measures
taken by governments were the most important factor in how violent anarchism
declined. Governments fought back: with tougher laws on incitement; barring
immigrants or visitors known to have anti-democratic and militant views; more focused
law enforcement; fewer "free passes" on free speech grounds; bi-lateral and multilateral
cooperation on intelligence and extradition; and creating or improving domestic
intelligence organs, including the American Federal Bureau of Investigation. States declined to surrender to tiny minorities.

The anarchist movement well illustrated what can arise in free societies. The delays in governmental response to violence were also classically democratic. So too was the hard decision to defend rule of law with a brief interruption of civil norms and a deployment of guns in London on 3 January 1911. That day, government proved better armed than Anarchism. At least as important was this principal: unlike the Anarchist leaders, the young state minister had competed and won election to the public office in which he could deploy force.

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