

Part A: Carry out a historical enquiry**How should the police respond to the use of guns?****The Siege of Sidney Street, 1911**

During the nineteenth century the police had had to recognise that there would be times when the criminals they faced would be armed with guns. This was a real challenge to a force which was designed to be unarmed. In the 1880s, after police had confronted a number of armed burglars, thousands of Metropolitan Police carried pistols on the beat but, as the fear receded, these were gradually withdrawn. During the twentieth century this threat from armed opposition to the police – from both political extremists and criminals – increased.

In 1911 there was a serious challenge to the unarmed police. The response of the authorities raised questions about just how prepared the police were to react to such a challenge. This event is known as 'The Siege of Sidney Street'. The Siege of Sidney Street was carried out by immigrants from Latvia. They were revolutionaries as well as being criminals.

Countdown to confrontation:

16 December, 1910, the 'Gardstein gang' attempt to rob a jeweller's shop, in the Houndsditch area of London.

They kill three unarmed policemen and injure two others when interrupted.

2 January, 1911, the Metropolitan Police receive information that two of the Gardstein gang are hiding at 100, Sidney Street, Stepney, London, in the flat of Mrs Betsy Gershon.

Did you know?

The two sides in the confrontation at Sidney Street were not equally armed. The police were armed with revolvers, shotguns and rifles fitted with barrels normally used on a miniature firing range. On the other hand the Latvian gunmen were armed with Mauser pistols. These were capable of fast and deadly fire (though they were not nearly as powerful as the rifles used by the Scots Guards).

The response of the police:

- 3 January, 1911, 200 police cordon off the area and evacuate other residents.
- At dawn, Inspector F. P. Wensley, of H Division (Whitechapel) police, goes with several officers to knock on the door. Pistol shots, from inside, hit Detective Sergeant Leeson. He is rescued by the unarmed Inspector Wensley.
- Police rescue Mrs Gershon.
- The **Home Secretary**, Winston Churchill, goes to Sidney Street to take command.
- 21 **marksmen** of the Scots Guards arrive from the Tower of London.
- The Scots Guards fire into the upper rooms of 100, Sidney Street. The gunmen are forced downstairs by the gunfire.
- Then more Scots Guards – placed across the street – fire on them.
- Churchill orders in heavy weapons (normally used on the battlefield).
- Before the artillery arrives, the house catches fire. One gunman emerges and is shot.
- The fire brigade arrives but Churchill orders them not to put out the fire.
- The fire destroys the building.
- Two bodies are discovered inside. One man has been shot; the other has died in the fire.

Fact file

The Home Secretary, Winston Churchill, had served in the army in India, the Sudan and in the Boer War. He had also been a war correspondent as well as a politician.

Home Secretary: a senior member of the government, in charge of the Home Office.

Marksmen: a person who is skilled in accurate shooting of a firearm.

Source B: Police shelter to avoid being shot by the gunmen in Sidney Street.

Police are poorly armed, compared to well-armed Latvians.

Scots Guards are used to support the police.

Unlike the police, the Scots Guards are well-armed marksmen, skilled in accurate shooting.

The impact of the Siege of Sidney Street

The Siege of Sidney Street raised serious questions of how the police should respond to challenges from armed criminals.

The question of command: Should the Home Secretary have been standing on a street corner within range of the gunmen? Most people agreed that the job would have been better done by a senior police commander on the spot. Such a police officer would need better training to be able to lead in such a situation in the future.

The question of armed police: Few people wanted the police regularly to carry weapons. But most were agreed that they should be armed with better weapons when needed. As a result of the Siege of Sidney Street, the police were equipped with faster-firing Webley semi-automatic hand guns when needed.

It was also argued that the police needed better training in how to deal with such violent situations in future.

Did you know?

A bullet from one of the gunmen went through Churchill's top hat while he was commanding the police. It almost killed him!

Fact file

The Siege of Sidney Street was not the only violent crime involving Latvian immigrants in London. In January, 1909, two Latvian anarchists stole wages being delivered to a factory in Tottenham. As they made their getaway, they shot 21 people, killing a policeman and a 10-year-old boy. They were eventually cornered and committed suicide.

Activity

2. Imagine that you are a senior police officer at the time. You have been asked to write a report about the siege. Your report should:

- present the evidence of whether the police were prepared for the challenge of the siege
- explain what was needed in future to better prepare the police to deal with such events.