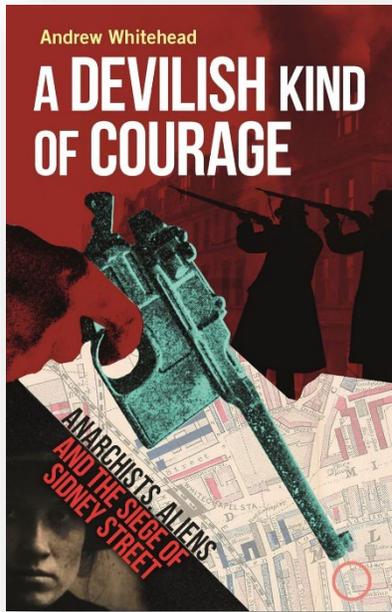


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## *A Devilish Kind of Courage: Anarchists, Aliens and the Siege of Sidney Street*

**Andrew Whitehead**

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**Review by Shelby Shapiro, first published online 24 June 2025 and will appear in Volume 11 of *The Independent Scholar*.**

“A devilish kind of courage”—this was the assessment of the Daily Chronicle, describing the actions and intensity of two men who held off the police and the army for six hours [p. 7].

There were actually three separate, but connected, events: a payroll robbery (the “Tottenham outrage”), the failed attempt to tunnel into a jewellery store (on Houndsditch Street) to crack its safe, and then the “Siege of Sidney Street.” Anarchists were only peripherally involved. The protagonists in all these events consisted of Latvian revolutionist refugees.

So what was the Anarchist “involvement”? It turned out that Latvian emigres were among those who would

socialize and go to lectures at the Anarchist club house on nearby Jubilee Street, a venue open to all.

One of the most interesting aspects for this reviewer lay in how the author noted the roles played by recent technological changes in multiple spheres: “

London’s evening papers were the first to introduce the ‘new journalism’ that had proved so successful—and profitable—in the United States. This took advantage of the invention of the Linotype press and the availability of cheap newsprint made from wood pulp, which together made possible the printing of hundreds of thousands of copies of a paper an

hour. The halftone process of printing photographs allowed grainy but often starkly dramatic images to appear in the daily press, heralding the end of woodcut images, of staff engravers and—more gradually—of newspaper sketch artists. The popular press went for cheap cover prices, large advertisements and prominent headlines. Two other technological innovations, the typewriter and the telephone, also began to revolutionize how journalists worked.” [p. 156]

Human interest feature stories represented one of the hallmarks of America’s New Journalism. The result? A lively, engaged and immediate press, a change from the staid and sober journalism which had characterized the press before all of these cumulative changes.

While in the 21st century we congratulate ourselves on the fact that dissemination of news is instant, Whitehead points out that the newsreel—an innovation in movie houses, in a period before the advent of sound—came to England from France in 1910. Mere months after its introduction on British shores, movie theatres depicted the events on Sidney Street the very day they occurred. Sidney Street sparked the action newsreel.

Houndsditch unleashed virulent antisemitism: a 1910 cartoon advocating for a more restrictive Aliens Act depicted hooked-snouted rats teeming through a gate, in a style that would become familiar two decades later in the Nazi newspaper *Der Stürmer* or the infamous film of the Nazi Fritz Hippler, *“Der ewige Jude”* [The Eternal Jew] (1940), with its images conflating and combining groups of Jews in Poland and swarming rats. This particular antisemitic trope (Jews as rodents) has been traced back to the Middle Ages and the outbreaks of bubonic plague..

Fortunately for Jews and radicals in England, the voices clamoring for immigration restriction went unheeded. The country remained a site of refuge for political dissidents.

The “Siege of Sidney Street” was a six-hour shoot-out between Latvian nationalist revolutionaries and police and the Army. What led to the Siege was a failed attempt to break into a jeweler’s store and safe through a tunnel from an adjoining building.

None of those involved in the Siege were Anarchists, although a number of them had gone to the Anarchist clubhouse, open to the public, in nearby Jubilee Street.

The would-be safecrackers had used a device made at the workshop of the Italian Anarchist Errico Malatesta, without him knowing how it was to be used and for what purpose.

The Latvians were using a tactic common to Eastern European revolutionaries at the time: “exes”—“expropriating” funds for the cause by illegal means. Since the object of the exercise was to raise funds for the Cause (whatever it might be) by taking it from the perceived enemy (or the enemy’s class representative), those involved in “exes” justified their actions. One of the most notorious practitioners of such activities was a man who went by the *nom de guerre* of “Koba,” Joseph Vissaarionovich Dzhughashvili, a Georgian who became better known by the name he assumed later, “The Man of Steel” —in Russian, “Stalin.”

Those involved in the “Siege of Sidney Street” were neither Jews nor Anarchists. The protagonists in both incidents were Latvian nationalist revolutionaries. England was a safe place for political exiles of many kinds, and probably the most notorious exile had been a bitter enemy of the Anarchists, Karl Marx. Marx famously wrote *Capital* while using the British Library. Other non-Anarchist exiles included the Hungarian nationalist Louis Kossuth, France’s Emile Zola, and the Czechoslovakian Tomas Masaryk. The three most prominent Anarchists in London all came from overseas: Errico Maltesta (Italy), Peter Kropotkin (Russia) and Rudolf Rocker (Germany). All three opposed the activities of the Latvians. They recognized that Britain was much more tolerant than their home countries. Not only was it possible to express dissent with greater freedom, it had opened its shores to rebels of all stripes. In 1909, Rocker had successfully worked to convince Russian revolutionists to abandon plans to bomb a Lord Mayor’s show [p. 67].

The most notorious Latvian nationalist was Peter Piatkow, dubbed “Peter the Painter” by the daily press. In contrast to the mythical image of the bomb-throwing anarchist, Peter the Painter was an elegantly dressed young man more suggestive of a dandy than a political desperado. He was not even in the country for either the Houndsditch shootings or Sidney Street. Indeed, the British authorities had been notified of Piatkow’s presence in Australia, and chose not to extradite [p. 20]. After the furore over Sidney Street had ended, Peter the Painter disappeared for good, never to be heard from or about again, beyond “sightings” in, among other places, Brussels, Paris, Marseilles,

Illinois, Winnipeg, Naples, Germany, Switzerland, Australia, and even India.

What exactly these particular Latvian revolutionaries sought—their goals, aims, objectives, and mission—remains a mystery. Were those in London just in favor of national independence from Czarist Russia, a constitutional republic, or a social revolution? To what extent, of any, did they differ from other exile groups in England's capital? Peter the Painter, we learn, began his revolutionary career with the Latvian Social Democratic and Workers Party, organizing its military wing and successfully planning a jailbreak for two Latvians scheduled to be executed, who then made their way to London [p 41].

In the final chapter, "Legacy," Whitehead examines Sidney Street's continued life as a cultural touchstone. In 1934, Alfred Hitchcock used the frame upon which to make the final scene of *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934); when he remade the film in the 1956, that scene was deleted [pp. 258-259]. Georges Simenon's *Inspector Maigret* series began with *Pietr-le-Letton*, inspired by Peter the Painter [p. 259]. The author discusses more of these offerings, noting accuracies and inaccuracies. Sidney Street had two main legacies: new police weaponry (personally tested by Home Secretary Winston Churchill) and the refusal of the Liberal Government to enact knee-jerk restrictive legislation aimed at ending the rights of political refugees [p. 265].

While Sidney Street marked the demise of the Latvian anarchist group *Liesma* (in conjunction with many being attracted back to Russia following the Russian Revolution) the glory days of the mostly Jewish Anarchist workers movement still lay ahead, despite the closure of the Jubilee Street Club. Jewish workers struck at the sweating system<sup>1</sup> and the Yiddish

anarchist newspaper, *Arbeter fraynd* (Workers' Friend) appeared as a daily. Their victory was followed up with poor Jewish families taking in the children of striking dockworkers. World War One marked the end of the active movement. Yet...despite being unable to reestablish itself at the end of the war, in 1936 the longest-lasting legacy appeared when Nazi-supporting Oswald Mosley's black-shirts tried to start a pogrom in the East End of London. They were met by young Jews, anti-fascists—and the children of the dock-workers—who physically routed the Mosleyites in the Battle of Cable Street [p. 256].

Finally, a word about this book's production. This reviewer has looked at other volumes published by Reaktion Books. Like the others, the physical object is first-rate. with good bindings, and excellent reproduction of illustrations. Reaktion has treated Andrew Whitehead's *A Devilish Kind of Courage: Anarchists, Aliens and the Siege of Sidney Street* with the publishing respect this interesting, well-written and well-researched book deserves.

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<sup>1</sup> The system of exploiting labor by supplying materials to workers and paying by the piece (piecework) for work done in workers' homes or in small workshops (sweatshops).