

Profiting from War

Keenie Meenie

The British Mercenaries Who Got Away with War Crimes

Phil Miller

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John Newsinger

Phil Miller has written a tremendous book, based on a huge amount of research, that really is required reading for anyone who wants to understand the politics of the world that we live in. As he points out in the first few pages, 'the UK has one of the world's largest networks of private armies' (p. 5). Admittedly, his research focuses on just one part of this network, Keenie Meenie Services or KMS, that was founded back in 1976. Nevertheless, this reader certainly put the book down much better informed and, at the same time, seriously concerned that so much of what Miller reveals was new to him.

It was during the Reagan-Thatcher years that the British so-called 'private military companies' first came into their own. Mercenaries had operated before then but, during that period, a permanent network of stable private companies was established – ready to fight wars for profit with the covert encouragement of the Foreign Office and MI6. As Miller puts it, by the 1980s these companies 'were part of a booming industry, fuelled by free market Thatcherism and relentless privatisation, and supercharged by Ronald Reagan's aggressive anti-communism'. In the 1980s, these companies 'were now in their element, sabotaging left-wing regimes as readily as they propped upright-wing dictatorships'. By the time Thatcher left office, 'Britain had a well-established private security industry' that would eventually give birth to the likes of G4S. (p. 8) KMS was one of the path-breakers in helping create this new political world.

Let us start with the difficulties he encountered doing his research. In early 1979, under the Callaghan Labour government, John Percival Morton, an elderly British counterinsurgency veteran, was sent to advise the Sri Lankan government on how to suppress Tamil rebels. He was 'an unrivalled expert in oppression' and had 'imbibed the racism of empire' from an early age. The report Morton produced was kept a close secret

and forty years later, when Miller requested a copy from MI5, his request was acknowledged and then ignored. Miller goes on: 'The Foreign Office had a file called "Sri Lanka Security: Assessment 1978". That file was destroyed by the department. Another record, "Sri Lanka: Defence Visits from UK", was compiled in 1979 It too was destroyed'. What was missed, however, were the notes made regarding Morton's visit that had been made by the British defence attaché, Lieutenant Colonel Reynolds. 'One set of Reynolds' copious notes survived the purge and can be found among RAF files tucked away in obscure parts of the National Archive repository'. (p. 72) While the full report cannot be recovered, we do know from Reynolds that Morton recommended that Britain provide assistance in the training of Sri Lankan special forces and in training and reorganising their intelligence apparatus. As Miller points out, this involved providing assistance to a regime whose troops and police were routinely torturing and killing Tamil prisoners. Morton returned to the country to offer further advice as an emissary of the Thatcher government and his recommendations were gradually implemented. In June 1980 an SAS team was sent to provide training. How do we know this? One of their number mentions it in his memoirs. This is 'the only record It is not mentioned in what remains of the official British archive, given that so many files from that year were shredded'. (p. 75) Soon after, troops ran riot in the Tamil city of Jaffna, killing a number of people, wrecking over a hundred shops and destroying the public library which 'held over 90,000 volumes of text, some so old they were written on palm leaf. It was razed to the ground'. (pp. 75-76)

Nevertheless, despite all the difficulties, Miller has put together an indispensable account. The story begins in Oman. Here the British had installed Sultan Qaboos in power, had suppressed a leftist insurgency in Dhofar province and subsequently benefited handsomely from the country's oil wealth. Indeed one of those responsible, Tim Landon – a British officer especially close to Qaboos – benefitted personally, becoming 'one of Britain's largest landowners, leaving his son Arthur a £200 million inheritance' courtesy of his friend the Sultan. (p. 18) Landon, Miller tells us, had 'deep personal connections to Thatcher', helping her son Mark out in his business dealings; and his son, Arthur, is a friend of the young Windsors, William and Harry. (p. 256) Having crushed the Dhofari rebellion, the British – or more particularly Landon – oversaw a process of 'Omanization' with the services of the SAS being replaced by a private security company, Keenie Meenie Services (KMS), made up of ex-SAS. Indeed, KMS provided Landon himself with bodyguards up until his death in 2007. It is worth briefly noticing here the closeness of the

relationship between Qaboos and the British Establishment. For the Queen's ninetieth birthday celebrations, he flew hundreds of horses to Britain, 'one of the largest horse transportations by air in history, costing millions'. (p. 289) This was a year after his regime had brutally broken an oil workers strike for better pay and conditions! And when Qaboos died in January 2020, flags were flown at half-mast on public buildings in Britain, Prince Charles and Prime Minister Johnson flew out to attend the funeral and Tony Blair praised the dead tyrant as one of the wisest, most generous men of modern times, a veritable paragon. Such was, and is, the value placed on Oman's oil.

KMS was founded by a retired Brigadier, Mike Wingate Gray, and got its first contract from the then Labour government, providing bodyguards for the diplomatic mission in Lebanon in 1976. A number of other bodyguard contracts followed in Uganda (where they also trained the president's bodyguard), El Salvador, Uruguay and elsewhere. Over time, they became deeply involved in providing covert British assistance to the Sri Lankan government, the Nicaraguan Contras and the Afghan Mujihadeen – as well as, of course, Sultan Qaboos in Oman. Miller does not seem to have found any evidence of KMS involvement in Thatcher's provision of military assistance, at the request of the United States, to the Khmer Rouge, a commitment which was presumably fulfilled by serving SAS.

The book then moves on to Afghanistan where, as Miller observes, 'the level of British involvement remains highly classified' (p. 182). However, he is of the opinion that there was KMS involvement as early as 1982.

The CIA were very grateful for British support. The head of its Afghan Task Force not only acknowledged Thatcher as being 'to the right of Atila the Hun', but was also amazed 'at the lack of legal constraints on MI6. "They had a willingness to do jobs I couldn't touch", the CIA chief exclaimed'. (pp. 181-182). The British and KMS were also extremely useful to the Americans in assisting the Contras in their efforts to overthrow the revolutionary Sandinista government in Nicaragua. Oliver North met with KMS's David Walker, ex-SAS, towards the end of 1984, to discuss the company's involvement in both training Contra insurgents and carrying out operations inside Nicaragua. As Miller puts it, 'the company's work was about to shift towards a more direct role in fighting, bombing and eventually killing people'. (p 116) Miller argues that there was KMS involvement in a spectacular Contra attack in Managua in March 1985, in which the army headquarters and a munitions dump were blown up and

one of the country's largest hospitals was destroyed by fire. Certainly, the Sandinista government complained about 'the scum of this earth . . . British mercenaries' being involved. (pp. 142-145)

In July 1987, KMS involvement became public knowledge when it was mentioned during testimony at Congressional hearings into the Iran-Contra scandal. North was asked whether he had authorised KMS to 'perform military actions in Nicaragua?' and he replied 'I did'. Further questioning revealed that KMS had indeed been involved in the Managua attack back in March 1985. (pp. 249-252) Attempts to persuade KMS's David Walker to testify before Congress failed. He just ignored the requests, even when offered immunity. What is interesting is that, while the US Congress went after these people, the British House of Commons was wholly impotent – although some Labour MPs, most notably a certain Jeremy Corbyn, did attempt to press the issue. And, as Miller points out, in March 1987 Archie Hamilton, the Defence Secretary and Tory MP for Epsom (only a few miles from Esher, where Walker was a Tory local councillor), was asked if his department had any contracts with KMS and replied 'I know of none'. (p. 266) In 1993, when he stepped down as a minister, he promptly joined the board of KMS's successor company, Saladin Holdings, as well as the Parliamentary Committee on Standards in Public Life.

The bulk of Miller's account is concerned with the KMS involvement in counterinsurgency repression in Sri Lanka. This sometimes became an embarrassment for the Foreign Office, particularly because of the damage it might do to relations with India. The atrocities and war crimes they were a party to did not seem to worry KMS's bosses, however. Miller recounts how the KMS-trained Police Special Task Force carried out reprisal killings, and the burning down of shops and a school, in Point Pedro in September 1984.

As he observes, two days later, David Walker, wearing his local councillor rather than his mercenary hat, attended a Recreations and Amenities Committee meeting where he and his fellow councillors discussed 'how the local Elmbridge museum could assist with a travelling exhibition on wedding fashions [. . .] They also discussed caretaking and cleaning services at Hersham village hall, as well as facilities for Walton hockey and cricket clubs'. (p. 127)

But KMS were not only providing training, their helicopter pilots were also flying combat missions. This was frowned on by British officials, but effectively tolerated, even when it involved machine-gunning a school. Miller failed to make contact with the pilot involved in the school attack,

but did discuss it with one British diplomat who treated it all as a bit of a joke. It was a 'slightly dodgy operation'. (p. 234) Miller's account of British involvement in Sri Lanka was certainly a revelation to this reader and on its own makes the book essential reading. More generally, the rise of private security companies has to be taken deadly seriously and must be seen as very much the sharp end of neo-liberalism's threat to democratic rights and liberties.

John Newsinger is working on a book on the Labour Party's foreign, defence and colonial policies.