

A Toff Goes to War

The Clandestine Lives of Colonel David Smiley: Code Name 'Grin'

Clive Jones

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The Second World War was very much a 'People's War' – or so we are told. What Clive Jones' volume brings out is the extent to which it was in fact a 'Toffs' War', with the products of Britain's public schools very much in charge. The great majority of the population, meanwhile, were fed the 'People's War' myth in order to keep them quiet while the toffs got on with safeguarding their Empire. And this continued into the post-war world. In many ways the career of David Smiley exemplifies this. His clandestine career provides illuminating insights into the activities of the British state both during and after the War. Clive Jones biography is a remarkable piece of work, managing to be a sometimes embarrassing exercise in hero-worship of this 'uncomplicated patriot' and an apology for British government policy. At the same time, it is an extremely interesting, informative and well-written volume.

David de Crespigny Smiley was the son of Sir John Smiley, a baronet whose wealth derived from cotton and shipping interests in Northern Ireland. His grandfather had been a staunch Unionist, the proprietor of the *Northern Whig* newspaper, and was very close to Edward Carson during the Home Rule crisis before the outbreak of the First World War. In 1912, when arms were landed to prepare the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) for rebellion and civil war, they were landed at a harbour at Larne, north of Belfast, owned by the Smiley family. (p. 2) While his grandfather played an important part in helping organise Unionist resistance against the Liberal government, his father, a cavalry officer, was actively involved in the 'Curragh Mutiny' in March 1914.

David Smiley was born in April 1916, into a life of wealth and privilege. In due course, he went to the Royal Military College at Sandhurst; and on from there to become an officer in the Blues and Royals cavalry regiment. The 'Blues', as they were known, was one of the most prestigious regiments in the British Army; its officers were upper

class, and well-connected. Smiley obviously fitted in really well, because on his eighteenth birthday he had inherited a small fortune from his maternal grandmother that allowed him to buy a Bentley, a number of horses ('four steeplechasers, as well as two hunters' – p. 9) and his own private aircraft. His military duties did not really interfere with a life spent skiing, horse-racing and gambling. Despite this life of privilege, his biographer still insists that he was 'a meritocrat'. (p 8) This is much too generous. It would be more accurate to say that he believed that only 'competent' toffs should be in positions of authority: some were just not up to it. And then the Second World War broke out.

His regiment, by now the 1st Household Cavalry, was sent to the Middle East and played a small part in the final suppression of the Great Palestinian revolt that had begun in 1936 against British rule and Zionist settlement. He subsequently recorded his distaste for the methods used, after watching three Palestinian suspects being tortured by the police – torture that included applying a lit cigarette to the testicles of one prisoner. As far as Smiley was concerned, these were the methods of the Gestapo. According to Jones, throughout his later career Smiley 'was never to condone the harsh or inhumane treatment of the civilian population'. At the very same time, he tells us he did on occasion advocate 'harsh measures, including house demolitions, against villages suspected of harbouring insurgents'. (p. 19) As we shall see, a good case can be made that at the very least he condoned, turned a blind eye to, much more brutal conduct than house demolitions.

Smiley was desperate to see action and used his connections – General Wavell, the British commander in the Middle East, was a family friend – to secure a transfer to 52 Commando, going on to serve in Abyssinia. The unit returned to Egypt where they were tasked with guarding the docks in Alexandria and regularly came into conflict with off-duty Australian soldiers. Smiley, in his biographer's words, 'condoned' the disciplining of these veterans of the campaign in Greece with 'a flurry of boots, fists and the odd truncheon'. (pp 33-34) The Australians were, one suspects, too imbued with the democratic spirit and did not show enough respect towards the officer class. At the same time as his men were beating up Australians, Smiley and his fellow officers 'frequented various clubs, bars and, indeed, Mary's House, a brothel'. The brothel was actually hit by a German bomb during an air raid, with several officers killed but nevertheless reported with grim irony as 'killed in action'! (p. 36)

Smiley went on to serve in Iraq and Syria before taking part in the

little known British occupation of Iran, a joint operation with the Russians. For a while, he was stationed in Tehran where he and his fellow officers had 'an enjoyable time', especially in 'the company of desirable young women from the more affluent sector of Persian society'. According to Jones, Smiley was impressed by how well turned out the Red Army officers and men were. On one occasion, British and Russian officers all got drunk 'on copious amounts of vodka' and ended the evening with 'boisterous renditions of the "Internationale", "God Save the King" and the "Eton Boating Song"'. (p. 53) I am reminded of the famous episode towards the end of George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, with on this occasion the Iranians being unable to tell the pigs from the men!

Smiley was desperate for combat, however, and eventually joined the Special Operations Executive (SOE). He was parachuted into Albania in April 1943, on the flight out reading *Horse and Hound* and the *Tatler*! Jones insists that while he had 'conservative . . . leanings', he was by and large 'uninterested in politics'. (p. 83) Once again, this seems much too generous. In fact, his conservatism was so deeply ingrained and taken for granted that it was never called into question and thus seldom given overt expression. Indeed, once in Albania and working with the Communist resistance, he quite happily dressed like a partisan wearing a cap with a red star and giving 'the communist salute to whomever I meet'. (p. 191) He inevitably was involved in the debates within SOE about whether to back the Communist resistance in Albania or the royalists, the followers of King Zog. While Smiley was critical of the Zogists' military performance, he believed that the British should have backed them, a feeling that became stronger over subsequent years. How far Smiley blamed this on the strength of left-wing influence within SOE is unclear. As for his support for the Zogists, even Jones concedes that this reflected his 'innate political leanings'. (p. 326)

In November 1943, Smiley returned to Egypt to report on the situation in Albania and quickly plunged into the social life available to the officer class. A large villa was the site of their bacchanalian revelries that often matched 'the excesses of a 1970s rock band on tour: sofas were thrown out of windows . . . games of indoor golf saw smashed windows'. (p. 112) Of course, only officers were allowed to do this. It would have been quite unacceptable for other ranks to have behaved like hooligans. Jones quotes from the diary of one of Smiley's fellow officers, who recorded Smiley relaxing in the bath and proclaiming: 'This is a good war – I hope it lasts much longer'. (p. 114) Not everyone shared this outlook, as he found out in January 1944 when he briefly returned to London. The

taxi driver whom he asked to drive him to Berkeley Square asked if this was the place 'where all them aristocrats live? They ought to be shot in my opinion'. Smiley was horrified. He spent a month in London – staying at the Ritz of course – before returning to Albania.¹

After his Albanian adventure had come to an end, he was preparing to return to his regiment when 'he met by chance an old family friend, Prince Subha Svasti, brother-in-law to the exiled monarch of Siam'. Before the War, the two friends had flown together in Smiley's private plane. Now the Prince encouraged Smiley to join Force 136, the Far Eastern section of SOE, and towards the end of May 1945 he was parachuted into Siam (today Thailand). He went on to be involved in the British effort at restoring French rule in Laos. At one point he suggested that former British Prisoners-of-War (POWs) should be armed and, if necessary, used against the Viet Minh. But he was told that this was unacceptable. The British public knew that the former POWs had spent more than three years experiencing the horror of imprisonment at the hands of the Japanese military. The government obviously saw the prospect of those same former POWs then being killed in a fight to restore French colonial rule as not a good idea. It would cause an outcry back home, to say the least. Instead, he was told to rearm the surrendered Japanese troops and use them. He seems to have had no problem with this despite being well aware of how the Japanese had cruelly mistreated POWs. It is worth noting that by now there was a Labour government in London, and it authorised the rearming and use of Japanese troops in Vietnam and Indonesia as well as in Laos! The fighting in Indonesia, the so-called Forgotten War, was particularly fierce, with the Japanese suffering over a thousand fatalities, more than the British troops they were assisting. Some 20,000 Indonesians were killed during Britain's attempt to restore Dutch rule in the colony.

Smiley was still involved in clandestine activity in the immediate post-war years. He played an active part in Operation Embarrass – the sabotaging of ships carrying Jewish refugees to Palestine,. Limpet mines were attached to vessels in Italian ports, disabling five of them and showing, as far as MI6 were concerned, 'how clandestine operations could achieve results at relatively little cost'. (p. 216) After this, he was involved

¹ One reason for this interest in Smiley's wartime social life is the way it contrasts with the wartime experiences of my own family, including my father who actually reached the rank of corporal on a number of occasions while serving in the Middle East and in Western Europe, in campaigns in which many of his friends and comrades were killed and maimed.

in Operation Valuable, the disastrous attempt to bring down the Communist regime in Albania. Then in August 1950, he returned to the Royal Horse Guards as commanding officer, taking part in the pageantry around George Windsor's funeral and Elizabeth Windsor's coronation. By now he was ready to leave the military and bought a farm in Kenya, where the brutal suppression of the 'Mau Mau' revolt was underway. He intended to join the white settler community but was persuaded by his old friend Julian Amery to put this on hold. Instead took command of the Muscat and Oman Field Force in April 1958.

The reactionary Sultan Said bin Taimur was facing a revolt that was being covertly assisted by the Saudis and, despite the appalling nature of his regime, including the continued enslavement of thousands of men, women and children, the British government was determined to keep him in power. Smiley took charge of the operation to capture the last rebel stronghold, the Jebel Akhdar plateau. The SAS were brought in to secure access to the plateau and they and their apologists subsequently claimed credit for the defeat of the rebellion, much to Smiley's disgust. It was he who 'had largely planned the final assault and exercised effective leadership'. This was, Jones writes, 'in many ways the apogee of Smiley's military career' and he quotes Julian Amery celebrating it as 'one of the best things that have happened since the war'. (p. 275) One thing that Jones does not give enough attention to is the role of air power in this operation. The Jebel and its civilian inhabitants were subjected to an aerial bombardment by four engine Shackleton heavy bombers dropping something like a thousand tons of bombs. Claims that British counterinsurgency relied on minimum force have clearly been exaggerated.

There is something particularly distasteful about this celebration of the successful maintenance in power of a brutal, corrupt slave-owning despot; but obviously any qualms were cancelled by the country's oil fields. To be fair, as Jones points out, Smiley did complain about the brutal conditions in the Sultan's prisons, but not enough one feels. Jones does not really engage with the question of slavery however. This is surprising, because Smiley himself did. In his own account of this conflict he makes clear that he thought the Sultan's black slaves (there were perhaps as many as 600 of them) were generally 'well treated – unless they ran away and were caught, in which case they might be whipped or put in shackles'. The British sense of fair play was still in evidence, however: if a runaway slave made it to the British Consulate and clasped the flagpole in the courtyard, he was considered free. Indeed, Smiley's

bugler, whom he somewhat predictably named Sambo, was such an escaped slave!² Other accounts testify to an incredibly brutal domestic regime that saw slaves beaten for the crime of speaking, or of looking up or looking sideways, with many actually deformed by the severity of their oppression. But there were oil fields at stake.³

It is worth making the point here that while the Sultan presided over what has been described as a medieval tyranny, with his people living in the most appalling poverty, he was stashing money away in his Swiss bank account and spending his summers abroad, usually in luxury hotels in London. Even after he had given up his Oman command, Smiley kept in touch with the Sultan, for example, writing to him in January 1969, complaining about the Wilson Labour government. He looked forward to 'getting rid of Wilson and his gang who have done so much harm to our country by forcing on us their socialist policies well knowing that they were against the interests of the country'. (p. 324) This to a brutal slave-owning tyrant! When the Sultan was deposed by the British in favour of his more compliant playboy son the following year, he was sent to end his days 'in the luxury of the Dorchester Hotel'. (p. 325)

In April 1961, Smiley was actually offered command of the SAS, but refused unless he was promoted to Brigadier. He finally resigned his commission, selling his farm in Kenya and giving up on his original intention of retiring to the now independent African nation. But his service for the British state was not yet over. Amery persuaded him to help organise British support for Royalist rebels trying to overthrow the Republican government of Abdullah as-Sallal, in the Yemen. David Stirling was brought in to recruit ex-SAS men to serve as mercenaries, assisting the rebels.⁴ As Smiley himself somewhat cynically put it: for these men the SAS motto had changed from 'Who Dares Wins' to 'Who Pays Wins'. (p. 307). He eventually took command of the mercenary force himself. While the Saudis were the main backers of the rebels, even financing the

² David Smiley, *Arabian Assignment: Operations in Oman and the Yemen* (London: Leo Cooper, 1975) pp. 27-28

³ Slavery was supposedly abolished by the new Sultan in 1970, but as late as 2018 the Global Slavery Index estimated that there were still 9,000 slaves in Oman. See <<https://www.globallslaveryindex.org/2018/findings/regional-analysis/arab-states/>>.

⁴ Stirling's reputation is comprehensively demolished in Gavin Mortimer's new biography, *David Stirling: The Phoney Major: The Life, Times and Truth about the Founder of the SAS* (London: Constable, 2022). The determination with which he goes after Stirling's reputation is motivated at least in part by anger that having earlier been taken in by the myths surrounding the man. Stirling now stands, courtesy of Mortimer, exposed as a lying fantasist and very much another toff at war.

mercenary operation, Smiley was also involved in securing assistance from the Israelis. He made four trips to Tel Aviv 'to organise covert air drops by the Israeli air force' and between 1964 and 1966 there were thirteen arms drops to Royalist forces. Smiley was to later claim that the Saudis had no knowledge of Israeli involvement, but this is just not credible. Much more likely is that they did not want the rest of the Arab world to know they knew and had, indeed, actually agreed to it. Even while he was a mercenary in the pay of the Saudis, he was also Gentleman of Arms of Her Majesty's Bodyguard, regularly putting in an appearance at Elizabeth Windsor's court.

The war in the Yemen was, according to Jones, Smiley's 'last direct experience of a "hot war"' and he subsequently retired to Spain, using 'the money he had earned from the Saudis to buy some land and build a house'. (p. 323) He wrote three volumes of military memoirs in retirement, all of interest, and survived to the age of ninety-two. Summing his life up, Jones argues that his 'clandestine lives mirrored Britain's decline as pre-eminent world power'. (p. 335) Despite Jones' tendency towards hero-worship, and an uncritical attitude towards the way Britain exercised power, this biography is essential reading for anyone interested in this clandestine world.

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His latest book is *Chosen by God:*

Donald Trump, the Christian Right and American Capitalism,
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