British role in 1984 Amritsar massacre

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Recently released documents reveal that Britain's SAS (Special Air Service), acting on orders from Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, assisted the Indian government in planning the June 1984 forcible expulsion of Sikh militants from the Golden Temple in Amritsar, Sikhism's holiest shrine.

Operation Blue Star resulted in a massacre that shocked and angered India's Sikh minority and fuelled a communal secessionist agitation that was ultimately suppressed by the Indian state through great violence.

The exposure of British complicity in Operation Blue Star has embarrassed the British government. Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron has ordered an "urgent investigation," in which the cabinet secretary, Sir Jeremy Heywood, will be tasked to discover why the documents were not marked sensitive and held back when papers from 1984 were released under Britain's thirty-year government document disclosure rule.

Cameron told parliament last month the documents don't constitute proof of British involvement in a military operation that left "deep scars" and "incredibly strong feelings that exist to this day."

This is a gratuitous lie. The Whitehall correspondence uncovered by Phil Miller, an independent journalist, establishes that months before Operation Blue Star, an SAS officer had been dispatched to Delhi to assist in planning an assault on the Golden Temple.

A top secret February 23, 1984 letter explains that the then foreign secretary, Sir Geoffrey Howe, had responded "favourably" to a request from the Indian government for British advice on an operation to remove armed Sikh militants from the Golden Temple. An SAS officer had already visited India "with the prime minister's agreement" and "drawn up a plan which has been approved by Mrs Gandhi. The letter adds, "The foreign secretary believes that the Indian government may put the plan into operation shortly."

Miller, who discovered the British involvement in Operation Blue Star while seeking information on SAS involvement in Sri Lanka, was able to follow a trail of documents concerning British assistance for the operation into March 1984. (The documents he uncovered have been published on the Stop Deportations web site.) But he was denied access to "the next part of the folio" that dealt with events in the immediate run-up to the assault on the Golden Temple

Operation Blue Star

On the orders of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, the Indian military mounted an assault on June 3-8, 1984 to remove Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and his armed followers from the *Harmandir Sahib* (the Sikh Golden Temple) in Amritsar, Punjab.

Bhindranwale was accused of amassing weapons at the holy site in order to start a major armed uprising, claims that have been contested by many analysts since.

In addition to the attack on the Golden Temple complex, the operation involved raids across the Punjabi countryside to capture alleged co-conspirators. It was immediately followed by Operation Woodrose. This months-long action involved the arrest of the leaders of the Akali Dal—a Sikh communal party that with Bhindranwale's support had demanded greater autonomy and power for the Sikh-majority Punjab—and the detention of tens of thousands of Sikh youth, many of whom were tortured. To carry this out, massive numbers of Indian Army troops equipped with tanks, artillery, helicopters and armoured vehicles were deployed.

According to official figures, 83 Indian army soldiers were killed in Operation Blue Star along with 492 "terrorists." Independent sources report that large numbers of pilgrims and other civilians were killed, with a total death toll of as many as 3,000.

Historical artefacts and manuscripts in the Sikh Reference Library were seized by the state before it was burnt down.

The military action led to increased communal tensions and assaults on Sikhs throughout India. Some Sikh soldiers in the Indian Army mutinied, while others resigned from armed and civil administrative office or returned awards and honours received from the Indian government.

On October 31, Indira Gandhi was assassinated by two of her Sikh bodyguards. In the ensuing anti-Sikh pogroms, orchestrated by Congress Party leaders in collusion with the police, over 3,000 Sikhs were killed.

In the socially-charged atmosphere following the assaults on the Golden Temple, claims were made by leading military personnel that the operations had forestalled the imminent proclamation of a separate Sikh state and even the danger of Pakistani troops crossing the border into the Indian side of

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Punjab.

For several years the Congress government and much of the Punjab's Sikh political and business elite had been involved in an increasingly bitter confrontation, under conditions where there were large numbers of disaffected unemployed and under-employed Sikh youth. This conflict had seen both sides resort to increasingly aggressive communal appeals (although Gandhi postured as a secular nationalist), resulting in increasing strife between Hindus and Sikhs in the Punjab.

Fear within the Indian elite of an eruption of social tensions in the Punjab in June 1984 was real, but the claims regarding Bhindranwale—who did not command broad-based support outside of his Sikh sect—were not.

Bhindranwale

Amid a deep economic crisis and nationwide social unrest, Indira Gandhi had declared a state of emergency in June 1975, suspending elections and civil liberties and placing thousands of protestors and strike leaders under arrest. It was not lifted until March 1977.

In the 1977 elections, in which Gandhi lost power, a coalition led by the Sikh communalist Akali Dal came to power in Punjab. Attempting to split the Akali Dal and gain popular support among Sikhs, Gandhi's Congress Party elevated the orthodox religious preacher Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale to prominence in Punjab politics. Bhindranwale soon became toxic as his organisation, the Damdami Taksal, became embroiled in violence with another religious sect.

He was arrested for instigating the September 1981 murder of Congress leader Jagat Narain, but released soon after for want of evidence. Thereafter Bhindranwale disassociated himself from the Congress and joined forces with the Akali Dal.

In July 1982, he led the campaign for the implementation of the Anandpur Sahib Resolution, which demanded greater autonomy for the Sikh-majority state of Punjab (including the scrapping of central government control over the pricing of wheat and other agricultural products) and the revision of the agreement under which the Punjab had been divided into three states in 1966 (Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, and a majority Punjabi-speaking and Sikh Punjab.)

A small section of Sikhs, including some of Bhindranwale's followers, turned to the militant wing of the Khalistan movement, which—in keeping with the reactionary communalist logic of the 1947 Partition of subcontinent—aimed to create a separate Sikh state.

Bhindranwale did not openly associate himself with the Khalistan movement, but he repeatedly referred to the Sikhs as a "nation."

In the decade that followed Operation Blue Star, Indian government forces resorted to widespread human rights violations, including arbitrary arrest, prolonged detention without trial, torture, disappearances and summary killing of civilians and suspected militants to reassert unbridled Indian state control over the Punjab. Family members of anti-government and pro-Khalistan activists were frequently detained and tortured.

The Khalistan separatists, for their part, carried our atrocities, targeting Hindus in indiscriminate attacks and murdering Sikhs who rejected their communal-separatist politics. In June 1985, 329 people died when Khalistan activists bombed a Montreal-London-New Delhi Air India flight.

Other documents in the recently opened Whitehall file reveal the naked economic interests involved in the British government's support for Operation Blue Star, including lucrative arms sales to India. A secret Foreign Office briefing dated June 22, 1984 stressed that British "commercial interests" in India were "very substantial." The document continued, "It is a large and growing market for both commercial and defence sales. British exports in 1983 exceeded £800m and since 1975 India has bought British defence equipment worth over £1.25bn."

Labour's former deputy chairman, Tom Watson, suggested the British government might have played a part in the assault on the Golden Temple in exchange for the Indian government agreeing to purchase a fleet of helicopters in a £65 million deal. He asked Cameron, "On your Amritsar inquiry, instead of ordering the civil servants to investigate, why don't you just ask Lords Geoffrey Howe and Leon Brittan what they agreed with Margaret Thatcher, and whether it had anything to do with the Westland Helicopter deal at the time?"

Cameron naturally dismissed any suggestions of a conspiracy.

It is barely a year since Cameron assembled the largest overseas trade delegation ever to accompany a British prime minister for his three-day visit to India. In the hopes of boosting trade with India, Cameron claimed that India and Britain have a "special relationship" and as evidence, cited a "shared language, culture, ties", including the 1.5 million Indian "diaspora in Britain."

This was also the occasion where Cameron visited the Golden Temple in Amritsar and the nearby Jallianwala Bagh to offer condolences—but no apology—for the infamous massacre carried out by the British Indian Army on April 13, 1919 of hundreds of unarmed, mainly Sikh, civilians protesting British colonial rule.

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