

Wilf Dixon reminds us of the parallels between two infamous attempts by the British state to squash workers' protests



Contemporary engraving shows the attack on civilians at the 1819 Peterloo massacre.

Peterloo and Orgreave

2019 is the 35th anniversary of the 1984-85 miners' strike and the so-called 'Battle of Orgreave', when a militarised force of police, horses and dogs brutally attacked miners and pickets. 2019 is also the 200th anniversary of the Peterloo Massacre at St. Peter's Fields Manchester in 1819. What took place on the 16 August 1819 resulted in 19 deaths and hundreds of injuries as a result of wounds from the dragoons' drawn swords or being trampled by horses.

It truly was a massacre, and knowledge of this event has been ignored, denied and suppressed by bourgeois historians for two centuries. Its memory has been kept alive through the years by the labour movement and radical historians such as E.P. Thompson who challenged the 'official' version of events.

In anticipation of the 200th anniversary of the Peterloo massacre, the film *Peterloo* directed by Mike Leigh was released late in 2018. This film should be given wide distribution, but so far has been given only restricted showings.

But the facts about what happened that day are now absolutely clear.

A huge crowd, estimated at least 60,000 people, assembled to hear Henry Hunt, a reformer and landowner. Parliamentary representation at this time was based on a very restricted franchise including the 'Rotten Boroughs' where several candidates could be elected by as few as two or three wealthy electors.

The assembly was peaceful and good-humoured, and the weather was bright and sunny. But the authorities were fearful of such a display of political protest. The French Revolution was well within living memory, and after the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 there had been a series of uprisings and localised violence, mainly about food and living conditions in the years of shortages and unemployment that followed.

Luddites had also broken machinery in mills across the country as the introduction of new machinery for spinning and weaving increased unemployment and forced down wages.

In Manchester, to counter these perceived threats, local businessmen created the Manchester Yeomanry in 1817. They, and more than 1,500 soldiers, including 340 regular cavalry from the 15th Hussars, were deployed on that fateful day. It is clear that the Home Secretary Lord Sidmouth along, with the local mag-

istrates, had prepared for only one outcome to the events that day. The Yeomanry cleared a corridor to the hustings to enable the arrest of Hunt after the Riot Act was read (inaudibly) and the Dragoons and Cavalry were mounted and ready. The people, including women and children, were allowed, unhindered, to crowd into St Peter's Fields.

A similar scenario took place at Orgreave in 1984 when the police placed no obstacles on miners assembling near Orgreave coking plant. Clearly, in both cases, the forces of the state had something in mind other than 'keeping order'.

In the days after Peterloo, those who had orchestrated the bloody outcome celebrated. The Prince Regent sent a message recording his "great satisfaction at their prompt, decisive and efficient measures for the preservation of the public tranquillity". The view that the bloody repression had "done the people good" was the prevailing one among

these notables. Similarly, days after the miners' strike ended, on March 27 1985, the government invited police chief constables to the Home Office for celebratory drinks.

No public enquiry was ever held into the events at St. Peter's Fields, such was the fear of the government that it would expose its conspiracy. But the death of an ex-soldier, John Lees, an Oldham cloth-worker who died subsequently from wounds received at Peterloo, prompted an inquest which, through press interest, turned into an enquiry into the events at St. Peter's Fields, Manchester. However, the judge, who was blatantly partial towards the magistrates, forced an adjournment on the grounds of jury fatigue, during which time a case was trumped up to dismiss the jury and inquest on a technicality.

The events at Peterloo, although more bloody than those that took place at Orgreave on June 18 1984, are a mirror image of mounted police with batons charging into a peaceful crowd. The conspiracy of the Thatcher government to brutally suppress the miners in their just struggle to save pits and jobs is on a par with the conspiracy of Lord Sidmouth and his ministers to save their power and privilege in 1819.

It is no less of a conspiracy by the current Tory Government to obstruct a public inquiry into the events at Orgreave. But 2019 is not 1819. We will have an inquiry!

Not enough dead for a massacre

The historian Donald Read wrote *Peterloo: The Case Reopened* in 1958. In the book he makes this amazing comment: "Peterloo is a name so well-established in English history that it is perhaps easy to forget that it is in fact a soubriquet, angrily fabricated in bitter mockery of the feat of British arms at Waterloo four years before. It first appeared in print in the Manchester Observer newspaper on August 21, 1819. The successful designation of Peterloo as a 'massacre' represents another piece of successful propaganda. Perhaps only in peace-loving England could a death-roll of only eleven persons have been so described."