

British 'Volunteers' Prepare for Crisis

Reuter

LONDON—Deep in the English countryside, men are meeting secretly and discussing what to do when—as they fear—a doomsday smites the British way of life.

Such a catastrophe, they fear, may not be delayed long beyond next winter.

The theory is that strikes, left-wing intrigue and the forces of inflation could by then topple some of the nation's most cherished institutions.

Up to now these vigilante groups are believed to number no more than a few hundred, or a few thousands at most.

They deny any pretensions to undercover military power and claim their sole idea is to provide civil skills in the event of "a breakdown of law and order."

In other words they claim to be preparing to operate such facilities as transport and communications in case the regular systems give out under civil stress.

Best known of the leaders in this field is a former commander-in-chief of allied forces in northern Europe.

From his farmhouse home in Somerset, western England, Gen. Sir Walter Walker advocates the setting up of regional volunteer forces in England to cope with emergencies.

When he first suggested this it was taken to mean he wanted some kind of militia. But the general denies he means any such thing. He insists he is thinking only about civilian volunteers to run such services as telephone exchanges and bus lines.

At least two such vigilante groups are looking for recruits.

One is known as the National Association of Ratepayers Action Groups. The association started out as a pressure group to support the interests of people who pay rates—or local taxes—on property.

But the scope of the movement seems to have grown, according to one of its leaders, Maj. Alexander Greenwood.

"We have 900 volunteers throughout the country," Maj. Greenwood said. "Recruiting is continuing steadily. The great majority are members of the professional classes who are desperately concerned about the way things are going."

What worries the major and his followers is a variety of developments over the past year or so—from the coal miners' strike last winter which reduced the nation to a three-day week, to the attempt earlier this year to kidnap Queen Elizabeth's daughter Princess Anne within sight of Buckingham Palace.

Though nobody tries to connect these events, they are taken as symptomatic of a general breakdown in standards.

Another secret group came to light Friday when Col. David Stirling, also a former World War II hero, admitted that he had orga-

nized a group of volunteers as Great Britain 75. He said its members included engineers, scientists and pilots who were willing to use helicopters to jump picket lines to take supplies and workers into strike-bound factories.

Col. Stirling, founder of Britain's Special Air Service Units, was known as "the phantom major" because of his activities behind enemy lines in World War II.

He said his organization received money from "industrialists and City [of London] interests."

Col. Stirling said the organization was formed because "it is very important for the government to have access to volunteers" in case of a crippling strike.

But Defense Minister Roy Mason attacked the groups, calling them undemocratic and near-fascist.

Mason said the growth of such organizations could act "as a catalyst for all those extreme and indeed, Nazi-like factions, to band together and overthrow our well-established parliamentary democratic procedures."

Gen. Walker, of Somerset, supports a group called the Unison Committee for Action. He says it is easily the best organized group in the country.

"It is an essentially non-militant organization," Gen. Walker said. "Its members would act only if there was a collapse of law and order and they were needed to provide a backup service."

"At the moment membership is concentrated in the north and the Midlands, places where there is most likely to be trouble."

One leader of the ratepayers' action groups is a sports store dealer named David Petri. "I tell them the lion is waking from a hypnotized sleep," Petri said.

The trend was highlighted by an article in the Times of London written by Lord Chalfont, a former government minister and regular army officer.

Discussing some of the more alarmist features of life in Britain—such as the recent military occupations of London airport to guard against guerrilla attackers—Lord Chalfont wrote:

"It would be wise to recognize that more and more people in this country, many of them men and women of impeccable liberal instinct, are beginning to contemplate seriously and not without some satisfaction the possibility of authoritarian rule in Britain."