

FIRMS & HATCHETMEN: REAL-LIFE GANGSTERS IN THE WORLD OF HOT WAR

By Malcolm Craig

For the past year you have been living in a crumbling row of terraced houses, packed in with hundreds of other dispossessed people, living on rats and the occasional handout from the Government or Army. No washing facilities. No toilets. No privacy. Despair and filth are everywhere. Things just can't be any worse.

Then some men arrive and start taking anything of value you might have. Even the sole blanket you managed to scrounge. People have their ration of tinned meat wrenched from their hands. Men and women alike are beaten to within an inch of their lives. Some resist and are tortured or killed.

When things go really badly for people, there will always be some who seek to profit from their misery. This article takes a look at some of the real-life gangsters who ruled the London underworld in the 1950s and 60s and how they might have survived and prospered in the world of Hot War.

This article gives a brief overview of some of the real criminals who might have been lucky enough to survive the War. I'll be offering brief pen-portraits of two of the most notorious gangs and two of the most infamous figures associated with them.

It must be stressed that these are real people who committed real, often conspicuously brutal, crimes. They are not heroes, not even anti-heroes. They are villains in the truest sense of the word, antagonists of a singularly vicious stripe. One of the advantages of using such characters in your Hot War games is that there is already a rich seam of information available on them and their activities. In both fact and fiction, on the big and small screens, their lives and methods have been documented in painful detail.

One thing to note is that British criminal gangs were quite different in their methods and means from their American cousins. Guns, while used by gangsters, are much less common than in the USA. A common 'shooter'⁽¹⁾ would be a sawn-off shotgun rather than a pistol. After the War, firearms are more widely available on the streets of London. Gangs are likely to have a stash of bolt-action .303 rifles and maybe a few handguns like Webley revolvers or Browning semi-automatics.

Large criminal syndicates are powerful adversaries and lethal antagonists. Even members of the Special Situations Group would be only too aware that harming or killing a member of a gang would lead to almost certain reprisals from their friends. In a similar vein, many of the more powerful organisations have contacts within the Government and military, contacts that could make the lives of humble SSG officers very difficult indeed.

THE FIRMS⁽²⁾

THE KRAYS

Probably the most famous British gangsters of any era, the Kray Gang was headed up by the twin brothers Reggie and Ronnie (a paranoid schizophrenic), men who became folk villains⁽³⁾ to rank alongside Jack the Ripper and Dick Turpin.

Their initial underworld success was based on armed robbery, protection rackets and the running of bars and nightclubs. In the alternative history of Hot War, they have expanded their reach all across London. The Krays now run a fearsome array of rackets, from prostitution to gun-running.

The gang is known for its brutality and total lack of sympathy for its victims. Refugees come in for the worst treatment of all, brutalised into working for the gang, the women in disgusting brothels, the men as slave labour. The police and military often turn a blind eye to their activities as they help to 'keep order' in some of the more desperate parts of London.

The twins themselves live like kings, enjoying ample food and luxuries. It's common knowledge that they regularly dine with ranking Army officers, members of the Government and other people of influence and substance. Their only real enemies are other gangs aspiring to their position of power and eminence. Gangs like...

THE RICHARDSON GANG

The Richardsons had another name: 'The Torture Gang'. This might give some idea of the fearsome reputation that they enjoyed during their reign of terror during the 50s and 60s. Their most infamous method involved nailing a victim to the floor and lopping their toes off with a fearsome set of bolt cutters. These were not, under any circumstances, nice people. The Richardsons famously feuded with the Krays from 1965 onwards, but even in our alternative 1963, tensions between the two powerful criminal syndicates will doubtless be running high.

The Richardsons (lead by 'Charlie' Richardson) were heavily involved in money laundering, fraud and moving stolen goods. Many of their businesses appeared legitimate, but were used as fronts for massive credit fraud or money laundering activities.

In post-apocalyptic London, the firm, with its huge network of contacts, warehouses full of stolen goods and sheer muscle has established itself as a powerful ally of the more corrupt military elements. They are also drafted in to areas where a bit of a 'lesson' needs to be handed out. In the main, the brutal torturing of a handful of people will generally quiet the more disruptive elements.



THE HATCHETMEN

'MAD FRANKIE' FRASER⁽⁴⁾

If ever a sobriquet was deserved, it was that of 'Mad Frankie' Fraser. A notoriously violent thug who ended up in the employ of the Richardsons (see above), he spent more than half of his life in prisons or psychiatric institutions, being certified insane on more than one occasion.

In the 1990s and 2000s, Fraser obtained a bizarre kind of celebrity as an icon of a past criminal era, even going so far as to host his own stage show reminiscing about his life.

In Hot War London, Fraser is likely to be a ferocious figure and a senior enforcer for the Richardson firm. His propensity for torture and violence would not go unnoticed by either the authorities or the common people. The fragile situation in the winter of 1963 would give him even greater opportunities to enhance his reputation.

JACK 'THE HAT' MCVITIE

Allegedly gaining his nickname from his habit of always wearing a distinctive trilby, McVitie had strong ties with the Krays but, for various reasons, was never part of the firm. He acted as a semi-mercenary strongarm man, robber and sometime assassin for the twins. A series of indiscretions would eventually lead to his death, in 1967, at the hands of his former employers.

Yet, in 1963, McVitie isn't dead; his indiscretions haven't come to light and he still works for the Krays. Having become dependant on drugs, he is likely to have connections with anyone who can supply him from dwindling medical stocks, particularly the military. His interests outside of those demanded by his employers could lead to all sorts of trouble down the line.

NOTES

(1) In British slang, a 'shooter' is a gun of any kind, normally a handgun or shotgun: "Bloody hell, he's got a shooter!"

(2) In British slang, a 'firm' is an organised crime syndicate: "Yeah mate, he's with the firm."

(3) Beginning in the early 60s, the twins enjoyed a certain degree of celebrity status (alongside their criminal infamy). This was mainly due to their proprietorship of several popular 'Swinging London' nightclubs. They socialised with film stars, pop idols, members of parliament and high-born Lords and Ladies. They even had their photographs taken by David Bailey.

(4) Real name: Francis Davidson Fraser.

