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The Ballot or the Bullet? Little Known (But Highly Entertaining) Assassination Trivia

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Fall/Winter 05/06

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Violence among humans seems to be worst when it is institutionalized (as in a standing army). Then it becomes the basis of the society's economy. It becomes self-perpetuating and self-justifying. In addition to the death and destruction it causes, it re-enforces a masculinist character among the people. This is not the violence I am talking about, but rather the hit-and-run spontaneous violence of autonomous anarchist collectives. Not against the general populace, but against those in control. Anarchist violence still kills, but is quite a different thing from the massive, scientifically planned objective violence of institutions like the Pentagon. It is more like the violence of a cornered animal defending itself. Still, those who kill defile themselves, and they must be prepared to accept the consequences of that defilement. But at this stage in the crisis of international industrialism, I see no effective alternative to revolutionary violence. And revolutionary violence *is* effective — that's why the U.S. government is so uptight about it.

I'm not saying that revolutionary violence is the only form of resistance or even the most important form at all times. But it does play a part, depending on the circumstances. Revolution is an act of both creation and destruction.

For those who detest the very thought of violence, let them consider for a moment the powder keg the U.S. ruling class is already sitting on. The U.S. today is a country whose economy is based on ghastly exploitation of peoples throughout the world. Not only do U.S. corporations exploit these peoples' labor, but they take the better part of their natural resources, churn them into commodities, and sell them in the U.S. and

other countries, where they are quickly converted to garbage. As a result of this imperialism, mass starvation now stalks the Third World. Within the borders of the U.S. itself, the ruling class and the privileged professional classes live as zombies, utterly alienated from their sexuality, from nature, and from themselves. The great American middle class lives in a plastic bubble, surrounded by suburbs and television, totally oblivious to the dragon whose tail it is treading on. At the bottom, the lower classes burn with resentment. With each passing year, the skies grow darker with pollution, and the earth is ever more gorged with refuse. The privileged classes grow old, filled with fat and cancer.

These outrages cannot last forever! Sooner or later, something is going to give, and when it does, the debate over violence will be academic indeed.

— Arthur Evans,
Witchcraft and the Gay Counterculture

Probably the first clandestine organization to consciously put into practice the strategy of “propaganda by deed” was the Narodnaya Volya, or People’s Will, a small group of Russian nihilists that was founded in 1878 to challenge Tsarist rule. For the Narodnaya Volya, the apathy and alienation of the Russian masses afforded few alternatives other than the resort to daring and dramatic acts of violence designed to attract attention to the group and its objective. However, unlike the many establishment historians who have equated the principle of ‘propaganda by deed’ with the wanton targeting of civilians in order to assure political publicity through the shock and horror produced by wholesale bloodshed, the Narodnaya Volya displayed a nearly idealistic attitude towards their utilization of revolutionary violence. To them, ‘propaganda by deed’ meant the selective targeting of specific individuals whom the group considered the embodiment of the autocratic, oppressive State. Hence

“My sympathy for the solitary killer ends where tactics begin; but perhaps tactics need scouts driven by individual despair. However that may be, the new revolutionary tactics — which will be based indissolubly on the historical tradition and on the practice, so widespread and so disregarded, of individual realization — will have no place for people who only want to mimic the gestures of Ravachol or Bonnot. But on the other hand these tactics will be condemned to theoretical hibernation if they cannot, by other means, attract collectively the individuals whom isolation and hatred for the collective lie have already won over to the rational decision to kill or to kill themselves. No murderers — and no humanists either! The first accept death, the second impose it. Let ten men meet who are resolved on the lightning of violence rather than the long agony of survival; from this moment, despair ends and tactics begin”

— Raoul Vaneigem

their ‘victims’ — the Tsar, leading members of the royal family, senior government officials — were deliberately chosen for their ‘symbolic’ value as the dynastic heads and subservient agents of a corrupt and tyrannical regime. An intrinsic element in the group’s collective beliefs was that ‘not one drop of superfluous blood’ should be shed in pursuit of aims, however meritorious or visionary they might be.

Even after having selected their targets with great care and the utmost deliberation, group members still harbored profound regrets about taking the life of a fellow human being. Their unswerving adherence to this principle is perhaps best illustrated by the failed attempt on the life of the Grand Duke Serge Alexandrovich made by a successor organization to the Narodnaya Volya in 1905. As the royal carriage came into view, the insurgent tasked with the assassination saw that the duke was unexpectedly accompanied by his children and therefore aborted his mission rather than risk harming the intended target’s family (the Duke was killed in a later attack). Ironically, the Narodnaya Volya’s most sensational accomplishment also led directly to its demise.

On 1 March 1881 the group assassinated Tsar Alexander II. The failure of eight previous plots had led the conspirators to take extraordinary measures to ensure the success of this attempt. Four volunteers were given four bombs each and deployed along the alternative routes followed by the Tsar’s cortege. As two of the bomber-assassins stood in wait on the same street, the sleighs carrying the Tsar and his Cossack escort approached the first nihilist mutineer, who hurled his bomb at the passing sleigh, missing it by inches. The whole entourage came to a halt as soldiers seized the ill-fated executioner and the Tsar descended from his sleigh to check on a bystander wounded by the explosion. ‘Thank God, I am safe,’ the Tsar reportedly declared — just as the second bomber emerged from the crowd and detonated his weapon, killing both himself and the noxious autocrat. The full weight of the Tsarist State now fell on the heads of the Narodnaya Volya. Acting on information provided by

the arrested member, the secret police swept down on the group's safe houses and hideouts, rounding up most of the plotters, who were quickly tried, convicted and hanged.

Further information from this group led to subsequent arrests, so that within a year of the assassination only one member of the original executive committee was still at large. She too was finally apprehended in 1883, at which point the first generation of Narodnaya Volya armed fighters ceased to exist, although various successor confederations subsequently emerged to carry on the struggle. At the time, the consequences of the Tsar's assassination could not have been known or appreciated by either the condemned or their comrades languishing in prison or exiled to Siberia. But in addition to precipitating the beginning of the end of Tsarist rule, the group also deeply influenced individual revolutionaries and subversive coalition's elsewhere.

To the nascent anarchist movement, the 'propaganda by deed' strategy championed by the Narodnaya Volya provided a model to be emulated. Within four months of the Tsar's murder, a group of radicals in London convened an 'anarchist conference' which publicly applauded the assassination and extolled tyrannicide as a means to achieve revolutionary change. The concept took hold and anarchists were responsible for an impressive string of individual assassinations of heads of state from about 1878 until the second decade of the twentieth century; After Tsar Alexander came a failed assassination attempt on Kaiser Wilhelm I by anarchist Karl Eduard Nobiling in 1878, followed by the assassinations of French president Carnot in 1894, Spanish prime minister Canovas in 1897, Premier Antonio Canovas del Castillo of Spain (1897), Empress Elizabeth of Austria in 1898, King Umberto 1 of Italy in 1900 (planned in Paterson, NJ), U.S. President McKinley (1901), Russian interior minister Von Plehve in 1904, Grand Duke Sergei of Russia in 1905, King Carlos of Portugal and son Luiz in 1908, Russian prime minister Stolypin in 1911, Premier Jose Canalejas of Spain (1912) and

to the best of our knowledge there has only been one other effort — to use aircraft — and it was directed at Richard "Tricky Dick" Nixon.

Sam Byck, an unemployed furniture salesman who hated Nixon and capitalism, and had protested at the White House to impeach him, was the heroic individual who undertook this assignment. The government later claimed that he had a history of mental illness, and was investigated by the Secret Service in 1972 after he threatened President Nixon. On February 22, 1974, Byck, chief orchestrator and sole member of "Operation Pandora's Box," ventured to hi-jack a commercial jetliner from Baltimore-Washington International Airport with the intent of flying it "as best I can" into the White House to assassinate Nixon.

Poor Sam never even made it off the ground though. During the botched action, he killed a security officer in the airport; then after a brief cockpit struggle in which he fatally shot the pilot and copilot, Byck himself was shot twice by the police while still on the ground. Byck then put his gun to his right temple and blew his brains all over the instrument panel.

[Editors Note: In addition to all these various attempts on the life of the "Commander-in-Chief," eight governors, seven U.S. Senators, nine U.S. Congressmen, eleven mayors, 17 state legislators, and eleven federal-level judges have been violently attacked. No other country with a population of over 50 million has had as high a number of political assassinations or attempted assassinations.]

"Anarchy, once achieved, makes further bloodshed irrelevant. Away with our explosives, then! Away with our destroyers! They have no place within our better world. But let us raise a toast to all our bombers, all our assassins, most unlovely and unforgivable. Let's drink to their health... then meet with them no more."

— Simon Moon

Why Would Anyone Shoot a Demoncrat?

A failed “hit” also took place against FDR’s heir, Harry S. Truman (former Ku Klux Klan member, anti-Semite, and the only “human” to ever order the use of the atomic bomb — twice) on November 1, 1950. Two Puerto Rican nationalists, Oscar Collazo and Griselio Torre sola, tried to shoot their way into the president’s residence but were stopped outside by guards. In a hail of gunfire, observed by the president from an upstairs window, a guard and Torresola were killed, while two other guards and Collazo were wounded. Collazo was sent to prison and later released.

The Pope’s Faith in the Afterlife is Tested

In the early 1970’s, our occasional allies, the surrealists, took a (literal) stab at “propaganda by the deed” when Benjamin Mendoza Flores, a Bolivian surrealist painter, attempted to put the kibosh on Pope Paul VI. On November 27, 1970, Pope Paul VI, visiting the Philippines, was attacked at the Manila airport by the dagger-wielding Bolivian painter disguised as a priest. Although the Vatican maintained the pontiff was not hurt, it was revealed in 1979, a year after his death, that Pope Paul had, in fact, suffered a serious chest wound. Flores explained his act as being in opposition to hypocrisy and superstition.

Why Settle For Impeachment?

During the course of researching this special investigative feature it was revealed that 9/11 was not the first time that someone conspired to fly a plane into the White House. One would think the methods of assassinating the U.S. President would be quite varied, but in fact the only proven manner of doing so is the use of a firearm. Not only has no other device or technique ever been successful, but

King George of Greece in 1913. Being a ruler was obviously a riskier business a hundred years ago!

While candle-holding liberals and “anarcho-gradualists” pursued a strategy of half-hearted “protest,” capitulation and guaranteed defeat, the practitioners of Propaganda by Deed understood that their relationship with the established order was one of TOTAL WAR, and that they were involved in a life and death struggle for the independence of their minds and bodies. As members of the exploited and dispossessed, they were compelled to turn towards revolution because they grasped that the pounding pressures of the predatory System left no time for placid reflection, and through their exercise of retaliatory homicide, they contributed to exposing the process of pacification which holds the whole authoritarian order together.

Disparate and haphazard though the anarchists’ assaults were, the movement’s emphasis on individual action or operations carried out by small cells of like-minded radicals made detection and prevention by the police particularly difficult, thus further heightening the State’s fear of this ungovernable force. In 1901, following the assassination of US President William McKinley (by a young Hungarian refugee, Leon Czolgoz, who — while disavowed by more “conservative” and reformist anarchists — was nonetheless influenced by the philosophy), a troubled and apprehensive Congress swiftly enacted legislation barring known anarchists or anyone ‘who disbelieves in or is opposed to all organized government’ from entering the United States. We’ve anthologized this inventory of obscure and uncelebrated assassination folklore in honor of the defiant, insubordinate wimmin and men who made the decision to stop whining and start winning, and who exhibited the willingness and capability oi Hitting Back!

The Revenge of Leon Czolgoz!

In October of 1912 Theodore (Teddy) Roosevelt was on his way to address a campaign rally in Milwaukee, Wisconsin when he was shot with a .38 revolver by German immigrant John Schrank. Schrank claimed that the ghost of William McKinley came to him in a dream and told him to avenge his assassination by killing his successor, Roosevelt! The bullet smashed through Roosevelt's eye-glasses case and his two-page speech, fractured his fourth rib and lodged in his chest. Roosevelt, famed for his "dramatic flair," insisted on delivering his speech as planned, and only afterwards went to a hospital for treatment. He unfortunately recovered quickly, but did lose the election. Schrank was sent to an insane asylum.

Hungry Stomachs Lead To Loaded Guns

Teddy's cousin and fellow president Franklin D. Roosevelt was almost killed before he could even take office! On February 15, 1933, anarchist Giuseppe Zangara attempted to assassinate FDR while the then President-elect was giving a speech in Miami, Florida. As he shot, he shouted, "Too many people are starving to death!" Zangara — an unemployed brick-layer — later said, "I don't hate Mr. Roosevelt personally... I hate all officials and everybody who is rich."

Zangara, a Sicilian anarchist, had lived in New Jersey since 1924, and had only been in Miami for a couple of months. According to the papers, "he was in Miami because it was warm and he was out of work, and he had lost \$200 on the dog races." It is said that he wanted to kill kings and presidents of wealthy governments since he was 17. By chance, Zangara heard that FDR would be in Miami to give a speech. Three days before the shooting, Zangara purchased a 38-caliber pistol at a Miami Avenue pawnshop. As Roosevelt finished a short speech at Bay side Park, Zangara fired five rounds from 25 feet. Roosevelt was completely untouched by the gunfire due to Zangara

losing his footing atop an uneven chair, and a bystander striking his arm. One bullet struck and fatally wounded Chicago's Mayor Anton Cermak, who was shaking hands with Roosevelt at the time. Four others were wounded, including Mrs. Joseph Gill, wife of the President of Florida Power and Light.

An example of swift retribution by the State, Zangara pled guilty five days later and was sentenced to 80 years in Raiford Prison. At his sentencing he said of the President-elect, "I decide to kill him and make him suffer. I want to make it 50-50. Since my stomach hurt I want to make even with capitalists by kill the President. My stomach hurt long time."

Anton Cermak subsequently died from his wounds two weeks later, and Zangara was immediately tried for his murder. In perhaps one of the shortest periods of time between crime and execution (32 days), Zangara was sentenced to the electric chair and executed on March 20 at Raiford. Unrepentant, Zangara was cursing and railing against capitalists as he was put to death. Giuseppe Zangara's last words were spoken to the judge present at his execution: "You give me electric chair. I no afraid of that chair! You one of capitalists. You is crook man too. Put me in electric chair. I no care!"

A spectacularized journalistic account of Zangara is detailed in a book by Blaise Picchi entitled "The Five Weeks of Giuseppe Zangara: The Man Who Would Assassinate FDR."

There was also a film that came out that same year (1933) called *The Man Who Dared*, which is an "imaginative biography" of Anton Cermak, the Chicago Mayor who was killed in the line of fire during Zangara's attempt on FDR; Zangara is also discussed in the 1992 documentary *Stalking the President: A History of American Assassins* (directed by Peter Gust).