

COMMENTARY

The Timelessness of Propaganda of the Deed

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Dr. Meloy comments on the *New York Times* opinion article of March 16, 1883, “The Dispensation of Dynamite,” the terrorist need for both a target and an audience, and the assassination of President McKinley by an anarchist several decades later.

The particular ideology of a terrorist movement is always captive to its historical context. In 1883, it was anarchism. Today most terrorist ideology—conscious beliefs which justify acts of political violence toward noncombatants—comes from three sources: jihadists, right wing ethnic nationalists, and single-issue extremists, such as antiabortionists in the United States.

But the targets and tactics are typically the same and have not appreciably changed in the 135 years since this opinion article appeared in the *New York Times*: the assassination of political leaders, the killing of groups of individuals, or the destruction of property through the use of firearms or bombs. Here is the pathway behavior of the assassin of President William McKinley, 18 years after the article appeared and anarchism had subsequently crossed the Atlantic:

On September 6, 1901, U.S. President William McKinley attended the Pan American Exposition in Buffalo, New York. Leon Czolgosz, an avowed anarchist and follower of Emma Goldman, was in Chicago on August 29, and traveled to Buffalo by train. He intended to shoot the President but had not yet devised a plan. Once in Buffalo, he rented a room at a local bar and hotel owned by a Polish American. He stated that he went to the Exposition a couple of times a day. It was not until September 3, however, that he firmly decided to make the attempt on the President. It was on this day

that he purchased a .32 caliber revolver and ammunition. That evening, Czolgosz went to the Exposition grounds near the railroad gate where McKinley was due to arrive that day. McKinley exited the train and entered the grounds, but Czolgosz stated that he was afraid to attempt that day due to the number of bodyguards, and he feared that he would be discovered and fail. He then returned to the Exposition on September 4 and was able to stand near McKinley during a Presidential speech. He again decided not to make the attempt because the crowd was large and he was being frequently jostled, which could have thrown off his aim. Czolgosz waited until Thursday, September 5, but could not get close enough for a clear shot. So he returned on the morning of September 6 to the Exposition grounds. “Emma Goldman’s speech was still burning me up. I waited near the central entrance for the President, who was to board his special train from that gate . . . I stayed on the grounds all day waiting” (*Buffalo Evening News*, September 7, 1901, p. 9). Czolgosz then conceived the idea of wrapping his handkerchief around his revolver in his hand so that he could bring the weapon to bear quickly. He went to the Temple of Music, where a final reception for McKinley was to be held before his departure. Czolgosz stood in line and waited his turn. “I got in line and trembled and trembled, until I got right up to him, and then I shot him twice through my white handkerchief. I would have fired more, but I was stunned by a blow in the face, a frightful blow that knocked me down” (*Buffalo Evening News*, September 7, 1901, p. 9). U.S. Secret Service agents immediately jumped on him, but McKinley had

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been wounded in the chest and abdomen. The President died 8 days later (Meloy, Hoffmann, Guldemann, & James, 2011, p. 9).

The *Times* article hints at the anger and grievance of such assassins and bombers in addition to their ideology, an opinion now buttressed by research: most lone actor terrorists, regardless of their purported belief system, will have a personal grievance (often composed of a loss, humiliation, anger, and blame) that they then join with moral outrage concerning a suffering group, a group to which they paradoxically do not belong. They then frame this personal grievance and moral outrage with an ideology, cherry picking phrases which justify their violence (Meloy, 2017). In the late nineteenth century the predominant terrorist ideology was anarchism whose original hero was Mikhail Bakunin, the Russian founder of collectivist anarchism (Leier, 2007). Bakunin also noted the importance of both the target and the audience in any terrorist act, what he termed “propaganda of the deed.” Today we see this evident in the degree to which both lone actor and terrorist groups claim responsibility for targeted violence to further their cause: the lone actor often leaves behind a “legacy token” (A. Simons, personal communication, April, 2017) in the form of a social media posting; terrorist groups will frame the violent event as having been “inspired” by their ideology, even if a lie.

Several research findings, however, challenge the belief in the *Times* article that public

figure attackers are often terrorists. Fein and Vossekuil (1999) found this was not the case in their study of public figure attackers in the second half of the twentieth century; and Meloy and Amman (2016) validated this finding in their study of US public figure attackers between 1995 and 2015. Such findings, however, provide little comfort to the political leaders in 2018 who face intense animosity and tribalism from many of their constituents, and the ever present danger of a targeted attack from an angry and aggrieved few.

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Received September 28, 2018

Accepted October 1, 2018 ■