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### The Answer Is: Who Was Leon Czolgosz?

At 4:07 p.m., on Friday, September 6, 1901, while receiving the public inside the Temple of Music on the grounds of the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York, William McKinley became the third president within thirty-six years to be fatally shot. Eight days later he died and Theodore Roosevelt assumed the presidency. While some students might name John Wilkes Booth as Lincoln's assassin or Lee Harvey Oswald as Kennedy's killer, very few would be able to identify Leon Czolgosz (Cholgosh). Little wonder. My own review of thirteen college American history survey texts, all published within the last five years, reveals that one does not even provide the information that McKinley was assassinated, while four others do not give the assassin's name. Eight do identify and label Czolgosz as an anarchist while omitting any explanation of the term. One of those judges him to have been "deranged." Two identify him as unemployed and one asserts that he came from the Cleveland slums as an avenger of the poor. None furnish more than two sentences about the event. Thus, the purpose of this paper is twofold: to provide historical context and to examine what prompted Leon Czolgosz's action.

Most of what is known about his life was compiled by two alienists, the common nineteenth century term for psychiatrists, who interviewed family and associates after the events with the preconceived notion and intent to prove that Czolgosz was insane. He was born in the spring of 1873 in Detroit, the fourth of ten children of Catholic, Polish immigrants. His mother died when he was twelve. His father remarried, but by all indications Leon and his stepmother had a strained relationship. The family moved seven times over twenty-four years. He attended both parochial and public school, but probably for no more than a total of five years; nevertheless, he was an avid reader. All who knew him described him as quiet and introspective, a bashful loner without playmates. His father could not remember

seeing him with a girl, but Leon later allegedly told the assistant Buffalo district attorney that he had been jilted by a girl once and since then had nothing to do with them. At sixteen he entered the Gilded Age workforce at a glass factory near Pittsburgh carrying hot bottles to cooling racks for 75 cents a day.

By 1889 a conspicuous gap between the astonishing wealth of American capitalists and the daily struggles of workers was obvious. Many Americans were concerned about the growing sense of class distinctions as widespread labor activism challenged the existing social order, which, according to one estimate, had created a system in which 40% of the laborers lived in what today would be considered below the poverty level. Theodore Roosevelt wrote in 1894, "The time of the great social revolution has arrived. We are all peering into the future to try to forecast the action of the great dumb forces set in operation by the stupendous industrial revolution . . . . We do not know what to make of the vast displacements of population, the expansion of the towns, the unrest and discontent of the masses." From their mansions and boardrooms, the rich and powerful and most politicians ignored the disparity. One capitalist, Jay Gould, flippantly commented, "I can hire half of the working class to kill the other half."

When the family moved to Newburgh, a Cleveland suburb, Leon got a job in a fence wire factory where he was by all accounts a cheerful, dependable, hard worker, who caused no trouble. In 1893 as a depression gripped the nation, management cut wages to bolster profits. Plant workers fought back with a strike and his name was added to a blacklist. Six months later, using the name Fred Nieman, he was rehired by a new foreman. But his unemployment and the Panic of 1893 had lasting effects on him. His brother, Waldeck, said, "he got quiet and not so happy." He could not understand how everything he had learned about obedience to God and equality and democracy in America had no effect on economic justice. Disillusioned by his priest, who urged him to just pray harder, he broke all religious ties. Waldek remembered Leon denigrating the priest trade as "the same as the shoemaker or any other." During his unemployment and even after going back to work, he concentrated on reading anything that would help him understand and come to grips with the inequity of the American economic and social system. One of

his favorite books was Edward Bellamy's Looking Backward, a story in which Julian West, a well-heeled Bostonian, goes to sleep in 1887 and awakens in 2000 to a utopia in which social classes did not compete, but existed in harmony in an American economy controlled by a single government-owned trust. One historian postulated that Leon had "learned that the great abstraction of democracy and individualism served mainly to hide bids for power. The markets were rigged and the churches corrupt . . . but he hoped to find a new brotherhood in community with his fellow Americans."

He joined a benevolent fraternal society called The Knights of the Golden Eagle and a Polish socialist club, neither of which was linked to anarchism. Although one of his fellow socialists later claimed that it was no secret that he was an anarchist, no evidence other than hearsay has ever surfaced to link him directly to an anarchist group. A Cleveland anarchist leader later swore that Leon was "unknown to us as a co-worker or even as a co-thinker." His father denied that he ever talked about anarchism or read anarchist literature.

In 1897 the family made its last move to start its own cooperative venture. They pooled their money to buy a fifty-five acre farm near Warrensville, Ohio, close to Cleveland. He put in his savings of \$46, but continued to work at the wire factory until 1898. After work, he frequented a saloon where, after meticulously washing his hands and face, he would sit and read while enjoying a single drink. The owners, Mr. and Mrs. Dryer, never saw him lose his temper or use crude language. Mrs. Dryer told one of the alienists that he was "a nice boy" who would literally never kill a fly. She said, "He would brush them off or perhaps catch them and let them go." Mr. Dryer described him as, "kind of broke down like."

In the spring of 1898 he began to experience labored breathing, coughing, and spitting up chunks of phlegm. Doctors prescribed some sort of medicine which he took constantly. In August he quit his job and moved to the farm, but did very little but read and sleep. His brother told one of the alienists that he "had gone to pieces." He became more withdrawn, arguing with his stepmother, and refusing to eat with the family. He made frequent, mysterious trips into Cleveland for days at a time.

On July 29, 1900, a Patterson, New Jersey, anarchist, Gaetano Bresci, assassinated Italian King Umberto I. Leon carefully clipped a newspaper account of the story and put it in his wallet. Ten months later, during one of his absences from the farm, he heard the noted anarchist, Emma Goldman, speak in Cleveland. Later, District Attorney Thomas Penney would allege that Leon proclaimed during questioning, "I am an anarchist, a disciple of Emma Goldman. Her words set me on fire." However, Goldman's Cleveland speech was not particularly inflammatory. According to a leading historian of American anarchism, Sidney Fine, Americans have a misunderstanding of anarchist doctrine. Violence was not an integral part of their doctrine. He wrote, "Anarchists placed their faith in education and passive resistance and were unequivocally opposed to the propaganda of the deed," a nineteenth century term for an individual act of violence. Goldman herself wrote, "I have never advocated violence, but neither do I condemn the anarchist who resorts to it. I look behind him for the condition that made him possible, and my horror turns to pity."

That night, after Goldman's speech, he asked her to recommend further reading and attempted to network with the anarchists. Shortly after, he announced to his family that he was leaving and needed his investment back. His sister-in-law gave him \$70. Over the course of the next three months he tried in vain to join anarchist circles and to ingratiate himself with leading Cleveland and Chicago anarchists, quizzing them about meetings and plots in the works. In his clumsy attempt to fit in, he demonstrated no knowledge of anarchism doctrine, and only served to arouse their suspicion that he was a police spy. On September 1, 1901, the editor of the anarchist newspaper, The Free Society, issued a warning as such to his readers. Goldman later speculated, "Czolgosz must have read the charge. It must have hurt him . . . to be so cruelly misjudged by the very people to whom he had come for inspiration. Was it that experience, fearfully wounding his spirit that led to his act? Perhaps his great urge had been to prove that he was sincere, that he felt with the oppressed, that he was no spy."

Exactly when he decided to kill the president is unclear. He purchased his Iver-Johnson .32 caliber revolver for \$4.50 on September 3 at Wallbridge Hardware Store

on Main Street in Buffalo. The event itself is clear. At the fair on September 6, wrapping a handkerchief around his right hand to conceal the gun and give the appearance of a bandaged hand, he stood calmly in line to shake hands with McKinley. As the President reached to shake his left hand, Czolgosz fired two rapid shots and was instantly wrestled to the ground. He was held by Buffalo police on charges of attempted murder until McKinley died on September 14. What happened to Czolgosz during those eight days is impossible to recount with certainty.

The consensus was that he was not shrewd enough to have planned and carried out the crime alone. It was inconceivable that one man could have done it. Never mind that he simply hid the gun, walked up to McKinley, and fired before anyone could do anything. The police, prosecutor, politicians, and public were eager to place blame on a widespread anarchist conspiracy. Fanciful, fabricated reports and so-called exclusive interviews appeared in many newspapers. In the age of yellow journalism, sensationalism often substituted for truth. It is impossible to know what he said and did not say while in custody. Versions of statements and events vary widely in the sources. In addition, there are gaps in the official record. Transcripts are missing. Statements recorded after the event are often self-serving and contradictory and cannot be relied on. Czolgosz, himself, was frustratingly uncooperative in supplying information. He was denied legal counsel for ten days and his two court appointed lawyers publicly stated that they served only under court duress. Just as well, as Leon refused to talk with them. Of all the statements supposedly attributed to him, the only one he signed was, "I killed President McKinley because I done my duty. I don't believe in one man having so much service and another man having none."

To preclude an insanity defense, the D.A. had six alienists question the prisoner. All declared he was sane. The defense team's two doctors confirmed that diagnosis. However, not one talked to his family or people who knew him nor did they direct questions to him about his background; instead, they spent their limited time trying to catch him in inconsistencies and to elicit his anarchistic beliefs.

Despite all efforts by newspapers and politicians to label him as an anarchist, the prosecution's star witness, James Quackenbush, who had heard his confession on

the night of the shooting, denied under cross examination that Czolgosz had ever called himself an anarchist, but stated that the D.A. had constantly applied the term to him. Quackenbush testified that Leon did not admit allegiance to any society, but claimed the shooting was "the result of his own individual theorizing and reflection." Two police officials refuted this testimony, claiming that he did maintain that he was an anarchist. The defense called no witnesses during the two day trial. Within twenty-seven minutes the jury returned a guilty verdict. Two days later at his sentencing, Leon spoke publicly about the event for the first time, "I was alone . . . I never told anything to nobody . . . I never thought of murder until a couple of days before I committed the crime." Incredibly, slightly different versions of his statement appeared in newspapers.

On October 29, 1901, a mere forty-five days after the death of McKinley, twenty-eight year old Leon Czolgosz was electrocuted at New York's Auburn Prison. Even accounts of his final moments are contradictory. Some witnesses said he died screaming and cursing, while others said he was stoically calm. Two recorded his last words to the effect that he killed the president for the good of the working people and did not regret his crime. Following a brief autopsy of his brain to detect deformities associated with insanity (none found), he was buried in the prison cemetery with sulfuric acid dropped onto the body to completely disintegrate the corpse.

Leon Czolgosz's act unleashed a short-lived wave of xenophobia and increased alarm over what was seen as immigrant radicalism. Politicians and the public sought to hold anarchism responsible for McKinley's death. Mobs attacked known anarchists throughout the country and police detained anarchists in several cities. In his first message to Congress, Roosevelt, who believed that the United States "should war with relentless efficiency not only against anarchists, but against all active and passive sympathizers," declared America's first war on terror. He urged Congress to make assassination of the president a Federal crime. He also proposed that Congress exclude from immigration anyone who proclaimed anarchist principles, asked for executive power to deport alien anarchists, and advocated entering into international treaties outlawing anarchy, similar to agreements on

piracy and the slave trade. Congressmen introduced seventeen proposals for expanded presidential protection, but Congress was unable to agree on a compromise measure. The only action passed was to add an anarchist exclusion amendment to pending immigration legislation. Not until 1906 was the Secret Service given exclusive protection authority, and not until 1965 was presidential assassination made a Federal crime.

The Polish diphthongs of Czolgosz's name helped Americans then to identify him as utterly alien. In the week after the attack the Buffalo Evening News observed, "we are pleased to know the assassin is not an American." The Journal of the American Medical Association described him as "a man . . . who, thank God, bears a name that can not be mistaken for that of an American." Born a citizen in Michigan, Leon Czolgosz was an American. He must be understood as an American. He had a highly American disillusionment with the direction the country was going. He is one of a long list of self-righteously bloody zealots appearing in American history, from John Brown to Timothy McVeigh, who believe that they have a divine understanding of America's destiny and must commit an act of sacrifice to awaken America to the truth. Reacting to Brown's raid at Harpers Ferry, Lincoln observed, "an enthusiast broods over the oppression of a people till he fancies himself commissioned by Heaven to liberate them. He ventures the attempt, which ends in little else than his own execution." Time after time, when political violence erupts, the public, media, and politicians find it more convenient to simply label the perpetrator as insane without examining the harsh social conditions, extreme inequities, or public policies which may have prompted the violence. It is more reassuring and easier for us to dismiss Leon Czolgosz and others like him from our mind as just an insane terrorist. James W. Clarke concluded in an article titled, "American Assassins: An Alternative Typology," that there is a "politically and methodologically based reluctance . . . to acknowledge that some assassins acted for primarily political rather than personal reasons . . . grievances associated with the motives of these assassins were shared by millions of others. It is from such reservoirs of resentment that those persons spring—not the unresolved oedipal crises, paranoia, desire for recognition and so

forth that form the basis for the less disturbing, but highly questionable, explanations which dismiss them as irrational.”

In the novel American Pastoral, Philip Roth coined perhaps a more appropriate term for persons like Czolgosz, “the indigenous American berserk.” Most think berserk to be merely a synonym for crazy, but Roth carefully chose the term. The dictionary definition of a berserk is “one whose actions are recklessly defiant.” Not insane. As much as we would like to make it so, not all horrific acts of violence are easily explained as acts of insanity.