CrimethInc.
Bullets for McKinley
A Few Words on Political Assassination
May 30, 2018

Retrieved on 16th June 2021 from crimethinc.com

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

Bullets for McKinley

A Few Words on Political Assassination

CrimethInc.

May 30, 2018

Let's be clear: we don't endorse shooting, stabbing, bombing, garroting, guillotining, or electrocuting the President of the United States. Yes, we've published a convincing argument that, if there were any justice in this world, "Donald Trump would walk across the desert on a broken ankle, pursued by helicopters and armed men with dogs, before dying of dehydration, terrified and alone, within miles of hospital facilities—as he has forced others to do simply in hopes of rejoining their families." But we would argue strenuously against anyone attempting to inflict this fate on him. On the contrary, we hope Donald Trump will die of natural causes—and the sooner the better, before anyone gets any crazy ideas. For us, anarchism is not about meting out justice, but making it unnecessary. Here's why.

In 1901, the President of the United States was greeting well-wishers at the Pan-American Exposition when he unknowingly offered his hand to an anarchist. The younger man slapped it aside and shot the president twice in the stomach.

Neither man survived. President McKinley died of the wound eight days later. Leon Czolgosz died in an electric chair a month after that.

No one doubted that McKinley, a former governor and sitting President of the United States, could change the course of history—just as no one would have expected a steel-working son of Polish immigrants to change much of anything. But in return for his life and $4.50 for a pistol, Czolgosz stamped his name in the history books right next to McKinley's.

A hundred and twenty years before President Trump, President McKinley campaigned for president on a platform of American interventionism and economic isolationism. During an intense economic depression, he answered to big business funders and took a stand against organized labor. In office, he stayed conspicuously quiet when black postmasters were killed in racist attacks and let white supremacists pressure him out of the political appointment of at least one black postmaster.

To be fair—and to offer him more credibility than any recent US president deserves—when McKinley ordered military interventions, he did so as someone who had seen the cost of war firsthand from the front lines. McKinley had volunteered for the Union in the Civil War and fought as a private, eventually attaining the rank of major. When he went to war with Spain over Cuba, McKinley did so only when public opinion inflamed by the yellow journalism of William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer forced his hand.

Still, McKinley presided over a process of empire building. The press painted the Spanish-American war as a war of liberation freeing the Cuban people from the tyranny of Spain, but at the end of hostilities, the US had gained control of Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and Guam. Puerto Rico and Guam remain US

If anarchism is not a cult of revenge, neither is it for us to sit in moral judgment over the desperate acts of the oppressed and enraged. Rather, we should seek to do away with the conditions that drive people to such desperation in the first place. The only way to guarantee that no human being will ever shed another's blood again is to abolish all the factors that pit people against each other, starting with the institutions of power.

The tyrants of the world have good cause to be afraid. For all their power, they are made of the same meat and bone as the rest of us. An anarchist reminded everyone of that simple fact. Yet McKinley's death didn't bring us any closer to a better world. That part is up to us.

> "It is, therefore, not cruelty, or a thirst for blood, or any other criminal tendency, that induces such a man to strike a blow at organized power. On the contrary, it is mostly because of a strong social instinct, because of an abundance of love and an overflow of sympathy with the pain and sorrow around us, a love which seeks refuge in the embrace of mankind, a love so strong that it shrinks before no consequence, a love so broad that it can never be wrapped up in one object, as long as thousands perish, a love so all-absorbing that it can neither calculate, reason, investigate, but only dare at all costs."
>
> -Emma Goldman, "The Tragedy at Buffalo"

all the ills we suffer. Yet were it not for the structures that concentrated so much power in his hands—capitalism, white supremacy, patriarchy, the state—McKinley would simply have been an arrogant and unlikable buffoon. Those structures are administered by men like McKinley, but they are built on social constructs such as the idea that state authority is inherently legitimate and the habit of conceiving of one's interests on an utterly individualistic basis. If we are to arrive in a world without oppression, the important question in regards to any tactic is whether it serves to undermine those constructs and catalyze others into action.

As Gustav Landauer wrote, "The State is a condition, a certain relationship between human beings, a mode of behavior; we destroy it by contracting other relationships." This is not to downplay the importance of resistance; while some have protested that "you can't blow up a social relationship," getting free of the social relations that are imposed on us the police and military will surely involve some confrontations. If our current relationship to our oppressors is characterized by obedience, "contracting other relationships" means becoming ungovernable, spreading practices of self-defense far and wide throughout society. The point is that in this struggle, the strategic target is not any particular person within the halls of power, but above all the passivity of those who have not yet taken a side.

Like Emma Goldman before us, we can understand Czolgosz's attack as the predictable consequence of the frustrations engendered by tremendous inequalities in wealth and power. Czolgosz grew up working in a glass factory as a teenager, lost his job in the economic turmoil presided over by men like McKinley, and struggled to find a place for himself in a hostile and alien world. As more and more wealth concentrates in fewer and fewer hands, the surprising thing is that more attacks like his do not take place.

territories to this day, without real representation in the US government. Any claim that the US was "liberating" these islands was just window dressing to cover imperialist motives. This pattern will be familiar to everyone who witnessed the "liberation" of Afghanistan and Iraq.

In addition to seizing these territories, McKinley's administration carried out the annexation of Hawaii. Presidents before him had waged colonial war against the native inhabitants of North America, but McKinley opened the floodgates of American interventionism abroad and openly identified as imperialist. Arguably, the role of the US as the "policeman of the world" dates from McKinley's administration.

He didn't stop at occupying foreign territory. When miners went on strike in Idaho and dynamited a mine in 1899, McKinley ordered black troops from Texas to put down the rebellion—a move calculated to increase racial tensions. Afterwards, over 1000 workers were imprisoned in cattle pens for months. The area remained under military occupation until 1901.

McKinley's death didn't end these policies. It didn't make it any easier to be an anarchist in the United States, either. Thirteen anarchists—including the orator Emma Goldman—were arrested and held for several weeks without charges. Socialism gained ground over anarchism in America as a direct result of the attack and the subsequent media demonization of anarchists.

Leon Czolgosz was not popular among the anarchists of his time. His suspicious questions, lack of connections, and zeal for violence left many assuming he was a police infiltrator until he killed the president. Afterwards, the Italian-American anarchists and Emma Goldman were mostly alone in defending him and his actions.

Czolgosz himself was unrepentant. He pled guilty and largely refused to communicate with the judge or even his own defense council. His last words, just before his death by electrocution, were "I killed the President because he was the

enemy of the good people—the good working people. I am not sorry for my crime. I am sorry I could not see my father."

His family was not permitted to receive his body. The US government poured acid over it in his casket.

Mobs attacked anarchist communes and newspapers in retaliation. The US government passed anti-anarchist laws. Fear of anarchists paved the way for the establishment of the Bureau of Investigation in 1908, which became the FBI thirty years later. Most of the anti-anarchist laws were not employed until World War I, when they were used against anarchist immigrants and any other immigrants deemed a threat to the nation.

After McKinley's death, Theodore Roosevelt ascended to presidency. Roosevelt was a moderate with a name for breaking up corporate monopolies, far and away more populist than McKinley. Instead of using the army to suppress miners' strikes, he threatened miners with the army but then came in to negotiate compromise. He fought against governmental corruption that targeted Native Americans, though he certainly did nothing to return the country to its indigenous inhabitants. If nothing else, Roosevelt may have been the greatest conservationist president the US has ever had, establishing national parks and wildlife preserves all over the country.

On the other hand, while McKinley had introduced the idea that the US might serve as the policeman of the world, Roosevelt cemented this role. He greatly expanded the Navy and stepped in to negotiate peace between foreign powers. This sounds nice on paper, but when we understand peacemaking as a core method of establishing global hegemony, we can see the element of menace implied in this sort of diplomacy.

Roosevelt was far to the left of the majority of his Republican party, perhaps comparable to Barack Obama or Hillary Clinton

today. There's little doubt that the US and the world was better off with him in office than McKinley. It seems likely he would have become president in 1904 regardless.

Not all violent action has left has anarchists isolated from society. In 1886, when police attacked a labor demonstration in Chicago, someone threw a bomb at them. The police crackdown was immediate and overreaching; although at first it seemed to have public support, it eventually provoked a backlash in popular opinion. The worldwide workers' holiday May Day derives from the global outpouring of solidarity in response to the events in Chicago.

But things don't always work out that way. A few years later, the anarchist Alexander Berkman attempted to kill the union-busting industrialist Henry Clay Frick. Berkman failed, but more importantly, his attempt did not incite the working class to take up arms against their oppressors. If anything, it alienated anarchists from their peers.

So it went with the assassination of McKinley. By all accounts, it seems to have consolidated public opinion against anarchists.

People all over the world had every right to consider William McKinley an oppressor, elected or not. But did assassinating him advance the cause of freedom? Should we promote attacks on those who hold oppressive power, regardless of the consequences? Is it possible to rid the world of authority figures one bullet at a time?

As we see it, anarchism is not a cult of revenge. Our ultimate goal should not be to mete out punishment according to an economy of vengeance, but to organize so effectively that we render assassinations unnecessary. Focusing on targeting men like McKinley seems to imply a great man theory of history in which specific extraordinary individuals are to blame for