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Cary Federman

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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Nineteenth-century origins

- 1 Assassinations played a key role in the development of the discursive construction of the late-nineteenth-century dangerous individual². As paradoxical as it may seem, assassinations bring forth life. The murder of a political figure reconfigures the lives of both the deceased and the assassin. In the case of the deceased, hagiographies are written, celebrating the deceased's birthplace, his education, his army service, his friendships and his fidelity to his wife, culminating in the achievements of his political career: president, statesman, hero³. The criminal, however, gets a different biography. "After the crime", Don DeLillo writes, "comes the reconstruction"⁴. The assassin's friendships, ethnicity, occupations, and political associations are mined for his motive. The life of an assassin unravels backward: from rational assassin to crazy, unemployed, loner⁵.
- 2 Leon F. Czolgosz – Czolgosz had no middle name, he used the "F" "because he liked the extra initial"⁶ – was either born in Detroit or in Alpena, Michigan, there are contradictory accounts, including from Czolgosz himself. His parents were born in Poznan, Prussia, and

arrived in America either in 1871 or 1873⁷. Czolgosz's birthday is unknown, though it is thought he was born in 1873. There is no extant birth certificate⁸.

- 3 The McKinley assassination illustrates vividly how the construction of a late nineteenth-century assassin's life occurred within Gilded Age thought that stressed the dangerous capacities of those on the fringes of society. Czolgosz's life starts not with a birthday, but with the event, and works its way back, not toward an innocent, misspent youth, but toward a type⁹. Although born in the United States, he is said to come from any number of central European countries which had recently experienced revolutionary violence. Having a father who once briefly owned a saloon makes Czolgosz a saloon dweller, surrounded by prostitutes, anarchism, tobacco and alcohol¹⁰. Incapable of working because of his health, he is considered lazy and a malingerer¹¹. A non-practicing Roman Catholic and an itinerant day laborer, he is classified as a member of an oppressed minority religion and a working-class radical¹². Hitherto shy and aloof, he is now a loner. His associations frame his biography, providing his life with a meaning he could not give¹³. Motives are ascribed to him, his secrets are revealed. The construction of an individual figure of harm out of hints, allegations, and faulty historical narratives allows for generalizations that overlook contradictions, in an effort to say something significant about the manner of the man that kills. Upon the soft ground of a quiet and dissembling killer, a tree of knowledge has been built.
- 4 The purpose of this essay is not to describe the life of an unknown assassin, but to examine the discourse of his life – to analyze an assassin whose life and motive have been created for him by the popular press, the medical and legal professions, and by succeeding generations of writers. The views of Czolgosz are not simply alternative narratives to a largely unknown life. Rather, I see them as working within a discourse of danger and deviance that finds its roots in the emergence of the social and medical sciences during the nineteenth century¹⁴. Like Jack the Ripper, Czolgosz is the creature not of facts, but of “complex rhetorical structures”¹⁵.
- 5 By a discourse, I mean a framework through which concepts are understood as already in existence and which play an important part in constructing reality. “Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the ‘nature’ of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern.”¹⁶ As a social and linguistic construction of the late nineteenth century, I argue that there is no Czolgosz whose motive can be explained by what he says, by what he does not say, by a hitherto unknown revelation, or by solemn proclamations of his intentions. Czolgosz remains a mystery, lost in the discourse of deviance, criminality and anarchism that was already in existence at the time of the assassination¹⁷.
- 6 The construction of the assassin's life began right after he shot McKinley and declared: “I shot the president because he was the enemy of the people, the good working people,” and “I killed President McKinley because I done my duty. I didn't believe one man should have so much service and another man should have none”¹⁸. These words did not satisfy (and have not satisfied) those interested in the assassination, both past and present. Czolgosz's contemporaries made him appear physically dangerous. “There was a plain trace of the expression of vanity, shadowy evidence that his grand passion was egotism,” wrote Murat Halstead, just after the assassination¹⁹. Surveying his body, the police, the medical profession, and the press instantly linked Czolgosz with European anarchism and hereditary taints.

- 7 Our contemporary writers, too, want more. Rather than accepting the confession as the isolated thoughts of a mentally troubled person, mimicking what he had heard from others regarding the state of the nation²⁰, an entire discourse has been created that situates Czolgosz firmly within Gilded Age pathologies, mostly focusing on the oppressive economic conditions Czolgosz lived under, but not excluding his sexual interests and work habits. James W. Clarke, the author of *American Assassins*, criticizes the alienists who wrote sympathetically about Czolgosz because they failed “to consider the context” of the assassination²¹. Situating Czolgosz within the strikes and violence that marked the Industrial Revolution, Clarke sees Czolgosz as a revolutionary, seeking to overturn the political order. But if Czolgosz’s contemporaries said nothing of Czolgosz’s revolutionary fervor it is because Czolgosz made no speech to this effect. Unlike with his predecessors in assassination, there is a tendency among modern writers to “multiply auxiliary hypotheses”²², in an attempt both to deny Czolgosz’s insanity – to establish his responsibility – and to categorize him as a warrior against the excesses of the age.
- 8 In focusing on the discursive construction of Czolgosz, my purpose is to highlight the interpretation of Czolgosz as sane and rational, despite the presence of certain “insane” ideas and practices he had and engaged in. If I had to choose, I would say, with the leading mental alienists of the time, that he was mentally ill, “an aggravated specimen from the insane borderlands”²³. From a legal perspective, however, borderline insanity is problematic because it means the subject is not fully insane, and given that option, the law focuses on sanity, and therefore, responsibility. Indeed, based on the legal reasoning and the lack of medical knowledge about the brain at the time, it would be impossible to say that Czolgosz was insane. He had no delusions or hallucinations. At a minimum, he satisfied New York State’s legal test of right and wrong²⁴. Perhaps a better term would be “mad”, as insanity is a purely legal concept, and the discourse that surrounds Czolgosz is not strictly juridical. But the discourse of madness, rooted in a medieval notion of unreason, and unrelated to any medical inquiry into the brain’s relation to behavior, was superseded by the medical-juridical discourses that surrounded the mad at the beginning of the nineteenth century, turning them into the “insane”, a legacy which provides no real guidance, either for law enforcement or the medical profession, and which is still with us²⁵.
- 9 It is this medical-juridical discourse of isolation, quantification, labeling, confinement, and death that I want to present as an example of the forces that shaped the meaning and context of the McKinley assassination. By presenting part of the enormity that was the criminological discourse of danger and the need for personal responsibility, a discourse deeply embedded within the Gilded Age, but not wholly dependent on it²⁶, I want to demonstrate how a man about whom so little is known and understood could become a slate upon which every evil of the Gilded Age could find a platform, except the discourse of insanity itself.

The structures of his thought

Panics

- 10 Leon Czolgosz could not ignore the depressions, called “panics,” that riddled the late nineteenth-century economy. They bracketed his life. The first post-Civil War depression began in Czolgosz’s presumed birth year, 1873, and lasted until 1879²⁷. The depression of

the 1870s was the “longest cyclical contraction in American history”²⁸. Another panic hit in 1886, lasting until 1889, and then another, in 1893. That one ended in 1897, but some economists say that the United States did not fully recover from these series of depressions until 1901, the year of Czolgosz’s execution²⁹. Rather than seeing these panics as discrete, Rendigs Fels calls the period from 1873 to 1897 “the long-wave depression”³⁰. Spanning some twenty-eight years, these panics cast a shadow over Czolgosz, framing his existence as an angry day laborer.

- 11 After old age and illness, the “lack of work or trade misfortune” was the second leading cause of poverty among males during the Gilded Age³¹. Lloyd Vernon Briggs, a medical doctor who wrote a full-length biography of Czolgosz just after the assassination, but published it in 1921, tells us that Czolgosz worked on the family farm and in lumber mills, in a bottle works factory as a wire thresher, and in a glass factory. The *Chicago Sunday Tribune* reported that Czolgosz worked as a blacksmith in “the Consolidated Mill,” near Cleveland³². Any other job he may have had is without proof.
- 12 Yet Mary Foote Henderson, a suffragette and temperance advocate, writing just after the assassination, has Czolgosz working in the Stroh Brewery in the East End of Cleveland, surrounded by anarchist and socialist talk³³. Although Briggs establishes that Czolgosz began working in mills in Michigan at age twelve³⁴, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* says that Czolgosz started working at wire mill at age thirteen as a “water boy”³⁵. Emma Goldman has Czolgosz working at age six, shining shoes and selling papers, and then working in a factory. But he was not a simple factory worker. He was a “silent youth,” bookish and aloof³⁶. If Czolgosz worked at these and other jobs, Briggs does not record them.
- 13 In 1889, the Czolgoszes moved near Pittsburgh, where Czolgosz got a job at a glass factory³⁷. There, Czolgosz’s “duties consisted of carrying bottles red hot on forks to the different ovens.” He also worked on galvanized fence wire, and then was given “more fancy work to do.” Czolgosz earned “seventy-five cents a day until the last six months when he got a dollar a day”³⁸. Moving near Cleveland,

Czolgosz worked in the Newburg Wire Mills, from 1892 to 1897, the work was so arranged that he worked ten hours a day for one or two weeks and then had twelve hours’ night work for a similar period. He was paid \$16 or \$17 for the two weeks of day work, and \$22, then \$24, for the two weeks of his night work³⁹.
- 14 This would be Czolgosz’s last job. He quit working on August 29, 1898⁴⁰. He had been laid off about 1894, with many others, and “that at that time he changed – ‘got quiet and not so happy’”⁴¹. After six months, Czolgosz reapplied for the job under the name Fred C. Nieman⁴². Czolgosz was rehired, working until 1898, when he quit, according to Briggs, for health reasons.
- 15 We can already see that Czolgosz’s work history is more than the sum of its parts. It is said that he starts working as a six-year-old, becomes an itinerant day laborer and a budding intellectual, and winds up representing the problems of proletarianization confronting industrial countries at the turn of the century. His brief and episodic career as a worker is instantly placed within the language of class struggle⁴³. This is most clearly illustrated by the rumors of Czolgosz’s participation in violence that constitute his years before the assassination.
- 16 In his short life, Czolgosz traveled no farther west than any one of these three cities: Fort Wayne, Indianapolis, or Chicago⁴⁴. Yet there is a rumor that Czolgosz made it to California, where he “tracked” McKinley⁴⁵. He may never have been farther east than Buffalo, but press reports put him in Duryea, Pennsylvania, where there are rumors he

participated in labor violence⁴⁶. He was never farther north than Alpena, Michigan, but rumors have him in the Upper Peninsula, engaging in lawless behavior⁴⁷. And he traveled no farther south than Pittsburgh, but maybe he was in Charleston, West Virginia, where he may have gotten married⁴⁸.

- 17 Once the assassination occurred, the idea that Czolgosz was only a factory worker could not be contained. In 1901, the *BurlingtonHawk-Eye* reported that “six years ago,” using the alias “Fred Nieman,” Czolgosz organized a “lodge of anarchists” in the anthracite region of Pennsylvania. The newspaper described Nieman as doing “all the talking,” which contradicts other descriptions of Czolgosz as shy and reticent⁴⁹. The Buffalo District Attorney, Thomas Penney, for example, thought Czolgosz was “not a voluble chap,” a sentiment shared by Czolgosz’s lawyer⁵⁰. A correspondent for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* said that Czolgosz’s manner of speech was “slow” and that he had an “awkward grasp of the questions asked him.” The newspaper also noted that Czolgosz did not “take an active part in the speeches or discussions” of the social clubs he attended⁵¹. Joseph, Czolgosz’s brother, told Briggs that Leon was “awful bashful”⁵². The *Buffalo Express* reported that Czolgosz had a “slight lisp” and spoke with a Polish accent⁵³.
- 18 Czolgosz was never an organizer of anarchists, for two reasons. One, he did not call himself an anarchist until around 1900, by his own testimony. Prior to his interest in anarchism, he admitted to being a socialist⁵⁴. It is unlikely that a socialist would organize anarchists, though maybe the newspaper meant that Czolgosz organized socialists, not anarchists. Second, as noted, his physical illnesses started to flare around 1894, restricting his ability to travel far from home. Moreover, it would be a rare moment in labor history if an unskilled, mostly Polish-speaking seasonal day laborer, who feared or disliked talking to strangers, whose manner of speech was slow, and who had an “awkward grasp of the questions asked [of] him,” organized a group of men of different ethnic backgrounds into a political force⁵⁵. Unskilled laborers lived on the fringes of late nineteenth-century industrial society. They were neither strike leaders nor labor organizers. They were generally known as “migratory and casual laborers, drifters, hoboos, rounders, blanket-stiffs”⁵⁶. Most important, it was this class of laborer, not the skilled and the unionized, which were likely to become “followers of unscrupulous men”⁵⁷.
- 19 Briggs does not make it clear if Czolgosz was laid off or participated in a strike in 1894, but all other accounts, past and present, have him striking. If it was a strike, then Czolgosz participated in only one documented strike against a factory. The larger question is: does participating in one strike make one a revolutionary? Was his discontent formed in the factory, among workers, or at home, reading books and newspapers? In asking these questions, I want to refocus the interpretations and attempted understandings of Czolgosz that only see him as participating in the establishment of an identity “grounded in the modern processes of industrialization and urbanization”⁵⁸. Rather than seeing Czolgosz as an important assassin because he represents a new threat to American security, the specter of both international and domestic terrorism at the beginning of the twentieth century⁵⁹, I see Czolgosz as America’s first modern assassin and criminal subject because his unspoken thoughts, his physiognomy, and his associations take on meaning independent of their source, and are understood as signs that can unearth the secret motive of the assassination.

Health

- 20 As important as the Industrial Revolution was in producing certain types of persons and of classes, it was not the only force operating on subjects. Czolgosz's economic activity was seriously jeopardized by his illnesses. Here, however, little is made of his physical infirmities as real or influencing his reasoning skills. Instead, writers at the time of the assassination transformed his physical problems into moral weaknesses and willful character flaws.
- 21 About 1894, Czolgosz began to act "queerly", his sister, Victoria, told Briggs, and she encouraged him to go west for his health. This was also a time of increased friction between Czolgosz and his stepmother (Czolgosz's mother died sometime between 1883 and 1885). Briggs says that when Czolgosz's stepmother was away from the house, Czolgosz cooked and ate dinner with his family⁶⁰. When his stepmother returned, "he would never eat with them nor come into the house when she was there if he could help it... He seldom took anything else to eat unless his stepmother was away, when he would go into the pantry and eat some things." Czolgosz would wait for his stepmother to leave the house and then he would "run into the kitchen and fry and eat [fish] by himself, but if she returned unexpectedly or if strangers came in, he would let the fish burn or throw them away"⁶¹. Leon's brother, Jacob, told Briggs that Czolgosz "was the only member of the family who took his meals alone, which he always did when his stepmother was around"⁶². Victoria told Briggs that her brother "could not get along with his stepmother; they were always nagging each other; he never swore, but he came pretty near it in talking to her"⁶³. Beyond these descriptions, there is no information as to why Czolgosz disliked his stepmother. Although there are insinuations of an abusive relationship, we do not know if it was physical or mental⁶⁴. Those who believe, like Briggs, that Czolgosz was less than psychologically stable by 1901, find Czolgosz's relationship with his stepmother to be a salient feature of Czolgosz's biography. Yet none of the medical doctors interested in psychiatry who later wrote about the assassination – Briggs, Walter Channing, J. Sanderson Christison, Allan McLane Hamilton and Charles Hamilton Hughes, each of whom thought Czolgosz had mental problems, or Edward Sptizka, who thought Czolgosz sane – investigated this important question.
- 22 By the late 1890s, while on the family farm, Czolgosz fixed machines, but mostly slept and read. Beginning around 1896, Czolgosz ceased working on heavy machinery, and instead he "fussed about with small things"⁶⁵. Waldeck told Briggs that Czolgosz "refused to do heavy work unless obliged to do so – said he did not care for it, though he was not unwilling to take a hand when it was necessary"⁶⁶. Victoria told Briggs that Czolgosz "had not been doing anything but catching rabbits, etc. He had a cough when she was there and would 'spit out great chunks'"⁶⁷. Often, Czolgosz "would go out under a tree and lie down and sleep"⁶⁸. Jacob, another brother, told Briggs that Leon "frequently dropped asleep in the daytime, without any explanation whatever; he never got excited"⁶⁹. Czolgosz was taking medicine for his cough and had been using "an inhaling machine" for "about 2 months", a clear sign that his illness was respiratory and serious⁷⁰.
- 23 Briggs tracked down one of Czolgosz's doctors, Marcus Rosenwasser, of Cleveland, who provided Briggs with the notes from his examination:
- April 28th, 1898. – Czolgosz, Leon, 23 [note that this puts his birth year as 1875].
Worker in wire mill – Res. 319 Cowan St.; – Sick two years; short breath (catarrh) – palpitations – some wheezing at apices – emphysema (?). R. Potass. Iodid Oz. i),

Tinct. Nux. Vomic. Oz. fs av Oz. iv.

Nov. 1st, 1898. – Has been better throughout summer – worse past two months – wheezing – aches all over – Pulse 64 – respiration 25 – Examination negative. R. Strych sulph. 1/30 gr.⁷¹

- 24 As Rosenwasser's description makes clear, Czolgosz's symptoms point to a respiratory illness, most likely emphysema, possibly epilepsy or tuberculosis; at the outside, he had pulmonary syphilis. His pulse was low, so Rosenwasser proscribed two drugs – potassium iodine functions as an expectorant and the sulphuric strychnine as a stimulant. With the hindsight of modern medicine, it seems probable that he had “carbon dioxide-retaining chronic obstructive pulmonary disease” (COPD), though there was no such diagnosis in 1898. Such respiratory diseases were not uncommon among factory workers and smokers, and it seems Czolgosz was partial to cigars⁷². Today, smoking is the leading cause of COPD, though in the nineteenth century, working conditions probably caused Czolgosz's breathing difficulties. As Rosenwasser remarked on Czolgosz's medical sheet, his symptoms pointed to “catarrh,” a common nineteenth-century catch-all phrase for respiratory problems, and he was treated with potassium iodide, the usual treatment for catarrh in the late 1890s.⁷³
- 25 Even though COPD was not named before the end of the nineteenth century, doctors knew that patients with serious respiratory problems could retain carbon dioxide⁷⁴. The typical symptom of carbon dioxide retention is drowsiness. Czolgosz, however, had more problems than fatigue. Rosenwasser suggests emphysema, but puts a question mark next to the diagnosis, most likely because the proof of emphysema could only be found in autopsy⁷⁵. If not COPD or emphysema, was it tuberculosis? There are, however, reasons to be skeptical of a diagnosis, primarily because Rosenwasser should have been able to diagnose the disease in his office⁷⁶.
- 26 By the end of the nineteenth century, tuberculosis was linked to the environment in which one lived and worked. It was associated with eight factors:
- (1) a low rate of wages, entailing discomfort and privations in the home; (2) unsanitary conditions of the place of employment; (3) exposure to dust arising from marble, stone, plaster, wood, metals or textiles; (4) excessive physical exertion or a continued constrained position; (5) close confinement within doors; (6) exposure to excessive heat; (7) temptations to intemperance; and (8) long or irregular hours⁷⁷.
- 27 Despite that Czolgosz fulfills nearly all of the eight factors, there is no extant diagnosis of him having the disease. To be sure, throughout the 1870s and 1880s, a proper diagnosis “depended largely upon a patient's temperament, which could be sanguineous, lymphatic, bilious, or nervous”⁷⁸. Rosenwasser makes no such characterization. He says the examination was “negative” – though the symptoms of tuberculosis, culturally as well as organically, are present. Tuberculosis produces mania: “spells of euphoria, increased appetite, exacerbated sexual desire”. It is a disease of “poverty and deprivation”, but also of “too much passion”, whether political, romantic or moral⁷⁹. Its defining characteristic is the cough, and Czolgosz had a serious cough and was often sleepy. Similarly, his appetite seems to have fluctuated from meager to ravishing⁸⁰. For health reasons, he sought to get away from cities and he had a limited diet centered on milk⁸¹.
- 28 Tuberculosis, moreover, was known to be present in higher than average quantities in immigrant communities, in large cities, and among the poor⁸². When Czolgosz quit working in 1898, he said he wanted to go out west, which is where many consumptives went before the rise of sanitariums in the twentieth century⁸³. Czolgosz also used an inhaling machine, which writes Katherine Ott, “allowed everyone to be her or his own

physician and remained the most popular therapeutic apparatus for consumptions throughout the nineteenth century”⁸⁴. Patients in advanced stages of tuberculosis can cough up blood, and even parts of pulmonary tissue, as Czolgosz clearly did, symptoms that could make anyone appear to “go all to pieces”, as Waldeck said of his brother⁸⁵.

29 Despite what looks like a clear diagnosis, there is no way to tell if Czolgosz had tuberculosis. But it is more interesting to note that even if Czolgosz was tubercular, he was not portrayed as tubercular, that is, sympathetically, as an artist, a romantic, a sufferer over a lost cause, though there are insinuations from Briggs that this precisely describes Czolgosz⁸⁶. Along with insanity, the cultural construction of Czolgosz as tubercular is notably missing. Why? If Czolgosz had tuberculosis, syphilis, emphysema or was insane as a consequence of these diseases, the thinking went, he brought it on himself, by his politically extreme associations and sordid working-class indulgences⁸⁷. In this instance, Czolgosz’s perversions, and neither economic factors nor his musings about capitalism was to blame for the assassination. One thing is certain: that Czolgosz became ill at a time when it was no longer “glamorous to look sickly”⁸⁸. At the beginning of the twentieth century, it is the discourse regarding responsibility that changed, not the discourse of illness itself; in the face of a serious crime, and absent clear markings of bizarre behavior, the carrier was held responsible for his illness⁸⁹.

30 It is possible he was very tired from a life spent working twelve-hour days as a wire winder, or for unknown medical reasons. Or, as Drs. Channing and Christison think, Czolgosz had epilepsy⁹⁰. In A. Ross Defendorf’s textbook, written in 1902, he described the symptoms of epileptic insanity as follows:

Epileptic insanity is a complex accompanying epilepsy, characterized by a varying degree of mental deterioration, evidenced by impairment of intellect, and to a lesser extent of memory; emotional irritability, impulsiveness, moral anergy, and incapacity for valuable production. It also includes certain periodical disturbances, transitory ill-humor (*Verstimmung*), and dreamy states (*Daemmerzustaende*), which accompany epilepsy⁹¹.

The press promptly dismissed the idea that Czolgosz was epileptic. The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reported that Czolgosz “appeared to be suffering from epilepsy, but [it] was the epilepsy of personal fear”⁹². One defining feature of epileptics is a dreamy state, which is the most common description of Czolgosz’s behavior. Indeed, the *Post-Dispatch* described Czolgosz in just these terms:

Viewed at close range as he was by the correspondent of the *Post-Dispatch* he appears to be a strange creature of moods, a dreamy, uncanny sort of individual in whom the quality of imagination has been abnormally developed⁹³.

Ridding this description of its moral overtones, some within the medical community viewed Czolgosz more sympathetically. But perhaps for this reason, they were excluded from the trial. Only Drs. Spitzka, Carlos MacDonald, and John Gerin, the three doctors who performed Czolgosz’s autopsy, and the three prison doctors, Joseph Fowler, Floyd Crego, and James Putnam got to examine Czolgosz. All six thought Czolgosz sane. For Christison, however, observing Czolgosz during his trial, Czolgosz “had marked twitchings of the right fore-arm while in the court room, and of the lower right jaw just before his electrocution”⁹⁴. Although these tics do not amount to epilepsy, Christison thought his diagnosis had validity, coupled with some form of insanity⁹⁵. Channing also suggested, but admitted he did not know, that Czolgosz’s onslaughts of sudden sleepiness were really epileptic fits⁹⁶. Ultimately, Drs. Channing, Christison, Briggs, Hamilton and Hughes – all of whom either saw Czolgosz at trial or spoke with his relatives, but never

physically examined him – thought that Czolgosz had psychological problems, resulting from a mixture of causes, heredity, the environment, and neurological⁹⁷.

- 31 Considering that Czolgosz left no medical or confessional archive, it is exceptionally difficult to diagnose his physical disorders, to say nothing of his mental problems. But even if one existed, the narrative of mental illness linked with irresponsibility could not overcome the assassination of a president. Although it is quite likely that John Wilkes Booth (Abraham Lincoln), Charles Guiteau (James Garfield), Joseph Prendergast (Mayor Harrison of Chicago) and Czolgosz were each mentally deranged, only Richard Lawrence (Andrew Jackson) and John Schrank (Theodore Roosevelt) were found to be insane and therefore not responsible for their crimes. Of these seven assassins, it is notable that only Lawrence and Schrank were unsuccessful in their attempts at murder. At the time of the McKinley assassination, rather than mental illness, we have the preservation of personal responsibility in the face of an attack against governmental figures. Relying on that discourse, Czolgosz's behavior exists as a metaphor for the ills of an American-born, Polish factory worker, who became an assassin seemingly for no reason other than that President McKinley was the enemy of the working people.

Contemporary misrepresentations

- 32 Modern commentators begin their interpretations of Czolgosz with the Gilded Age and all that it represents to us. For Clarke, it was “not easy to be an immigrant member of the working class” at the end of the century, because the “country was run by industrialists such as Carnegie and Rockefeller, masters of capital like Morgan and Gould, and their spokesmen in government with names like Blaine and Aldrich and Hanna”⁹⁸. Don Sneed, in an examination of the role of news coverage at the time of the McKinley assassination, similarly situates Czolgosz's motive squarely within the Robber Baron ideology:

Czolgosz's decision to assassinate McKinley in 1901 can best be understood if analyzed in the context of the economic and political climate in the 25 years which preceded the shooting.... The country was run by industrialists such as George Vanderbilt, John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie and Henry C. Frick....[It was an age of] big banks, big railroads, big iron and big steel...long hours, low wages...dirty and dangerous work...strikes and labor unrest⁹⁹.

- 33 Searching for a motive that makes more historical sense than psychological or neurological illnesses, which are difficult to diagnose¹⁰⁰, and unwilling to acknowledge Czolgosz's paltry association with anarchism¹⁰¹, these commentators dismiss and ignore the possibility of real mental illness affecting Czolgosz's judgment, downplay any effect his physical ailments may have had on his psychological outlook, and see Czolgosz as an industrial product, the result of a life witnessing and participating in economic privation. “What we see”, Clarke writes, “is not a psychotic but a young man who was as much a product of the times as William McKinley”¹⁰². For the Michigan historian, Jeremy Kilar, Czolgosz killed McKinley because he “was a product of his ethnic culture and accompanying discrimination”¹⁰³, though Czolgosz said nothing while in prison about being discriminated against because he was a Catholic or because of his Polish ancestry. Kilar also rejects any notion that Czolgosz was insane, seeing his anarchism as emanating from “complex changes in the socio-economic order”, and as a response to the upswing in revolutionary fervor that rocked the turn of the century¹⁰⁴. He sees Czolgosz, at age four,

being affected by the national railroad strike of 1877, and at twelve, the Alpena, Michigan lumber wagon-drivers strike (1885)¹⁰⁵.

- 34 By connecting capitalism and the Gilded Age to his motive – of which there is no evidence that Czolgosz understood these events in a specific way, as he never said a word about them when in prison¹⁰⁶ – a narrative is created around the assassination that funnels meaning in one direction: that a sane and responsible Czolgosz, motivated by knowledge of the history of violence against the working class, killed the president. Situating Czolgosz within an industrializing and imperial milieu gives him a nobility, a reason for dying, that he himself failed to provide. In the absence of a coherent confession from the murderer himself, the era and his class speak for him.
- 35 Clarke’s Czolgosz embodies nineteenth-century working-class anger. Clarke suggests that in the autumn of 1897, Czolgosz had a mental breakdown, following the outbreak of violence at Lattimer Mines, in eastern Pennsylvania, which began on September 10, 1897, and in which sixteen Slavic workers were slaughtered¹⁰⁷. Czolgosz, Clarke writes, was “obsessed with the need for social change in America” because he knew that the problems of poverty and of crime were “symptoms of political and economic oppression.” Indeed, “It was this realization and not ‘dementia praecox’ that was at the core of Czolgosz’s ‘breakdown’ following the Lattimer Mines incident”¹⁰⁸.
- 36 As the assassination occurred four years to the month after the events at Lattimer, and fifteen years after the anarchist violence at Haymarket, Clarke believes that Czolgosz became a political “zealot” from the shock of labor violence at Lattimer Mines and in Chicago. Clarke writes that as a consequence of Lattimer, Czolgosz “believed in revolution” and was “obsessed with the need for radical social change in America”¹⁰⁹. In an attempt to create a revolutionary Czolgosz, he says that Czolgosz was psychologically troubled by social history, not ill from disease, “foremost was the intolerable injustice of industrial employment epitomized by events such as the Lattimer Mines Massacre”¹¹⁰.
- 37 While this makes for an interesting Czolgosz, it does not seem to be an accurate one. According to Briggs’s account, Waldeck told Briggs that Czolgosz went “all to pieces” sometime in the late 1890s, but refused to go the hospital¹¹¹. Briggs offers no explanation for Waldeck’s portrayal of his brother falling apart. Clarke, however, relies on Waldeck’s description and on another quote from Czolgosz to Waldeck, “I can’t stand it any longer”, to arrive at his diagnosis of a mental breakdown¹¹². Clarke, however, splices these two quotes together from Briggs’s book, when in fact, according to Briggs, they occurred three years apart. Moreover, a nervous breakdown by a presidential assassin seems like something that would have been mentioned by any Czolgosz observer, whether ally or foe. Yet no medical professional at the time of the assassination mentions a nervous breakdown. More significantly, of the variety of confessions that existed at the time of the assassination, none, including from Czolgosz himself, gave Lattimer Mines or Haymarket as a motive. Indeed, according to Briggs, an anarchist gave Czolgosz a book of Haymarket speeches to read, sometime after May 19, 1901, but Czolgosz returned it, unread¹¹³.
- 38 As I can find no evidence at the time of the assassination that Czolgosz had a nervous breakdown, it seems that the idea of Czolgosz’s mental breakdown is a modern one, a contribution to the search for Czolgosz’s motive that is related to a reappraisal of the Gilded Age as a producer of industrial workers who become assassins. In the

contemporary reassessment of Czolgosz, the Gilded Age becomes the lens through which everything is filtered: poverty, resentment, assassination.

Forbidden desires

- 39 There is more to the Gilded Age than factory work. The narrative of Czolgosz's life does not stop by noting the existence of strikes and panics. Modern writers on the assassination have also diagnosed his peculiar behavior and habits and situated it within Gilded Age sexual pathologies. Clarke, for example, mentions that Czolgosz avoided people, mostly his stepmother, as a sign of his oddity. At the time of the assassination, however, this was understood in part as shyness, and as an unexplained problem with his father's new wife. Is it possible, however, that Czolgosz avoided people because he thought he was contagious with a communicable disease? Did he eat alone because he thought his food was poisoned?¹¹⁴ Both are possible. But who can say what Czolgosz knew of the pathologies of disease? He avoided doctors for class reasons, not medicinal. He once told Waldeck, "*There is no place in the hospital for poor people; if you have lots of money you will get well taken care of*"¹¹⁵ It is unlikely he understood what he was suffering from on his own, or anticipated its proper outcome. It is clear that his avoidance of people was not something that started happening with the onset of his physical problems. A closer examination of the record reveals that Czolgosz's desire for solitude was not restricted to his stepmother. Paul Czolgosz, Leon's father, said his son "*was always quiet and retiring and would not play with other children*"¹¹⁶. "As a little child", Channing wrote in his assessment of Czolgosz, "[i]t was hard for [Czolgosz] to get acquainted with other children; he cared to play with only a few. If he was angry he would not say anything but he had the appearance of thinking more than most children"¹¹⁷.
- 40 Apart from Waldeck, with whom he seemed to be quite close, his only "chum", Briggs writes, was a fellow factory worker named Jugnatz Lapka. Briggs relates the story that Lapka and Czolgosz talked often. It was an "association", Briggs writes, "more intimate than Leon was in the habit of having with anyone else"¹¹⁸. Czolgosz's father, on the other hand, told Briggs that Leon never had male or female friends, but that he was exceptionally shy with females. Briggs writes that Czolgosz kept his distance from the females in the saloon. Jacob said that Czolgosz never looked at girls¹¹⁹. Czolgosz told the police in Buffalo that one girl had "gone back on him" and since then he stayed away from girls¹²⁰. But the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* took all this a step further, and said that Czolgosz "evinced a singular dislike for women"¹²¹. And the members of the saloon that Czolgosz frequented told Briggs that they thought Czolgosz was "an onanist, but no one had ever had proof of this"¹²².
- 41 By mid-century, the discourse around masturbation was not only directed at one's potential health problems; it was also understood as a sign of a lack of moderation in a person's life. Onanism had political connotations. It was assumed that masturbation could lead to greater impertinence among children, lasting through adulthood if not controlled, and was taken as a sign of moral degeneracy. Masturbating in secret signified that outside forces had lost their power to shape individual behavior. "There was a deep-seated sense", Stephen Mintz writes of the problem of social control in the latter-half of the nineteenth century, "that individualism, unless contained and socialized, would result in a general process of society unraveling"¹²³.

- 42 Here, then, is the crux of the Czolgosz problem, presented through the discourse of the Gilded Age, yet unrelated to factory life. If Czolgosz was an onanist, then he had accepted his own notions of right and wrong as more important than submitting to the powers of external government and historically sanctioned social forces. It is onanism, then, and not his anger over capitalism, strikes, Robber Barons or anything he had read or heard about McKinley that was Czolgosz's link with anarchism and assassination¹²⁴. But of course this is not so. The condemnation of Czolgosz relies on many different ideas.
- 43 Nineteenth-century medical literature also linked solitary sex with homosexuality¹²⁵. Masturbation, in other words, could be understood as a substitute for the desire to have sexual relations with the opposite sex. If Czolgosz was not just shy with women but avoided them, and was an onanist, was Czolgosz a homosexual? On the one hand, Czolgosz spoke of liking a girl, an unnamed woman who "went back on him", and others described Czolgosz as mesmerized, if not in love with, Emma Goldman¹²⁶. There was even a rumor that he was married. Yet the *Iowa State Register* reported that Czolgosz's effeminacy was the cause of more or less comment among his acquaintances¹²⁷. Czolgosz's own lawyer suggested that the handkerchief he wrapped the gun in was a women's handkerchief¹²⁸. But apart from the fact that he lived in a homo-social culture, there is no evidence that he engaged in so-called "decadent" behavior or frequented male-only clubs with a homosexual subculture. Likewise, even if Czolgosz traveled throughout the Midwest by train, in search of jobs or anarchist ties, he does not seem to have been taken in by the hobo or tramp subculture, where homosexuality was an accepted practice¹²⁹. The problem is that, unlike onanists, and apart from obvious effeminacy, the understanding of homosexuality in the late nineteenth century lacked a physiological feature¹³⁰.
- 44 While in prison, Czolgosz told Dr. Carlos F. MacDonald that he "admitted having had sexual intercourse with women, but denied masturbation or other unnatural practices"¹³¹. Did Czolgosz have a sexually transmitted disease? MacDonald writes:
- The external genitals were normal, excepting two small, flat, unidurated cicatrices on the mucous surface of the prepuce, probably the result of previous chancroids, although he [Czolgosz] denied having had venereal disease other than gonorrhoea. There were no signs of specific nodes or periodsteal tenderness over the usual sites of these lesions¹³².
- 45 Where did Czolgosz get the idea that he had gonorrhoea? There are two possibilities. Either a doctor diagnosed him with it or he assumed he had it¹³³. Note that MacDonald neither confirmed nor denied Czolgosz's self-diagnosis. Gonorrhoea is not usually visible and the problems associated with the disease are usually lodged in the urinary tract and the urethra. Although there can be a complete absence of symptoms, the disease itself could spread to the joints and the eyes. Czolgosz's autopsy, however, showed no signs of this occurrence¹³⁴. It is also possible that the scar tissue could be left over from gonorrhoea, and MacDonald knew this and was satisfied with his observations.
- 46 But MacDonald makes no determination of a sexually transmitted disease. It may be because neither MacDonald nor Spitzka were experts on venereal diseases, or because late nineteenth-century physicians considered "gonorrhoea a relatively minor, nonspecific, inflammatory disorder"¹³⁵, or because no tissue could be taken out of the prison for further examination, or because there was no cure, just proscribed abstinence, so any sexually-transmitted disease that a factory worker may or may not have had was taken without assumptions of its origins. On the other hand, if Czolgosz had syphilis, then

there was an increased chance he was insane, which would diminish, if not obviate, his responsibility in the crime, and these doctors, unsympathetic with any claim that Czolgosz was mentally ill, chose not to pursue this idea.

- 47 The difficulty here is that throughout the nineteenth century, many physicians had no clear idea how individuals contracted venereal diseases. Many experienced doctors thought that faithful married couples could contract gonorrhea; others thought that a male having sex with a menstruating woman could become infected¹³⁶. It was not uncommon, moreover, for the uneducated to think that all kinds of physical ailments were signs of sexually transmitted diseases. According to John and Robin Haller, “Lepra, herpes, scabies, pemphigus, impetigo, eczema, lichena rubber, psoriasis along with leucorrhoea and catarrhal discharges were all confused at one time or another with venereal disease”¹³⁷. Gonorrhea, in fact, can produce “a chronic catarrhal condition”¹³⁸. Did Czolgosz confuse his “catarrhal discharges” with a venereal disease and not a respiratory problem?
- 48 Czolgosz had two scars on his body, one on his face from a factory accident, and the other on his genitalia, but this was not known until the autopsy. Waldeck told Briggs that he had a secret about Czolgosz that he would sell to Briggs for \$100. It was not connected to a woman, Waldeck told Briggs. Although he tried to pry the secret from Waldeck, Briggs did not pay Waldeck for the information because he did not trust him. He thought Waldeck was “a useless member of the community,” and he found the other Czolgoszes generally uneducated¹³⁹.
- 49 But Eric Rauchway has figured out Waldeck’s (and Leon’s) secret. Although Rauchway suspects that Czolgosz did not have syphilis, he writes that “Leon Czolgosz was acting like someone who believed he had syphilis”¹⁴⁰. Czolgosz was taking herbal concoctions and potassium iodide, which Rauchway suggests Czolgosz used for treating his syphilis, but it is clear it can be taken for emphysema, as an expectorant, as well as for other ailments¹⁴¹. Rauchway also suggests that Czolgosz’s respiratory problems were induced from syphilis, which is possible, but impossible to prove. Given Czolgosz’s blood-curdling cough and his history as a worker in a bottle works factory, it seems clear that Rosenwasser’s diagnosis of emphysema, even with a question mark attached, is closer to the mark than syphilis as the cause of his respiratory problems. Rauchway also assumes that Czolgosz steered clear of people because he thought himself contagious from syphilis, but fails to recognize that Czolgosz’s peculiar social habits were directed against his stepmother for the most part and others as well, but not everyone. Czolgosz’s work supervisor, for example, told Briggs that Czolgosz ate with his fellow workers¹⁴². Finally, Rauchway asserts, without documentary evidence, that Czolgosz was a homosexual because a) “same-sex contact was commonly known, especially among an immigrant population that skewed heavily male”; and b) the location of Czolgosz’s chancroids indicates that he was the penetrator in a homosexual relationship¹⁴³. From this, Rauchway asserts that Czolgosz killed McKinley in a murder-suicide.
- 50 There are two problems here. First, being in a homo-social environment does not make one a homosexual. Could he have engaged in homosexual sex and did not consider himself a homosexual? That is possible¹⁴⁴. But all this is just too much speculation to arrive at a motive for assassinating a president. Second, it is medically impossible to judge from the location of chancroids whether or not one is a penetrator in a homosexual relationship. Yet Rauchway writes, “In many working-class contexts, it was not even especially stigmatized if a man was the penetrator, as the location of Leon’s chancroids

indicates he was"¹⁴⁵. At the time of the assassination, it was well known in medical circles that chancroids could come from sexual or from non-sexual contact, from basic uncleanliness, from syphilis or from gonorrhoea.

- 51 According to Robert W. Taylor, the leading scientist on the study of venereal diseases at the turn of the century, one could develop chancroids by a faulty medical procedure, such as circumcision, or chancroids "could originate in some subjects *de novo*." In other words, Taylor writes, "it is not very uncommon to see chancroids in men who have had no sexual exposure whatever, such lesions being perhaps due to inherent peculiarities of their tissues... Such cases are far from rare"¹⁴⁶. Taylor also notes that a male can develop chancroids after having sex with a woman who had other non-sexually derived infections that affected her genitals¹⁴⁷. Lacking proof, then, how does Rauchway know Czolgosz did not engage in sex with a woman, whether syphilitic or not? Waldeck's cryptic phrase to Briggs (Briggs is not directly quoting Waldeck here), that the doctors "could have found" Czolgosz's scar "if they had looked for it," and that "it was in no way connected with a woman; in a way it was an accident and in a way it was not," does not provide enough evidence to support Rauchway's speculation that Czolgosz killed McKinley as a kind of suicide for his own impending death¹⁴⁸. Besides, surely Briggs was aware that the scar would be found in autopsy and that he could make an independent judgment on its merits when the contents were revealed, without hearing it from Waldeck. Most telling, perhaps, is that Briggs does not reproduce the "scar" story in his published essay on Czolgosz, though he published it twenty years after the assassination, when all that Waldeck had hidden from him was known.
- 52 In general, assassinations generate two kinds of narratives, one that celebrates the life of the deceased as more than human, and another that vilifies the assassin as less than a man. In the event, they create facts about both the assassin and the assassinated that unspool and multiply exponentially, creating archetypes and stereotypes, generating something intricate and larger, but less certain, than what was. Not myths but factoids. The Czolgosz biography is a magician's handkerchief. Pulling a fact out of a hat, one finds another attached, once removed from the truth, and so on, until Czolgosz is constructed in such a manner that on September 6, 1901, Czolgosz arrives fully formed, a seamless cloth, his identity perfectly choreographed and his motives certain, when, in fact, he is an ensemble of obvious contradictions, fabrications, embellishments and hearsay.

Conclusion

- 53 The point of this essay is not to tell the story of an unstable person who, when all the rhetoric of motive, social condition, and psychological baggage is peeled away, or added on, is revealed to be a simple person with an ax to grind. Rather, I want to situate the assassination within the discourse of danger that permeated late nineteenth-century criminological thought, and point out that this discourse remains with us. The great work of post-World War II social psychology, the Warren Commission, dismissed Lee Harvey Oswald's "attachment to Marxist and Communist doctrine" as "in some measure, an expression of his hostility to his environment"¹⁴⁹. Having lost his father before he was born, the Commission found it salient that Oswald grew up in an orphanage and experienced poverty. Substitute anarchism for Marxism and the death of Czolgosz's mother for the death of Oswald's father (poverty remaining a constant) and you are staring at Leon F. Czolgosz, presidential assassin. Indeed, for modern writers, the more

Czolgosz is encased in the social and economic structures of the late nineteenth century, the clearer his motive becomes, creating an inverse relationship between Gilded Age knowledge and Leon Czolgosz uncertainty. It is the Gilded Age that is real, the producer of subjects, and Czolgosz becomes the “expression of a cultural tradition in somatic form”¹⁵⁰.

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ABSTRACTS

The purpose of this essay is to examine the discourses that surrounded the life of Leon Czolgosz, the assassin of President William McKinley. The gaps in Czolgosz's life, his peculiar silences, his poor health and the ambiguity and thinness of his confession, rather than taken as instances of mental and physical distress, have, instead, been understood as signs of a revolutionary anarchistic assassin. Czolgosz is an expression of a cultural tradition in somatic form. I argue that the discursive construction of criminality, already present in the late nineteenth century within the medical and human sciences, is what shaped Czolgosz's life story.

Cet article vise à examiner les discours qui ont entouré la vie de Léon Czolgosz, l'assassin de William McKinley. Les trous dans la biographie de Czolgosz, ses silences étranges, sa mauvaise santé, l'ambiguïté et la minceur de ses aveux, ont été interprétés dans la perspective d'un assassin révolutionnaire anarchiste, plutôt que comme des symptômes de détresse physique et mentale. Czolgosz est une manifestation somatique d'une tradition culturelle. Mon argument est que l'histoire de vie de Czolgosz a été forgée par une construction discursive du crime, présente dès la fin du XIX^e siècle.

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