

Brushes With Death

By Ed West – Wrong Side of History, July, 2024

History's most notorious failed assassinations

It's been reported that, according to some Japanese conservative pundits, at the moment he was shot last Saturday Donald Trump heard Shinzo Abe's 'voice and moved out of the path of the bullet'. Whether or not they actually believe this or they're in on the joke, this story originated from a meme that went around Twitter very soon after the failed assassination attempt in Pennsylvania.

Trump escaped death by the narrowest of margins, and the truth of his miraculous survival is itself slightly bizarre; that he turned his head at the last minute to point to a chart of illegal immigration numbers. 'If I hadn't pointed at that chart and turned my head to look at it, that bullet would have hit me right in the head', he said afterwards.

We think of American politics as being unusually violent, in part because of the memory of the 1960s when four prominent public figures were killed by assassins. America's history of four murdered presidents also stands in contrast to Britain's one slain prime minister, poor Spencer Perceval back in 1812, yet the last sitting American federal politician to be assassinated was way back in 1978, since when six British MPs have been murdered.

It's not like there haven't been numerous attempts to assassinate more presidents; one of the most famous, and cited variously after Trump's belligerent response last weekend, **was the October 1912 shooting of Theodore Roosevelt. The former president, running again for office, was due to give a speech in Milwaukee when he was struck in the chest. Teddy Roosevelt was saved by a steel eyeglass case and a 50-page copy of his speech - titled 'Progressive Cause Greater Than Any Individual' - which stopped the bullet doing more damage.**

Rather bizarrely, Roosevelt continued his speech for 90 minutes, beginning with the words 'Ladies and gentlemen, I don't know whether you fully understand that I have just been shot; but it takes more than that to kill a Bull Moose.'

His distant cousin **Franklin Delano Roosevelt also survived an assassination attempt two weeks before his inauguration in 1933; Giuseppe Zangara failed to take down the president but killed the Mayor of Chicago and was executed by electric chair.**

The most famous attempt in recent years was the Ronald Reagan shooting. His would-be assassin, John Hinckley, apparently wished to impress the actress Jodie Foster, although he was certainly going about it in an unorthodox way. (As the *Onion* headline put it, 'Hinckley, Foster to wed'.) When, a few years later, a balloon made the horrifically familiar sound of a popping bullet, Reagan displayed characteristic calm and good humour.

Perhaps less well known are the two attempts on **Gerald Ford, both by women, the first by one of the Manson family, and the second by a woman obsessed with Patty Hearst.** Neither of these incidents remained in the public consciousness for very long, although America was far less polarised at the time and Ford was certainly a less divisive figure than Trump.

Generally speaking, women assassins seem to have a worse success rate, although Charlotte Corday is a notable exception. Mussolini also survived a close shave at the hands of a female assassin in 1926, when he was shot by an Irishwoman, Violet Gibson, and like Trump lived because he turned his head at the last moment. The shot grazed his nose, and Gibson's gun then jammed before she could fire again.

There were three other attempts on the Italian dictator's life, including, just six months later, a 15-year-old boy who took a shot at him and was immediately lynched by supporters of the dictator, leading to suspicion that it had been an inside job.

Lenin similarly survived a female assassin, in August 1918, an anarchist called Fanny Kaplan who had been previously arrested in 1906 for trying to assassinate a tsarist official.

Victor Sebestyen wrote in Lenin the Dictator of her first efforts at being an assassin:

She bungled the attempt and was wounded from the blast of her own home-made bomb. She was sentenced to "eternal hard labour". She was sent first to a tough prison at Maltsev, where she was frequently caned in public – a routine punishment at the time – then to Orel in central Russia and finally to the notorious Akatua silver-mining camp in eastern Siberia, where conditions were so harsh that hundreds of inmates died. She developed serious problems with her sight and was partially blind in one eye. She was released after the February Revolution and went to live in Crimea. In prison she had ditched anarchism and become a Socialist Revolutionary. After eleven years as a convict she was as dedicated and fanatical as the day she had been arrested as an eighteen-year-old.

On the day of Kaplan's second, more famous attempt at being an assassin, Lenin was leaving a factory where he had given a speech when she fired three shots, one lodging in his shoulder and another puncturing a lung.

Kaplan was sentenced to death and her execution was witnessed by just one person, the 'proletarian poet' Demyan Bedny, ordered to attend the event by Cheka officials for the purpose of 'revolutionary inspiration' (he just felt sick, as you would).

The Bolsheviks blamed it on the British, as Russians officials tend to for most things, although there remains something of a mystery about the incident: Robert Service, for one, believes that Kaplan could not have fired the shots because of her poor eyesight and chaotic mental state.

Lenin's close shave led to an intensification of repression, with over 6,000 death sentences handed out in the following two months. 'Having heard of the wicked attempt of capitalist hirelings on the life of the greatest revolutionary, the leader of the proletariat,' Stalin declared, 'we answer this base attack with the organisation of systematic mass terror against the bourgeoisie and its agents.'

As Sebestyen wrote: 'The murder attempt was the beginning of the "Lenin cult", the exaggerated praise and semi-religious worship that characterised leadership in the Communist world for the following decades – perfected later by Stalin, Mao Zedong and Kim Il-Sung but originating in the days after the threat to Lenin's life. Three days after the shooting Zinoviev made an absurd speech that set the tone: "Lenin is the greatest leader ever known by humanity, the apostle of the socialist Revolution," he gushed.'

This bloodthirsty response rather contrasts with Pope John Paul II, who became friends with his would-be assassin, whose motivations are still shrouded in mystery. After Mehmet Ali Ağca shot at the Holy Father in 1981, the Pope asked people to 'pray for my brother' Ağca 'whom I have sincerely forgiven'. Two years later the two met privately at the prison Ağca was being held at and the former assassin kissed the pope's ring, and John-Paul later met his family. In 2005, as the Pope lay dying, Ağca sent him a letter of good wishes.

Some public figures endured multiple assassination attempts, **with Queen Victoria perhaps holding a British record, with eight made on her life**, three of those in the difficult first five years of her reign during the 'Hungry Forties'.

In 1840 the first of these assassins, Edward Oxford, fired a pistol at the pregnant queen as she was travelling in an open carriage when they passed along Constitution Hill; Oxford drew his gun, shot, missed, then said 'I have got another' and fired again.

Onlookers disarmed Oxford, but unfortunately one of the first people to grab him and take his guns was mistaken for the assassin and beaten until stopped by Oxford shouting: 'I am the man who fired; it was me!'

The assassin was first sectioned in Bedlam and then Broadmoor before being allowed to emigrate to Australia, where he lived into old age. He probably wasn't insane, and the case helped to change the law on criminal insanity in England, as did the attempted assassination of Prime Minister Robert Peel in 1843 – the assassin mistakenly killed his private secretary, Edward Drummond, instead. These M'Naghten rule subsequently made it harder to claim insanity.

In May 1842 Victoria and Albert were once again in their carriage when another man, John Francis, took aim. Francis described how he saw 'a little, swarthy, ill-looking rascal' – the Prince Consort - and pulled his trigger, but the gun failed. He ran off and came back to fire again; Francis was apprehended and sentenced to death but the Queen intervened and had him transported to Australia. Indeed, none of her eight would-be assassins were executed.

Just three months later the Queen was in another carriage departing from Buckingham Palace when yet another man fired at them. This assassin, John William Bean, was mentally ill and had loaded the gun with tobacco rather than bullets; he received 18 months in prison. Another wannabe killer, William Hamilton, made an attempt in 1849 but again his gun was loaded only with gunpowder. The closest Victoria came to death was an attempted assassination with a cane by ex-Army officer Robert Pate, who left a scar on her face and yet only ended up being transported to Tasmania. All of which goes to illustrate that Victorian Britain was not a very punitive place, and presumably there were outraged conservative commentators calling for some *real* sentences to be handed out.

The record for the most failed assassination is held either by Charles de Gaulle, Fidel Castro or King Hussein of Jordan, all of whom had over 20 attempts on their lives, although the history of the CIA's attempts to kill the Cuban leader has developed its own legend and the details are often unclear.

De Gaulle's survival is all the more impressive considering that the French president was 6'5", and yet they still couldn't hit the target. After the most famous attempt, by Pied-noirs extremists – made famous by the novel and film *The Day of The Jackal* - De Gaulle taunted his would-be killers by saying that they shot 'like pigs'. The ringleader, Jean-Marie Bastien-Thiry was executed by firing squad, the last Frenchman to do so.

In his memoirs, *Uneasy Lies the Head*, Jordan's King Hussein recalled some of the various attempts on his life, starting when he was just 15 and standing beside his grandfather King Abdullah in Jerusalem. After killing Abdullah, the gunman took aim at the grandson too but a medal on his chest deflected the bullet. He recalled that 'without doubt my grandfather's insistence that I wear my uniform saved my life'.

This was just the start of his troubles. In 1955 the king's car was strafed by bullets, but he had switched cars just moments earlier. In the spring of 1957 there was an attempt to assassinate him and declare a republic, and during the fighting he recalled how he 'felt the heat of the bullets' as they raced past him.

In 1958 Syrian jets tried to shoot him down as he was travelling to Switzerland. Hussein, a keen airman, was being flown by his trusted British pilot Jock Dalglish, who successfully evaded the attacks with death-defying aerobatics. Landing safely in Amman, the King turned to Dalglish, smiled and said 'Let's have some breakfast.'

In April 1961 the royal chef, who had been recruited by the Syrians, poisoned Hussein's food, a scheme that was uncovered when several cats at the palace turned up dead (Hussein was very fond of the creatures). The following year there was a plot by a housekeeper, again recruited by the Syrians and Egyptians, to inject acid into the nose drops Hussein used for treating sinusitis. The king was alerted when an accidental drip fell on the floor and burned it.

In Britain, Margaret Thatcher narrowly survived an assassination attempt at the hands of the IRA in the Brighton bombing of 1985. Afterwards the terrorists issued a now famous statement: ‘Today we were unlucky, but remember we have only to be lucky once, you will have to be lucky always.’

She continued to remain lucky, and Perceval remains the only British prime minister to be assassinated, at the hands of disgruntled failed businessman John Bellingham. Bellingham’s descendent Henry was a Conservative MP under David Cameron, leading to banterous exchanges in the House. Back in 1997 he had been denied a place in Parliament after narrowly losing the North West Norfolk constituency when 5% of the vote went to a UKIP candidate – Roger Perceval, descendent of the slain prime minister.

More recently, gunmen tried to kill Imran Khan in 2022, the same year in which Argentinian leader Cristian de Kirchner survived a gun attack. There was an attempt on Japanese prime minister Fumio Kishida last year; in May Slovakian prime minister Robert Fico was lucky to survive.

Successful assassinations have certainly had consequences – 1914 most of all – but failed attempts are less clear. In tyrannical regimes like the Soviet Union and, to a lesser extent, Mussolini’s Italy, they have certainly resulted in greater paranoia and repression. The Gunpowder Plot in England led to the creation of Guy Fawkes Night as an annual festivity and further imbedded the idea of Papists as traitors, but the consequences of its success would have been enormous, and probably catastrophic for the country’s Catholics.

Perhaps the most consequential assassination attempt was the so-called Orsini affair when Italian nationalists tried to kill Emperor Napoleon III in January 1858. Napoleon and the Empress Eugénie were on their way to the theatre to watch Rossini’s opera *William Tell* when three bombs were thrown at their carriage; eight people were killed and 150 wounded.

The incident, unusually for a failed assassination, helped to achieve its goal by spurring the French Emperor - viewed by the extremists as blocking unification - to lead an army into Italy and drive the Austrians out.

The incident also shook France’s relations with Britain, which had no real rules regarding foreign radicals and had become the home of various extremists wanted on the continent, linked to a group of English radicals known as the ‘Muswell Hill Brigade.’ The French demanded that the British expel the foreign extremist (a pattern that would remerge at the turn of our century when London was nicknamed ‘Londonistan’ by French security officials), and while Lord Palmerston’s government fell as a result, all the trials ended without convictions and Britain did not extradite the Italians.

Felice Orsini, the head of the plot, was executed by guillotine, while one of the other assassins, Camillo di Rudino, had his death sentence commuted to hard labour and later went to the United States where he fought with Custer in the Battle of the Little Bighorn.

The violence also made the French Emperor far more popular, and that seems to be the general trend of failed assassinations. After Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro was stabbed in September 2018, his polls improved. Reagan's approval rating shot up by 22% after the assassination attempt, although this didn't last. Whether Trump becomes more popular after the events in Butler, Pennsylvania, we can't be sure, although Nate Silver thinks cautiously that it probably will. It's worth noting that Teddy Roosevelt lost the presidential election to Woodrow Wilson later that year, largely due to a split in the Republican Party.

Certainly, Trump's response – his defiance, courage and seemingly miraculous ability to survive – will have raised some people's opinion of him, although few Americans sit on the fence exactly. Whatever other qualities a politician displays, courage remains among the most impressive. Having said that, perhaps no one else has displayed such grace under fire as then Prince Charles in Australia in 1994, after two blanks were fired at him and he responded with only a brief touch of his cufflinks. One mustn't make a scene, after all.