



Assassins and their Victims: who Assassinates whom?

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Assassination is the killing of a political figure such as a prime minister, president or king. It goes back to the beginning of recorded history. Many cases show that it does change the course of history. There are three groups of assassins: political; psychiatric; or Lone Wolf (marginal or fringe characters). The latter group provokes the most speculation. While some believe it is for fame, albeit brief, their motives are often confused, difficult to understand and politically shallow. We look at their characteristics. Aside from excluding over psychosis, psychiatry has little to offer in explaining their motives. A review of the phenomenon is presented.

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Abstract

Assassination is the killing of a political figure such as a prime minister, president or king. It goes back to the beginning of recorded history. Many cases show that it does change the course of history. There are three groups of assassins: political; psychiatric; or Lone Wolf (marginal or fringe characters). The latter group provokes the most speculation. While some believe it is for fame, albeit brief, their motives are often confused, difficult to understand and politically shallow. We look at their characteristics. Aside from excluding over psychosis, psychiatry has little to offer in explaining their motives.

A review of the phenomenon is presented.



The attempted assassination of former president Trump has brought back attention to the eternal question: who assassinates whom and do they change the course of history?

The term assassin is of Italian and French origin, derived from the Arabic term *hashshasin* (hashish), referring to a murderous 11th to 13th century group in the Middle East. The evidence that they used hashish is now discounted.¹

Assassination is the killing of a political leader such as a prime minister, president or king. While most definitions include other politicians, the killing of lesser figures is probably better regarded as political murder. Some would argue the distinction makes classification of the assassins easier. So-called Targeted Killing, organised by governments (USA, Russia, Israel are prominent), remains controversial, not least because of the ethical issues involved.² Also excluded are celebrity killings which arise from a different phenomenon (erotomania).

Assassination goes back to the beginning of recorded history and there are plenty of examples of Roman tribunes, Arab caliphs, Ottoman sultans, European monarchs, US presidents, and scores of prime ministers, Julius Caesar perhaps being the most well-known.

Considering the belief that assassination changes history, the prime example cited is the murder of Archduke Frans Ferdinand and his wife by Gavrilo Princip, the spark which started the First World War – although the Great Powers had been steadily heading in that direction for some time. Would American involvement in Vietnam have continued if John Kennedy had not been assassinated? ³ It is widely believed that the killing of Dr Hendrik Verwoerd, the South African architect of apartheid, by Dimitri Tsafendas, was an important step towards the eventual dismantling of the repressive system of segregation.⁴ Middle Eastern history certainly was changed by the shootings of Yitzhak Rabin and Anwar Sadat Sharon.⁵

¹ Martin Booth. *Cannabis: A History*. Macmillan, 2004.

²Koven, S. G., & Perez, A. F. (2021). Ethics of Targeted Killings and Assassinations. *Public Integrity*, 24 (3), 319–328.

³Andrew MacDowall. Villain or hero? Sarajevo is split on archduke's assassin Gavrilo Princip. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/27/gavrilo-princip-sarajevo-divided-archduke-franz-ferdinand-assassination>. Accessed on 3 August 2024.

⁴Robert M. Kaplan. *The Man Who Killed Apartheid: The Life of Dimitri Tsafendas*: by Harris Dousemetzis. Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2018. ISBN 978 1 431 42754 3. Book Review. *South African Historical Journal*, Volume 71, 2019 - Issue 3.

⁵ Jonathan Freedland. The assassination of Yitzhak Rabin: 'He never knew it was one of his people who shot him in the back'.



Franklin Ford notes that assassinations have “demonstrated the capacity for affecting, often in the most dramatic fashion, situations which, in the absence of lethal violence, might conceivably have developed very differently.”

There are the near-miss attempts that can only be considered in counterfactual terms. George Elser narrowly missed killing Hitler in 1939 – the consequences of which can only be imagined. Charles de Gaulle had 33 attempts, all unsuccessful, by the OAS when he granted Algerian independence.

Assassins fall into several categories:

a) Political agents: These are members of a political organisation with a defined agenda. There is the logic that it is easier to kill a leader than mount a full insurrection, although this is often what follows. Machiavelli pointed out how unstable conspiracies can become, to say nothing about often leaking.⁶

During the first century Jewish extremist groups—the Zealots and the Sicarii—used assassinations to provoke a revolutionary uprising against Roman rule in Palestine.

Gavrilo Princip was a member of the Serbian Black Hand society. There are numerous other examples, one being Al Qaeda’s killing of their opponent Ahmad Shah Massoud two days before 9/11.⁷

b) Psychiatric agents: These are assassins who are psychotic (or occasionally demented). The most famous – and legally significant – is the attempt of Daniel M’Naughten to shoot the Prime Minister, but instead mistook him for his secretary John Drummond who later died from medical mistreatment. M’Naughten, originally a joiner from Glasgow, had become increasingly paranoid in reaction to the political ruckus about repealing the Corn Laws. After the shooting he did not attempt to deny what he had done. At the court it was agreed that he was insane and therefore not responsible for his actions. The public uproar, headed by Queen Victoria, who had a previous attempt made on her life, took the matter to the Law Lords who

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/31/assassination-yitzhak-rabin-never-knew-his-people-shot-him-in-back>. Accessed 3 August 2024.

⁶ Michael Burleigh. *Day of the Assassins: A History of Political Assassination*. Picador.

⁷ Barry Bearak. Rebel Chief Who Fought The Taliban Is

Buried.<https://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/17/world/rebel-chief-who-fought-the-taliban-is-buried.html>.

Accessed 17/08/2024.



defined what are known now as the M'Naughten Rules.⁸ These require that an individual suffers from a “defect of reason”, which is caused by a “disease of the mind”, and, as a result, he or she does not know the “nature and quality” of the act or that it was wrong. This became law in many Anglophone countries, although the arcane language has often been revised. M'Naughten, whose mental state never changed, was kept in the Bethlem and Broadmoor Hospitals until he died.⁹

The late nineteenth century (1880-1910) was the classical age of assassination of (mostly) royalty by anarchists, nationalists and nihilists who managed to include the Empress Elizabeth of Austro-Hungary on their list.¹⁰ Some of the anarchist assassins seem to have had psychiatric problems, making for a crossover of categories which is not uncommon.

The first of four US presidential assassinations was the killing of Abraham Lincoln by John Wilkes Booth. A conspiracist and fantasist, no one has suggested that Booth was insane but he was an alcoholic and was drinking heavily in the afternoon before he shot Lincoln.

The second and third assassinations, the only presidential killings that proceeded to court, were by Charles Guiteau, who killed President James Garfield, and Leon Czolgosz, who killed President William McKinley. Both men were psychotic (although this did not help them at their trials and they were duly executed). Interestingly, a father (Dr Charles Leonard Spitzka) provided medical evidence at the trial of the first and his son (Dr Anthony Spitzka) at the second.¹¹

John Hinckley's failed assassination of President Reagan arose from an obsession with a film actress and the influence of the movie *Taxi Driver*. He was found not guilty by virtue of insanity and institutionalised for three decades.¹²

c) Lone Wolf (or, in the vernacular, Lone Nut) agents: These are marginal or isolated characters who are not members of a group. They often proclaim a vague

⁸ Robert M. Kaplan. Daniel M'Naughten: The Man Who Changed the Law on Insanity. *Psychiatric Times*, Vol 40, Issue 1.

⁹ Ailderidge P. Why was McNaughton sent to Bethlem? In: West DJ, Walk A, eds. *Daniel McNaughton: His Trial and the Aftermath*. Gaskell Books/Royal College of Psychiatrists; 1977:100-112.

¹⁰ Michael Burleigh. *Day of the Assassins: A History of Political Assassination*. *Ibid*.

¹¹ D E Haines (1995) Spitzka and Spitzka on the brains of the assassins of presidents, *Journal of the History of the Neurosciences: Basic and Clinical Perspectives*, 4:3-4, 236-266.

¹² John Hinckley Jr. to begin living full-time in Virginia Sept. 10. *Fox News*. September 12, 2016.



or inchoate political agenda that on scrutiny does not amount to much or make sense but are not psychotic. Indeed, such individuals can never convincingly articulate what drives them. The commonest explanation for their behaviour is the “15-minutes of Fame” scenario but this is only a superficial thesis.

Lee Harvey Oswald may be the index case.¹³ He had a disrupted childhood with a mother who may have been disturbed herself and moved him to 25 different schools. Sent to a psychiatrist for truancy when he was 13, the finding was that he had “definite traits of dangerousness... was intensely self-centred... and had a vivid fantasy life turning round the topics of omnipotence and power” requiring prompt treatment, to which his mother responded by just moving to another school.¹⁴ Despite picking up a cod Marxism when he was 16, Oswald followed his brothers in joining the Marines. He did not have a good military career, being court-martialed twice, once after shooting himself in the hand with an illegal revolver, was taunted as a homosexual by soldiers and would tell everyone about his communist beliefs. He eventually got a dishonourable discharge when he lied that he had to look after his ailing mother. In fact what he did was borrow money from her and go to the Soviet Union. The Russians were less than interested but their hand was forced when he tried to commit suicide. Regarding him as unstable and having little useful information to offer them, far from getting a luxury flat like the other spies, he was given a job as a lathe operator in a Minsk factory, remaining under constant surveillance by the KGB. When his minor celebrity status wore off Oswald, following his usual pattern, became disillusioned and moved back to the US with wife Marina. It was a loveless marriage and likely she married him as a ticket to get out of Russia.

Violent to his wife, sexually distant and, as usual, remaining disgruntled, he moved from job to job and decided that Castro’s Cuba now represented the kind of communism he wanted. Refused a visa (his instability was easy to pick up), he seems to have decided that killing a prominent figure would ensure his passage there as a hero and first fired at – and missed – a notorious right-winger, General Edwin Walker. Then, through an incredible series of coincidences that put him in the Texas School Book Depository above the road where the Kennedy procession drove, he killed the President. Probably the best assessment comes from Michael Burleigh who described Oswald as a delusional autodidact.

¹³ For the definitive story on the assassination, see: Gerald Posner. *Case Closed: Lee Harvey Oswald and the Assassination of JFK*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing, 1993.

¹⁴ Robert M Kaplan (2024). “Lee Harvey Oswald”; chapter in *The King who Strangled his Psychiatrist and Other Dark Tales*. In press.



While best regarded as a secondary assassin, Jack Ruby, who then killed Oswald, would also fit into this category. As a fringe character and serial failure he had similarities with Oswald. The Jewish Ruby overcompensated to fit into Dallas by wearing cowboy clothes and assuming a macho image. Devastated by Kennedy's death, it was only a series of chance events that led to his impulsive shooting. Debates continue as to his state of mind at the time. He was full of amphetamines to lose weight, something which would have increased aggression and had a disinhibitory effect. Attempts to prove he was epileptic failed. After he was jailed he became overtly psychotic, fearing a conspiracy to kill all the Jews, again raising questions regarding his psychiatric status before the killing.

Both Sirhan Sirhan (Robert Kennedy) and James Earl Ray (Martin Luther King) were marginal characters with superficial, if not deeply confused political ideas, raising doubts about the extent that they truly believed in them. Sirhan, who seemed to have no goals in life, objected to Kennedy's support for Israel, although this was not a prominent feature of his political agenda. Ray spent the rest of his life claiming that a mysterious Raoul had done the killing but was essentially a solo operator.¹⁵ On the run from the authorities at the time, he supported segregation but was hardly politically active. His hopes to receive money from right-wingers, achieve recognition and fame probably played a part.

While African politics are chronically unstable with frequent coups and executions, assassination of political leaders is surprisingly uncommon. It says something that the inflexible architect of apartheid, Dr Hendrik Verwoerd had two attempts on his life. David Pratt, an epileptic and psychotic businessman, shot him in the face in 1960 but Verwoerd was barely harmed, his survival enhancing his messianic beliefs.¹⁶ He was not so lucky in 1966 when Dimitri Tsafendas, a mixed-race parliamentary messenger, stabbed him to death in the parliament. Once Verwoerd's ideological extremism was gone, it was a case of the government just hanging on. In 1994 the game was up and democracy was introduced.

There is an unusual twist in the tale. Tsafendas claimed that a worm in his gut had told him to kill the prime minister.¹⁷ This was readily accepted by John Vorster, who

¹⁵ Although two of his brothers may have also played a part. See: Gerald L. Posner. *Killing the Dream: James Earl Ray and the Assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Random House, 1998.

¹⁶ Loammi Wolf. David Beresford Pratt: Die mens agter die sluipmoordpoging. *LitNet Akademies* Jaargang 9(3), Desember 2012.

¹⁷ Verwoerd Killer Is Called Insane as Trial Starts. *New York Times*; Oct 18, 1966; pg. 10.



was to succeed Verwoerd, and Hendrik van den Berg, the sinister head of security, as it was their lapses that had allowed Tsafendas back into the country and employed as a messenger despite his mixed-race status, history of imprisonment and psychiatric admissions. The psychiatrists who saw Tsafendas readily agreed and the judge found that he was insane. He was kept, punitively, not in a hospital but in Pretoria Central Jail for decades until moved to an institution by order of Nelson Mandela.

After his death the truth emerged in a new biography. Far from a deranged psychotic, Tsafendas was intelligent, sociable, influenced by Marxist ideas and appalled by the Holocaust and racial oppression. He travelled widely as a seaman, often being arrested. He learned from another internee that to claim he had a talking tapeworm would get him moved from jail to hospital and had used this before. It suited the government to portray him as a peripatetic madman rather than a motivated communist determined to remove the racist prime minister and the psychiatrists who examined him did not think to challenge this idea.¹⁸

Information so far released about the alleged Trump shooter is limited and will almost certainly be changed later. Nothing has been said of a difficult or traumatic upbringing but, unsurprisingly, he was described as a loner who wore hunting clothes to school and was bullied. His political ideas, as expected, were in flux, having previously had contact with the Democrats before changing to the Republican Party. A preoccupation with guns and loading his car with explosives could indicate an affinity with the extreme right survivalist movement, a group that sees itself at war with the Federal government and is prepared to go to any lengths to defend gun rights. This would put him at the end of a trajectory starting with the Waco disaster and Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City bomber.¹⁹

It all brings us back to the issue of marginal, strange or eccentric characters who become assassins: how to predict their potential, good or bad? One may be a future Picasso or Einstein, but who can tell which way the next will go? They may publicise their ideas, if not their intentions, but this is easily lost in the vast internet white noise that is replete with extremism. Should attention be raised by such cases however, rapid vigilance and intervention is required

¹⁸ Robert M. Kaplan. *The Man Who Killed Apartheid: The Life of Dimitri Tsafendas*: By Harris Dousemetzis. Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2018. *Ibid*.

¹⁹ Kaplan RM. Timothy McVeigh: Portrait of a Political Mass Murderer. *Joshua* 4. December 2023 10, 6.



Psychiatric assessment of such characters, invariably post-hoc, does not come up with much except to exclude conditions like schizophrenia. They are often found to have personality disorders, but this is a diagnosis of low validity and more often just a way of saying they are different from most people but in a way that is difficult to define. The closest explanation is that such individuals have extreme overvalued beliefs which constitute rigidly held non delusional beliefs, not a psychotic condition, and that may be as far as psychiatry can go with the issue.²⁰

Anders Breivik, the Norwegian mass murderer, underwent two lengthy psychiatric assessments.²¹ The first found that he was schizophrenic, but this finding was overturned in response to public outrage. The second assessment found that, although he had dysfunctional personality traits, Breivik was not psychotic, and he duly proceeded to trial and conviction.

In the end there is no easy way to predict which individuals will go to such lengths and it will remain a perennial problem. Of course removing the means of killing will make a big difference but who can expect America to ban easy access to assault weapons?

²⁰ Rahman T, Resnick PJ, Harry B. Anders Breivik: Extreme Beliefs Mistaken for Psychosis. *J Am Acad Psychiatry Law*. 2016 Mar;44(1):28-35.

²¹ Kaplan, R.M. (2024). Forensic psychiatry on trial: The Quisling, Hamsun and Breivik cases. *Sushruta J Health Pol* vol 16; Issue 1: art 4



About the Author



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