

Introduction

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<http://www.britishcouncil.org/learnenglish-podcasts-themes.htm>

This support pack contains the following materials:

- The article that you can listen to in the podcast
- An optional language activity based on the article
- Links to other activities on the LearnEnglish website on this theme (assassination).

Read the article

Assassination

by Richard Sidaway

My heart burnt within me with indignation and grief; we could think of nothing else. All night long we had only snatches of sleep, waking up perpetually to the sense of a great shock and grief. Every one is feeling the same. I never knew so universal a feeling.

This was the reaction of Elizabeth Gaskell, an English writer, on hearing of the shooting of US President Abraham Lincoln in 1865; but it could well describe the feelings of millions on November 22nd 1963 when another US president fell victim to an assassin's bullet. The event so etched itself into the collective memory that years after people could remember exactly where they were and what they were doing when they heard the news. There are few other types of historical moment that affect so many people in quite this way.

When in Rome

Back in the days of the Roman Empire, being the top dog was just as risky a business and assassination was an occupational hazard. If you take a look at the long list of emperors who met their death at the hands of others, you wonder what made the job so attractive. In the period between 284 and 41 BC, more than half of the 40 or so emperors came to a premature and violent end while in office, often at the hands of the soldiers who were supposed to protect them - from Heliogabalus down to Claudius and Julius Caesar, not forgetting Caligula this very week in AD 41.

Where it all began

The earliest known examples of assassination may be in Iran, where three Kings were done away with after palace intrigue in the 5th century

BC. The father of Alexander the Great, Phillip of Macedon, received his coup de grâce in similar fashion a century later. The word itself is supposed to derive from an 11th century religious sect in Iran called the Assassins or Hashishim, who saw it as their duty to eliminate enemies in this way, their name coming possibly from their habit of eating hashish.

Headcount

Throughout history, political or religious succession has often been a bloody affair. In virtually every society, the phenomenon repeats itself. In the United States, four presidents have been assassinated, most recently of course John F Kennedy on that day in Dallas, Texas in 1963. In Russia three Tsars have perished in the same way. In Italy seven Popes, in Egypt, one President and two Prime Ministers, in France three kings, including the last...or was that merely execution?

Little triggers

So what exactly constitutes an assassination? The word always implies the murder of someone important, usually involved in politics. And the assassin is sometimes doing it for money, but more often for a cause. The Anarchists of late 19th century Europe saw it as a legitimate political weapon which would cause the downfall of the whole ruling hierarchy: President Carnot of France, the Empress of Austria, and King Umberto I of Italy were all sacrificed to this philosophy, although the edifice refused to crumble. Political extremists of the Far Left followed the same path in Italy and Germany in the 1970s. At certain points in history, however, such acts can set off a far larger chain of violence, as occurred after the slaying of the

Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austro-Hungary in 1914 or the Prime Minister of Rwanda in 1994.



Democratisation of death

The demise of absolute rulers in the 20th century hasn't put an end to this type of selective killing. Prime Minister was just as dangerous a position to occupy as king or emperor before it; Afghanistan, Burundi, India, Israel, Japan, Jordan, Lebanon, Pakistan, Rumania, South Africa, and Sri Lanka are among the nations that have had at least one PM assassinated at some point. A certain ruler of the United Kingdom narrowly escaped death from a bomb meant for her in 1984.

Fair game?

Political activists are also seen as legitimate targets for assassination by those who disagree with their views. Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Chico Mendes immediately spring to mind. More recently, it is powerful men in the world of business and law who have become prey to the dedicated assassin. In Europe, since the 1980s, German industrialists, Greek ship owners, Spanish bank directors and Italian judges have all been bumped off.

Hidden hands

Other states are sometimes involved in assassination by proxy: a prime example being SS leader Heydrich in Czechoslovakia during WWII, killed by resistance fighters on the orders of the UK government intelligence service. The involvement of foreign powers is suspected but still unproven in other cases: Salvador Allende, Prime Minister of Chile and Samora Machel, President of Mozambique, are but two; Belgium has now apologised for the part its intelligence

services played in the death in 1961 of Patrice Lumumba, PM of Congo.

Give us the tools...

And how has the assassin plied his trade? In ancient times, the knife was favoured for a quick end and poisoning for a slower lingering death, while in modern times it is usually the gun, but not only. The bomb, the plane crash, the ice-pick and the exploding cigar have all been employed. And as for that infamous Russian personal lifestyle coach, Rasputin, poisoning, shooting, beating and drowning were all apparently necessary before he finally gave up the ghost.

The ones that got away

Which brings me to the subject of assassinations that failed. Cuba's Fidel Castro must hold the record for the political leader who has survived the most attempts to get rid of him. He has employed a food taster for decades as did Roman emperors of old. In England, one plot that failed to kill King James I and the entire parliament in 1605 is still commemorated to this day every November with fireworks and bonfires to symbolise the explosives the conspirators tried to use.

Inexplicable

And what about those public figures who were targeted out of the blue? I have always thought it rather bizarre that anyone would want to murder John Lennon or Andy Warhol, not to mention Olof Palme, the Prime Minister, and recently Anna Lindh, the Foreign Minister, of Sweden, one of the world's most peaceful societies. It just goes to show you don't have to be a tyrant or involved in a power struggle to be the victim of a madman.

The grassy knoll and the patsy

One persistent feature of assassinations are the conspiracy theories that go with them - did the marksman really act alone? Conspiracies are not difficult to construct. Ask yourself who would have wanted the victim dead and then collect a few facts about the crime that don't quite tally. Add in the obvious point that high-ranking figures are often involved with the secret services and have access to sensitive information that ordinary citizens are not allowed to see, and you have yourself a very fertile mixture which can keep those with an active imagination busy for years .

By the content of their character

Whatever the true circumstances surrounding their death, many high profile figures live on long after they are taken from us in so sudden and shocking a manner. I leave you with the portentous words of Martin Luther King spoken on the night before he died. His life is now celebrated in the USA by a public holiday on the third Monday of January every year.

Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And he's allowed me to go to the mountain. And I've looked over, and I've seen the promised land! I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the promised land.

After reading

Exercise 1

Death is referred to in many ways in the article. Can you match up the beginnings of the 10 expressions in the left-hand column with the ends in the right-hand column?

1. Fall	to a premature/violent end
2. Meet	bumped off
3. Come	your coup de grace
4. be done	from us
5. Receive	rid of
6. Be taken	victim to
7. Become	away with
8. Be	the ghost
9. give up	your death
10. Get	prey to

More activities on this topic

You'll find links to all the following activities connected to the theme of assassination at:

<http://www.britishcouncil.org/learnenglish-central-themes-assassination.htm>

- **Word games: Idioms with 'kill'**. Practise idiomatic expressions using the word '**kill**' by completing a jigsaw puzzle.
- **Story: A Small Family Business**. "One last job", thought Jack Robino. "One last job, then I'll finally retire." Jack knew that it was time to give up working and go and collect his pension like other people of his age. But would his last job work out?
- **History**: The following articles are available: Aldo Moro killing, Malcom X killing, Oswald killing, Pope killing attempt, Rabin killing, Reagan killing attempt, Robert Kennedy killing, Sadat killing
- **Trivia**: Everything you (n)ever wanted to know about assassination.
- There is also an assassination-related cartoon and some carefully selected external links.

Answers to activity 1: 1. fall victim to; 2. meet your death; 3. come to a premature/violent end; 4. be done away with; 5. receive your coup de grace; 6. be taken from us; 7. become prey to; 8. be bumped off; 9. give up the ghost; 10. get rid of