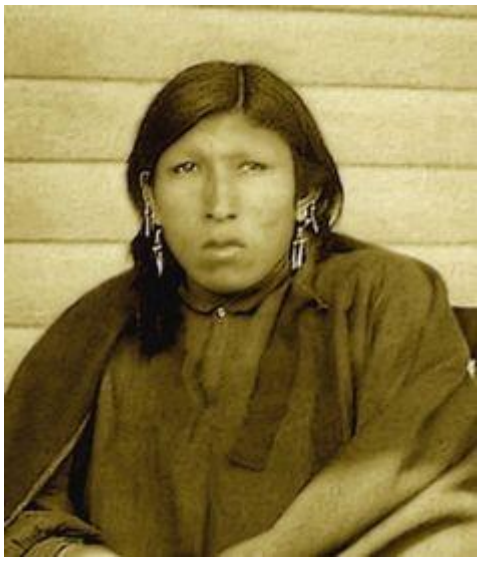

Martyrdom (Part III)

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I have written elsewhere about Martin Luther King's call to martyrdom, his exhorting a crowd of black citizens in Montgomery, Alabama: "You must say, somehow, 'I don't have much money—I don't have much education—I may not be able to read or write—but I have the capacity to die!" These days when we think of calls to martyrdom, we think of Muslims, suicide bombers. And we may note stark differences: King's martyrs were not to kill but only to be killed, beaten, or jailed, with the idea that newspaper and television reports of these events would help win greater rights for black Southerners, as indeed they did.

Those of us who are far from engaging in such courageous, desperate acts wonder about how others can come by the courage, or the craziness, to accept such a role—be this presenting one's body to be beaten, perhaps to death, by policemen or vigilantes, or blowing oneself up in the middle of a crowd of strangers.

In an essay of some years ago, the Native American writer N. Scott Momaday tells of the martyrdom, or quest for martyrdom, of Plenty Horses, a young Sioux (or Lakota) warrior.

> On January 7, 1891, nine days after the massacre at Wounded Knee, [he] shot a popular army officer, Lieutenant Edward W. Casey, who wanted to enter the Sioux village at No Water for the purpose of talking peace. The killing appeared to be unprovoked. Plenty Horses shot Casey in the back at close quarters.

Momaday provides some background:

> As a boy Plenty Horses had been sent to Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania, the boarding school founded in 1879 by Richard Henry Pratt, whose obsession was to "kill the Indian and save the man." Carlisle was the

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> model upon which an extensive system of boarding schools for Indians was based. The schools were prisons in effect, where Indian children were exposed to brutalities, sometimes subtle, sometimes not, in the interest of converting them to the white man's life.

The story continues, and perhaps readers may find themselves making comparisons to the circumstances of young Arab men in the current period. Of his experience at Carlisle, Plenty Horses said:

> I found that the education I had received was of no benefit to me. There was no chance to get employment, nothing for me to do whereby I could earn my board and clothes, no opportunity to learn more and remain with the whites. It disheartened me and I went back to live as I had before going to school.

Apparently when he returned to his own people,

> they did not fully accept him. He had lost touch with the old ways; he had lived among whites, and the association had diminished him. He rejected the white world, but he had been exposed to it, and it had left its mark upon him. . . . His being had become tentative; he lived in a kind of limbo, a state of confusion, depression, and desperation.

At his murder trial Plenty Horses was passive. He expected to be hanged. He said later:

> I am an Indian. Five years I attended Carlisle and was educated in the ways of the white man . . . I was lonely. I shot the lieutenant so I might make a place for myself among my people. Now I am one of them. I shall be hung and the Indians will bury me as a warrior. They will be proud of me. I am satisfied.

Plenty Horse was not hung. George Shiras, Jr., the presiding judge in the case, halted the proceedings and instructed the jury to find that around the time of the killing a state of war existed between the Lakota and the United States and that the skirmishes between the Lakota warriors and the U.S. Army were actually battles. "If they were not," Judge Shiras stated on record, "it would be hard to justify the killings of the Indians at Wounded Knee and other places."

An Afterword

Though not a martyr, Russian opposition leader Boris Nemtsov was certainly a courageous man. For all we know he may have been on the CIA payroll or otherwise caught up in the shady world of power politics. But what he was—or also was, besides a human being—was a symbol of the possibility in Russia for outspoken opposition.

Going back to a first visit in 1969, I have long taken an interest in Russia and have visited, lived in, the country many times. Nemtsov was assassinated around the time I was working on this little piece. The odd thought came to me, a non-religious person, that now was a time to pray for Russia.

It might therefore be asked if, after the massacre at Wounded Knee, or at the time of Malcolm X's or Martin Luther King's assassination, or, say, after Secretary of State Colin Powell lied to the United Nations Security Council about Iraq having weapons of mass destruction—did someone in Russia, or perhaps more than one, think to pray for the USA?

Credits and References

Image at top is a close up of a photograph of Plenty Horses by John C. H. Grabill. It may be found in the John C. H. Grabill Collection of the Library of Congress.

N. Scott Momaday, "The American West and the Burden of Belief." In ***The Man Made of Words: Essays, Stories, Passages*** (St. Martin's Griffin, 1998).

The previous discussions of martyrdom:

- I: **Snowden/Jesus**. Montaigbakhtinian.com, 31 January 2015.
- II: **I may not be able to read or write—but I have the capacity to die!** *Zeteo is Reading*, 11 February 2015.