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**ASSASSINATION BEFORE ASSASSINS:
A DISCUSSION PAPER
*Michael Gray-Fow*¹**

Introduction

Strictly speaking *assassination* is a neutral term. It tells us nothing about the motives or results of the deed, nor whether the victim was good or bad. There is a broad assumption that only persons of high public stature qualify to be described as assassinated as opposed to being simply murdered, and traditionally the term has been largely confined to heads of state or major government figures.² As such history books have no problem in going back to the earliest times and listing a range of people, usually rulers, who were assassinated. Almost everyone knows that Julius Caesar was *assassinated*; not just killed, slain, or murdered, but assassinated. Allowing for the usual issues of finding exact (or as nearly exact as possible) equivalents in the Latin of Caesar's day it ought therefore to be easy to find in our sources the Roman word for *assassinated*. Yet it cannot be done. There simply was no classical word equivalent in Greek or Latin that related solely to the killing of exalted personages. Herodotus used the same verb for the killing of an Athenian tyrant as he did for Persian priests slaughtering animals. Tacitus used the same verb for the murder of a Parthian king as for the killing of ordinary Roman soldiers.³ Without a distinct term that applied only to the slaying of kings, rulers, and the like there would seem to have been no corresponding concept that distinguished such killings as *killings* from the killing of ordinary mortals and even animals.

Despite (according to Shakespeare) having 'such divinity as doth hedge a king', there was no shortage of rulers in the ancient world who were murdered, including at least three (divine)

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² Yet one authority refers to John Lennon being assassinated. *The Oxford Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* E. Knowles (ed.), (Oxford: 2000) p.597.

³ Herodotus, *The History of Herodotus*, 41BC, trans G. Rawlinson, 1.140, 5.55 (compare also 2.100, 9.104) available at <http://classics.mit.edu/Herodotus/history.html> [accessed 19 November 2013]; Tacitus, *The Histories*, 109AD, trans A.J. Church and W.J. Brodribb, available at <http://classics.mit.edu/Tacitus/histories.html> [accessed 19 November 2013], 2.98; Tacitus, *Annals*, 109AD, trans A.J. Church and W.J. Brodribb, available at <http://classics.mit.edu/Tacitus/histories.html> [accessed 19 November 2013], 11.10. Compare with Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, IV: *Caius Caligula*, 121AD, trans J.C. Rolfe, 27.4, available at http://lexundria.com/suet_cal/0/ [accessed 19 November 2013]; *ibid*, V: *The Deified Claudius*, 44.2.

pharaohs.⁴ Most of the time, such killings were simply to replace the victim as ruler, and the motives ranged from personal ambition to somehow serving the public good (as conceived by the killers). Some killings were highly public, like that of Hipparchus at Athens (514 BC) or Julius Caesar at Rome (44BC), where the killers were either self-proclaimed or recognised as liberators from tyranny with statues or coins in their honour.⁵ Most however took place within the confines of the palace and were revealed only by the result, like the killing of Candaules of Lydia by his successor Gyges (c.680BC) or of the Roman emperor Claudius by his wife (AD54).⁶ Yet neither Gyges nor Claudius is usually described as having been *assassinated*, just murdered. To qualify as assassination killings would seem to need a public event.

Yet clearly to apply the word assassination to any killing in the ancient world is essentially anachronistic, both in the sense that a special terminology for the slaying of rulers did not exist and in the more literal sense that the word itself only arose much later. In fact the word begot the concept. The word *assassin* (whence all other forms) derived from a fanatical Ismaili sect derisively called *Hashishiyyun* which the crusaders encountered in the Holy Land and which supposedly got its name from the use of hashish in recruiting, and which specialised in the killing of rulers and leaders.⁷ Stories of the sect were spread by travellers and chroniclers like Benjamin of Tudela (1130-1173), William of Tyre (1130-1186), Joinville (1224-1317), and Marco Polo (1254-1324), but the use of their name for the killing of kings only spread slowly through the West. Even as late as the Renaissance it was a rare rhetorical coinage, occurring only once in Shakespeare (c.1564-1616).⁸ Only from this point on can we say that a special terminology existed in European languages for the killing of high exalted persons.

⁴ Teti, Amenemhet I, and (perhaps) Ramesses III. Teti founded Dynasty 6 and Amenemhet founded Dynasty 12 so lacked the aura of ancient legitimacy, while Ramesses III was only the second ruler of Dynasty 20. See N. Grimal, *A History of Ancient Egypt* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992) pp.81; 161; 276.

⁵ Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 10 vols, trans W. Jones and H. Ormerod (London: William Heineman, 1918), 1.5, available at <http://www.theoi.com/Text/Pausanias1A.html> [accessed 19 November 2013]; Plutarch, *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans: Marcus Brutus* 75AD, trans J. Dryden, 24.1, available at http://classics.mit.edu/Plutarch/d_brutus.html [accessed 19 November 2013]; D.L. Vagi, *Coinage and History of the Roman Empire* 2 vols (Sidney, OH: Coin World, 1999), I, p.59; vol.2, pp.197-200; J. Manca, S. Costello, & P. Bade (eds), *1000 Sculptures of Genius* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2007), p.38.

⁶ Herodotus, *History*, 1.8-14; Suetonius. *Deified Claudius*, 44.

⁷ S. Runciman, *A History of the Crusades* 2 vols (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965) 2, pp.119-20; P. Hitti, *A History of Syria* (New York: Macmillan, 1951) pp.610-11; W.B. Bartlett *The Assassins. The Story of Medieval Islam's Secret Sect* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2001) particularly pp.viii-xix; 247-248.

⁸ *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela* trans. and ed., M.N. Adler (London: Oxford University Press, 1907) p.416; William of Tyre, *History of Deeds Done Beyond the Sea*, 2 vols, trans. and ed. E.A. Babcock and A.C. Key (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943) 2, p.390; Geoffrey de Villehardouin and Jean de Joinville, *Memoirs and Chronicle of the Fourth Crusade* trans and ed. F. Marzials (London: J.M. Dent, 1908) pp.197; 248-51; R. Latham (ed.), *The Travels of Marco Polo* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958)

1 'Assassination' in Ancient History

However it would be fatuous to deny the usefulness of using the term assassination for killings in those ages before the word and its corresponding broad concept existed, given that it clearly conveys the sense we mean. At the same time, since it is an anachronistic usage, we need to apply those criteria we commonly use today when we describe a killing as an assassination. Primarily this means that the victim must be a ruler or leader and the killing must be sudden, public, and unexpected by the world at large. Motive is always an uncertain issue since the assassin's declared motive may not be the only one or even the main one. Thus while Harmodius and Aristogeiton were subsequently celebrated for striking against tyranny when they cut down Hipparchus, they were actually provoked by personal affronts and insults; and Caesar's assassin, Marcus Junius Brutus, may well have had mixed motives.⁹ In one geographical area at least however a major motive can be eliminated. In the ancient eastern monarchies before Greece and Rome no ruler was ever assassinated to change the form of government. Along with some pharaohs, many kings of the Hittites, Persians, Parthians, and other monarchies were murdered but only to replace them: no one ever thought of modifying or abolishing government by kings.¹⁰ Dynasties might be changed, usually after a succession of weak rulers.¹¹ In some instances the dynasty was retained even after assassinations, as with the Davidide line in Judah; while its northern neighbour Israel went through a rapid succession of fleeting dynasties.¹²

pp.40-2; William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* Act 1, Scene 7. Compare with R. Latham (ed.), *Revised Medieval Latin Word List from British and Irish Sources* (London: British Academy, 1965) p.33; Stephen Skinner, *Etymologicon Linguae Anglicanae* (London 1671) under 'assassinate'; R. Grandsaignes d'Hauterive *Dictionnaire D'Ancient Français* (Paris: Larousse, 1947) p.37; C. Mish (ed.), *Webster's Word Histories* (Springfield, Mass: Merriam-Webster, 1989) pp.23-4. Rabelais seems to have been the first French writer to use the term.

⁹ Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, 431BC, trans R. Crawley, 1.20, 6.54-57, at <http://classics.mit.edu/Thucydides/pelopwar.html> [accessed 19 November 2013]; Appian, *The Civil Wars*, vols 13-17 of *Roman History*, trans H. White, 2.16.112, available at <http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Appian/home.html> [accessed 19 November 2013].

¹⁰ Between c.1590-1400BC a succession of Hittite kings were either deposed or murdered along with their sons; seven of the eleven Achaemenid kings of Persia between 559-330BC were murdered; and five of the Arsacid kings of Parthia were murdered between 58BC and 7AD. See T. Bryce *The Kingdom of the Hittites* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998) pp.105-30; K. Farrokh, *Shadows in the Desert* (Oxford: Osprey Publishers, 2007) pp.52-108; 135-47; H. Muller, *Freedom in the Ancient World* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1961) pp.47-72.

¹¹ As in Egypt at the close of Dynasty 20. See D. Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times* (Ewing, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp.283-5.

¹² In the kingdom of Judah, Athaliah, Joash, and Amaziah were assassinated in succession (perhaps in 833BC, 803BC, and 786BC). See J. Miller and J. Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006) pp.347-52.

It was different with Greece and Rome. The Greek cities had originally been ruled by kings, replaced in most cases by oligarchies, occasionally tyrants, and sometimes republics. Rome had also begun with kings, then a republic dominated by aristocratic families whose monopoly of power was gradually counterbalanced by popularly elected tribunes. After Augustus (27BC–14AD) established himself as the first emperor, it continued to be ruled by emperors but the possibility of restoring the old republic was still canvassed as late as 41AD.¹³ Both Greek and Roman thought understood that in principle, forms of government could be changed, and assassination was a possible beginning.

It has been argued that assassination is usually understood to mean the sudden and highly public killing of rulers where this is not expected (though it may be much desired) by the people at large. Plots and conspiracies abounded around many rulers in the ancient world, and most unpopular ones took at times extraordinary measures to protect themselves. Dionysius I, Tyrant of Syracuse (405-367BC) slept surrounded by water, with access only by a narrow bridge he raised when he retired, and was shaved only by his daughters. The Roman emperor Domitian (81-96AD) lined his colonnades with shiny stone so he could see what was going on behind his back, and complained no-one believed rulers when they suspected plots until they were killed.¹⁴ Dionysius survived, Domitian did not.

Once the example of assassination was set in a state, however, it could be repeated. The ancient monarchy at Corinth ended with the assassination of Telestes in 747BC. There, after a period of oligarchic rule, a tyranny was established by Cypselus which was terminated with the assassination of his grandson, Psammetichus (c.582BC). Corinth had never really tried democracy but the oligarchy was not unpopular. When Timophanes tried to become tyrant there around 365BC, he was killed by his brother, Timoleon, with popular approval.¹⁵ At ultra-

¹³ When Caligula was assassinated, the Senate debated restoring the republic, but while they dithered the Praetorians acted and made Claudius emperor. Cassius Dio, *Roman History* c.222AD, trans E. Carey, 60.1-4, available at <http://lexundria.com/dio/0/cy> [accessed 19 November 2013]. Compare with R. Syme, *Tacitus* 2 vols, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 2, p.548.

¹⁴ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* trans, and ed. A. Peabody, 5.20, available at http://archive.org/stream/cicerostusculand00ciceiala/cicerostusculand00ciceiala_djvu.txt [accessed 19 November 2013]; Suetonius, *Twelve Caesars*, VIII: *Domitian*, trans. and ed. R. Graves, 14.4; 21, available at <http://www.ourcivilisation.com/smartboard/shop/suetnius/domitian.htm> [accessed 19 November 2013].

¹⁵ Diodorus Siculus, *Fragments* 30-60AD, trans. and ed. F.R. Walton, 7.9.2-6, available at http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Diodorus_Siculus/loose_fragments*.html [accessed 19 November 2013]; Cornelius Nepos, *Lives of Eminent Commanders*, XX: *Timoleon*, trans. and ed. J.R. Selby, 1.4 available at <http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/nepos.htm#Timoleon> [accessed 19 November 2013].

conservative Sparta, assassination was used to preserve the archaic governmental system. When the reforming king Agis IV tried to rationalise the way things were run, he was killed by reactionaries (241BC).¹⁶

For the more daring assassins, the more public the place for their deed, the better. In 365BC, the tyrant Euphron of Sicyon was cut down by opponents from his city while addressing the authorities at Thebes (though his supporters at home still managed to arrange a public funeral for him there). Jason of Pherae, *Tagus* of Thessaly, was slain by seven youths while reviewing his troops (370BC); Philip II of Macedon was stabbed to death at a public celebration (333BC); and Nabis, tyrant of Sparta, was slain in the middle of his army (192BC).¹⁷

Rome's legendary history of early kings included one possible and two definite assassinations.¹⁸ However, until the last century BC, the republic which followed the period of kingship managed to avoid dominant single leaders and hence assassinations; though traditionalist forces had no hesitation in striking down perceived threats to the established order. A number of semi-legendary figures were supposedly put to death for seeking kingship, and three undoubtedly historical reformist tribunes were killed with senatorial connivance.¹⁹ Under the empire assassinations were rife, though at Rome itself with the exception of Julius Caesar (44BC) and Caligula (41AD) most were hidden from public gaze in the confines of the palace. Thus, when Claudius was assassinated in 54AD and Commodus in 196AD, their killers succeeded for a time in passing off their deaths as natural causes.²⁰ Many later emperors perished in military tumults

2013]; R.J. Hopper, *The Early Greeks* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1977) pp. 109-155; A.R. Burn, *The Lyric Age of Greece* (London: Edward Arnold, 1968) pp.20-22; R. Osborne *Greece in the Making 1200-479BC* (London: Routledge, 1996) pp.192-7.

¹⁶ Plutarch, *Lives: Agis; Cleomenes*, 11-21; W.G. Forrest *A History of Sparta 950-192BC* (New York: Norton and Company, 1968) pp.144-5.

¹⁷ Xenophon, *Hellenica*, trans. and ed. Carlson L. Brownson, 6.4.31-36; 7.3.4-12, available at <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0206> [accessed 19 November 2013]; Marcus Junianus Justinus, *Epitome of the Phillipic History of Pompeius Trogus* trans. and ed. J.R. Selby, 9.6-7, available at <http://www.forumromanum.org/literature/justin/english/> [accessed 19 November 2013]; Titus Livius (Livy), *History of Rome*, c27-9BC, trans. and ed. Aubrey de Selincourt, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), 35.35, a version of Livy available at <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.02.0026> [accessed 19 November 2013]. At Pherae, Jason was followed by a brief sequence of related rulers who mostly met violent ends.

¹⁸ Romulus, Tarquin I, and Servius Tullius. See Livy, *Rome*, 1.16, 40, 48.

¹⁹ The semi-legendary figures were Spurius Cassius Vecellinus (485BC), Spurius Maelius (439BC), and M. Manlius Capitolinus (384 BC). The tribunes were Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus (133BC and 123BC) and L. Appuleius Saturninus (100BC). See M. Cary and H.H. Scullard, *A History of Rome down to the Reign of Constantine* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1979) pp.76; 204-21; 587 n.16; Livy, *Rome*, 2.41.

²⁰ Suetonius, *Twelve Caesars: Deified Claudius*, 44-45; *Nero* 9; Herodian, *A History of the Roman Empire Since the Death of Marcus Aurelius* trans. and ed. E.C. Echols (Berkeley, CA: University of California

which had the air of spontaneity but were sometimes orchestrated by their successor; in effect they were disguised assassinations. The third century in particular took a heavy toll. In the period 222-284AD, at least 18 emperors or would-be emperors were killed by their own troops.

In the Greek and Roman world, few assassins acted on their own for purely personal reasons (though conversely private wrongs could be dressed up as serving some greater good, as with Harmodius and Aristigiton). Even when the assassins had some deep personal grievance, the act was usually sponsored at least (if not actually aided) by others with their own agenda. Pausanias, the assassin of Philip II of Macedon, had his own resentments but Philip's wife Olympias was probably behind the deed (333BC); Caracalla's assassin, Martial, had his own grudge against the emperor but was the tool of the Prefect Macrinus who succeeded Caracalla (217AD).²¹

In some instances the assassination was genuinely spontaneous and the result of popular outrage. In the ancient monarchies of the Near East it was not unknown for kings to be slain by their own people after repeated defeats in battle brought the homeland into dire peril, to please the invader or angry gods or to substitute someone more capable. Though widely separated by time this fate befell the Mitannian king Tushratta (c.1340BC, beaten by the Hittites), the Elamite kings, father and son, Hallushu-Inshushinak and Kudur-Nahhunte (693BC and 692BC, beaten by the Assyrians), and the Persian king Darius III (330BC, beaten by Alexander the Great).²² Sometimes kings were the victims of factional struggles over alliances. The last days of the kingdom of Israel at Samaria saw a succession of assassinations over whether or not Israel should accept or resist the domination of Assyria.²³

In the Graeco-Roman world, spontaneous popular furore was also not unknown. While the behaviour of kings and emperors was normally protected from popular anger by the power

Press, 1961), 2.1.3, a version available at <http://www.livius.org/he-hg/herodian/hre000.html> [accessed 19 November 2013]. The emperor Nero made an unsuccessful attempt to kill his mother using a ship designed to fall apart; she survived by swimming. See Tacitus, *Annals*, 14.5.

²¹ Justin, *Epitome* 9.6-7; Dio, *Roman History* 78.5.3-5.

²² Bryce, *Hittites* pp. 105; 182; W. Hinz, *The Lost World of Elam* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1972) p.149; Farrokh, *Shadows* pp.107-8. However even victorious conquerors could be assassinated, as with the Hittite Mursili I (c.1590BC), and the Assyrians Tukulti-Ninurta I and Tiglath-Pileser I (1208BC and 1077BC).

²³ Pro-Assyrian Zechariah, killed by anti-Assyrian Shallum, killed by pro-Assyrian Menahem (752BC); Menahem's pro-Assyrian son Pekahiah killed by anti-Assyrian Pekah (740BC), killed by (initially) pro-Assyrian Hoshea (732BC). *Holy Bible: 2 Kings* 15:18 – 17:6; 21:19-26; Miller and Hayes, *Ancient Israel and Judah* pp.376-88.

imbalance, they were occasionally exposed to the furious rage of their subjects. Despite their high pretensions, the last rulers of the Seleucid dynasty in Syria were little more than petty squabbling brigands. When Seleucus VI seized Mopsuestia (modern: Misis in Turkey) in 95BC and set about looting the town the furious inhabitants burned him to death in his palace. At Alexandria when the young Ptolemy XI Alexander II married, but then immediately murdered, his much-loved stepmother Berenice III, he was dragged from the palace and torn to pieces by the mob (80BC). Roman emperors avoided similar fates until the very end of the Western Empire. In 455AD the emperor, Petronius Maximus, and his son, Palladius, were caught trying to flee Rome ahead of the advancing Vandals and were torn limb from limb by the angry populace.²⁴

2 King-Slaying in the Mediaeval Era: Elaborating on a Tradition

The early Germanic kingdoms which arose in Europe from the ruins of the Western Empire were essentially tribal conglomerates where the king's authority was limited by tradition, custom, and the consent of his followers. Equally, the Christian kingdoms of the early Middle Ages acknowledged a moral code independent of the king's will; and monarchs were further constrained by common assumptions among nobles and councils about the role and character of kingship. Since kingship was intensely personal, rulers who egregiously violated these norms or failed to live up to what was expected of them, were likely to be violently removed or assassinated.²⁵

Ineffectual leadership in war for the barbarian kings was a recipe for removal. Both the Visigoth Amalaric (531AD) and his second cousin, the Ostrogoth Theodahad, (534AD) were assassinated by their own troops after losing territories. Discarding age-old religious beliefs for new faiths invited similar retaliation. In Britain, pushing the switch from paganism to Christianity caused the assassinations of Eorpwald of East Anglia (c.632AD) and Sigibert II of the East Saxons (c.653AD). Elsewhere in Europe, the assassinations of Wenceslas I of Bohemia ('Good King Wenceslas', 929AD) and (probably) Haakon I of Norway (961AD) were from the same cause; while among the now Catholic Visigoths, Witteric perished in an attempt to restore

²⁴ E. Bevan, *The House of Seleucus*, 2 vols, 1902 (reprinted Chicago: Ares Publishing, 1985) 2, pp.259-60; G. Hölbl, *A History of the Ptolemaic Empire* (London: Routledge, 2001) pp.213-14; J.B. Bury, 2 vols, 1923, *History of the Later Roman Empire* (reprinted New York: Dover, 1958) 1, p.325.

²⁵ J.E.A. Jolliffe, *The Constitutional History of Medieval England* (London: A and C Black, 1967) pp. 41-55; C.W. Previté-Orton, *The Shorter Cambridge Medieval History* 2 vols, (Cambridge University Press, 1952) 1, pp.128-31; 160-1.

Arianism (610AD).²⁶ Early medieval kings were constantly on the move, and as their rule was very personal, their character and failings became widely known. The Frankish ruler, Chilperic I of Soissons (584AD), and the English ruler, Osred of Northumbria (716AD) along with Ethelbald of Mercia (757AD) were all assassinated for cruelty and egregious awfulness even by the standards of a barbaric age.²⁷ Later in the Middle Ages, the growth of royal bureaucracy built a hedge between crown and people where ministers and officials took some of the blame for misgovernment. In Switzerland, the mythical William Tell supposedly slew Landburger Gessler as the representative of hated Austrian rule. In France and England, peasants' revolts in the fourteenth century were aimed at the nobles and the kings' ministers; and in London, the rebels slew those they could lay hands on (1381AD).²⁸

Along with other venerated traditions, the Byzantine Empire inherited that of the forcible removal of unpopular or incapable emperors. Many were deposed and packed off to monasteries (after mutilation). Some were imprisoned and killed later, and seven were assassinated while still emperor. Out of the last group, five were killed with the connivance of their successors; while Constans II was probably slain for his religious policies (668AD), while Andronicus I was torn to pieces by an infuriated mob (1185AD).²⁹ In Italy, the collapse of Carolingian authority in the late ninth century left the papacy as a plaything for competing Roman families. Between 882AD and 985AD, nine popes were murdered. A few were first deposed but most were simply imprisoned and killed. Some were assassinated by rivals, some the victims of factional warfare.³⁰ Later in

²⁶ M. Gallyon, *The Early Church in Eastern England* (Lavenham: Terence Dalton, 1973) pp.57-8; Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, trans. and ed. B. Colgrave, J. McClure and R. Collins, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 2.15, 3.22; K.S. Latourette, *History of Christianity* 2 vols (New York: Harper and Row, 1975) 1, p.393; R. Ferguson *The Vikings* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2009) pp.266-8; M. Deanesly *A History of Early Medieval Europe 476-911* (London: Methuen, 1956) p.103.

²⁷ Gregory of Tours *The History of the Franks*, 575-594, trans. E. Brehaut (New York: Columbia Press, 1916), 6.46, a version available at <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/gregory-hist.asp> [accessed 19 November 2013]; M. Ashley, *The Mammoth Book of British Kings and Queens. The Complete Biographical Encyclopaedia of the Kings and Queens of Britain* (New York: Carroll, 2000) p.287; C. Brooke *The Saxon and Norman Kings* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1996) p.112.

²⁸ *William Tell schauspiel von Friedrich Schiller*, A. Palmer ed. (New York: Houghlin, Mifflin and Company, 1900) pp.xxv-xi; S.L. Ollard and G. Crosse, *A Dictionary of English Church History* (London: Mowbray and Company 1912) pp.575-6; Previt -Orton, *Shorter Cambridge Medieval History* 2, pp.881; 987-8. The London victims included Simon Sudbury, Archbishop of Canterbury and Lord Chancellor.

²⁹ The five were Leo V (820AD), Michael III (867AD), Nicephorus II (969AD), Romanus III (1034AD), and Alexius II (1183AD). G. Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1957) p.110; J.M. Hussey (ed.) *The Cambridge Medieval History*, (Cambridge University Press, 1966) IV, Part 1 pp.99-116; 156; 196; 244-5; Michael Psellus, *Chronographia* trans. and ed. E.R.A. Sewter (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1953) 3.26.

³⁰ John VIII, 882AD, Stephen VI(VII), 897AD, Leo V, 903AD, Christopher, 904AD, John X, 928AD, John XI, 935AD, Benedict VI, 974AD, John XIV, 984AD, Boniface VII, 985AD. John XII died after receiving injuries from a husband whose wife he had seduced, 963AD. Leo VI and Stephen VII (VIII) were both

the high Middle Ages, Italy repeated the classical Greek pattern of local states using assassination either to change the nature of government or to remove an insupportable tyrant. At Rome, the former popular hero but now detested papal agent Cola di Rienzo, was assassinated by a mob (1354AD); at Milan, the monstrous duke Giovanni Maria Visconti who fed human flesh to dogs was publicly assassinated (1412AD). Later, Duke Galeazzo Maria Sforza was assassinated 'in the name of liberty' (1476AD), though the Sforzas continued to rule. A similar attempt in Florence two years later to assassinate the Medici brothers only took the life of one; Lorenzo the Magnificent continued to rule. However many Italian rulers were assassinated by ambitious relatives, or those concerned about the survival of the dynasty: at Milan, Duke Matteo II Visconti by his brothers (1355AD), and the ferocious Duke Bernabo Visconti by his nephew (1385AD).³¹ One assassination that never happened but would certainly have been spectacular had it taken place belongs to 1414AD, when the despot Gabrino Fondolo of Cremona was showing the pope and the emperor the view from a high tower and was apparently briefly tempted to throw them both off to achieve lasting notoriety.³²

By the time the Milanese dukes were being assassinated the word 'assassin' in various forms was making its slow way into European languages. The original *Hashishiyyun* had first become known to the crusaders as killers of fellow Moslem rulers who had fallen foul of the sect's Grand Master for religious reasons.³³ They began to figure much more prominently in Western awareness when they started to include crusader leaders among their targets. Their victims included Raymond II of Tripoli (1152AD) and the king-elect of Jerusalem, Conrad of Montferrat (1192AD); though the future Edward I of England survived an attack (1272AD).³⁴ The Latin *assassinus* (with variations of spelling) began to appear in British and Irish sources from

stopgaps and may also have been assassinated (929AD and 931AD). R.P. McBrien, *Lives of the Popes* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997) pp.141-63; J.N.D. Kelly *The Oxford Dictionary of the Popes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) pp.111-33.

³¹ J. Burckhardt *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, 1860, (reprinted London: Dent, 1970 edit.) pp.8-9; 26; J.C.L. Sison, *A History of the Italian Republics*, 1832, (reprinted London: Everyman, 1907) pp.141-4; 184; 243-9; Previté-Orton, *Shorter Cambridge Medieval History* 2, pp.1079; 1087-8; W.T. Waugh *A History of Europe from 1378 to 1494* (London: Methuen, 1949) pp.452; 462.

³² Burckhardt, *Renaissance*, p. 11. The Holy Roman Emperor was Sigismund and the pope was 'John XXIII' who was subsequently regarded as an antipope and dropped from the official list of popes.

³³ The reasons could also be described as political since politics and religion were inseparable in the Muslim world. The sect endorsed the Fatimid caliphate in Egypt and hence opposed the Abbasid caliphate at Baghdad and its supporters the Seljuk sultans. Runciman, *Crusades*, 2, pp.119-20.

³⁴ *Ibid*, pp.33; 3, pp.64; 338.

about 1250, but even in Latin, the term was a rarity and vernacular forms only appeared slowly until the Renaissance.³⁵

Examples from very different ages and cultures have been surveyed, to highlight killings which would undoubtedly be classified today as assassinations even though they all come from the time before European thought had special language for the slaying of rulers. Some general conclusions can be drawn. First, the absence of a special vocabulary for king-killing does not mean that the act was not viewed with particular horror. In the sacred monarchies of the ancient Near East, killing the ruler was an offence against the divine order as well as the political one. Under these circumstances, it is likely that most such killings were carried out by those closest to the ruler, for whom the reverential awe had lost its force.³⁶ Even in other states where leadership was either by consent or election, the killing of rulers struck at the accepted social order and begat anxiety and apprehension.

Secondly, to say that these rulers were assassinated says nothing about their character, any more than saying they were killed or murdered. Among Roman emperors both the murderous Caligula and the innocent Severus Alexander have here been described as assassinated.³⁷ As this background discussion has sought to emphasise, being assassinated implies high rank and status not virtue or vice. There is perhaps, however, a tendency to describe good rulers as being murdered rather than assassinated, since murder carries the stronger connotation of something that should not have happened in a perfect world.

Thirdly, the term assassination normally suggests suddenness and high publicity. The *slow* poisoning of various rulers is invariably described as murder, partly because of the time sometimes required by the poison and partly because the act of the killing was meant to be concealed.³⁸ Public assassination, on the other hand, was meant to be seen, perhaps even to demonstrate that no one was immune. This was certainly the case with the original Hashashin

³⁵ It is missing from the *Promptorium Parvulorum* of c.1440AD and the *Catholicon Anglicanum* of 1483AD.

³⁶ Mentuhotpe IV (III) the last pharaoh of Dynasty XI was overthrown and probably killed by his vizier Amenemhet, who founded Dynasty XII but despite a long reign was himself assassinated probably by those viewing him as just a usurper. Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel* pp.70-75; P. Clayton *Chronicle of the Pharaohs* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994) pp.76-9.

³⁷ D.R. Sear, *The Emperors of Rome and Byzantium* (London: Batsford, 1981) pp.10; 16. However Severus Alexander is usually described as having been *murdered*.

³⁸ As with the Persian kings Artaxerxes III and his son Arses (338BC and 336BC), maybe Germanicus (19AD), Tiberius' son Drusus (23AD), Tiberius Gemellus (37AD), Britannicus (55AD), and others.

and with those who struck down Jason of Pherae, Philip II of Macedon, Caligula, and many others.

Fourthly, assassination is often assumed to have a political motivation. While many did, many also did not. Even where a political motive was asserted this did not preclude personal factors playing their part. Ruling out hired killers, the majority of assassins must have been personally committed to their cause especially if escape after the event was a highly uncertain. In fact while the ancient equivalent of the suicide bomber was not absent from the known assassins many seem to have made plans for their escape after the deed, as with Harmodius and Aristogeton, Pausanias who slew Philip II of Macedon, and Cassius Chaerea and his friends who killed Caligula. Pausanias' motives were entirely personal but Harmodius and Aristogeton along with Chaerea and his associates believed that slaying the tyrant would end the tyranny and they would have wanted to live in the brave new world which they thought would follow.

Fifthly, apart from the original *Hashishiyyun*, public religion appears to have played only a very small motive part as in assassinations. The possibility that the 'heretic pharaoh' Akhenaten (died c.1336BC) may have been secretly murdered for his onslaught on traditional Egyptian religion cannot be excluded; and the same suspicion could attach to his two brief successors Smenkhare and Tutankhamun (died c.1327BC); though in the last case the reason may have been reversing Akhenaten's changes.³⁹ Definitely a victim of religious hatred was the Baalist queen, Athaliah of Judah, slaughtered in a coup orchestrated by the Yahwist high-priest, Jehoida (833BC).⁴⁰ And as already noted, in early medieval Europe Eorpwald of East Anglia, Sigibert of the East Saxons, and Wenceslas I of Bohemia were all killed for attempting to Christianise their peoples.

Yet one aspect of religion must have been present in the minds of many assassins, namely the belief in and fear of a deity who avenged wrongful killings by future punishment in this life or the next. In the ancient Near East the plethora of deities with widely different aspects perhaps allowed for finding one in favour of the killing just as war gods were invoked for victory over the enemy. Israelite sacred history endorsed at least one act of genocide supposedly at Yahweh's directive, and a number of prophets encouraged the slaughter of rulers whose religious policy

³⁹ N. Reeves, *Akhenaten: Egypt's False Prophet* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2001) pp.174-89.

⁴⁰ *Holy Bible*, Chronicles 2, 23:1-15; J.A. Soggin, *An Introduction to the History of Israel and Judah* (London: SCM Press, 1999) pp.241-3.

was not to their liking. Ancient Israel, however, lacked any discernible belief in an afterlife of rewards or punishments so religious and ethical constraints applied only to this.⁴¹ Similarly while some Greek and Roman philosophers posited a 'flight' of the soul after death, popular belief consigned the departed to a shadowy existence in Hades irrespective of their past record (though a few egregiously wicked ended up suffering torments in Tartarus).⁴² Egyptians, on the other hand, had a very strong belief in rewards and punishments after death for deeds done or omitted in this life. Only the virtuous survived Osiris' judgment and proceeded to *Amenti*, a land of the dead similar to the Egypt they had known. Those who failed the judgment were devoured into extinction by the *Ammut* monster.⁴³

Celtic, German, and Slavonic mythologies had more to say about the afterlife of heroes than what might befall wicked humans, but all were succeeded in medieval Christendom with the fully fledged vision of Hell epitomised in Dante's *Inferno*. Here eternal flames and torments were the fate of the wicked, pre-eminent among whom in medieval thinking were those who raised their lethal hand against their liege lords.⁴⁴ Finally, one cannot omit, for all these periods, the universal belief in ghosts, especially the avenging spirits of those foully murdered.⁴⁵ For all would-be murderers, including assassins, the fear of divine retribution along with the fear of being haunted and pursued by the ghosts of their victims would have to be overcome before they could embark on their deeds.

⁴¹ *Holy Bible*, Samuel, 1.15; 15; Kings 2.9. The Israelites certainly believed in a shadowy realm of the dead but it involved neither reward nor punishment. See H. Ringgren, *Israelite Religion* (London: Fortress Press, 1966) pp.242-7.

⁴² Plato, *Phaedrus*, 340BC, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1871), 246c-248c, at <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/phaedrus.html> [accessed 19 November 2013]; Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Re Publica*, trans. Francis Barham (London: Edmund Spettigue, 1841-42) 6.15.15-26.29, version available at http://oll.libertyfund.org/?option=com_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=546&chapter=83299&layout=html&Itemid=27 [accessed 19 November 2013]. R. Garland *The Greek Way of Death* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2001) p.50; H.J. Rose, *Religion in Greece and Rome* (Ithaca, NY: Harper and Row, 1959) p.137.

⁴³ S. Morenz *Egyptian Religion* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992) p.207; L. Oakes and L. Gahlin, *Ancient Egypt* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2003) pp.394-5.

⁴⁴ Compare with M. Goldberg, 'Hell' in D.L. Jeffrey (ed.) *A Dictionary of Biblical tradition in English Literature*, (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans, 1992), pp.340-3; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1265-74, trans A. Freddoso, 2013, Suppl. Ad P. 3, 97 at <http://www3.nd.edu/~afreddos/summa-translation/TOC.htm> [accessed 19 November 2013]; Musée Condé Chantilly, Jean Longon, Raymond Cazelles, *The Très Riches Heures of Jean, Duke of Berry* (New York: George Brazillier, 1969) pp.65; 91.

⁴⁵ *Holy Bible*, Samuel, 1.28.7; Homer, *Iliad*, trans. Richard Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 23.65; 100; Homer, *Odyssey* trans. Richard Lattimore (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 11.387; 467; Pliny, *The Letters*, trans. Betty Radice (London: Penguin, 1963), 7.27.4-11.

Ultimately, the motives behind all assassinations can be reduced to two basic kinds: killings to change the system and killings simply to replace the individual. The first kind is only possible where an alternative form of government can be imagined. This requires either a historical knowledge of past changes in how a country was governed, or an acquaintance with literature about possible alternatives. Assassinations for this reason therefore were only carried out by those with some education. Killings simply to replace a ruler include a range of subsidiary motives. The most common one has probably always been personal ambition: to take the ruler's place. Others include a final rebellion against the intolerable cruelty and awfulness of some despot, or revenge for injuries received at his hands.

One characteristic of all assassinations was the lack of awe. In societies with divine and semi-divine rulers, or where the ruler was at least 'the Lord's anointed' (literally anointed in some instances), or personified in some numinous way the tribe or the nation, or had been chosen by the near unanimous voice of fellow countrymen, it required more than just courage to strike him down. The assassin needed to be able to lay aside his own normal reverence for the awe and mystery that hedged around a duly consecrated ruler. Hence such assassinations were most commonly carried out by those close to the ruler, where daily contact had eroded the majesty. Whether the gradual appearance in European languages from the Renaissance onwards of a special terminology for the killing of rulers affected in any way those carrying out such deeds is not immediately obvious. However for previously non-violent people contemplating the killing of tyrants, to think of their action as assassination rather than murder may well help to bridge the emotional gap between their self-image as peaceful law abiding citizens and the deed to which they now feel impelled. Words have emotive force as well as meaning, and we can use them to brush over actions which starkly presented in their raw form offend and repel. Emotionally, it may be easier to call something assassination rather than murder.⁴⁶ At the same time it implicitly recognises the standing of the victim. Both the verbal escape and the status concession were things denied to earlier ages, though the deed remained the same.

3 Renaissance Consciousness to Modernity: Updating the Assassination Process

The Renaissance period not only brought the term *assassination* into vernacular European languages, but the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries also created two major new developments

⁴⁶ See H. Rawson, *Dictionary of Euphemisms and other Doubletalk* (Edison, NJ: Castle Books, 2002) pp.1-14.

which changed the available methodology for killing rulers and the audience such deeds commanded. The first was the invention of firearms; primitive and initially unreliable they nevertheless gave would-be assassins a chance of escape vastly superior to plunging a knife into their victim. Previously the longbow and crossbow had offered a means of distance killing but the vagaries of wind and marksmanship meant they were only rarely employed for assassination.⁴⁷ Poison had an ancient pedigree but was of the hit and miss variety, though many rulers were credited with keeping professional poisoners around.⁴⁸ Equally, their food tasters were not there just for ceremony. However it was the invention of the fire arm in the shape of the arquebus (late fifteenth century) and the pistol (sixteenth century) which transformed the issue of protection. The first major victim was François Duke of Guise (1563AD), followed by James, Regent of Scotland (1566AD), and William the Silent of the Netherlands (1584AD).⁴⁹ Thereafter the line continued to include among many others the Archduke Franz Ferdinand (1914AD), John F. Kennedy (1963AD), and Martin Luther King (1968AD); with attempts on Ronald Reagan and Pope John Paul II (1981AD).

In the sixteenth century it had soon been realised that gunpowder could be used in larger quantities to blow up victims; the first prominent target being Lord Darnley, husband of Mary Queen of Scots in 1567AD (though he was, in fact, finished off by strangulation). Then, in 1605AD, Guy Fawkes and his companions planned to blow up king and parliament together.⁵⁰ The development of the grenade in the seventeenth century led to the bomb-throwing assassin, though as it required accuracy the thrown bomb often killed others without hitting the intended target. An attempt in 1903AD to kill Alfonso XIII of Spain and his queen Ena on their wedding day left them unharmed but covered in blood from other victims; and before being later fatally shot, Franz Ferdinand had deflected an earlier bomb thrown at him. Yet thrown bombs could be successful, as with the assassination of Czar Alexander II in 1881AD, and with the combination of grenades and automatic weapons used to kill Anwar Sadat of Egypt in 1981AD. However the unreliability of bombs, thrown or buried, is best illustrated by Adolf Hitler surviving four known

⁴⁷ Modern historians rather than contemporaries have suggested the death of William Rufus (1100AD) from an arrow was no accident. The legendary killing of Landburger Gessler by William Tell with a crossbow may have some basis in fact. See C. Brooke, *The Saxon and Norman Kings* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1996) p.186; H.S. Williams (ed), *The Historians' History of the World* (New York: New York University Press, 1905) XVI, pp.556-60.

⁴⁸ The Borgias were notorious (perhaps exaggeratedly so) for using poisons to get rid of people, and later Catherine de Medici was also suspected. See Burkhardt, *Renaissance*, p.277.

⁴⁹ L. Frieda, *Catherine de Medici* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2003) pp.167-9; A. Stewart, *The Cradle King* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2003) pp.34-5.

⁵⁰ Stewart, *Cradle King*, pp.15-25; 219-25.

such attempts.⁵¹ The first car bombing, an attempt to assassinate the Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid II in 1907AD, was equally unsuccessful.

The invention of printing (c.1450AD) initially produced more and cheaper books; but within a century it also generated pamphlets, and the German Reformation saw a raging pamphlet war. Since, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it was almost impossible to separate religion from politics, pamphlets urging the overthrow of opponents easily morphed into active encouragement of assassination.⁵² The Jesuits were credited with advocating tyrannicide in the case of heretic rulers or those deemed lax on heresy, a justification underlying the assassinations of William the Silent (1584AD) and Henri III and Henri IV of France (1589AD and 1610AD).⁵³ The execution of Charles I of England in 1649AD produced a flurry of books and pamphlets (including one by Milton) arguing for and against the slaying of kings.⁵⁴ Pamphlets circulated widely; one quoting the child witnesses at the Bury St. Edmunds witchcraft trial (1682AD) obviously influenced the child witnesses at the Salem trial in New England (1692AD).⁵⁵ Broadsheets, newspapers, and now social media succeeded the pamphlet as a means of disseminating violent political views. They not only encouraged the isolated extremist to feel that he was not alone in his views and that murderous solutions were after all acceptable, they played into a desire for fame or notoriety.

While many assassins have sought anonymity outside the ranks of their immediate band, there have always been those who gloried in the deed and wanted the world to know their role. Even within the ranks the chosen one was often a volunteer whose motives may not have entirely excluded the consciousness of future fame; such almost certainly included the youthful assassins of Franz Ferdinand (1914AD) and perhaps even Claus von Stauffenberg in 1944AD.

⁵¹ J. van der Kiste, *Crowns in a Changing World: The British and European Monarchies 1901-1936* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1993) pp.42-5;100; M. Hudson, *Assassination* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2000) pp.100; 128; 185; I. Kershaw *Hitler: 1933-1945 Nemesis* (New York: W. Norton, 2000) pp.271-5; 651-83; G. Fetherling, *The Book of Assassins* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2001) pp.297-9.

⁵² E. Bigmore and C. Wyman, *A Bibliography of Printing* (London: Oak Knoll Press, 2001), 1, pp.287-8; 403-4; Latourette, *History of Christianity*, 2, p.715; E. Cameron, 'Luther' in A Hastings et al (eds), *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) p.309; C.V. Wedgwood, *The Thirty Years War* (Harmondsworth: 1957) pp.60; 105; 118; 128. See also, G. Matthews (ed.) *News and Rumor in Renaissance Europe (The Fugger Newsletters)* (New York: Capricorn Press, 1959).

⁵³ Frieda, *Catherine de Medici*, pp.383-5; D. Ogg, *Europe in the Seventeenth Century* (London: Routledge, 1961) p.92. Not the Jesuits but Aquinas was quoted in defence of tyrannicide as recently as 1963 after an attempt on De Gaulle. See Fetherling, *Assassins* p.47.

⁵⁴ J.R. Tanner, *English Constitutional Conflicts of the Seventeenth Century 1603-1689* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962) pp.158-9.

⁵⁵ R. H. Robbins, *Encyclopedia of Witchcraft and Demonology* (London: Peter Nevill, 1959) pp.66-9; 429-48.

Charlotte Corday had arranged for her justification for assassinating Marat to be published simultaneously with the deed in 1793AD, but the most conspicuous self-glorification by an assassin must surely be John Wilkes Booth's in 1865AD.⁵⁶ Having shot Abraham Lincoln at Ford's Theatre he leaped onto the stage (injuring himself in the process), declaimed *sic semper tyrannis* to the audience, and only then ran off; though he could probably have avoided recognition in the immediate confusion and escaped scot free had he simply fled at once from Lincoln's box by the way he had entered.⁵⁷ Yet like many assassins Booth had made escape plans; to enjoy his fame not merely to have it posthumously. Assassins have always included those with no expectation of surviving the deed (like the original *Hashishiyun*, *Kamikaze* pilots, and the modern suicide bomber); but equally many assassins obviously intended to get away, and the dream of basking in popular, or at least collegial, acclaim may have played an important psychological part.

Two other developments of the Renaissance period also contributed in different ways to the acceptability of assassination and its opportunity. The so-called Age of Exploration brought Europeans into contact with ancient eastern monarchies where assassination was a common approach to changing rulers. The Great Moghul Farruksiyar (1713-1719AD) had come to the throne by assassinating his uncle. In 1717AD he was successfully treated by an English doctor from the trading post in Calcutta, but was himself assassinated two years later by the Sayyid brothers who then elevated and forcibly removed four Moghul emperors in one year (at least two being assassinated).⁵⁸ Saffavid Iran (Shakespeare's 'The Sophy') experienced similar violent changes, and in Sri Lanka the Portuguese contended with fleeting rulers whom either they or the Singhalese themselves assassinated.⁵⁹ Of more immediate interest to Europe was the Ottoman Empire, initially from fear of its expansion and then from rival concerns over it falling apart. Four Ottoman sultans were deposed and killed, and many Grand Viziers dismissed and executed.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ C. Corday, *Adresse aux Français Amis des Lois et de la Paix*; 'Charlotte Corday' *Encyclopédie Larousse en Ligne* (2010).

⁵⁷ Hudson, *Assassination* p.132.

⁵⁸ In 1759 another Moghul emperor, Alamgir II, was also assassinated. J. T. Wheeler, *Early Records of British India* (Calcutta: 1878) pp.171-86; W. Haig, *The Cambridge History of India*. 6 vols, IV: *The Mughal Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971) pp.330-46; 444; J. Keay, *India: A History* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2000) pp.364-7.

⁵⁹ A. Bausani, *The Persians* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1971) pp.145-63; J.E. Tennent *Ceylon*, 2 vols, (London: Macmillan, 1860) 2, pp.11; 21; 31.

⁶⁰ Osman II (1622AD), Ibrahim (1648AD), Selim III and Mustafa IV (1807AD). The 'suicide' of Abdul Aziz (1876) is also suspicious. C. Finkel *Osman's Dream* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2005) pp.200-1; 233-

4 Appropriate Targets

The Renaissance period also saw the arrival of embassies, with diplomats being permanently stationed in foreign capitals in place of the medieval system of *ad hoc* heralds. An inheritance of the older pattern was that diplomats were accorded the inviolability previously assigned to heralds. While this generally held until the last century, beginning with the assassination of the German ambassador to China in 1900AD by the so-called ‘Boxer’ rebels. A number of diplomats have been assassinated as representatives of some alien government or regime – the most recent being the terrorist attack on the American consulate in Benghazi in 2012AD (the assassination of a German diplomat in Paris in 1938AD provided Hitler with the excuse for *Kristallnacht*). In effect the creation of embassies created targets, enabling assassins to strike in their home territory at countries they might not be able to reach otherwise.⁶¹

Assassinated diplomats are part of a larger but more amorphous group who constitute symbolic targets. These often have little connection with the policies of whatever country they are from but, in the eyes of the assassin, they serve as a token target. The attempt by an Irish nationalist on Queen Victoria’s son Alfred in Australia in 1868AD, on the Czarevitch Nicholas by a Japanese nationalist in 1904AD, the assassination of Martin Luther King (1968AD), and the assassination of Lord Mountbatten by the IRA (1975AD), all come under this heading. A common characteristic is the absence of any personal animosity towards the victim as an individual, simply towards what he was presumed to stand for.⁶²

Nationalism has often been a primary motive behind assassinations. The religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Europe eventually gave place to a largely secular national consciousness with its own antipathies; though religion continued to be an expression of national feeling in some occupied countries, as in Ireland under English rule and Poland under Soviet domination. In the Muslim world today, religion continues to be a supra-national

5; 417-23; 481-2; A.J.P. Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954) pp.49-59; 231-53; 359.

⁶¹ Other assassinated diplomats include Vatsav Vorosky (1923AD), Folk Bernadotte (1948AD), Edwin Reischaur (attempted 1964AD), John Mein (1968AD), Christopher Ewart-Biggs (1975AD). O. Neubecker, *A Guide to Heraldry* (New York: Harper and Row, 2007) pp.12-22; J. Fairbank, *et al. A History of East Asian Civilization. Vol. 2, East Asia: The Modern Transformation* (Boston 1969) p.482; R. Albrecht-Carrié, *A Diplomatic History of Europe since the Congress of Vienna* (New York: W. Norton, 1958) pp.4-9; R.M. Kerr (ed), *The Student’s Blackstone* (London: Sweet and Maxwell, 1858) pp.202-5. Some governments were slow to appoint permanent ambassadors; the Ottomans only did it in 1793.

⁶² E. Longford, *Victoria R.I.* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1964) pp.360-1; D. Keene, *Emperor of Japan: Meiji and his World 1852-1912* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2002) pp.454-458; A.N. Wilson, *Our Times* (New York 2010) pp.256-9.

bond, uniting on the one hand against what is seen as Western contamination and corruption but dividing Muslims along ancient religious fissures sustained by local tribal loyalties. Occasionally just the fear of foreign designs has inspired assassination attempts, as when a Japanese nationalist tried to kill the Russian Czarevitch in 1891AD, but actual occupation by a foreign power has been the more common trigger. The victim was almost invariably that power's local deputy, whose assassination not only failed to weaken the enemy occupation but often brought ferocious reprisals, as in Czechoslovakia after the assassination of *Reichsprotektor* Reinhard Heydrich in 1942AD. Sometimes, one assassination beget another, and with unexpected results. In 1895AD, the Japanese arranged the assassination of the Korean Min Queen who opposed the Japanese protectorate; in 1909AD, the Japanese resident-general in Korea was assassinated by a Korean nationalist, and a year later Japan annexed Korea.⁶³

Heads of state have always been the prime targets for assassins, even where actual power lay with their ministers. At least five attempts were made to assassinate Queen Victoria; though perhaps by an agreed convention, the would-be killers were often described as madmen.⁶⁴ The convention, if such it was, has been employed in other countries, presumably to publicise the view that only the deranged would attempt such acts.⁶⁵ In the case of reigning monarchs, assassination was a recognised if not accepted risk of their position, though danger from ambitious family members (an ancient hazard) was confined largely to monarchies with fluid rules of succession. Thus Shaka, the creator of the Zulu kingdom, was assassinated by his half-brothers in 1828AD, while Czar Peter III was killed to make room for his wife Catherine (the Great) who had absolutely no claim to the Russian throne in 1762AD.⁶⁶ Rival dynasties posed an equal danger. The Karageorgević and Obrenović families had battled for the Serbian throne throughout the nineteenth century. The brutal assassination of Alexander II Obrenović and his

⁶³ A. Read, *The Devil's Disciples* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2003) pp.749-51; Fairbank, *East Asia* pp.467; 482. The assassination of Lord Frederick Cavendish the new Secretary of State for Ireland by Fenians in Dublin, in 1882AD, simply confirmed anti-Irish prejudice in Britain. R.R. James *The British Revolution 1880-1939* (New York: 1977) pp.60-1.

⁶⁴ John Bean (1842AD), William Hamilton and (separately) Robert Pate (1850AD), Arthur O'Connor (1872AD), and Roderick McClean (a Fenian, in 1882AD). Pate's attack was an assault with a stick, but his motive may have been more lethal.

⁶⁵ In the United States those who attempted to kill Andrew Jackson (1835AD), Theodore Roosevelt (1912AD), and Ronald Reagan (1981AD), were all pronounced insane. A similar verdict had been pronounced on a man who tried to assassinate Kaiser Wilhelm I in 1878AD as well as the one who assassinated President Verwoerd of South Africa (1966AD). See Fetherling, *Assassins* pp.261; 358-9.

⁶⁶ Catherine subsequently killed off another genuine Romanov tsar, the long imprisoned Ivan VI (1764AD). Her son Paul I (almost certainly not by Peter III) was assassinated in 1801AD with the connivance of his son Alexander I. I.S. Dixon *Catherine the Great* (London 2009) pp. 86-92, 123-125, 155, 320-321; D. King, *Vienna 1814* (New York: 2008) p.26.

queen Draga in 1903AD to make way for a Karageorgević restoration so appalled Edward VII that he pushed the British government into a temporary severance of diplomatic relations with Serbia, adding that he and Alexander belonged to the same 'profession'.⁶⁷

Crowned heads of any kind have generally been targets for assassins who attributed all of their own or their country's woes to the monarch, a reversal of the older belief that misgovernment stemmed from the king's favourites and if only the king knew he would make things right. Royal favourites have often been detested (usually more by displaced nobles) and have frequently fallen victim to assassination. When Charles I's favourite the Duke of Buckingham was assassinated only the king mourned his death in 1628AD.⁶⁸ The last in a long line of hated favourites was Grigori Rasputin, whose assassination in 1916AD came too late to save the Romanov dynasty from the obloquy to which he had largely contributed.⁶⁹ Favourites could and sometimes did function as ministers (Wolsey, Richelieu, Pombal, Godoy, etc.), but did so only as long as royal favour continued. However by the late eighteenth century in Britain and a few other countries ministers responsible to elected bodies were taking their place. Since unpopular policies could now be attributed to ministers of the crown rather than just to the monarch they became just as liable to assassination as former favourites had been.

This became increasingly true in the new world following first the American Revolution, the French Revolution, and the revolutions of 1848AD. Faced with the realization that republics were a viable alternative most European monarchies granted constitutions, and kings and emperors graciously assumed a highly visible (and for many of them probably profoundly boring) range of official public duties.⁷⁰ This did not stop republicans plotting assassinations, with a failed attempt on Louis Philippe of France (1835AD), and successful assassinations of the papal minister Pellegrino Rossi (1848AD) and Carlos of Portugal with his son Crown Prince Luis (1908AD).⁷¹ Most republicans, however, rejected assassination as a tool, and beyond opposing monarchy and admiring the American system were vague about replacement ideologies. Much clearer programmes emerged after the failed 1848 Revolutions with the Anarchists and the Socialists.

⁶⁷ Van der Kiste, *Crowns* pp.21-22. The killers were also motivated by Alexander's pro-Austrian position.

⁶⁸ D. Hanrahan, *Charles II and the Duke of Buckingham* (Stroud 2006) pp.1-3.

⁶⁹ J. Perry and C. Pleshakov, *The Flight of the Romanovs* (Old Saybrook 1999) pp.117-119, 132-135.

⁷⁰ G. de Diesbach, *Secrets of the Gotha* pp. 32-33. Russia was a holdout on constitutions and Nicholas II only granted one reluctantly in 1905.

⁷¹ Fetherling, *Assassins* 75-76, 79, 141-143.

For many 'anarchist' and 'assassin' are almost synonymous and the image of the cloaked anarchist waving a bomb complete with fizzling fuse almost defines the subject. In reality anarchism by definition could never be a unified movement (though for a time it was feared as such), and the assassinations claimed as the work of anarchists fell within a clearly defined period of 1875-1935AD. Within this time frame there were six successful assassinations and nine known unsuccessful attempts; the last attempt being on Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1933AD, though the real target may have been Mayor Cermak.⁷² By the 1930s Anarchism as a philosophy of discontent had largely given way to more cohesive ideologies of the Left and the Right.

Left wing movements tended to concentrate their energies on gaining office or overthrowing regimes rather than targeting individuals for assassination; though Communist takeovers were sometimes followed by the killing of previous leaders or at least their questionable deaths, as with the Regent Kyril of Bulgaria (1945AD) and the Czech Foreign minister Jan Masaryk (1946AD).⁷³ Stalin's pursuit of sole power in Soviet Russia included the elimination of any real or potential rivals, even the exiled Trotsky (1940AD). Some self-styled socialist revolutionary groups like the Baader-Meinhof gang (*Rote Armee Fraktion* 1970-1998AD) occasionally struck violently at public officials and business leaders, but specific assassinations were rare; the kidnapping and killing of the former Italian premier Aldo Moro by the Red Brigade (*Brigate Rosse*) being an exception (1978AD).⁷⁴

Right wing movements were much more prone to identifying their enemies through individuals and acting accordingly, as with the assassinations of the French socialist leader Jaures (1914AD), the Italian socialist Matteoti (1924AD), and the Belgian communist leader Lahaut (1950AD). Some assassinations were clearly government sponsored, as with Orlando Letelier the exiled opponent of Chilean president Pinochet (1975AD), and the South African communist

⁷² G. Woodcock, *Anarchism* (Cleveland 1962) *passim*; A. Cobban, *A History of Modern France, Vol. 2: 1799-1945* (Harmondsworth: 1961) p.234; W. Atkinson, *A History of Spain and Portugal* (Harmondsworth: 1960) pp. 308-309. The successful anarchist assassinations were of Czar Alexander II (1881), French President Sadi Carnot (1894), Spanish premier Canovas del Castillo (1897), Empress Elizabeth of Austria (1900), Umberto I of Italy (1900), U.S. President McKinley (1901), Russian premier Stolypin (1911), George I of Greece (1913).

⁷³ M. Pundeff, 'Bulgaria' *The Columbia History of Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century* J. Held (ed.) (New York: 1992) p.99.

⁷⁴ J. Trager, *The People's Chronology* (New York 1994) pp.1045, 1066.

leader Hal Christiani (1993AD). In Japan militarist circles were behind the assassination of two premiers and the Lord Privy Seal in the period 1930-1936AD.⁷⁵

Constitutions such as that under which the Japanese premiers operated had become part of the world political scene in the aftermath of American and European revolutions, granted with more or less goodwill in ancient monarchies or as part of the founding fabric of new republics such as sprang up in the Americas after the collapse of Spanish rule. In Europe they received additional impetus after World War I when new nations emerged or old ones recovered their independence, and positively blossomed in the decolonisation era following World War II. In theory democracies where those in power step down when their term was complete should have dissuaded the aggrieved and unhappy from the need to remove them by violence, yet even in mature democracies like the United States four presidents and other leading figures have been assassinated.⁷⁶

In reality despite the outward democratic forms many republics became effective dictatorships or tribal monopolies, with military juntas and Presidents for Life effectively replicating the unresponsive regimes of older monarchies. Perhaps not surprisingly some opponents adopted assassination as a means of removal; though, equally, right-wing factions also used assassination to get rid of populist presidents. In Central and South America 14 serving presidents and two ex-presidents were assassinated in the century 1874-1980AD. During the period 1963-1999AD, 13 African Heads of State were assassinated (with three other violent deaths also possible assassinations); and nine (possibly ten) elected Heads of State or monarchs were assassinated in South and East Asia in the period 1963-1993AD. Eight elected Heads of State or monarchs were assassinated in the Middle East in the period 1919-2001AD.⁷⁷ This does not include numerous attempted assassinations (Kemal Ataturk, Gamal Nasser, Hosni Mubarak, Edvard Shevardnadze, *et al.*) or the assassination of premiers and other

⁷⁵ Premiers Hamaguchi Osachi (shot 1930 and died from injuries 6 months later and Inukai Tsuyoshi (1932); and Lord Privy Seal Saito Makoto and other ministers (1936). H. Bix *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan* (New York 2000) pp. 226, 252, 297;

⁷⁶ Presidents Abraham Lincoln (1865), James Garfield (1881), William McKinley (1901), John F. Kennedy (1963); with attempts on Andrew Jackson (1835), Theodore Roosevelt (1912), Harry Truman (1949), Gerald Ford (twice in 1975), and Ronald Reagan (1981). Other victims include Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King (both 1968).

⁷⁷ Central and South America beginning with Agustin Morales of Boliva and ending with ex-president Anastasio Somoza Debayle of Nicaragua; Africa beginning with Sylvanus Olympio of Togo and ending with Ibrahim Bare Mainassara of Niger; South and East Asia beginning with Diem of South Vietnam and ending with Birendra of Nepal; Middle east beginning with Habbibulah of Afghanistan and ending with Rene Mu'awwad of Lebanon.

ministers. Assassins' motives varied; some wanted revenge for injuries received, some aspired to replace the victim, and some simply hoped that things would be better if the victim was gone. Curiously two royal assassinations by family members do not seem to have involved the hope of succession: Faisal of Saudi Arabia (1975AD) and Birendra of Nepal (2001AD).⁷⁸

Two further categories need to be considered: professional assassins and government sponsored assassinations. Renaissance Italy abounded in paid assassins, as did France in the mid-sixteenth century.⁷⁹ The modern world of international policing and communications means that professional assassins hide under a variety of covers, avoiding publicity and leaving even their existence uncertain (though Hollywood likes them, along with gangster hitmen). Two at least are known: 'Vlada the Chauffeur' (Vlada Cherozamsky) who killed Alexander I of Yugoslavia and the French Foreign minister (1934AD), and 'Carlos the Jackal' (Illich Ramirez) who began as a Palestinian nationalist and became a self-glorifying free-lance (1970s-1980s).⁸⁰ State sponsored assassinations go back to ancient times, though even then culpability was usually denied.⁸¹ Today both totalitarian regimes and democracies have either attempted or successfully carried out the assassination of opponents in other countries; usually justified (at least to themselves) in the name of national security. Hitler was almost certainly behind the assassination of Austrian Chancellor Engelbert Dolfuss (1934AD), and Chilean president Pinochet behind that of his exiled opponent Orlando Letelier (1976AD). Both Russian and American security agencies have been credited with attempted and successful assassinations, and conspiracy theorists have little trouble in finding parallels for their conclusions.⁸²

Conspiracy theorists have inherited from much older forebears the belief that the violent unexpected deaths of heads of state and government figures must have some nefarious explanation. Airplane crashes have provided ample fodder and have frequently been claimed as assassinations. Polish nationalists averred that General Sikorsky was such a victim (1943AD),

⁷⁸ The assassination of Ananda Mahidol (Rama VIII) of Thailand (1946) was almost certainly to bring his 19-year old brother to the throne but the brother was at school in Switzerland. D.G. Hall, *A History of South-East Asia* (London: 1964) p.811.

⁷⁹ Burckhardt, *Renaissance in Italy* pp. 276-277; Frieda *Catherine de Medici* pp. 206-207.

⁸⁰ Fetherling, *Assassins* pp.94-96, 307-310.

⁸¹ The Hittite prince Zannanza was almost certainly assassinated on the orders of Egyptian leaders (1327 BC); Aratus of Sicyon was poisoned on the orders of Philip V of Macedon (212BC); and the fugitive Roman leader Pompey was killed by the clique governing the boy Ptolemy XIII of Egypt (48BC). Bryce *Hittites* pp. 195-197; Polybius 8.12; Plutarch, *Lives: Aratus* 52.

⁸² Fetherling, *Assassins* pp.301-2; Trager, *People's Chronology* p.1055. The polonium poisoning of former FSB agent Alexander Litvinenko (2006) has been attributed to Russia's president Putin, and the death of Princess Diana (1997) has been claimed as a secret assassination.

and similar claims were made (with more probability) for the death of Pakistan president Zia al-Haq (1988AD).⁸³ The airplane crash which killed two African presidents at the same time (Melchior Ndadaye of Burundi and Juvenal Habyarimana of Rwanda, 1993AD) was claimed as assassination by Rwandans, with the curious implication that those in Burundi were willing to sacrifice their own president to do it. Most recently the plane crash in Russia which killed the Polish leadership (2010AD) has aroused old Polish suspicions about Russia.

Conclusion

Drawing together the strands relating to assassination and assassins since the Renaissance when the word and the concept began to appear in vernacular European languages, a number of distinct characteristics emerge. Obviously some of the older factors from before the Renaissance continue to operate. A common reason for assassination remains for an assassin to replace the victim. The awfulness of the victim's rule is held in some instances to justify the deed. Yet at the same time some features are new.

New means of killing with the invention of firearms and explosives meant that assassins could strike from a distance. The idea of self-sacrifice on the part of an assassin ceased to be a necessary component of the plan. New forms of news dissemination with pamphlets, newspapers, and modern media meant that assassins no longer had to feel isolated in their grievances but could feel part of some wider movement. At the same time these provided a forum for assassins seeking fame or notoriety. Symbolic targets for assassination entered the political spectrum with the creation of embassies and diplomats, while monarchs and presidents became more vulnerable to assassination by assuming a range of public roles and duties. The rise of responsible ministers framing policies marked new victims for assassination, replacing the older royal favourites.

In Europe nationalist fervour largely displaced religious hatreds as a motive for assassinations, though religious loyalties and antipathies in the Middle East continued to underlie many killings. Ancient clan or tribal ties in post-colonial Africa and Asia undermined constitutional forms of government, fostering bitterness and revolts that led to coups and assassinations. On the other hand after the Enlightenment in Europe older inhibitions on killing due to fear of divine vengeance were gradually eroded, though conversely tyrannicide continued to be used as an occasional justification for assassination. Political movements provided a new basis for

⁸³ I. Pogonowski, *Poland: A Historical Atlas* (New York: 1988) p.290; Trager, *People's Chronology* p.1110.

hostilities and hatreds, where extremists assassinated victims for standing in the way rather than from any personal animosities. Few assassinations actually changed systems or policies, and some exacerbated abuses. Charlotte Corday's assassination of Marat triggered a redoubling of the Terror, and the assassination of Hendrik Verwoerd simply led to a strengthening of Apartheid. On the other hand Orsini's attempted assassination of Napoleon III (1858) oddly convinced the emperor to take up the cause of Italy.⁸⁴

While it is impossible to find a single unifying explanation behind all assassinations, a number of common features can be suggested. First and foremost, as with all murders, the life of the victim is held to be less important than the perceived needs and goals of the assassin. Secondly, the assassin is ready to risk the possible consequences of the deed. Thirdly, the assassin believes that a successful assassination will initiate a better condition for at least the assassin if not for others. Where these three conditions apply, assassination will always be an option for some.

⁸⁴ Cobban *Modern France* Vol 1, pp. 218-219; Vol 2, p. 171; Trager *People's Chronology* p. 1002.