Tyrants and Terrorists

POLITICAL MURDER: FROM TYRANNICIDE TO TERRORISM

by Franklin L. Ford. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 440 pages, $29.50

Reviewed by Ted Robert Gurr

Some of the finest examples of the historians’ craft are to be found in the genre of “universal and very long-term history,” a phrase attributed to the economic historian Ronald Max Hartwell. These works stand at the opposite pole from the exhaustive, in-depth studies of “the politics of the exclusion crisis, 1678-1683” and “the Prussian welfare state before 1740” which are the bread and cheese of contemporary historiography and the stuff of promotions and academic reputations. Universal and very long-term history is thematic history which focuses on one grand issue or question and uses the evidence of chronicles and monographs to explore it across a broad reach of time and geocultural space.

By comparison with other recent works in thematic history, Franklin Ford’s Political Murder offers more scope but less synthesis. My benchmarks here are McNeill’s The Pursuit of Power: Technology, Armed Force, and Society since A.D. 1000 and Eric L. Jones’s The European Miracle: Environments, Economies, and Geopolitics in the History of Europe and Asia. These two studies each focus tightly on a particular question. McNeill traces the complex interactions between the art and organization of war and societal change in European history; Jones analyzes the environmental, technological, and geopolitical factors responsible for the diverging paths of economic development followed by Europe and China during the last millennium. Ford’s central subject, by contrast, is a phenomenon rather than an interaction, and his main purpose is to describe the recurring manifestations of political murder and assassination rather than to explain them.

By comparison with McNeill and Jones, Ford traces his subject across a broader span of time and, within the limits of the sources, attempts universality. His account begins more than 3,000 years ago with a biblically derived account of political murder among the Jewish tribes and later in the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. This is followed by analyses of tyrannicide in ancient Greece and of the emergence of the tradition of assassination in late Republic Rome that endured to the end of the empire. These 100 pages are prelude to an account of political murder in Europe from the early medieval period to the 1980s. The history of political murder in the Americas, including the United States, is surveyed in the penultimate chapters, more for convenience in ordering the account than from assumptions about American exceptionalism.

The first recorded leader to fall victim to an assassin in this span of three millennia was Eglon, king of Moab, slain by an Israelite tribute bearer in the twelfth century B.C.; the last in Ford’s chronicles was Indira Gandhi, shot by two of her Sikh guards in October 1984. In between, by my count, Ford records the murders of 155 monarchs, contenders for the throne, popes, prime ministers, presidents, and caudillos, along with countless retainers, lesser officials, and politically significant figures like Martin Luther King. The study is Eurasonic in that it focuses mainly on societies which have contributed to the mainstream of the Western tradition of political violence, but that is a limitation more of the sources than of Ford’s ambitions. Throughout, he offers passing glimpses of powerful men killed by rivals and conspirators in such places as ancient Assyria and Persia, dynastic China, precolonial Africa, and premodern Japan. In the four decades since World War II his scope is global, although most of his accounts of political murder in the Third World are skeletal by comparison with the treatment of Western cases.

While the book is nominally concerned with political murder in all of its manifestations, the principal subject is assassination, conceived as a particular species of the genus. Assassination is defined at the outset as “the intentional killing of a specified victim or group of victims, perpetrated for reasons related to his (her, their) public prominence and undertaken with a political purpose in view.” Tyrannicide, the murder of illegitimate rulers for reasons of principle, is a subset of assassinations which warrants special attention because from the twelfth to the sixteenth century it was the subject of contending scholastic doctrines about the right of resistance to tyranny—some of them put to political use. About the role of political murder by the state, the author usually interprets states’ past and present use of judicial murder and political terror as part of the political circumstances within which assassinations occur: they are context, and sometimes they are pretext.

The phenomenology of political murder across virtually the entire sweep of recorded history is so diverse as to virtually defy synthesis: generalization, yes; integrated explanation and interpretation, no. In this regard Ford begins with a set of general questions: Why do people kill for political reasons at all? Does the incidence of political murder oscillate over time? Are assassins more like to be loners or conspirators? What ethical justifications are offered for political murder? Most important in his view is the pragmatic question of whether assassination is likely to achieve any of the objectives of those who sought it. These questions imply varying mixes of description and interpretation of causality, and it may be said that the answers to the descriptive questions are better than the explanations. These are the kinds of answers that emerge inductively from the disorderly tangle of events.

Why do people kill for political reasons? In almost all cases the historical records reveal assassins’ known or imputed motives, and in some instances the killers’ memoirs, testaments, and trial records provide knowledge in depth. Particular attention is given to the rationales of tyrannicides and regicides in early modern Europe and of presidential assassins in the United States. Ford attempts no general answer to the question, which is just as well given the extraordinary variety of individual motives. On the basis of the evidence I can suggest four categories of reasons. There are first assassinations by people who plot to seize power themselves. Such dynastic
or palace infighting was very common historically and in societies on the periphery of European civilization, but Ford concludes that it is substantially less common now. The last European monarchs to die at the hands of courtiers were Gustav III of Sweden in 1792 and Paul I of Russia in 1800. Political murder in the course of coups appears to be a contemporary analogue.

Political murder to avenge the public wrongs done by a ruler is a second well-represented category. Both King Elgon and Indira Gandhi died at the hands of assassins acting on behalf of a subject people; so did Prince Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in 1914 and many other public figures. No obvious trends in the relative frequency of this kind of motive are evident in Ford's accounts. A third category of assassins kills leaders not for what they have done but for what they are or represent. This category includes nineteenth century anarchists and twentieth century revolutionary terrorists energized by an absolute opposition to reigning political authorities. Such nihilistic motives have few historical precedents, and the frequency of assassinations thus justified has increased over time. The fourth category consists of psychotic loners who strike at figures of authority out of some compelling inner need rather than a commitment to any larger political purpose. There are remarkably few historical examples: Ford points out, drawing heavily on James Clarke's *American Assassins: The Darker Side of Politics*, that most of this country's lone assassins were influenced in what they did by the political events and sensations of their time, while a number had specific political or ideological objectives.

Does the incidence of political murder change over time? Ford offers some clear-cut answers to this question. Over the long run political murder has been a recurring phenomenon in the societies he examines, but there have been four intermittent remissions. They occurred in Greece during the fifth century B.C., in Rome during the first 400 years of the republic, in feudal Europe from the mid-eleventh through fourteenth centuries, and in Europe from the mid-seventeenth century until the French Revolution. Although these observations do not rest on precise quantitative comparisons, there is reason to think that they are valid. The principal question I have about them is whether the evidence from Greece prior to the fifth century, and from medieval Europe before the eleventh century, is reliable enough to support the contention that those periods had higher levels of assassination than the supposed remissions that followed them.

Ford offers some interesting comparative speculations about why the remissions should have occurred: a common feature of them was, not "pitiless repression" but a pattern of responsible autocratic rule, in which successive ruling groups accepted restraint in the exercise of power and the customary rights of those they ruled. This was balanced among the ruled by respect for government and forbearance. A political scientist would use terms like limited autonomy and legitimacy to characterize such a pattern.

Extrapolating and generalizing from the evidence—something he ordinarily does with reluctance—the author suggests that practice of limited autocratic rule in these periods of remission gave way to increasingly arbitrary and tyrannical rule, for example the emergence of absolute monarchy in early modern Europe. He concludes that most periods of repression and injustice were not generally accompanied by high rates of assassination—an assertion that seems contradicted by the evidence of the early Roman Empire and the revolutionary and reactionary despotism of the French revolutionary period. Rather, he proposes that political murder has "burgeoned when such summits of autocracy have been passed, in times characterized by nervous concessions and partial reforms from above... Such periods open long-neglected paths to power, inviting often ruthless competition among new aspirants." As is evident from many specific accounts, ruthless challenges for power usually provoked ruthless retaliation from those who seized or retained it.

The explanation may be plausible, but it is not complete nor is it made with any rigor. One could argue as well that remissions and resurgence in political murder had something to do with the pace and patterns of socioeconomic change. Some of the evidence about the reemergence of the idea and practice of assassination also seems consistent with diffusion models. A more rigorous approach to testing such alternative or complementary explanations in the European milieu would be to compare the experience of different realms or countries over time: after all, the tides of political repression and reform, economic change and class conflict did not run on the same timetable throughout all Europe.

Ford does not mention that arguments similar to his have been made about the origins of revolution and popular rebellion in European history: it is not autocracy or repression per se that stimulates the outbreak of internal war, but rather their weakening and the consequent emergence of new expectations and new coalitions of challengers. He denies, without elaboration, that there is any correlation between the incidence of assassination and popular unrest. He does explicitly point out that the establishment of new states—in Europe after World War I, in the Third World after World War II—provided the occasion for intense struggles for power, first against colonial rule, then among factions within the new states. Comparative data on twentieth century assassination attempts show sharp increases beginning in the 1940s or 1950s in every Third World region.

One other short-term regularity is to be observed in ebb and flow of assassinations in Western societies. They have been relatively infrequent when major wars were in progress but have increased sharply in their aftermath. The evidence and the reasons are both abundant.

Are assassins loners or conspirators? The question here concerns the relative frequency with which assassins have acted alone, as members of small groups, or as agents of extended conspiracies. In his conclusion Ford combines the first two of these three implicit categories, which tends to obscure differences in the character of the assassins and the dynamics of the act. The lone assassin is historically relatively uncommon, although there are both ancient and modern examples. The first woman tyrannicide seems to have been Jael, celebrated in the Book of Judges for slaying an alien Canaanite tyrant while he slept, for good political reason but apparently without premeditation. One of the most remarkable individual assassins of the twentieth century was Friedrich Adler, a thirty-seven-year-old Ph.D. in mathematics and secretary of the Austrian Social Democratic Workers' Party, who in October 1916 shot dead the prime minister of Austria-Hungary, on his own responsibility and evidently without the party's foreknowledge. He used his subsequent trial to publicize his objectives: to protest the government's refusal to convene parliament and its restrictions on civil liberties. He also asserted his right to murder a minister as a symbol of oppression. Before he could be executed the old emperor died and his successor, in response to widespread pressure, had parliament called, relaxed many political restrictions, and, rather than creating a socialist martyr, commuted Adler's death sentence. Released at war's end in 1918, Adler lived an uneventful life as a teacher and writer, dying in Switzerland at the age of eighty-one. Adler was remarkable not only in personal background but in his survival, for few assassins in Ford's chronicles escaped with their lives. And he was one of the few twentieth-century assassins whose invocation of the ancient right of tyrannicide met public approval. Had the conspirators of July 1944 succeeded in assassinating Hitler, they too