

TERROR IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY: POLITICAL ASSASSINATIONS AND PUBLIC DISCOURSE IN EUROPE AND THE UNITED STATES, 1878–1901

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Events do not happen; events are produced. An occurrence becomes an event only when certain groups in society pay attention to it, consider it important, speak and write about it, react to it, and remember it. Thus events are socially constructed. This does not mean, however, that they are pure constructs. At their starting point, they have acts and occurrences that are very real indeed.

A good example of the social construction of an event is Max Hödel's attempt to assassinate Kaiser Wilhelm I on May 11, 1878. As the German emperor states in his handwritten notes, he did not notice the attack. Absorbed in a conversation with his daughter, he heard shots but did not think he was the target. Only when his daughter, the grand duchess of Baden, told him later what she had seen did he begin to understand that somebody had intended to kill him. And only then did he realize "that a crime was involved here!"¹ Although the emperor had not noticed Hödel's attempt on his life, the plot immediately became a first-class event. Half an hour after the incident, masses of people had collected in front of the Hohenzollern palace, cheering enthusiastically to express their sympathy for the monarch. The emperor had to repeatedly appear on the balcony for the public.² That evening, Wilhelm I went to the opera and the theater. Along the way, the streets were decorated with flags and illuminated with Bengal lights, bright flames burning in different colors. When he entered the opera house, the whole audience rose, greeting him with frenzied cheers and singing the national anthem accompanied by the orchestra.³ On the same day, the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in its evening edition printed two telegraphic dispatches dealing with the events in Berlin.⁴ The next morning, the paper reported the events on the front page and tried to establish its own version of the case. It insisted that, just as was the case in England, all attempts to assassinate the sovereign should be considered acts of insanity, at least until there was enough

information about the assassin and his motives to allow clear judgments.⁵ In this way, the liberal paper tried to caution against rash political interpretations already making the rounds, which blamed the assassination attempt on the treason of Social Democrats.

What makes an event an event, therefore, is not necessarily a break in historical continuity, an objective force changing the path of history or some kind of monstrosity, but how people deal with specific incidents.⁶ First, they produce events through their actions, for example, when they swarm together in front of the palace to see the emperor and cheer for him, when they hang up flags in front of their house, light Bengal lights, and rise in the theater. Actions such as these have to be part of the analysis, not only because to a considerable degree they constitute the event "Hödel's assassination attempt," but also because they are part of symbolic politics. Secondly, political attacks such as Hödel's become events by semanticizing. "An interpretation does what it says, while it pretends to simply state, show, or tell," Jacques Derrida states, "[I]n fact, an interpretation produces, it is already performative in a certain way."⁷ Examples of this productivity of interpretations are the eyewitness account of the grand duchess that led the emperor to see the shots as an attack and the *Frankfurter Zeitung's* attempt to interpret the attack as an act of insanity. The productivity and performance of such interpretations point to the task of an analysis of media events. In the words of Jacques Derrida: "The political vigilance that this calls for on our part consists in organizing a critical knowledge of all those apparatuses that pretend to *communicate* the event when, in reality, they are *making*, interpreting, or producing it."⁸

Accordingly, the basic aim of this project is a critical analysis of the actions and interpretations that produced the event "political assassination" around the end of the nineteenth century. The main focus will be on the political dimension of how the event "assassination attempt" was constituted through speech and action. I want to study the role of such attacks in the political process and in public discourse by reconstructing the conflict about the hegemony of interpretation, a conflict about public opinion, political measures, their acceptance, and, as in the German case, a fight about the nation's form of government, its legal character, and the inclusion or exclusion of its citizens.

My research on "assassination attempts" as outlined above will not be limited to the German Empire. By studying the attacks on Tsar Alexander II (1881), U.S. president James A. Garfield (1881), the French president Sadi Carnot (1894), the empress Elisabeth of Austria-Hungary (1898), and U.S. president William McKinley (1901), I want to look at Russia, France, Austria-Hungary, and the United States in an analogous way.⁹ The concrete and immediate political outcomes of these attacks are

well known for every country. They are highly diverse: Whereas in Germany, Bismarck could exploit the middle classes' nightmare of revolution for a conservative turn and his fight against the Social Democratic Party, in Russia, the murder of Alexander II put a sudden end to reforms and the country's development toward a constitutional monarchy. Moreover, anti-Semitic pogroms followed. In the United States, the assassination of James A. Garfield was blamed on the spoils system, a system of party patronage. Hence the Pendleton Act, a law reforming public services, was the immediate outcome of the murder. The shooting of William McKinley twenty years later reinforced the feeling of resentment against immigrants, but at the same time, it opened the way for political modernization in the Progressive Era.¹⁰

Nonetheless, it is necessary to take a closer look at the contested emergence of these political consequences as well as at other topics negotiated in the event "assassination attempt." A preliminary analysis of several European and American newspapers reinforces this impression. After the attack on James Garfield, for example, the *Atlanta Daily Constitution* seems to have regarded it as especially important to underline the loyalty of the Southern states to the president as the first representative of the Union. Thus on the next day the main article on the front page stated, with an explicit comparison to the northern states, "Atlanta has seldom been so moved as she was yesterday. After the news of the president's assassination had been confirmed, business was suspended almost entirely, and the staunchest of New England republican towns could not have felt more profoundly the shame and disgrace of the assassination or sympathized more thoroughly with the stricken statesman than did Atlanta."¹¹ In the following weeks, the theme continued throughout the press coverage, and seems to have been vital for the North as well. The *Daily Constitution* cited articles from the *Baltimore Gazette*, the *Philadelphia Press*, and the *Boston Herald*, writing: "A gratifying feature of the expressions of popular feeling over the assault upon the president's life, has been the swift and manifestly heart-felt sympathy with General Garfield and his family, evoked at the south. [. . .] It is their president who has been stricken down—their government that has received a shock. [. . .] The voice of nature and the spirit of patriotism again show the nation to be one. Around the couch of the suffering president, all are Americans and brethren."¹² Whereas in the German Empire the assassination attempts fired the starting shot for the imprisonment and political exclusion of Social Democrats, it seems that in the United States, in the face of the attack on James Garfield, the inner reunification of the nation was brought about: The assassination attempt was taken as a chance for national reintegration. One outcome of this project, therefore, might be a

comparative history of the way in which societies have dealt with assassination attempts and of the consequences this had for them.

The meaning of such attacks was not negotiated at the national level alone. The shots directed at Wilhelm I and the murders of Alexander II, Garfield, Carnot, Elisabeth of Austria-Hungary, and McKinley produced transnational media events, i.e. they were the object of press coverage and, thus, interpretation in Vienna as well as in St. Petersburg, Paris, Berlin, London, Washington, and beyond.¹³ A whole range of factors seems to have influenced how foreign events were presented and explained to readers at home: the information level of the newspaper editors, the press policy of the government in the country where the attack had taken place, and government measures of censorship, as well as the political system at home and the considerations it imposed. Besides the attacks in the narrow sense, the assassin, his motives and his biography, the interrogations, the custody, the trial, and the sentence—in most cases, the execution—were noteworthy issues. If the victims survived (as in the case of Wilhelm I and, at least for some weeks, James Garfield), there was extensive press coverage on their physical and mental state. Moreover, background articles appeared discussing the social and political situation of the country in question and explaining its political system to enable readers to better understand the attack and the motives of the perpetrator. To this end, even the cultural sections of the newspaper were mobilized, for instance, when after the attack on Garfield, the *Neue Freie Presse* in Vienna suddenly changed from the usual serialized novels to travel stories from the United States and articles on the American economy as well as on American cities and their architecture. Therefore, it seems that the media event “assassination attempt” triggered an expansion and deepening of international press coverage toward the end of the nineteenth century.

The character of the press coverage was not only international in content, however, but also international, or better transnational, in form. For example, newspapers all over the world reprinted articles and comments from the leading newspapers in the country where the attack had taken place. They did this mainly because the information was simply better there. But if the public could be assumed to be well-acquainted with the political circumstances of the country reported on—as was the case for Vienna and Berlin—there seems to have been another reason as well: Newspaper editors thought their audiences capable of reading between the lines and assessing the political sympathies and the meanings of an article for themselves, if given the source. And finally, the leading press from the capitals of the Western world was cited or reprinted to give the public at home an idea of international public opinion.

What is of interest, here, about these media events—inter- or transnational in many respects—is, again, the political dimension. This dimension can be found, first, in the different national formations of the interpretations of the attacks, formations that must be understood against the different national backgrounds. One must not forget, however, that these interpretations were kept open for quite some time, because the international press commentaries, partly competing and partly contradicting one another, stood directly side by side. And second: If on the national level the nation's form of government and its character as a state under the rule of law was at stake, on an international level the question of the *best* type of state and, again, its legal character were negotiated. The ways different states dealt with the assassins and their attacks were in fact critical points of discussion in this context. Here, the passage from the *Frankfurter Zeitung* might again serve as an example, as it claimed that in England all assassination attempts on the sovereign would be dealt with as acts of insanity, and it combined this statement with the suggestion that this problem be handled similarly in Germany. Asking for the consequences on an inter- or transnational level in society, therefore, one could put forward the hypothesis that the transnational media event "assassination attempt" helped to establish a world public embracing at least the European countries and the United States. To put it more carefully: world opinion evolved around the end of the nineteenth century, and this partial process of globalization can be studied in an exemplary form by researching the media events following the attempts to assassinate heads of state.

This project thus attempts to contribute to a transnational history of society, the public, and the media in the second half of the nineteenth century. The comparison between the different ways in which societies dealt with the attempts to assassinate their heads of state and the consequences this brought about is intended to contribute to the history of nation-building. It also offers connections for a political history. The research on the press coverage on the attacks as transnational media events promises to contribute to the history of the evolution of a world public and thus to the history of globalization. Moreover, this project is intended to be a contribution to the history of political ideas, especially the history of social radicalism. The overarching aim is to help historicize the phenomenon "terrorism" by confronting the discourse on the recent attacks with the discussions in the nineteenth century. Along these lines, this raises the question of the relationship between mass media, public, and the attacks: To what extent have the mass media and the world public brought forth the phenomenon "terrorist attack" by creating the national and international sounding-board that is a vital part of the terrorist's calculation?

Notes

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¹ Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz (Berlin), Brandenburg-Preußisches Hausarchiv, Rep. 51, Nr. 851, Aufzeichnung Kaiser Wilhelms über das Hödel'sche Attentat, Berlin 11. Mai 1878 (für den Druck vorbereitete Abschrift).

² *Frankfurter Zeitung*, "Attentat auf den Kaiser. Berlin, 11. Mai, 4 Uhr 59 M.," May 11, 1878, Abendblatt.

³ *Frankfurter Zeitung*, "Telegraphische Depeschen. Wagner's telegr. Correspondenz-Bureau. Berlin, 11. Mai, 11 Uhr 25 M.," May 12, 1878, Morgenblatt.

⁴ *Frankfurter Zeitung*, "Attentat auf den Kaiser. Berlin, 11. Mai, 4 Uhr 45 Min. Nachmittags. (Privatdepesche der 'Frankfurter Zeitung')," May 11, 1878, Abendblatt, and *Frankfurter Zeitung*, May 11, 1878, "Berlin, 11. Mai, 4 Uhr 59 M.."

⁵ *Frankfurter Zeitung*, "Das Attentat auf den Kaiser," May 12, 1878, Morgenblatt.

⁶ See esp. Egon Flaig, "Ein semantisches Ereignis inszenieren, um ein politisches zu verhindern. Die entblößten Narben vor der Volksversammlung 167 v. Chr.," in *Ereignis: Konzeptionen eines Begriffs in Geschichte, Kunst und Literatur*, ed. Thomas Rathmann (Cologne, 2003), 183–198; for a different approach see e.g. Johanne Villeneuve, "Abwesenheit und Wiederholung: Die Erwartung des Ereignisses und das Beispiel der Sowjetunion," in *Zeit des Ereignisses—Ende der Geschichte?* ed. Friedrich Balke, Erich Méchoulan, and Benno Wagner (Munich, 1992). For conceptions of the event in history and historiography see esp. Karlheinz Stierle and Reinhart Koselleck in *Geschichte—Ereignis und Erzählung*, ed. Reinhart Koselleck and Wolf-Dieter Stempel (Munich, 1973): 526–528, 530–534, 560–571, and Hayden White, "The Narrativization of Real Events," *Critical Inquiry* 7 (1981): S. 793–798. On the media event see Pierre Nora, "Le retour de l'événement," in *Faire de l'histoire: Nouveaux problèmes*, ed. Jaques Le Goff and Pierre Nora (Paris 1974); Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz, *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History*, (Cambridge, Mass., 1994) and Jacques Derrida, "Une certaine possibilité impossible de dire l'événement," in *Dire l'événement, est-ce possible?* ed. Gad Soussana and Alexis Nouss (Paris, 2003), 79–112.

⁷ Derrida, "Une certaine possibilité impossible," 90.

⁸ Derrida, "Une certaine possibilité impossible," 90.

⁹ For these and other assassination attempts in the nineteenth century see esp. Benedict Anderson, *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and the Anti-Colonial Imagination* (London, 2005) and the relevant chapters in Walter Laqueur, *A History of Terrorism* (New Brunswick, 2002); Wolfgang J. Mommsen and Gerhard Hirschfeld, eds., *Sozialprotest, Gewalt, Terror: Gewaltanwendung durch politische und gesellschaftliche Randgruppen im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart, 1982); and the pertinent parts of anthologies written for a wider public, such as Alexander Demandt, ed., *Das Attentat in der Geschichte* (Cologne, 1996) or Jörg von Uthmann, *Attentat: Mord mit gutem Gewissen. Von Julius Caesar bis Jitzhak Rabin* (Berlin, 1996).

¹⁰ See Wolfgang Pack, *Das parlamentarische Ringen um das Sozialistengesetz Bismarcks 1878–1890* (Düsseldorf, 1961), Oleg V. Budnitskiy, *Terrorizm v rossijskom osvoboditel'nom dvizhenii: ideologiya, etika, psikhologiya (vtoraya polovina XIX—nachalo XX v.)* (Moscow, 2000); Kenneth D. Ackerman, *Dark Horse: The Surprise Election and Political Murder of James A. Garfield* (New York, 2004) and Eric Rauchway, *Murdering McKinley: The Making of Theodore Roosevelt's America* (New York, 2003).

¹¹ *Daily Constitution*, "The News in Atlanta," July 3, 1881.

¹² *Daily Constitution*, "The People Reunited: Boston Herald," July 7, 1881. See also *Daily Constitution*, July 7, 1881, "Southern Sympathy. Philadelphia Press. Baltimore Gazette."

¹³ For the term "transnational" see esp. Jürgen Osterhammel, "Transkulturell vergleichende Geschichtswissenschaft," in *Geschichtswissenschaft jenseits des Nationalstaats: Studien zu Beziehungsgeschichte und Zivilisationsvergleich* (Göttingen, 2001) as well as the discussion in *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 27 (Göttingen, 2001) and the introduction to Sebastian Conrad and Jürgen Osterhammel, *Das Kaiserreich transnational: Deutschland in der Welt 1871–1914* (Göttingen, 2004).