Definition: **assassination** from *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*

Murder, usually of a political, royal, or public person. The term derives from the order of the Assassins, a Muslim sect that, in the 11th and 12th centuries, murdered officials to further its political ends.

**Summary Article: Assassination**
*From Encyclopedia of Death and the Human Experience*

Assassination is an ambiguous concept when used to describe events or when it is employed in general analyses. Assassination is selective killing; it also refers to the intentional killing of a public figure. These two views of assassination share the element of killing and are similar to the extent that the expressions “a leader” and “a public figure” refer to similar types of people. But they are also different from each other. Notice that according to the second definition, but not the first, assassination is a killing accomplished treacherously; this introduces into the second definition a dimension that is not present in the first one, namely the evaluative dimension. Unlike murdering, the notion of killing is purely descriptive. An act of killing can be evaluated as a morally or legally permissible or even an obligatory act, under certain circumstances of self-defense and necessity, but can also be evaluated as a morally impermissible or even abhorrent act, under circumstances of wicked aggression. The adverb *treacherously* is on a par with murdering rather than killing. To act treacherously is to act in a wrongful way. It is never justifiable. Recall Dante’s attitude toward treachery in the *Inferno* part of his *Divine Comedy*. The circle of treachery is the ninth and final circle of hell. In its innermost zone and within Lucifer’s mouths were Brutus and Cassius, eternally suffering for their assassination of Julius Caesar.

Consequently, a deep distinction emerges between a definition of assassination as a selective killing of a leader and a definition of it in terms of what is accomplished treacherously. Whereas the former definition leaves open questions of the justifiability of acts described as assassination, the latter definition leaves no room for any question of justifiability, since an act described as assassination involves treachery, which is always wrong. When the former definition is used, moral issues can and often should be considered. When the latter definition is used, it is pointless to raise such issues. A moral consideration has already been made and a negative evaluation reached. As a result of that deep difference between various definitions of assassination, we have an induced difference between discussions that employ, whether explicitly or between the lines, different definitions of the term.

The important distinction between descriptive and evaluative definitions of assassination is often blurred, when evaluative terms appear in seemingly simple conjunction with descriptive ones. For example, *assassination* is to destroy unexpectedly and treacherously a specific human target. A depiction of an act as performed unexpectedly is purely descriptive, even though it involves expectations, which are possibly subjective. However, a depiction of an act as performed treacherously involves both a description and an evaluation. Similarly, assassination represents a...
deliberate action that involves extralegal killing that is based on political ideologies. Assuming that an act can be extralegal and morally justified, the question is left open whether a certain act of assassination was morally justified or not, but the normative question of its legal nature has been closed by definition.

Given such a variety of definitions of the notion of assassination, preference must be given to one definition, or one family of similar definitions, in order to discuss assassination by giving examples of such acts, searching their meanings, and evaluating their justification. It has been demonstrated that there is a reason to prefer usage of terms that enables us to draw a distinction between a description of an act, activity, or event and its evaluation from a certain normative point of view, thus making the nature of the evaluation transparent. When descriptive terms are used, the mode of evaluation has to be introduced in a way that enables seeing the grounds of it. If evaluative terms such as treacherously are used, the grounds for portraying a certain act or policy as wrong are left unstated and remain unclear. Hence, in the sequel, assassination is going to be understood in a broad sense that leaves open for further discussion issues of moral, ethical, religious, or legal justification.

The difference between definitions of assassination that include a conveyed evaluative element and those that do not is not the only difference one encounters in the usage of the term and in its suggested definitions. Here is a list of features that appear in usage and analysis, some of which are necessary conditions for the occurrence of an act described as an assassination and some of which are not:

1. Killing a person
2. Killing a political leader
3. Killing a noncombatant
4. Doing it selectively
5. Doing it intentionally
6. Doing it in a premeditated manner
7. Doing it for political or religious purposes
8. Doing it unexpectedly
9. Doing it by a person not in uniform
10. Doing it in a secret and clandestine manner
11. Doing it treacherously

Given the background of the previous discussion, number 11 will not be included in the definition, thus leaving the question open whether an act of assassination under consideration is of a treacherous nature or not.

Some of the other 10 suggested definitional elements of assassination are features of common instances of what is called an assassination rather than necessary ingredients of the concept of assassination. For example, because an instance of an expected assassination can be imagined, element 8 of the list should not be an ingredient of an adequate definition. For similar reasons,
Ingredients 3 (an assassination of a head of state can take place whether or not the person is commander in chief, of a military rank, or in military uniform), 9, and 10 can be discarded as well.

Element 1 is indeed a necessary ingredient of the definition. Element 2 is problematic, as the term *assassination* has been used for describing acts of killing people who did not play any political role of leadership at the time of the killing. Paul Klebnikov wrote a book about corruption among Russian so-called oligarchs. Although he held no political position, whether formal or societal, his killing was later protested as an assassination. On the background of such examples, it is proposed that element 2, “killing a political leader,” be replaced by the broader “killing a person of prominence,” that could be political but not necessarily so. Element 7, “doing it for political or religious purposes,” does not presuppose that the person killed is a political leader. Prominence is sufficient for rendering an act of killing, an act that can be intended and understood as done for political or religious purposes. This leaves elements 1, 2 (modified), 4, 5, and 7. Element 6 has been deleted as it can be included in element 7; what is done for political or religious purpose is necessarily premeditated, in a sense. Element 7 includes not only political reasons but also religious ones, as suggested by the Canadian Forces manual on the Law of Armed Conflict.

Thus, the following working definition of the term *assassination* is proposed for the present purposes: An assassination is an act of killing a prominent person, selectively, intentionally, and for political or religious purposes. This definition leaves open all questions of justification. An act of killing a prominent person, selectively, intentionally, and for political or religious purposes can and should be evaluated from any relevant point of view, be it moral, ethical, legal, or denominational. Notice that some of these points of view may vary in time. For example, the legal point of view of the United States, before the related Executive Order of President Ford, which banned assassination performed on the behalf of the U.S. government, later formulated in Executive Order 12333, is different from the present legal point of view of the U.S. government, assuming it has not been changed.

**Examples of Assassination**

**Greece**

King Philip II of Macedon conquered Greece, except for Sparta, in 338 B.C.E. and was about to fight Persia. During a wedding ceremony of his daughter Cleopatra to the King of Epirus in 336 B.C.E., he was killed by Pausanias, one of his bodyguards. According to some historians, it was an assassination in which his wife Olympias was involved. His son was Alexander the Great.

**Rome**

After successful battles, extended from Italy to Spain, Greece, and Egypt, Julius Caesar became, in 44 B.C.E., a self-declared dictator for life. Numerous Roman senators turned against him and conspired to assassinate him. When he came to a Senate meeting on the Ides of March 44, some senators, including Servilius Casca, Cassius, and Decimus Brutus, stabbed him to death. One result of the assassination was a series of civil wars.

**Hellenistic Egypt**

Hypatia, daughter of the philosopher and mathematician Theon of Alexandria, was the first woman to be head of a philosophical school and to be known to have broad mathematical knowledge. Her special personality and her friendship with the Roman prefect Orestes served followers of the Christian Patriarch (later St.) Cyril as grounds for depicting her as responsible for the political rivalry between
patriarch and prefect, Church and State. In 415 C.E., a Christian mob, possibly of Nitrian monks, assassinated Hypatia.

**Medieval England**

King Henry II appointed to the most influential position of chancellor his friend of “one heart and one mind,” Thomas Becket. After Archbishop Theobald died in 1161, the king thought Thomas would help him reform the church. In 1162 Thomas was ordained priest and a day later consecrated bishop. However, as the archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas’s first loyalty was to the church. In a series of events he was in conflict with the king. In 1170 four knights assassinated him in the cathedral. Two years later he was canonized.

**The Netherlands**

William I, Prince of Orange (“The Silent”), was governor of Holland under Philip II, King of Spain’s occupation of the Netherlands. Later, he led a Dutch revolt against Spain, which led to the Eighty Years War between the two, which in turn led to the 1648 independence of the Netherlands. He was assassinated by a Catholic French supporter of the king of Spain in 1584. The Dutch national anthem, flag, and coat of arms are directly related to the “father of the fatherlands.”

**Russia**

Emperor Paul I, son of Emperor Peter III and Catherine (“The Great”), formed the Second League of Armed Neutrality with Prussia, Denmark, and Sweden but was rigidly conservative in internal affairs. He was assassinated in 1801 by dismissed officers and other officials led by Levine August, Count of Bennigsen, and a general in the service of the emperor. The assassins declared emperor his son, Alexander I (eventually, “The Blessed”).

**The United States**

Abraham Lincoln, the 16th president of the United States, defeated the Confederate States of America in the Civil War. His executive orders, “Emancipation Proclamation,” were significant steps toward ending slavery in the United States. On that background, a Confederate agent assassinated Lincoln on April 15, 1865, while coconspirators failed to assassinate Vice President Andrew Johnson and Secretary of State William H. Seward.

**World War I**

Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir apparent to the throne of Austria-Hungary, was assassinated in Sarajevo, on June 28, 1914, by a Serbian group interested in the independence of Serbia. Within a few weeks, a war erupted between Austria-Hungary and Germany, on the one hand, and Serbia, Russia, France, and Great Britain, on the other hand, which lasted more than 4 years. Many other states joined the war, among which were the United States and Italy. The number of military deaths is estimated between 9 and 10 million, that of civilians between 8 and 9 million.

**India**

Mohandas Karamachand (“Mahatma”) Gandhi was born in India, educated in England, and experienced discrimination during a long stay in South Africa, where he developed his political position of nonviolent struggle. Upon returning to India, he led the struggle against the United Kingdom, for the independence of India. His insistence on nonviolent methods and his religious tolerance enraged some Hindu fundamentalists, who made five attempts to assassinate Gandhi. On January 30, 1948, he was...
On October 31, 1984, India's prime minister, Indira Gandhi, was assassinated by a Sikh bodyguard, on the background of a conflict related to Sikh temples. Her son, Ragiv Gandhi, immediately followed her as prime minister. On May 21, 1991, after resigning from office, he was assassinated by a female suicide bomber, a member of a Tamil extremist organization.

**Israel**

After the Oslo accords were signed by the Government of Israel and the Palestinian Authority, which involved prospects of Israel's withdrawal from belligerently occupied Palestinian territories, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated, on November 4, 1995, by an extremist, nationalist-religious Jew. The assassination was followed by changes in the ruling party, government, and policies.

**Meaning and Justification**

Every case of assassination involves, by its nature, causing the death of a prominent person for political or religious purposes. However, the full meaning of an assassination has an additional element: An assassination can be instrumental or symbolic. In the former case, the death of the assassinated person is a necessary condition for achieving the purpose of the act. The assassination of Julius Caesar is an example as are most of the previously mentioned cases. In the latter case, an interpretation of the assassination is meant to be understood by members of the groups directly related to the political or religious purpose of the act. The assassination of the Archduke of Austria-Hungary, for example, was not a necessary precondition of the independence of Serbia, but it stood for the struggle of some Serbians for their political independence.

Moral evaluation of an act of assassination depends on the full intended meaning of the act. The simpler cases are the extreme ones. On the one hand, if it can be certainly assumed that the assassination will radically change for the better a horrendous state, such as an ongoing genocide, by removing from power, in the only way possible, a person who is responsible for the atrocities, then assassination is permissible. The case of Hitler during World War II is a prime example. On the other hand, assassination meant for symbolic purposes is always morally wrong, because it involves treating a person as merely a means to an end.

Symbolic acts of assassination are never necessary and always have better alternatives.

U.S. Executive Order 12333, which forbids acts of assassination of or on the behalf of the United States, marks a presumption that such acts are usually morally wrong. Reasons for such a stance with respect to intermediate cases have involved a variety of considerations. Because heads of states are often not members of the armed forces, the Principle of Distinction between combatant and noncombatants has been invoked. This is not a compelling argument, as heads of states are often directly involved in crucial warfare decision-making processes. Some analysts argue that persons with whom peace will eventually be negotiated and reached should therefore not be assassinated. When assassination is meant to terrorize people, the arguments against terrorism convincingly apply against it. Usually, assassinations cannot be justified on grounds of necessity and therefore are understood to be symbolic in nature and therefore morally wrong.

**See also**

Atrocities, Death, Humanistic Perspectives, Hate Crimes and Death Threats, Homicide, Legalities of Death

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