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978-1-107-06490-4 - July Crisis: The World's Descent into War, Summer 1914

T. G. Otte

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

Do not despise the diplomatic documents.

GILBERT MURRAY (1915)¹

It appears to me to be from its very nature an impossibility even to determine from documentary evidence the question of who was responsible for the outbreak of the war.

VICTOR NAUMANN (1919)²

At the end of June 1914, the young Oxford historian E. L. Woodward was spending part of his summer vacation at a resort in the Black Forest. In the late afternoon of Sunday, 28 June, the polite tinkling of cosmopolitan teacups on the long terrace of the Badenweiler spa hotel was interrupted by some startling news: the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Habsburg throne and future ruler of some forty-five million people in central and south-eastern Europe, had been assassinated in Sarajevo. The hotel crowd excitedly dispersed to form separate groups according to nationality: 'I knew that something very grave had happened', Woodward reflected many decades later.³ Something grave had indeed happened, though Woodward was perhaps reading back into the past a fancy of foresight.

When viewed at the distance of a century, there is a paradox about 1914: it should have been an unremarkable year. After years of turmoil, especially in south-eastern Europe, the short-term indicators pointed towards peace. European diplomats spoke of a new era of *détente*. But the two recent Balkan conflicts in 1912 and 1913 had left unexploded ordnance in their wake, one being Albania, now independent but without agreed frontiers. Under the rule of a German princeling, the Prince of Wied, the country was on the verge of becoming a failed state: 'les caisses sont vides, le trône est Wied, tout est vide [the coffers are empty, [on] the

¹ G. Murray, *The Foreign Policy of Sir Edward Grey, 1906–1915* (Oxford, 1915), 122.

² Statement Dr V. Naumann [1919], *OGD* 1, no. 8.

³ E. L. Woodward, *Short Journey* (London, 1942), 72–3; for similar observations on that day see S. Zweig, *Die Welt von Gestern: Erinnerungen eines Europäers* (Frankfurt, 1981 (pb), [1st edn 1944]), 248–51.

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throne is Wied, everything is empty]’,⁴ as some unkindly soul put it in the spring of 1914. But whilst there were problems in the periphery of Europe, relations between the Great Powers appeared relatively free of friction, especially when compared with previous years. To explain how and why the Powers found themselves in a world war, then, poses a significant challenge to the student of the past.

To say that the First World War transformed the modern world is to state the obvious. The conflict was, as George F. Kennan observed, ‘the great seminal catastrophe’ of the twentieth century:⁵ from it flowed many, if not all, of the vicissitudes of that century. Even outwardly, it has left its scars on the surface of Europe’s landscape and social fabric. In Britain, but also in many Commonwealth countries, this war, the bloodiest in these nations’ histories, has remained something of a national obsession. Commemorated sombrely and formally once a year, it continues to provide a stimulus for soul-searching. And no-one can drive through the flat fields of Flanders or the rolling hills of the Champagne and not be struck by the endless rows of white tombstones and crosses in the Commonwealth war cemeteries, or in the *jardins de funèbre* and the *Heldenhaine* that pockmark those landscapes.

Countless participants in the war wrote on the profound impact of the conflict; legions of later writers have amplified on it and have reflected on the origins of the war. The 1914–18 conflict has never ceased to attract the attention of scholars and the wider public alike. Its origins have furnished enough nutritious matter for generations of historians to feed on. The debate surrounding the origins is, as John Langdon’s aptly named historiographical study suggests, ‘the long debate’.⁶ This prolonged pre-occupation with the immediate, and the longer-term, structural origins of the war is easily understandable. Three considerations help to explain it. For one thing, as the Swiss historian Werner Näf observed in 1930, for all the loose pre-1914 talk of a ‘coming war’, the reality of the world war

⁴ As quoted in *JK* 1, 216.

⁵ G. F. Kennan, *The Decline of Bismarck’s European Order: Franco-Russian Relations 1875–1890* (Princeton, NJ, 1979), 3.

⁶ J. W. Langdon, *July 1914: The Long Debate, 1919–1990* (Oxford, 1991); see also J. Droz, *Les causes de la Première Guerre mondiale. Essai d’historiographie* (Paris, 1973); for further studies with special emphasis on the debate in Germany see J. A. Moses, *The Politics of Illusion: The Fischer Controversy in German Historiography*; W. Jäger, *Historische Forschung und politische Kultur in Deutschland. Die Debatte um den Ausbruch des Ersten Weltkriegs, 1914–1980* (Göttingen, 1984); A. Mombauer, *The Origins of the First World War: Controversies and Consensus* (London, 2002); see also the articles on the Fischer controversy in the special issue of *JCH* XLVIII, 2 (2013).

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shook European civilization.⁷ There it was, noted the Austrian novelist Arthur Schnitzler in his diary: ‘The world war. The ruin of the world. Tremendous and frightful news.’⁸ The war rocked the sense of security, prosperity and progress that had sustained the confidence of the nations of Europe. Until the summer of 1914, most Europeans, certainly those of the comfortable middle and upper classes, led a ‘relatively privileged life . . . confident that . . . frontiers would always be open, that intellectual and scientific progress would continue, without disturbing the habitual course of life’.⁹ After 1919, confronted with the realities of war, and with the many limbless and otherwise mutilated ex-soldiers a daily reminder of its horrors, the European and North American publics were driven by an almost psychological need to come to terms with what had occurred.

The profound transformation of European society and culture, indeed of world politics, is the second consideration that helps to explain the enduring fascination with the First World War. In many ways, that conflict ushered in the short twentieth century. It is a pleasant diversion to speculate that, without the war, the balmy summer’s afternoon of 1914, so powerfully invoked in the novels of Henry James and others, could have been perpetuated and the later horrors averted. Without the war, one Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov may well have been destined to eke out a meagre living as an abstruse dialectician in the emigré circles of Zürich. A certain, moderately talented, postcard painter might well have continued to dream dreams of improbable greatness in the dank dosshouses on the banks of the Danube, never to develop his mesmeric evil powers. And he and Messrs Dzhugashvili (better known by his *nom de guerre* Stalin), Bronshtein (Trotsky) and Broz (Tito), all living within a few streets of each other in the Habsburg capital in early 1913, would have remained habitués of the city’s coffee houses, four faceless fringe figures among the polyglot crowds of the city, of no great concern to later generations. And the idea of an ‘iron curtain’ might have been something dreamed up by very avant-garde interior designers. But the after-effects of the war continue to reverberate to the present day, nowhere more so than in the Middle East. Thus, Osama bin Laden sought to justify the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States with reference to the Muslim community ‘tasting this humiliation and contempt for more than eighty years’, by which he meant the dissolution

⁷ As quoted in M. Rauchensteiner, *Der Tod des Doppeladlers. Österreich-Ungarn und der Weltkrieg* (Graz, 1993), 11.

⁸ Schnitzler diary, 5 Aug. 1914, W. Welzig (ed.), *Arthur Schnitzlers Tagebuch, 1913–1916* (Vienna, 1983), 129.

⁹ F. Stern, ‘Historians and the Great War: Private Experiences and Explications’, in his *Einstein’s German World* (London, 1997), 202.

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of the caliphate in the aftermath of the First World War.¹⁰ If this statement betrayed a somewhat uncertain grasp of history, it nevertheless highlighted the continued political relevance of the First World War and its outcomes.

The third factor helping to explain the longevity of the debate about the origins of the war is political. For the half-century after 1919, much of the debate surrounding 1914 was influenced by political considerations. The Paris peace treaties, foisted on the vanquished Central Powers, all contained a 'war-guilt clause' that attributed joint or, in the case of Germany, sole responsibility for the war.¹¹ The clause justified the stipulations of the peace treaties which were imposed on the defeated nations. From the perspective of the vanquished, disproving individual war guilt or asserting some form of collective, and thus individually exculpating, responsibility on the part of all the Powers had a political point to it: it was meant to knock aside the intellectual props on which the 1919 peace settlement rested.¹² Thus in the aftermath of the peace conferences, historians – many government-appointed – began to fill the trenches barely yet vacated by the exhausted troops. On the war itself there now followed what the German staff officer-turned-historian Bernhard Schwertfeger called the 'world war of the documents'.¹³ Governments published pre-war despatches and telegrams in an effort to refute their 'war guilt' or any share in it. The wave of weighty document collections soon unleashed a revisionist tide. This was especially marked in Germany, anxious to prove her innocence, but also in the United States, aggrieved at having been dragged into a seemingly senseless overseas conflict. Political passions had by no means evaporated by the middle of the century, as was demonstrated by the vitriolic controversy triggered by Fritz Fischer and his disciples in the 1960s. They placed the sole responsibility for both world wars squarely on

¹⁰ Bin Laden statement on Al Jazeera TV station, 7 Oct. 2001, *FBIS Report: Compilation of Usama Bin Ladin Statements 1994 – January 2004* (Washington, DC, 2004), 183, at www.fas.org/jirp/world/para/ubl-fbis.pdf.

¹¹ They are art. 231 Versailles Treaty (Germany), art. 177 Treaty of St Germain (Austria), art. 161 Trianon Treaty (Hungary), art. 231 Treaty of Sèvres (Turkey) and art. 121 Treaty of Neuilly-sur-Seine (Bulgaria), in United States Senate, *Peace Treaties* (Washington, DC, 1921).

¹² See the thoughts offered by H. H. Herwig, 'Clio Deceived: Patriotic Self-Censorship in Germany after the Great War', K. M. Wilson (ed.), *Forging Collective Memory: Government and International Historians through Two World Wars* (Oxford, 1996), 87–127, and K. A. Hamilton, 'The Pursuit of "Enlightened Patriotism": The British Foreign Office and Historical Researchers during the Great War and its Aftermath', *ibid.*, 192–229; see also S. Zala, *Geschichte unter der Schere der politischen Zensur: Amtliche Aktensammlungen im internationalen Vergleich* (Munich, 2001), 47–91.

¹³ As quoted in C. Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (London, 2012), xxiii.

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Germany, while orthodox revisionists sought to absolve her from at least the responsibility for the 1914 conflict. To no small extent the explosive nature of this debate was rooted in a wider debate about a German 'Sonderweg', a special, abnormal path of development since the nineteenth century, a faintly masochistic, Teutonic variant of A. J. P. Taylor's controversial *Course of German History*.¹⁴

Much of the poison has been drained from not just that particular debate, but also the debate surrounding 1914. Even so, the origins of the Great War still have the potential of generating intense passions, as was underlined by the often heated discussions in the United Kingdom in the summer of 2013 on the appropriate ways of commemorating the centenary of the war.¹⁵

Historians have continued to shine their torches into the many nooks and crannies of pre-1914 Great Power relations. The immediate origins of the war have been examined meticulously and so have been its presumed longer-term causes, what Harry Hinsley once referred to as 'the impersonal and the man-made' forces, or in more recent nomenclature 'structure versus agency'.¹⁶

The first point to make is that much of the debate about 1914 continues to be focused on Germany and her role in pre-war international politics. At the same time, the focus has shifted away from decision-making processes in the various European capitals. Instead, historians have tended to concentrate their attention on underlying, structural forces. In the 1970s, some scholars sought to recast the debate in terms of vast socio-economic forces that drove the politics of the period.¹⁷ Few historians today would subscribe to some of the cruder notions of a *Primat der Innenpolitik*, which accords foreign policy a subservient function. Even so, the notion of

¹⁴ A. J. P. Taylor, *The Course of German History* (London, 1945); for the problems of 'continuity' see the perceptive comments by J. Droz, 'L'Allemagne est-elle responsable de la Première Guerre mondiale?', A. Prost (ed.), *Mourir pour la patrie* (Paris, 1992), 74–80; for the Fischer controversy see Moses, *Politics of Illusion*, esp. 107–32; Mom-bauer, *Origins*, 127–65; and the articles in *JCH* XLVIII, 2 (2013).

¹⁵ Ben Macintyre's thoughtful piece 'One Last Battle over How We Mark the First World War', *The Times*, 27 Apr. 2013, triggered a prolonged discussion of the subject.

¹⁶ F. H. Hinsley, *Power and the Pursuit of Peace: Theory and Practice in the History of Relations between States* (Cambridge, 1967 (pb)), 290; see also K. J. Holsti, *Peace and War: Armed Conflicts and International Order, 1648–1989* (Cambridge, 1992), 3–24; and B. F. Baumöeller, *The Great Powers and the International System: Systemic Theory in Empirical Perspective* (Cambridge, 2012), 3–10.

¹⁷ Illustrative of the neo-Kehrite strand, V. R. Berghahn, *Germany and the Approach of War in 1914* (London, 1973), and I. Geiss, *German Foreign Policy, 1871–1914* (London, 1979).

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Europe's ruling élites on the eve of the Great War as being beleaguered continues to command much support among scholars. These élites, so the argument runs, were ill-suited to cope with the demands of the age of the masses. More especially, they were unable to contain the genie of hyper-nationalism, which they themselves had let out of the bottle. The forces of nationalism, demographic pressures and more intense economic competition pushed the Powers towards confrontation. The situation was compounded by the now far less flexible nature of international politics. The straitjacket of a near-rigid system of power blocs, which pitted aggressive and ambitious Germany and her allies against a defensive, status quo-oriented, so-called 'Triple Entente', curtailed the freedom of manoeuvre of the chancelleries of Europe. Finally, heightened arms races since around 1904 raised the stakes yet further. Colonel House, Woodrow Wilson's confidential aide, is often cited in support of such interpretations. Writing to the President during his European sojourn, he observed that the situation there was 'extraordinary': 'It is militarism run stark mad . . . There is some day to be an awful cataclysm'.¹⁸ Thus, the dictates of railway timetables, the inherent logic of arms races and the mechanisms of the existing alliance system forced the actions of the Powers in 1914.¹⁹ Underlying much of the extant literature, indeed, is an implicit, quasi-teleological assumption: a concatenation of crises and the confluence of diverse structural forces made war in 1914 inevitable.²⁰

There is nevertheless scope for a fresh examination of the July crisis of 1914. For one thing, recent interpretations have tended to move away from the sources, and the latter warrant a much closer inspection. Re-examining them helps to highlight a question that ought to be central to all discussions of the events of 1914. The Sarajevo crisis was not the first such international dispute the Powers had had to confront. There had been

¹⁸ House to Wilson, 29 May 1914, C. Seymour (ed.), *The Intimate Papers of Colonel House* (4 vols., London, 1926), 1, 255.

¹⁹ The *loci classici* are G. W. F. Hallgarten, *Das Wetttrüsten. Seine Geschichte bis zur Gegenwart* (Frankfurt, 1967) and A. J. P. Taylor, *War by Timetable: How the First World War Began* (London, 1969); for further studies see G. Barraclough, *From Agadir to Armageddon: Anatomy of a Crisis* (London, 1982); J. Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive: Military Decision Making and the Disasters of 1914* (Ithaca, NY, 1984); S. D. Sagan, '1914 Revisited: Allies, Offense, and Instability', S. E. Miller, S. M. Lynn-Jones and S. Van Evera (eds.), *Military Strategy and the Origins of the First World War* (Princeton, NJ, rev. edn 1991), 59–108; D. G. Herrmann, *The Arming of Europe and the Making of the First World War* (Princeton, NJ, 1996); and D. Stevenson's magisterial and nuanced *Armaments and the Coming of War: Europe, 1904–1914* (Oxford, 1996).

²⁰ For some thoughts on this see T. G. Otte, *The Foreign Office Mind: The Making of British Foreign Policy, 1865–1914* (Cambridge, 2011), 21–2.

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several Balkan stand-offs within the eighteen months or so before July 1914, and yet none of them escalated into a full-blown war. What historians ought to ask themselves is, what made the summer of 1914 so different?²¹

But the move away from the sources that accompanied the focus on impersonal forces also diminishes too much the role of individual decision-makers. In turn, this has tended to mask a much more complex political reality, one that cannot be reduced to a handful of impersonal, structural forces. The same is also true of more recent attempts at a cultural and social turn in international history, one which seeks a safe haven from the disturbed past and present by genderizing 'Britannia' or reconstructing 'ornamentalist' representations of identity through imperial regalia and exotic finery. All of these distract from the 'diplomatic twitch' that lies at the heart of governmental decisions for peace and war.²² But they also have a distorting and oddly distancing effect on posterity's perspective on the problems facing the decision-makers of 1914, with the insinuation that their plumed hats, stiff collars and elaborate court rituals somehow reflected their antiquated attitudes.²³ In the end, the decisions to mobilize millions of men and to send them to 'do and die' on the battlefields were not made by anonymous 'factors', but by real people. They were made by small circles of advisers and officials around the crowned heads in Vienna, Berlin and St Petersburg. There was nothing illegitimate in this. Within the existing constitutional arrangements, the two Kaisers and the Tsar had the power to decide over war and peace. But in France and Britain, too, the number of people involved was small. Their perceptions and calculations were essential; their miscalculations and eventual decisions would ultimately prove catastrophic.

Their concerns about the present and fears for the future thus hold one of the keys to a deeper understanding of the events of the summer of 1914. These men could not know the future, any more than we can today. It is, therefore, important to appreciate the elements of risk and risk calculation that their deliberations contained. All of this becomes more

²¹ See also the pertinent observation by W. Mulligan, *The Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge, 2010), 3–22.

²² See the cogent reassertion of the importance of the traditional focus of international history by D. Reynolds, 'International History, the Cultural Turn and the Diplomatic Twitch', *CSH* III, 1 (2006), 75–91; and also T. G. Otte, 'Diplomacy and Decision-Making', P. Finney (ed.), *International History* (Basingstoke and New York, 2005), 36–57.

²³ The most eloquent expression of this is D. Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw their Empire* (London, 2001); for observations on the distorting and distancing effects of such approaches see Otte, 'Diplomacy', 38–9; Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, xxv.

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intelligible only if one takes a closer look at who took decisions, how they took them and why. Similarly, the often haphazard, frequently chaotic nature of decision-making in the capitals of the Great Powers belies assertions of Europe's ineluctable progress towards war.

At the heart of this book lies that strange dialogue between the broader system of Great Power politics and the actions of individuals. Debates about the interaction between individual agency and systemic constraints are, of course, the staple diet of much of the extant literature on international relations and international history. All too often, the default position of systemic scholars is to assert the complexity of the 'system' and then to stipulate 'correct' – that is system-appropriate – policy choices against which the actual policy decisions are then measured (and subsequently approved or dismissed).²⁴ Such an approach is not only ahistorical; it also fails to elucidate the more variegated nature of the relations both between the Powers and within the decision-making élites. The conceptual framework for the book, then, is different. Although it places the events of 1914 in the context of the existing alliance structures, accepted norms of international behaviour and notions of national 'honour', its focus is on the role of the individual decision-makers. The staccato of the July crisis drives forward the analysis of the perceptions, misperceptions and deliberate deceptions of the 'doves' and 'hawks' in the chancelleries of Europe as they struggled to control a complex international situation and to master its escalating dynamic.

²⁴ See e.g. P. W. Schroeder, 'Old Wine in Old Bottles: Recent Contributions to British Foreign Policy and European International Politics, 1789–1848', *JBS* xxvi, 1 (1987), 9–10; for a critique see T. G. Otte, 'A Janus-like Power: Great Britain and the European Concert, 1814–1853', Wolfram Pyta (ed.), *Das europäische Mächtekoncert. Friedens- und Sicherheitspolitik vom Wiener Kongress 1815 bis zum Krimkrieg 1853* (Cologne and Vienna, 2009), 125–54.

1 PRELUDE: THE ROAD TO SARAJEVO

The summer of 1914 did in fact begin well, better than so many earlier summers . . . After ten years or so of troubles and commotion, the people hoped at least for a lull and a good year which would recompense in every way for the harms and misfortunes of earlier years.

IVO ANDRIĆ¹

Great historical events require a trigger moment. The occurrence that set in motion the chain of events which culminated in the First World War was the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand. The preparations for his visit to Bosnia-Herzegovina encapsulate the essential characteristics of that ancient empire whose throne he stood to inherit, the Habsburg Empire, just as the plot to kill him throws a revealing light on the currents and countercurrents of the Balkans, Europe's most disturbed region in the years before 1914. But the chaos, confusion and coincidences at Sarajevo on 28 June 1914 also set the tone for the crisis that preceded the first general war since the defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte nearly a century earlier.

The Bosnian visit

The Archduke's visit to the provincial capital of Bosnia-Herzegovina, administered by Austria-Hungary since 1878 and formally annexed in 1908, had long been planned. It originated with the Habsburg military commander and governor of the province, General Oskar Potiorek, who suggested in the late summer of 1913 that Franz Ferdinand might wish to attend the manoeuvres of the local XVth and XVIth Army Corps to be held in central Bosnia towards the end of June the following year.²

¹ I. Andrić, *The Bridge on the Drina* (London, 1994 [orig. 1945]), 266.

² The precise date of Potiorek's invitation is in some doubt; for the background see F. Conrad von Hötzendorf, *Aus meiner Dienstzeit* (5 vols., Vienna, 1921–5), III, 445–7 and 700–2.

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The high-profile visit by a member of the imperial dynasty was meant to 'show the flag'. Potiorek considered such a demonstration of Habsburg commitment to the province, with its volatile ethnic composition, all the more necessary since Austro-Hungarian rule there was troubled. Attempts since 1908 to establish a functioning administration, supported by the local population, had run into the quicksand of ethnic politics. The province's constitution, proclaimed in February 1909, was in parts liberal, guaranteeing minority rights unheard of elsewhere in the Balkans, and in parts regressive in that it limited the powers of the provincial parliament. Like the seventeenth-century Holy Roman Empire, it was *monstro simile*. The seventy-two deputies of the *Landtag* or *Sabor*, the provincial parliament, were elected through an electoral college system (*curia*) that reflected the different religious and ethnic groups of Bosnia-Herzegovina, topped up by twenty senior religious representatives who were appointed members. The legislative process was prolix even by Habsburg standards. Any bill required the approval of the governments at both Vienna and Budapest, in whom, in contrast to other parts of the Habsburg Empire, sovereign power was jointly vested. Ultimate responsibility for administering the provinces lay with the common Austro-Hungarian finance minister, one of only four common ministers in the Danube Monarchy, the others being the foreign, war and navy ministers. Reconciling the positions of the Austrian and Magyar governments was a fraught and laborious process. As Leon von Biliński, the finance minister since 1912, later reflected, Vienna's approval was easily obtained, that by Budapest less forthcoming and dependent on commercial and other advantages for the Hungarian half of the empire being secured first.³ The day-to-day running of the provincial administration was in the hands of the military commander, who acted as *Landeschef* or governor, assisted by a *Ziviladlatus*, a senior civil servant appointed directly by the Emperor to head the civilian departments at Sarajevo.

If the imperial context of Bosnian politics was complex, the local situation was even more so. Nearly half the inhabitants were ethnic Serbs, who were to varying degrees hostile to Habsburg overlordship, and indeed

³ L. [von] Biliński, *Wspomnienia i dokumenty, 1846–1922* (2 vols., Warsaw, 1924–5), I, 237. For the constitutional arrangements see J. Brauner, 'Bosnien und Herzegowina. Politik, Verwaltung und leitende Personen vor Kriegsausbruch', *BMH* VII, 4 (1929), 316–19; see also R. W. Seton-Watson, 'The Role of Bosnia in International Politics, 1875–1914', L. S. Sutherland (ed.), *Studies in History: British Academy Lectures* (Oxford, 1966), 263–5; P. F. Sugar, *Industrialization of Bosnia-Herzegovina, 1878–1918* (Seattle, WA, 1963), 79–80; N. Malcolm, *Bosnia: A Short History* (London, 1994), 151–5.