The Genesis of *Global Crisis*

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I REMEMBER as if it were yesterday the moment when I became interested in the Global Crisis of the seventeenth century. As an undergraduate, I had read the articles on the "*General* Crisis" by Eric Hobsbawm and Hugh Trevor-Roper, as well as sundry critiques of their views, published in the 1950s in the journal *Past and Present*.[2] Although they were breathtakingly erudite, I noted with surprise that none of the participants in the "debate" strayed beyond Europe. I did not realize the extent of this oversight until one evening in 1976 when I listened to an interview on BBC Radio with Jack Eddy, a solar physicist, who had just published a paper in *Science* on the "Maunder Minimum": the period between 1645 and 1715 when virtually no sunspots appeared. Eddy emphasized that he presented "evidence of absence" and not

[1] My thanks to Carla Pestana, my friend and former colleague at OSU, for organizing this panel; to Lauren Benton, Daniel Headrick, and Joe Miller for their most helpful comments; and to the audience for participating in a highlight of my academic career. I also thank Donald Yerxa for permission to draw upon a somewhat different version of this introduction to "Global Crisis: A Forum," published in *Historically Speaking* 14, no. 5 (2013): 29–39.

[2] Eric J. Hobsbawm, "The General Crisis of the European Economy in the Seventeenth Century," "The Crisis of the 17th Century," "The General Crisis of the European Economy in the 17th Century," and "The Crisis of the 17th Century—II," *Past and Present* 5 (1954): 33–53; 6 (1954): 44–65; a 1957 symposium on it summarized in *Past and Present* 13 (1958); Hugh R. Trevor-Roper, "The General Crisis of the Seventeenth Century," *Past and Present* 16 (1959), and critiques in *Past and Present* 18 (1960): 8–42. All except the last were reprinted in Trevor S. Aston, *Crisis in Europe, 1560–1660* (London: Routledge, 1965). See the splendid review of this debate by one of the participants: John H. Elliott, "The General Crisis in Retrospect: A Debate without End," in *Early Modern Europe from Crisis to Stability*, ed. Philip Benedict and Myron Gutmann (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005), 31–51.

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just "absence of evidence"—astronomers used the powerful telescopes invented by Galileo to observe the sun on eight thousand days during the reign of Louis XIV (ironically called "the Sun King"), but in those seventy years they saw a grand total of scarcely one hundred sunspots, fewer than appeared in a single year of the twentieth century—and he speculated that the prolonged "sunspot minimum" contributed to an episode of global cooling that earth scientists had christened the Little Ice Age.

Eddy did not suggest that global cooling might have contributed to the General Crisis—his article did not mention the topic—but I found the connection so plausible and exciting that, together with a former student, Lesley Smith, I decided to edit some essays on the crisis that had appeared since Aston's volume. We requested and received Eddy's permission to include his essay in our collection, published in 1978. It was, I believe, the first application of solar physics to early modern history.[3]

Thereafter, the General Crisis "debate" languished until 1990, when William S. Atwell, a historian of Ming China, published in the journal *Modern Asian Studies* the papers delivered at a panel titled "The General Crisis in East Asia" at the annual meeting of the American Association for Asian Studies. In 1997 Lesley Smith and I included three of the essays, as well as one on Germany by another former student of mine, Sheilagh Ogilvie, in a new and expanded edition of *The General Crisis*.[4]

Shortly afterward, I realized that I had identified my next research project and in February 1998 I breathlessly e-mailed a friend with the news:

> Last night I awoke at 4 AM and realized that I wanted to write a book about the General Crisis of the seventeenth century—not a collection of essays (been there, done that) but an integrated narrative and analytical account of the first *global* crisis for which we possess adequate documentation for Asia, Africa, the Americas, and Europe. My account would adopt a Braudelian structure, examining long-term factors (climate above all), medium-run changes (economic fluctuations and so on) and "events" (from the English Civil War and the

[3] John A. Eddy, "The 'Maunder Minimum': Sunspots and Climate in the Reign of Louis XIV," *Science* 92 (1976): 1189–1202; reprinted in Geoffrey Parker and Lesley M. Smith, eds., *The General Crisis of the Seventeenth Century* (London: Routledge, 1978; 2nd ed., 1997). See Eddy's account of how he rediscovered and substantiated the Maunder Minimum in a fascinating 1999 interview: http://www.aip.org/history/ohilist/22910.html.

[4] *Modern Asian Studies* 24 (1990): 625–697.

> crisis in the French and Spanish Monarchies, through the murder of two Ottoman sultans, the civil wars in India and sub-Saharan Africa to the collapse of Ming China and the wars around the Great Lakes of North America) . . . [The book would examine] why such synchronic developments occur with so little warning and why they end. Since it addresses issues of concern today—the impact of global climatic change and sharp economic recession on government and society—it should not lack interested readers.[5]

I therefore prepared a book proposal, titled "The World Crisis 1635–1665," which secured not only a contract and a hefty advance from Basic Books and Penguin Press, but also a Guggenheim fellowship that enabled me to start serious writing. I promised to deliver a complete typescript in 2003.

How could I have been so stupidly optimistic? First, it took me a while to realize just how Eurocentric I remained: The core chapters in my book proposal covered little more than Europe and China. What about Central and South Asia, Africa, Australia, and the Americas? Then I realized that my target dates were meaningless: The roots of the crisis lay further back than 1635 (more precisely, in 1618, with the Bohemian revolt in Europe, the Manchus' declaration of war on Ming China, and the beginning of a severe period of global cooling), while a measure of stability returned only in the 1680s, not in 1665. Finally, I found that these notable geographical and chronological extensions, coupled with an avalanche of publications on both the climate and the history of the period, required far more research and far more writing than I had anticipated.

Nevertheless, thanks to the efforts of several research assistants funded by the Mershon Center and the History Department at Ohio State University, I combined material from the "natural archive" of the period (such as fluctuations in tree-ring size, harvest dates, and glacier advances) with data from the "human archive" (mainly chronicles, letters, diaries, art, and archaeology). I tried to identify one "core source" for each of the regions afflicted by what seemed to me a "fatal synergy" between human and natural disasters. Thus in 2001 I located the dispatches of Karl Anders Pommerenning, the only resident foreign diplomat in Russia during the traumatic upheavals of 1648–1649, and procured a translation of his dispatches in Swedish, which I linked with other surviving natural and human records. The following year, while

[5] E-mail to Robert Baldock, 21 February 1998.

doing research in Japan, a colleague drew to my attention the recently published autobiography of Enomoto Yazaemon, a salt merchant living northwest of Tokyo (Edo) who left a vivid record of the extreme weather he experienced during the 1640s. Here too, after procuring a translation, I linked this find with other sources.[6]

In June 2007—a mere four years late—I completed a 1,500-page typescript, which I proudly submitted to both my publishers. They sent it out to three eminent readers, all of whom swiftly produced helpful and enthusiastic reports. Then, after six months of total silence, my editor at Basic Books rejected the work outright as "Too long and too late," while my editor at Penguin first lost the typescript, then reconstituted it from electronic files in the wrong order, and finally criticized me for writing a typescript that did not "flow."[7]

This double rejection was a terrible professional blow, but in the end it proved a boon. By the time I had recovered my self-confidence, far more material from both the natural and the human archive had become available, while the contemporary debate over the impact of climate change steadily intensify. In 2010, I therefore repaid the hefty advance and signed a contract with Yale University Press, while three ruthless OSU graduate students, Sandy Bolzenius, Kate Epstein, and Mircea Platon, and an equally ruthless visiting scholar, Rayne Allinson, unearthed yet more material that strengthened my argument (Mircea, for example, found striking new material from the Balkans, while Rayne directed me to information on Australia). They also cut my typescript by more than one third. Kate even forced me to abandon my title by reminding me that *The World Crisis* had already been used, by Winston Churchill, for his history of World War I. When I hesitated, she reminded me that A. J. Balfour had waspishly dismissed the

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[6] Others have subsequently noted the value of these sources. See, respectively, Matthew P. Romaniello, "Moscow's Lost Petition to the Tsar, 2 June 1648," *Russian History* 41 (2014): 119–125; Luke Roberts, "Name and Honor: A Merchant's Seventeenth-Century Memoir," in *Recreating Japanese Men*, ed. Sabine Frühstück and Anne Walthall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 48–67. The colleague was Ronald P. Toby, who had just read Ōno Mitsuo, ed., *Enomoto Yazaemon oboegaki: Kinsei shoki shōnin no kiroku* (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 2001).

[7] After listening to the AHA forum, Edmund ("Terry") Burke III wrote to me: "I very much enjoyed your presentation, which reminded me in certain of its particulars to the late J. H. Hexter's preface to *Reappraisals in History* [Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1961, p. xxi], which reminded readers that "Three of the essays in it were rejected by scholarly journals in good standing . . . All of the rejections came when the author was over forty. A letter of rejection is not a divine decree; it is neither an immutable nor an eternal judgment, but the decision of one or two fallible men, subject to reversal by other men equally fallible." I wish I had remembered Hexter's helpful advice in 2007.

book as "Winston's brilliant Autobiography, disguised as a history of the universe."[8] Hence the eventual title: *Global Crisis*.

I had secured sabbatical leave for the academic year 2011–2012, and I spent it implementing the many helpful suggestions of my editorial quartet, as well as those supplied by other experts in areas where my own knowledge is weak. In May 2012, I sent to Yale my revised typescript, now a tight 1,200 pages, which reflected the research and reading I had done over the thirty-six years since I heard the radio interview with Jack Eddy. *The Global Crisis* appeared in both Britain and the United States in spring 2013; in December *The Sunday Times* of London proclaimed it "The History Book of the Year"; and in 2014 it won one of the three medals awarded annually by the British Academy for "landmark academic achievement in any of the disciplines supported by the Academy, which has transformed understanding of a particular subject or field of study." It may still be "too long," but it may not, after all, be "too late."

[8] Max Egremont, *Balfour: A Life of Arthur James Balfour* (London: Collins, 1980), 321.