



Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife, the Duchess of Hohenberg, on 28 June, 1914, in Sarajevo

At the beginning of 1914, there hadn't been a war involving all the major European powers for almost a century, since Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo. But the recent economic and political growth of Germany and the emergence of a unified Italy had made the traditional powers nervous. France sought an ally and found one in Russia. Britain, protected by the sea and its navy, followed a policy of "splendid isolation," but meanwhile negotiated an entente cordiale, or "friendly understanding," with France and, consequently, Russia, an agreement that became known as the Triple Entente. In response, Germany struck a "Triple Alliance" with Austria-Hungary and Italy. Thus, while Europe was technically at peace, it was in reality divided into rival camps, both primed for war.

TWO BULLETS THAT LED TO NINE MILLION DEATHS

THE ASSASSINATION OF
ARCHDUKE FRANZ FERDINAND

Suddenly, startlingly, the open car veered round the corner and screeched to a halt, right in front of him. In the rear seat, less than five feet away, sat the heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, resplendent in his gold-braided uniform and gilt-trimmed helmet, and his wife, the Duchess of Hohenberg, smiling under a wide-brimmed hat and veil. She was holding the archduke's hand.

The thin, spidery youth with the piercing black eyes had fired the Browning pistol only once before, in an impromptu target practice, and missed with almost half his shots. This time, however, his aim was true. The first bullet caught the archduke in the throat, pitching him forward into his wife's lap. "In God's name, what is happening to you?" she cried, before a second bullet struck her in the abdomen. "Sopher! Sopher! Don't die! Stay alive for the children!" onlookers heard the archduke cry, using his pet name for the duchess. But the duchess, too, collapsed, and before either could receive medical attention, the royal couple had bled to death.

Swinging their sabers, horrified officers from the royal entourage knocked the young man to the ground and wrestled away his pistol. Spectators piled on top, pinning him down. The struggling prisoner somehow managed to pull a cyanide pill from his pocket and force it into his mouth, only to regurgitate it seconds later.

There was no chance of escape, but, buried beneath the pile of bodies, Gavrilo Princip felt nothing but satisfaction. He and his co-conspirators, a motley crew of students and misfits, had struck a blow for their beloved cause—the creation of a Greater Serbia. Little did they realize that the two shots that had just echoed down the quay, on this day of June 28, 1914, in Sarajevo, Bosnia, would be the first in a conflagration that would engulf all Europe and cost nine million lives.

A SYMBOL OF OPPRESSION

It had never occurred to the plotters that the assassination might have "serious consequences," one of Princip's fellow conspirators said later. He never would have taken part, he insisted, if he had known it would "lead to a world war." Indeed, only one of the almost farcical band of youthful assassins seems to have given the impact of their actions much thought. Danilo Ilic, oldest of the group at twenty-four, had repeatedly asked, "But what will it accomplish?" They thought they were simply making a political statement while striking a blow against oppression.

Most of the group knew little about their target. But as the head of the Hapsburg Empire, the archduke was the personification of Austrian oppression of Bosnian Serbs. And that made him fair game. The Serbs had suffered centuries of foreign domination, beginning with their humiliating defeat at the hands of invading Turkish armies at the battle of Kosovo in 1389. Under the Ottoman Turks, Christian Orthodox Serbs were pushed into the most mountainous, marginal lands of the Balkan Peninsula. They continued to fight for their independence, however, and in the early 1800s they finally managed to throw off Turkish rule and establish their own monarchy, which was recognized by other countries in 1878.

But more than half a million Orthodox Serbs remained outside this state, in the provinces of Bosnia and Herzegovina, where they were nominally under Turkish rule but governed by the Hapsburgs of Catholic Austria-Hungary. When the Turkish empire finally began to collapse in the early years of the twentieth century, the Austrians simply annexed the largely Slavic provinces. Serbs everywhere were enraged by the "theft," which, they charged, unjustifiably made "slaves" of the Bosnian Serbs.

Princip knew the oppression and suffering of the Bosnian Serbs all too well. He had been born into a poor family of *kmets*, peasants who lived in a two-room hovel with a smoke hole in the roof. The family laboriously tilled a tiny, four-acre plot of scruffy land in the Krajina, the most impoverished region of Bosnia. They were not allowed to own land and were forced to pay one-third of the cash value of their meager crops to a landlord, usually a Muslim. To pay the debt and feed his family, Petar Princip, Gavrilo's father, was forced to deliver mail and operate a rickety transport service over the mountains, while his wife tended the fields.

"Gavro" was one of ten children, six of whom died in infancy. He grew up undersized and frail, and was bullied by peers and school mates. To escape their taunts, Gavrilo turned to books. Bosnia was ninety percent illiterate, but he became the first member of his family to read and write. "Books were my life," he was to recall later. He immersed himself in epics of Serbian history, weeping over the tragic defeat at Kosovo and swearing to himself that he would take up arms for the cause of a united Serbia.

THIS GUN FOR HIRE

Assassination had become a favored form of political protest in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Four kings, three American presidents, the Empress of Austria, two monarchical heirs, and assorted dukes, barons, governors, legislators, and other political figures had been gunned down or stabbed to death by 1911. The King of Serbia died in a grisly 1903 massacre in which he, the queen, and her two brothers were shot and then thrown out of palace windows. The estranged wife of Hapsburg Emperor Franz Josef, Elisabeth of Bavaria, was stabbed to death by an anarchist in Geneva in 1898. That these assassinations seemed to change little did not decrease their popularity.

While Princip was in school in 1911, a fellow student, Bogdan Zerajic, fired four shots at the Austro-Hungarian governor of Bosnia. He missed, and used his last bullet to shoot himself. Others ridiculed him as an impetuous schoolboy and a blundering fool. But not Princip. He saw Zerajic as a hero, a martyr to the Serbian cause, and he took a vow at Zerajic's graveside to follow in the young man's footsteps.



Gavrilo Princip in jail awaiting trial

As a first step, Princip moved to Belgrade in 1913 to further his education. At the time, inspired by events in Russia, all of Europe was in revolutionary ferment. Radical parties in France and Germany were flexing their muscles. In the Balkans, Croats, Slovenes, and Muslims, as well as Serbs, were agitating for freedom from Hapsburg rule. Cries went up for a union of all southern Slavs in a single country, to be called Yugoslavia. Belgrade was a hotbed of revolutionary fervor. Princip was by now reading and soaking

up the teachings of the Russian anarchists, particularly those of Peter Alekseyevich Kropotkin, an advocate of the use of tyrannicide—the killing of an unjust ruler—to liberate oppressed people. He began to frequent a cheap café, the Green Garland, where hotheaded young men gathered nightly over coffee and powerful plum brandy to argue politics far into the night. There was much talk of violence as the only plausible route to advance Serbian causes. “History moves too slowly,” one agitator shouted. “It needs a push!”

Secret societies to provide that push were forming on both sides of the border. In Sarajevo, a group calling itself Young Bosnia announced its goal as “the unification of Serbdom” by “all means available.” In Belgrade, a group named Norodna Obranda enrolled nearly 5,000 members and called for forcible action to overturn the Austro-Hungarian annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Under pressure from the Serbian government, it subsequently renounced violence and re-formed as a cultural society. But a breakaway group calling itself Union or Death, and known to its enemies as the Black Hand, was founded by a colonel in Serbian army intelligence—one of the officers who had led the attack on the Serbian king in 1903. Its 2,500 members, organized into cells of between three and five

people, pledged to uphold the goals of “terrorist action,” as opposed to “intellectual propaganda,” and to infiltrate other organizations.

Princip was not a born conspirator. He was a teetotaler and a loner who led an almost monastic life. In the cafés, he avoided the plum brandy, sipped only water, and took little part in the discussion. “I was not in general gifted as a talker,” he was to say later to a psychiatrist who examined him in prison. “I was always a reader and always alone, not often engaging in debates.” But he listened intently to the others’ arguments, and the terrorists’ words convinced him. Violence was the only answer. Someone had to strike a fatal blow—and right at the heart of Austrian power.

Then fifty-year-old Archduke Franz Ferdinand wasn’t yet the official ruler of Austria-Hungary, and wouldn’t ascend the imperial throne until his eighty-three-year-old uncle, Franz Josef, passed away. He was, in reality, sympathetic to Slav aspirations—his wife, indeed, was a Slav (specifically, a Czech)—and he had advanced the idea of a three-pronged monarchy, under which the empire’s Slavic subjects would be given equality with Austrians and Hungarians. Serbs, however, viewed this unfavorably, believing it would only end their dream of a united Serbia. Moreover, Princip had convinced himself that the archduke wielded a malign influence at the royal court against the Slavs.

Princip decided he must assassinate Franz Ferdinand.

ONE HOUR OF BAD PRACTICE

Princip realized, however, that he needed collaborators. He shared his Belgrade room with another rebellious young Bosnian, eighteen-year-old Trifko Grabez, who had been expelled from school and jailed in Sarajevo for assaulting a professor in a political argument. When his friend confided his dream of assassination, Grabez, thirsty for revenge on authority, immediately agreed to participate.

In February 1914, the teenagers read in a newspaper that Archduke Franz Ferdinand, as inspector general of the Austro-Hungarian forces would come to Bosnia on June 28 to observe army maneuvers. Whether anyone in the Austro-Hungarian administration realized it or not, it was a provocative choice of day: June 28 was the anniversary of the battle of Kosovo. For Princip, it was an obvious opportunity for a symbolic act.

Princip recruited Nedjelko Gabrinovic, another Bosnian, whom he considered his best friend in Belgrade, and an old friend in Sarajevo, Danilo Ilic. Princip wrote to Ilic, urging him to locate three more volunteers and said he would arrive in Sarajevo in May, bringing guns and bombs. He failed to mention certain impediments, however: none of the conspirators had access to guns or bombs, or had money to buy them, and none had ever held a gun, let alone fired one.

Despite this, Princip persevered and managed to make contact with a former Serbian guerilla leader and, through him, with Dragutin Dimitrijevic, a Serbian intelligence officer and then leader of the Black Hand. Soon, he took delivery of four Browning pistols—each loaded with eight cartridges—reserve ammunition, six bombs filled with nails and bits of lead, plus a supply of cyanide. Also in the package were instructions on how to use the bombs: “unscrew the cap, knock the bomb against something hard, count three, throw the bomb, then wait ten to thirteen seconds for the explosion.” The untrained would-be killers were given one hour’s pistol instruction and target practice in a nearby forest.

WELCOMING THE ARCHDUKE

Sunday, June 28, 1914, was to be a banner day in Sarajevo. The archduke’s visit was to be brief, but ceremonial. He would spend June 26 and 27 watching military maneuvers. The next day he would be joined by his wife, and the two would travel in a slow, seven-car motorcade four miles along the quay to the town hall. There would be speeches and welcomes and then the motorcade would proceed through the narrow streets adorned with the yellow-and-black double-eagle imperial banner to the new museum, which the archduke would dedicate. A grand lunch would follow, after which the royal couple would depart for Vienna.

Princip learned of the archduke’s exact schedule only a few days before the visit. On the night of June 27, he called a meeting of the conspirators in a café garden to draw up the final plans, issue guns, bombs, and cyanide capsules, and meet the new accomplices. Ilic had recruited two schoolboys, seventeen-year-old Vaso Cubrilovic and eighteen-year-old Cvjetko Popovic, as well as Muhamed Mehmedbasic,

FRANZ AND SOPHIE: A LOVE STORY

Franz Ferdinand dearly loved his wife Sophie, but few others did in the snooty imperial household. After all, she was a mere countess, not of royal blood, and a Slav at that. Emperor Franz Josef permitted their marriage only on condition that it weremorganatic—their children would never have rights to the throne, Sophie could not become queen, and in royal protocol she had to be grouped with the other, less nobles. Sarajevo was a rare chance for them to appear together proudly, since the archduke was appearing as a military commander, not a royal personage. June 28 was also a day for personal celebration as it was their wedding anniversary.

They died holding hands.

Even in death, the court could not accept the archduke’s wife. As a mere countess, she was not permitted to have a state funeral, and her coffin was not allowed in the archduke’s cortege. Nor could she be interred in the Hapsburg royal crypt, for that, it was said, would defile the monarchy.

In the end, the archduke and his beloved Sophie were entombed side by side, in their country home, just as Franz Ferdinand had requested.

twenty-seven, a Muslim carpenter who claimed to have once attempted assassinate the Austro-Hungarian military commander Oskar Potiorek

Princip and Grabez had concluded that the best place for an ambush would be along the four-mile motorcade route. The archduke would be too well guarded at the railway station, the town hall, and the castle outside Sarajevo where he and his wife would be staying overnight. The slow motorcade would allow for a more accurate gunshot or throw of a bomb.

Princip decided that the conspirators would be posted about thirty yards apart. He gave guns to the two youngest recruits, Cubrilovic and Popovic, and to Grabez, keeping the fourth for himself. He issued a bomb to each man with instructions to conceal it under his coat, and divided the cyanide into six packets. Then Grabez, Ilic, and Princip

went to a café, where Princip, uncharacteristically, toasted the success of their enterprise with a glass of wine, swallowed in a gulp.

Next morning, all were at their appointed stations, sweating in dark suits or heavy clothes that were worn to conceal the bombs, but that also, on this muggy day, drew quizzical looks from bystanders. Mehmedbasic was first in line as the motorcade proceeded up the quay, but he merely watched it go by and left his bomb untouched. The youthful Cubrilovic followed his example: "When I saw the archduke, I could not bring myself to kill him," he said later.

Cabrinovic, next in line, was cooler. "Which is the archduke's car?" he asked a police guard. "The third one," the helpful guard replied. Whereupon Cabrinovic took out his bomb, rapped it against a tramway sign to release the safety cap, and aimed it directly at the archduke. It missed him by inches, bouncing off the car into the street and exploding in front of the next car; one guard was hurt and taken to hospital. Cabrinovic, who had not been trusted with a gun, tried to swallow his cyanide capsule but spilled most of it. With a bound, he leaped over a fence and dove into the Miljacka River, which, however, was less than three feet deep. He was then captured easily by police. "Who are you?" a policeman asked. "I am a Serbian hero," Cabrinovic said proudly.

The archduke insisted that they halt the procession as soon as the car could safely stop to see if anyone had been seriously injured. That brought him in front of Princip, but because of his short stature the would-be assassin could not see over the other onlookers and had no field of fire. By the time he was able to wriggle through the crowd, the procession had moved on.

But half an hour later the cars came back down the quay at high speed, passing a surprised Grabez, who had no time to react, and the archduke's driver made the wrong turn that would bring him to a final rendezvous with Princip—and death.

THE TALKATIVE CONSPIRATOR

In prison, Cabrinovic disclosed names and details of the plot, partly at Princip's urging. Police had rounded up more than two hundred Serbs, and Serb homes and businesses had been burned down and

demolished. "Tell everything so that just people do not come to harm," Princip told Grabez. Mehmedbasic escaped to Montenegro, but the other conspirators were soon caught.

Under Austrian law, anyone aged eighteen and under could not be executed. Princip, Cabrinovic, and Grabez received the maximum twenty years' imprisonment, Cubrilovic and Popovic sixteen and thirteen years, respectively. Ilic, being slightly older, was sentenced to hang along with two other men who had helped smuggle the weapons into Bosnia and two peasants who had assisted along the way, but their sentences were later commuted to life imprisonment. By that time the Austrians and the tenacious Serbs were clashing along the border, the Germans were closing in on Paris, and thousands of men had already died across Europe.