

Outbreak of World War I

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An illustration of the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary and his wife, Sophie, by Gavrilo Princip in Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, June 28, 1914, that led to World War I. Photo from Wikimedia

On June 28, 1914, a 19-year-old Serbian named Gavrilo Princip killed Archduke Franz Ferdinand, who was to be the emperor of the Austria-Hungary Empire. The assassination set off a chain of events that would lead to the start of World War I. But the seeds of this terrible "Great War" had been planted long before Princip fired those fatal bullets.

Europe by 1914

From 1814 to 1815, Austria, Prussia, Russia, England and France met at the Congress of Vienna to set up borders and rules for countries in Europe. However, 100 years later, by 1914, Europe was about to be torn apart by the Great War.

Problems began as a result of the Franco-Prussian War (1870 to 1871). France was defeated by Prussia. France lost land and had to pay money to Prussia. Prussia grew stronger and became the German Empire, so France felt it needed a partner. Russia agreed to be France's ally in 1892. England was also worried Germany was getting too strong, so it became allies with France and Russia.

Soon after, Austria-Hungary and Russia wanted control of lands in the Balkans. The Balkans included several countries like Serbia, Greece, Montenegro, Bulgaria and Bosnia Herzegovina. In 1908, Austria-Hungary claimed Bosnia-Herzegovina, but Serbia felt it should be part of its country. The German Empire supported Austria-Hungary. This grab for territory angered Serbia and also Russia.

Serbia, Greece, Montenegro and Bulgaria then formed the Balkan League and in back-to-back Balkan wars with the Ottoman Turks (1912 and 1913), they got control of more Balkan lands away from the Ottoman Empire. This was seen as a threat by both Austria-Hungary and Russia.

As 1914 began, the German Empire and Austria-Hungary were allies. France, England and Russia had their own alliance, so this meant that any conflict in Europe could lead to war.

Assassination of Franz Ferdinand

Austro-Hungarian Archduke Franz Ferdinand was a great friend of Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany. He met with him in June 1914 to discuss the tense situation in the Balkans. Two weeks later, on June 28, Franz Ferdinand and his wife, Sophie, came to inspect the army in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Gavrilo Princip, who was part of the Young Bosnia movement that hated Austria-Hungary and wanted to join Serbia, learned of the archduke's visit.

Supplied with weapons by a Serbian revolutionary group called the Black Hand, Princip and five others traveled to the city of Sarajevo in time for the archduke's visit.

The royal couple was touring the city in an open car. One of the Serbs threw a bomb at their car, but it rolled off the back of the vehicle, wounding an army officer and some bystanders. Later that day, the archduke's car took a wrong turn near where Princip happened to be standing. Seeing his chance, Princip fired into the car, shooting Franz Ferdinand and Sophie at point-blank range. He then turned the gun on himself, but before he could fire, he was tackled and held until the police arrived. The archduke and his wife died within the hour.

The Road to World War I

Austria-Hungary wanted to show the Balkan countries it was strong and would respond to this terrible crime. However, Russia also wanted Balkan lands and Austria-Hungary was not prepared for a war with Russia. So the emperor of Austria-Hungary, Franz Josef, wrote a personal letter to Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany asking for his support. Wilhelm wrote back, promising Germany's full support.

On July 23, Austria-Hungary told the Serbian government to wipe out terrorist organizations within its borders. It also demanded the right to investigate who was responsible for Franz Ferdinand's assassination. It threatened military action if these demands were not met. Serbia asked Russia for help. The leaders of the Russian Empire were always called the czar. Now, the czar started getting his army ready. Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia on July 28. On August 1, Germany declared war on Russia. The German army then launched its attack, moving through Belgium, on Russia's ally, France. This attack on Belgium brought England into the war.

The Great War and its Impact

Over the next four years, the Great War (as World War I was then called) would grow to involve Italy, Japan, the Middle East, the United States and other countries.

More than 20 million soldiers died or went missing and 21 million more were wounded. Millions of other people fell victim to the flu epidemic that the war helped to spread.

The war ended the reigns of royal leaders in Germany, Austria-Hungary and Turkey and also led to the Russian Revolution that ended the rule of the czar. In the end, an uneasy peace was signed in Versailles, France, in 1919. Tensions began to grow over the next 20 years and would lead to another devastating world war in 1939.

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Reading Questions

Directions: Read the Article Outbreak of world War I and answer the following questions thoughtly. Make sure you answer all parts of the question.

1. What happened on June 28, 1914?
2. How did the Franco-Prussian War help set the stage for World War I?
3. What did Austria Hungary want in the Balkans? Why did that create conflict with Serbia & Russia?
4. What was the Balkans League? What did they do?
5. Who was Franz Ferdinand? Why was he in Bosnia-Herzegovina?
6. What was the Young Bosnia movement? What did they want?
7. What happened when Franz Ferdinand's driver too a wrong turn?
8. Why did Austria-Hungary ask Germany for help?
9. What did Austria-Hungary want Serbia to do? What did Serbia actually do?