

This Day in History... June 28, 1914

Assassination of Franz Ferdinand

On June 28, 1914, Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife were assassinated by a Bosnia Serb nationalist, sparking World War I.

Europe was experiencing a rebirth of nationalism and imperialism in the early 1900s, along with mounting military power in many countries that was desired to protect their interests. Several powerful countries built alliances promising mutual aid against outside threats. Unrest among civilian populations, often teetering on the brink of revolution, added to the explosive mix.

Nephew of Emperor Franz Josef and heir to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Franz Ferdinand traveled to Sarajevo in 1914. He was there to survey the armed forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which were former Ottoman territories that had been acquired by Austria-Hungary in 1908. That acquisition had upset Serbian nationalists who wanted the area to join their recently formed independent Serbian nation. A group of six conspirators saw the visit as a chance to separate the southern Slav provinces from Austria-Hungary to be combined into Yugoslavia.

Ferdinand's visit was scheduled for June 28, a significant date for many. It marked the anniversary of a major lost battle for medieval Serbia (the 1389 Battle of Kosovo) and was also Ferdinand's wedding anniversary. Though his wife, a former lady-in-waiting, was denied royal status at home, in Sarajevo she could ride in the limousine as he conducted his tour. They rode the streets in an open car with very little security as crowds followed excitedly.

As they rode along, one of the conspirators threw a bomb at the car, but it rolled off the back and injured a police officer and some bystanders. The Archduke later went to visit the injured officer, but his car took a wrong turn, down a street where another of the conspirators, 19-year-old Gavrilo Princip, happened to be.

Princip ran up to the car and shot Ferdinand and his wife at close range. As the couple lay dying in the car, Princip attempted to shoot himself but was attacked by a group of bystanders and eventually taken away by the police. Ferdinand and his wife died within an hour.

Shortly after, Austria-Hungary blamed Serbia for the assassination. A 10-point ultimatum was delivered to the Kingdom of Serbia, which accepted nine of the points and agreed to most of the ten. Nevertheless, with Germany's confirmed support, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia on July 28, 1914.

Because it had formed an alliance with Serbia, Russia joined the war against Austria-Hungary. Germany then declared war on Russia and France and invaded Belgium. Soon, the Allied Powers of Russia, France, and Great Britain were aligned against the Central Powers of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire. Because many of the empires had colonies throughout the world, the conflict would soon reach nearly around the globe.

Interestingly, the Treaty of Versailles, which ended World War I, was signed on the same date in 1919.



Bosnia & Herzegovina stamps commemorating the third anniversary of Ferdinand's assassination.



*Ferdinand's uncle,
Emperor Franz Josef*

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