

THE GREAT WAR

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World War I set the violent twentieth century in motion. It was the first use of chemical weapons; the first mass bombardment of civilians from the sky; the century's first genocide.

Never in history had so many taken up arms; never had war reached so far from the battlefield. Everyone became a soldier, one way or another. This is the story of the men and women on five continents for whom the war was the defining moment of their lives. It colored everything that came before and shadowed everything that followed.

“Some damn foolish thing in the Balkans,” Bismarck once predicted, would ignite a major war. In 1914, just as in 1912 and 1875, tensions were running high in the troubled region. Thousands of ethnic Slavs, ruled by Austria-Hungary, remained determined to break away.

The tiny Kingdom of Serbia was the center of Slavic resistance. Many in the country were eager to expand it into a Kingdom of Greater Serbia. Once such patriot was Gavrilo Princip. Princip had been rejected by the Serb Army for being too small.

“Wherever I went, people took me for a weakling, even though I was not.”

Princip finally found acceptance in a secret Serbian society – the Black Hand. On June 28, 1914, the heir to the Austrian throne – Archduke Franz Ferdinand – paid an official visit to the city of Sarajevo. Waiting for him were the assassins of the Black Hand. At 11:00 AM, a wrong turn by the Archduke's driver brought the heir to the Austrian throne face to face with Gavrilo Princip.

“At that moment I was feeling a strange feeling as I aimed at the Archduke from the pavement. I fired twice, perhaps more.”

Within minutes, both the Archduke and his wife were dead.

Austria and its emperor, Franz Josef, wanted to punish Serbia. To his ally the Kaiser he cabled: “Their policy of uniting all southern Slavs under the Serbian flag encourages such crimes. Serbia must be eliminated as a political factor in the Balkans.” Despite the dangers, the Kaiser and his military staff pledged Austria their full support.

“Appearing strong in a moment of crisis is what they must do, and it's what pushes them over the brink when they come to brinkmanship in the July crisis of 1914. This is it. It's a test of character rather than a test of national interest. My view is that the balance of evidence shows that Germany wanted a small war, with some nasty treatment of Serbia, increased power for Austria-Hungary, and nothing else. But this was an act of madness because they couldn't stop it. No one could.”

The alliance system had long ago set a deadly trap. Now it would be sprung. On July 28, 1914, Austria declared war against Serbia. But war between Austria and Serbia meant war between Austria and Russia. *That* meant war between Russia and Germany, and *that* meant war between Germany and France, and *that* meant war between Germany and Britain.

In a flash, the whole continent was going to be at war.