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## Serbia, Sarajevo and the outbreak of the First World War

Blog Team



*The assassination of Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the Habsburg throne, and, by accident, duchess Sophie, by Gavrilo Princip in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914 triggered the First World War, the causes of which are deeply complex. Disagreements regarding the responsibility for and legacy of the war seem to have exacerbated in the centenary year, which provides an opportunity to revisit and contextualize the assassination. Words by **Dejan Djokić**.*



Postcard for the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo. (Source: Europeanna 1914-1918)



**#WW1 100 years on:  
Life and Death of Gavrilo Princip**  
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BBC Breaking News style coverage of Archduke Franz Ferdinand's assassination is available [here](#).

[The 1878 occupation and then annexation in 1908 of Bosnia-Herzegovina](#) – a South Slav Ottoman province – by Austria-Hungary was the main, though not the only reason for tensions between Serbia and the Habsburg Monarchy. Serbia's efforts to escape Habsburg domination led to Vienna imposing a trade embargo on Belgrade in 1906. That same year a Croat-Serb Coalition won elections for the Croatian assembly, campaigning for the South Slavs' self-determination. Serbia and Montenegro – the only two independent Slav states, Bulgaria and Russia aside – significantly increased their territory (including Kosovo) as a result of [the 1912-13 Balkan Wars](#). Belgrade became a regional cultural centre, with leading South Slav intellectuals visiting or moving to Serbia's capital.

The Ottoman defeats against Italy and the Balkan states in 1911-13, which led to the loss of territory in Libya and south-eastern Europe, and an internal crisis caused by [the Young Turks](#), did not go unnoticed. Approaching 1914, the Habsburg leadership perceived an increasing threat from its Slavs and from neighbouring Serbia. This was the context in which the Austro-Hungarian military manoeuvres took place in Bosnia in June 1914. The potential risk to Franz Ferdinand was clear to senior members of the archduke's entourage and local politicians who advised that the visit to Sarajevo on 28 June be postponed.

[The Kosovo Battle](#), fought on 28 June 1389 between Serbia and Ottoman Turkey, had become the symbol of the Serbs' and Yugoslavs' struggle for independence. Habsburg South Slavs visited Serbia and Montenegro to take part in the 'Kosovo celebrations' on 28 June 1914. When that day a choir sang the Croatian national anthem in central Belgrade, passers-by broke

into a spontaneous applause. The mood changed somewhat when the news from Sarajevo arrived, the Serbian and Montenegrin governments ordering an immediate halt to festivities out of respect for the murdered archduke and duchess.

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Princip was born in 1894, in a village in western Bosnia, as the sixth of nine children, and one of only three to survive infancy. When his family sent him to continue secondary education in Sarajevo he would meet and soon join members of the nationalist youth.



*"Our shades shall roam Vienna, haunt the court, frighten the lords", says this graffiti in Belgrade, depicting Gavrilo Princip.*

The assassins and their helpers came from Bosnia-Herzegovina; most were Serbs, but there were also Croats and Muslims. They belonged to Young Bosnia, a heterogeneous group united in belief that only radical action would lead to the liberation of the South Slavs and their unification with Serbia and Montenegro. Their interpretation of the past was romantic-nationalist; they lamented the loss of the medieval independence to Hungarians, Austrians and Turks. It was the history of medieval Serbia and its struggle against the Ottomans, symbolized by the Kosovo Battle, and the cult of [Miloš Obilić](#), the alleged assassin of Sultan Murat, that resonated powerfully. As did the memory of [Bogdan Žerajić, who in 1910 committed suicide after a failed assassination attempt on Bosnia's Habsburg governor in Sarajevo](#). Four years later, and less than hundred meters away, Princip would assassinate Franz Ferdinand.

Young Bosnia should be understood in a transnational context of Italian, German, Polish, Irish and other contemporary European national movements. Princip cited Mazzini of the Young Italy during his trial, while Vladimir Gaćinović, a leading Young Bosnian, called himself a garibaldino, after Garibaldi's volunteers who in 1875 joined an anti-Ottoman uprising in Herzegovina. They read and were inspired by Bakunin, Chernyshevsky, Kropotkin, Stepnyak, Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, Herzen, Dostoyevsky, William Morris, Conan Doyle, Schiller, Ibsen... Aspiring philosophers, poets and writers – [Ivo Andrić, who in 1961 became the only Yugoslav Nobel prize-winning writer](#), had also been a Young Bosnian – they believed their goals were noble and means justified, and that Serbia would play the role of a Yugoslav Piedmont.

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Belgrade immediately condemned and distanced itself from the assassins, treating the murder as an internal Austro-Hungarian matter, while promising to try any person found in Serbia who was involved in the assassination. Business and trade between Serbia and Austria-Hungary continued, Serbia's politicians campaigned before elections, while the army was recovering from the Balkan Wars and its chief-of-staff holidaying in Austria.

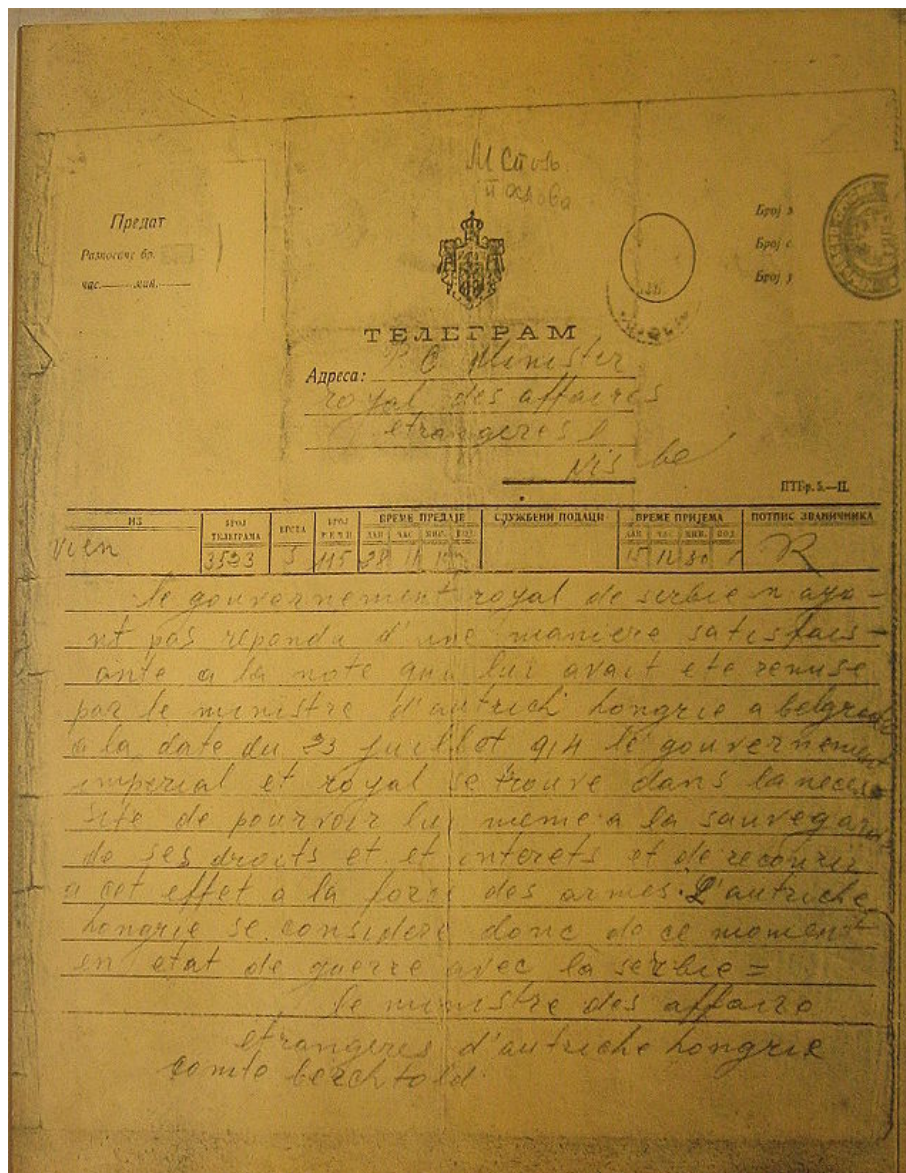
Vienna blamed the assassination on Serb nationalism, for which Serbia was to be punished, even if the Belgrade government was not implicated in Franz Ferdinand's murder. In early June prime minister [Nikola Pašić](#) acquired some knowledge of armed Bosnian students crossing the border, believed such 'crossings ought to be prevented'... 'for they are very dangerous for us', and ordered an internal investigation. He did not know details of the plot, though he probably suspected Franz Ferdinand's life could be in danger on such a symbolic day. An unofficial warning appears to have been delivered by the Serbian minister in Vienna, only to be allegedly ignored.

Princip and his friends were aided by the 'Unification or Death!' (a.k.a. 'Black Hand'), a nationalist Serbian organisation which believed that murdering tyrannical Habsburg rulers was justified. It was the Young Bosnians who asked for help and eventually lieutenant colonel Dragutin Dimitrijević-Apis and other Black Hand leaders agreed to assist them.

The 23 July ultimatum was deemed – not just by Serbs – as extremely harsh and designed to be rejected. Pašić personally carried the reply to the Austro-Hungarian legation, 'a long envelope, with Serbia's destiny sealed inside', according to an eyewitness. It was carefully worded, conciliatory and accepted all but those demands deemed as violating Serbia's sovereignty. The Habsburg minister stopped reading it upon realizing that not all demands were met, leaving Belgrade immediately, his luggage already packed.

Written in French, Austria-Hungary's declaration of war on Serbia reached [Niš](#), a town in Serbia where the government had evacuated in anticipation of an attack on Belgrade, around midday. The telegram was delivered to Evropa, a restaurant where

Pašić was having lunch. Hours later Austro-Hungarian troops shelled Belgrade, marking the beginning of the Great War, in which all sides would suffer heavy casualties.



The Austro-Hungarian government's declaration of war in a telegram sent to the government of Serbia on 28 July 1914, signed by Imperial Foreign Minister Count Leopold Berchtold.

By late 1918 Austria-Hungary disintegrated. South Slavs joined Serbia and Montenegro in what became Yugoslavia. Apis was sentenced to death for an alleged attempt at prince-regent Aleksandar's life at a show trial staged in 1917 by the prince-regent, with Pašić's support. In 1926 Aleksandar, now king of Yugoslavia, forced Pašić to resign as prime minister, just months before his death at the age of 81. Aleksandar was assassinated in 1934, when on a state visit to France, by a Macedonian revolutionary working with the Croatian Ustaša nationalists. Apis would be exonerated posthumously by Tito's communist government in 1953, while Princip – who died in prison just months before the end of the war, his young age and Habsburg laws sparing his life in 1914 – and the Young Bosnians were celebrated in Tito's Yugoslavia as national revolutionaries, even proto-communists.

The Yugoslavs achieved independence in 1918, as the Young Bosnians had once dreamed, though the self rule did not mean an end to internal conflicts and external threats. But that is another story.

[Listen to Dejan Djokić speaking on the subject in the BBC Radio 3 programme. Music in the Great War: Gavrilo Princip's Footprint.](#)

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of LSEE Research on SEE, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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