Assassination of an Archduke

It all began with two deaths.

On Sunday, 28 June 1914, the heir to the Austrian-Hungarian (Habsburg) throne, the Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife, the Countess Sophie, paid an official visit to Sarajevo, capital of Bosnia, to inspect troops of the Austrian-Hungarian army.

Bosnia had been a recent and unwilling addition to the Habsburg Empire. Resentful Bosnian Serbs dreamt of freedom and incorporation into the nation of Serbia. Nationalistic groups formed, determined to use violence to strike terror at the heart of the Austrian-Hungarian empire. One such group, the sinisterly named 'Black Hand', included among its number a nineteen-year-old named Gavrilo Princip. It was in Sarajevo that Princip would change the world.

Princip and a handful of his Black Hand comrades arrived,

each armed with a bomb and, in the event of failure, a vial of cyanide. They joined, at various intervals, the throng of onlookers lining a six-kilometre route and waited for the six-car motorcade to come into view. The first two would-be assassins lost their nerve, while the third managed to throw his bomb, causing injury to a driver but leaving the Archduke and his wife unharmed. Racked with a sense of failure, Princip trudged to a nearby tavern.

The Archduke, having delivered a speech, decided to visit the wounded driver in hospital. On his way, his driver took a wrong turning down a one-way street, a street named after Franz Ferdinand's uncle, the emperor, Franz Joseph, along which was a tavern. Princip, astonished to see the royal car, acted on impulse. Jumping onto the running board as the driver tried to engage the reverse gear, he fired two shots. Mortally wounded, Franz Ferdinand's last words were: 'Sophie, stay alive for the children.' It was not to be. The Archduke and his wife died together. It was their fourteenth wedding anniversary.

The Road to War

The assassination of Franz Ferdinand had very much been the work of Princip and his band of Black Hand conspirators but the Austrian-Hungarian empire saw an opportunity to assert its authority over Serbia. First it sought reassurance from its powerful ally, Germany. Together, they had formed the Dual Alliance in 1879 which, three years later, became the Triple Alliance when Italy added its signature. Now, the German Kaiser, Wilhelm II, gave Austria-Hungary the assurance it needed, then promptly went off on a cruise around Norway.

It took the Austrian-Hungarian government three weeks but the ultimatum they sent Serbia was, in the words of Britain's

foreign secretary, Sir Edward Grey, the 'most formidable document ever sent from one nation to another'. Serbia was given forty-eight hours to comply with ten demands, specifically designed to humiliate and therefore be rejected. Although the Serbs agreed to eight, it was never going to be enough for the bellicose Austrian-Hungarians and on 28 July they declared war on Serbia.

Events now moved quickly, one triggering off another. In response to this declaration of war, Russia, which saw itself as protector of Serbia, began to mobilize. France, Russia's ally since 1892, offered her its support. In response, the Germans gave Russia twelve hours to halt its mobilization. The deadline passed, thus on 1 August, Germany declared war on Russia and, two days later, on France. 'The sword has been forced into our hand,' claimed the Kaiser.