It is a sad fact that the best-remembered detail of the life of Franz Ferdinand is his death. Archduke Franz Ferdinand was the nephew of Austrian emperor Franz Josef (1830–1916) and the last heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Bosnia and Herzegovina was a province of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. While visiting the provincial capital of Sarajevo on official business, the archduke and his wife, Sophie, were killed by a Serbian named Gavrilo Princip (1894–1918). Princip belonged to a political group that was angered by Austro-Hungarian domination of Bosnia and Herzegovina. He felt that assassinating a high official of the empire would help Serbia’s cause. Serbia was a country that wanted to unite the region—including Bosnia and Herzegovina—and gain independence from Austria-Hungary. However, the deaths of the archduke and his wife only caused the Austrian emperor to respond with angry demands and finally a declaration of war on Serbia. This declaration set off a complex chain of events that led the world into World War I. Franz and Sophie Ferdinand have been called the first casualties of that war.
An Heir by Chance

Though Franz Ferdinand was born into the royal family of the Habsburgs on December 18, 1863, in Graz, Austria, he did not grow up as the heir to the throne. During the early part of his life, he was only the third in line to rule the empire, behind the emperor’s son, Archduke Rudolf, and Ferdinand’s own father, Archduke Carl Ludvig. A shy child, Ferdinand was educated at home by private tutors. He was intelligent and a very strict Catholic. However, many people—including some within his own family—considered him spoiled, cold, and conceited, and he had few friends.

In 1883, Franz Ferdinand joined the army and served in various places around the empire. He advanced through the ranks from lieutenant to general in just a little more than ten years. Tragedy struck the royal family in 1889, when Archduke Rudolf, the heir to the throne, killed himself. Though the emperor had a daughter, Archduchess Elizabeth, she could not rule under the law of the empire because she was a woman. Franz Ferdinand’s father was the next in line for the throne, but he died in 1896, leaving his son Franz to be the emperor’s heir.

A Royal Romance

Ferdinand had just been promoted to major in the imperial army when he met a Czech woman, Sophie Chotek von Chotkowa und Wognin, at a dance in Prague in 1888. The two fell in love, and Ferdinand approached his family with his plans to marry Sophie. The royal family were not pleased with Ferdinand’s choice, because, though Sophie was the Duchess of Hohenberg in her own country, the proud Habsburgs considered her little better than a commoner, certainly not good enough to marry the heir to the throne of the empire.

Ferdinand fought for his bride, and he was eventually allowed to marry Sophie. But he had to agree to several things that would limit her power within the empire. First, Sophie would never be given the title of empress, and her children would not be heirs to the throne. She would not even be allowed to sit next to her husband in his carriage or in the royal box at the opera. In spite of these humiliating requirements, Sophie and Ferdinand were happily married in 1900.
and had three children. Ferdinand loved his wife very much, and with the family they created, he seemed to find a peace and happiness that he could never find elsewhere.

The Explosive Politics of the Empire

Outside his domestic life, however, Ferdinand remained unpopular, with a reputation for being arrogant and hot-tempered. Besides disliking his personality, many in the empire disagreed with his political views. One particularly controversial idea he had was called “Trialism.” Under this plan, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, already considered a dual empire because it was ruled by an Austrian emperor and a Hungarian king, would have a third branch. This third branch of power would be given to the Slavic peoples of southeastern Europe who had been living under the rule of the empire. Some Slavs supported the notion of Trialism, but others, who hated Austro-Hungarian rule, were angered by it.
It may seem surprising that Ferdinand’s wish to give the Slavic people a greater voice made him an enemy to Slavs who wanted independence from the empire. But to Serbian nationalists, who wanted their country to be completely independent of Austro-Hungarian rule, the archduke’s idea was dangerous because limited power might make Slavic people more comfortable within the empire, and they might no longer wish to fight for independence. Serbian nationalists, represented by militant groups like the Black Hand, wanted to unite the Slavic people in an independent pan-Slavic state. The fact that Ferdinand was a major supporter of Trialism, coupled with the fact that he would one day inherit the throne of the empire, made him a target for the rage of the Serbian nationalist movement.

**Murder in Sarajevo**

In 1913, Ferdinand was appointed inspector general of the Austrian army. In 1914, he was invited to Sarajevo by the colonial governor, General Oscar Potiorek (1853–1933), to observe military exercises. Because the Serbs had been increasingly hostile to the empire, the Serbian prime minister, Nicola Pašić, sent a warning to Vienna that someone might try to assassinate the archduke if he came to Sarajevo. In spite of this, Franz and Sophie Ferdinand went to Sarajevo on June 28, 1914. The date was significant for two reasons. First, it was St. Vitus Day, a religious holiday when the Serbs celebrated their resistance to the Ottoman Turks. Second, it was Ferdinand and Sophie’s wedding anniversary. Many people think that the nationalistic feelings of the Serbs were especially roused on their patriotic holiday. And many also think that a major factor in Ferdinand’s insistence on going to Sarajevo was his affection for Sophie. Outside of Vienna, she could ride in the car beside him and receive all the attention and ceremony that she was denied at home.

As the archduke and his wife drove down a well-publicized parade route in an open car; seven assassins waited in the crowd, each armed with a pistol and cyanide, a poison they could use to commit suicide if they were caught. One of the assassins threw a bomb at the car, but it missed the target and blew up under the car behind it, injuring several people. Amazingly, Ferdinand and Sophie arrived safely at city hall and listened to a flattering speech by the mayor before deciding to go
back by a fast and direct route to avoid more trouble. Unfortunately, those in charge did not tell the archduke’s driver about the route change. He made a wrong turn and was forced to back up into an alley to turn around. Most of the assassins, including nineteen-year-old Gavrilo Princip, had given up and left when the bomb missed its mark. However, when the car slowed to back into the narrow alley, Princip found himself only a few feet from the archduke, the uniformed symbol of the hated Austro-Hungarian rulers. Princip raised his gun and fired two shots, killing Ferdinand and Sophie. He later said that he had intended his second bullet for Potiorek and was sorry he had killed Sophie.

The Changing Judgments of History

Who is the hero of this story, and who is the villain? History does not provide a clear answer.

After the assassinations of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife, the Austrian government erected a monument on the spot where they were killed. A bronze plaque bearing their pictures remained there as a memorial until 1953. In that year, Josip Broz Tito (1892–1980), the leader of the young nation of Yugoslavia made up of various Slavic countries, removed the monument and opened a museum to honor Gavrilo Princip and the Young Bosnia movement, a Slavic nationalist movement. Tito led a country that had recently liberated itself from German Nazi occupation during World War II, and he wanted to elevate early Slavic nationalists like Princip to the status of heroes. The place where Princip stood to fire the fatal shots was marked with concrete footprints.

But Princip’s stature as a hero did not last. A new wave of political unrest swept through Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, resulting in the breakup and restructuring of that country; Bosnia and Herzegovina declared its independence, and in this new political climate Princip was no longer considered a hero of Slavic nationalism, but rather a terrorist. Princip’s footprints were removed, and so was the museum honoring him and the Young Bosnians who attacked the archduke. Some officials want to restore the original monument to the archduke, bringing the cycle back to its beginning almost a hundred years later and proving that history, even when set in concrete, can continue to change.
For More Information

Books


Articles

Films
*From Mayerling to Sarajevo.* Produced by Eugene Tuchener and directed by Max Ophuls, 1997. Videocassette.

Web sites
