Outbreak of World War I

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On June 28, 1914, a 19-year-old Serbian named Gavrilo Princip shot and killed Archduke Franz Ferdinand. If he had lived, Ferdinand would have become the emperor of the Austria-Hungary Empire. The assassination set off a chain of events that would lead to the start of World War I. But the seeds of this terrible "Great War" had been planted long before Princip fired his gun.

Europe by 1914

From 1814 to 1815, Austria, Prussia, Russia, England and France met at the Congress of Vienna. These meetings set up borders and rules for countries in Europe. However, 100 years later, by 1914, Europe was arguing over its borders again and was about to be torn apart by the Great War.
Problems began as a result of the Franco-Prussian War (1870 to 1871). France was defeated by Prussia. France lost land and had to pay money to Prussia. Prussia grew stronger and became the German Empire, so France felt it needed a partner. Russia agreed to be France's ally in 1892. England was also worried Germany was getting too strong, so it became allies with France and Russia.

Soon after, Austria-Hungary and Russia both wanted control of lands in the Balkans. The Balkans included several countries like Serbia, Greece, Montenegro, Bulgaria and Bosnia-Herzegovina. In 1908, Austria-Hungary claimed Bosnia-Herzegovina. But Serbia felt that the people in Bosnia-Herzegovina were Serbian so it should be part of their country. The German Empire supported Austria-Hungary. This grab for territory and control angered Serbia and also Russia.

Serbia, Greece, Montenegro and Bulgaria then formed the Balkan League. In back-to-back Balkan wars with the Ottoman Empire (1912 and 1913), they took control of Balkan lands that the Ottoman Turks had controlled. This was seen as a threat by both Austria-Hungary and Russia.

As 1914 began, the German Empire and Austria-Hungary were allies on one side. France, England and Russia were allies on the other side. So this meant that any conflict in Europe could lead to war.
Assassination of Franz Ferdinand

On June 28, Franz Ferdinand and his wife, Sophie, came to inspect the army in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Gavrilo Princip was part of the Young Bosnia movement that hated Austria-Hungary, and wanted to join Serbia. The Young Bosnia group learned of the archduke’s visit. They were given weapons by a Serbian revolutionary group called the Black Hand. Princip and five others traveled to the city of Sarajevo to kill the archduke.

The royal couple toured the city in an open car. One of the Serbs threw a bomb at their car, but it rolled off the back of the vehicle and exploded, hurting people nearby. Later that day, the archduke's car took a wrong turn near where Princip happened to be standing. Seeing his chance, Princip fired into the car, shooting Franz Ferdinand and his wife. He then turned the gun on himself, but before he could fire, he was tackled and held until the police arrived. The archduke and his wife died within the hour.

The road to World War I

Austria-Hungary wanted to show the Balkan countries it was strong and would respond to this terrible crime. However, Russian also wanted Balkan lands and Austria-Hungary was not ready to fight a war with Russia. So the emperor of Austria-Hungary, Franz Josef, wrote a letter to Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany asking for his support. Wilhelm wrote back and promised Germany’s full support.

On July 23, Austria-Hungary told the Serbian government to wipe out terrorist organizations within its borders. It threatened to attack Serbia if these demands were not met. Serbia asked Russia for help. The leaders of the Russian empire were always called the czar. The Russian czar started getting his army ready. Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia on July 28. On August 1, Germany declared war on Russia. The German army then launched its attack, moving through Belgium to attack France. This attack on Belgium brought England into the war.

The Great War and its impact

Over the next four years, the Great War (as World War I was then called) would grow to involve Italy, Japan, the Middle East, the United States and other countries.

More than 20 million soldiers died or went missing and 21 million more were wounded. Millions of other people fell victim to the flu epidemic that the war helped to spread.

The war ended the reigns of royal leaders in Germany, Austria-Hungary and Turkey and also led to the Russian Revolution that ended the rule of the czar. In the end, an uneasy peace was signed in Versailles, France, in 1919. Tensions began to grow over the next 20 years and would lead to another devastating world war in 1939.