

## WORLD HISTORY

# IT'S WAR!

A century ago this summer, two shots fired by a teenage assassin led to the horror of World War I



The young assassin emerged from the shadow of the doorway. At last, Gavrilo Princip's time had come.

Quickly, the 19-year-old approached the car carrying the Archduke. Princip had to hurry. The assassin tugged at the small

### WORDS TO KNOW

- **Serb** (n): a member of a Slavic ethnic group, primarily in Serbia
- **Western Front** (n): the Great War battle line in Belgium and France

bomb tied to his waist—but couldn't free it. Instead, he drew his revolver and shot twice.

The date: June 28, 1914. The place: Sarajevo, a city of the empire of Austria-Hungary in central Europe. Word quickly began to spread around the world that Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, and his wife, Sophie, had been killed. Few could have expected that Gavrilo Princip's two shots would lead to a conflict that engulfed Europe and killed more

than 20 million people, including 116,000 Americans—World War I.

Princip had met up in Sarajevo that day with six other young **Serbs**. Members of a terrorist group called the Black Hand, they sought freedom for Serbs in territory that Austria-Hungary controlled. Each carried a bomb, a gun, and a packet of cyanide. Like today's suicide bombers, each was eager to be martyred for their cause—and none planned to be taken alive.

But before Princip had a chance to kill himself, he was stopped



by the crowd around him and then arrested. Soon, he was tried, convicted, and sentenced to life in prison. But Princip had no regrets.

"I suggest that you nail me to a cross and burn me alive," he said to his jailers. "My flaming body will be a torch to light my people on their path to freedom."

By then, Europe itself was in flames.

## A Chain Reaction

A century ago, people called it the Great War because it dwarfed all previous wars. By the end of the war in 1918, it had reached Africa and the Pacific, caused the collapse of three empires, changed the face of Europe, and propelled the U.S. onto the world stage.

"Never had so many nations taken up arms at a single time," historians Jay Winter and Blaine Baggett have written. "Never had the battlefield been so vast . . . never had the fighting been so gruesome."

How did the murder of two people in a small European city lead to such widespread horror? During the 19th century, Europe had suffered through a series of major wars. Prior to 1914, the continent's three major military powers—Germany, Russia, and France—had spent years building up their armies for the *next* big war. They had also created a web of alliances with other countries. These agreements required each country to defend its ally if it were attacked.

In the weeks after Archduke Ferdinand was killed, the alliances started a terrible chain reaction. First, Austria-Hungary threatened Serbia with war. Russia warned



**THE ASSASSIN**  
The 19-year-old terrorist fought to free the Serbs of Bosnia from Austria-Hungary.



**THE VICTIMS**  
The murders of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, and his wife, Sophie, shocked Europe.

that it would come to Serbia's aid. Germany, Austria-Hungary's ally, said that would mean war with them too. During the tense days of late July, European leaders sent increasingly frenzied messages back and forth to each other.

Finally, on July 28, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia. One by one, allies of those countries entered the fray. Within days, the continent was at war.

## "All the World Is Dead"

On one side of the conflict were the Central Powers, led by Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire (*see map, p. 11*). Opposing them were the Allies, which included Russia, France, and Great Britain. (The U.S. joined the Allied Powers in 1917.)

At first, patriotic crowds in town after town turned out to cheer on

their departing troops. "The sword is being forced into our hands," Germany's Kaiser Wilhelm II told his people. Other countries used the same justification for war.

While some people believed it "would all be over by Christmas," the soldiers quickly learned otherwise. After Germany attacked through Belgium and France, the Allies fought back. By November 1914, the situation had become a deadly stalemate.

For 450 miles, from the coast of Belgium to Switzerland, armies faced each other along a long series of trenches called the **Western Front** (*see map inset*). This battle line would become a symbol of the misery and horror of war.

The trench was the soldier's home for weeks or months. Exposed to constant enemy fire, this refuge and bed might be filled with rain, snow, knee-deep mud, and the corpses of other soldiers.

Over and over again, soldiers on both sides were given the order to go "over the top" of their trench and charge across a "no-man's-land" toward the other side's trenches. Raked with fire from machine guns and artillery, hundreds of thousands of men died there, often with little change in either army's position.

The Battle of the Somme in 1916 became synonymous with such slaughter. The Allies intended the offensive to be their "Big Push" to end the war. For a week the British slammed the German trenches with artillery. But the Germans had built deep dugouts and held their ground with few casualties. When the British finally went over the top

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## **"NEVER HAD THE BATTLEFIELD BEEN SO VAST . . . NEVER HAD THE FIGHTING BEEN SO GRUESOME."**

on July 1, they were mowed down in waves.

"I'd never seen so many dead men, clumped together, as what I saw then," one British soldier recalled later. "I thought to myself, 'All the world is dead. They're all dead. They're all dead.'"

Nearly 20,000 British soldiers were killed on that first day. By November, when they abandoned the offensive, about 1.3 million British, French, and German soldiers were dead or wounded. The Allies had pushed the Germans back only about five miles.

### **"Safe for Democracy"**

In the U.S., President Woodrow Wilson at first tried to stay neutral. Many Americans opposed entering the war. But the country's ties to Great Britain and repeated attacks by German submarines on U.S. ships changed Wilson's mind.

On April 6, 1917, Wilson asked Congress for a declaration of war against Germany. "The world must be made safe for democracy," he declared. Congress voted overwhelmingly for the war.

The entry of the U.S. was a turning point in the war, providing arms and about 2 million soldiers to the exhausted Allies. In September 1918, the Allied armies launched a coordinated attack on the German line. At last, it broke and the Allies pushed through. In October, after a series of defeats and riots in German cities over food shortages, Germany's leaders were ready to surrender.

On November 11, 1918, Allied and German leaders met in the Compiègne Forest of northern France to sign an armistice—an agreement to stop fighting. Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire had already surrendered. As word got out, church bells rang in towns and cities throughout the victorious countries. The Great War was over.

### **"Sleepwalkers"**

World War I caused vast changes in Europe. The Russian Revolution of October 1917—in part spurred by the misery of the war—had led the new Communist government to seek peace with Germany. After the war, Russia lost large parts of its territory. Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire broke up completely.

In the end, the fighting seemed to settle nothing. From the moment of the Armistice, Germany seethed with resentment over having to give up territory and pay enormous sums to the victors in reparations (payment for damages). That resentment, combined with a crippled economy, led to the rise of Nazi Party leader Adolf Hitler. In 1939, he led Europe into a war that would require another name and number: World War II.

Most historians see the Great War as a tragic waste. Christopher Clark places the blame on the leaders of all of the major powers. None actually wanted war, he says. But they were prepared to accept a "local" conflict if they could pretend "that it had been forced upon them."

"The [leaders] of 1914 were sleepwalkers," he writes. They were "watchful but unseeing . . . blind to the reality of the horror they were about to bring into the world."

—Bryan Brown

ILLUSTRATION BY MIRIAM MIGLIAZZI & MART KLEIN, JIM McHAUDON/MAPMAN [MAP]



## MAPSEARCH

### WWI Alliances 1914-1918

- Allied Powers\*
- Central Powers
- Neutral countries

Scale: 0 200 MI  
0 400 KM

\*The U.S. joined the Allied Powers in 1917.



### QUESTIONS

1. What were the two main alliances of the war?
2. Russia was separated from its ally Serbia by which enemy country?
3. Which side did Italy take during the war?
4. The Western Front began at which body of water and ended at which neutral country? *(Also consult the article for this answer.)*
5. The First Battle of the Marne is named for what geographic feature?
6. The trench line was mainly in which country?
7. Which battles on this map were fought in Belgium?
8. Which major combatant isn't pictured on this map, and on which side did it fight?
9. About how many straight-line miles separate Paris and Verdun?
10. The Ottoman Empire is mostly on what continent?