**Biography of Gavrilo Princip**

**It would have been incomprehensible, at the turn of the nineteenth century, to believe that the actions of one man could set in motion a series of events that would reverberate through history for the next nine decades. Yet when Gavrilo Princip (1894-1918) stepped in front of the automobile carrying Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife, the Duchess Sophie, putting two bullets into their bodies and killing both, that is precisely the path on which he set the world.**

*Read the following article and answer the questions below.*

1. *How does reading the biography of Gavrilo Princip enhance your historical perspective of World War I?*
2. *“Gavrilo Princip: terrorist or freedom fighter?” Respond to this question and explain your response.*
3. *Based on Princip’s experiences, what social, political, economic or historical conditions can sometimes result in radicalization and in come cases, national or international destabilization? Give specific examples in your explanation.*
4. *What is your reaction to Princip’s biography, actions, motivations? Did you find anything particularly interesting, shocking or otherwise worth discussing in his biography?*

**Early Life**

Princip’s home village was in what is now Bosnia though when he was born, no such nation existed. Instead, the west Balkans was a mosaic of land parcels mostly divided between foreign empires. For four centuries, his home was occupied by the Ottomans, which led to many local Slavs converting to Islam, progenitors of today’s Bosnian Muslim population. But in 1878, Bosnia was ‘‘flipped’’, occupied by Austria-Hungary, and any sense of Bosnian national identity was then a flight of fancy. The Slav community that Princip’s family belonged to followed eastern Orthodox Christianity, making him an ethnic Serb – although this did not make him Serbian. To be Serbian you had to live in Serbia, the new country east of Bosnia which had bloodily and recently won independence from Ottoman control.

The Princip family were at the bottom of the pecking order. They survived like medieval serfs, obliged to give almost all their meagre farming earnings to local elite landowners. They lived in a hovel with a beaten earth floor and rock walls roofed by shingles cut from local timber. Six of Princip’s eight siblings died as infants.

To seek a better life, Gavrilo left Obljaj in 1907, enrolling in a secondary school in Sarajevo, capital of the Austro-Hungarian colonial province. There he excelled, outdoing classmates from richer backgrounds. But it was in Bosnia’s schools that the green shoots of nationalism were growing and he soon fell in with youth demanding freedom from colonial rule. A key mistake is made by historians who say that Princip supported Serbian nationalism, the theory that the Balkans should be ruled by an enlarged Serbian state. This is not true. All the evidence shows that Princip supported Slav nationalism: the idea that foreigners should be driven out so local people could rule, no matter if they were Serbian, Croatian or from other ethnicities.

**Princip’s Radicalization**

After leaving school in Sarajevo, Princip travelled to Serbia where he helped to hatch the assassination plot. There he received help from Serbian nationalists, but Princip’s motives were never exclusively Serbian. At the same time, a group of students formed Mlada Bosna (Young Bosnia) and adopted an anti-Hapsburg platform (the Hapsburgs were the royal family of Austria-Hungary). Their campaign took on a wider, Pro-Yugoslav slant, moving away from their previous narrow Serb nationalist position. Of this group, Princip went on to become the most famous, moving into the ranks of the Black Hand terrorist organization. He clearly defined his beliefs when he stated at his later trial, "I am a Yugoslav nationalist, aiming for the unification of all Yugoslavs, and I do not care what form of state, but it must be free from Austria."

**The Black Hand**

The Ujedinjenje ili Smrt (Union or Death) was a secret society also known as the Black Hand. The society was formed in 1911, one year before Princip was recruited and trained in terrorism. It was during this training that his desire to unite the south Slavs into a federal nation by eliminating the Austro-Hungarian rule began to surface. It became clear to Princip that this goal would only be achieved through the elimination of a government official or a member of the ruling Hapsburg imperial family.

Princip had a history of ill health and although admitted to the Black Hand academy in 1912, he was considered unfit for active duty. His health did not, however, prevent him from coming to the attention of the organization's leader, Major Tankosic, who considered him to be a strong personality with good leadership qualities.

**The Assassination**

By the spring of 1913 relations between Austria-Hungary and Serbia were critical. War was imminent between the two powers. Serbian conquests of neighboring territories threatened the Austro-Hungarians, causing the military governor of Bosnia to declare a state of emergency. His actions were harsh and immediate. He dissolved parliament, suspended civil courts, closed Serb associations and took over the control of Bosnian schools. By the end of May 1913, the short-lived First Balkan War ended with the Treaty of London. However, by this time the governor's anti-Serb policies were securely established, much to the distress of the Serbian citizens. Everything was now in place for the events that would occur in June of 1914. The Austro-Hungarian army made plans to stage military maneuvers in Sarajevo, and Archduke Ferdinand and his wife were scheduled to be present to review the army.

Princip remained closely tied to the Black Hand society during this two-year period. When it was learned that Archduke Franz Ferdinand would make an official visit to Sarajevo, the wheels were set in motion for one of the most influential acts in world history. As the plot to assassinate the Archduke began to unfold, Princip was selected to be its leader for his marksmanship abilities and those very same leadership qualities recognized by his Black Hand superiors two years earlier.

On June 28, 1914, Princip and his comrade, Nedeljko Cabrinovic, along with four other members of the Black Hand, awaited the arrival of the Archduke. The first attempt to assassinate Ferdinand failed when Cabrinovic tossed a bomb at the royal automobile, but the bomb bounced off it and rolled under a second car, exploding and injuring an army officer. Archduke Ferdinand and his wife Sophie, the Duchess of Hohenberg, sped off to a reception at the City Hall untouched. Afterward the Archduke asked to visit the officer who had been injured earlier that day, and his driver unwittingly followed the same return route as the one taken earlier. The Duchess was not originally scheduled to return with the Archduke, but when last minute plans were made to visit the officer injured in the first attempt, she insisted on accompanying her husband. This decision, coupled with the lack of judgment in planning the return route, resulted in her death. The return route brought the Archduke back into the sights of Gavrilo Princip. As the royal car stopped within feet of him, Princip stepped forward and fired two shots. Sophie was hit on the right side and died first. The Archduke outlived her by only a short time. The bullet that took his life severed his jugular vein and came to rest in his spine. Princip later claimed that he intended one shot for General Oskar Potiorek, military governor of Bosnia, but the shot felled the duchess instead. One month later, on July 28, 1914, Austria-Hungary had found the reason it sought to enter into conflict with Serbia and establish its imperial hold on the Balkans – filling the power vacuum that the Ottoman Empire had left behind. Austria-Hungary held Serbia accountable for the actions of Gavrilo Princip and declared war.

**The Trial, the Sentence and Death**

Princip understood only too well the actions that would follow. He attempted suicide at the scene by shooting himself, but a quick-thinking onlooker swiftly knocked the gun from his hand. An angry mob began to close in on him, but Princip was rescued by the police and imprisoned.

Princip and his fellow conspirators were all arrested at the scene but during interrogations, neither Princip nor Cabrinovic broke their code of silence with the Black Hand. His account of the event was not clear. "Where I aimed, I do not know. But I know that I aimed at the Heir Apparent. I believe I fired twice, perhaps more, because I was so excited. Whether I hit the victims or not, I cannot tell, because instantly people started to hit me."

While in custody, Princip again attempted suicide by the use of cyanide, but again his attempt was unsuccessful. Throughout the trial, Princip remained quiet and aloof. He also remained loyal to the Black Hand, refusing to place the blame for the assassination with any organization. He expressed no remorse for the crime, with the exception of the death of the Duchess, whom he said he had not meant to shoot. He made only a short final statement saying, "In trying to insinuate that someone else has instigated the assassination, one strays from the truth. The idea arose in our own minds and we ourselves executed it. We have loved the people. I have nothing to say in my defense."

Princip was found guilty, and it was at this point that the question of his age became pivotal to the outcome of his trial. The prevailing law of the country prevented the execution of any prisoner who was under twenty years of age on the day of his crime. Princip's exact birth date could not be determined, and the court gave him the benefit of the doubt. He was sentenced to twenty years in prison, the maximum the courts could give.

Princip was imprisoned in Theresienstadt prison in Austria. It is thought that he was tubercular before entering prison, and as a result of his poor health he underwent the amputation of an arm. During his incarceration he was transferred between his prison cell, where he was kept in solitary confinement, and the prison hospital where he was treated for his tuberculosis. Princip's death certificate reads that he died April 28, 1918 at 6:30 p.m. of tuberculosis of the bones in Theresienstadt Hospital. He was buried secretly.

**A Century of Warfare**

The whole of the twentieth century was sent into a tailspin as a result of two bullets fired from the gun of Gavrilo Princip. The "war to end all wars," World War I, concluded with the Treaty of Versailles, an agreement so punitive to Germany that its reaction fostered the rise of Nazism and led to World War II. The division of Europe at the end of World War II aided in the rise of Soviet Russia and the Communist bloc and resulted in Cold War tensions that persisted until the fall of Communism in the late 1980s and the dissolution of the Soviet state in 1991. By the end of the twentieth century the world had come full circle, with the whole international community focused on another Balkan terrorist named Slobodan Milosevic.

Books

Dedijer, Vladimir, *The Road to Sarajevo,* Simon and Schuster, 1966.

Malcolm, Noel, *Bosnia: A Short History,* New York University Press, 1994.

Periodicals

*Newsweek,* March 15, 1999. *Time,* June 14, 1999.

Online

"Black Hand," *Encyclopaedia Britannica,* [http://www.britannica.com/seo/b/black-hand-I](http://www.britannica.com/seo/b/black-hand-I%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) (November 17, 2000).

"Gavrilo Princip," [http://www.worldwarI.com/biosgprn.htm(November](http://www.worldwari.com/biosgprn.htm%28November%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) 17, 2000).

"Princip, Gavrilo," *Encyclopaedia Britannica,* [http://www.britannica.com/seo/g/gavrilo-princip/](http://www.britannica.com/seo/g/gavrilo-princip/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) (November 17, 2000).

"Princip, Gavrilo," [http://raven.cc.ukans.edu](http://raven.cc.ukans.edu/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) (November 17, 2000).