

'Hero or terrorist?' 100 years ago, Gavrilo Princip fired the fatal shot that sparked the First World War'

Aida Cerkez, Associated Press - June 19, 2014



In this June 28, 1914 file photo, a suspect, second right, is captured by police in Sarajevo, Yugoslavia. Gavrilo Princip fired the shots that assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, and his wife Sophie.

AP Photo File

A century after Gavrilo Princip ignited the First World War with a shot from his handgun, the baby-faced Serb teenager who assassinated the Austro-Hungarian crown prince in Sarajevo in 1914 still provokes controversy.

His legacy has been molded time and again to meet political agendas in the Balkans, which remains a smoldering patchwork of ethnic and religious rivalries.

He lived and died for his ideas to liberate and unite the southern Slavs. May he rest in peace

Nikola Princip crossed himself and stood silently

recently in front of a Sarajevo chapel plaque that read "The Heroes of St. Vitus Day." The list starts with Gavrilo Princip's name for the assassination he carried out on that sacred Serb holiday of June 28.

"He lived and died for his ideas to liberate and unite the southern Slavs. May he rest in peace," the 81-year-old man said, lighting a candle.

A few blocks away, another plaque marks the spot where Princip killed Crown Prince Franz Ferdinand. There, Halida Basic, a 72 year-old Bosnian Muslim, has a different view.

"He was a killer, a terrorist. He did it because he wanted Bosnia to be part of Greater Serbia," she said.

Barely a month after the 19-year-old fired his shots, Europe, and eventually the world, was at war.

In this June 28, 1914 file photo, a suspect, second right, is captured by police in Sarajevo, Yugoslavia. Gavrilo Princip fired the shots that assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, and his wife Sophie.

AP Photo File

Austria accused Serbia of masterminding the assassination. Backed by Germany, Austria attacked Serbia, whose allies, Russia and France, were quickly drawn in. Britain, its sprawling Commonwealth empire and the United States also joined the fighting.

When the mass slaughter known as the Great War ended in 1918, it had claimed some 14 million lives – 5 million civilians and 9 million soldiers, sailors and airmen – and left another 7 million troops permanently disabled.

For his part, Princip was immediately arrested and died in captivity months before the war ended.

With the centenary remembrance of the assassination approaching in the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo, the old entrenched positions are resurfacing.

"Gavrilo Princip will, just like the past 100 years, remain a hero for some and a terrorist to others," said the head of the Sarajevo History Institute, Husnija Kamberovic. "It is a matter of feelings toward what he did, and not a matter of serious historical arguments."

The split follows Bosnia's ethnic divisions.

Christian Orthodox Serbs celebrate Princip as someone who saw Bosnia as part of the Serb national territory. The same idea inspired the Serbs in 1992 to fight the decision by Muslim Bosnians and Catholic Croats to declare the former republic of Bosnia independent when Serb-dominated Yugoslavia fell apart.

In Serb history books, the "great liberation act" of Princip and his comrades is described for over 20 pages.

"They were heroes who were ready to sacrifice their own lives for freedom and liberation," said Jovan Medosevic, a primary school history teacher in the Bosnian Serb town of Pale, near Sarajevo.



This undated photo provided by the Historical Archives Sarajevo shows Archduke Franz Ferdinand, right, and his wife Sophie shortly after they were killed on June 28, 1914. Bosnian Serb nationalist Gavrilo Princip fired the shots that killed them.
AP Photo/Historical Archives Sarajevo

That's exactly what makes Princip unpopular among Muslim Bosnians and Catholic Croats. In their official textbooks, Princip is mentioned in just one sentence as a member of a secret terrorist organization who "did not assassinate Franz Ferdinand to liberate Bosnia from the occupier, but wanted Bosnia to become a part of

Kingdom of Serbia," high school student Ermin Lazovic said.

A century ago, Muslim Bosnians and Catholic Croats preferred to stay in the big Austrian empire that had brought progress, law and order. Serbia was already in the process of destroying all mosques on its territory after it had liberated itself from the Ottoman Empire.

Accordingly, authorities in the Serb part of Bosnia plan to erect a monument to Princip and refuse to take part in the planned commemorations in Muslim Bosnian-dominated Sarajevo.

The front page of "The Excelsior" newspaper, announcing the assassination of Archduke Franz-Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, by pro-Serb nationalist Gavrilo Princip on June 28, 1914 in Sarajevo, which triggered the First World War.

AFP/Getty Images

For the Serbs, it is beyond doubt that Austria and Germany were the instigators of the First World War, not Princip or the Serbs.

The Sarajevo commemoration includes a performance of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra and an international historical conference at which no Serb academics will attend.

"We have no new facts and we can only reinterpret old documents," Bosnian Serb historian Draga Mastilovic said. "So are we now supposed to accept the Austro-Hungarian position that Serbia caused that war?"

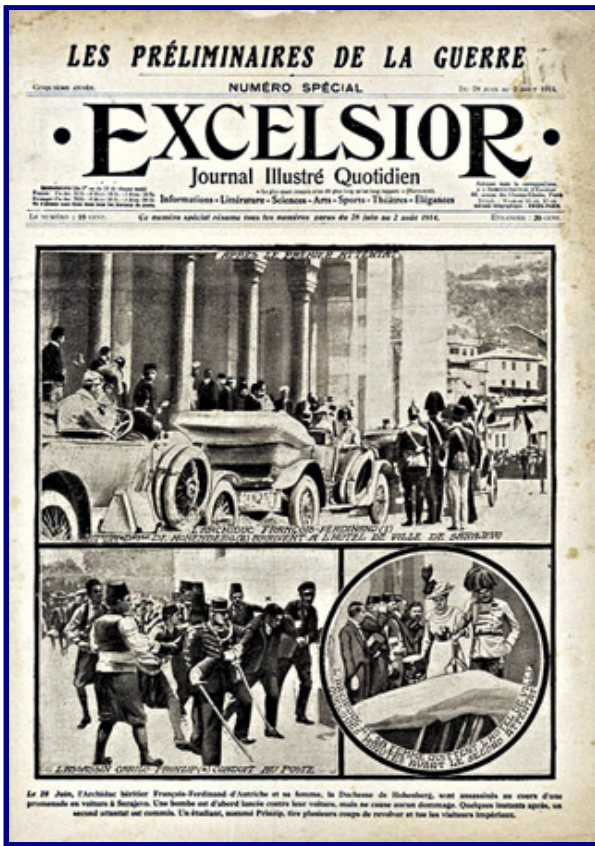
He said he understood why Germans and Austrians want to promote their version of events. "It is not easy to carry the burden of having caused two world-wide bloodbaths in the 20th century," he said.

For Kamberovic, the professor organizing the conference in Sarajevo, everything is open for academic review.

"People who accuse us of trying to revise history before the conference has even started are aware that we do intend to open discussions they do not really like," he said.

"We will talk about how much the expansionist policy of the German monarchy has contributed – but also how much the expansionist policy of Serbia toward Bosnia has contributed to the outbreak of that war," he said.

A Bosnian rock group has even written a song about the sunny morning in 1914 when, according to their lyrics, Princip became a "hero to some, a criminal to others, while probably his own soul is still wandering, somewhere in between."



Fixing the flower arrangement he laid in front of the little chapel in Sarajevo, Nikola Princip admitted he had a personal stake in the debate.

"Gavrilo Princip was my uncle," he said.



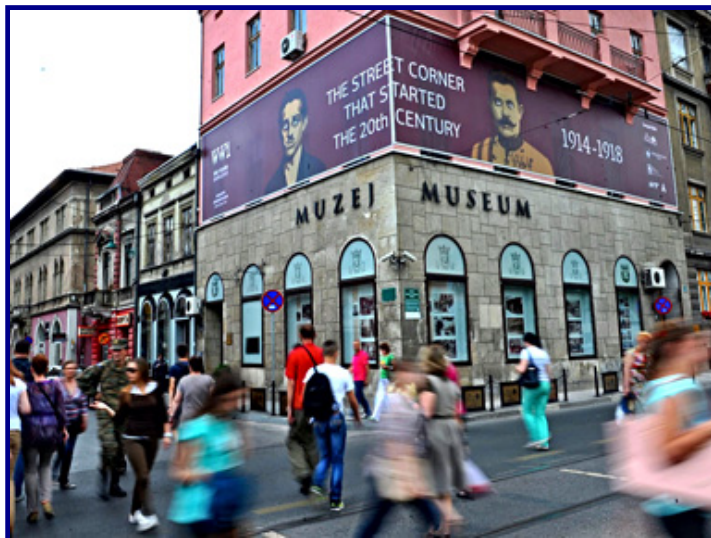
Gavrilo Princip's grandnephew Novak Princip, 16, hides from rain as he plays with a tennis ball and racket inside the doorway of the house Gavrilo Princip was born in the village of Obljaj, near Bosansko Grahovo, 300 kilometres west of Sarajevo, Bosnia.
Photo/Amel Emric



Weapons used by Bosnian Serb student Gavrilo Princip (top picture). A die-hard nationalist terrorist or a young idealist patriot: the jury is still out, one hundred years after the shots Ferdinand fired assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand, triggering World War I.
DIETER NAGL/AFP/Getty Images



In this Nov. 11, 2013 photo, an expert at the Historical Archives Sarajevo inspects old newspapers and a photo collection surrounding the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria and his wife Sophie in Sarajevo, Bosnia
 Photo/Amel Emric



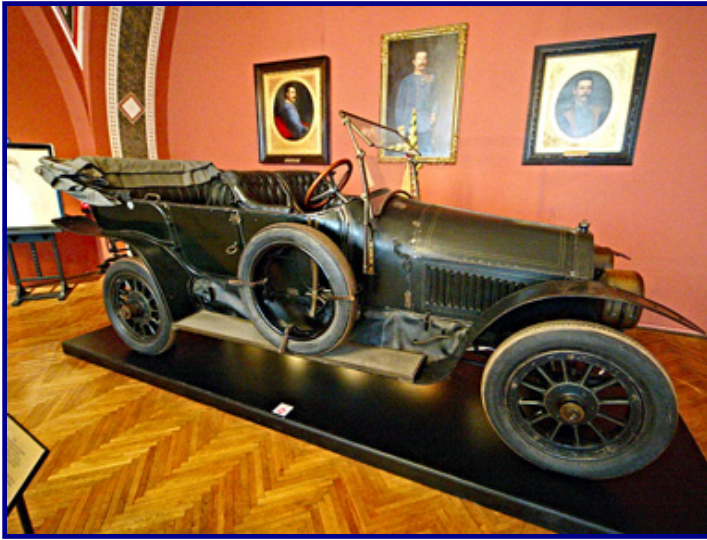
Citizens cross the street in front of the historical landmark, where Austro-Hungarian heir to the throne, Archduke, Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sofia were assassinated on June 28, 1914.
 ELVIS BARUKCIC/AFP/Getty Images



Gavrilo Princip's relatives, from left, Nikola Princip, Miljko Princip, Milan Princip, and Novak Princip, 16, look at the remains of the house Gavrilo Princip was born in the village of Obljaj, near Bosansko Grahovo, 300 kilometres west of Sarajevo, Bosnia.
 Photo/Amel Emric



A Bosnian man walks down an alley in the town that Gavrilo Princip was born in the village of Obljaj, near Bosansko Grahovo, 300 kilometres west of Sarajevo, Bosnia.
 ELVIS BARUKCIC/AFP/Getty Images



A file photo taken on June 28, 2004 shows a military history museum in Vienna displaying the car in which the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne was riding in Sarajevo when he was killed.

DIETER NAGL/AFP/Getty Images



In this June 1914 photo provided by the Historical Archives Sarajevo, Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria and his wife Sophie arrive in their car on a visit to Sarajevo.

AP Photo/Historical Archives Sarajevo

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