

Searching for Sources:

The Assassination of Franz Ferdinand, Sarajevo, 1914

Sylvie Nickels describes her pursuit of primary evidence of the event which triggered the First World War. Through this one incident, she illustrates the challenges and frustrations History students can encounter when they seek to establish a fuller picture of the past.

The Assassin's Shots

ON SUNDAY 28 JUNE 1914, 19-year-old Gavrilo Princip stood on a street corner in Sarajevo, Bosnia, and fired two most fateful shots. One mortally wounded the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir presumptive to the Austro-Hungarian throne. Arguably, it was the spark that fired the European tinderbox, exploding just over five weeks later into the First World War.

Evidence

Innumerable books detail the political background and examine, in minute detail, causes and effects but in doing the research for my own publication (*Assassination at Sarajevo*, published by Jackdaw Publications, 1966) I wanted to get as close as possible to original sources. This presented few problems when it came to trawling for the reactions of the British Press, the Government and, by inference, the public of the day, for the Public Records Office in London and the archives of various newspapers provided rich pickings. The Public Records Office files, especially, produced some stirring moments as I pored over governmental memoranda scrawled and initialed by

some of the most important politicians of the time: Sir Edward Grey, Sir Arthur Nicolson, Sir Eyre Crowe - even Mr (later Sir Winston) Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty.

Sarajevo

In order to be closer to the chief players in the assassination drama, though, it was necessary to travel to Sarajevo itself. Recent tragic events will have changed the face of that ill-fated city yet again, but at the time of my research it enjoyed moderate prosperity and apparent ethnic harmony as the capital of Bosnia-Herzegovina, one of the six republics of Tito's Yugoslavia.

For all its high rise modern suburbs the city's core bears unmistakable evidence of its complex history: the

mosques and oriental bazaar-style markets reflecting well over four centuries of Ottoman (Turkish) rule; a peppering of ornately pseudo-Moorish public buildings dating from the Austro-Hungarian administration and subsequent annexation (in 1908).

Why was 28 June the Day?

I did not establish whether it was by coincidence or intention that Franz Ferdinand chose to review the Imperial troops a few miles from Sarajevo on 28 June. This is a deeply sensitive date in South Slav history, since it marks the anniversary of their major defeat by the Ottoman Turks on the fields of Kosovo (south Serbia) in 1389, symbolically the dawn of Turkish rule throughout the region. In any case, there had been deepening unrest as neighbouring Serbia gained and consolidated her



Gavrilo Princip assassinates Franz Ferdinand and wounds his wife

independence, while Bosnia, in effect, had simply changed one lot of foreign domination for another. In Serbia the sinister and ruthless Black Hand was an organisation dedicated to terrorist methods to achieve its pan-Serb ends, that is, to expand Serbia in order that all Serbians would be governed from Serbia's capital, Belgrade. There is no doubt that it encouraged rebellion within neighbouring Bosnia and supplied weapons to the young nationalists.

The Scene and the People

I wondered whether any of the leading participants in the assassination plot were still alive. Through a series of leads, I made contact with Dr Svetozar Koljević, Professor of English at Sarajevo University. Yes, there was one, he told me but, alas, too ill and frail to be interviewed. So instead we first pounded the assassination trail while Dr Koljević translated for me modern street names into the original Austrian ones. Thus, we followed the banks of the Miljacka river along Appel quay (now Vojvode Stepe obala) past Cumurija (Zrinski) bridge, from which one of the young conspirators had hurled a bomb at the Imperial car, wounding an aide-de-camp. From here we continued, as had the incensed Archduke, to the same pseudo-Moorish Town Hall (later National Library) - where fatally he made a change of plan.

In order to avoid further risk it was decided to amend the route and return the same way at speed, but now the Archduke additionally proposed to visit the wounded officer in hospital. Unfortunately, these changes were not made clear to the chauffeur who, at the corner of Franz Josef Street (Jugoslovenske Armije), slowed down intending to turn right for the Cathedral, as originally planned. Thus, Gavrilo Princip and his revolver were presented with a sitting target.

Photographs from 1914

From a photographic agency we obtained a series of Press photographs illustrating the sequence of the day's events. In later times the building on the corner of Appel quay and Franz Josef Street became the Mlada Bosna (Young Bosnia) Museum and a major source of documents and photographs. These include many official and private documents, among them a moving letter written from prison by one of the leading conspirators, Veljko Čubrilović, to his daughter, Nada, then only three years old. Čubrilović committed suicide in February 1915 before the death sentence could be carried out. The letter exhorts: 'My darling only child' to '... love and honour your mother' and to have '... a pure heart and noble thoughts'. In the only indirect reference to the events leading to his death he says '... the only thing that your father can leave you is his honest and untarnished name'.

The most vivid impression I acquired of the young men involved was from a French translation of a transcript of the trial in October 1914 (it was not available in English). From it Gavrilo Princip emerges as a 19-year-old student from Orthodox peasant stock, in rather poor health but burning with nationalist fire. He said:

I am not a criminal for I destroyed a bad man. I thought I was right. ... It is a departure from the truth to insinuate that somebody else was the instigator of the outrage. The idea originated with us and it was we who carried it out. We have loved the people. I have nothing to say in my defence.

It was the unshakeable contention of the Austro-Hungarian government that Serbia had been deeply involved in the plot, leading inexorably to ultimatums, accusations and counter-accusations, and the ever more dangerous flexing of military muscle. At the trial Princip said he chose to stand in a place where there were not too many people, as he only wanted the Archduke to die. By the time of the trial (in October 1914) many, many more had died and Europe's attention was already far removed from the young men who had played some part in their death. Several of the assassination conspirators were hanged but, too young for the death penalty, both Princip and the bomb-thrower Čabrinović died in prison before the war ended.

False Trails and Dead Ends

In the course of this kind of research there are irresistible temptations to be drawn along potential trails that finally end at a blank wall. One such was my decision to try and trace the British Consul in Sarajevo at the time of the assassination who, I was told by an elderly Sarajevan, had taken some excellent photographs of the city. From the Foreign Office I learned the Consul was John Francis Jones, who had died on 9 February 1940. This was a sufficient lead for me to trace his will in Somerset House, giving the name of his solicitors in Liverpool. My letter of enquiry to the latter was duly forwarded to a relative of the ex-Consul, then living in Hampshire from whom, in due course, I learned that there were, unfortunately, no relevant papers among his personal effects, but suggesting a tenuous lead to a close friend of the late Consul Jones. This led me to an irrelevant letter dating from 1939 regarding the dispatch of some furniture - merely showing how deep and dusty are solicitors' archives. But the chase was engaging while it lasted - and it just might have yielded some treasure.

For me a final wry footnote lay in the far more accessible shelves of the Public Records Office: Britain's declaration of war on Germany, 37 days after the two shots in far away Sarajevo. A draft of this declaration had been amended by Foreign Minister Sir Edward Grey with a scrawl of almost doodle-like casualness. With horror it was found that the typed-up amended version contained a serious error and an hour or so after it was sent to the German Embassy a junior member of the Foreign Office was dispatched urgently with yet another, and this time, final version.

Words to note

tenuous: weak or feeble.

insinuate: to suggest indirectly, to slip in dishonestly.

inexorably: not changed even by pleading.

wry: bitterly humorous or twisted.

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