

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 74

“A Few Serbian Bullets”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

In the evening of Tuesday, June 23, 1914, the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, crown prince of Austria-Hungary, and his wife, the Duchess Sophia, prepared for their long-scheduled trip to Bosnia to observe Austrian Army maneuvers. The first leg of the journey was a train ride from Vienna to Trieste.

As they prepared to leave, the Archduke was heard to remark, “This thing isn’t especially secret, and I wouldn’t be surprised if there are a few Serbian bullets waiting for me.”

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 74. A Few Serbian Bullets.

All the way back in episode one, I told you the story of how the suicide of Archduke Rudolf, the only son of the Austrian Emperor, Franz Josef, left the Emperor’s nephew, Franz Ferdinand, the heir presumptive to the Empire.

It is difficult to take the measure of the man. He grew up a Habsburg heir, served in the Austrian Army as one does when one is a Habsburg heir, acquiring the rank of lieutenant at the tender age of 14, and major general by 31. He was not well liked. He could be brusque, and he could be moody, and he had a tendency toward angry and intemperate outbursts. In a place like Imperial Vienna, the elite aristocrats could and did remember small slights for a very long time.

It was perhaps in 1894, when the Archduke was 31, that he first met the woman who was to be the love of his life, Sophia Chotek, the daughter of a Bohemian count, and four years the Archduke’s junior. We don’t know exactly when this relationship got going, because they kept it secret for some time, because Franz Ferdinand knew full well that the Habsburgs would not approve of it.

You might think, well, Sophia is a count’s daughter, right, so what’s the problem? Except as we’ve already seen several times the Habsburgs are very particular about whom they will let into the family. Generally, only another Habsburg makes a fully acceptable spouse. They might settle

for a royal from another country. But a count's daughter? That was hardly any better than marrying the stablehand's bastard, as far as the Habsburgs were concerned.

But to his credit, Franz Ferdinand would not back down, and eventually he and the Emperor reached a compromise: a morganatic marriage. This means that the marriage would not be recognized for dynastic purposes. Sophia would not become a Habsburg, or an Archduchess, and their children would be excluded from the line of inheritance.

This would mean that Franz Ferdinand's heir presumptive would be his younger brother, Otto. Except that Otto died of syphilis in 1906, making his eldest son Karl, or Charles if you like, Franz Ferdinand's heir, and next in line to become Emperor.

Franz Ferdinand and Sophia would marry in 1900. Although the bride was already 32 years old at the time of their wedding, she bore him three children, Sophia in 1901, Maximilian in 1902, and Ernst in 1904. A fourth child was stillborn. The Archduke would later say that marrying Sophia was the most intelligent decision he had ever made.

After the wedding, Sophia was given the courtesy title of "Princess." She was made a Duchess in 1909, but even then her rank was lower than that of her husband and most of the Imperial court. The Austrian Kaiser never forgave his nephew for marrying Sophia over his objections, and he and his court never missed an opportunity to extract their petty vengeance. At Imperial functions, the nobility were always arranged by rank, which meant that Sophia could never sit with her husband and his Habsburg relations, but was always consigned to the back of the room with the lesser aristocracy. Franz Josef may have been content to sit idle while his Empire and his Army slid into obsolescence and irrelevance, but he was always scrupulous about making sure his niece felt inferior and out of place.

Technically, Sophia's low rank still applied when the couple traveled abroad, but the courts of foreign monarchs, such as King George in Britain or Kaiser Wilhelm in Germany, generally didn't bother with all this protocol, preferring instead to act like grownups and let Sophia sit with her husband already. And so, Ferdinand and Sophia, unsurprisingly, were generally happier when they were traveling abroad.

Whatever Franz Ferdinand's failings, he did seem uncommonly devoted to his wife, and it shouldn't surprise us that the way she was being treated in Vienna made him feel angry and bitter. I already mentioned that he had a reputation as a quick-tempered hothead. His anger management issues probably didn't begin when the court started mistreating his wife, but that surely didn't help any.

And Ferdinand was no dilettante. He'd spent the eighteen years since he had become the heir presumptive planning for that glorious day when he would rule as Emperor. We've already touched on this a bit in previous episodes. He aspired to give the South Slavs greater autonomy within the Dual Monarchy—convert it into something like a Triple Monarchy. He also had

ambitions of easing ethnic tensions in the Empire by granting more regional autonomy to the Empire's many ethnic groups: Czechs, Poles, Ukrainians, Italians and others in Austria, and Slovaks and Croats and Romanians in Hungary. These plans made him as unpopular in Budapest as he was in Vienna. Hungary prized its special place in the Dual Monarchy, and Hungarian ministers adamantly opposed either watering down the "dual" in Dual Monarchy or in granting any sort of autonomy to ethnic minorities within Hungary.

But don't call Franz Ferdinand a liberal. He favored more autonomy for the various ethnic regions of the Empire, but he was also a staunch monarchist who had little use for elected parliaments, and a devout Catholic with little sympathy for the Empire's Orthodox, Muslim, or Jewish subjects.

Despite this mutual antipathy between the Emperor and his heir, Franz Josef gave his nephew an amazing palace in Vienna, the Belvedere, and Ferdinand would put together there a shadow court, as it were, or a government in waiting, against the day when the old man would finally ring down the curtain and join the choir invisible. I mean, he was already in his seventies. How long could it take?

But it did take a long time, and the two rival courts—Franz Josef's and his loyal courtiers on the one side, versus Franz Ferdinand and his courtiers who were loyal because they were looking forward to the day when they would replace Franz Josef's loyal courtiers—sometimes fought bureaucratic battles, as we have also already seen. Remember, for example, how Franz Josef's people leaked the existence of Plan U, the war plan aimed at Hungary, to discredit Franz Ferdinand's people?

Nevertheless, the aging Emperor had turned over day-to-day supervision of the Austro-Hungarian military to the heir in 1913, as we saw, and the Archduke and the military chief of staff, General Conrad, agreed to hold special maneuvers in Bosnia in June of 1914 as a way of sending a warning to the Serbians. The Archduke would be going to Bosnia to observe the maneuvers, and his wife Sophia would be accompanying him. Unusually for the couple, they would leave behind their three children, their 13-year old daughter and their sons, now aged twelve and ten. They had never been away from their children for this long before.

The governor of Bosnia and also its chief military commander was the 60-year old General Oskar Potiorek, an ethnic Slovene. You'll recall he became governor of Bosnia after his predecessor was the target of a failed assassination attempt in 1910 and subsequently resigned. As the military commander in Bosnia, Potiorek was in command of the army units on maneuvers and, as governor, the couple's host while they visited Sarajevo. Now, it was known that there were shadowy political radicals in Bosnia, supported by equally radical Serbs in Serbia, and some local political figures in Bosnia were sending warnings that the visit of the Archduke would be provocative and possibly dangerous. But Potiorek wanted to be seen as the man who had stabilized Bosnia and brought it firmly under Imperial control, so he was dismissive of those

warnings, and assured the Archduke there was nothing to worry about. He also vetoed all suggestions of special security precautions during the visit to Sarajevo, things like armed soldiers on the streets, because he wanted to project an image of a calm and secure Bosnia.

On Tuesday the 23rd, the Archduke and his wife took the train from Vienna to the port city of Trieste, at the top of the Adriatic, as I mentioned at the top of the episode. On Wednesday morning, they boarded *Viribus Unitis*, the dreadnought that was the flagship of the Austrian Navy, which took them south along the coast of Dalmatia. On Thursday, they boarded a train to the resort town of Ilidža, not far from Sarajevo, where the couple stayed during the maneuvers.

In the rural countryside of Bosnia, the Archduke and the Duchess met only friendly locals and saw only smiling faces. On Saturday night, local Bosnian political leaders held a banquet for the couple. One of these local leaders was Dr. Josip Sunarić, an ethnic Croat who had previously been one of those warning about the dangers inherent in the trip. Sophia greeted him at the banquet and told him “You see? You made a mistake. It isn’t as you said it would be. Everywhere we have gone, we have been treated cordially, even by the Serbs, and we are very happy about it!” Sunarić replied, “I ask God that if I will have the honor tomorrow evening of seeing you again, you can tell me the same words again.”

[music: “*Unfinished*” *Symphony*]

In Sarajevo on Sunday, June 28th, the weather was beautiful, and the security was minimal. The Archduke agreed with Potiorek that a heavy security presence would send a message that the Habsburgs feared and distrusted their subjects in Bosnia. And so, the Archduke, resplendent in his cavalry uniform and hat adorned with green ostrich feathers, arrived by train at Sarajevo on Sunday morning. He and Sophia transferred to an open car and rode along a previously announced route down the Appel Quay, with only local police to provide security. Even the security men assigned to follow the Archduke got left behind at the train station as the result of a mix-up. The Archduke and Sophia rode side by side in the third car of the motorcade. None of this nonsense about Sophia’s rank; Governor Potiorek wanted the Archduke’s goodwill.

From the motorcade, it appeared everything was going smoothly, until a bomb was tossed at them. The driver of the Archduke’s car sped up when he saw the device flying toward them, which resulted in it bouncing off the back of the car and landing in the street behind them. It exploded just as the next car in the motorcade was passing over it. No one was killed, but some in the car and some nearby spectators were injured. Sophia had gotten a cut on her cheek from some flying shrapnel, but she and the Archduke were otherwise unharmed.

The Archduke ordered the motorcade to halt, and insisted on making sure the wounded were cared for. The worst injury was to General Potiorek’s adjutant, who was dispatched to a military hospital. The bomber was captured while this was going on. The Archduke declared, “That fellow is clearly insane; let us proceed with our program.” And off they went.

The Archduke was remarkably calm at this moment, but it is often the case that people keep their cool during a crisis and then become shaken later, as the full import of what just happened begins to sink in. By the time the motorcade reached the town hall, the first stop on their itinerary, the Archduke began to lose his cool. So did the Lord Mayor of Sarajevo, a Bosniak Muslim who had been in the motorcade and knew full well what had just happened, but was too flustered to think what to do other than proceed with his welcome speech at the town hall as if nothing had happened. The Archduke interrupted him, angrily blurting out, "Mr. Mayor, I come here on a visit and I am greeted with bombs! It is outrageous." At this point, Sophia leaned over and whispered into the Archduke's ear. We'll never know what she said, but it seemed to calm him down. The Archduke collected himself and told the mayor to continue.

Then the Archduke gave his own speech, from a prepared manuscript still stained with the blood of the staff member who had been carrying it, in the fourth car. At the end of the prepared speech, Franz Ferdinand added a few gracious extemporaneous remarks, thanking Sarajevans for their warm welcome and noting that the vast majority of them were horrified by the bombing.

Afterward, Sophia went to meet with a delegation of Muslim women at the town hall. It was a women-only event, arranged that way so the Muslims could take off their veils. While that was going on, the Archduke arranged for a telegram to be sent to the Emperor, assuring him that he and Sophia were all right. But witnesses recall that the Archduke was looking distinctly agitated by this time.

There was a discussion about what to do next. The original itinerary called for the couple to attend the dedication of a new museum in Sarajevo. From the town hall, the route would be a short distance back along the Appel Quay, and then a right turn onto Franz Josef Street. It was decided instead to cancel the rest of the Archduke's itinerary and deliver the couple to the Governor's residence, presumably the safest place in the city, until arrangements could be made to put them on a train and get them out of town. But the Archduke insisted on visiting the wounded adjutant in the hospital first, and Sophia insisted on coming along.

The trip to the military hospital would take them back along Appel Quay, which was unfortunate, but the plan was that the cars would drive quickly, giving any other potential assassin limited time to strike, and a bodyguard would ride on the left running board of the car, next to where the Archduke was sitting.

And so the motorcade began its trip back along Appel Quay. Unfortunately, in the confusion of changing plans, no one had informed the drivers. And so, when the motorcade reached Franz Josef Street, the first car turned right, as if they were still going to the museum. The second car followed it. When the third car turned, Governor Potiorek ordered the driver to stop and back out into the Appel Quay again. As he was doing this, the bodyguard watched in helpless horror as a young man, small and slender, quickly strode up to the right side, the opposite side, of the car, drew a pistol, and fired two shots.

The driver put the car in gear and pulled away from the scene, toward the Governor's residence. At first, the couple continued to sit upright in the car, and Potiorek and the bodyguard dared to hope they had not been seriously hurt. Even when the Duchess fell into the Archduke's lap, they thought perhaps she had simply fainted from all the excitement. It was only when they saw the blood flowing from the Archduke's mouth and throat that the full truth began to become clear.

Franz Ferdinand looked down at his wife and said, "Sophie, don't die. Stay alive for our children." The bodyguard asked the Archduke if he was in pain. "It's nothing," the Archduke said, and repeated it several times, "It's nothing...it's nothing..."

By the time they reached the Governor's palace, the Duchess was already dead. The Archduke died minutes after they arrived, just after eleven o'clock in the morning.

[music: *Kindertotenlieder*]

In 1977, two psychologists named Roger Brown and James Kulik published a groundbreaking paper about what they called "flashbulb memories." This refers to moments when people hear shocking news and find they can recall that precise moment with an uncanny clarity for many years afterward. Characteristic elements of "flashbulb memory" are a vivid recollection of exactly where you were at the time, what you were doing, who told you the news, what thoughts went through your mind immediately after you heard it, and what you did next. Often a few trivial, even silly, details of no particular meaning or consequence are also preserved as part of the overall memory.

In order for a piece of news to trigger a flashbulb memory, it must be particularly surprising and particularly consequential. Brown and Kulik also speculated that a powerful emotional response to the news was also a factor.

For Americans of my age and older, the epitome of flashbulb memory is the news of the assassination of President Kennedy on November 22, 1963. For younger Americans, news of the *Challenger* explosion on January 28, 1986 or of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 might fill that role. For my parents' generation, it was the news of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

Prominent Austrians of 1914 wrote of similar flashbulb memories of hearing the news of the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand and Duchess Sophia, often in memoirs published long after the event.

Summer had started. The business of government customarily slows in the summer months, and the highest-ranking officials typically leave the capital for extended periods. The elderly Kaiser, Franz Josef, was vacationing at the Imperial Villa in the Austrian alpine resort of Bad Ischl, along with his constant companion, the actress Katharina Schrott, when he received the news. Franz Josef closed his eyes for a moment, then declared, "Horrible! The Almighty does not allow

himself to be challenged with impunity. A higher power has restored the old order.” In other words, the Emperor had leapt at once to the conclusion that the assassination was divine retribution for Franz Ferdinand marrying a woman of insufficient rank, an act of defiance the Emperor clearly still held a grudge over, even this day, of all days. He then gave orders to return to Vienna.

The Austrian writer Stefan Zweig would recall many years later that he was on holiday in the Austrian town of Baden, near Vienna, on that fateful Sunday morning. He recalled sitting in the park, reading an essay on Tolstoy. Other vacationers were strolling about, and in the distance, musicians were playing. Then, the music stopped. Sensing something was wrong, he looked around, and noticed that the other people in the park had also stopped. Now they were gathering, talking among themselves. Zweig thought, *Something must have happened.*

The Austro-Hungarian Finance Minister, Leon Biliński, recalls sitting at home, reading the Sunday edition of *Die Neue Freie Presse*, Vienna’s pre-eminent newspaper. Outside, his servants were preparing the carriage in which he would ride to Sunday Mass as usual. He noticed an article in the paper about the Archduke’s planned visit to Sarajevo. As he saw how many details of the Archduke’s itinerary were being made public, the thought was forming that there was something disturbing, even reckless, about the degree of risk the Archduke was accepting. Then the phone rang.

Throughout the highest circles of Austrian government, there was shock, but little mourning. The Archduke was a disagreeable sort. He did not have many friends. He was a stickler for protocol, but often complained of subordinates’ groveling, making it difficult to figure out exactly how he *did* want to be approached. He was, as one senior Austrian minister remarked, “a good hater,” meaning he never forgot a grievance or slight.

And so, among the elites in Vienna, the meaning of the assassination was less the loss of a friend and colleague and more the symbolic significance of the murder of the heir. Austria was an elderly, doddering monarchy, ruled over by an elderly, doddering Kaiser. Franz Ferdinand symbolized potential. He represented the prospects for Austria-Hungary to modernize and thrive in the new century. Now, suddenly, a single shadowy assassin had stolen the future of an entire Empire.

The relative lack of mourning was used against Austria at the time and by historians ever since to suggest that the Austrian response to the crime was driven more by Austria’s already well-established grievances against Serbia than by outrage over the assassination itself. In this view, the assassination was merely a convenient excuse to justify what the Dual Monarchy wanted to do anyway.

But the fact is, striking at the heir when the reigning Emperor is 83 years old and the Empire itself seems to be tottering has to be viewed as nothing less than an effort to bring down the Empire, the likability or the popularity of the heir notwithstanding. *Die Neue Freie Presse* would

describe the event as *ein Schicksalsschlag*, a formidable German construction that translates to something like “a stroke of fate,” or “a fateful blow,” although I’m not sure that either translation carries the weighty *angst* of the original German.

Among the common people of Vienna, the initial reaction was disbelief. Rumors were flying, but remember that in 1914, there is no radio or television or internet from which to get instant news bulletins. It was only Sunday evening, when the capital’s newspapers began circulating their extra editions, that the truth became inescapable.

These newspapers were printed with copious amounts of black ink. Big, black headlines. Black banners. Black outlines around the portraits of the deceased. By Monday, the basic story of the assassination, as I have just told it to you, was being reported in all the newspapers. The motorcade. The bombing. The rush to the town hall. The intemperate exchange with the mayor. The Archduke’s insistence on visiting the hospital. The fateful wrong turn. The Archduke’s dying plea for his wife to live, for the sake of the children.

Alongside that narrative were profiles of Franz Ferdinand as a devoted family man, which he certainly was, and sorrowful accounts of the now-orphaned children. Musings on how the Emperor, who in his 83 years had already experienced the suicide of his only son and the assassination of his wife, now had to cope with the loss of his nephew and heir. And gloomy speculation about what it all meant for the future of the Dual Monarchy.

[music: *Four Pieces*]

In Sarajevo, the investigation of the crime was underway before the end of the day. The authorities had two young men in custody. One was Gavrilo Princip, who, after firing his two fatal shots, had tried to turn his pistol on himself, but was wrestled to the ground and disarmed before he could. Then he tried taking the cyanide he had been issued, but again, the cyanide was old, and was no longer potent enough to kill. It only made him sick.

The police had also arrested that earlier assassin, the one who had thrown the bomb. Remember from last week’s episode that this fellow had also taken the cyanide and thrown himself in the river as well, but had survived both of these experiences. He was one of the two friends that Princip hung out with in Belgrade, and I haven’t troubled you with his name yet, but I suppose I’m going to have to now. He was Nedeljko Čabrinović, and like Princip, he was just 19 years old.

Although their attempts to kill themselves had failed, these two men had had it drilled into them during their training that they must never give any information connecting their actions to Serbia. And so, when they were questioned, both of them insisted they had planned their crimes on their own and their showing up on the Appel Quay on the same day was just a coincidence. When asked, Čabrinović said he had been given the bomb he had used by an anarchist in Belgrade, but he couldn’t remember the man’s name.

The next day, however, Čabrinović would concede that he and Princip had gotten to know each other in Belgrade and had planned the crime together, using weapons donated to them by Serb veterans of the Balkan Wars. Princip would go along with that, and the investigation might have ended right here, as the two assassins were telling the same story, a story that implicated no one else.

But as these interrogations went on, the Sarajevo police began rounding up known associates of the two detainees and known Serb nationalists in the city. One person picked up in these sweeps was Danilo Ilić, who, you'll recall, was the ringleader of this cell of assassins. He was arrested on Wednesday, July 1.

If you know anything about game theory, you've probably heard of The Prisoner's Dilemma. If not, you can read about it on Wikipedia. Here's an instance where game theory meets history. Danilo Ilić knows that these two young men from his cell have been arrested. He does not know what, if anything, they have told the police. He knows the police have arrested him, but does not know the reason, or whether or not it has anything to do with information received from Princip or Čabrinović. Okay, game theorists, what should Ilić do?

What Ilić actually did, was immediately offer the investigating judge a deal: I'll tell you everything I know in exchange for a promise that I will be spared the death penalty. The judge told him that he could not make such a promise, but noted that cooperation with the investigation was normally a mitigating factor when sentencing was determined.

And that was good enough for Ilić. He admitted to leading a cell of six assassins, and gave up the names of the four who were not in custody, along with his best guess as to where each of them was right now, along with the names of those who had supplied the weapons and helped Princip and his friends travel from Serbia into Sarajevo. Within ten days, all but one of the six would be in police custody. The last one managed to escape into Montenegro before they caught him.

And Ilić got the death penalty anyway, so all I can say about that is: Worst. Prisoner's Dilemma player. Ever.

The bodies of the Archduke and the Duchess returned to Vienna as they had come, aboard the dreadnought *Viribus Unitis* and then by train. Royalty across Europe got out their date books and blocked out time to attend the funeral in Vienna, but the Palace announced the funeral would be a private, family affair, and no foreign royals attended.

The funeral was held that Friday, July third, and even after her death, the Imperial Court insisted on disrespecting Sophia. She got a smaller coffin, which was placed on a lower dais. Soldiers were ordered not to salute. The Emperor did not attend. After the funeral, the caskets were transported to one of Ferdinand's castles to be buried, as per his instructions, since the Habsburgs would not allow Sophia to be buried in the family crypt. In a sort of spontaneous protest against this shabby treatment, many Austrian nobles formed an impromptu funeral

procession and followed behind the caskets as they were carried to the train station. Court officials even tried to bill the cost of the funeral to the Archduke's estate, which essentially means charging the funeral to the orphaned children, but there was an outcry, and they were forced to back off on that.

We'll have to stop there for today. Thanks for listening, and if you like *The History of the Twentieth Century*, like us on Facebook. Follow us on Twitter. Give us a rating and review at iTunes or Stitcher or wherever you're listening. Come to the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com, and leave a comment. And while you're there, I invite you to click the "donate" button if you have a few bucks, to help keep the podcast going. And thank you to Anne and David and Liam for donating already. Some of you have asked about a Patreon page; that's coming, I hope to have it ready soon.

Two weeks from now, we'll take a look at the Austrian reaction to the assassination of the Archduke and the Duchess, but before we get to that, I hope you'll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we take one final look around at the state of Europe in June 1914. It's "The Great Illusion," next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Nedeljko Čabrinović, the bomb thrower, was the only member of the conspiracy ever to express regret, and he publicly apologized to the children. Two of the children, Sophia and Max, wrote him a letter expressing their forgiveness to him for his role in the crime. Ernst, the youngest, refused to sign. Čabrinović would die in prison of tuberculosis just eighteen months later.

The children would be raised in Bohemia by a friend of the family until 1918, when the new state of Czechoslovakia would confiscate Habsburg properties. They would then move to Vienna. Sophia would marry an aristocrat. They had four children.

Maximilian and Ernst would also marry. Maximilian had six children, Ernst two. When Austria became a republic, Maximilian and Ernst would be advocates for the restoration of the monarchy. They would oppose unification with Germany, and as a result would both be sentenced to Dachau concentration camp for a time, and then to house arrest until the end of the Second World War.

Ernst, the youngest, passed away in 1954, at the age of 49. Maximilian, the middle child, died in 1962, at the age of 59. Sophia, the eldest, would survive until 1990, passing away at the age of 89.

[music: Closing Theme]