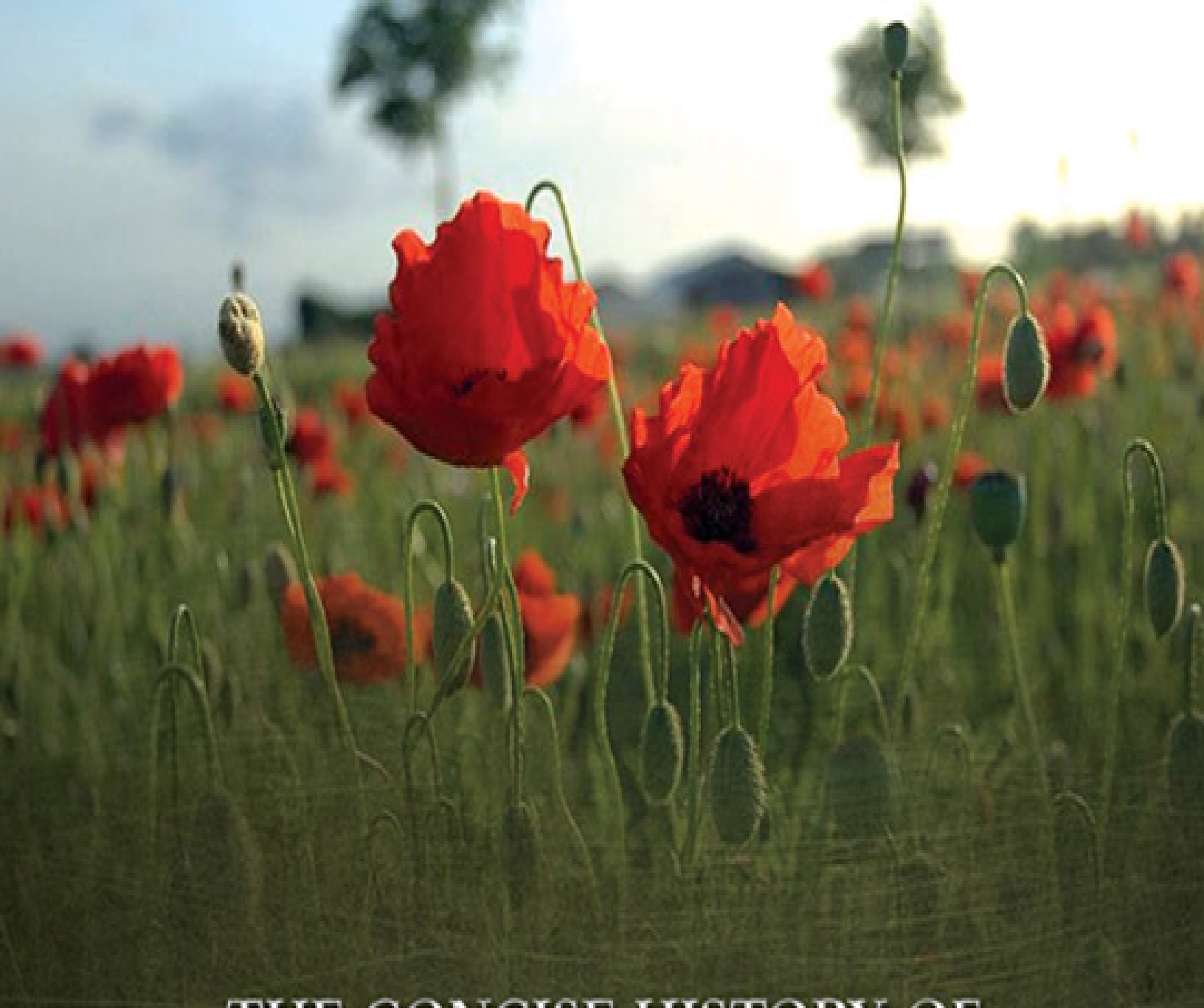

THE CONCISE HISTORY OF WWI

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Contents

Causes of war

War in Western Europe

Life in the Trenches

The World at War

Air and sea

Peace at what cost?

The Causes of War

It was triggered by two shots from an opportunistic assassin's pistol. It erupted into the most widely devastating war the world had ever seen, involving more than seventy million combatants and killing more than sixteen million people.

The Great War was like no other conflict the world had ever seen, or ever will see again. Of those seventy million military personnel, more than nine million never went home. Advances in the technology of war meant weapons were more deadly than ever, and their effects reached far beyond the battlefields. War spread to each corner of the planet as every one of the world's major powers entered the fray. And when the fighting was over, the 'war to end wars' had resulted in the dismantling of four empires and the redrawing of the map of Europe.

The one thing it didn't do was end war. Despite the formation of the League of Nations in a futile attempt to avert further conflicts, festering nationalism provoked by the Great War and the formation of new, deadly ideologies led eventually to the killing fields of the natural sequel: World War II.

To understand these consequences, and to unravel the tangle of ambitions, treaties and alliances that led inexorably to World War I, it's necessary to delve decades back into history. First, though, let us shed some light on the spark that ignited the powder keg: the assassination of

Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914.

A would-be assassin attached to the Black Hand secret military society fires at Franz Ferdinand, Archduke of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and his wife Sophie in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914. A further, successful assassination attempt was made later in the day.

German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck flanked by Nikolay Girs (left), Russian Foreign Minister, and Austria-Hungary Foreign Minister Count Gustav Kálnoky at Skierniewice, Poland on 15 September 1884. The occasion was a meeting of the Three Emperors League.

The assassin was Gavrilo Princip, a Serbian student who had been supplied with weapons by the Black Hand, a secret nationalist group opposed to the control of Bosnia and Herzegovina by the Empire. Franz Ferdinand had already survived one assassination attempt by colleagues of Princip when his car stopped on its way out of town and the little Serb stepped forward to seize his opportunity, shooting the Archduke and his wife Sophie. He did not know that his actions would set in train a world-changing chain of events.

After the initial shock of the killing, and as the European powers engaged in a frenzy of diplomatic manoeuvring, the

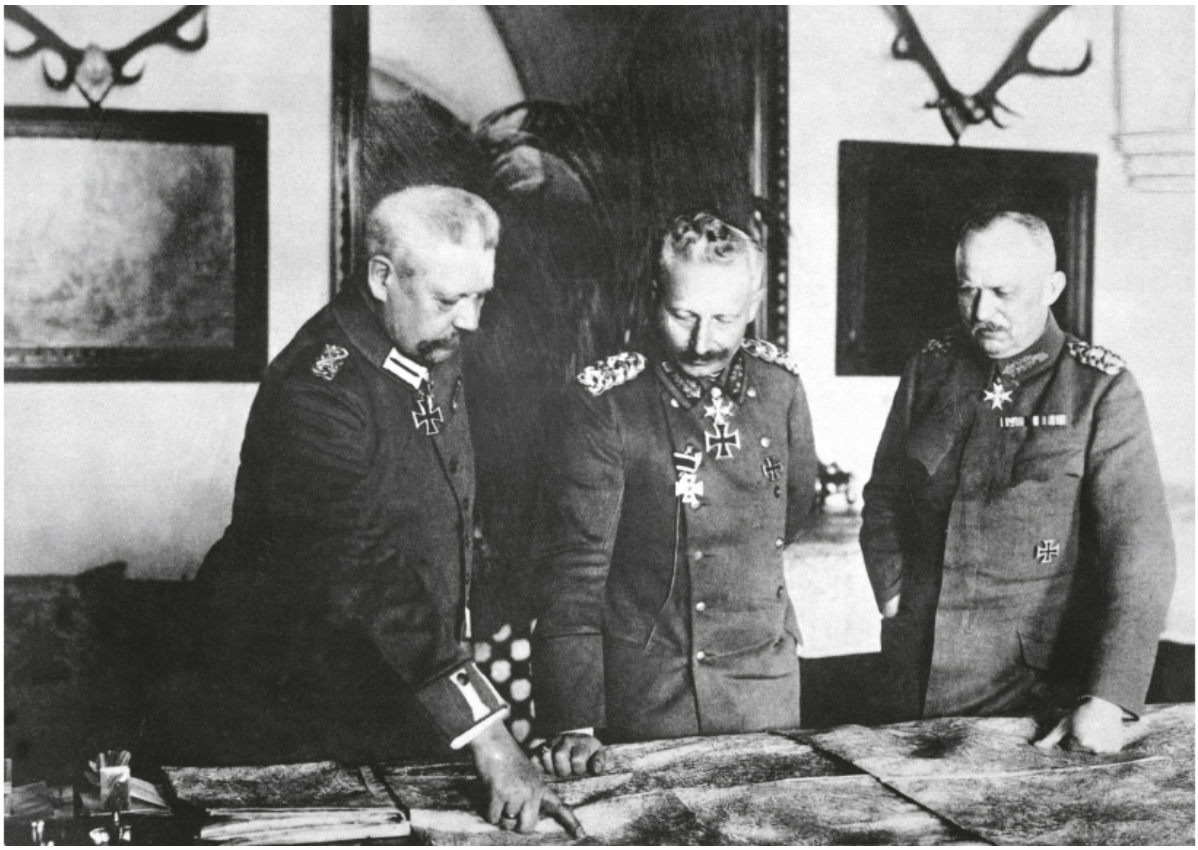
Austro-Hungarians took three weeks to decide how they should react. When it came, their decision was drastic: they would take the opportunity to crush the Serbian nationalist movement and stamp their authority on the Balkans. Declaring that Serbia was involved with the Black Hand, the Empire issued an ultimatum containing ten unacceptable demands that were intended to provoke a limited war. Serbia duly agreed to just eight of the demands, and Austria-Hungary declared war on 28 July 1914.

The chain reaction triggered by the Empire's declaration and the cobweb of alliances that had built up between the European powers over the preceding decades started to unwind. Russia was bound by treaty with Serbia to spring to its aid, and it announced a mobilisation of its vast military machine just one day after Austria's declaration. This was, however, a huge process that would take six weeks or more to complete. Germany, too, was bound by treaty to react: it was an ally of Austria-Hungary, and it lost no time in declaring war against Russia on August 1.

France had signed a treaty with Russia, so it found itself at war with Germany and its Austro-Hungarian allies. Germany, meanwhile, proved itself swifter to go to war than Russia, invading the neutral country of Belgium on August 3 as a way of reaching Paris by the shortest possible route. This action brought a reaction from Britain, which was under a moral obligation to defend France under the terms of a treaty, but was also obliged to defend Belgium under an older agreement. Faced with the German invasion, the King of the Belgians, Albert I, appealed to his British allies for aid, and it was swift in coming. A British ultimatum demanding the withdrawal of German troops from Belgium met with no response, and Britain, her colonies and dominions were thus at war with Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

The chain reaction continued. While United States President Woodrow Wilson declared his country neutral (a policy that would continue until 1917), Japan had a military agreement with Britain, and declared war on Germany on August 23. Austria-Hungary responded by declaring war on Japan two days later. Italy was an ally of both Germany and Austro-Hungary but was able to declare itself neutral until 1915, when it took the side of the Allies against its two former partners.

So it can be seen that what was intended to be a short, limited war waged by an Austro-Hungarian Empire eager to stamp its authority on Serbia could never have been any such thing. The tangled spider's web of alliances reaching from one end of Europe to the other did as much as any assassin's bullet to ensure the argument escalated from a local dispute into a global conflict. To understand how this complex state of affairs came about, it's necessary to look further back into the history of Europe.



Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany with his military commanders Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg (left) and General Erich Ludendorff in January 1917

The last German Emperor – Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany, a grandson of Queen Victoria of Great Britain, ruled from 1888 to 1918

We can start our research by focusing on the ambitions and actions of one man: Otto von Bismarck. This was a man who, as Prime Minister of Prussia and then Chancellor of the German Empire, figured large in European politics from the 1860s until his dismissal by Kaiser Wilhelm II in 1890. It was Bismarck who, by intrigue and warfare, succeeded in creating that Empire out of a loose collection of confederated German states.

His first step, in 1866, was to reduce Austria's influence as the most important of those states by drawing it into a war over disputed territory in the duchy of Holstein. The seven-week war, in which the Prussian military established its dominance, ended in the creation of the North German