

to the retroactive renaming of the Great War as the First World War, or World War I.

Wars are much easier to start than to control. The Great War resulted from long-simmering and extremely complex national rivalries and ethnic conflicts in central Europe that second-rate statesmen and war-hungry generals allowed to spin out of control. At the core of the tensions was the Austro-Hungarian Empire, a collection of eleven nationalities that was determined to stop the aggressive expansionism of its neighbor and long-standing enemy, Serbia, in the Balkan peninsula. At the same time, a recklessly militaristic Germany, led by Kaiser (Emperor) Wilhelm II, was eager to assert its dominance on the European continent against its old enemies, the Russian Empire and France, at the same time that it was expanding its navy to challenge the British Empire's supremacy on the seas.

War erupted just five weeks after Gavrilo Princip, a nineteen-year-old Serbian nationalist in Sarajevo (the capital of present-day Bosnia-Herzegovina), used a pistol to assassinate the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, 50-year-old Archduke Franz Ferdinand, and his pregnant wife Sophie, on June 28, 1914. It was a war that few wanted but nobody could stop.

To avenge the murders, Austria-Hungary, with Germany's approval, recklessly bullied and humiliated Serbia by demanding a say in its internal affairs. Serbia gave in to virtually all of the demands, but Austria-Hungary declared war anyway. In turn, Russia mobilized its army to defend Serbia, an action that triggered chain reactions by a complex system of European military alliances: the Triple Alliance, or **Central Powers** (Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy), and the Triple Entente, or **Allied Powers** (France, Great Britain, and Russia).

Germany declared war on Russia on August 1, 1914, and on France two days later. Germany, hoping to defeat France before Russia could mobilize its armies in the east, invaded neutral Belgium to get at France, murdering hundreds of civilians in the process. The "rape of Belgium" brought Great Britain into the war against Germany on August 4 on the **Western Front**, the line of fighting in northern France and Belgium. Despite being a member of the Triple Alliance, Italy at first declared its neutrality in the war and then joined the Allies in return for a promise of territory taken from Austria-Hungary. On the huge Eastern Front, Russian armies would clash with German and Austro-Hungarian forces as well as those of the Turkish (Ottoman) Empire. Within five weeks of the assassination in Sarajevo, a "great war" had erupted (it would not be called the First World War until the second one came along in 1939).

An Industrial War

What started as a local conflict in the Balkans became a catastrophic war that reshaped the world. By its end, in November 1918, more than forty nations had joined the fighting, in large part because most of the warring nations had far-flung colonies around the globe. The Great War was the first

Assassination in Sarajevo

Central Powers One of the two sides during the Great War, including Germany, Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, and Bulgaria.

Allied Powers Nations fighting the Central Powers during the Great War, including France, Great Britain, and Russia; later joined by Italy and, after Russia quit the war in 1917, the United States.

Western Front Contested frontier between the Central and Allied Powers that ran along northern France and across Belgium.