



**28.07.1914**

**The Austro-Hungarian Monarchy Declares War on Serbia**

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**F**rom 1867 to 1918, Hungary existed as a part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, a dualistic, bi-central state that functioned as a constitutional monarchy over which a common ruler reigned. Within this dual system, foreign and military affairs were conducted jointly, along with finance, the branch responsible for funding the previously mentioned areas. As a consequence of the dual monarchy's shared approach to foreign diplomacy, Hungary had no choice but to conform to any steps taken in the name of the Austrian emperor, including his decision to declare war on Serbia.



**D**uring the decades of peace preceding the outbreak of the Great War, significant changes took place in the arena of international politics. Following its conception in 1871, the unified German state quickly rose to become a leading force on the continent; within only a few decades, Germany's policies on armament and the acquisition of colonies posed a genuine threat to Great Britain's position. In an attempt to counterbalance Russia's ambitions regarding the Balkans, Germany, the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and Italy laid out the groundwork for the so-called 'Triple Alliance' in 1882. As a result, France and Great Britain established their own alliance in 1904, the 'Entente Cordiale' (frequently abbreviated as the 'Entente'), which Russia later joined in 1907. As the 20th century took its first breaths, these alliances had already established the formation of separate military blocs that would be put to the test by a series of diplomatic crises, such as the military occupation of Morocco, the annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina by the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, the Balkan wars, etc. Meanwhile, the arms race was taking even greater strides on both sides. The Monarchy's decision to enter into war was encouraged by Germany, which—given its significant accumulation of military arms—judged this moment to be the most suitable one for taking action.



**T**he casus belli which sparked the Great War was the assassination in Sarajevo of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir apparent to the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy's throne. The assassination was a consequence of certain Serb aspirations concerning the unification of Serb-occupied territories under their own, Serb leadership. Already home to a significant number of Southern Slavic nationalities (e.g. Slovene, Croat, Serb), this was not the first time for the multi-ethnic Monarchy to experience the threat posed by Serb ambitions. As a means of keeping these aims in check, in 1878 the Monarchy occupied Bosnia and Herzegovina with the consent of the Great Powers, an event followed by the region's later annexation in 1908. In retaliation, the nationalist organization known

..... as the Black Hand resolved to carry out the murder of the crown prince. In spite  
..... of numerous warning signs indicating a possible assassination attempt, Archduke  
..... Franz Ferdinand did not want to miss the opportunity of using his personal  
..... presence at an imperial event to reinforce his authority as inspector general of the  
..... military. On 28 June 1914, after weeks of careful preparation and with the support  
..... of secret, nationalist groups such as Young Bosnia, the Black Hand and  
..... Unification or Death, the Serb student, Gavrilo Princip, shot several rounds at the  
..... imperial couple from only a few steps away. While his wife, Duchess Sophie, died  
..... instantly, it took a total of ten minutes for Archduke Franz Ferdinand to die from  
..... wounds sustained to his neck.

**W**hen news of the assassination hit, emotions in both Vienna and Budapest ran high as public opinion immediately turned against Serbia and in support of war. In his autobiography, *The Life of a Man*, the avant-garde poet, Lajos Kassák, looked back at this ominous day from the perspective of his own, anti-war stance: ‘All the newspapers were filled with it, and in one cry the whole city genuinely reverberated with the news: “The heir to the throne and his wife were murdered in Sarajevo!” Like a herd of sheep before a storm, an enormous crowd of people stood huddled together, staring at one another emptily, their eyes blank of comprehension, their voices bleating out questions and confused replies. And then the blood-scented cry rang out from someone’s throat: “Long live the war!” Within seconds a sort of craze swept over everyone.’

**F**or the Monarchy, the assassination provided ample reason for attacking Serbia, yet war was still not declared until Germany’s assent had been given. In Hungary, the definitive political forces of the time supported the war, with the exception of Hungary’s prime minister, István Tisza, who warned against the possibility of an attack on Hungary by Romania or Russia. Tisza also had doubts concerning the Monarchy’s level of military preparedness. Under pressure exerted by Hungary’s allies, Kaiser Wilhelm II and Emperor Franz Joseph, Tisza was later convinced that Germany’s formidable military might provided sufficient guarantee of a victorious outcome and subsequently supported the war whole-heartedly. On 23 July, the Monarchy presented the Serb government a harshly worded directive demanding that Austro-Hungarian detectives be allowed to track down the murderers within Serbia’s borders. This ultimatum was rejected by the Serbs, primarily because it was perceived as a threat to the sovereignty of the Serb state, but also due to the fact that the Serbs were confident of receiving military support from Russia.

**O**n 28 July 1914, the Monarchy declared war on Serbia. Since the threat of armed conflict had already loomed over the chasm gaping between Europe’s leading powers, declaration of a war in the Balkans quickly evolved into an event sweeping first the continent, then the world. On the one side stood the Central Powers, Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, eventually joined by the Ottoman Empire and Bulgaria as the war progressed. They were opposed by the Entente, which later expanded to include Italy, Romania and the United States (USA) as well as a number of other, smaller nations. While the Entente possessed the advantage as far as its number of troop reserves and economic resources were concerned, Germany was a formidable force in representing the Central Powers. In spite of initial difficulties, the Monarchy also stood its ground.

**N**o matter which side they represented, all parties were confident that the war would soon be over. The German ruler, Kaiser Wilhelm II, even made the prediction that ‘by the time the leaves fall from the trees,

our soldiers will have returned home.’ This initial euphoria was soon replaced by doubts and apathy. As the Hungarian playwright and war correspondent, Menyhért Lengyel, wrote in January 1915: ‘People are bored by the war—they leaf through the papers, read the reports and continue to wait for it all to end... I just want to scream: “Have you any idea what is happening to you? If you only had any inkling of what you are doing! It’s you, you senseless people, who are killing one another! Do something already to put an end to it and keep it from ever happening again! People, come to your senses!” If we were all to scream this and a lot of other things inside our heads, just to ourselves, then maybe one fine day we would realize that we no longer recognise our own voices, maybe then there would not be nearly as much of this elemental outrage...we have come to accept it—that we, too, are just bored by it all.’ (Egyszerű gondolatok, Simple Thoughts) As the war continued to drag on, anti-war sentiment grew increasingly vigorous. The poets Endre Ady and Mihály Babits—whose works were published in one of the era’s most prominent journals, Nyugat (West)—also criticised the incessant carnage wreaked by the war and used their work to speak in defence of humanity’s value.

**I**n the beginning, the civilian population was not directly affected by the war. During the first year, no armed conflicts occurred within Hungary’s borders, therefore those left behind on the home front were only able to follow events via reports made by war correspondents. By the end of 1914, however, the swiftly advancing Russian forces could only be stopped at the price of huge losses. With the continuation of the war, inflation began to set in and civilians also had to struggle with supply shortages. Due to the Entente’s blockade, the Central Powers were completely cut off from the pulse of international economy, a circumstance that eventually paralysed national economies lacking access to goods from the colonies. To allay these problems, the state turned to war economy, resulting in the seizure of crops and raw materials and the introduction of ration cards for the procurement of many types of goods. Only those families capable of purchasing foodstuffs on the black market did not find themselves going without.

**F**ollowing Emperor Franz Joseph’s death in 1916, the new ruler, Karl IV, realised the Monarchy would most likely not survive a defeat and therefore made an attempt to withdraw from the war. Both rejected by the Entente and deflected via German intervention, this attempt to initiate peace talks failed, leaving the Monarchy in an even more subordinate position under Germany. Once the United States of America entered the fray, the war’s outcome was decided: the Central Powers, including Hungary, were defeated. On 17 October 1918, István Tisza dramatically announced the following in Hungary’s House of Representatives: ‘We have lost this war. We have not lost it in the sense that we would not be able to continue our tenacious and heroic defence, but we have indeed lost it in the sense that...any hope of ending the war in victory has disappeared.’ On 3 November 1918, Hungary laid down its arms not far from Padua, Italy.

**W**hile the war only brought a varying level of success, it still exacted an enormous amount of human sacrifice from both sides. Out of its population of 54 million, the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy mobilised a total of eight million troops throughout the war. From Hungary’s territories alone, four million soldiers were sent to the front, a number exceeding that provided by the Austrian Empire. The disproportionately large role played by Hungary arose as a result of the fact that pre-war Hungary was mainly agrarian in nature; an examination of the region’s states reveals that men enlisted for military service mostly originated from the peasant class. Hungarians were therefore forced to endure extreme military losses, a circumstance emphasised by the fact that a total of 700,000 deaths were recorded, while 750,000 were injured and a similarly large number was taken prisoner. The war’s most severe loss was endured by the Hungarian Army in battling Italian forces at the confluence of the Isonzo River and the Doberdò Plain, when Italian troops broke through the Austro-Hungarian line of defence at the dawn of 9 August 1916.

Numerous Hungarian soldiers found themselves in either Italian or Russian prisoner-of-war camps. Many attempting to return to Hungary from Russia were only to arrive home in the 1920s, after enduring arduous journeys made through Japan, China, or Persia.

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