

Francis Ferdinand Biography

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Biography

Francis Ferdinand (1863-1914) was archduke of Austria and heir apparent to the Austro-Hungarian throne. His assassination in 1914 was the immediate cause of World War I.

Born on Dec. 18, 1863, Francis Ferdinand (German, Franz Ferdinand) was the oldest son of Archduke Karl Ludwig, brother of Emperor Francis Joseph. He started a military career at the age of 15, serving in Hungary, Upper Austria, and Bohemia. The suicide of the crown prince Rudolf (1889) and his own father's death (1896) made him heir apparent.

Partly to cure a lung ailment and partly to enlarge his knowledge, Francis Ferdinand took several cruises during the 1890s, one of which brought him around the globe. Following his return he spent some time in Bohemia (1894-1895), but his illness soon forced him to spend several years on the Adriatic and the Mediterranean coasts. In the meantime he advanced in rank (becoming general of the cavalry in 1899), but this did not lessen his long-standing contempt for Viennese high society or his differences with the Emperor. He crowned his contempt by his morganatic marriage (July 1, 1900) to Countess Sophie Chotek.

Francis Ferdinand regarded the nationality question as the most serious problem of the empire. Initially he sought a solution in terms of "crownland federalism," with the historic borders more or less retained (except for Hungary). Later he favored the idea of the "United States of Greater Austria," which called for a thorough restructuring along ethnic lines. Simultaneously, Francis Ferdinand also toyed with the "trialistic" solution, which was to be achieved by granting the South Slavs an equal partnership with the Austrians and Hungarians in the empire. Finally, due largely to threatening Serbian irredentism, he returned to a modified dualism, calling for a special position for Bosnia-Herzegovina as the "Kingdom of Rama."

In foreign affairs Francis Ferdinand favored the pro-German orientation but also wished to restore understanding with Russia. This desire prevented him from advocating a policy of final solution against the growingly bellicose Serbia.

Francis Ferdinand's influence grew, and by 1913 he was inspector general of the combined armed forces. In this capacity on June 28, 1914, he visited Sarajevo and was assassinated by a group of Serbian conspirators. The fateful bullet, which unleashed the war, was fired by Gavrilo Princip.