

AIM: Why did the Balkan “powder keg” explode in 1914?

DO NOW: Using the projected image as an example, draw a powder keg in your binder.

Q1: Why do you think the Balkans were sometimes called the “powder keg” of Europe?

The Balkan peninsula is a mountainous region whose difficult terrain has created distinct, isolated ethnic groups and has discouraged much cultural unity. Prior to the 19th century, the Ottoman Empire ruled much of the Balkans. This non-European, Muslim rule was resented by the largely Slavic, Christian peoples of the Balkans, and both Austria and Russia planned on taking Balkan territories from the Ottomans. Thus, an intense rivalry developed in the area between Austria and Russia. Austria-Hungary had annexed Slovenia and Croatia by the 1800s, and in 1878 Austria occupied Bosnia-Herzegovina. But many of the Balkan ethnicities desired to become independent. In time, Greece, Serbia, Montenegro, Romania, Bulgaria, and Albania became independent nations. But their early history was violent; two Balkan wars were fought by these countries in 1912 and 1913, and boundary disputes kept tensions high amongst them all.

In 1908 Austria-Hungary annexed the region of Bosnia-Herzegovina from the Ottoman Empire. Bosnia was populated mainly by Slavic Muslims, Serbs, and Croats. The Serbs especially harbored a strong desire for independence. Serbia, Austria’s tiny neighbor, resented Austrian control of Bosnia and desired to join the Slavic Bosnians to its own nation.



Q2: What happened on June 28, 1914? How did the government of Austria-Hungary react?

On June 28, 1914, **Archduke Franz Ferdinand** (Austria-Hungary) visited the city of Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia, to inspect military training sessions. He was the heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. During the royal couple’s visit, they were shot and killed by Gavrilo Princip, a 19-year-old Serbian member of the Black Hand, a secret society committed to ridding Bosnia of Austrian rule.

Austria-Hungary blamed the government of Serbia for the murders. Backed by Germany’s offer of unlimited support, Austria-Hungary presented a set of demands to Serbia. One called for the dismissal from certain officials from the Serbian government. Serbia agreed to most of the demands and offered to have others settled by an international conference.



Q3: How did the Balkan crisis quickly escalate into a larger war?

Austria, however, was in no mood to negotiate. The nation's leaders, it seemed, had already settled on war. On July 28, Austria rejected Serbia's offer and declared war on Serbia. That same day, Russia, an ally of Serbia with its largely Slavic population, took action. Russian leaders ordered the mobilization of troops toward the Austrian border. Leaders all over Europe suddenly took notice. The British foreign minister, the Italian government, and even Kaiser Wilhelm himself urged Austria and Russia to negotiate. But it was too late. The machinery of war had been set in motion. Within days, Germany declared war on both Russia and France. When German forces moved through neutral Belgium to reach France, Britain declared war on Germany on August 4, 1914.



Q4: What were the two opposing sides in World War I?

The two opposing sides in World War I were the Central Powers and the Allied Powers. The **Central Powers** were Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire (later joined by Bulgaria). On the other side were the **Allied Powers**: Britain, France, and Russia. Italy at first remained neutral, but it eventually joined the Allies, in hope of obtaining Italian-speaking areas in Austria-Hungary. Other nations, including the United States, also joined the Allies later.

