

# The tipping point

As the hundredth anniversary of the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Princess Sophie approaches, **MICHAEL IVORY** takes a look at two fascinating accounts of their lives and their deaths

**T**he imminence of the hundredth anniversary of the outbreak of World War I has already been marked by a flurry of controversy in the media as interested parties advance their arguments about its causes and effects and snipe at their opponents.

However, there seem to be no doubts about the starting signal for the conflict: the assassination on June 28, 1914, of Habsburg Archduke Franz Ferdinand as he was driven through the streets of Sarajevo, capital of Austria-Hungary's recently annexed province of Bosnia.

Prior to 1992 (when they were destroyed), most visitors to the city will have seen the concrete footprints set into the pavement at the corner of what in 1914 were the Franz Joseph Strasse and the Appelkai; it was from this spot that the teenage Bosnian Serb assassin Gavrilo Princip fired his revolver. He mortally wounded both the heir to the Habsburg throne and his wife Sophie, setting off the chain of events with which every school-boy is, or at least was familiar: diplomatic notes, consultations with allies, ultimatums, mobilisations, frontier violations, then outright war.

**T**he conventional view used to be that Franz Ferdinand had it coming to him. The oyster-eyed, ridiculously moustached representative of a tottering, outdated yet still oppressive dynasty ruling over a "prison of the nations", notoriously bad-tempered and generally unloved, a famous slaughterer of wild animals, he and his like were seen to stand in the way of the democratic development of the peoples of Austria-Hungary.

And gallant little Serbia was fully justified in sending its gang of young but not very well trained marksmen to put paid to him. As history continues with its unending task of revision, this kind of interpretation has naturally been modified.

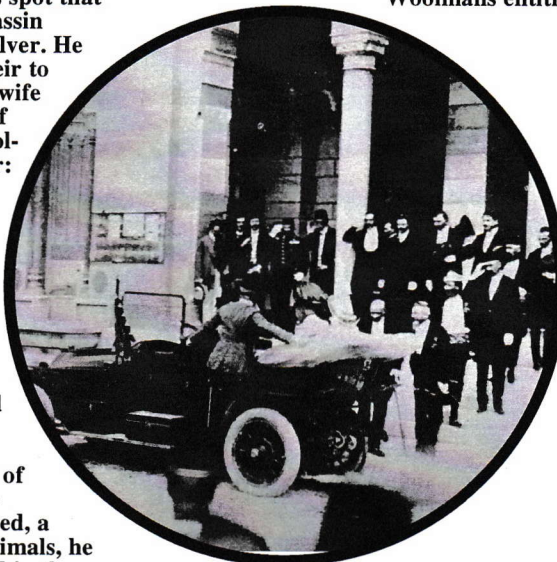
Christopher Clark's blockbusting account of the days leading up to the start of hostilities (*The Sleepwalkers: how Europe went to war in 1914*. Penguin 2013) spreads responsibility around fairly evenly, designating Serbia as something of a terrorist state and Austria as a Great Power with justifiable interests to be respected. The negative image of the Archduke has been modified too, not least by his portrayal in a well-received book co-written by Greg King and Sue Woolmans entitled

*Archduke*



schemes (in which it has to be said, truly democratic aspirations would have played little part) would almost certainly have foundered on Hungarian intransigence.

**K**ing and Woolmans deal admirably with all this, but their book is most fascinating in its emphasis on the personal rather than the political, on Franz Ferdinand as, however improbably, a romantic hero in his pursuit of true love, then as a devoted family man. The story of his single-minded wooing of Countess Sophie Chotek is well known, but here it is described in fascinating detail, as are the tricks and



The Assassination of the Archduke: Sarajevo 1914 and the murder that changed the world. (Greg King, Sue Woolmans. MacMillan 2013.)

While acknowledging that Franz Ferdinand was not superficially the most attractive of characters, they stress his more positive qualities: his emergence from debilitating illness, his energy and extreme conscientiousness allied to an overarching concern for the future of the empire. This concern led him to serious consideration of proposals to radically alter its structure once on the throne, perhaps to create a Triple or even Quadruple monarchy. In this plan the Bohemian kingdom and some sort of South Slav entity would counterbalance the excess of Hungarian power and privilege characteristic of the Dual (k.u.k. – Imperial and Royal) Monarchy. Such





stratagems of the moribund court in its attempt to deter him from marrying a consort of such lowly rank. When it failed the court subjected the couple to constant petty humiliations and reminders of her inferior status.

Franz Ferdinand had never wanted to undertake the 1914 trip to Bosnia, but the fact that Sophie was for once able to accompany him helped reconcile him to what was an unwelcome duty.

Sophie, rather than Franz Ferdinand, was the subject of a fascinating talk given by co-author Sue Woolmans at the Czech Embassy in March this year. Entitled "Sarajevo's Other Victim" it brought this Bohemian noblewoman vividly to life, as far as is possible, given the sad loss of most of her personal correspondence.

She was depicted as a descendant of an ancient Czech family of far

more venerable vintage than the Habsburgs, making her shunning by the Imperial court even more unfathomable. Many of her forefathers were faithful and eminent servants of the dynasty, among them Bohemian Chancellors, archbishops, ambassadors, and the builders of two of the most distinctive "Great Houses" of Bohemia, Veltrusy and Kačina, and perhaps most memorably, Karel Chotek (1783-1868), the distinguished "Improver" of Prague, after whom the Chotkové sady are named.

Sophie's calm and patience were exemplary, helping her to bear the snubs and insults meted out to her, and, more positively, to be a constant, soothing presence in the life of her irascible husband.

Their domestic life seems to have been idyllic, particularly at their summer residence at the castle of Konopiště, where Franz Ferdinand revelled in domestic bliss and the couple's happiest hours were spent in the company of their three beloved children.

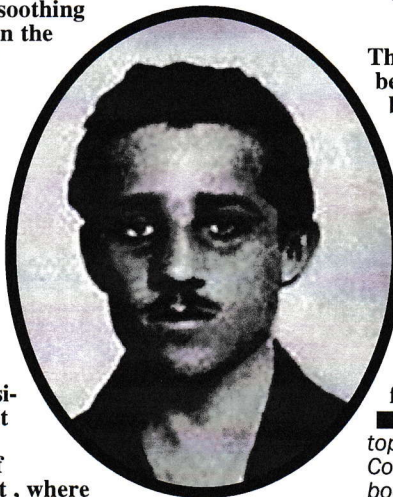
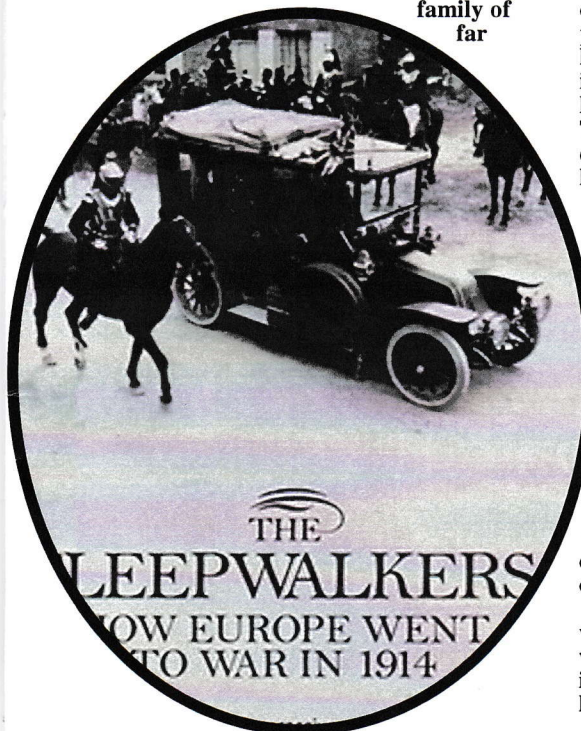
Sophie's devotion and steadfastness was evident in the last minutes of her life, when she overrode his warnings and insisted on accompanying him on that last fateful drive to their deaths.



The Assassination of the Archduke can be recommended as almost certainly the best-researched account of the lives of Franz Ferdinand and Sophie Chotek.

The book also deals with the subsequent fate of their children, two of whom, Max and Ernst, spent time in Nazi concentration camps. It evokes the ambience of the family residences, principally Konopiště but also Velké Bzerno and Schloss Artstetten, the latter the last resting place of Franz Ferdinand and Sophie and still in the possession of the family.

■ **Pictures:** facing page clockwise from top, Archduke Franz Ferdinand and Countess Sophie Chotek; cover for the book *The Assassination of the Archduke: Sarajevo 1914 and the murder that changed the world* by Greg King and Sue Woolmans; Archduke Franz Ferdinand and Sophie's wedding; middle getting into their car in Sarajevo on June 28 1914. This page clockwise from top: elephant hunter Franz Ferdinand; an early image of the Bosnian Serb assassin Gavrilo Princip; cover for Christopher Clark's book *The Sleepwalkers: how Europe went to war in 1914*



## Konopiště remembers

by Maria Hughes

And so they've killed our Ferdinand," said the charwoman to Mr Švejk. "Which Ferdinand, Mrs Müller?" he asked. "I know two Ferdinands. One is a messenger at Průša's, the chemists, and the other is Ferdinand Kokoška who collects dog manure. Neither of them is any loss."

"Oh no, sir, it's His Imperial Highness, the Archduke Ferdinand, from Konopiště."

While Mr Švejk might not have been as switched on as Mrs Müller, these memorable opening lines of Jaroslav Hašek's renowned novel *The Good Soldier Švejk* show the close association that Franz Ferdinand and his family had with the Bohemian castle of Konopiště which he bought in 1887 and extensively renovated.

They stayed there regularly; their last visitor was Kaiser Wilhelm II, just before Franz Ferdinand and Sophie left for Bosnia in June 1914.

The Archduke organised large hunts there. A veritable forest of antlers and other hunting trophies are on display together with the location of each shoot, indicating that big game

hunting overseas also featured as his pastime.

Franz Ferdinand's collection of woodcarvings, paintings and other artefacts connected to the cult of St George are displayed in the former Orangery. Edward VII was also an avid collector. A major collection of historic arms and weapons have been displayed at Konopiště since 1904.

Today the castle offers guided tours to visitors (see [www.zamek-konopiste.cz](http://www.zamek-konopiste.cz)) of which tour three is exceptional. It offers a true insight into how Franz Ferdinand and his family lived in their private quarters, still furnished as they were originally with personal touches everywhere.

Because of the nature of the exhibits, small groups of eight people only can be accommodated, so book as soon as you arrive. Tours are available in English. The castle is closed on Mondays.

To mark the centenary of Franz Ferdinand's death, there is a special exhibition "United in life and death" and on June

28, the anniversary of the assassination, a memorial mass will be held in the presence of Cardinal Duka.

There is a restaurant below the castle called Stará Myslivna ([www.staramyslivna.com](http://www.staramyslivna.com)) where you can sample beers from the local brewery bought by Franz Ferdinand, including one called 'sedm kulí' (seven bullets), commemorating his assassination. The Ferdinand brewery ([www.pivovarferdinand.cz](http://www.pivovarferdinand.cz)) is on the outskirts of the nearby town of Benešov; it also operates two pub restaurants in Prague.

There is a regular train service from Prague's main railway station to Benešov; journey time just over one hour by the local stopping train or less by the occasional express train. From the station, cross the bridge over the tracks and follow the road out of town (Nádražní, then Konopišťská) to the edge of the park on the left then follow a path through the grounds to the castle, a pleasant 30-minute walk.

Jaroslav Hašek, *The Good Soldier Švejk* and his *Fortunes in the World War*, translated by Cecil Parrott, Penguin 1974.