

Gavrilo Princip's Legacy Still Contested

Author: [Benjamin Beasley-Murray](#)

Serb assassin of an Austrian archduke has been appropriated to back more recent historical narratives.

One hundred years on, Gavrilo Princip, the man who shot Archduke Franz Ferdinand, is as contentious a figure as ever, and communities in Bosnia and Serbia are unable to agree how the event – and the assassin himself – should be remembered.

Just memorialising the act that lit the touchpaper for the First World War is proving hugely divisive.

Commemorations this weekend in the Bosnian capital Sarajevo, the scene of the assassination on June 28, 1914, are being boycotted by Serb leaders who had earlier agreed to attend. Instead, an alternative event is to be held in the predominantly Serb-populated Republika Srpska, one of the two administrative entities that make up Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The centrepiece of the Sarajevo event, a concert by the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, due to be broadcast by Eurovision on June 28, might not even go ahead, according to an international diplomat in Sarajevo.

Speaking on condition of anonymity, he said two obstacles stood in the way. First, the venue is the city hall, which was destroyed by incendiary shells in August 1992 during the siege and has been newly restored – but it might not even be structurally ready. “At the moment, only the atrium has been properly finished,” the diplomat said, “so the chances of the event going ahead there are low.”

As of the morning of June 26, the building was still ringed with fencing with a sign saying it was closed due to ongoing construction.

Second, the diplomat said, because the building is state property, permission to use it needs an official signature. “Given that the minister of civil affairs, who is ultimately responsible for granting the permit, is a Serb, how likely is he to do so in time for the weekend? For a concert by Austrians in the building in Sarajevo where Archduke Ferdinand was visiting literally minutes before he was killed? Where there is a plaque on the exterior referring to the ‘Serb criminals’ who destroyed the library?”

The final lines of the plaque refer to the destruction of the library the building housed in 1992, noting that two million books, periodicals and documents “vanished in the flames”.

“Do not forget. Remember and warn!” it says.

Republika Srpska’s president Milorad Dodik, who had originally been expected to attend the planned event, announced earlier this year that no representatives from the entity would be present.

Two weeks ago, Serbia’s prime minister Aleksandar Vucic said he would not be taking part, and claimed that what was meant to be a joint commemoration had been hijacked by the Bosniak Federation, Bosnia’s other entity. Serbian president Tomislav Nikolic said at the same time that he could not attend an event that amounted to an “accusation” against his people. And Nebojsa Radmanovic, the Serb member of the tripartite Bosnian Presidency, declined his invitation in a letter to Austrian president Heinz Fischer, stating that the Sarajevo city government had abused the commemoration and “subordinated its meaning to the context of the 1990s civil war in Bosnia and Herzegovina”.

So instead, Serb officials plan to gather in East New Sarajevo – which lies within Republika Srpska – where they will unveil a statue of Princip.

Assuming that the concert goes ahead – the Office of the High Representative could presumably intervene to clear the bureaucratic obstacles – it will be loaded with significance. Second on the Austrian orchestra’s list for the evening, following the Bosnian national anthem, is Haydn’s Third String Quartet, nicknamed the “Emperor” because it borrows from “Gott erhalte Franz den Kaiser” (“God save Emperor Francis”), another Haydn piece that later became Austro-Hungary’s national anthem.

PRINCIP’S ROLE RESHAPED AFTER THE FACT

Long after his death, Princip’s legacy is still disputed. Celebrated as a hero by Serbs, he is regarded as a terrorist by many Bosnian Muslims.

Over the years, he has been depicted as a Serb expansionist, an anti-imperialist and a pan-Yugoslav

idealist, and his motivations ascribed variously to upholding or undermining Serbian statehood, a desire to unite the southern Slavs, or a bid to shake Bosnia free of its Austro-Hungarian shackles.

“People are owned by history,” says Branislav, 48, an anthropologist whom I meet for coffee on a bright morning in Pancevo, a city nestled on the north of the Danube, near Serbia’s capital Belgrade. “History shapes and reshapes people, and our interpretation of them changes all the time.”

Branislav’s piercing stare from over the rim of his coffee-cup is reminiscent of the photos of Princip I had been looking at. He seems to look two inches behind me as he speaks, his eyes glinting beneath dark eyebrows and a sweep of jet black hair.

It is no surprise, then, that his surname is Princip and that he is a great-nephew of Gavrilo. Perhaps it is only my imagination, but he appears to have the same jawline and nose as his great-uncle.

Branislav’s brother Sasha, 51, joins us under the shade of a parasol. Living in Canada where he works as an engineer, he is visiting Serbia on holiday. Like Sasha, he is aware that for many people, Gavrilo Princip is a blank canvas on which they paint their own picture of him.

“In my mind he was just a young guy trying to change the world for the better,” Sasha says, “but people are trying to use him. There are Serbs who try to use him as an Orthodox Serb.”

Sasha is referring to the fact that many nationalist Serbs have adopted Princip as their poster-boy, the very image of a selfless young man who they say acted to better the lot of Serbs as an ethnic group.

According to this narrative, Princip was trying to unite the homelands of Orthodox Serbs across Serbia and Bosnia when he assassinated the Archduke. This project – the creation of a Greater Serbia – would foreshadow the terrible acts committed during the Bosnian war of the 1990s.

And so it was that General Ratko Mladic, who stands accused of war crimes in The Hague, began a pre-trial hearing in 2012 by saying he wanted to offer up some words about the “knight” Gavrilo Princip. The judge refused, but Mladic went on regardless, prompting the court to switch his microphone off.

“Gavrilo Princip gave his life for his people just as I did,” the defendant shouted as he hammered the table with his fists. Mladic said that in 1914 and 80 years later, the Bosnian Serbs were “under blockade”.

Judge Alphons Orie explained to Mladic, “The nation or the country are not in the dock, but you as an individual.”

The problem with Mladic’s account is that it robs Princip of his individuality and historical context, and turns him into a cipher responsible for anything done by any Serb.

Many would say that reducing Princip’s motives to monoethnic nationalism misses the point entirely. Living under Austro-Hungarian rule, he was driven by anti-imperialist zeal, and wanted the Balkan Slavs, whether Serb or not, to live unoccupied by great powers.

“Gavrilo was acting as somebody who wanted an end to the occupation of Bosnia by the Austro-Hungarians and who wanted the southern Slavs to live together,” says Sasha.

HISTORICAL ACCOUNTS MODIFIED TO SUIT THOSE IN POWER

Dubravka Stojanovic, a professor of history at Belgrade University, says that under successive regimes, the reputations of Princip and his co-conspirators – who, she reminds me, included a Croat and two Muslims – have been revised to suit whichever historical view is in vogue.

“In socialist Yugoslavia, they were celebrated as socialist heroes, as freedom fighters for the workers and for the oppressed,” she says. “It was that socialist component that was emphasised. And it wasn’t until [post-socialist leader Slobodan] Milosevic that suddenly, for the first time, Princip becomes a Serbian national hero rather than a Yugoslav. Every regime has misused him – in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia it was conveniently forgotten that he was a left-wing anarchist. Under socialism, it was forgotten that he was a nationalist, albeit a Yugoslav. And then with Milosevic, Princip becomes – wrongly – a Serbian nationalist. Then in the 1990s, he starts to be seen as the father of the fight for Republika Srpska in Bosnia.”

She concludes, “These changes of understanding show that you can do whatever you like with history. History is always about the present rather than the past.”

The picture painted by Sasha and Branislav is one of a romantic idealist.

“He was a poet,” says Sasha. “He was in touch with [Nobel prizewinning Croat writer] Ivo Andric, with whom he shared thoughts about poetry. He destroyed all his poetry before he carried out the plot, however.”

Princip died in prison of tuberculosis in April 1918 in Terezín, now in the Czech Republic – he had been

spared the death penalty because he was not yet 20 when he carried out the assassination. Denied books or paper, he carved into the stone wall of his cell: "Our shadows will walk through Vienna, stroll around the court and frighten the gentry."

I ask Sasha whether he believes his great-uncle would have thought that the downfall of the Austro-Hungarian empire and the establishment of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was worth the enormous cost in human lives.

"He would," Sasha answered, "but it depends on the time-frame – were he to have seen Yugoslavia in the decades after World War I, he would have said it was worth it. But looking further, if he were to know what happened to Yugoslavia, how it met its end, he would definitely say it was not worth it."

MONUMENTAL CHANGES

Striking out on a hired bicycle in Sarajevo, I ask a pedestrian for directions to Principov Most – Princip Bridge. I am politely shown the way, but reminded that the bridge is called Latinska Cuprija. It reverted to its old name – Latin Bridge – in 1992 with the onset of hostilities.

Cycling on, I am sure I'll spot the bridge from some distance. Surely there will be some large monument to mark the site of the most famous event in Sarajevo's history. But no, there is only a very missable inscription on the side of a nearby building, once a café and now the city museum, outside which Princip pulled the trigger.

That has since changed – the museum now has large pictures of Princip and the archduke on its front façade, put there in time for the anniversary.

Few historical locations can have undergone so many different rememberings as this one, at the intersection of two roads and a bridge. In the wake of the assassination, the Austrians erected a memorial to Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie at the site, consisting of two enormous columns with medallions and a marble plaque. It marked the memory of the royal couple who died "martyrs' deaths by a treasonous hand".

The columns were pulled down with the establishment of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1918, and a metal plate embedded in the road to mark where the archduke's car was fired on disappeared, as well. No replacement was put in place for 12 years, because regicide – Franz Ferdinand was heir to the throne – is not something monarchies tend to publicly celebrate. But in 1930 a monument, officially funded by private citizens but with a nod and a wink from the government, was put up to celebrate Princip, who "proclaimed freedom on St Vitus Day".

In 1941, the plaque was torn down by invading Nazi forces and handed to Adolf Hitler as birthday present. At around the same time, their allies in the Croatian Ustase brought in Princip's younger brother, grandfather to Branislav and Sasha. A doctor called Nikola Princip, he was executed, they say, for no other reason than the family connection.

As in a children's party game, a plaque appeared in 1945, again in Cyrillic letters but this time with a Partisan star. This was "a symbol of eternal gratitude to Gavrilo Princip and his comrades, to fighters against the Germanic conquerors".

When Bosnian Serb forces began shelling Sarajevo in April 1992, the plaque swiftly came down.

Shoepprints – actually dating only to 1953 – that were embedded in the pavement to show where Gavrilo stood at the fatal moment also disappeared.

In 2004, a bilingual inscription was put in place stating, now in Latin script, simply that this was the spot where Princip assassinated the Archduke and his wife.

For many Serbs, that is not enough. Emir Kusturica, a Sarajevo-born Serbian filmmaker who has twice won the Palme d'Or at Cannes, is adamant that Princip should be publicly acknowledged as a hero.

This April, he unveiled a statue to Princip in the Serbian town of Tovarisevo. Unveiling the statue in the town centre, an emotional Kusturica kissed its cheek.

"If we cannot agree on this one thing, if Serbs and Muslims cannot agree on the simple fact that Princip was a freedom fighter, we cannot agree on anything," Kusturica told me in a telephone interview. "I have tried to find just one thing to agree on, but they cannot. Bosnia was the last colony in Europe. Princip was an anti-colonial revolutionary and his shot was the beginning of freedom."

Kusturica is orchestrating an alternative celebration on June 28 in Andricgrad, his theme-park-like construction in Visegrad, Republika Srpska. A host of Serb dignitaries are expected to attend.

A large mosaic mural will be unveiled dedicated to Princip and Mlada Bosna (Young Bosnia), the

revolutionary group he was part of.

“We will make a performance, reconstructing the events of the day,” says Kusturica. “And there will be a 35-minute alternative trial of Princip.”

Kusturica believes that Princip’s trial for treason was illegitimate. “The Austro-Hungarian empire was not the sovereign power of Bosnia. Their law was not applicable and the trial was illegal,” he says.

The filmmaker says that on June 28, he will launch a petition that he hopes will win support all across Bosnia for a “retrial” to be held in Sarajevo. He hopes this will vindicate those who carried out “the most amateur assassination in the history of the world”.

POLITICAL CONTROVERSY AS “CONTINUATION OF WAR”

In the official Bosnian Serb ceremony, one statue to Princip will be unveiled in a park in East New Sarajevo on June 28. When plans for the monument were announced this spring, officials in Belgrade said another statue of Princip would go up, at the top of Kalemegdan, the historic fortress in the Serbian capital, in time for the centenary. This project seems to have been dropped, though.

It is possible the Serbian government is reluctant to obstruct its growing relationship with the European Union by marking so publicly its pride in a figure viewed as the originator of the continent’s Great War. Having roads, schools and hospitals named after Princip is one thing, but having him standing proud on the capital’s skyline might be too provocative.

Provocation is all too often the norm in Bosnia, whose two entities, Republika Srpska and the Federation, grind against each other as much as they interlock.

“The Serbs in Bosnia who are wanting to glorify Princip have the intention of provoking a fresh crisis,” says historian Stojanovic. “They are wanting to show that they are still on the Serbian side, that they are still fighting the war of the 1990s.”

Stojanovic cites the dictum of Prussian general and military thinker Carl von Clausewitz that “war is the continuation of politics by other means.”

“This may be true,” says Stojanovic, “but we can see the other side of this in Bosnia. There, politics is the continuation of war by other means.”

Benjamin Beasley-Murray is a freelance journalist based in London and Belgrade.

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