

Read-Aloud Script: the Sarajevo Assassination That Sparked World War I

Prologue:

Characters:

Narrator 1

Narrator 2

Narrator 1: If a reporter in early 1914 had posed the question “What is the most dangerous ‘hot spot’ in the world today?”, any well informed European in early 1914 would have said “the Balkan peninsula,” and most would have specifically said “Bosnia.”

Narrator 2: In fact, Bosnia was seething with revolutionary discontent. At the center of it all was a group of revolutionary teenagers called Young Bosnia, a movement that had spread throughout the high schools of the region. What was Young Bosnia? What were the goals of the movement? And why were many people in Bosnia so dissatisfied with the current state of affairs that they were willing to sacrifice their lives and even the stability of Europe to bring about change?

Narrator 1: While we are answering these questions today and reenacting the assassination, we need to consider whether the teenagers who started World War I were terrorists or freedom fighters, emotionally unbalanced young people or national heroes.

Narrator 2: Also, we might be thinking about how this one act resulted in a world war.

Act 1: The Background

Scene 1: Balkan Background

Setting: Belgrade, Serbia, spring 1914

Characters:

Thomas (male): a foreign correspondent from England working for the *London Times*

Bogdana (female): a young Serbian woman, a teacher at a girls’ high school in Belgrade

Lazar (male): Bogdana’s husband, a newspaper reporter from Serbia

Thomas: Thank you so much for inviting me for dinner tonight. It was so wonderful to have Serbian home cooking and not the restaurant fare that I have been eating.

Bogdana: It was wonderful having you here. There have been a lot of reporters coming through here – because of the recent wars of 1912 and 1913. But there are not many like you, who try to understand the complexity of the situation here in the Balkans.

Thomas: So why do you think that Serbia is always at the center of the controversy?

Lazar: Well, a lot of it comes from our history and our powerful sense of identity. I mean, Serbia has always led the resistance to the Ottoman Empire. In 1389 we Serbs led the coalition of Balkan states that fought the Ottoman expansion. I myself am named after the famous Serbian king who died fighting at the great battle of Kosovo on June 28, 1389.

Thomas: Oh yes, I've heard that June 28 – 'Vidovdan,' isn't that what you call it? – is important to Serbs, but I don't really understand why.

Bogdana: Well, to understand that, you'd have to understand Serbian epic poetry – and our epic poetry is very impressive; even the great German writer, Goethe, said so. Every Serb grows up knowing the stories. On June 28, 1389, St. Vitus' Day (Vidovdan), the Balkan armies set out to defend their freedom and their Christian faith against the Ottoman Turkish, Muslim invaders. According to legend, King Lazar, the Serbian ruler who led the Balkan forces, received a message from God. He was given the choice between winning the battle and gaining a great earthly kingdom or else doing God's will, achieving a heavenly kingdom, but losing the battle.

Thomas: (*chuckling*) I wouldn't want THAT kind of choice! But I bet I know where this story is going.

Bogdana: You're right. Lazar chose the heavenly kingdom, so although the Serbian forces fought incredibly bravely, they were defeated, and Tsar Lazar was killed.

Lazar: The Serbs lived for centuries under Ottoman rule. However, they always kept their language, their religion, and their special sense of having defended Europe against the Muslim invaders. Of course, we were the first of the Balkan peoples to revolt against the Turks – in 1804.

Thomas: But I thought that Greece got its independence before Serbia.

Lazar: It did. But that was because the Great Powers made the decisions, not the local people. However, Serbia became autonomous – and then fully independent.

Thomas: So why is Serbia involved in so many wars?

Bogdana: This is the age of nationalism! The idea is that every group of people should have their own country – and every country should include all (or most) of that group of people. So the problem is that lots of Serbs live outside of Serbia. There is little Montenegro, which is independent and fiercely proud of it – Montenegrins are Serbs by language and culture. Also, there are many Serbs under Ottoman and Austrian rule (in Bosnia, Croatia, Kosovo, and other areas). The Ottoman Empire and Austro-Hungarian Empire, as multi-national empires ("prisons of nations") are so outdated in the 20th century!

Thomas: Hmm. I know that there have been frequent revolts in these empires, and the revolts often pull Serbia into war.

Lazar: And now there is the ‘Yugoslav’ movement, mostly among the educated people.

Thomas: I’ve heard mention of that a lot. Tell me what it means to you.

Lazar: ‘Yugoslav’ means ‘South Slav.’ The idea is that all South Slavs (Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, all the peoples of Bosnia, Macedonians, Bulgarians) make up one nation and should be united into one big, powerful state.

Thomas: I can see that this idea would be revolutionary – you’d have to destroy Austria-Hungary as well as get the other great powers’ approval to create a Yugoslav state.

Bogdana: And yet, we’ve had some successes of late. In the Balkan Wars of the past few years, Serbia and some other Balkan countries have driven the Ottomans out of Europe. Serbia is a lot bigger now than it was just a few years ago; now we have Kosovo and a big part of Macedonia.

Thomas: And the next step?

Lazar: Bosnia. Then, maybe one day, Croatia, Slovenia, Bulgaria...But first, Bosnia.

Thomas: I don’t know. Defeating the Ottoman Empire is one thing, but threatening Austria – one of the Great Powers??? It seems like a big war could come out of that.

Lazar: Maybe it’s a chance we’ll have to take.

Scene 2: The European Alliance System

Setting: a U.S. high school classroom, modern times

Characters:

Teacher

8 students – **Note:** give each student one of the alliance system or country signs

Teacher: (*standing at the front of the room*) Let’s look at Great Power relations and how it led to World War I. First of all, what were the five great powers of Europe?

Student #1: (*holding up his/her sign*) England – or should I say “Great Britain”?

Student #2: (*holding up his/her sign*) Germany!

Student #3: (*holding up his/her sign*) Russia!

Student #4: (*holding up his/her sign*) Don't forget France.

Student #5: (*holding up his/her sign*) Italy.

Student #6: No, Italy's not all THAT powerful. Not enough to make the top five. (*holding up his/her sign*) Austria-Hungary is the fifth one!

Student #7: What about the United States? We're a great power, aren't we?

Student #8: We weren't a great power in 1914. Then, we were just a *potential* great power, not one that people expected to be a really important country.

Teacher: These powers were in conflict with each other for a number of reasons. Does anyone know one?

Student #1: Nationalism. That would cause conflicts because everyone wanted all of the people with their nationality to be included in one national state. Not too many years before World War I (1850s and 1860s), Germany and Italy had become united, combining the smaller territories into bigger, more powerful countries. Why shouldn't some other country, like Serbia, hope to bring all of its people into Serbia?

Student #6: That would cause real problems for multi-national empires like Austria – and Russia and the Ottoman Empire! In fact, nationalism would threaten these empires' very existence!

Student #2: Economic reasons are important too. The Industrial Revolution changed all of Western Europe, the U.S., and Japan. But other countries were left behind – like Russia and especially the Balkans, the Ottoman Empire, and the rest of the “developing world.”

Student #3: Both nationalism and industrialization led to imperialism as powerful European countries competed to control less developed countries in Africa and Asia. So the Great Powers conquered areas all around the world and then fought with each other over who would take over which area!

Student #4: And isn't it ironic that imperialism led to the rise of nationalism among the conquered people? Nationalism then encouraged these subject people to overthrow their conquerors and make their own nation-states.

Student #5: One final issue is the growth of literacy in industrialized areas. Because people could read the newspapers, everyone got involved in nationalism. This made a global war even more of a possibility – as large numbers of people rushed to enlist in the army to defend their country's interests.

Teacher: Finally, it was the alliance system that turned all of these factors into a world war. Let's see how it worked. Would someone help me tell this story?

Student #7: (*coming to the front of the class and bringing his/her sign – though not showing the sign yet*) France had recently lost a war to Germany, and Frenchmen were feeling humiliated – and threatened by German power.

Student #4: (*coming to the front of the room holding up his/her sign*) So France looked around for an ally and found Great Britain.

Student #1: (*coming to the front of the room holding up his/her sign*) Great Britain and France have similar interests in the world and rather similar political ideas, so they became allies. (*France and Britain shake hands with each other and remain standing together, displaying their signs.*)

Student #4: But France wanted even more allies, and Russia was a good possibility.

Student #3: (*coming to the front of the room holding up his/her sign*) Russia was not very developed industrially and was very backward politically; however, Russia had a great advantage: geography. Russia was – and is – a huge country, and it is east of Germany. So if Germany attacked France, it would have to watch its back! It would need to fight on two different fronts: France and Britain in the west; Russia in the east. France and Russia became allies. (*France and Russia shake hands with each other and remain standing together – France in between Britain and Russia – displaying their signs.*)

Student #7: But before this could become a real alliance, France's two friends – Britain and Russia – had to become friends with each other. It took a lot of persuasion since Britain and Russia didn't have much in common, but eventually they came to an agreement. (*Britain and Russia shake hands, somewhat reluctantly.*) Now THIS is the Triple Entente (*holds up the sign*).

Teacher: (*collecting the signs and taping them to the board at the front of the room – the Triple Entente sign at the top; the three country signs underneath; the students return to their seats*). Naturally, Germany was not thrilled about this turn of events!

Student #2: (*coming to the front of the room holding up his/her sign*) Germany felt threatened by France's diplomatic maneuvers and looked around for a good ally. Austria-Hungary was the logical choice.

Student #6: (*coming to the front of the room holding up his/her sign*) Austria-Hungary and Germany were both ruled by German-speaking emperors and were located near each other in the middle of Europe, which is why they would later be called the Central Powers. (*Germany and Austria-Hungary shake hands enthusiastically.*) But they needed another ally.

Student #5: (*coming to the front of the room holding up his/her sign*) Italy may not have been quite as powerful as the others, but it was still an important country. (*Italy shakes hands with Germany and with Austria-Hungary.*)

Student #8: *(coming to the front of the room holding up his/her sign)* This alliance became the Triple Alliance. Remember that there might be some changes to these systems after the war started. And also remember that other countries would join in too: the Ottoman Empire, Japan, and many smaller countries. But for now, this is what the alliance looked like.

Teacher: *(collecting the signs and taping them to the board at the front of the room – the Triple Alliance sign at the top; the three country signs underneath. The students return to their seats.)* Notice how these two alliances could easily transform a small incident into a world war. For example, let's say that little Serbia had a problem with Austria. Russia shared the Orthodox Christian religion with the Serbs and also spoke a Slavic language like the Serbs; therefore, Russia would back their Serbian "little brothers." Look at the board, and you could see what would happen if Austria and Russia went to war against each other. Austria's allies – Germany and Italy – would back Austria; Russia's allies – Britain and France – would back Russia. So the situation in 1914 was really dangerous. A small conflict could easily turn into a world war.

Act 2: The Assassination

Scene 1: Introducing Young Bosnian ideals

Setting: Sarajevo, April 1914

Characters:

Dragana (female): a student at the girls' teachers' school in Sarajevo

Fatima (female): her friend and fellow students

Dragana: I'm glad it's spring and that school will be over in a few months. Maybe things will settle down before someone that we care about gets arrested – or worse.

Fatima: I know. I worry about my brother. He's really involved in the movement.

Dragana: It's hard to disagree with their ideals. In fact, I've gone to Slovenia to represent our people at a "Yugoslav" conference – it's easier for me to travel without the police getting suspicious than for a boy to do it. I mean, national unity, freedom, the hope that there will one day be a just society in which people of all nationalities, both male and female, can be equal – the goals are so important!

Fatima: Yes, I agree with all that. I just worry that so many of the boys' secret societies emphasize assassination. I want change as much as anyone, but to kill an innocent person? THAT is something I couldn't do – and it's against my religion of Islam!

Dragana: Well, it's against Christian beliefs too. My brother says that not everyone agrees with the choice of methods. But how many options do we have? It's not like we have an army! Those who talk of assassination want to cause an international crisis

somehow. When the great powers realize how bad our situation is, they will make changes – maybe give us our independence. And wouldn't that be better than a war? Only one person would have to die – hopefully Potiorek, who's made the students' lives so difficult, instead of many that would die in a war.

Fatima: Unless we get a war too. Like when there was that revolt in 1875. I don't know. I have mixed feelings. Maybe if we just moved more slowly.....

Dragana: You're probably right. However, I don't think a lot of the boys want to wait. Life is short and insecure, after all, so many want to take action NOW!

Scene 2: Introducing the conspirators

Characters:

7 male students

Time: Mid-June 1914.

#1. I am Gavrilo Princip (*pronounced GavREelo PRINtsip*), but my friends call me 'Gavre' (*GAVray*). I am 19 years old and a high school student from a poor village in Herzegovina, a not-very-advanced region in Bosnia-Herzegovina. I study in Belgrade, Serbia, which is difficult sometimes because even though they speak the same language as we do, I feel like an outsider with my Bosnian accent. Also, it's hard to live on what little money I have. I spend a lot of time thinking about my country and yearning to be part of its liberation! I tried to volunteer during the recent wars – like my brother, who died fighting in the Serbian army – but I was turned down because of poor health. Do they think that I'm too frail to die for my country? No! I will do great things and become a hero like my Serbian ancestors at the Battle of Kosovo!

#2. I am Nedeljko Čabrinović (*NeDELko ChaBREENovich*), 19 years old, a student and apprentice locksmith in Belgrade. My country, Bosnia, is under the rule of a foreign tyrant – and Austria treats my country just as badly as my father treats me! My friend Gavre and I have attracted the attention of some important people in the Serbian government. They are helping us to achieve something great, to strike a blow for independence.

#3. I am Trifko Grabež, (*TREEFko GRAbesh*), like my friends, 19 years old and a Bosnian student in Belgrade. I'm not quite as fiery and militant as the others, but I believe deeply in the cause of freedom. I'm dating a young woman, a teacher, who also believes in our cause. I would love to help bring about a more equal and just society – politically and socially. But we can't make progress under foreign rule.

#4. I am Colonel Dimitrijević (*DeemeETREEyevich*), an important official in the Serbian army. Yet, I also have a secret identity. By day, I work for the Serbian government; by night I am the leader of a secret organization called "Unification or Death" or the "Black

Hand,” a group that wants to bring all Serbian lands into Serbia. I consider myself a real Serbian patriot, but I have to keep my identity secret – My code name is “Apis.” – since some people believe that my activities can get the Serbian government in trouble with the more powerful countries. My goal is to help create revolution in Serbian areas under foreign rule. Then, there might be a great international crisis – or a war – which would make the Great Powers change the borders. Lately, I’ve met some revolutionary students from Bosnia, who truly want to assassinate a political figure. I have provided them with weapons (guns, bombs, ammunition) and helped them smuggle these arms across the border into Bosnia. I have also helped them find other participants. Best of all, we have found the perfect person for them to assassinate – the Heir to the Austrian throne Franz Ferdinand. Perfect! I’ve provided all the students with cyanide too, so that they will not live to be taken prisoner. It’s a great plan – and I’m the perfect one to organize the plot. (*lowers his voice*) After all, this is NOT my first assassination, you know....

#5. I am Muhamed Mehmedbašić (*MuHAMED MehMETbashich*), 24-years-old, and as you can tell from my name, a Bosnian Muslim. I have been working with Apis for a while now, so I am excited about this opportunity to finally strike a blow for freedom. I’ll have to be careful not to get caught, however, since I am over the age of 20 and therefore the Austrians could sentence me to death if – when – the plot succeeds.

#6. I am Cvjetko Popović, (*TSVEEyetko Popovich*), almost 17, a Bosnian Croat high school student in Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia. This is a really amazing opportunity. A young teacher that I know recruited and is helping us!

#7. I am Vaso Čubrilović (*VASo ChuBREElovich*), 16 years old and the youngest member of the group. I study in a high school in Sarajevo. Like a lot of the others, I’m a Bosnian Serb, so I must say that the Archduke Franz Ferdinand picked the WRONG day to plan a parade in Sarajevo. Can you believe it? A conqueror parading through our streets on Vidovdan, the day that we Serbs mourn our defeat by another conqueror at the Battle of Kosovo?!!! Franz Ferdinand deserves to die just for that affront to our honor, doesn’t he? I mean, he isn’t a bad person – hasn’t done anything really evil – but he’s the symbol of oppression and killing him could bring about our liberation. Isn’t that a good enough reason to assassinate him? Even though he’s not really bad....

Scene 3: The assassination

Characters:

Ana – a high school student

Vladimir – her brother, one year older

Zora – his girlfriend, Ana’s best friend

Scene: Sarajevo, June 28, 1914.

Ana: Hurry up, you tow! Come out in the barn where no one will over hear us, and tell me what happened! I heard a rumor. Is it true that the archduke was shot? Oh, I can’t

believe that our father made me stay home today. I always have to take care of our baby brother, and now I've missed the most interesting thing ever to happen here!

Vladimir: Wait a minute. I don't want to be overheard. I have a feeling that the police are out looking for people to arrest, and high school students will be at the top of their list.

Zora: I can't believe that such a beautiful day could end up being so frightening. Really, Ana, you wouldn't want to have seen the things we saw.

Ana: OK, OK. Now tell me everything.

Vladimir: This morning dawned a beautiful, sparkling day – warm, sunny, a rare day in Sarajevo, so –

Ana: Oh for heaven's sake, I don't need to hear EVERYTHING!

Zora: He is studying literature you know.

Ana: Yes, but I want the ABRIDGED version of the story!

Zora: Then, let me start. We arrived at the parade route down by the river. There was a huge crowd since nothing this exciting ever happens in Sarajevo. (*Noticing her friend's sad face, she hurries on.*) But you sure wouldn't have wanted to be there this morning! There was a big crowd, and we waited and waited. Then we heard a bang, but the crowd milled about, and we couldn't see anything. Soon after, the royal car passed us going really fast with everyone looking upset.

Vladimir: Yes. People said that a student – one of my friends told me that it was Nedeljko Čabrinović, who lives near him – threw a bomb right at the heir to the throne! Some people were saying that Franz Ferdinand threw up his arm, and the bomb bounced right off it –

(*Ana gasps.*)

Vladimir: But my friend – I won't tell you his name, just in case.... – he said that it really hit the windshield of the car and bounced off. It exploded in the street and injured some people.

Ana: What happened to Nedeljko?

Vladimir: We didn't see it. But people say that he jumped into the river and then got violently ill. Iv---my friend – said that he'd probably taken poison to try to kill himself. Apparently, it didn't work, and he was arrested.

Zora: We were all confused, upset, a little excited when we heard all this. But we were also disappointed that the parade had ended so abruptly because nothing exciting EVER happens here. So we decided to stay a while. I didn't think that the parade would continue, but we wanted to hear the stories about what had happened. There was a rumor that the parade would continue, and you know how I wanted to see Franz Ferdinand and especially his wife Sophie.

Ana: Oh yes! Such a romantic story! He married her for love – even when the emperor, Franz Josef, said that Sophie was not quite high enough in the nobility to marry the heir to the throne. But Franz Ferdinand didn't give in! He insisted on marrying her. And since the old emperor had already lost one of his heirs, his son, because he killed himself over a love affair, he finally agreed. But the condition was that their children would not inherit the throne. Also, she could not be seen with him at public events in Vienna. No wonder she was excited to come here, where she could ride with him in the parade.

Zora: And now they have been married a while and have three children – people say they are still really in love. Oh, it's such a romantic story!

Vladimir: (*clearing his throat*) So do you want to hear what happened to this “romantic” couple today?

Ana: Yes, yes. I'm sorry to interrupt. I'm listening.

Zora: So your brother went off to find out what was happening while I stayed with some other friends. In the meantime, Vladimir met up with that friend that he told you about, and the two soon came back together. We were all walking along by the river. Just as we came to the Lateiner Bridge, we saw that the parade was approaching.

Ana: How exciting!

Vladimir: More than you can imagine. Just then the cars turned the corner. But something was wrong. We could see the driver arguing with the general in the front seat. Franz Ferdinand and Sophie were in the back seat. Then, the car started to back up. I guess they had made a wrong turn and were trying to get back on the main street. At that exact moment, a young man approached.

Zora: Your brother's friend said, “Oh, that's Gavrilo Princip. I think he's one of Nedeljko's friends.” Just then, Gavrilo took out a revolver, aimed it at the car, and fired two shots. Both Franz Ferdinand and Sophie slumped over, obviously hurt. The shooter was arrested. Vlade and I stood there a few minutes just staring in shock....

Ana: So what happened then? Are they BOTH dead?

Vladimir: I think so. That's what people are saying.

Ana: It's all so shocking! What do you think will happen now?

Vladimir: Maybe our liberation. Or maybe a terrible Austrian crack-down on all the people of Bosnia.

Zora: (*softly*) Or maybe, a war.

Epilogue:

Characters:

Narrator 1

Narrator 2

Narrator 1: The Sarajevo Assassination DID end in war – a WORLD war. Austria-Hungary blamed Serbia for the assassination. In fact, the Serbian government had heard rumors of the plot, rumors that one of their own leaders was involved. But what could they do? They couldn't just tell the Austrians since it would make the Serbs look bad. Yet, they wanted to stop the assassination from happening. Their compromise was to hint to the Austrians that maybe it was dangerous to have the parade, especially on that particular day....

Narrator 2: These warnings were not heeded – and later led Austria to believe that the Serbian government had planned the act. They issued an ultimatum, saying that the Serbs had to meet many harsh conditions to avoid a war. The Serbian government didn't want to be invaded by Austria, so they practically groveled! They agreed to all but one condition (which would have meant Austrian investigators on Serbian soil). Even the German Emperor was relieved that Serbia had done everything it could to avoid war. However, Austria WANTED a war, wanted to put Serbia in its place once and for all.

Narrator 1: One month after the assassination, Austria declared war on Serbia. Russia mobilized for war to scare Austria. So Germany joined its ally Austria in declaring war on Russia. Britain and France supported THEIR ally, Russia. Soon other countries would join in as well. It was really a “world war.”

Narrator 2: I bet you are wondering what happened to the students who started it. The Austrians arrested all of them, except for the oldest, Mehmedbašić, who escaped across the border. There was a trial of 25 conspirators. The five students who had carried guns and bombs to the parade were all under the age of 20 at the time of the assassination, so none of them could be condemned to death under Austrian law. Each was sentenced to serve from 13 to 20 years in prison. Princip, Čabrinović, and Grabež died there of tuberculosis. (They may have had it before they went into prison.)

Narrator 1: To the end of his life, Princip defended what he had done, saying it was for the good of his country. He only regretted killing Sophie, which he hadn't meant to do. (He had been aiming at General Potiorek but hit Franz Ferdinand's wife instead.) He

never lived to see the end of the war: when Bosnia became part of a large Yugoslavia. And he never lived to see Bosnia become a bloody battleground in two later wars during the 20th century.

Narrator 2: The two youngest of the students lived long lives, and both became historians. One of them, Vaso Čubrilović, refused to talk much about the assassination, saying that it was the “sacred cause of his youth.” But he admitted privately, to an American professor that talked to him 50 years later, that he had had no idea their act would lead to a horrible, bloody world war. “If you’d known then what you know now,” the American professor asked, “would you still have done it?” “Definitely not!” he answered, “But we had no idea what effect our actions would have.” Teenagers changed the course of history, but they and their people paid a terrible price. Was it worth it?

Questions for Discussion

1. The conspirators of Young Bosnia were not evil people, yet they killed a man that they knew to be a decent person in order to achieve national goals. Do you think that “the ends justified the means”? Do you think that “the good of the nation” overrules individual decisions about what is good and bad?
2. Many Serbian and Bosnian historians consider Princip and the others to be national heroes, while many Western historians call them assassins and terrorists. Why this difference of opinion? What is *your* opinion? What do you think about the assertion that “One man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter”?
3. Do you think that the war would have started if the assassination hadn’t occurred? Why or why not?
4. The region (Bosnia, the Balkans) suffered terribly during World War I. Not only did people die in the fighting, but war brought diseases like typhus that carried off huge numbers of its people. (The Kingdom of Serbia alone lost over 27% of its total population, military and civilian!) Of course, after the war, a big country of Yugoslavia was created (which must have made the surviving Young Bosnians happy). However, the country had a difficult first 20 years, exploded into conflict during World War II, survived another 50 years, and then dissolved in civil wars and killing. Today the former Yugoslavia has become 7 small countries, one of which is Bosnia-Herzegovina. Looking at this mixed record of suffering and success, was the effort made by the students worth it? Does hearing the whole story change the decision that you made during the simulation?