

The Black Hand: Serbian Terrorists Spark WWI



The Black Hand was the name of a Serbian terrorist group with nationalist aims, who sponsored the attack on Austrian Arch-Duke Franz Ferdinand in 1914 that both killed him and provided the spark for World War I.

Serbian Terrorists

Serbian nationalism and a collapsing Ottoman Empire produced an independent Serbia in 1878, but many weren't satisfied as another ailing empire, Austria-Hungary, held territory and people that they felt should be in the greater Serbia of their dreams. The two nations, one notionally newer and the other ancient but creaking, didn't exist together well, and Serbs were outraged in 1908 when Austria-Hungary fully annexed Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Two days after the annexation, on October 8th, 1908, the Narodna Odbrana (National Defense) was formed: a society which was to promote a nationalist and 'patriotic' agenda and was to be loosely secret. It would form the core of the Black Hand, which was formed on May 9th, 1911 under the alternative name Unification or Death (Ujedinjenje ili Smrt). The name is a good clue as to their intentions, which was to use violence to achieve a greater Serbia (all Serbs under Serb rule and a Serbian state that dominated the region) by attacking targets from the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires and their followers outside it. The key members of the Black Hand were mainly Serbian military and were led by Colonel Dragutin Dimitrijevic, or Apis. The violence was to be achieved through guerrilla acts by cells of just handfuls of people.

Semi-Accepted Status

We don't know how many members the Black Hand had, as their secrecy was very effective, although it seems to have been in the low thousands. But this terrorist group was able to use its connections to the (only semi-secretive) National Defense society to gather a huge amount of political support in Serbia. Apis was a senior military figure.

However, by 1914 this was tailing off after one assassination too many. They'd already tried to kill the Austrian Emperor in 1911, and now the Black Hand began to work with a group to assassinate the heir to that imperial throne, Franz Ferdinand. Their guidance was key, arranging training and probably providing weapons, and when the Serb government tried to get Apis to cancel he made little effort, leading to an armed group making the attempt in 1914.

The Great War

It took luck, fate, or whatever divine assistance they might want to call on, but Franz Ferdinand was assassinated and World War I followed swiftly. Austria, aided by German forces, occupied Serbia and tens of thousands of Serbs were killed. Within Serbia itself, the Black Hand had become hugely powerful thanks to the military connection, but also more than an embarrassment to political leaders who wanted their own names kept well apart, and in 1916 the Prime Minister ordered it neutralized. The people in charge were arrested, tried, four were executed (include the colonel) and hundreds went to prison.

Aftermath

Serbian politics did not end with the Great War. The creation of Yugoslavia led to the White Hand emerging as an offshoot, and the 1953 'retrial' of the Colonel and others which argued they weren't to blame for 1914.

Sources

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