

Black Hand: The Secret Group Who Set Fire to Europe and Initiated World War I

-Jeanette Lamb



The name fits their actions. On the surface, the Black Hand were official military personnel. In the shadow of that identity, the Black Hand were a secret Serbian Nationalist military group. For years, the secret society wielded an impressive amount of unofficial influence. They were well networked throughout the Balkans; dangerous, organized and powerful.

From their conception, the radical gang comprised of officers who served in the Military Kingdom of Serbia. When they officially established themselves in 1911, many of their members were already part of another secret nationalist society led by a talented, fearless, well-educated [Dragutin Dimitrijević](#), also known as, Apis — and, “Holy Bull.” Apis would eventually use the Black Hand to commit their most infamous crime. Many scholars agree that crime ignited World War I.

A military captain, Apis first served as a professor of tactics at the military academy; he was acutely skilled. He served as the mastermind and leader of the Black Hand throughout the gang’s lifespan. The formation of the gang resulted after Apis encourage a number of his low-ranked officers to align with him. He eventually led the group to conspire against their unpopular Dynastic rulers.



Center left, Dragutin-Dimitrijevic Apis. Wikimedia.

It was under Apis' leadership that the officers gathered one June night by the Old Palace in Belgrade. With Apis ready to give orders, they waited in the darkness for their chance to assassinate the Serbian Royal Couple.

That night, both King Alexander I Obrenović and his wife, Queen Draga [were shot down](#). Not long after the King's death, the Black Hand Gang took control of the army. This did not cause much of a problem until the Austrian Empire began expanding and asserting control over Serbian territories.



Austria-Hungary Empire. Wikimedia.

The Problem Empire

Five years later in 1908, a group of Serbian ministers, officials, and generals quietly arranged to gather for a meeting in Belgrade's City Hall. Their decision to meet was a reaction to the Austrian Empire's brazen decision. Just two days earlier, the Empire decided to [annex Bosnia and Herzegovina](#). The topic of discussion was how to liberate Serbs caught inside the Austro-Hungarian occupation.

The underlying problem: the Hapsburg-Empire had been inching its way into Serbian territories. Groups of Serbs who were linguistically, religiously, culturally and ethnically unified found themselves under new rule. They were captured by the Empire's expansion. Needless to say, they were not amused by new borders being drawn up, all of it for the purpose of enhancing the Monarchy's wealth.

The decision was to organize and fight. At this juncture, the group recognized themselves as defenders of what they considered to be theirs. Aptly, they called themselves "National Defense." Like the Black Hand, they were a [secret group](#). They worked covertly to manufacture

and distribute propaganda that did not support Austria. They sent spies into occupied areas. In areas not oppressed by the Empire, they set up satellite groups.

“Unification or Death!”

In only a few years, the ambitious goal to unify Serbia became the focal point of the group’s purpose. Their motto became “Unification or Death.” When the Black Hand established themselves, their goal was to [unify all of southern Serbia](#). That region was comprised of separate individual territories at the time. Many of them had no official ruler. The nearby territories of Germany and Italy had also recently gone through unification, which made the desired reality seem well within reach.

In organized fashion, they drafted a constitution. It was modeled on those previously written by similar nationalist German groups and those used by secret Italian societies. Other nationalist groups in the Balkans were absorbed by the Black Hand. This made them more powerful. It also demonstrated their goal for unification was becoming something of a reality.



At 19, Gavrilo Princip, a Bosnian nationalist assassinated the Austrian archduke and his wife.

Nationalists Aligned

They trained. Small cell groups scattered themselves throughout the Balkan territories. Some of their members were high-ranking officials. When anyone high ranking broke with the Black Hand's nationalist ideology, the gang used terrorist activities to assert more control; fear tactics.

Eventually, when the Black Hand was not able to sway the Serbia government, the two groups began competing. This was more dangerous in many ways for the government officials who, at least in theory, did not kill anyone who stood in their way. Despite working in tandem at times, the Serbian leaders began losing favor with Black Hand.

The Prime Minister did not show enough conviction for the cause the Black Hand members had dedicated their lives to. By this time, a decision by the Black Hand to [assassinate the Austrian Archduke](#) upon his upcoming visit to Sarajevo was final. The Serbian government had no control

over the plot. Nonetheless, they were put in the unfortunate position of having to answer to the incident. Some of those serving in the Serbian government were members of the Black Hand.

The Austrian Archduke was, of course, a member of the Austrian Royal Family and next in line to inherit the throne. A relevant modern-day comparison is close to something like a member of ISIS assassinating the son or daughter of the British Royal Family. The emotional explosion would be a storm – and a storm it was.



Members of the Black Hand being arrested after assassinating the Archduke of Austria.

Assassination and Declaration of War

Despite the assassination order going through numerous channels (and is thought to have been called off) it still happened. Both the Archduke and his wife were shot dead by a 19-year-old Bosnian nationalist and Black Hand member; [Gavrilo Princip](#). Rumors of the assassination may have been spread throughout the Serbian government. Black Hand members who knew about the plan were not completely convinced provoking the powerful Austrian Empire was a good idea.

Uncertainty that Russia would side with Serbia if Austria declared war as a result of the assassination, was a popularly held position. Without Russia, Serbia would most certainly be crushed. An Austrian-led investigation shed light on the Black Hand's otherwise well-hidden operations. The chain of events leading to the assassination, including the transport of artillery and the assassins to the location of the event was completely revealed. Austrian authorities and Serb leaders yelled at one another over the situation. This caused little more than disdain.

No Way Out

It took five short days after the assassination of the Archduke before Austria [officially declared war on Serbia](#). To further complicate things, the declaration enacted a Secret Treaty signed back in 1892. It tied France and Russia together. The two countries were economically invested with each other. The ruin of one would lead to the ruin of the other. Meanwhile, [the Triple Alliance](#), another secret pact, tied Italy, Germany and Austria together.

On July 28, 1914, World War I officially began. The actions of the Black Hand plunged nations into a cataclysmic war that would echo through the 20th century. The First World War would last for four years and claim an estimate of 16 million to 37 million lives, becoming known as one of the deadliest conflicts the human race ever created.

Where did we get this information? Here are our sources:

[History Channel Online: The Outbreak of World War I](#)

[History on the Net: How many people died in World War I? A look at the numbers](#)

[Britannica: Black Hand, Secret Serbian Society](#)

[USA Today: Before the Mafia, there was the terrifying 'Black Hand'. April 2017. Web.](#)