Ever since firing the fatal shots that killed Francis Ferdinand and Sophie on June 28, 1914, Gavrilo Princip has been an icon as well as an assassin.

In this paper I will describe five different interpretations imputed to Princip over the past hundred years: Terrorist (1914-1918), Yugoslav national hero (1918-1941), degenerate criminal (1941-1945), communist revolutionary hero (1945-1970), and celebrity (1970-present).

But Habsburg officials vilified Princip and his co-conspirators as terrorists, while honoring Francis Ferdinand and Sophie as martyrs of the Habsburg Monarchy.

From Vienna, the Emperor Francis Joseph sponsored a grandiose but gloomy memorial project.¹

They proposed an immense, cavernous memorial Catholic Church, apparently to be located beside the Miljacka River at the assassination site, much like the Church of the Savior on Spilled Blood (Cerkov Spasa na Krovi) was built in St. Petersburg, Russia, at the site of Czar Alexander II's assassination in March 1881.

With a heavy Romanesque design and brooding interior, the proposed church seemed to mourn the Monarchy’s impending doom in addition to memorializing Francis Ferdinand and Sophie in sculptures with each kneeling before an altar.

The imperially-sponsored structure was never built. Mercifully, it remained only a few sketches and images in a diminutive yellowing pamphlet.

Not until the third anniversary of the killings, on June 28, 1917, did officials erect a monument across the street from the assassination site.

The memorial was torn down in the early months of royal Yugoslavia.

Yugoslav National Hero (1918-1941)

The Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, proclaimed on December 1, 1918, and renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1929, portrayed Princip as a Yugoslav national hero – he had, in the popular imagination, fired the first shots in a war that ended in the formation of Royal Yugoslavia. At the site of the assassination, officials placed a plaque that read, in Cyrillic, “On this historic place, Gavrilo Princip pronounced in favor of freedom on June 14/28, 1914.”

Princip’s post-assassination utterances and writings suggest that he was both, but that his fundamental loyalty was to Serb nationalist ideals. In two written statements and conversations
from prison in 1916, he suggested that his commitment to Yugoslavism derived from his intense Serb nationalism. Princip saw Yugoslavia was the means by which the Serb national ends were to be achieved. Many other Serb nationalists also adopted that position, as long as Yugoslavia was a politically viable option, in Royal Yugoslavia and in the 1990s.

Early in their rule, officials of Royal Yugoslavia received permission from the new government of Czechoslovakia to exhume and transport the remains of Princip and other conspirators to Sarajevo for reburial in a Serbian Orthodox cemetery at Vrbanja.

In 1939, a stone memorial chapel was built north of the Vrbanje cemetery at Košev to hold the remains of the “St. Vitus Day heroes.”

Nazi and Ustasha Pariah (1941—45)

Upon entering Sarajevo on April 17, 1941, German troops removed the memorial plaque and sent it to Hitler in Berlin on April 20, as a present on his 52nd birthday.

Anti-Fascist Youth Hero (1945-1992)

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3 *Jugoslovenska Pošta*, September 19, 1939, p. 4.

After liberating Sarajevo on April 6, 1945, the victorious Partisans and youth organizations made Princip a hero of youthful anti-fascism. They erected a new plaque to replace the one sent to Hitler, with the text, “As a sign of everlasting thanks to Gavrilo Princip and his colleagues, fighters against German conquest, the youth of Bosnia and Herzegovina dedicate this plaque. Sarajevo, May 7, 1945.”

Neither youthful anti-fascism nor specifically anti-German language stood the test of time. In 1953 the plaque was replaced with another that broadened Princip's iconic appeal to all Yugoslavia's people and did not mention any specific enemy. It read:

[Slide 16: Plaque and Footprints]

“From this place on June 28, 1914, Gavrilo Princip proclaimed with his shots a popular protest against tyranny and for our peoples' centuries-long struggle for freedom.”

[Slide 17: Unidentified tourist, 1987]

Footprint depressions were placed in the sidewalk in front of the plaque.

Celebrity

In the last two decades of socialism, Princip's former iconic political personas were surpassed and overwhelmed by his stature as a celebrity, an icon of popular culture. Short of a major catastrophe that destroys global capitalism, Princip will likely henceforth be first and

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6 Ibid.
foremost a global celebrity, even if he also evokes less important political or national associations as a terrorist or national hero.

I must first explain what I mean by “celebrity,” and note that it has a specific meaning in scholarship on the topic. The “celebrity” is a phenomenon of the age of global capitalism: he or she relies upon global economic integration, mass marketing campaigns, electronic and print media, and readily available, inexpensive travel.

Studies of the phenomenon emphasize the celebrity’s elevated status, evoking curiosity, awe, and admiration in the rest of us; he or she teases us to “uncover the real person behind the public persona,” so that we can satiate our curiosity about them and experience vicariously their monumental deeds. Celebrities are morally and politically neutral. We pursue them not because they are good or evil, but because they are did something extraordinary and consequential. The celebrity becomes a Rorschach test, becoming, like an inkblot, a complex, ambiguous, and inscrutable being onto whom others project their interpretations and fantasies.

Seeking to make Princip a global celebrity, Yugoslav authorities in 1975 supported a motion picture, entitled “Sarajevski atentat” in Bosnian, and in English, “The Day that Shook the World.” The cast, costumes, and publicity aimed at a foreign audience seeking entertainment rather than political propaganda.

[Slide 18. The Day that Shook the World]

The film promises entertainment, not a political indictment. We are invited to witness a “momentous, monstrous event,” that is also a mystery story, one we should see if we “love foreign intrigue and suspense.”


So obsessed are the filmmakers with “celebrity” that they advertise as stars the Canadian-born actor Christopher Plummer (Francis Ferdinand), Austrian-born Maximilian Schell as Djuro Šarac; and Brazilian-born Florinda Bolkan as Sophie. No mention is made on the cover of the English-language VHS of Irfan Mensur, the Bosnian-born actor who played Princip.

In the film, Mensur was far from the stern, expressionless Gavrilo Princip who stood trial for killing the heir to the throne in 1914. He is glamorous, handsome, confident, and attired in a fine suit and bow tie—dressed, in short, more for an evening at the Oscars than a world-shattering assassination. He cavalierly exchanges best wishes with fellow conspirators and receives their support. He shoots his pistol with carefully calibrated determination and a sure hand. As for the victims, Sophie loses none of her Brazilian good looks or fashionable hair style as she reacts with horror at her husband’s graceful passing from this world. All the players are dignified, self-possessed, and unblemished as they change the tide of world history forever.

A socialist-era likeness of Princip in the Young Bosnia Museum presented him in a similar manner: handsome, athletic, coarsely attractive with curly hair and firm, jutting jaw and penetrating eyes.

Today, Francis Ferdinand and Sophie are similarly portrayed as beautiful, fashionable people, with expressionless faces but colorful, immaculate attire. They, too, are celebrities: politically androgynous and ethically neutral personalities who entertain without polarizing.
Today’s plaque reflects the complete triumph of celebrity over all of Princip’s iconic political personas. On June 28, 2004, officials unveiled a simple, a-political descriptive panel in English and BCS: “From this place on June 28, 1914, Gavrilo Princip assassinated the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, Francis Ferdinand, and his wife Sophie.” The new, a-political inscription allowed Princip to resume his career as an inoffensive celebrity.

Conclusion

I have argued that Princip’s celebrity status will be indefinitely the most dominant of his iconic reincarnations. I believe we should welcome rather than scorn the emergence of the protagonists as apolitical celebrities and focus as well on the horrific war that followed the assassination. I propose that Bosnians, along with those of us who care about Bosnia and its peoples, memorialize the trio of antagonists by making the assassination site into a memorial for peace, in particular in memory of the millions of victims of the First World War. No place on earth that better symbolizes the human cost and futility than the north end of the Latin Bridge.

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U znak vječite zahvalnosti Gavrilu Principu i njegovim drugovima borcima protiv germanskih osvajača, posvećuje ovu ploču omladina Bosne i Hercegovine – Sarajevo 7. maja 1945. godine

Sa ovog mjesta 28. juna 1914. godine Gavrilo Princip svojim pucnjem izrazi narodni protest protiv tiranije i vjekovnu težnju naših naroda za slobodom.

Sa ovog mjesta 28. juna 1914. Gavrilo Princip je izvršio atentat na austrougarskog prestolonaslednika Franca Ferdinanda i njegovu suprugu Sofiju