



How close did the world come to peace in 1914?

Slithering over the brink

Narrated by Prof. Margaret MacMillan, Historian

Video transcript

[Voiceover]

“One day the great European War will come out of some damned foolish thing in the Balkans”.

[Margaret MacMillan]

Those were the words of the eminent German statesman Otto von Bismarck in 1888.

26 years later, in June 1914, the heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary, Franz Ferdinand, was assassinated in Sarajevo, on the Balkan Peninsula.

37 days after that, Europe was at war, and the world was engulfed in the most catastrophic conflict it had ever seen.

Writing in his memoirs after the conflict had ended, the wartime Prime Minister David Lloyd George described the nations as slithering “over the brink into the boiling cauldron of war without any trace of apprehension or dismay... not one of them” he added “wanted war”, “certainly not on that scale.” It almost sounds as though they had no choice. That war was inevitable.

But is that really true?

After Franz Ferdinand’s assassination, was war really inevitable? Or were there moments in those crucial 37 days when war could have been avoided?

Just how close did the world come to peace in 1914?

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