

PART I

*Precarious elites*

How did contemporaries experience and explain imperial decline in continental Europe? Perhaps the most famous image of imperial decline in the twentieth century is the photograph of Franz Ferdinand shot on the last day of his life in Sarajevo. The Habsburg family did not just represent its empire but embodied it. This explains the particular shock caused by the death of Franz Ferdinand not only to Europeans but to a global readership of world news. A photograph shot just minutes before the assassination – such an utterance poignantly expresses the tint of celebrity surrounding this particular death.

The first chapter places the effect of his death in the context of a longer affective genealogy of dynastic decline. In the last decades of Habsburg rule, members of the Habsburg family, like those of other dynasties such as the Romanoffs, were plagued by fears of assassination. We can grasp imperial decline both from a first-person perspective of its rulers, and indirectly, by observing the changing function of dynastic families in the period of declining empires. From the intellectual formation of the last ruling Habsburgs in the climate of cultural globalization, we get to the odd wartime ethnography of aristocratic officers serving Germany and Austria in the First World War. In the same generation, they went from a sentimental education in the grand tours of the Belle Epoque to a very different kind of mobility. Their deployment as officers in the First World War gave them techniques and technologies of detachment from the theatre of war. Looking at imperial transformation through the eyes of the dynastic and military elites exposes the connections between imperial societies both during and after imperial decline. Whether empires ended gradually or abruptly, by way of partial devolution and decolonization, like Britain, or revolution, like Russia, they did not collapse independently from each other. The old imperial elites were mutually connected and remained so after the demise of their former rulers.



Figure 3 'Anniversary of the War's Origin', *New York Times*, 27 June 1915