

Ballhausplatz

By [William D. Godsey](#)

The Imperial and Royal Ministry of the Imperial and Royal House and of Foreign Affairs, informally called “Ballhausplatz” after the Viennese square on which the central office was located, was one of only three joint ministries of Austria-Hungary. Foreign Minister Leopold Berchtold played the dominant role in the decision-making process in Vienna that led to war in the summer of 1914.

Table of Contents

- [1 Organization of the Ministry](#)
- [2 Domestic Political Context](#)
- [3 The July Crisis, 1914](#)
- [4 Foreign Policy during the War](#)
- [5 Dissolution of the Ministry](#)
- [6 Ministers \(1914-1918\)](#)
- [7 Leading officials in the central office](#)
- [8 Leading diplomats in missions abroad](#)
- [Notes](#)
- [Selected Bibliography](#)
- [Citation](#)

Organization of the Ministry

The Foreign Ministry was one of only three joint ministries of [Austria-Hungary](#), the other two being War and Finance. The Foreign Ministry remained divided throughout the war into its customary three branches: central office, diplomatic corps, and consular service. The structures of the central office expanded in an ad hoc way to deal with problems that arose in the wake of the conflict, e.g. the future status of [Poland](#). Even so, no major reorganization occurred, nor was there any substantial revamping of personnel. As many standing missions abroad closed as a result of war, Austria-Hungary compensated by opening diplomatic “representations” in [occupied territories](#), including Belgrade, [Brussels](#), and Kiev.

Domestic Political Context

Foreign policy in Austria-Hungary remained the constitutional prerogative of the monarch. Major foreign policy issues - including the response to [Franz Ferdinand, Archduke of Austria-Este's \(1863–1914\) assassination](#) - were debated in the Joint Ministerial Council, a collegial body to which the Austrian and Hungarian minister-presidents, Count [Karl Stürgkh \(1859–1916\)](#) and [Istvan Tisza \(1861–1918\)](#), and the three joint ministers belonged *ex officio*. In 1914, the Council was “the crucial forum for decisions affecting the development, coordination, and execution of Habsburg strategic policy.”^[1]

The July Crisis, 1914

Despite his reputation for vacillation, Berchtold dominated the policy debate after the assassination in Sarajevo. From the beginning, he pressed for “a final and fundamental reckoning”^[2] with Belgrade. In early July, the Foreign Minister Count [Leopold Berchtold \(1863-1942\)](#) dispatched one of his most bellicose advisors, Count [Alexander Hoyos \(1876–1937\)](#), to consult with Austria-Hungary’s main ally, Berlin. The “Hoyos Mission” yielded the famous German “[blank check](#)” for decisive Austro-Hungarian action against [Serbia](#). This support strengthened Berchtold’s hand in the Joint Ministerial Council, where he had been faced with the Hungarian minister-president’s opposition to a confrontational stance. Even before this support was secured, the Foreign Ministry began drafting an ultimatum to Serbia, and Berchtold proved skillful in misleading the other powers and public opinion about Austria-Hungary’s actual intentions. Generally speaking, the decision-making process in Vienna throughout the crisis was characterized by a narrowness of perspective and little attention “to the question of whether Austria-Hungary was in any position to wage a war with one or more other European great powers.”^[3]

Foreign Policy during the War

Early on, high priority was given to keeping potentially hostile states, especially [Italy](#) and [Romania](#), out of the conflict, and bringing others, particularly the [Ottoman Empire](#) and [Bulgaria](#), in on the side of the Central Powers. The problem of territorial concessions to achieve certain aims bitterly divided policymakers. Ultimately, it cost Foreign Minister Berchtold his job when he proposed sacrificing the [Trentino](#) to Italy. As the war progressed, questions of ultimate aims and the post-war order were attended by the increasing subordination of Austro-Hungarian interests to its ever more dominant German ally. This was apparent in the problem of future hegemony in Poland, but also in the disagreement about the conditions to be imposed on defeated [Russia](#) at [Brest-Litovsk](#). Foreign Minister [Ottokar Graf Czernin’s \(1872–1932\)](#) decision to pin his hopes on a German military victory led him to disavow, in the famous [Sixtus Affair](#) of April 1918, the peace feelers that [Charles I, Emperor of Austria \(1887–1922\)](#) extended to [France](#) and even to press for the latter’s withdrawal from government.

Dissolution of the Ministry

The former Imperial and Royal Foreign Ministry paradoxically survived Austria-Hungary’s dissolution for nearly two years. A number of states, such as [Switzerland](#), maintained diplomatic relations with the Ministry rather than with the successor states. It continued to be headquartered on the Ballhausplatz, and its agenda primarily involved the liquidation of Austro-Hungarian assets.

Ministers (1914-1918)

- Count Leopold Berchtold, in office: 17 February 1912 – 13 January 1915
- Baron [Stephan Burián \(1851-1922\)](#), in office: 13 January 1915 – December 1916
- Ottokar Graf Czernin, in office: 22 December 1916 – 14 April 1918
- Baron (1918 Count) Stephan Burián, in office 15 April 1918 – 24 October 1918
- Count [Julius Andrássy the Younger \(1860-1929\)](#), in office: 24 October 1918 – 2 November 1918
- Baron [Ludwig Flotow \(1867-1948\)](#), in office: 2 November – 11 November 1918 as acting ‘director’ (*Leiter*)

Leading officials in the central office

- First Section Chiefs: Baron [Karl Macchio \(1859-1945\)](#) , in office 30 March 1912 – 4 January 1917; Baron [Ladislaus Müller \(1855-?\)](#), in office 4 January 1917 – 21 June 1918); Baron Ludwig Flotow, in office 21 June 1918 – 11 November 1918
- Second Section Chiefs: Count [Johann Forgách \(1870-1935\)](#), in office 8 October 1913 – 4 January 1917); Baron Ludwig Flotow, in office 4 January 1917 – 21 June 1918); Count [Ludwig Széchényi \(1686-1919\)](#), in office 21 June 1918 – 11 November 1918)
- Other Section Chiefs: Count [Markus Wickenburg \(1864-1924\)](#); [Otto von Weil \(1861-1924\)](#); [Gustav Gratz \(1875-1946\)](#)
- The Minister’s Chiefs of Staff (*Chefs des Kabinetts des Ministers*): Count Alexander Hoyos (1876-1937), in office 22 April 1912 – 12 January 1917; Count Ferdinand Colloredo-Mannsfeld, in office 12 January 1917 – 11 November 1918

Leading diplomats in missions abroad

- Count [Johann Pallavicini \(1848-1941\)](#), Ambassador in Constantinople 1906-1918
- Prince [Gottfried Hohenlohe-Schillingsfürst \(1867-1932\)](#), Ambassador in Berlin 1914-1918
- [Cajetan von Mérey \(1861-1931\)](#), Ambassador to the Kingdom of Italy 1910-1915
- Ottokar Graf Czernin, Minister in Bucharest 1913-1916
- Count [Adam Tarnowski \(1892-1956\)](#), Minister in Sofia 1911-1916
- Count Ludwig Széchényi, Minister in Sofia 1916-17
- Count Otto Czernin, Minister in Sofia 1917-1918
- [Constantin Dumba \(1856-1947\)](#), Ambassador in Washington, D.C. 1913-1915
- Baron [Erich Zwiedinek \(1870-?\)](#), Chargé d'affaires in Washington, D.C. 1915-1917

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Notes

1. ↑ Williamson, Samuel: *Austria-Hungary and the Origins of the First World War*, Houndmills et al. 1991, p. 55.
2. ↑ *Ibid.*, p. 194.
3. ↑ Clark, Christopher: *The Sleepwalkers. How Europe Went to War in 1914*, London 2012, p. 429.

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