

Version 1.0 | Last updated 01 July 2015

Germany's Blank Cheque to Austria-Hungary

By [William Mulligan](#)

Germany's offer of unconditional support to its Austro-Hungarian ally in July 1914 remains one of the most controversial decisions in modern history. Historians have interpreted the blank cheque in several, often contradictory, ways – either as a German attempt to escalate a regional crisis into a wider European war or as a move to localise war in the Balkans. Most historians agree that the blank cheque marked a victory for the war party in Vienna.

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Assurance of Support

On 5 July 1914, [Alexander Hoyos \(1876-1937\)](#), a leading hawk in the Austrian Foreign Ministry, and Count [Ladislaus von Szögyény \(1841-1916\)](#), the Habsburg ambassador to Berlin, met [Wilhelm II, German Emperor \(1859-1941\)](#) and [Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg \(1856-1921\)](#), the German chancellor. Later that day, Bethmann Hollweg assured Szögyény that [Germany](#) would support her ally, whatever measures the Austro-Hungarian leaders decided to take against [Serbia](#).

Germany's Faulty Assumptions

In issuing the blank cheque, German leaders made a number of faulty assumptions. They believed that [Austria-Hungary](#) was ready to initiate war against Serbia immediately and that a rapid strike would present Europe with a *fait accompli*. They reckoned that the Tsarist regime was not militarily

ready to risk a general European war. Moreover, they thought that monarchical solidarity would trump pan-Slav sentiment, that the Tsar would not support a state that had allegedly harboured the assassins of the heir to the Habsburg throne. In other words, the "blank cheque" was designed first and foremost to secure a triumph, either political or military, for the Central Powers in the Balkans. The "blank cheque" was vital in bolstering Austro-Hungarian leaders in their decision to embark on war against Serbia.

Attempted Withdrawal

Bethmann Hollweg had also built into his calculations the risk of a general European war and in supporting Austria-Hungary he believed that were a European war to happen, better that it happen in 1914 than several years later. This scenario, however, was not considered a probability on 5 July. When that prospect became a probability in late July, Bethmann Hollweg and Wilhelm II sought, but failed, to amend the cheque.

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Citation

Mulligan, William: Germany's Blank Cheque to Austria-Hungary , in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2015-07-01. **DOI:** [10.15463/ie1418.10677](https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.10677).

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