

Germany's Blank Cheque to Austria-Hungary

By [William Mulligan](#)

Summary

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.

Table of contents

- [1 Assurance of Support](#)
- [2 Germany's Faulty Assumptions](#)
- [3 Attempted Withdrawal](#)
- [Selected Bibliography](#)
- [Citation](#)

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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Selected Bibliography

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- [Mombauer, Annika: *Die Julikrise. Europas Weg in den Ersten Weltkrieg*, Munich, 2014: C.H. Beck.](#)
- [Otte, Thomas: *July Crisis. The world's descent into war, summer 1914*, New York, 2014: Cambridge University Press.](#)

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External Links

- [Äußerungen des Englischen Regierungs Blattes, in: Neue Freie Presse 17930, 26 July 1914, p. 8 \(Österreichische Nationalbibliothek\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Die deutschen Dokumente zum Kriegsausbruch 1914 \(Auswärtiges Amt / Internet\)](#)

[Archive\) \(Database\)](#)

- [Telegramm des österreichisch-ungarischen Botschafters in Berlin, Ladislaus von Szögyény-Marich, an Außenminister Leopold Graf Berchtold \("Blankoscheck"\), 6 July 1914 \(100\(0\) Schlüsseldokumente\) \(Article\)](#)
- [The "Blank Check": Ladislaus Count von Szögyény-Marich to Leopold Count von Berchtold, Berlin, 5 July 1914 \(German History in Documents and Images \(GHDI\)\) \(Article\)](#)

Metadata

Regional Section(s)

[Central Europe](#) > [Austria-Hungary](#) > [Austria](#)

[Central Europe](#) > [Austria-Hungary](#) > [Hungary](#)

[Central Europe](#) > [Germany](#)

Thematic Section(s)

[Power](#)

[Pre-war](#)

Subjects

[Politics, law](#) > [International relations](#) > [July crisis](#)

[Politics, law](#) > [International relations](#) > [Alliances, alliance systems](#)

[Politics, law](#) > [International relations](#) > [Diplomacy](#)

[Politics, law](#) > [International relations](#) > [Entering the war](#)

[Politics, law](#) > [International relations](#) > [Origins of war](#)

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[Europe--History--July Crisis, 1914](#)

Rameau Subject Headings

[Guerre mondiale \(1914-1918\) -- Origines](#)

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