

July Crisis 1914

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The international crisis that began with the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914 and culminated in the British declaration of war on Germany on 4 August is referred to as the July Crisis. In these five weeks decisions were made that led to the outbreak of a European war which soon escalated into a world war of unprecedented scale.

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Introduction

Explaining how Europe plunged into the First World War has been a difficult challenge which has divided historians for over a hundred years and continues to be controversial. Some of the latest publications on the origins of the war in general, and the July Crisis in particular, re-opened the debate on the origins of the war on the eve of the centenary.^[1] Most recent publications acknowledge that the crisis can only be understood in an international context, and try to understand the events of

July 1914 by looking at the decisions taken in all the European Great Power governments.^[2]

All Great Power [governments](#) shared the fear that at some point in the near future a major European war was inevitable. This fatalism underpinned most of the decision-making of the immediate pre-war years, and it also explains the decisions taken during the July Crisis. The years before the outbreak of the First World War were characterised by international tensions, mutual suspicion and a widespread [arms race](#) in Europe. While with hindsight it might seem as if a major war was almost inescapable, it is worth noting that in fact these last years of peace saw a number of successful attempts by the Great Powers to avert a large-scale war. Peace conferences and mediation, not war, were the usual way to settle international crises, at least those among the so-called Great Powers ([Austria-Hungary](#), [France](#), [Germany](#), [Great Britain](#), [Russia](#) and [Italy](#)). While smaller states engaged with each other in armed conflicts (and occasionally with a Great Power), the governments in Vienna, Paris, Berlin, London and St. Petersburg did not, and war was avoided at several important junctures.^[3] This history of “avoided wars”^[4] is crucial background for understanding the decision-making of European statesmen and military leaders during the July Crisis of 1914 when the Great War, so frequently anticipated and so often avoided, finally broke out. Before the war, [alliance systems](#) both sustained peace and acted as deterrents, and it can be argued that they “generally functioned as a restraint on war”, rather than being a cause of it.^[5] During the July Crisis, some governments continued to try and find a diplomatic solution to the international crisis that resulted from the [assassination of the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne](#). In Vienna and Berlin, however, there was no such desire for yet another conference or for mediation.

The Assassination

A general European war would need a trigger, and this was provided by the murder of the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, [Franz Ferdinand, Archduke of Austria-Este \(1863-1914\)](#) and his wife [Sophie, Archduchess of Austria \(1868-1914\)](#) in the Bosnian capital Sarajevo on 28 June 1914. The assassination, carried out by Bosnian Serb [nationalists](#), has often been described as the spark that would set light to a continent that was riddled with international tensions. However, a European war was not inevitable. Right until the last moment, some European statesmen were desperately trying to avoid an escalation of the crisis by advocating mediation, while others did everything in their power to ensure that a localised war would break out whose escalation into a European conflict they were willing to risk.

The news from the Bosnian capital about the assassination of the Austrian heir to the throne hit “like lightning strike”, as the *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger* reported on 29 June 1914. The previous day the nineteen-year-old Bosnian Serb [Gavrilo Princip \(1894-1918\)](#), part of a small group of conspirators who had planned an attack on this representative of the Dual Monarchy, had shot and killed Franz Ferdinand and his wife. The murder of the Archduke caused widespread outrage.

Why did the Archduke become a victim of a violent conspiracy? We know that the conspiracy can

be traced back to the Serbian capital Belgrade, where each of the six young men who waited for the hapless Archduke in Sarajevo had been radicalised by Serbian nationalist and irredentist organisations such as the so-called “[Black Hand](#)”. [Serbia](#) had been a threat and irritant to Austria-Hungary, particularly since it had emerged victorious from the recent [Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913](#) and as a consequence nearly doubled its territory and increased its population from 3 million to 4.5 million Serbs. The government’s aim was to unite even more Serbian territory and people with the country – and those people happened to live in the multi-ethnic Dual Monarchy, including parts of Croatia, the Vojvodina and the [Sandžak](#), and Bosnia, which had been [annexed by Austria-Hungary in 1908](#).

Three of the young conspirators had left impoverished lives in Sarajevo for Belgrade. [Trifko Grabež \(1895-1918\)](#), [Nedeljko Čabrinović \(1895-1916\)](#) and Gavrilo Princip were all members of the revolutionary organisation *Mlada Bosna* (Young Bosnia). In the Serbian capital they succumbed to the anti-Habsburg propaganda of underground organisations such as the *Narodna Odbrana* and the “Black Hand” (its official title was “Union or Death”), a conspiratorial officers’ group which stood for the idea of a greater Serbia. Among its members were leading members of the army, including the man in charge of military intelligence, [Dragutin Dimitrijević \(1876-1917\)](#), also known as Apis.

In Vienna, the assassination was immediately perceived as a Serbian provocation, even though actual evidence of Serbian involvement in the plot was hard to come by. They could not have known at the time that one of the instigators of this act was indeed a member of the Serbian government. The head of the Serbian military intelligence service, Apis, and members of the secret “Black Hand” organisation were behind this successful assassination just as they had been behind an unsuccessful attempt to kill [Francis Joseph I, Emperor of Austria \(1830-1916\)](#) in 1910. This was not, however, a plot which had been sanctioned by the Serbian government.

It is perhaps a tragic irony that it was Franz Ferdinand’s assassination which led to a war between Austria-Hungary and Serbia. He had opposed such a war in his last few years of life, and had clashed with Chief of the General Staff [Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf \(1852-1925\)](#) over this issue.^[6] More tragic still is the fact that among the decision-makers at the [Ballhausplatz](#) in Vienna, he had been in favour of granting more rights to the minorities in the Dual Monarchy. However, this actually made him more of a target, for it was feared that upon his accession to the throne, he might allow the minorities in the Dual Monarchy more of a say in their own affairs. This was a worry to the Hungarians who wanted to defend their current status as the most influential minority in the Habsburg Empire, but it was also a concern to Serbian irredentists who feared that reforms under Franz Ferdinand as *Kaiser* might have prevented Serbia’s future unification. After the assassination, Gavrilo Princip referred to this motive, arguing that Franz Ferdinand was dangerous for Serbia because he “would have prevented, as a future ruler, our union by realizing certain reforms which would evidently have been against our interests”.^[7]

The would-be assassins were trained in the use of [weapons](#) in Belgrade and equipped with weapons from the Serbian state arsenal in Kragujevac. They smuggled these into Bosnia via different routes,

aided by members of the “Black Hand”. In Bosnia, they were joined by three more conspirators: [Danilo Ilić \(1891-1915\)](#), [Veljko Čubrilović \(1895-1915\)](#) and [Cvijetko Popović \(1896-1980\)](#). The youngest of their group was just seventeen.

They lined up along the previously announced route that Franz Ferdinand and his wife would take on that Sunday morning, travelling from the train station to Sarajevo’s Town Hall. However, the first attempt to kill the Archduke failed. Nedeljko Čabrinović threw a bomb on the Appel Quay, but it bounced off the open convertible car in which the couple were travelling. It exploded underneath the car behind, injuring a few of the onlookers and passengers in that car, among them [Erik von Merizzi \(1873-1914\)](#), the adjutant of the Austro-Hungarian military governor of the province, [Oskar Potiorek \(1853-1933\)](#). The Archduke was unhurt; his wife suffered a small wound on the cheek.

Čabrinović’s attempt to commit suicide with cyanide failed, and his subsequent jump into the river was also not fatal, so that the unsuccessful assassin was arrested on the river bank. The couple were hurriedly taken to the Town Hall. Potiorek, who had been responsible for the rather minimal security arrangements for the trip, declared that he could not guarantee the couple’s safety and advised to cancel the rest of the scheduled programme. However, Franz Ferdinand insisted on visiting Merizzi in the hospital before continuing the official programme. Only the visit to the National Museum would be cancelled. As a compromise, it was agreed that the convoy should follow a different route and not, as planned, travel down Franz-Joseph-Strasse. However, tragically, this change of plan appears not to have been communicated to the driver in the first car, who turned into the street as previously planned. In the hastily conducted reverse manoeuvre which followed, the Archduke’s car came to a halt right in front of Princip who had positioned himself, by chance, at the exact same spot. A few metres away from his target he managed to shoot the Archduke in the neck and his wife in the abdomen. Sophie died in the car, and Franz Ferdinand shortly after reaching the Governor’s residence. The hapless young assassins could not have known to what extent they had made history that day.

Princip succeeded in murdering the royal couple, but failed to kill himself and was arrested before the outraged crowd could lynch him. The assassins did not reveal any of the details of the planning or the links to the “Black Hand”. Rumours soon began to circulate that Serbia’s Prime Minister, [Nicola Pašić \(1845-1926\)](#), had had prior warning about the planned assassination which he had passed on to the Austrian envoy in Belgrade, though Pašić would deny any prior knowledge of the plot.^[8] His warning, in turn, had not been taken seriously in Vienna, particularly by [Leon Ritter von Biliński \(1846-1923\)](#), the finance minister who was also governor of Bosnia-Herzegovina. This fact was uncomfortable for both Pašić and Biliński, who in the following weeks wanted to downplay that a warning had been received. In the aftermath of the assassination, all they could do was to wait for the official reaction to this murder in Vienna.

Reactions to the Assassination

According to *The Times* in London, the assassination of the Archduke “has produced horror and

consternation throughout Europe”.^[9] [George V, King of Great Britain \(1865-1936\)](#) ordered a week’s mourning at court, [Nicholas II, Emperor of Russia \(1868-1918\)](#) and his foreign minister conveyed heart-felt regrets to Vienna,^[10] and in Berlin, [Wilhelm II, German Emperor \(1859-1941\)](#) was genuinely grieving his friend “Franzi” whom he had last seen just weeks before. However, in Vienna the response was more varied. The official reaction to the assassination was indignant outrage, but this outward appearance was in stark contrast to the privately held thoughts of some. Franz Ferdinand had not been universally popular – the Germans within the Dual Monarchy had considered him to be too Slavophile, the Slavs too German, and the Hungarians too Austrian.^[11] Moreover, some of the decision-makers in Vienna had been keen for a “reckoning” with Serbia for some time, a move that always been opposed by the Archduke, and considered this a golden opportunity.

In order to explain the escalation of the crisis into full-scale war, this article first looks at Vienna and its ally Berlin. It was in Vienna that war (that is to say a war between Austria-Hungary and Serbia) was first consciously risked and planned in response to the assassination. As [Leopold Baron von Andrian-Werburg \(1875-1951\)](#) recalled after the war had ended: “We started the war, not the Germans and even less the Entente – that I know.”^[12] Germany’s support needed to be secured, and it, too, helped plan this war in the early stages of the crisis. France, Russia, Britain and Italy only participated decisively much later in July 1914, when most decisions had already been taken and an ultimatum been given to Belgrade with the intention to begin a war.^[13] Until this point, most European statesmen had been deliberately kept in the dark about the nature of their plan by the decision-makers in Vienna and Berlin. Of course, they did expect a reaction to the assassination and had got word of a planned action against Serbia, so that the ultimatum was not a complete surprise to them when it was finally delivered.^[14] However, until firm demands were made of Serbia its potential allies were not in a position to influence the crisis which was, until 23 July and the delivery of the Austro-Hungarian note, almost entirely a matter for the Dual Alliance partners Austria-Hungary and Germany.

Austria-Hungary’s Chief of the General Staff Conrad welcomed an excuse for a war with Serbia. He still regretted what he, as well as his German counter-part [Helmuth von Moltke \(1848-1916\)](#) had considered the “missed opportunity” for a “reckoning with Serbia” in 1909.^[15] Other so-called “hawks” in Vienna were also keen to seize the apparent opportunity of waging a war against Serbia whose pan-Slav agitation threatened to undermine the cohesion of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.^[16]

Just one day after the assassination Conrad had a confidential meeting with Foreign Minister Count [Leopold von Berchtold \(1863-1942\)](#) in which the Chief of Staff immediately demanded a war against Serbia in response to the crime. Even without any direct evidence he presumed that Belgrade had been behind the assassination and demanded a “mobilization against Serbia”. Berchtold was calmer, advocating making demands of Serbia, such as the “dissolution of certain organizations, dismissal of the Chief of Police, etc.”. He agreed with Conrad that this was an opportune moment “for solving the Serbian question”, but he could not agree to an immediate mobilisation.^[17]

First of all it would be necessary to establish how the Dual Monarchy's ally, Germany, would react to any potential move against Serbia. An early opportunity for this was a meeting with the German Ambassador in Vienna, [Heinrich von Tschirschky \(1858-1916\)](#). He, however, did not seem to favour a war. Thus he reported back to the German Foreign Office (the *Auswärtiges Amt*) in Berlin:

I frequently hear expressed here, even among serious people, the wish that at last a final and fundamental reckoning should be had with the Serbs. The Serbs should first be presented with a number of demands, and in case they should not accept these, energetic measures should be taken. I take opportunity of every such occasion to advise quietly but very impressively and seriously against too hasty steps.^[18]

This report, when received in Berlin on 2 July, was greeted by *Kaiser* Wilhelm II with a characteristically irate outburst. In the margins of the document he scribbled angrily: "Who authorized him to act that way? That is very stupid. None of his business, as it is solely Austria's matter what she plans." Here we also find the first of much encouraging advice from Berlin to the ally in Vienna: "The Serbs must be sorted, and that right soon!" It is perhaps understandable that the *Kaiser* reacted in this way. He was genuinely struck by the loss of his friend, and the idea of a regicide was particularly abhorrent to him. The assassination was a crime that had to be avenged. For the *Auswärtiges Amt*, these marginal notes meant the *Kaiser's* go-ahead for Vienna to react as it pleased, and Ambassador Tschirschky abandoned his initially cautious attitude. From now on, the government in Vienna would only receive encouragement from its ally.

The Hoyos-Mission

However, early in the crisis Austria-Hungary could not be certain how Germany would act in the event of an Austrian-Serbian war. Therefore, an envoy was despatched to ascertain Berlin's position. On 5 July, Count [Alexander von Hoyos \(1876-1937\)](#) arrived in the German capital with a memorandum and a letter by *Kaiser* Franz Joseph which explained the Austrian predicament in the wake of the assassination and in view of Serbian provocations and asked the German decision-makers for their views on Austria's future plans.

In Berlin, the possibility of a Balkan crisis was greeted favourably by military and political decision-makers, for it was felt that such a crisis would ensure that Austria would definitely be involved in a resulting conflict (unlike during the earlier [Moroccan crises](#), for example). When Hoyos arrived in Berlin to ascertain the powerful ally's position in case Austria made demands of Serbia, he was assured that Germany would support Austria unconditionally, even if it chose to go to war over the assassination, and even if such a war were to turn into a European war. This was Germany's so-called "[blank cheque](#)" to Vienna. The Austrian Ambassador in Berlin, Count [Ladislaus Szögyény-Marich \(1841-1916\)](#) reported that

the Kaiser authorised me to inform our Gracious Majesty that we might in this case, as in all others, rely upon Germany's full support. He must, as he said before, first hear what the Imperial Chancellor had to say, but he did not doubt in the least that Herr von

Bethmann Hollweg would entirely agree with him. This was especially so regarding an action on our part against Serbia. But it was his (Kaiser Wilhelm's) opinion that this action must not be delayed. Russia's attitude would in any case be hostile, but for this he had been prepared for years, and even if a war between Austria-Hungary and Russia were to result, we could be convinced that Germany would stand by our side with the usual faithfulness of an ally.^[19]

Historians have debated why Germany's decision-makers decided to support their ally come what may, and some consider the "blank cheque" a crucial step that led Europe into war. For Dominic Lieven, for example, this was "the single most decisive moment in Europe's descent into war".^[20] In the calculations of Germany's leaders, the crisis was a golden opportunity to test the Entente which seemed to be encircling Germany and its weakening ally Austria-Hungary. They were still confident that a war, should it break out, could be won by the Triple Alliance partners (Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy), while in the long run, the Entente Powers (Russia, France and Great Britain) would be come invincible. The worry was in particular that Russia would increase its army and improve its [railway infrastructure](#) to such an extent that in the near future it would become impossible for Germany to fight a successful war against Russia. Germany would then be helplessly "encircled" by hostile powers in the East (Russia) and West (France, and possibly Britain). Chancellor [Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg \(1856-1921\)](#) summarised this strategy thus: "If war does not come, if the Tsar does not want it or concerned France counsels peace then we still have the chance to break the Entente apart over this."^[21] Thus Russia would have been defeated – either militarily or diplomatically, before its army increases could take effect.

Planning the Ultimatum

Berlin's promise of support enabled the Viennese government to plan its next steps against Serbia. This occurred in an important meeting of the Joint Council of Ministers on 7 July. All participants were aware of the fact that any action against Serbia could not only lead to a war with that country, but had the potential of escalating into a war against Russia (Russia saw itself as a protector of Slavic people and might not be prepared to look on as Serbia was crushed by Austria-Hungary). Berchtold explained that "a war with Serbia could result in a war against Russia". This was, however, unavoidable in the long term, he felt, because of Russia's anti-Habsburg foreign policy. "The logical result [...] would be to get in advance of our foes and by a timely reckoning with Serbia to stop the development of the process at present going on, which we would not be able to do later."^[22] In other words, a preventive war against an ever-strengthening Russia, as well as a "reckoning" with Serbia, was on the cards. Following long discussions the meeting agreed that a war with Serbia needed to be provoked with an ultimatum, so that, at least outwardly, Vienna appeared to be acting reasonably and moderately, rather than simply declaring war on Serbia immediately. Only the Hungarian Prime Minister [István Tisza \(1861-1918\)](#) disagreed with the general mood of the meeting

that a purely diplomatic success, even if it ended with a glaring humiliation of Serbia, would be worthless, and that therefore such far-reaching demands must be addressed

to Serbia which will make a refusal almost certain, so that the road to a radical solution by means of a military action should be opened.^[23]

The planned ultimatum needed to be kept a secret while Austria-Hungary's decision-makers waited for the right moment to make their demands of Serbia. The delay was necessary for a number of reasons. This was the time of the annual harvest leave of soldiers. Not only would it have looked suspicious if these had all been recalled to their barracks, but also the harvest could not be jeopardised. As Berchtold explained on 6 July, "the Monarchy would have to exist from the harvest for an entire year".^[24] Another reason for secrecy was that the other powers should not suspect that Vienna might plan a military strike against Serbia. And furthermore, an additional problem was posed by a planned state visit of the French President and other members of the [French government](#) to Russia. Between 21 and 23 July the two allies would be able to discuss their joint response to any Austrian provocation of Serbia. Rather than allow this, it was decided to time the ultimatum so that it would arrive at the most inconvenient point in time for Russia's and France's leaders, just when President [Raymond Poincaré \(1860-1934\)](#) had boarded the ship *France* to begin his long journey home. He would not step on French soil until 29 July, leaving the French government essentially without effective leadership. As Berchtold informed *Kaiser* Franz Joseph:

All those present [at a further joint council's meeting on 14 July] shared my opinion that if we sent the ultimatum during the meeting in St Petersburg, this might be regarded as an affront, and that a personal discussion between the ambitious President of the Republic and the Tsar about the new situation created by the despatch of the ultimatum would increase the probability that France and Russia may join in a war.^[25]

The text of the ultimatum was decided in a further ministerial council meeting on 14 July, as well as details about its delivery. It was to be deliberately unacceptable in character, and only forty-eight hours would be given to Belgrade to respond. Berchtold advised *Kaiser* Franz Joseph on the same day: "The text of the note to be sent to Belgrade, as it was settled today, is such that we must reckon with the probability of war."^[26]

While most decision-makers in Vienna and Berlin did not actually want a *European war*, the available evidence shows that they were certainly willing to risk it. In Vienna, they were motivated by a growing awareness of Austria-Hungary's increasing loss of prestige and by a fatalism of what the future would hold which meant they preferred, in the words of a contemporary German saying, an "end with terror to a terror that never ends". In Berlin, they had been encouraged to accept the risk of a European war by Germany's leading military advisers who had advocated war "the sooner the better" on many occasions and who had assured the politicians that Germany stood a good chance of defeating its enemies. Germany's military leaders had been conjuring up the image of a Russia that could still be defeated by Germany at this time, but that in future would be too strong to be taken on successfully.^[27] These fatalistic views were shared by their military colleagues in Rome and Vienna, and in London and Paris, too, there was growing concern of Russia's predicted future strength. Neither France nor Britain felt they could abandon Russia for fear of what would happen if

she emerged victorious from the war. Unfortunately, such estimations of Russia's perceived strength did nothing to reassure Russians that their future was not in jeopardy.

Throughout these early days of the crisis, Vienna's leaders kept their colleagues in Berlin informed of their plans, while to the outside world, both governments gave the impression of calm, even sending their main decision-makers on holiday to keep up this illusion – Wilhelm II considered this to be “childish”, but it was arguably much more devious than that.^[28] It certainly helped put the other powers off the scent. As [Jean-Jacques Becker](#) has put it, “it is hard to imagine the leaders of the country indulging in the joys of tourism [...] having plotted the outbreak of a European war”, and yet, this was the case for Austria-Hungary and Germany, where under the pretence of holidaying a war was plotted behind the scenes.^[29]

The Italian alliance partner was also deliberately kept in the dark, save for some indiscretions of the German Ambassador [Ludwig von Flotow \(1867-1948\)](#). Despite such deliberate deception, Russian, French and British leaders expected a reaction by Vienna and used this time to co-ordinate their stance (e.g. during the French presidential trip to St. Petersburg) – though when details of it finally emerged, the harsh nature of the ultimatum surprised everyone. It is due to this deception that the other major powers did not play a decisive role in the July Crisis until 23 July, the day when the ultimatum was finally presented in Belgrade. While increasingly suspicious of the intentions of the Austrian government and aware that some action was being planned, the governments of the other European powers expected that Austria-Hungary would seek redress of some kind, but they were largely unaware of the extent of the secret plotting in Vienna and Berlin. In the capitals of the other Great Powers, Vienna's outrage at this act of terrorism was certainly shared, and it was conceded that it would have the right redress of some kind. However, the other powers were taken by surprise by the severity of the demands made of Serbia and now suspected that Vienna's decision-makers were determined to provoke a war. The harsh nature of the ultimatum confirmed to the decision-makers in St. Petersburg, Paris and London that they needed to work together to prevent a war from breaking out, or if that proved impossible, to be in the best possible position to wage it. For St. Petersburg and Paris, this meant co-ordinating their response with each other, as well as trying to ensure that London would declare its support for the Entente in case of war.

The Ultimatum and Mediation Attempts

Hopes that an amicable solution might be found were dashed at 6 p.m. on 23 July, when the Austrian Minister in Belgrade, [Wladimir Giesl \(1860-1936\)](#), delivered a forty-eight-hour ultimatum to the Serbian Foreign Ministry, timed carefully to ensure maximum inconvenience for France and Russia in particular, as the French President was known to be on the way home from St. Petersburg at the time the Austrian demands were handed over.^[30] In addition to declaring that the Serbian government was guilty of tolerating the existence of a subversive movement in Serbia, which opposed the annexation of Bosnia by Austria-Hungary, the text of the ultimatum demanded that Belgrade would have to accept the annexation of Bosnia. It was asked to issue an official apology in

the Serbian press, distancing itself from “the whole body of the efforts whose ultimate object it is to separate from the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy territories that belong to it”.^[31] Some further ten separate demands forced the Serbian government, *inter alia*, to suppress all publications which might incite hatred and contempt of the Monarchy; to dissolve the organisation *Narodna Odbrana*; to eliminate anti-Habsburg teaching materials; to dismiss all officers and officials who have carried out propaganda against Austria-Hungary; to assist Austrian organs to suppress subversive movements in Serbia; to conduct a judicial enquiry against all participants in the 28 June plot; to arrest Major Vojta Tankosić and Milan Ciganović, a Serbian government official, “who have both been compromised by the results of the enquiry”; to dismiss and punish those border guards who assisted in the smuggling of weapons into Bosnia.

Baron Giesl, the Austro-Hungarian Minister in Belgrade, had been charged with issuing the ultimatum, and instructed: “However the Serbs react to the ultimatum, you must break off relations and it must come to war.”^[32] Forty-eight hours after he had delivered the ultimatum, Giesl and the rest of the Austrian delegation hastily left Belgrade. However, the Serbian response to the “unacceptable” ultimatum astonished everyone and was, in the words of Christopher Clark, a “masterpiece of diplomatic equivocation”.^[33] Equivocally or not, on paper, the Belgrade government agreed to almost all of the demands, making Austria’s predetermined decision to reject Belgrade’s response look suspicious in the eyes of those European powers who wanted to try to preserve the peace. It is, however, doubtful that even the fullest acceptance of the Austrian terms would have secured a different outcome for Belgrade. As [Thomas Otte](#) notes, “however conciliatory the official reply to the Austro-Hungarian note, it was never likely to be sufficient. Vienna wanted war”.^[34] Even *Kaiser* Wilhelm II now thought that every reason to go to war had gone. In Britain, Foreign Secretary Sir [Edward Grey \(1862-1933\)](#) took heart from the Serbian reply and suggested (repeatedly) that the issue could be resolved at the conference table, but his mediation proposals were only given half-hearted support by Berlin and not taken up by Vienna.

Instead, from 23 July the crisis was dominated by attempts on the side of the Entente as well as the Alliance to get Grey to declare Britain’s position. Both sides hoped their hand would be strengthened with a clear declaration from London as to whose side it might be on. It is important to bear in mind that from the delivery of the ultimatum onwards, this was no longer a crisis dominated by the decision of the Dual Alliance partners. Whereas until this point the Entente partners conferred with one another in the face of rumours and small amounts of intelligence gleaned from spies and careless diplomats, now France, Russia and Great Britain had to react and make decisions which would affect the outcome of events. However, despite being pressed by its Entente partners, the [British government](#), at this point still preoccupied with the Irish question and determined to stay out of a continental quarrel, refused until the very end of July to commit to its allies. In an effort to try and prevent an escalation of the crisis, the British Foreign Secretary kept his cards close to his chest and refused to commit Britain one way or the other.

It has been argued that Britain could have played a more decisive role by declaring its intentions to

support France earlier, and that the outcome of the crisis might have been different as a result. According to this point of view, if Germany's decision-makers had known earlier and with certainty that Britain would not have remained [neutral](#), they would have accepted mediation proposals and would have counselled peace in Vienna. Certainly Berlin worked on the (misconceived) assumption that British neutrality was possible, and even likely. However, it was impossible for Grey to declare Britain's hand given that the British cabinet was divided over an involvement in a European war, and no definite decision to support France was possible until Germany's violation of neutral [Belgium](#) provided Grey with a much-needed reason for joining the war. By then, he was so convinced that Britain needed to declare its support for France and Russia that he threatened to resign over the issue.^[35]

In the crucial last days of July, Britain's decision-makers were torn between their fear of a victorious Germany or a victorious Russia, if the latter managed to win the war without British support. We can of course only speculate if an earlier declaration of British involvement would have changed the minds of decision-makers in Vienna or Berlin and made them more inclined to accept mediation instead of war. The prospect of British neutrality, based on an a misunderstanding by the German Ambassador in London, Prince [Karl Max von Lichnowsky \(1860-1928\)](#), certainly led to last minute attempts in Berlin to change the deployment plan for one that only sent German troops to the East, suggesting that British neutrality was a coveted outcome in Germany and might have changed how it began the fighting.^[36] Nonetheless, it would seem unfair to see the ambivalence of Sir Edward Grey's policy as a cause of the war, not least because his hesitant attitude was motivated by the desire to *avoid* an escalation of the crisis, although this certainly allowed Germany to indulge in the illusion of British neutrality.^[37] Grey's hands were tied, however, as the British public and the majority of the Cabinet were not ready to go to war over Serbia until Belgium's demise finally provided a reason to become involved in continental affairs. Until that point Grey had feared that a definite promise of support might have led France or Russia to accept the risk of war more willingly, and had consistently refused to declare Britain's hand one way or the other.

In France, decision-making was hampered by the fact that the senior statesmen were abroad on their state visit to St. Petersburg for many of the crucial days of the crisis (as we have seen, the ultimatum was timed to be presented at the least opportune moment for French decision-makers). France's attitude vis-à-vis its Russian ally has been much scrutinised by historians in order to ascertain if undue pressure, or at least the ready offer of support, influenced decisions in St. Petersburg and if war-guilt can thus be attributed to France (an argument advanced, for example, by revisionists in the interwar years).^[38] Certainly, the two allies reassured themselves of mutual support and agreed on "an intransigent opposition to any Austrian measure against Serbia".^[39] Poincaré certainly appears to have been willing to risk a war with his stance, if Germany and Austria chose not to back down "in the face of such unflinching solidarity", and as Christopher Clark points out, it seems as if the two allies did not discuss what measures they would accept Austria to take legitimately following the assassination, instead simply agreeing on rejection of any demands made

of Serbia.^[40]

France was caught uncomfortably between two stools, wanting to reassure Russia that it could count on support from Paris while needing to appear conciliatory to keep Britain on side. Its desire to ensure British support even affected its military plans. Nothing should suggest to the Entente partner that France might be responsible for the onset of hostilities, and mobilisation measures had to be postponed until reliable news had been received of German moves, while French troops were deliberately withdrawn ten kilometres behind the border to ensure that hostile acts would not even result accidentally.

In the weeks following the assassination, Russia's decision-makers reacted with alarm to the rumours that Austria might be planning to adopt severe measures against Serbia. Having initially been reassured by Vienna's denials, the surprise at the ultimatum was all the greater, and the text of the ultimatum suggested to Foreign Minister [Sergeij Sazonov \(1860-1927\)](#) immediately that war would be "unavoidable".^[41] In a meeting of the Council of Ministers on 24 July, the Ministers discussed the fact that demands had been made of Serbia which were "wholly unacceptable to the Kingdom of Serbia as a sovereign state". Nonetheless, the decision was made to advise Serbia not to offer any resistance to any armed invasion, while Vienna was to be asked to extend the time limit, and permission for mobilisation was to be sought to cover all eventualities.^[42] On 25 July measures for a partial mobilisation of four districts (the "period preparatory to war") were decided, and put into force early on 26 July. Much has been made of this early decision by historians who attribute responsibility for the war to Russia.^[43] However, as Russia's decision-makers were at pains to stress, this mobilisation did not make war unavoidable, though it is fair to say that the decision to begin the period preparatory to war "was the first Russian move down [the] slippery slope" to war.^[44] At the same time, the [Russian government](#) was keen to support Britain's mediation proposals and they also pressed the British to decide if they would become involved in a potential war on the side of the Franco-Russian alliance.

The prospect of Russia's support was a great relief to Prime Minister Nikola Pašić in Belgrade, and it has been argued that Serbia's rejection of parts of the ultimatum may have been made on the basis of this support.^[45] However, it would have been impossible for Pašić to accept all of Austria-Hungary's conditions, not least because of Serbia's recent military successes, but also because, as we have seen, they were deliberately designed to be unacceptable to a sovereign state. Public opinion would arguably not have condoned such an outwardly visible expression of weakness, even if the Prime Minister had been inclined towards acceptance. Moreover, an investigation of the background of the assassination would have led the Austrians to Dragutin Dimitrijević, the head of the Serbian Military Intelligence, and the "Black Hand" organisation which had been behind the assassination. The demand of an Austrian-led enquiry was unacceptable because it would have revealed that the Serbian government, while not the instigators of the plot, had nonetheless had prior knowledge of it, and had failed in its attempt to prevent the murder from taking place.

Only at the very last minute, when it was clear that Britain, too, would become involved if war broke out, did German Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg try to restrain the Austrians, but his mediation proposals arrived far too late and were in any case not forceful enough. They also did not have the backing of Germany's military leaders who continued to encourage their colleagues in Vienna to make a swift move. Austria declared war on Serbia on 28 July, starting the "local war" that Vienna's decision-makers had wanted for some time, and they were unwilling to stop their war against Serbia in order to make further negotiations possible. With their declaration of war and immediate bombardment of the Serbian capital they set in motion a domino effect of mobilisation orders and declarations of war by Europe's major powers which resulted in a war that far exceeded what they had planned or wanted.

By 1 August, any attempts to localise the conflict had failed, and Germany found itself at war with Russia, as predicted as far back as Hoyos' visit to Berlin. Vienna's war against Serbia now became relegated behind the war against Russia, and Berlin expected its ally to change its military plans to prioritise a mobilisation against their shared Russian enemy. By the time Britain had declared war on Germany on 4 August, following Germany's invasion of neutral [Luxembourg](#) on 2 August and Belgium on 4 August (necessitated by Germany's deployment plan, the so-called [Schlieffen Plan](#)^[46]), the Alliance powers (without Italy, which had decided to stay neutral) faced the Entente powers in the "great fight" that had been dreaded and anticipated in equal measure for such a long time, but whose scale and outcome nobody could quite have imagined.

Conclusion

[Historians have argued over the origins of the First World War](#) for over a hundred years, and the July Crisis is a particularly controversial aspect of this long debate. The fact that in 1919 the victorious allies took the unusual step to attribute "war guilt" to Germany and its allies has resulted in a debate about the origins of the war that was from the start based on arguments over truth and lies. This was not helped by the fact that even before the war had broken out, lies were told about who had caused the crisis to escalate, as all sides tried to appear as though they had been attacked. No government could hope to sweep away millions of volunteers for a war of aggression. Their positioning and deceptions during the July Crisis and subsequently have obscured our view and have allowed historians to indulge in an unprecedented debate over the interpretation of the minutest of detail.

Why did "conflict avoidance" not work in 1914 as it had in previous crises?^[47] What was the role played by certain key decision-makers, such as the chiefs of staff, foreign ministers and monarchs? In 2003, Richard Hamilton and Holger Herwig contended: "Lloyd George's notion of the innocent or unintended 'slide' stands sharply opposed to the evidence now available".^[48] In one of the more recent major investigations of the July Crisis, "the most complex event of modern times", an impressive amount of international evidence is mustered without a case being made against a single state. "There is no smoking gun in this story; or, rather, there is one in the hands of every major character," argues Christopher Clark in a revisionist account that largely exonerates Germany where

once it had stood almost solely accused and focuses our attention on the decisions and actions of some of the other Great Powers instead.^[49] Eschewing to place any blame or responsibility harks back to [David Lloyd George \(1863-1945\)](#), whereas most accounts of the origins of the war since the 1960s have sought to advance arguments which foreground the culpability of some governments over those of others whilst weighing up evidence for all.^[50] Most would agree that examining the events of the summer of 1914 through a truly international lens is essential if we are to understand the actions of the “men of 1914”. Today there is still no consensus on the origins of the war, but there is continuing interest in examining the crisis from every conceivable angle and in new ways. However, while it is possible, based on the available documentary evidence, to construct an account which attributes some responsibility to any one or all of the major players in July 1914, nonetheless there were those, in Vienna and Berlin, who created a crisis following the assassination, and those, in St. Petersburg, Paris and London, who reacted to the deliberate provocation of Serbia by Austria-Hungary which in turn reacted to a perceived provocation from Serbia. If all leaders are considered responsible, then arguably they were not equally so. In the governments of the Central Powers, a deliberate decision was taken to use the “golden opportunity” of the Sarajevo crime as a trigger for a war that they had long wanted to fight, and that they considered unavoidable in the long run. Moreover, a diplomatic victory was considered worthless and was deliberately ruled out in Vienna, while in London, for example, a diplomatic solution was sought until the very last days of the crisis. It was up to the other governments to choose if they wanted to accept that Austria had a genuine grievance and accommodate their demands, or if they were prepared to call their bluff and risk a general European war. Motivated by a shared fatalism that believed a future European war would be inevitable and that saw the threat of decline of one’s own Great Power status if one appeared weak to one’s allies or even one’s own population, in the end they all chose not to back down and, encouraged by each other’s support, to face up to real and imagined threats. With hindsight, it is easy to condemn all governments for their actions, for they unleashed a conflict they could not control and, in the case of the Central Powers, that they ultimately could not win. But if we ask why this crisis was not de-escalated like others beforehand, the answer is simple: not everyone wanted to prevent a war, not everyone considered it the worst-possible outcome of the July Crisis, and some were willing to risk war rather than risk a decline in their international status.

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Notes

1. ↑ In particular, Clark, Christopher: *The Sleepwalkers. How Europe went to War in 1914*, London 2012, re-kindled the old debate over culpability and led to soul-searching in Germany where the eve of the centenary saw a renewed interest in the origins of the First World War.

2. † Among the most recent publications see e.g., Otte, Thomas G.: *July Crisis. The World's Descent into War*, Cambridge 2014; Martel, Gordon: *The Month that changed the World. July 1914*, Oxford 2014.
3. † For a recent discussion of these conflicts, see Geppert, Dominik/Mulligan, William/Rose, Andreas (eds.): *The Wars before the Wars. Conflict and International Politics before the outbreak of the First World War*, Cambridge 2015.
4. † Dülffer, Jost/Kröger, Martin/Wippich, Rolf-Harald (eds.): *Vermiedene Kriege. Deeskalation und Konflikte der Großmächte zwischen Krimkrieg und Erstem Weltkrieg (1856-1914)*, Munich 1997. More recently, the thesis that war was actually improbable was tested by Afflerbach, Holger and Stevenson, David (eds.): *An Improbable War?: The Outbreak of World War I and European Political Culture before 1914*, New York 2007.
5. † Mulligan, William: *The Origins of the First World War*, Cambridge 2010, p. 229. Similar arguments have been made, inter alia, by Afflerbach, Holger: *Der Dreibund. Europäische Großmacht- und Allianzpolitik vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg*, Munich 2003 and Kießling, Friedrich: *Gegen den "großen Krieg"? Entspannung in den internationalen Beziehungen, 1911-1914*, Munich 2002.
6. † According to Franz Ferdinand's latest biographer, Alma Hannig, it would be wrong, however, to consider him a member of a "peace party": *Franz Ferdinand. Die Biographie*, Vienna 2013.
7. † Princip testimony of 18 October 1914, cited in Otte, *July Crisis* 2014, p. 18.
8. † See Otte, *July Crisis* 2014, p. 35 on this point, and in particular the fact that it was in Pašić's and in the Austrian government's interest to deny any prior knowledge of the plot after the event.
9. † *The Times*, 29 June 1914, p. 9.
10. † On the Russian reaction, see Lieven, Dominic: *Towards the Flame. Empire, War and the End of Tsarist Russia*, London 2015, p. 313.
11. † Angelow, Jürgen: *Der Weg in die Urkatastrophe. Der Zerfall des alten Europa 1900-1914*, Berlin 2010, p. 118. For more details, see Hannig, *Franz Ferdinand* 2013.
12. † Cited in Fellner, Fritz: *Austria-Hungary*, in: Wilson, Keith M. (ed.): *Decisions for War, 1914*, London 1995, p. 14.
13. † For further information on the diplomatic events of the July Crisis see, inter alia, Geiss, Imanuel (ed.): *July 1914. The Outbreak of the First World War. Selected Documents*, London 1967; as well as Albertini, Luigi: *The Origins of the War of 1914*, 3 volumes, English translation, Oxford 1952-57; Fischer, Fritz: *War of Illusions. German Policies from 1911-1914*, London 1975; Joll, James: *Origins of the First World War*, London 2006; Wilson (ed.), *Decisions for War* 1995; Stevenson, David: *Armaments and the Coming of War*, Oxford 1999, pp. 366ff.; Langdon, John W.: *July 1914. The Long Debate 1918-1990*, New York et al. 1991; Stevenson, David: *The Outbreak of the First World War*, London 1997; Mombauer, Annika (ed.): *The origins of the First World War: diplomatic and military documents*, Manchester 2013.
14. † Flotow's indiscretion in conversations with San Giuliano between 14 and 16 July had given some of the game away, and the French military secret service were also aware of the Austro-Hungarian intention to issue an unacceptable ultimatum. See Schmidt, Stefan: *Frankreichs Außenpolitik in der Julikrise*, Munich 2009, p. 68; Mombauer, *Documents* 2013, nos 169, 179. Ambassador de Bunsen was able to report on 16 July that Vienna was planning a move against Serbia. *Ibid.*, no. 161.
15. † Conrad von Hötzendorf, Franz: *Aus meiner Dienstzeit 1906-1918*, 5 volumes, Vienna et al. 1921-25, volume I, p. 165.

16. † On the decision for war in Vienna, see e.g., Kronenbitter, Günther: 'Krieg im Frieden', Die Führung der k.u.k. Armee und die Großmachtpolitik Österreich-Ungarns 1906–1914, Munich 2003; Williamson, Samuel R.: Austria-Hungary and the Origins of the First World War, London 1991; Rauchensteiner, Manfred: Der Erste Weltkrieg und das Ende der Habsburgmonarchie, Vienna 2013.
17. † Conrad von Hötzendorf, Dienstzeit 1921-25, volume IV, pp. 33f.
18. † Mombauer, Documents 2013, no. 108.
19. † Ibid., no. 120.
20. † Lieven, Towards the Flame 2015, p. 317.
21. † Mombauer, Documents 2013, no. 138.
22. † Ibid., no. 134.
23. † Ibid., no. 134.
24. † Conrad von Hötzendorf, Dienstzeit 1921-25, volume IV, pp. 39-40.
25. † Mombauer, Documents 2013, no. 153.
26. † Ibid., no. 153.
27. † See Mombauer, Annika: Helmuth von Moltke and the Origins of the First World War, Cambridge 2001, pp. 121ff.
28. † Mombauer, Documents 2013, nos. 144, 142, 171.
29. † Becker cited in Keiger, John: Raymond Poincaré, Cambridge 2002, p. 165.
30. † For the text see e.g., Mombauer, Documents 2013, no. 180. For a detailed discussion of the delivery of the ultimatum and reactions to it see e.g., Otte, July Crisis 2014, pp. 222ff.
31. † Mombauer, Documents 2013, no. 180.
32. † Cited in Fellner, Austria-Hungary 1995, p. 15.
33. † Clark, Sleepwalkers 2012, p. 464.
34. † Otte, July Crisis 2014, p. 280.
35. † On Grey's role see the special issue: Sir Edward Grey and the outbreak of the First World War, International History Review 38/2, 2016.
36. † For details of the so-called misunderstanding of 1 August, see e.g., Mombauer, Moltke 2001, pp. 216-226.
37. † On this point, see also Mombauer, Annika: Sir Edward Grey, Germany and the Outbreak of the First World War: a Re-Evaluation, International History Review 38/2, 2016, pp. 301-325.
38. † More recently, Stefan Schmidt argues for France's decisive role in strengthening Russian resolve: Schmidt, Frankreichs Außenpolitik 2009. In Clark's interpretation, the state visit was "centrally concerned with the crisis unfolding in Central Europe", rather than following a scheduled programme that pre-dated the assassination: Clark, Sleepwalkers 2012, p. 443. For details of the historiographical debate on the origins of the First World War see e.g., Mombauer, Annika: The Origins of the First World War. Controversies and Consensus, Harlow 2002.
39. † Clark, Sleepwalkers 2012, p. 449.
40. † Ibid., p. 450.
41. † See Lieven, Dominic: Russia and the Origins of the First World War, New York 1983, p. 140.
42. † See ibid., p. 144.

43. † E.g., McMeekin, Sean: *The Russian Origins of the First World War*, Cambridge, MA 2011.
44. † Lieven, *Towards the Flame* 2015, p. 326.
45. † Albertini, Luigi: *The Origins of the War of 1914*, 3 volumes, Oxford 1952–57 (Reprint: Enigma, New York 2005), volume 2, pp. 352-62; Clark, *Sleepwalkers* 2012, p. 462.
46. † For details on the debate on the nature of the Schlieffen Plan see e.g., Mombauer, Annika: *Of War Plans and War Guilt: the Debate Surrounding the Schlieffen Plan*, *Journal of Strategic Studies* 28/5, October 2005, pp. 857-885; Ehler, Hans/Epkenhans, Michael/Groß, Gerhard P. (eds.): *Der Schlieffenplan. Analyse und Dokumente*, Paderborn 2006. For details of Germany's war plans see Mombauer, Annika: *German War Plans*, in: Hamilton, Richard F. and Herwig, Holger H. (eds.): *War Planning 1914*, Cambridge 2010, pp. 48-79.
47. † On the argument of avoided conflicts, see e.g., Mulligan, *Origins* 2010; Afflerbach and Stevenson, *An Improbable War?* 2007.
48. † Hamilton, Richard F. and Herwig, Holger H. (eds.): *The Origins of World War I*, Cambridge 2003, p. 39.
49. † Clark, *Sleepwalkers* 2012, p. 561.
50. † Among them e.g., McMeekin, Sean: *July 1914. Countdown to War*, New York 2013; McMeekin, *The Russian Origins* 2011; Butler, Daniel Allen: *The Burden of Guilt: How Germany Shattered the Last Days of Peace, Summer 1914*, Philadelphia et al. 2010; Hoffmann, Dieter: *Der Sprung ins Dunkle, oder wie der 1. Weltkrieg entfesselt wurde*, Leipzig 2010; Beatty, Jack: *The Lost History of 1914: Why the Great War was not Inevitable*, London 2012; Hastings, Max: *Catastrophe. Europe Goes to War 1914*, London 2013; MacMillan, Margaret: *The War That Ended Peace. The Road to 1914*, London 2013; Mombauer, Annika: *Die Julikrise. Europas Weg in den Ersten Weltkrieg*, Munich 2014.

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