The JULY CRISIS

As the rest of Europe watched, Germany and Austria-Hungary tried to engineer war on their own terms.



e Kaiser rides with tain's future George V the 1901 funeral of een Victoria. The men, o were cousins, would to war in 1914.

The Austrians blamed the Serbian government for the murder of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo. The Serbs denied the charge – the killing had been the work of assassins. But the truth did not matter. The assassination gave the Austrians a perfect excuse to teach the Serbs a lesson for encouraging Slavic nationalism among the minorities of Austria-Hungary.

A harsh ultimatum

In the week after the assassination Austrian officials discussed the best way to punish their smaller neighbor. The chief of staff, General Conrad von Hötzendorf, wanted to mobilize the army to intimidate the Serbs. But such a course of action was dangerous. Russia might mobilize in turn to defend its threatened fellow Slavs.

There was a way around the problem. If Austria could get support from Germany, Russia would not dare risk a general war. Kaiser Wilhelm promised Vienna unconditional support. Reassured, the Austrians wrote an ultimatum to be sent to the Serbian government.

The ultimatum was harsh. It insisted that Serbia suppress all anti-Austrian propaganda. Serbia would have to dissolve all nationalist and terrorist groups. The Serbs would arrest and try any military officers implicated in anti-Austrian conspiracies and would tighten control of their borders with Austria. But Vienna's final term was

the harshest. The Austrians demanded its own representatives on Serbia's investigation of the plot and on the government agencies dealing with revolutionaries. Serbia would surrender its right to govern itself. If Serbia accepted the terms, it would be humiliated before the world.

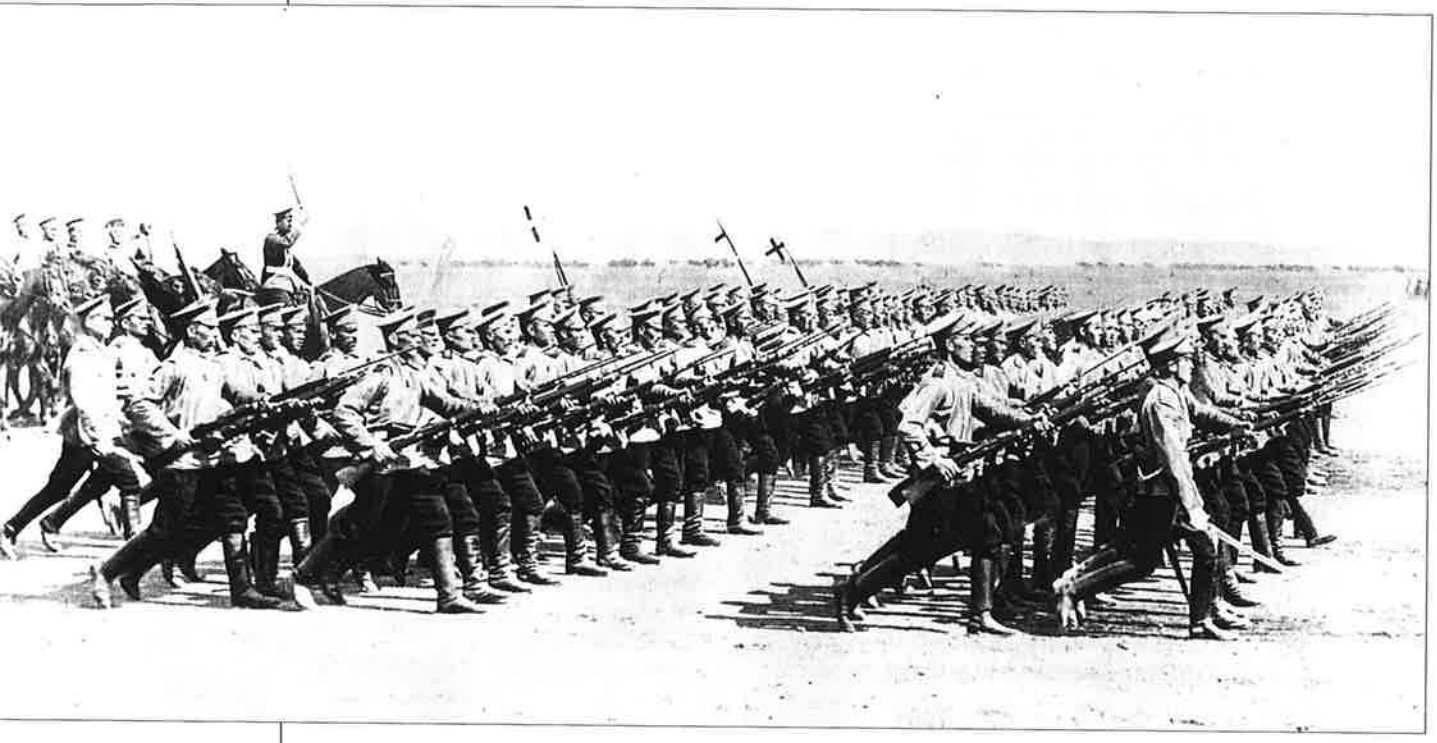
The Austrians knew that Belgrade would not accept such harsh terms. They did not want them to. A refusal would allow Austria to smash Serbia in a glorious, short war. The German government urged their allies on. They believed that if they and the Austrians acted positively, they would keep the Russians out of any fight.

Few other European leaders suspected that Vienna planned such a hardline reaction to the murder. Some people, such as French socialist leader Jean Jaurès, already warned against an impending catastrophe which they felt would engulf Europe. He urged a general workers' strike throughout Europe against war. But the continent's governments carried on as normal. A British diplomat recorded: "I have my doubts as to whether Austria will take any action of a serious character and I expect the storm will blow over."

On July 20 the French President, Raymond Poincaré, arrived in St. Petersburg with his prime minister for a long-planned three-day visit with their Russian allies. The Russian foreign minister, Sergei Sazonov, was relaxing on his country estate



Stockbrokers throng the streets of London during the July Crisis. Throughout Europe the threat of war caused a collapse of business.



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before the French arrived. The Russians ignored the few warnings that reached St. Petersburg that something terrible might be in the making.

The Austrians waited until Poincaré began his sea journey back to France on July 23. Then they delivered their ultimatum to the Serbs, giving them only 48 hours to comply. Russia could not contact its key allies. Austria believed that, isolated, Russia would back down and Serbia would have to capitulate.

The impact of the ultimatum

News of the ultimatum reached St. Petersburg on July 24. Sazonov understood its importance. He declared, "It is the European war." Britain's foreign secretary, Sir Edward Grey, called the ultimatum "the most formidable document I had ever seen addressed by one state to another."

In Belgrade, the Serbian capital, the ultimatum caused panic. The tight deadline boxed Serbia into a corner. The desperate Serbs telegraphed the Russian czar for support: "We cannot defend ourselves. Therefore we pray to Your Majesty to lend help as soon as possible.... We confidently hope that this appeal will find an echo in your generous Slav heart."

Preparations for war

Meanwhile Belgrade had to reply to Austria. The Serbs' formal response agreed to all of Vienna's demands except Austrian participation in Serbia's investigation. Austria declared this unacceptable and broke diplomatic relations. The next step was war.

Even before Serbia replied to Vienna, Russia had begun preparing for action. Austria's obvious intentions were intolerable within the European balance of power. On July 25 Czar Nicholas II ordered his army to begin preparing for mobilization. Both Berlin and Vienna dismissed the

move as precautionary. But both were ready to risk general war if necessary.

Now the prospect of war began to alarm the other powers. British Foreign Secretary Grey invited the European nations to discuss how to limit the hostilities to just Serbia and Austria. But the Germans were determined to bring the crisis to a head. They pressed Austria to start military operations immediately: "Any delay is regarded as a great danger because of the interference of other powers."

The Austrians could not meet their ally's urging. General Conrad, the chief of staff, told the government that the disorganized mobilization system meant that he would not be ready to fight until August 12 at the earliest. The delay would allow the other powers time to offer diplomatic solutions to the crisis. If Austria still went to war, it would appear as the aggressor, which could mean that Austria would be in a weaker position when it came to negotiating an eventual peace treaty.

Austria's leaders overruled Conrad. They decided on July 27 to declare war the next day. They still hoped that bluff and threat would prevent war. Meantime Russia had taken another step: the czar ordered partial mobilization on July 26.

Last efforts for peace

Russia's mobilization system, like Austria's, was slow. There was still time for diplomatic negotiation to defuse the crisis. The consensus was for peace. Russian Foreign Minister Sazonov searched for "a bridge to satisfy Austrian demands." But he insisted that Russia would not tolerate Serbian humiliation at Austria's hands. By July 27 all the powers had accepted Grey's invitation to hold talks except Germany. Everything depended on the German government restraining Austria.



That was a vain hope. In Germany Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg noted that "it was of highest importance to prevent Britain from making common cause with Russia and France." He sabotaged Grey's invitation to Austria, which Grey sent to him on its way to Vienna. Bethmann-Hollweg changed the message and delayed sending it on. He also deceived the Kaiser about what was going on. When he finally showed Wilhelm a copy of Serbia's reply to the Austrian ultimatum on July 28, the Kaiser exclaimed: "But that eliminates any reason for war." It was too late. Barely an hour later Austria declared war on Belgrade.

Bethmann-Hollweg still had work to do. He wanted Russia to take the blame for

1914

JULY

Europe

Jean Jaurès, French socialist leader and antiwar campaigner, who was killed on the eve of war.

WAR PROFILES

Jean Jaurès
1859–1914
French socialist

Jean Jaurès was one of Europe's leading antiwa campaigners in the decade before World War I. He had served i the French parliament and been a philosophy teacher.

Jaurès was a founder of the French socialist party and helped set up the socialist paper *L'Humanité* in 1904. His socialist beliefs convinced him that a war would only be bad for Europe's workers. In books, articles, and speeches he argued tha French and German workers should form an alliance against the war.

Through the crisis of July 1914 Jaurès continued to argue for a combined workers' campaign against the war. But many French and German workers had strong nationalistic beliefs and were excited by the prospect of war. On the evening of July 31, as he finished a meal in a Paris cafe, Jaurès was shot dead by a French nationalist.



A postcard commemorates the men who led Germany into war. The Kaiser sits in front of the table, surrounded by his military commanders.

the outbreak of war. Germany's diplomats promoted the argument, saying that the Austrians had assured the Russians that they were not aiming to capture Serbian territory, so Russia was not obliged to go to war. If it did, Germany would be bound to help Austria, but Russia would be seen as having started the war. Bethmann-Hollweg largely succeeded in his aim. Some historians blamed Russia for starting the war until 1961, when long-secret documents demolished the chancellor's fiction. Bethmann-Hollweg also planned to keep Britain out of the war by preserving the illusion that Germany was defending itself. It was a vain hope.

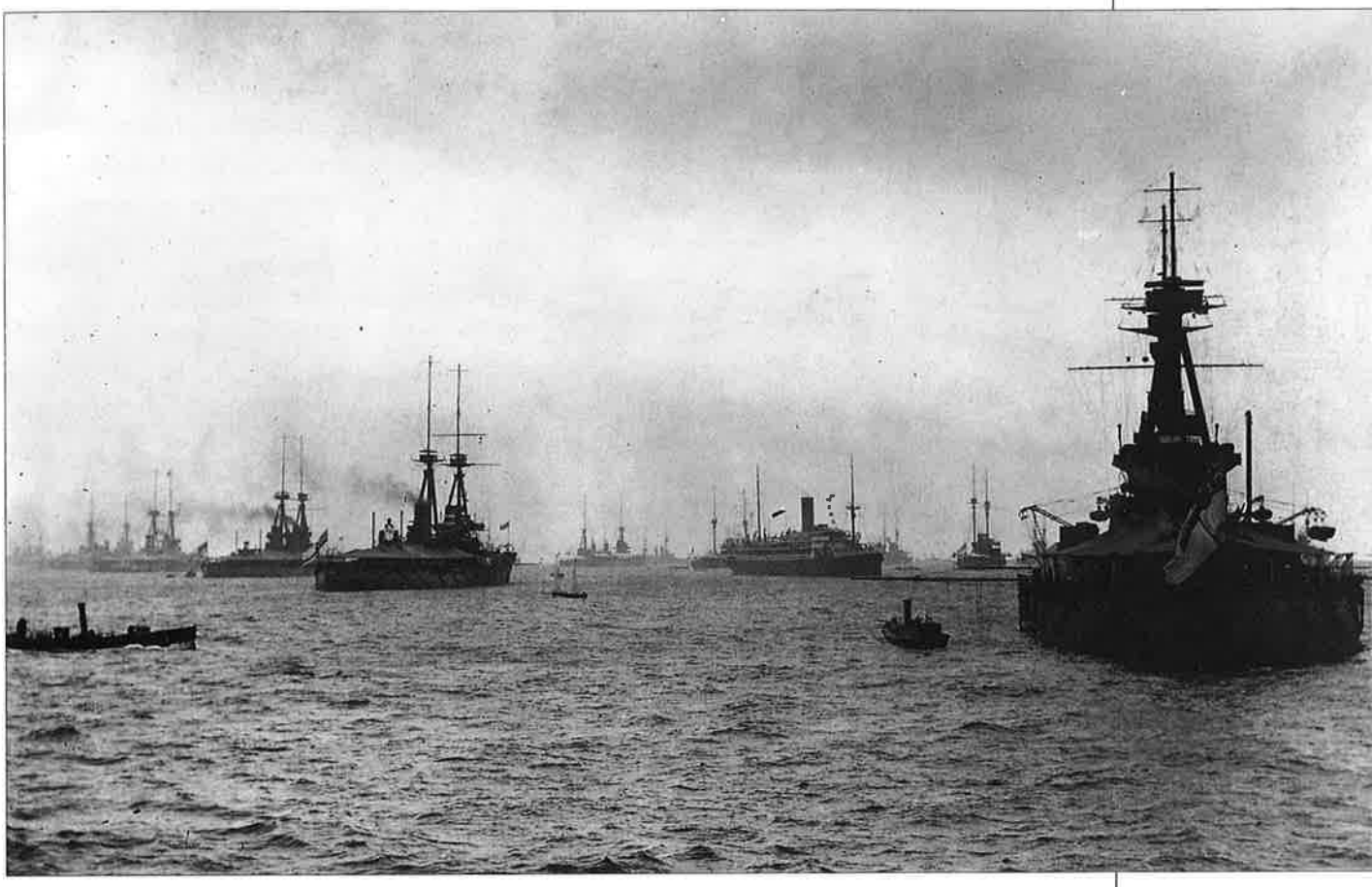
On July 28 the Austrian and German generals urged their governments to order full mobilization in response to Russia's partial mobilization two days earlier. If Bethmann-Hollweg had ever been in doubt about the implications of Germany's actions, Chief of Staff Helmuth von Moltke now laid them out clearly. Germany's mobilization plans meant that if the Kaiser ordered mobilization then all of Europe would inevitably go to war.

Bethmann-Hollweg hesitated. He was waiting for Russia to order a general mobilization. But military considerations began to outrun political concerns: The Schlieffen Plan called for Germany's army to enter neutral Belgium soon after mobilization. The military chiefs were eager to begin.

Germany's civil leaders had other reasons to be cautious. On the morning of July

30, after Britain's ambassador met with Bethmann-Hollweg, Foreign Secretary Grey called Germany's intentions "infamous," a strong term in diplomatic language. Grey spelled out Britain's position. If France were drawn into war with Germany, Britain would go to war too.

If Austria's argument with Serbia led to general war, Germany would stand with Austria against Russia, France, Britain, and probably Italy and Romania. Bethmann-Hollweg's policy had collapsed. He gazed into the abyss of general war and his nerve failed him. He telegraphed Vienna to reenter negotiations with Russia. Minutes later, however, he saw a telegram which suggested that Britain might still remain neutral. The chancellor canceled his instructions to Vienna: "The general staff has just informed me that military measures by our neighbors compel speedy decision if we are not to be taken by surprise."



The British fleet, mass for review on the eve war.

On July 30 Kaiser Wilhelm II heard about Russia's partial mobilization four days earlier. He declared that Czar Nicholas II was "taking on himself the guilt." At least one part of Bethmann-Hollweg's strategy had been successful. The Germans had not been seen to act first. The same day Russia ordered a full mobilization.

Next evening in France, as if symbolically, a prowar Frenchman shot dead the great spokesman for peace, Jean Jaurès. In Berlin, St. Petersburg, Paris, Vienna, and London governments prepared for war. It was only hours away.

WHERE TO FIND

Assassination in Sarajevo: 1:90
Conrad: 4:50
Poincaré: 1:24
Moltke: 2:11
Schlieffen Plan: 2:10
Declarations of War: 1:108