

## The Great War

The unholy mix of general political alliances and hair-trigger military strategies guaranteed a vast bloodletting. The balance of power had lost any semblance of the flexibility it had during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Wherever war erupted (and it would almost certainly be in the Balkans), the Schlieffen Plan saw to it that the initial battles would be fought in the West between countries having next to no interest in the immediate crisis. Foreign policy had abdicated to military strategy, which now consisted of gambling on a single throw of the dice. A more mindless and technocratic approach would have been difficult to imagine.

Though the military leaders of both sides insisted on the most destructive kind of war, they were ominously silent about its political consequences in light of the military technology they were pursuing. What would Europe look like after a war on the scale they were planning? What changes could justify the carnage they were preparing?

Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy*

The armies of 1914 were equipped to inflict appalling human and material destruction upon their enemies, but the technology of movement lagged. Worse, the vast mobilized masses had outgrown the ability of the commanders quickly to communicate with them.

Max Hastings, *Catastrophe 1914*

The Allied and Associated Governments affirm and Germany accepts the responsibility of Germany and her allies for causing all the loss and damage to which the Allied and Associated Governments and their nationals have been subjected as a consequence of the war imposed upon them by the aggression of Germany and her allies.

Article 231, Treaty of Versailles

The facts of the assassination are not in dispute, although much that happened afterward is. Two cells with seven assassins, three of whom came directly from Belgrade, gathered in Sarajevo in the days preceding a state visit of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Hapsburg throne, and his wife Sophie. Their primary target was Ferdinand, but both were

ultimately killed. The couple was certainly not popular in Vienna. The original heir apparent, Rudolph, Emperor Franz Joseph's son, committed suicide in 1889 with his mistress at Mayerling, outside Vienna: She was unacceptable to Franz Joseph and his court as a commoner, and life without her was unacceptable to Rudolph. But Franz Ferdinand's choice of a wife was hardly more acceptable to the monarchy—Sophie Chotek came from a remote branch of the Czech nobility, and her marriage to Franz was declared morganatic when they were wedded in 1900. "This placed them beyond the social pale of most of Austria's haughty aristocracy," comments Max Hastings in *Catastrophe 1914*. The marriage was successful, but, Hastings adds, "their lives were marred by the petty humiliations heaped upon her, an unroyal royal appendage." Neither figure was well-liked at court, and they were little mourned. This did not affect the Austrian government's reaction to the murders, however, and Franz Joseph, despite his distaste for Sophie, was said to have been enraged. The killings marked another triumph for "regicides" and another member of the Hapsburg family lost to terrorism: Empress Elizabeth had been fatally stabbed by an anarchist as she strolled around Lake Geneva in 1898. (She enjoyed even less security on her trip than her nephew did on his in 1914. She had traveled incognito—or so her entourage believed—and was accompanied on her walk only by her lady-in-waiting.)

The date June 28 was Franz Ferdinand and Sophie's wedding anniversary as well as the date of their arrival in Sarajevo. The schedule of Franz Ferdinand's trip, including the details of his itinerary, had been announced by the monarchy in March, a step that only added to the danger of travel: It gave the conspirators in Belgrade ample time to plan the assassination. The Archduke spent the days preceding his arrival in Sarajevo in a nearby village and arrived in the city train station in the morning. He and Sophie would travel from there to town hall for a ceremony and thence to a museum.

Franz Ferdinand's trip was thoroughly misconceived from the outset, marked by errors that would have stunning consequences for the twentieth century. Sarajevo was the capital of Bosnia-Herzegovina, which had been given to the Hapsburgs as a territory at the Berlin Conference even though the Ottoman Empire maintained nominal suzerainty over it. The Serbian state was created at the same time. In 1908, Bosnia-Herzegovina was formally annexed by Austria-Hungary and became a province of the state—one that Max Hastings justly calls “one of the most turbulent and perilous regions his uncle [Franz Joseph] ruled.” Serbia, an expansionist country, claimed it as part of “Greater Serbia,” though a census in the 1870s indicated that less than half the population was Serbian. (The balance was Croat and Muslim.) June 28 was especially inapposite for a visit; it was recognized by Serbs everywhere as the date when a Serb legion was defeated by an expanding Ottoman Empire in Kosovo in 1389. The overlap was probably no more than a coincidence that the Austrians overlooked, but it added to the sense of provocation for the Serbs. That Franz Ferdinand favored greater autonomy for the multiple nationalities that populated Austria-Hungary meant nothing to irredentists in Serbia. Indeed, one reason for his visit to the province was to establish how well it had been integrated into the Empire and the level of goodwill that prevailed among the nationalities crowded together there.

After detraining in Sarajevo, the couple and their entourage traveled in a six-vehicle motorcade down the Appel Quay to city hall, along the length of the river Miljacka. The security detail was negligible, and there were no barriers between the crowds along the quay and the fifty-year-old heir apparent. He reportedly disliked elaborate security procedures and wanted this part of his trip in particular to be as open as possible, free of any hint of danger from the Serb minority. But at some point in the ride after the couple and their entourage were on their way to town hall, one of the seven would-be assassins waiting along the route pitched a bomb at the lead

car. It either bounced off the back of it or got knocked off its path by someone standing on the running board. It rolled under the car immediately following, exploding and injuring some of the occupants. Remarkably, the motorcade briefly slowed but continued on its way to town hall. After an exchange of conventional remarks among the Archduke and officials of the city, the couple considered canceling the remainder of the trip and returning to Vienna, but chose instead to go to the hospital and visit those who had been wounded some hours before.

But the members of Ferdinand's entourage failed to tell the drivers of the changed itinerary, and instead of going down the quay to the hospital, the lead driver with the royal couple turned right on Franz Joseph street, taking the planned route to the museum. Informed of his error, the driver stopped the car, which, lacking reverse gear, had to be pushed laboriously back to the Quay. And that's when Gavrilo Princip struck. No more than a matter of feet from the car, Princip stepped forward, briefly considered whether he should shoot Sophie, decided to do so, and then aimed his pistol at Franz Ferdinand. Two bullets from a handgun killed the couple, orphaned their three children, and ushered in a cataclysmic war that in turn led to further horrors in the decades to follow. Princip was immediately arrested. (He died of tuberculosis in an Austrian prison near the end of the war.)

The sequence of events that followed the murders is well known. Austria rounded up as many of the plotters lingering in the capital as it could find. Assuming, more or less accurately, that the assassination plot originated with the Belgrade government, Austria insisted on supervising an investigation in Serbia and presented an ultimatum demanding this on July 25. The Serbs equivocated, and three days later, Austria declared war on Serbia. On July 25, the Russians began a partial mobilization that was quickly detected by German agents inside the country, and this led Germany to declare war on Russia on August 1. Two days later, Germany

declared war on France. Germany was intent on executing the Schlieffen Plan, which called for a massive sweep through Belgium and south into France. An example of the rigid military planning that Kissinger decries in *Diplomacy*, the strategy called for an invasion force that crossed through both sides of the Ardennes, the forest on the German-Belgium-Luxembourg border. One column would occupy Luxemburg and pass on to the west. The other would move to the west and then south into France, with the ultimate goal of enveloping Paris from the west. The approach enabled the Germans to avoid French fortifications to the south at Nancy, Verdun, Epinal, and Belfort, but the march into Belgium brought England into the war immediately. That was just one of the deadly flaws of the Schlieffen Plan. For three centuries, England's foreign policy had focused on maintaining a balance of power on the continent and above all of keeping the Low Countries free of foreign domination. Precisely to achieve this goal, Britain, notoriously hostile to "continental entanglements," became a signatory to the 1839 treaty that guaranteed Belgium's neutrality. In theory, the treaty obliged England (and the other signatories) to defend Belgium if it were invaded, though the Liberal Party in 1914 was reluctant to respect the commitment. Before the invasion took place, however, Germany improbably asked Belgium to offer no resistance and accept its temporary military presence. Albert, the Belgian king, was assured that German troops would vacate the country shortly and indemnify it for any damages caused. Not surprisingly, the Belgians rejected the offer and entered into war with Germany after the latter had occupied Luxemburg.

And the British? They were almost as insecurely attached to the Entente as the Italians were to the Triple Alliance. (Italy formally declared neutrality a few days into August, a step that relieved France of the need to defend its southeastern frontier. The 80,000 men this freed up would play a critical role in the fighting in the north in August and September. The prospect of

grabbing Istria and the South Tyrol from Austria, however, brought Italy into the war on the side of the Entente in 1915.) England had entered into informal military discussions with France in the first years of the century, an undertaking pushed resolutely in the decade preceding the war by General Henry Wilson, director of military intelligence. The purpose was to build an informal alliance that was concealed not only from Parliament but also from the various cabinets that held office from about 1900 to 1914. Edward Gray, foreign minister from 1905 to 1916, “ran Britain’s foreign policy as a private bailiwick,” writes Hastings, and acted in secrecy “because he knew he could secure no Parliamentary mandate.” But in the summer of 1914, there were serious issues obstructing British involvement. Acute, sometimes violent labor unrest distracted the entire country from European affairs. The question of Home Rule for Ireland proved so volatile that the country seemed on the brink of civil war. In the first half of 1914, the threat of war in Europe was remote from the minds of British politicians, and the murders in Sarajevo, no matter how sensational, did little to divert them from these pressing domestic issues.

The German invasion of Belgium quickly settled the question of English involvement. In relation to the continental powers, England’s army was a negligible 250,000 men, but still large enough to play a part in the defense of France. It alone among the major participants rejected universal military service at a time when France, Germany, and Russia were amassing huge and well-equipped armies. There was also powerful opposition in the Cabinet and Parliament to sending armed forces to the continent.

But Germany’s determination to fulfill the Schlieffen Plan and use Belgium as a doorway to France settled all of these questions at once. On August 4, Germany crossed the frontier, and shortly afterward England declared war, even though the cabinet had been sharply divided on the question. This exposed yet another flaw in the Schlieffen Plan. The Germans won a quick victory

in 1870, but seem to have forgotten how tenaciously the British fought Napoleon when he sought to conquer Europe.

Who was to blame for what followed? Sydney B. Fay, a Harvard scholar who in 1928 published one of the earliest efforts to answer that question, blamed the pair of alliances that divided Europe in half in the decade preceding the outbreak of war. Bismarck, who had unified Germany in a series of wars that culminated in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870, seized the contested provinces of Alsace-Lorraine and converted France into a permanent enemy. He remained chancellor of the new Germany for twenty years but was dismissed by Wilhelm II in 1890. Bismarck's greatest concern was an alliance between France and Russia, which would put antagonistic powers on either side of the country; he advised his successors to do everything possible to obstruct it. This they failed to do, and by 1894, the two powers signed a military convention, and as the years passed, it only grew tighter, as French loans encouraged the expansion of Russia's economy, a development that only deepened German anxiety. This was the origins of what would become the Triple Entente, when Britain became an informal (and secret) partner.

But the complexity of the origins of the war has inevitably produced sharply conflicting interpretations. For decades after the war ended in 1918, there was a general sense among those studying it that no single country was to blame. Nationalism, fed by the popular press; imperial rivalries across Asia and Africa, some of which brought the Entente powers themselves into collision; regional territorial ambitions, fed by the decline of the Ottoman Empire, and which were especially potent in the Balkans, where a pair of regional wars broke out in 1912 and 1913; Italy's invasion in 1911 of the coastal area of what was then Turkish-occupied Libya, an event that emphasized the vulnerability of her possessions in the Balkans—all of these elements are

believed to have dispersed responsibility for the war among the major (and minor) powers of Europe. The age of small professional armies with paid mercenaries was a thing of the past. Almost all of the important armies had complex mobilization schedules involving hundreds of thousands of men. But nobody wanted to be seen as initiating a war, even if it were widely expected. Often to avoid stirring up domestic opposition, senior leadership everywhere wanted to be seen as responding to foreign provocation without appearing to be the first to mobilize. Offensive operations prepared years in advance by France, Germany, and Russia depended on striking quickly, but their execution was hampered by the need to appear defensive. For all of these reasons, Europe at the turn of the twentieth century has rightly been seen as a highly combustible mix of volatile disputes.

France's goal was the recovery of Alsace-Lorraine. Germany was determined to maintain control of it, and some historians, including Fritz Fischer, claim that she wanted more, including political and economic control over as much of Europe as possible—the so-called Kaiserreich. Serbia wanted to expand into what after the war became known as Yugoslavia, or the union of South Slavs. Austria wanted to check the Serbs in the Balkans, and eliminate them as a threat to the empire. The British wanted to maintain the balance of power on the Continent and prevent any one country from dominating it. The Russians? They sought to extend their influence in the Balkans—the element of pan-Slavism—and also gain access to the Turkish Straits. War, it was assumed by military and political leaders in Europe, was nearly inevitable, and it was almost certain to be ignited by an event in the Balkans.

The Italian historian Luigi Albertini shifted the burden of opinion with his seminal, multi-volume *The Origins of the War of 1914*. This was published in Italy in 1942, and in Britain eleven years later. Albertini began his research early enough to interview participants active in



the major powers in 1914, and suggested that Germany might well bear the brunt of responsibility for the outbreak of war, a claim enshrined in Article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles. The argument for German war guilt was powerfully stimulated by two volumes published in the 1960s by the German scholar Fritz Fischer: *Germany's Aims in the First World War* and *War of Illusions*. Fischer's volumes, which the historian Christopher Clark disparagingly calls "a bundle of documents," seek to establish beyond doubt that the Kaiser and his circle encouraged Austria-Hungary to take an aggressive line after the murders in Sarajevo in order to provoke a European war that it believed Germany could win. The fruits of victory would include the territorial expansion of the Reich, in the style seen in the Treaty of Bresk-Litovsk, which obliged the newly empowered Bolsheviks to cede large parts of Russia to Germany in 1918. The reaction against Fischer's argument, above all by German historians, was swift and harsh. "The bitterness of Germany's 'Fischer' controversy," writes Hastings, "has never been matched by any comparable historical debate in Britain or the United States." Yet Hastings, who accepts the Fischer thesis, writes that some version or another of it prevails to this day.

This claim of German responsibility is contested by Christopher Clark in *The Sleepwalkers* and by Niall Ferguson in *The Pity of War*. The argument rests on a pair of "blank checks" that the Germans offered Vienna in two crisis-ridden situations in 1912 and 1914. The first was in a special session of the German War Council in December 1912. The occasion was the aftermath of the first Balkan War that broke out in October, when Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece, and Montenegro decided to expand their territory by driving the Turks from what remained of their empire in the Balkans. The campaign was encouraged in part by Italy's Roman Empire fantasies and its successful war in 1911 against the Turks in Libya. The first Balkan War of 1912 was a spectacular success for Serbia and her allies, but generated more tension between Austria

and Serbia, above all over Serbia's claim for a piece of Albania. This led to the meeting of German leadership and, ultimately, word from Berlin to Vienna that the latter should take a hard line on Serbian expansionism. But Christopher Clark argues that the "meeting did not trigger a countdown to a preventive war," and that Bethmann Hollweg, the German chancellor, challenged the authority of Wilhelm and nullified the results of the session. Still, the two Balkan wars—there was a second in 1913--greatly expanded Serbia's size, did nothing to diminish her taste for expansion, and weakened Austria's position in the Balkans.

The second "blank check" was offered in July 1914, when the Austrians were considering their response to the murders of the heir apparent and his wife. "Sarajevo did not just stir the hawks to war," writes Christopher Clark. "It also destroyed the best hope for peace. Had Franz Ferdinand survived his visit to Bosnia in 1914, he would have continued to warn against the risks of military adventure, as he had done so often before. . . He would also have removed Conrad [von Hötzendorf] from his post." (Conrad was the Austrian military chief of staff, and for years one of the strongest proponents of war against Serbia.)

The picture quickly became murderously complex. Austria assumed that the Serbian government was behind the assassinations. This claim is substantially true. A state within the state, the Black Hand was managed by Dragutin Dimitrevic, the head of Serbia's military intelligence, who planned the murders and supplied the assassins with training and equipment. Clark, in agreement with other students of the subject, notes that networks managed by the Black Hand "reached deep into the Serbian state." Nicola Pašić, the Serbian Prime Minister, democratically elected, apparently knew of the plot to murder the Austrian heir apparent and his wife. He was certainly amply aware more generally of Serbian subversion in Bosnia. But Christopher Clark questions whether he was able to control it. Serbian border police were

themselves participants in the subversion. “The fissure between the structures of civilian authority and a military command substantially infiltrated by the Black Hand now ran all the way from the banks of the Drina [the Serb border with Austria] to the ministerial quarter in Belgrade,” he writes. The border with Austria, in other words, was no longer controlled by civilian authorities in the capital. As matters worsened in July, Russia loudly decried Austria’s claims that Serbian authorities were complicit in the murders. Yet years after the war ended, the country’s military attaché in Belgrade conceded that Russia had contributed funds to the Black Hand which were intended for the irredentist networks in Bosnia. But Pašić’s political position was weak, and he lacked the authority to control the Black Hand. The Belgrade press, and much of the public, openly celebrated the murders. The official Serbian investigation does not seem to have taken the murders very seriously and was anything but active. The Austrians demanded the right to investigate matters on Serbian soil and to participate in the prosecution of those held responsible, believing that the Serbs would not, in Clark’s words, “press home the investigation without some form of Austrian supervision.”

On July 6, Wilhelm and his entourage met with László Szögyényi, the Austrian ambassador to Germany and Count Alexander Hoyos, a senior member of the Austrian foreign ministry. Szögyényi wrote after the meeting that “His Majesty empowered me to convey to our Supreme Sovereign that we can count. . . on the full support of Germany.” Christopher Clark agrees with Hastings that the record justifies calling this communication a “blank check,” but he argues that “the key decision-makers did not believe a Russian intervention to be likely and did not wish to provoke one. . . .The Kaiser in particular remained confident that the conflict could be localized.” Wilhelm II and his chancellor also believed that the Austrians were justified in taking action against Serbia and deserved to be able to do so without the fear of Russian

intimidation.” Kissinger goes further, noting in *Diplomacy* that shortly after meeting Austrian officials in July, Wilhelm left Berlin for his annual summer cruise in the Baltic Sea, which is not what monarchs do if they are expecting war.

Bethmann Holweg essentially repeated this pledge the next day, July 6, when meeting with Hoyos and Szögyényi. According to the latter’s notes, Bethman declared that Austria “could be confident that Germany as our ally and a friend of the Monarchy would stand behind us.” Hastings believes that Germany was eager to use the occasion of Sarajevo to provoke war. Russia, always a fearful opponent because of her size and population, was enjoying rapid economic and military development. German planners believed the country had about two years before the combination of enemy powers—Britain, France, and Russia--would soon become unbeatable. Routing her enemies while she still had (she believed) the means of doing so left open the prospect of imposing on Europe what Hastings calls the *Kaiserreich*, or German domination.

Clark agrees that “we have here a clear decision, and one of momentous importance. For once, the German Government was speaking with one voice.” But he goes on to note that the assumption that Russia would peak as a military power in two to three years’ time reinforced the Germans’ belief that she would not risk war now. Why would the country intervene if a decisive advance in military strength was but two to three years away? This of course proved to be a fatal misjudgment, and it was built on a failure to understand the extent to which instability in the Balkans had become a critical feature of the alliance between France and Russia.

Bethmann Holweg, the chancellor, had lingering doubts of his own. They were reflected in a conversation with his adviser and confidant Kurt Riezler, which took place just after the second meeting with the Austrians on July 6. According to Riezler’s notes of the exchange,

Bethmann commented with some exasperation that “It’s our old dilemma with every Austrian action in the Balkans. If we encourage them, they will say we pushed them into it. If we counsel against it, they will say that we left them in the lurch. Then they approach the western powers, whose arms are open, and we lose our last reasonable ally.” Fearful or not of Austrian reliability, the Germans extended their guarantees.

John Röhl, in his exhaustive and exhausting three-volume biography of Wilhelm II, claims that the Norwegian cruise the Kaiser took was a feint, and that senior political and military leaders of the Reich maintained their August vacations in order to foster the illusion that Germany intended nothing aggressive. Up until the last days before the mutual declaration of war unspooled, German’s leadership was determined to see that either France or Russia—especially Russia—bore responsibility for the outbreak of war. Röhl belongs to the camp that faults the Germans for the outbreak and marshals considerable evidence to support this. Wilhelm hated Slavs and carried a nearly equivalent feeling for France and its history of socialism. He was eager to see the Serbs crushed and Austrian influence extended in the Balkans at the expense of the Russians. Part of his rage can be explained by a monarch’s hatred of regicides and his friendship with Franz Ferdinand. Its economy was on the path to dominating those of its adversaries. Like others, Hastings laments that Germany felt compelled to resort to arms when it might well have achieved similar aims through peaceful means. The country’s intellectual, technological, and economic supremacy was becoming insuperable.

But the Kaiser, Bethman Holweg, and others felt the country was not receiving the respect or recognition it deserved. The Kaiser “and the twenty or so men who shaped Germany policy in those pre-war years. . . had not by any means always had the intention to launch a war against her European neighbors,” Röhl writes. “But they shared the conviction that their

Empire's current constrained status was unjust, and in the longer run wholly unacceptable. . . and in the last years of the armed peace, their anger and frustration at being thwarted diplomatically reached a boiling point." The great illusion, Röhl maintains, is that up until the end, the Kaiser believed that England would stay out of an European war.

While secretly encouraging Austria to stand firm against Serbia, Germany argued in public that the assassination was a matter involving no other countries than Austria and Serbia. They had to settle the matter between themselves. In fact, Röhl claims, the German leadership developed two goals after learning of the murders in Sarajevo. The first was "the elimination of Serbia as a power-factor in the Balkans." If that could not be obtained without broader consequences, then the goal "was the immediate unleashing of a continental war against 'Russo-Gaul' in what were thought to be favorable conditions." The trouble is that Wilhelm's belligerence waxed when danger seemed remote but suddenly diminished when opposition lined up against him. As late as July 27, when he returned to Berlin from his three-week cruise, he adamantly insisted that Austria should have the support of his government. This explains his rejection of the proposal, initiated by Edward Grey, the British foreign minister, of a conference including Germany, France, Italy, and Russia that might negotiate everyone's way out of war.

But the Kaiser became a prisoner of his circle of advisers. They knew how easily he could lose his nerve. Bethmann Holweg, the chancellor, and others at the top of the government feared that Wilhelm's enthusiasm for war would diminish if he learned that Britain was likely to intervene against Germany. "In his audience on the afternoon of July 27," Röhl writes, "Bethmann presented the Kaiser with a copy of the dispatch from Lichnowsky that had been deliberately falsified—by the elimination of the British Foreign Office's warning that Russia could not possibly permit Austria to cross the Serbian frontier." Karl Max Lichnowsky,

Germany's ambassador to England, agreed that the need to maintain its role as a serious player in the Balkans would compel the Russians to act. Bethmann also removed from the document an urgent warning that war in the peninsula would not be localized but would inevitably engulf the entire continent.

On the morning of July 28, the Kaiser received Serbia's reply to the Austrian ultimatum. It is still considered a masterpiece of equivocation, conceding most demands and ambiguously resisting others. The Kaiser, famous for scribbling marginal notes on documents, including newspaper clippings, wrote on this one, "A brilliant achievement for a 48-hour time limit. . . . I am convinced that on the whole the wishes of the Danube Monarchy have been fulfilled. The few reservations that Serbia has made can in my view certainly be cleared up in negotiations." And then: "Every reason for war disappears." The Kaiser recommended "*douce violence*" (gentle violence) to ensure Serbian compliance, which would involve a brief Austrian occupation of Belgrade, just across the Danube from the Austrian border. He instructed Bethmann to cable his reaction to the Austrians.

Röhl writes: "The Kaiser's promising initiative remained without influence on the course of events. With studied cynicism, the Reich Chancellor and the leading officials of the Foreign Office saw to it that his suggestions were transmitted to Vienna in garbled form." The Foreign Office also delayed transmission until late in the evening, and it wasn't received until very early the next day. By the time that happened, Austria had already declared war on Serbia. On July 30, the Kaiser fell into a fresh rage over word of Russian mobilization—apparently against Austria—but still clung to hopes of British neutrality. "But he quite failed to perceive," write Röhl, "that his own ministers were pulling the wool over his eyes to a quite criminal degree." Nevertheless, Röhl cautions against absolving Wilhelm of guilt in the matter. He asserts

that “differences of opinion between Wilhelm II and the Wilhelmstrasse (Foreign Office) should not be blown up into conflict over matters of principal.” There was no “war party” or “peace party,” in the final weeks of peace; disputes at the top, he argues, were mostly over tactics. If Russia were goaded into war, he thought that England would stay neutral, at least long enough to execute the Schlieffen Plan. Italy would participate alongside the Triple Alliance. But by August 1, “this whole house of cards had collapsed.”

Germany, however, was not the only power offering blank checks to an ally; something very similar could be said of the French in regard to Russia, and it is surprising that the matter is not emphasized more heavily in discussions of the origins of the war. Consider this passage from Clark’s study:

For France, the alliance and the military convention attached to it were a means of countering and containing Germany. For Russia, the central concern was Austria-Hungary—try as they might, the French negotiators were unable to persuade their Russian counterparts to renounce the link asserted in Article 2 between an Austro-Hungarian and a French general mobilization. And this effectively placed a trigger in the hands of the Russians who—on paper, at least—were free at any time to instigate a continental war in support of their Balkan objectives.

In January 1913, according to Clark, French President Poincaré “reassured the Russians that they could count on French support in the event of a war arising from the Austro-Serbian quarrel.” Arguments of preventive war, contemplated by either side to justify mobilization if it seemed propitious, were far more common among Germany’s enemies than within the Reich. In the various crises that swept over the Balkans in the years preceding 1914, Clark concludes that “Berlin was far more restrained in its advice to Vienna than Paris was in its communications with St. Petersburg.” He adds that in July 1914, when Russia was accusing the Austrians of inventing the crisis to justify an invasion of Serbia, “the French government had already granted St. Petersburg *carte blanche* in the matter of an Austro-Serbia conflict. Without having looked into



the matter himself, Poincaré adamantly denied any link between Belgrade and the assassinations.” Even Hastings, intent on faulting the Germans, concedes that “Few responsible historians suggest that the French desired a European war in 1914, but to a remarkable degree Poincaré relinquished his country’s independence of judgement about participating in such an event.” Poincaré regarded the alliance with Russia as the core of his country’s defense, indispensable to French security, and nothing could be allowed to weaken it.

A critical element concerning the origins of the war is that few of the issues to which individual countries were attached mattered very much to their alliance partners. Neither England nor Russia would have gone to war solely to help France recover Alsace-Lorraine, the territory lost to the Germans in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870. Germany had no direct stake in the border disputes between Austria and Serbia or Serb expansionism more generally. Russia was keenly interested in the Turkish Straits in order to gain access to the Mediterranean and break out of the confinement of the Black Sea. But Bulgaria, not Serbia, had coasts on the Black Sea and offered better access to the Straits than land-locked Serbia.

The central problem, preceding the formation of alliances and assassinations, was structural. Bismarck had organized three wars—with Denmark, Austria, and finally with France—to unite Germany under Prussian domination, making Berlin (Prussia’s capital) the center of the country. The acquisition of Alsace-Lorraine guaranteed the permanent enmity of France. The new Germany, growing more powerful, proved a destabilizing presence and strained the balance of power that had governed the continent since the fall of Napoleon. Not even Bismarck’s balancing policies kept the danger at bay, and in some ways simply inspired distrust. Wilhelm II assumed the throne in 1888, and two years into his reign, in 1890, dismissed Bismarck as chancellor and then declined to renew the defense treaty with Russia. This ill-

considered action opened the door to a Franco-Russian military alliance, which was put into place in 1894. The most powerful powers lost their authority to ally freely with any other state, depending on the demands of the moment. England was not clearly or publicly allied with either set of alliances, a condition that prevented either side from feeling dominant. But in the decade preceding the war, England secretly grew more attached to the French, adding to the rigidity of the alliance system. German efforts to establish an alliance were ill considered and undermined by the naval arms race between the two countries. The rigidity led to consecutive tests of strength, not opportunities for compromise. “The nations of Europe transformed the balance of power into an armaments race without understanding that modern technology and mass conscription had made general war the greatest threat to their security,” writes Kissinger.

A turning point in the July crisis came when the Russian Council of Ministers met on consecutive days on July 24 and 25. The Tsar and his cabinet essentially made the decision to encourage the Serbs to maintain a firm line with the Austrians, whose ultimatum they had received on July 23. Yet another “blank check” was thereby tendered to an ally. The Serbians were coming close to accepting the most onerous terms of the ultimatum (extended on July 23) when Russian support turned them in the opposite direction. The Council released a set of confusing orders which could not help but stimulate anxiety in Berlin. The first command was termed a “period preparatory for war,” which essentially meant organizing troops in preparation for mobilization. This would extend to virtually the entirety of Russia’s border (in Poland) with Germany and Austria. This was followed by an order for “pre-mobilization,” which called for heightened security at supply depots, and later a “partial mobilization”—even though the military staff was not really organized for such a maneuver; staff planning called only for full mobilization against both Austria and Germany. A prime instigator of the program was the

Russian foreign minister, Serge Sazanov, and if historians are confused by the sequence of measures, readers can imagine the reaction of the Triple Alliance. “In taking these steps,” writes Clark, “Sazonov and his colleagues escalated the crisis and greatly increased the likelihood of a general European war.” And in the last week of July, the French were making it clear that they were encouraging Russia to support the Serbs. And for the Russians, behind it all? The Turkish Straits. Clark claims that the Balkans came “to be seen as the crucial strategic hinterland to the Straits.”

How differently events might have ended had the advisers surrounding the Czar been as cautious as Pyotr Durnovo. A former Russian Interior minister, he prepared a memo for Nicholas II in February 1914 that warned against the alliance with England and the danger of a continental war. Not everything in the memo is persuasive. Germany and Russia, Durnovo argued, were natural allies; they both represented “the conservative principle” in European politics while the British were more progressive and had little to offer the Romanovs. Durnovo argued for an alliance instead with Germany, without explaining how this could be reconciled with the latter’s ties to Austria and Russia’s connection to Serbia. Had it been read by its intended audience, the document might have had the effect of encouraging well-founded doubts about where membership in the Triple Entente was leading the country.

Durnovo accurately predicted that Italy would not enter the war on either side unless a possible gain in territory made it expedient, which is what happened. He pointed out that the distraction of a major war could encourage insurrection in lands that Imperial Russia occupied, not only in Poland and Finland, but also in parts of Persia and the Caucasus, regions of Afghanistan as well. “A struggle with Germany presents to us enormous difficulties, and will require countless sacrifices,” he remarks. “War will not find the enemy unprepared, and the

degree of his preparedness will probably exceed our most exaggerated calculations.” (See Goldar.)

As all of the planners in Europe understood, England had a small army and was unlikely to play a major role in ground fighting. “France”—Russia’s putative ally—“poor in manpower, will probably adhere to strictly defensive tactics. . . .The main burden of the war will probably fall on us.” Durnovo had few expectations regarding the possibility of obtaining control of the Turkish Straits, a major Russian objective. Even if the country succeeded in establishing control over the Straits, the only real benefit would be that of keeping the Black Sea safe and free of enemy vessels. The British would still be able to keep the Russians bottled up from the other side of the Straits, because of the multiplicity of islands in the Aegean Sea which could harbor English warships. Unfettered access to the Mediterranean would remain as remote as ever.

Perhaps Durnovo’s most serious warnings concerns the danger of domestic insurrection, which was is surprising; the Russian defeat in the 1904-05 war with Japan led to the Revolution of 1905. “As already stated,” he comments, “this war is pregnant with enormous difficulties for us and cannot turn out to be a mere triumphal march into Berlin. . . .But in the event of defeat, the possibility of which in a struggle with a foe like Germany cannot be overlooked, social revolution in its most extreme form is inevitable.”

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