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THE COMING OF WAR

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"It seemed as though human beings might really be on the brink of becoming civilized," the British writer and social critic Leonard Woolf remembered having felt before the First World War.[1] The Great War—as many Europeans have continued to call it, even after the Second World War—put an end to such facile illusions. Europe, the most prosperous and most sophisticated civilization on earth, was unable to avoid a civil war among its Great Powers in 1914. The four-year struggle that followed was the bitterest, bloodiest, and costliest war in Europe since the Thirty Years' War of the seventeenth century. And since the same participants went to war again in 1939 after a shaky armed truce of twenty years, twentieth-century Europe could be said to have experienced its own thirty years' war.

The First World War was not merely a barbaric bloodletting and a wanton destruction of what Winston Churchill called "the accumulated treasure of the long past."[2] It snuffed out the bravest and most promis-

[1]Leonard Woolf, *Beginning Again* (London, 1964), p. 44.

[2]Winston Churchill, *The World Crisis, 1911–1918* (London, 1923), p. 199.

ing part of a whole generation. It so distorted the world economy that Europeans could not be sure of earning the basic necessities until sustained prosperity returned in the 1960s. And it became a global war. Unable to dominate one another alone, the Great Powers involved the non-European United States and Japan and the semi-European Russia in an escalation that deprived the European states of sovereign control over their own destinies, perhaps forever.

No one in Europe had expected in 1914 that such a dark age was at hand. To be sure, many Europeans had feared war during periodic international crises that seemed to grow more ominous in the new century. The most frightening of these crises had been the confrontations between France and Germany over control of Morocco in 1905 and again in 1911. It was reassuring, however, that the Great Powers appeared determined to settle such confrontations by diplomatic negotiation after some ritual saber rattling. When lesser European states went to war among themselves, as in the two Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913, the Great Powers showed their determination to work together to keep such wars localized, in the nineteenth-century diplomatic tradition of the Concert of Europe.

If war did come, Europeans, touched by liberal optimism, believed that modern weapons would make it quick and decisive. Long wars, like long sieges, were supposed to have disappeared along with medieval military technology. The Hundred Years' War of the fourteenth century had been followed by the Thirty Years' War of the seventeenth century. The twenty-three–year long Napoleonic Wars of 1792 to 1815 had been followed by short, decisive campaigns that made maximum use of rapid railway movement. The Prussian wars against Denmark (1864), Austria (1866), and France (1870–71) seemed to reinforce the positivist notion that science and complex technology made quick knock-out blows possible and long wars impossible to sustain. The kind of war that many Europeans feared in 1905 and in 1911 bore little resemblance to the horrors of the war they finally got from 1914 to 1918.

That catastrophe called into question the validity of what modern Europeans had accomplished. This accounts for the passion with which the search for the causes of the First World War has been pursued ever since. The emotions of war first produced highly personal explanations like the "hang the kaiser" sentiment widespread in Britain in 1918. The publication of many volumes of diplomatic documents after the war led to a more sophisticated focus on the techniques of diplomacy under stress. It may be that fallible statesmen, bombarded with too many rapid communications and overwhelmed by tension and fatigue, simply lost control of the situation. In a still larger perspective, it may be that some fatal tragic flaw in the very dynamism of liberal, capitalist Europe was at work. It is the whole European achievement that is placed on trial when one considers the outbreak of the First World War.

THE JULY CRISIS OF 1914

It is necessary first to distinguish between the Austro-Serbian war which began the confrontation in July 1914, and the subsequent escalation that brought in all the Great Powers. For European statesmen had successfully contained local confrontations like this one a number of times in the recent past.

The crisis began with a political assassination, an act that has not usually led to war. A nineteen-year-old student, Gavrilo Princip, shot and killed the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, and his wife, on June 28, 1914, in Sarajevo, where the archduke was on an inspection tour of the province of Bosnia. Ferdinand was the nephew of the Habsburg Emperor Franz Josef, and was heir to the throne. At first glance, it looked like a purely internal matter: an Austro-Hungarian subject had killed the Habsburg heir on Austro-Hungarian territory. Princip, however, was a Bosnian activist passionately committed to the ideal of uniting Bosnian and all other South Slavic peoples around the Kingdom of Serbia, the only independent South Slav state. From 1876 to 1878, the people of the provinces of Bosnia and Herzegovina had revolted against crumbling Turkish rule, but their aspirations for independence had been frustrated when the Great Powers put them under Austrian administration at the Congress of Berlin in 1878. That frustration was further embittered when Austria annexed Bosnia and Herzegovina outright in 1908. Princip had been armed and trained by the Black Hand, a terrorist group working underground from Serbian bases for South Slav independence and unity.

The heart of the matter, then, is the extent to which the Kingdom of Serbia aided and abetted Princip's act. For the first month, from the assassination on June 28 to the Russian mobilization on July 29, the crisis revolved around Serbian complicity and Austro-Hungarian efforts to punish the Serbians for it. But to understand the crisis it is necessary to take a brief look back at the origins of the conflict.

The Political Background

Complicated Balkan conflicts during the late nineteenth century lay behind the Austrian–Serbian confrontation. The Balkans were the one area of Europe whose state boundaries had been radically redrawn in the late nineteenth century. The Ottoman Empire, which stood at the very gates of Vienna in the 1680s, had been slowly rotting from within. One Balkan province after another had asserted its national autonomy or independence from the Turks: local autonomy for Serbia in 1817, and for Wallachia and Moldavia in 1829; independence for Greece in 1832; independence for Serbia, and for Wallachia and Moldavia (united to form Romania), in 1878; local autonomy for Bulgaria in 1878 and independence in 1908.

The Bosnian student, Gavrilo Princip, seized by police moments after he shot the heir to the Habsburg throne, the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, and his wife at Sarajevo, June 28, 1914.

National independence for the European provinces of the Ottoman Empire posed both advantages and dangers for the neighboring Great Powers, especially Austria-Hungary and Russia. Both could expect to acquire new political and cultural protégés and new trading partners in the area. However, neither Great Power could afford to see the other gain predominance on its doorstep. The emergence of one new weak but independent people after another in the Balkans brought the Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires into almost continuous conflict in the late nineteenth century.

Russian aid to the Bulgarian war for independence (1875–78) opened forty years of smoldering confrontation in the Balkans between Austria and Russia. The other Great Powers, led by Bismarck's Germany, worked to neutralize this conflict by balancing gains. At the Congress of Berlin in 1878, Russia's new client state in Bulgaria was sharply trimmed in size, and Austria found compensation in powerful indirect influence in the Kingdom of Serbia and the right to administer a semiautonomous Bosnia and Herzegovina. Imperial ambitions could be tempered, it seemed, by patient diplomacy and by the Great Powers' reluctance to permit any one of them to establish Balkan hegemony.

But imperial ambitions and fears were not the only destabilizing aspect of the Balkan transformations. Because no traditional or natural frontiers separated the new Balkan States, they bickered with one another over borders and over ethnic minorities in that polyglot region. Serbia, Greece, Bulgaria, and Montenegro, for example, all claimed

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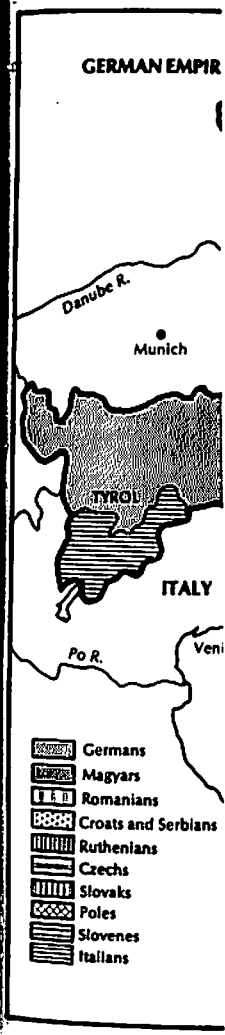
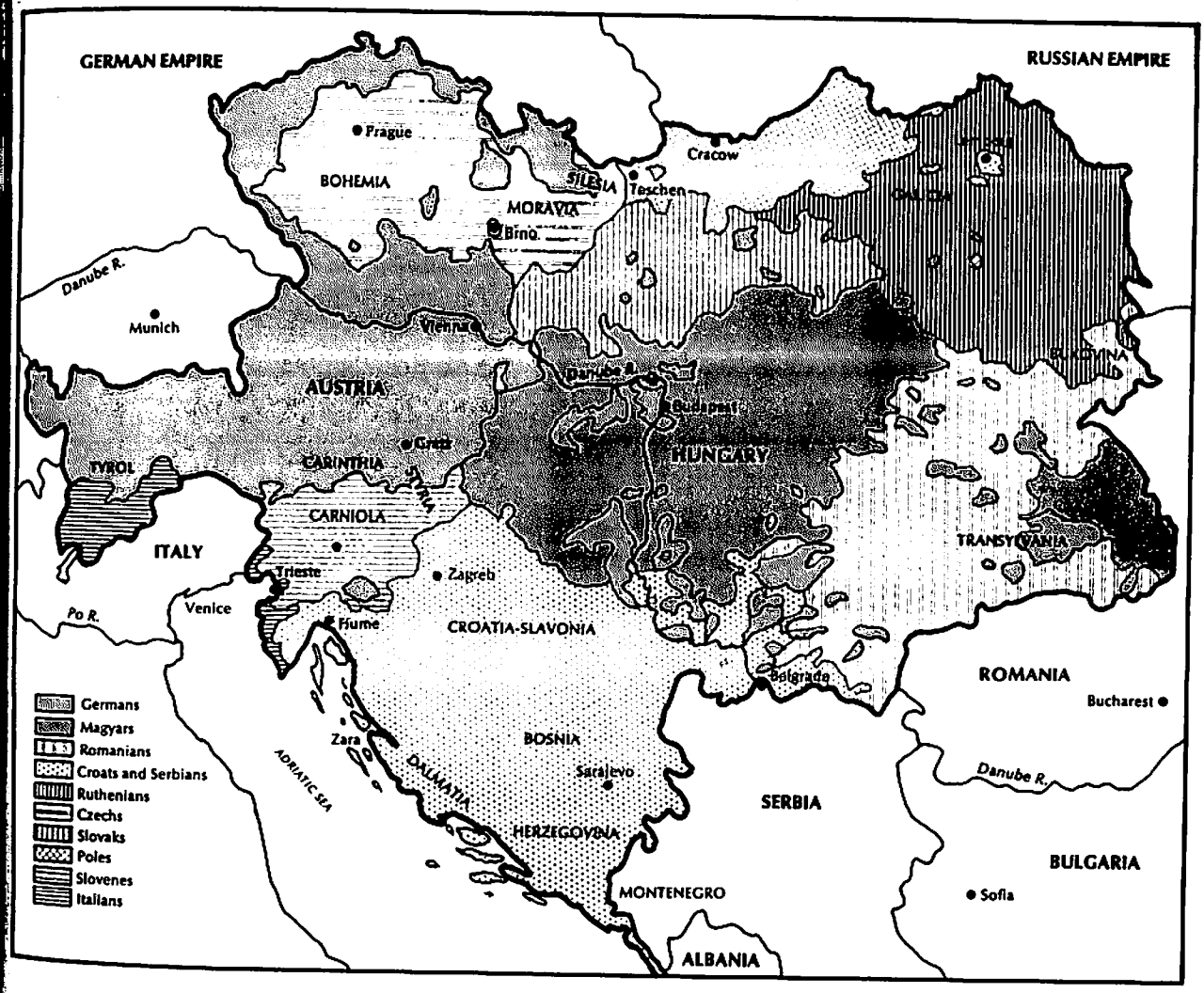


parts of Macedonia and sent secret terrorist groups, *comitaji* societies, into that largest remnant of the Turkish territory on the European Continent. There was always some risk that these squabbles could draw in one or another of the Great Powers and lead to a greater confrontation.

Another problem was that each newly independent or autonomous Balkan people was aglow with triumphant nationalism. Both Austria-Hungary and Russia had much to fear from ethnic revivals. Russia ruled over huge and restless Polish-speaking areas in the north, over large Ukrainian- and Turkish-speaking regions, and over Bessarabia, the region just east of the mouth of the Danube that Russia had seized from the Turks in 1812 and that the Romanians now claimed on grounds of national identity. The nationalist challenge to Russia was only a pinprick,

ETHNIC/LINGUISTIC COMPOSITION OF AUSTRIA-HUNGARY, 1914



however, compared with the nationalist threat to Austria-Hungary's very existence. The southeastern half of Hungary, Transylvania, contained a large Romanian population; the southwestern tip of Hungary was inhabited by Croats, and the north by Slovaks. In Austria, an apprehensive German population maintained a precarious dominance over Czechs and Poles in the north, and over Slovenes, Bosnians, and other South Slavic people in the south. Austro-Hungarian internal politics in the late nineteenth century was a delicate balancing act in which the Hungarian Magyars ruthlessly controlled their minorities, and the Austrian Germans sought allies in one or another nationality against the rest. It was not enough for the Austro-Hungarians to keep the Russians out of their kindred Slavic areas in the Balkans. Austro-Hungarian security depended on blocking the creation of one large independent Slavic state on the southern border. That meant blocking the enlargement of Serbia.

Serbia was the only Balkan nation to threaten a Great Power directly. Following a change of dynasties in Serbia in 1903, the aggressive Serbian leader Nicholas Pashich adopted an openly anti-Austrian policy. The Austro-Hungarian government retaliated with tariff barriers against the main Serbian exports, pigs and plum brandy, in what has been called the "Pig War." More seriously, the Serbians could or would do little to stop the activities of the anti-Austrian secret society, the Black Hand. Serbia had become after 1903 "a jackal snapping at the Austro-Hungarian Achilles heel."

The Austrian foreign minister, Baron Alois von Aehrenthal, became convinced that unless Austria decided to "grasp the nettle and make a final end to the pan-Slav dream" the Austro-Hungarian Empire would continue to "sink miserably step by step."[3] Aehrenthal's first move to block future Serbian growth was to begin a railroad southward to the Aegean that would cut Serbia off from other Slavic areas and from the Adriatic Sea. When this kind of "informal empire" seemed insufficient, Aehrenthal decided in 1908 to annex Bosnia and Herzegovina outright so that they could never become part of a greater Slavic state on the Austrian southern border. The moment seemed propitious, for Russia had just been humiliated in the Russo-Japanese War of 1905, and Turkey was too preoccupied with domestic reform under the Young Turk movement even to protest Bulgarian accession to full independence in 1908.

Aehrenthal negotiated the annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina with the Russian foreign minister, Alexander Izvolsky, in advance. In the most careful secrecy, the two foreign ministers agreed that in exchange for Russian acquiescence to the annexation the Austro-Hungarian

[3]Wayne S. Vucinich, *Serbia Between East and West* (Stanford, Calif., 1954), p. 229; Sidney B. Fay, *The Origins of the World War*, vol. 1 (New York, 1929), p. 395.

Empire would support Russia's acquisition of the right to move warships through the Straits at Constantinople. Before Izvolsky had finished negotiating his new Straits rights with the other Great Powers. Aehrenthal announced the annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Unable to achieve his side of the bargain, Izvolsky felt betrayed. "The dirty Jew has deceived me," Izvolsky cried to the German chancellor, Prince Bernhard von Bülow, in Berlin where he heard the news. "He lied to me, he bamboozled me, that frightful Jew."[4] Izvolsky's desire to bring Russia to war with Austria over Bosnia-Herzegovina was blocked mainly by a private German threat to release the information that Izvolsky had agreed to the deal earlier in secret. After the Bosnian humiliation of 1908, no Russian statesman could afford to appear to yield an inch to Austria-Hungary.

But even Aehrenthal had not achieved his aim. The Kingdom of Serbia continued to expand. In 1912, Serbia joined the other Balkan States adjoining Turkish Macedonia—Greece, Montenegro, and Bulgaria—in a lightning war of aggression to take Macedonia from the Ottoman Empire. This First Balkan War profited the aggressors handsomely in the spoils of Macedonia, but Austria-Hungary's insistence that Albania be set up as an independent state under a German prince blocked Serbian access to the Adriatic Sea once again. Within a few months, the victors of the First Balkan War were quarreling over the spoils. Taking advantage of a Bulgarian general's unauthorized attack on Serbian and Greek positions, Serbia, Greece, and Montenegro, now joined by Romania and Turkey, forced Bulgaria to give up some territory in the Second Balkan War.

The unedifying Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913 may have lulled Europeans into thinking that since the Great Powers had kept these two conflicts localized by working together in the last exercise of the Concert of Europe, they could keep Balkan conflicts localized indefinitely. In Vienna, however, the Balkan Wars proved to a frightened Austro-Hungarian leadership that no further successes must be allowed Serbia, "that viper's nest."

It was against the background of narrowed tolerance between Austria-Hungary and Serbia, on the one hand, and between Russia and Austria-Hungary, on the other, that young Princip assassinated the Habsburg heir at Sarajevo in June 1914.

The Austro-Hungarian government had no conclusive proof that the Serbian government had any foreknowledge of the plans of Princip and his helpers. Even today, the most one can say is that some members of the Serbian cabinet and the military command were aware of a number of terrorist plots, and that the Serbian government had little zeal and

[4]Bernhard von Bülow, *Memoirs*, vol. 2 (Boston, 1931–32), p. 440. Aehrenthal was not Jewish.

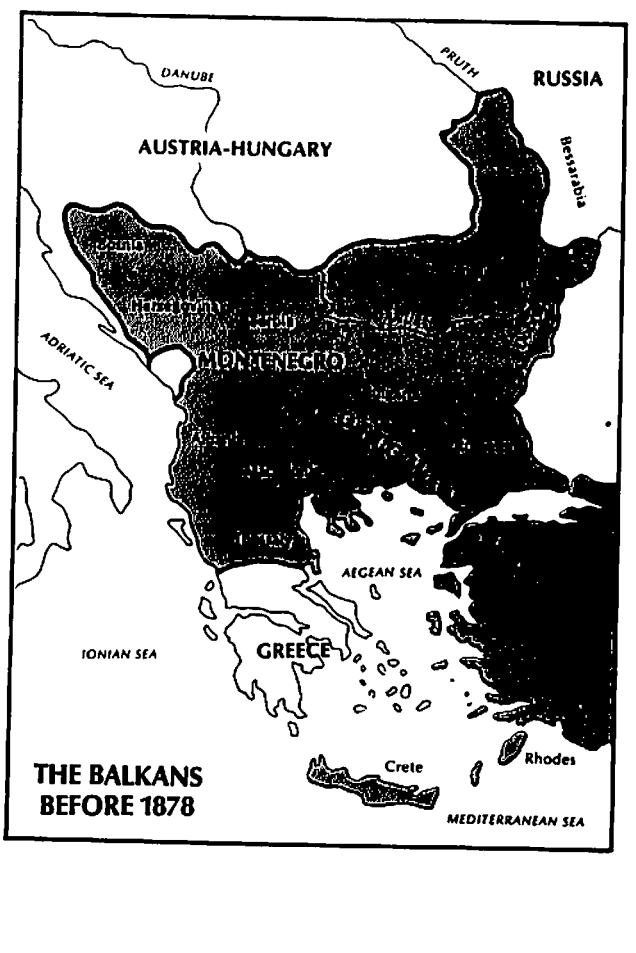
even less power to put a stop to them. In any event, the government in Vienna seized on the assassination as "the moment . . . to render Serbia innocuous once and for all by a display of force."[5] For men like the Austro-Hungarian Army's chief of staff, General Conrad von Hötzendorf, who had been urging a preventive war against Serbia since 1908, it was time to put aside such half-way measures as the "Pig War," the Aegean railroad, and the creation of an independent Albania. The Habsburg government decided to wage a punitive war directly on Serbia. The Austro-Hungarian leaders bear the heavy responsibility of having made the first decision to go to war in July 1914.

Germany's "Blank Check"

It was important to the Austro-Hungarian plan that this war be limited. There was a serious danger of Russian intervention on Serbia's side. Only a German counterthreat could neutralize the Russians. On July 5, therefore, Aehrenthal's successor as Austro-Hungarian foreign minister, Count Leopold Berchtold, sent a top career diplomat to Berlin to

[5]Austrian foreign minister, Count Leopold Berchtold, quoted in Fay, vol. 2, p. 228. Among Habsburg leaders, only the Hungarian prime minister, Count Tisza, made temporary objections to the idea of a war with Serbia on the ground that the Habsburg Empire contained too many Slavs already.

BALKAN CONFLICTS, 1878–1914



give Kaiser Wilhelm II a personal letter from Emperor Franz Josef urging German support of Austrian intentions that Serbia "be destroyed as a power factor." The net of involvements had already begun to ensnare other Great Powers.

The German government had previously helped restrain the Austrians. This time, however, Kaiser Wilhelm extended to the Habsburg Empire what has been commonly called a "blank check." He assured Berchtold's envoy that Austria-Hungary could count on Germany's "full support . . . even if matters went to the length of a war between Austria-Hungary and Russia."[6] Furthermore, in the days that followed, the German Imperial chancellor, Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, and other German officials actively goaded the Austrians to action with remarks about proving themselves a Great Power and remaining an ally worthy of Imperial Germany. The working papers of the German government captured after the Second World War show beyond doubt that the kaiser and his chancellor wanted a local Austro-Serbian war to reverse the decline of Germany's only ally. Did they see the broad implications of that position? Did they expect or want a wider war? These questions lie at the heart of the debate over the German "blank check" of July 5, 1914.

[6]Imanuel Geiss, *Julikrise und Kriegsausbruch*, vol. 1 (Hannover, 1963–64), p. 84.

According to the German state papers of July 1914 that survive, the German leaders knew that Russia might intervene if Austria made war on Serbia. Evidently both civilian and military leaders regarded that as an acceptable risk for Germany. Russia might be only bluffing, and it could be counterbluffed. Impressed by signs of internal unrest in Russia following the Revolution of 1905, the kaiser thought that the Russian government would be unable to wage war. The German leaders also had to take into account the Franco-Russian Alliance, formed in 1891 and tightened since then. The Germans believed that French intervention was doubtful, since the French had not come automatically to the aid of the Russians either in the Russo-Japanese War of 1905 or in the Bosnian annexation crisis of 1908.

The German leaders seemed to have believed that whatever risks were involved were more than counterbalanced by possible strategic gains. The kaiser was obsessed with the belief that Germany had been "encircled," a word that recurs in his papers. The opportunity offered itself in July 1914 to prove that Germany and Austria could break out of the ring, and "to make Austria preponderant in the Balkans at the expense of Russia," as the kaiser wrote in the margin of one of his papers.[7] His Army chief of staff, General Helmut von Moltke, nephew of the general who had defeated the French in 1870, assured him that even if the worst happened, Germany was in a better position to fight both Russia and France in 1914 than would be the case later. By 1917, the Russian rearmament program of 1908 would be completed and France would have adjusted to the new three-year military service law of 1913. Some of Moltke's statements lend themselves to the interpretation that he wanted a preventive war against Russia and France while there was still time. At the very least, his advice made the risks of war seem acceptable considering the possible gains. As German leaders saw their strategic position in July 1914, they must act vigorously to assert their growing world power or reconcile themselves to eventual decline.

Austria's Ultimatum to Serbia

Their backs stiffened by German prodding through the middle weeks of July, the Austro-Hungarian leaders set about making a public case for Serbian guilt. They prepared an ultimatum, quite consciously designed to make demands that Serbia could not accept. Once Serbia rejected the ultimatum, Austria-Hungary would have justification for military action. While Europe returned to midsummer tranquility, and the kaiser departed on a yachting vacation off Norway, this time bomb was being slowly prepared in Vienna. There was no hurry, for the Austrians had decided not to present the ultimatum until July 23, to avoid coinciding with the state visit to St. Petersburg of French President Raymond

[7]Fritz Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (New York, 1967), p. 67.

Poincaré and Prime Minister René Viviani. The timing shows that the Austrians knew they were going to the brink.

The "timed note," as the ultimatum was prudently called, accused Serbia of "culpable tolerance" of terrorist and secessionist movements within the Habsburg lands, which obliged Austria to take on "the duty of putting an end to the intrigues which form a perpetual menace to the tranquility of the monarchy."[8] There followed ten demands, some of which merely required Serbia to suppress anti-Austrian movements and punish the guilty parties. Other demands were far less compatible with Serbian sovereignty. Austria insisted that Serbia dismiss officials and army officers whom the Austrians chose to designate, and that Austrian officials take part in the investigation of a conspiracy in Serbia leading up to the assassination. Unconditional acceptance of all demands was required within forty-eight hours. This ultimatum was delivered in Belgrade at 6:00 P.M. on July 23 by an Austrian ambassador who was already packing in anticipation of Serbian rejection.

The Serbian reply, delivered just before the deadline on July 25, was masterfully drafted to arouse sympathetic European opinion. The Serbians rejected out of hand only the demand for Austrian participation in the investigation within Serbia. They made conciliatory replies to the other demands. At the same time, however, the Serbian Army was mobilized.

Despite signs of a slackening will in Vienna at the end of July, the Austro-Hungarian ambassador kept to the plan and broke relations with Serbia on receiving its reply. The German chancellor and foreign minister did their best to keep alive the "spirit of Sarajevo," although they were eager to keep Austria's punitive action localized.

The last week of July was a testing time for traditional Great Power diplomacy. The Great Powers had managed to prevent war between Austria and Russia over Bosnia in 1908, and they had localized the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913. This crisis, however, was neither a Great Power confrontation, as in 1908, nor a war among lesser states, as in 1912 and 1913. This was an attempt by one Great Power, supported by another, to change decisively its power position in the Balkans. That kind of conflict was much more difficult for the other Great Powers to stop.

The British government proposed a mediation that would forestall any military action between Austria and Serbia. But the Germans blocked all efforts at conciliation: they wanted a local war, not no war at all. This time, localization, as the British diplomat Arthur Nicolson pointed out, meant "holding the ring while Austria quietly strangles Serbia,"[9] without intervention by Russia on Serbia's behalf.

[8]Geiss, vol. 1, document N°. 155.
[9]Fay, vol. 2, p. 355.

On July 28, the Austro-Hungarian Empire declared war on Serbia. The Austrian Army shelled Belgrade on July 29. For the first time since 1878, a Great Power was at war on the European Continent. Would the other Great Powers inexorably be drawn in?

SCALATION: FROM LOCAL WAR TO CONTINENTAL WAR

Austria and Germany had wanted the Austro-Serbian war to remain localized, another Balkan war. But military alliances and Great Power rivalries[10] threatened from the beginning to widen the conflict. The German government was prodding its ally Austria-Hungary to seize the opportunity for major gains in the Balkans. Russia, determined to prevent further Austrian aggrandizement, drew confidence from a mutual defense treaty with France. France, in turn, had informal defense agreements with Britain. But alliances are not always honored, and it was not yet clear whether other Great Powers would be drawn into actual fighting. The degree of escalation depended on the skill of statesmen who were working to prevent it, their control over information and over their own complex military machines, and their view of the unfolding choices between fighting and humiliation.

Russia's Mobilization

Russia was the Great Power most immediately affected by the news of the Austrian ultimatum to Serbia, for Russia could not permit a repeat of the Bosnian humiliation of 1908. After that crisis Russia had launched a massive rearmament program that was designed to bring its Army to 2.2 million men. Izvolsky, who had borne the brunt of the humiliation, had been removed as foreign minister and named ambassador to allied France. His successor, Sergei Sazonov, was particularly sensitive to charges by Russian pan-Slav patriots that he showed weakness in foreign disputes. In July 1914, exhilarated as well as exhausted by the toasts and speeches of the state visit by French President Poincaré, Sazonov was in no state to deal calmly with the Austro-Serbian situation. The Russian government could barely restrain itself from ordering partial mobilization against Austria on learning the terms of the ultimatum to Serbia on July 24. Russia rushed to arms when Austria declared war on Serbia on July 28. Austrian assurances to the Russians that they planned no permanent annexation of Serbian territory only showed how determined the Austrians were to complete their punitive expedition. At 11:00 A.M. on July 29, the four Russian military districts fronting Austria-Hungary were mobilized.

[10]European Great Power alliances in 1914:
The Central Powers: Germany and Austria-Hungary, allied since 1879, were more loosely tied to Italy since 1882 in the Triple Alliance.
The Allies, or the Entente Powers: France and Russia were allied since 1891; France was linked to Britain by the *Entente cordiale* of 1904.

With this partial mobilization of the Russian Army military technology first took on a decisive role in the unfolding crisis. The preparation of a modern mass army for action had become a feat of prodigious complexity. It took minute planning to recall millions of reservists, to get them to the proper units along with supplies and equipment, and to move these massive assemblages of men and matériel by railroad to the front. Last minute changes in mobilization plans threatened to throw the whole procedure awry. Improvisation could be fatal. One had to follow the plan or become hopelessly snarled.

The Russian General Staff had worked out mobilization plans according to purely technical considerations, without taking into account the diplomatic implications of their elaborate timetables and emplacements. They had arranged for mobilization against Germany and Austria simultaneously. The generals assured Sazonov and the tsar that there was no way to carry out a partial mobilization against Austria alone without throwing the whole armed force into chaos. Furthermore, it was notorious that the creaking Russian bureaucracy needed a head start to match the military preparedness of Germany. If full mobilization were not ordered soon, Russia would never be ready to deal with a possible German attack.

Faced with these technical rigidities, the reluctant tsar ordered full mobilization later in the day of July 29. Just before midnight he revoked his order after receiving a warning telegram addressed to "Nicky" from his cousin "Willy" in Berlin.[11] After frantic appeals by the generals and Sazonov, he reinstated full mobilization on the morning of July 30, lest possible war with Germany be lost in advance. A second Great Power had committed itself irrevocably to a war stance.

France's Intentions

The French role in Russia's decision to mobilize is still highly controversial. The crucial point is whether the French, as Russia's only continental ally,[12] encouraged Russian belligerence in the hopes that a European war might permit them to recover the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine, lost to Germany in 1871. As we have seen, French President Poincaré and Prime Minister Viviani had been in St. Petersburg on a state visit just before the Austrian demands on Serbia became known. The ritual toasts and parades of the visit no doubt stimulated Russian faith in the Franco-Russian Alliance at that crucial moment. Moreover, the two chief leaders of France were insulated from any direct role in events from July 23 until July 29, when the battleship *France* finally returned them home. In their absence, Justice Minister Jean-Baptiste Bienvenu-Martin was both

[11]The tsar's great-grandmother was a Prussian princess. The kaiser was even more closely related to the Tsarina Alexandra; both were grandchildren of British Queen Victoria.

[12]Although Russia and Great Britain had resolved all existing differences in 1907, no formal alliance existed between them.

inexperienced and uninfluential as acting head of government. These accidents left an unusually large amount of responsibility in the hands of the French ambassador to St. Petersburg, Maurice Paléologue. Apparently without precise instructions from home, Ambassador Paléologue allowed his enthusiasm for Russian court life and the excitement of the recent state visit to warp his judgment. He effusively promised Sazonov unconditional French support. At the same time, he failed to inform his own government of the ramifications of Russian mobilization on both the German and Austrian frontiers, a failure that prevented the French government from understanding the full implications of its support.

As an ardent patriot and a native of lost Lorraine, President Poincaré has been suspected of willingness to risk a war that promised to return his native province. There is only circumstantial evidence for such an allegation, however. After returning to Paris on July 29, Poincaré did continue to promise Russian Ambassador Izvolsky that "France was ready to fulfill all her treaty obligations" to aid Russia in case of a German attack.[13] The treaty obligations required only that France come to Russia's aid in case of German attack, or of Austrian attack supported by Germany. Heretofore, the French had carefully withheld support from Russia's Balkan adventures, as in the 1908 Bosnian crisis. To stand aside once more while Russia underwent another Balkan humiliation would probably have meant the end of the Franco-Russian Alliance. Because he did not want France to be left to face Germany alone, Poincaré did not prevent the Russians from taking military steps that put the Germans' backs to the wall.

The French government also was coming under pressure from the technical requirements of its own Army. General Joseph Joffre, commander in chief of the French armies, warned the government that unless French troops were put on a war footing with sufficient lead time, he would be unable to defend France against a sudden German attack westward. On July 30, therefore, the French "covering force"—the first-line frontier troops—were mobilized, although they were held six miles behind the frontier to avoid provocation. However little French leaders contemplated a preventive war, they were determined not to be caught again, as they had been caught in 1870, without allies and mobilized too late.

Germany Declares War

The news of general Russian mobilization late on July 30 presented the German government with a military emergency and gave the generals a dominant voice in what followed. General Moltke was not placated by Russian Foreign Minister Sazonov's assurances that general Russian

[13]Geiss, vol. 2, p. 404.

mobilization did not mean that any Russian troops would cross the frontier. Moltke was keenly aware of the deadline German mobilization must meet in order to catch up with that of the Russians. He told his government that noon on July 31 was the latest the Army could wait and still be assured of matching the Russian mobilization.

The military machines now began to set their own timing on decisions, and it was therefore of little importance that some German statesmen were beginning to recoil before the general war they had so cavalierly risked earlier. Returning from his Norwegian cruise on July 28, Kaiser Wilhelm had finally read the Serbian reply to Austria and had decided that "the grounds for war had now fallen away." At the last moment, Berlin proposed that the Austrian armies "halt in Belgrade" and merely hold Serbian territory as a bargaining counter. Sazonov held out the promise that the Russians would cancel mobilization in return for Austrian withdrawal from Serbia. Austria, for its part, was willing to accept mediation and to promise to annex no Serbian territory, but not to renounce its punitive operation altogether.

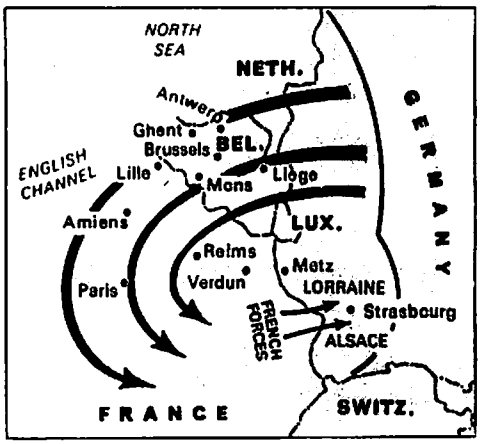
All these last-minute proposals, like the four-power mediation constantly urged by the British foreign secretary, had one flaw: they offered peace only at the cost of leaving the gradual Austrian decline in the Balkans unchecked by the kind of conspicuous success both Germans and Austrians had looked forward to after July 5. The decisive opinion offered in Berlin late on July 31 was General Moltke's, and it resulted in a German ultimatum to Russia. Germany gave the Russians twelve hours to renounce all military preparations against Austria and Germany. When the ultimatum expired the next day, Germany declared war on Russia at 5:00 P.M. on August 1.

The major question now was whether the French could stand aside while Germany and Russia fought in the east. There is every reason to think that Poincaré and Viviani were supported by public opinion in their determination to accept war rather than isolation from Russia or further German success. France did not feel responsible for war, wrote the centrist mass-circulation daily *Le Matin* on the morning of August 1, but "if it comes, we shall meet it with high hopes. We are convinced that it will bring us the restitutions which are our right."

The Schlieffen Plan

The question of whether France would stand aside was an academic one on August 1. For German military planners had decided long ago that the road to St. Petersburg ran through Paris. Assuming that the Franco-Russian Alliance was rigid, the German military planners helped to make it more so by arranging to attack the French first. General Alfred von Schlieffen, German chief of staff from 1891 to 1905, had responded to the Franco-Russian Alliance by shaping all his plans to fit a two-front war. Schlieffen reasoned that France, which could mobilize more quickly

THE UNEXECUTED SCHLIEFFEN PLAN



than Russia, could be defeated in six weeks by throwing almost the entire German Army westward in a rapid scythelike swing through Holland and Belgium into western France, while only a few covering units held the eastern front. Then the more numerous but slower Russians could be dealt with at leisure by the whole German Army.

Although Schlieffen's successor, General Moltke, reduced the scope of the wheeling maneuver in order to leave Holland neutral, he did not abandon the essential pattern of the Schlieffen Plan. When the German twelve-hour ultimatum was dispatched to Russia late on July 31, the German generals had to assume that Paris would be their first target. Moltke could not wait to learn about French intentions before deciding which way to move his forces, for improvising on the Schlieffen Plan risked throwing the whole German war machine into confusion. So a simultaneous ultimatum went out to Paris on July 31: France must declare its neutrality within eighteen hours.

French code-breakers learned that the Germans intended to demand the frontier fortresses of Toul and Verdun as surety for France's neutrality. Whatever doubts might have been felt in Paris about Russian general mobilization now disappeared. The French government declared general mobilization on the afternoon of August 1, without awaiting news of German general mobilization, which was announced at about the same time. Claiming for public consumption that French troops had violated the frontier in several places, Germany declared war on August 3. By assuming that war with France was inevitable, the German authorities had helped make it so.

Britain's Role

There were several reasons why Britain might have considered Germany an enemy in 1914. Germany's enormous warship construction program since 1898 had required Britain to construct a powerful new

class of battleships, Dreadnoughts, in order to keep control of the seas. The kaiser's support for Boer independence from the British in South Africa in 1896 and commercial rivalry in the Near East, China, and Latin America had greatly sharpened the British public's awareness of Germany as an enemy. Finally Britain had been engaged in joint military planning with France since 1905, and had settled all differences with France's ally Russia in 1907.

But no hard and fast agreements obliged the British to aid either France or Russia in case of a war with Germany. And, in fact, in 1914 British–German relations were more cordial than they had been at any time in the recent past. In that very June, Britain and Germany had agreed to cooperate in the completion of the Berlin-to-Baghdad Railway, heretofore a major focus of imperial and commercial rivalry. A British naval unit was visiting the German base at Kiel when the news broke of the Austrian ultimatum to Serbia. Wilhelm II's brother was assured by his cousin and fellow yachtsman, King George V, that England wished to remain neutral. It is characteristic of Wilhelm's view of the world that he based his tough policy on those royal words long after they had been contradicted by such underlings as foreign ministers and ambassadors.

The British foreign secretary, Sir Edward Grey, has been blamed for not using British power more decisively to stave off conflict. It has been suggested that if he had warned Germany sooner that Britain could not stand aside if France were attacked, the kaiser would have assessed the risks far more soberly in mid-July. To Grey's credit, he high-mindedly thought that any threat to make war only made war that much more likely. But having failed to give Germany a clear warning until July 29 that Britain would not remain neutral if France were drawn in, as the French urged, Grey also refused to bring pressure on Russia to demobilize, as the Germans urged. Instead, Grey devoted all his energies to a futile effort to arrange Great Power mediation of the Austro-Serbian dispute. During July he made four mediation proposals, all of which were doomed by German insistence that the conflict be "localized," that is, allowed to take place without Russian intervention. The French could not lend warm support to Grey's attempts at conciliation for fear of casting doubt in St. Petersburg on the reliability of their support as allies.

When events began to move rapidly in late July, the British government found itself thrust into the very position that it had hoped to avoid through its mediation efforts. It had to decide how to respond if the French were drawn into the war. British independence from continental allies had greatly diminished in the decade before 1914. The German naval challenge had led to a fateful British decision in 1912 to concentrate British naval forces in the English Channel, leaving the Mediterranean to control by the French Navy. Henceforth, British mastery of the seas depended on a friendly France to assure access to India and to

the Middle East oil on which the British Navy was now dependent, having begun to convert from coal to oil in 1911. Even Britain had been forced by the cost of the early–twentieth-century armaments race to count on allies.

Sir Eyre Crowe, a senior career diplomat in the British Foreign Office, drew up a memorandum on July 25 outlining very clearly the alternatives for British world power. If Russia and France were determined to take up the gauntlet, Crowe argued, it would be fatal for Britain to stand aside. If Germany and Austria won, there would be no French fleet; Germany would occupy the channel coast; and "what would be the position of a friendless England?" If France and Russia won without British support, "what would then be their attitude toward England?

The last meeting of Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany (left) and King George V of Britain, before the First World War. The two monarchs, both grandsons of Britain's Queen Victoria, are seen here on a family occasion, preparing to review the garrison at the royal palace at Potsdam before the marriage of Kaiser Wilhelm's daughter in 1913. As usual, the Kaiser has taken pains to hide his withered left arm.

What about India and the Mediterranean?"[14] There had never been any real possibility of British neutrality if Germany went to war with France, and the stubborn belief of the kaiser and of Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg in British neutrality was one of the most fatal blunders of the July crisis.

Crowe's reasoning shows why the last-minute German offer not to use naval units against the French channel coast failed to work its expected relief in London. It also shows that the British did not really go to war over a mere "scrap of paper," the Belgian Neutrality Treaty of 1839, as Bethmann Hollweg furiously charged on learning that his plan for a localized war was exploding into a continental war. It is true that a German ultimatum to Belgium on August 2 united British public opinion behind a dreaded war more effectively than Crowe's brand of geopolitical reasoning could have done. But British statesmen clearly understood well before August 2 that the real issue was not Belgian neutrality and the sanctity of treaties but the place of the British Empire in the world.

Britain declared war on an amazed Germany at 11:00 A.M. on August 4, after the expiration of an ultimatum demanding German withdrawal from Belgium.

Of the major European powers, only Italy stood aside from the conflict. Although formally linked to Germany by treaty since 1882, and informally linked by major economic investments, Italy had drawn more closely into the French economic sphere in the early twentieth century. More importantly, Italian national ambitions centered on the upper Adriatic Sea and its Balkan shores, areas once ruled by the independent Republic of Venice. These ambitions naturally threw Italy increasingly into conflict with Austrian interests in the years before 1914. In July and August 1914, therefore, Italian treaty links to Germany counted for less than potential gains from an Austrian defeat. For the moment, Italy remained neutral.

With that exception, all the European Great Powers were at war on August 4, 1914, for the first time since 1815, in a way no one would have believed possible only a month before.

A LONGER VIEW OF THE CAUSES OF WAR

We have looked at close range at that hectic week of accelerating crisis that led from the announcement of Austria's demands on Serbia on July 24 to the declarations of war from August 1 to 4. From that perspective, one sees flawed and fallible men struggling to understand the rush of events and to take the right steps on short notice. From that perspective, it is tempting to place responsibility on individual personalities or on

[14] *British Documents on the Origins of the World War*, vol. 11, p. 101.

individual failures to make diplomacy work. For none of the Great Powers got what their leaders wanted in July and August 1914. Germany and Austria did not get their therapeutic little local war for Balkan advantage; the Russians did not get their limited war against Austria; the Germans did not get British neutrality in their war with France and Russia; the French and the British could not maintain the *status quo* that was probably the preference of a majority of their people. The diplomacy of July and August 1914 makes a tale of almost unmitigated failure. Was the First World War, then, a tragic accident, the result of human error that interrupted the course of an otherwise promising civilization?

From a longer point of view, it seems unlikely that so massive a calamity could flow from so ephemeral a cause. It is often argued that inherent flaws in liberal, capitalist society made a general European war unavoidable, sooner or later. The system of sovereign states provided no outside tribunal to settle differences, and rising ethnic nationalism made those differences more frequent. Moreover, imperialist rivalry among capitalist powers and increasing class conflict within capitalist societies made war an attractive choice for European leaders. According to these determinist positions, even if the Great Powers had scraped through the Austro-Serbian crisis as they had earlier crises, a major war was unavoidable in the long run within the existing system.

Sovereignty and a Nation's Honor

The system of sovereign states in Europe and the world allowed for no recourse to a higher tribunal for arbitration or mediation when any two states were on a collision course. Since the sovereign nation-state was accepted as the ultimate human authority, its welfare became a supreme value. "In questions of honor and vital interests," wrote the kaiser in the margin of a memorandum submitted to him, "you don't consult others."[15] European statesmen considered the state morally as well as legally sovereign; war was an acceptable course of action to save a state from decline, in the view of all but a tiny minority of pacifists in Europe in 1914.

All the European leaders knew recent examples in which restraint had produced national humiliation: Russia in the Bosnian crisis of 1908, Germany in the second Moroccan crisis in 1911, and Austria in the Balkan Wars. All of them knew other recent cases in which going to the brink had saved national honor, as in the case of France in the second Moroccan crisis of 1911. A continent crowded with sovereign nations that recognized no higher interest than the state's success seemed bound to be jostled into a major war sooner or later.

[15]Geiss, vol. 1, p. 349.

Imperialist Considerations

The sharpened commercial and colonial rivalries of the generation before 1914 would necessitate war eventually, in the opinion of some. Lenin's *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism,* for example, argued that as capitalism ripened into monopoly, capitalism's profits would decline. Therefore, European monopolies would seek higher rates of yield outside their own countries in a world-wide race for profits that was bound to lead to war.

No one can deny the importance of colonial and commercial rivalries in statesmen's calculations of July and August 1914. The German historian Fritz Fischer has shown how frustrations in German commercial expansion eastward and southward in Europe contributed to the German leaders' sense of encirclement in 1914. If they did not build the Berlin-to-Baghdad Railway, someone else would. General Friedrich von Bernhardi's 1912 essay on Germany's choice—"World Power or Decline"—measured "world power" in cultural and commercial terms as well as in military terms.[16]

The two clearest instances in which colonial–commercial rivalry sharpened conflict between eventual belligerents of 1914 were the Moroccan crises of 1905 and 1911, and the German–British naval race. Both France and Germany had substantial investments in Morocco in the early twentieth century. Germany's deliberate challenge in 1905 to growing French political and military power there clearly heightened French nationalism and military expenditure in the following years. The second clash over Morocco in 1911, in which combined British and French pressure forced the Germans to back down, led General Moltke to write in his memoirs that another such display of weakness would make him despair of the future of the German Reich. The German–British naval race forced the British to admit that even their new fleet of Dreadnoughts could not guarantee access to the British Empire without French help. The web of economic interest and military calculation was tightening in the years before 1914.

It would be a mistake, however, to regard commercial and colonial rivalries as solely determining an inevitable war in 1914. German and British commercial interests recognized that they were each other's best trading partners and that trade prospers best in peace, as they proved by agreeing to the joint construction of the Berlin-to-Baghdad Railway in June 1914. London merchants and bankers were opposed to war during the July crisis. Colonial rivalries did not necessarily determine the alignments of 1914. After all, bitter colonial rivalries had pitted Britain against France in Africa and the Near East, and Britain against Russia in Iran and Afghanistan. Britain and Germany had cooperated in colonial

[16]Friedrich von Bernhardi, *Deutschland und der nächste Krieg* (1912), summarized in Fischer, pp. 34–35.

settlements in central and North Africa and in the Far East, while even France and Germany had avoided colonial rivalry between 1871 and 1905. Indeed, it was the Russian turn away from colonial interests in the Far East after losing a war to Japan in 1905 that dangerously heightened rivalries in the Balkans, within Europe itself.

Internal Dissent

Did the breath of revolution at home stir some European statesmen to a more bellicose posture abroad? Internal strife certainly rose sharply in a number of European states on the eve of 1914. In France, strikes had reached unprecedented proportions from 1906 to 1909, and after conservatives had succeeded in 1913 in increasing military service to three years, the elections of 1914 threw the whole issue open again by returning a left majority. The German Social Democrats had become the largest party in the *Reichstag* in 1912, and the Prussian three-class voting system was under bitter attack. The Italian "Red Week" of June 1914 was the bloodiest strike wave in that country's history. As for Austria-Hungary, where the insoluble problem of dissident ethnic minorities festered beneath the brilliant surface of Viennese culture, wits said that its situation was desperate but not serious. The Russian tsar, aristocrats, and conservatives watched in constant dread for a new revolution following the unsuccessful uprising of 1905. Even that citadel of calm gradualism, Great Britain, was shaken in 1913 and 1914 by three different movements that took their anger into the streets: the mass protests for women's suffrage; the strike wave that was about to culminate in a general strike in August 1914; and, on the right, the army officers and English landowners in Ulster (Northern Ireland) who threatened civil war rather than accept the new laws providing for Irish Home Rule.

The important point is not whether these states were actually nearing a revolutionary situation in 1914, but whether national leaders thought so and what they proposed to do about it. Some statesmen, both liberal and conservative, feared that the dislocations of a war would "mean a state of things worse than that of 1848."[17] But even the conviction that war would heighten the revolutionary danger may have encouraged the kaiser to believe that the Russians would not dare fight Austria. Other statesmen, mostly conservative, believed that the jingoistic nationalism stimulated by a successful foreign war or warlike bluff was the most effective remedy for internal dissent. Some Austrian leaders believed in "mastering internal troubles by prosecuting an active foreign policy."[18] Russian Foreign Minister Sazonov told the tsar that "unless he yielded to

[17]Sir Edward Grey, quoted in Arno J. Mayer, "Domestic Causes of the First World War," in Leonard Krieger and Fritz Stern, eds., *The Responsibility of Power* (New York, 1967), p. 321.

[18]German Ambassador to London Prince Karl von Lichnowsky, opposing that remedy, quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 320.

the popular demand and unsheathed the sword on Serbia's behalf, he would run the risk of revolution and perhaps the loss of his throne."[19]

Only the most determinist of historians would suggest that capitalism's late stages must inevitably produce conservative efforts to distract class conflict by external war. Nor is there a clear case of any European statesman manufacturing a national emergency for purely internal purposes. What can be said, however, is that when an international emergency was thrust on them, some European statesmen took risks more willingly, in the belief that foreign success could only strengthen the ruling circle at home. At the very least, they knew that international humiliation produced revolution, as in Russia when revolution followed defeat at the hands of the Japanese in 1905. Even the British Liberal Prime Minister Herbert Asquith found some consolation as he contemplated "the most dangerous situation of the last forty years" in the Balkans on July 26: "It may incidentally have the effect of throwing into the background the lurid picture of civil war in Ulster."[20]

The Alliance System

Other serious defects in the European system had developed in the past generation to narrow the choices open to leaders in 1914. Both the Franco-Russian and the Austro-German alliances had been made more binding in the years before the war. It was not the firmer language of the alliance treaties that was dangerous, however, for the Great Powers had not felt obliged in practice to support their allies under any condition contrary to their own interests. France had not given the Russians assurances of help during the Bosnian crisis of 1908, for example. What was dangerous was the growing sense among the Great Powers that their security depended on the continued power of an ally. Unlike Bismarck before 1890, who had brought both Russia and Austria into a loose mutual cooperation, the German rulers after 1890 committed themselves to Austria and Italy in the Triple Alliance. As ties with Italy grew slack, the German leaders felt quite alone with Austria-Hungary by 1914, and bound to that empire's uncertain fate. France had no possibility of holding its own against the more numerous Germans without Russian support; if the Russians went to the brink against Germany, the French could not risk future isolation by giving an impression of doubtful support. Even Britain, unfettered by any explicit military obligations, could not imagine a secure future without a strong and friendly France. Increasingly powerful weapons having made them all more vulnerable, the Great Powers had to support their allies even when those allies took risks.

[19]Quoted in Hans Rogger, "Russia in 1914," *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 3 (1966): 243.

[20]Quoted in Cameron Hazlehurst, *Politicians at War* (New York, 1971), p. 32.

The War Machines

The industrialization of war also narrowed the statesmen's choices in 1914. European war machines had not only doubled in size between 1890 and 1914, raising military expenditures to the unprecedented level of nearly 5 percent of national income,[21] but they had also become enormously complex. The use of railroads in war since the 1860s put a new premium on speed, without reducing the older emphasis on numbers. Millions of reservists and vast quantities of artillery, ammunition, and supplies had to be moved in a few hours by a rail network that first had to be shifted from its normal commercial uses. Mobilization had to be begun early enough to meet dangers that were still only potential, although the very act of mobilization provoked others to mobilize. Moreover, existing plans had to be followed whether or not they fit the current crisis, since improvisation was likely to produce chaos.

It has been noted how these technical requirements forced diplomacy out of control in the cases of general Russian mobilization on July 30, the German commitment to the Schlieffen Plan, and the early mobilization of the French "covering force" on July 30. Even in Britain, First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill took the exceptional step of not dispersing the fleet from its usual summer maneuvers in July. The fear of being caught unprepared in the railroad age was sharper than the fear of slipping uncontrollably into overreaction.

The Exercise of Choice

We have seen how many features of the European state, economic, and military systems and the perfervid nationalisms of 1914 narrowed statesmen's choices. So more was involved in the failures of July and August 1914 than mere miscalculation, fatigue, or haste. However, most historians would feel uncomfortable if such emphasis were placed on predetermining conditions for war in 1914 that the free choices of European leaders were ignored. Historians should be as interested in the exercise of choice as in the conditions that limit choice. In July and August 1914, the Austrian leaders chose to punish Serbia for matters going far beyond the assassination of a royal heir. The German kaiser and chancellor supported Austria in a local war in order to reassert German vitality. The Russians had resolved as long ago as 1908 to forbid any further successes to Austria. French and British leaders decided, as the British

[21]Military expenditures during the pre-1914 arms race, while greater than they had ever been before, were still comparatively modest by current standards. The Great Powers spent nearly 10 percent of national income on arms in 1937. The Super Powers' armaments expenditure reached 13 to 15 percent of gross national product in the Cold War 1950s. (Quincy Wright, *A Study of War*, 2nd ed. [Chicago, 1964], pp. 667–72; Charles J. Hitch and Roland N. McKean, *The Economics of Defense in the Nuclear Age* [Cambridge, Mass., 1965], pp. 37, 98.)

foreign minister told the House of Commons on August 3, that "if we are engaged in war, we shall suffer, but little more than we shall suffer if we stand aside."[22]

These choices, it must be realized, were not simple selections between pure states of "peace" or "war." Decisions were made, step by step, between acceptable increments of war risk and unacceptable increments of risk of national humiliation, isolation, or decline. At each stage, the war risk seemed all the more acceptable because no European in 1914 had the faintest idea what sort of war the Great Powers could wage in the twentieth century. The length, fanaticism, and violence of what was to come was beyond human imagining as the first eager troops rushed to the front.

[22]Quoted in A. J. P. Taylor, *English History, 1914–45* (Oxford, 1965), p. 4.