

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 77

“The Lamps Go Out I”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

Austria delivered her ultimatum to Serbia at 6:00 PM on Thursday, July 23. The original schedule had been for 5:00 PM, but Vienna ordered the delivery postponed for an hour to ensure that the President and Prime Minister of France would be aboard their ship and leaving St. Petersburg before the news broke.

As the Serbian government scrambled to assemble its scattered Cabinet and draft a response, the tensions between her and Austria, which were already fading from memory in most of Europe, moved to the front and center once again.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 77. The Lamps Go Out, Part One.

The delivery of the Austrian ultimatum triggers what history has come to call the “July Crisis.” It’s worth noting that this is something of a misnomer, since the Austrians spent most of July plotting and drafting the ultimatum in secret, as we saw last time, and it was only now, on July 23, 1914, that the ultimatum has been delivered and made public, and the “July Crisis” truly begins.

The ultimatum was delivered to Serbia while that country was in the midst of a general election campaign. The Prime Minister, Nikola Pašić, was on that date campaigning in the city of Niš. He had given a speech that morning, but in the afternoon, began to talk of taking a few days off to vacation in Salonika, the coastal city on the Aegean that had only last year come under Greek control. As Pašić was arranging his impromptu vacation, he received a telephone call from Belgrade. It was the finance minister, Lazar Paču, frantic that the Prime Minister drop everything and return to the capital immediately. It seemed the Austrian ambassador was coming to the foreign ministry that afternoon with an important note. Pašić told Paču that, whatever it was,

there would be plenty of time to deal with it after he got back from his Greek getaway. Paču told him that the rumor was that this was going to be no ordinary diplomatic note. Pašić refused to be deterred, boarded his train, and began his journey to the beach. It was only after fifty kilometers of travel, when the train made a station stop, that an urgent telegram was brought on board for the Prime Minister. It was from the Prince Regent, summoning him back to Belgrade.

While Pašić was working out the logistics of getting his railway car turned around and hitched to a train for Belgrade, Lazar Paču would already have convened the first Cabinet meeting to discuss Serbia's reply. The Prime Minister himself would return to Belgrade the following morning, and chair another Cabinet meeting on Friday the 24th. No decision was taken at either of those meetings, and although there was plenty of saber rattling, the emerging consensus appears to have been that Serbia was in no position to take on a war with Austria.

Unless, of course, the Russians would come to Serbia's defense. But would they? Many in Belgrade no doubt still remembered last October, nine months ago, when the Austrians had begun a partial mobilization to back up their demand that the Serbian Army surrender the positions it had taken on the Adriatic Coast. Then, the Russians had advised Serbia to back down. There was good reason to think the same thing might happen again. Hence, a flurry of diplomatic communications between Belgrade and St. Petersburg, meant to sound out the Russians on how far they would be willing to go in support of their ally. Serbia also pleaded with Austria for an extension of the deadline. Vienna would refuse this request when it came from Serbia, when it came from Russia, and when it came from the British foreign secretary, Sir Edward Grey. Because, as we know, Austria has already made up its mind that it wants a war, and the ultimatum is purely cosmetic.

So how will the Russians advise their Balkan ally? While the French President, Raymond Poincaré, had been in St. Petersburg, the principal point of discussion between the President and his Russian hosts had been over the ill feelings developing between Russia and Britain, principally Persia. Poincaré had tried his best to pour oil over these troubled waters, urging the Russians to be patient with the British and negotiate their differences. But the subject of Austria and Serbia had come up. There were already rumors that Austria was preparing a harsh response, and Russian government ministers were already talking about Russian intervention in any potential war between Austria and Serbia.

Now, the French and the Russians are allies, but their alliance is a defensive one, based on the principle that either nation will come to the aid of the other if it is attacked. It would be perfectly consistent with the alliance for Poincaré to tell the Russian Emperor that France would *not* feel obligated to support Russian intervention in a dispute between Austria and Serbia, since Russia herself is not being threatened. But in fact, Poincaré was a strenuous opponent of Germany, almost as strenuous as the French ambassador in St. Petersburg, Maurice Paléologue. You'll recall that the French have already been bolstering Russian policy in the Balkans by offering armaments and financing to the Serbian government, which, let's face it, goes far beyond any

obligation to honor a purely defensive treaty. In fact, the signals the French were sending the Russians suggested full French support for any decision Russia might make.

A good example of this happened during the farewell dinner, hosted by the French aboard the battleship *France* in the evening of July 23, just as Ambassador Giesl in Belgrade is preparing to deliver the ultimatum. Paléologue drafted a communiqué and showed it to René Viviani, the prime minister, who, by the way, was also holding the portfolio of foreign minister.

I should mention here that the French legislative election of 1914 had given the conservative Poincaré a decidedly liberal- and socialist-dominated Chamber of Deputies to work with. For a time, it had seemed unlikely that the President and the Chamber could find a Prime Minister they could all agree upon, but they managed to settle on the 50-year old Viviani, a socialist born in Algeria to Italian immigrants. Viviani was acceptable to the Chamber because he was a socialist, and he was acceptable to Poincaré because, unlike most socialists, he supported the Three-Year Law and other measures meant to strengthen the Army, which was music to Poincaré's ears.

Viviani had only become Prime Minister a month ago, in June, and had no particular background in foreign policy, which meant that Poincaré was basically calling all the shots during their trip to Russia. What Viviani did have was the goodwill of the socialists in the Chamber of Deputies, and when he saw Paléologue's draft communiqué, he balked. It included a reference to the situation in the Balkans that said, "The two governments have discovered that their views and intentions for the maintenance of the European balance of power, especially in the Balkan Peninsula, are absolutely identical." That was way too pro-Russian and interventionist for Viviani's tastes, and probably for those of the Chamber of Deputies, as well. In a rare instance of Viviani asserting himself on a foreign policy question, he demanded softer language. The revised version said that the two governments had "discover[ed] that they are in entire agreement in their views on the various problems which concern for peace and the balance of power in Europe has laid before the powers, especially in the Balkans."

That change may have satisfied Viviani, but how do you think the Russians are going to interpret it?

[music: "Pathétique Symphony"]

France, the battleship, had hardly left the dock for France, the nation, when rumors began to fly that Austria had issued some sort of ultimatum to Serbia. The word was that it was unacceptably harsh. The Russian Emperor received a telegram from the Serbian Prince Regent that evening, just hours after the ultimatum had been delivered. In this artfully worded telegram, the Prince Regent told the Emperor that Serbia would be unable to defend itself against Austria and was therefore willing to accept whatever portions of the ultimatum the Emperor thought it advisable to accept.

Allow me to translate that. “Are there any demands in this ultimatum that Russia would be willing to go to war over rather than see Serbia accept?”

The following morning, the Austrian ambassador in St. Petersburg, Friedrich Szapáry, formally delivered the text of the ultimatum to the Russian foreign minister, Sergei Sazonov. The meeting did not go well. Sazonov was livid. He accused Austria of fabricating an excuse to destroy Serbia. “You are setting Europe on fire.” Szapáry offered to show him evidence of the involvement of Serbian government officials in what was essentially an act of terrorism. Sazonov refused and repeated his claim that Austria was making excuses to crush Serbia. Szapáry insisted that Austria was a peace-loving nation that wanted no more than to defend itself. Again, Sazonov dismissed his argument. “One can see how peaceful you are. You are setting fire to Europe.” After he was finished getting dressed down by Sazonov, Szapáry hurried back to his office to report the exchange to Vienna.

Sazonov called a meeting of the Russian Council of Ministers for 3:00 that afternoon. He put the time in between to good use. First, he asked the finance minister to transfer all Russian state funds out of German and Austrian banks. Next, he met with the chief of the Russian general staff, Nikolai Yanushkevitch to discuss plans for a partial mobilization against Austria, apparently in the hope of intimidating Vienna, or at least, should it be war, of keeping Germany neutral.

The General Staff was concerned. There was no mobilization plan aimed at Austria alone, just one plan for mobilizing along the entire western border. There were the usual caveats about how a partial mobilization now would make it more difficult to call up a full mobilization later, not to mention the awkward fact that mobilizing even against Austria alone would entail putting troops into the Warsaw military district. Poland, as you may recall, is wedged between Austria and Germany, so there was no way to build up Russian forces there without alarming the Germans, which undercuts the entire rationale for a partial mobilization. So why not go all out?

While Russian military planners pondered this problem, Sazonov himself was off to lunch with Russia’s entente partners: specifically, Maurice Paléologue, the French ambassador, and Sir George Buchanan, the British ambassador. They discussed this Austrian ultimatum, and Sazonov told his colleagues that Russia would, at the very least, have to mobilize. What if the confrontation led to war? Buchanan asked. Paléologue declared that this could only happen if Austria and Germany had already made up their minds to fight a war. Both of them pressed Buchanan to stress to the British government that in the event of such a war, British neutrality would lead to disaster. Buchanan agreed to urge his government to oppose Austria and Germany forcefully.

At the Council of Ministers meeting that afternoon, Sazonov made his case. The German-speaking powers in Central Europe had been engaged in an aggressive strategy of increasing their own power and influence at the expense of Russia’s for ten years now. And make no

mistake; Germany is every bit as involved in this confrontation as is Austria. Russia had responded in the past with patience and civility, but the time for that approach was over. If Russia stood by and did nothing as Austria in effect stripped Serbia of its independence and sovereignty, then she would lose all credibility. No other nation would ever again treat with Russia as a great power.

The next speaker was Alexander Vasilyevich Krivoshein, the agriculture minister, a man known to have a close relationship with the Emperor. Krivoshein was a reformer on domestic issues, but a staunch nationalist in foreign affairs. He noted that the Russian Army had not completely rebuilt from the fiasco of the Russo-Japanese War and acknowledged there would be an element of risk in confronting Austria; nevertheless, he argued, the conciliatory approach had failed, and it was time to be firm.

These two back-to-back speeches calling for a robust response to Austria were heavily influential in the meeting. Others spoke, but no one challenged the developing decision. Austria would be asked to extend the deadline for a Serbian answer to the ultimatum, Serbia would be advised to fight, not a pitched battle, but rather a fighting withdrawal into the mountainous interior of the country, thus buying Russia time to mobilize. The council also endorsed Sazonov's recommendation of a partial mobilization.

I should pause here for a moment, because you are probably wondering why the agriculture minister, of all people, should be so zealous about confronting Austria. It becomes less surprising when you remember that most of Russia's agricultural exports pass through the Bosphorus on their way to foreign markets. Russians still dream of taking control of Constantinople and the straits and thereby securing this crucial trade route. There were a few times when this goal seemed almost within Russia's grasp, but here we are in 1914, and not only does Russia not control the strait, but her prospects of ever doing so appear to be dimming. You'll recall from episode 69 how the Bulgarians almost took control of the straits in the First Balkan War two years ago, a prospect not especially pleasing to the Russian government, as it merely implies replacing a Turkish knife at Russia's throat with a Bulgarian one.

Also, the Ottoman Empire has begun an initiative to rebuild its long-neglected navy, in the aftermath of the Italo-Ottoman War and the First Balkan War, in which the Ottomans found themselves outclassed by the Italian and Greek Navies, respectively. The Ottoman Empire has ordered up two dreadnought battleships from British shipbuilders, and the first of these is almost ready for delivery. Once Ottoman dreadnoughts are stationed at Constantinople, the Ottomans will not only begin to rival Austria and Italy and even France in the Mediterranean, but these dreadnoughts will also have access to the Black Sea, making the Ottoman Empire the *only* naval power with dreadnoughts in the Black Sea, since the Russians don't have any. In an age when naval power is measured in number of dreadnoughts, that's a big deal.

And then there is the Ottoman Army's cozying up to Germany. There are now some 2,000 German military advisors in Constantinople, and in itself this is a potential threat to Russian trade. Besides all these looming threats, another Austrian annexation in the Balkans raises the specter of Austria marching on Constantinople. So, as I say, when you consider all that, the agriculture minister being at the head of the pack demanding a confrontation doesn't seem so strange after all.

Meanwhile, in London, the big news of the day was the end of the Buckingham Palace Conference on Ireland. The talks had ended without an agreement, which seemed distinctly ominous. The Austrian ambassador in London met with the foreign secretary, Sir Edward Grey, to inform him of the contents of the ultimatum. Grey's first reaction was that this controversy did not concern any vital British interests, but he did float the idea of involving Italy, Germany, Britain and France in a Great Power conference to work out the dispute in the good old Concert of Europe way. The French ambassador, Paul Cambon rejected this idea out of hand, saying that the Russians would see it as Britain and France abandoning them. Cambon nominated Germany to serve as mediator. Grey raised that question with the German ambassador, but he suggested the best course of action was for the other Great Powers to take a step back and let Austria and Serbia work this out on their own. Grey would ask Austria to extend her deadline, just as the Russians had, but Austria will pay no mind to either proposal.

Grey remained optimistic longer than most as the July Crisis unfolded. He still believed that the old Concert of Europe could be brought back together for one more encore. He hoped Germany might be persuaded to press Austria to slow down and negotiate, not realizing the Germans were secretly telling the Austrians to do exactly the opposite. British relations with Russia were already strained over Persia. Grey thought, on the one hand, that if Britain did not back Russia, the Russians would likely take this as a sign their entente with Britain was no longer worth pursuing. On the other hand, backing Russia too strongly might encourage Russia to go ahead and start a war. A certain measure of ambiguity regarding British intentions was therefore called for, or so Grey reasoned.

The French saw it quite differently. In the French view, which was closer to the truth, Germany was egging Austria on, because it was not afraid of a war with Russia, or even war with both Russia and France. The only way to deter the Germans, and therefore stop a war, Cambon argued, was for Britain to make it clear to them up front that war with the Franco-Russian alliance meant war with Britain as well. "England is sure to join us in the end," Cambon reported to the French foreign ministry, "but too late."

[music: "Pathétique Symphony"]

Back in St. Petersburg that evening, foreign minister Sazonov met with the Serbian ambassador. He advised the Serbian government to accept the whole of the Austrian ultimatum, except for the most contentious point: the one where Austrians get a free hand to investigate the assassination

on Serbian soil. Sazonov also met with the German ambassador, who also suggested that the best course of action was for the other Great Powers to take a step back and let Austria and Serbia work it out on their own. Sazonov rejected this suggestion, arguing that Austria meant to annex Serbia, and that Russia was prepared to go to war to prevent that from happening.

The following morning, the day of the deadline, Saturday, July 25, the Russian Council of Ministers traveled out to the Emperor's isolated country palace outside St. Petersburg, where the Imperial family has been spending most of its time lately. Joining them was a number of military commanders, including Yanushkevich. Emperor Nikolai's record as ruler of Russia is by this point pretty consistent. He is easily swayed by his ministers, though with a tendency to drift back to his previous opinion after they are gone. The Council restated their arguments from yesterday. The Emperor was initially reluctant, but approved the idea of a partial mobilization, even though the distinction between partial and full mobilization was a pretty fine one, likely to be lost on the Germans. He also ordered what in Russian military parlance of the time was called a "Period Preparatory to War," a series of pre-mobilization steps intended to make mobilization easier if and when it was ordered. Things like giving immediate officers' commissions to Russian military cadets in their final year, reshoeing every horse in the Army, and requisitioning railroad cars.

These decisions, to move the nation toward mobilization, were technically secrets. But in an age where mobilizing first was seen as granting a major military advantage, all the Great Powers were carefully watching each other for just the sorts of sudden flurries of military activity that were now taking place in Russia. Nervous diplomats in St. Petersburg were soon firing off telegrams to their home governments, reporting that something big was going on with the Russian Army. And, of course, everyone assumed the worst: a full mobilization.

Back in Belgrade, the Serbian Cabinet appears to have been at least considering accepting the Austrian demands in full. But Russian diplomats were counseling them otherwise, and by midday Saturday the 25th, just hours before the deadline, the Russian Emperor and his government have made plain their willingness to mobilize in support of Serbia. And so the Serbian cabinet spent all day Saturday drafting its response to the Austrian ultimatum. They worked so hard at crafting the language that there was no time to type up a clean copy at the end of the day, and the Austrians were presented with a document full of grotty handwritten corrections.

The way the Serbian response is usually described is like this: the Serbian government agreed to all the Austrian demands, except for the one about Austrian investigators working in Serbian territory. But that description sells the Serbian government short. It is perhaps more accurate to say that the Serbian response was a masterpiece of sounding like agreeing to all the Austrian demands, except for the one about Austrian investigators working in Serbian territory. For example, the response to the demand that Serbian government officials that had made public statements hostile to Austria be removed, the Serbian response was something like, "We agree,

just tell us which government officials you have in mind and what statements they made that were anti-Austrian, then prove the official in question made the statement in question, explain in what way the statement is anti-Austrian, and we'll take it from there." The other demands were met in a similar way. The Serbian response was not so much a capitulation as an invitation to the Austrian foreign ministry to spend the next two years arguing with the Serbian foreign ministry over who said what, and whether or not that constituted an anti-Austrian sentiment.

But that's a moot point. By Saturday afternoon, the Serbian Army was mobilizing, and horns were blowing across Belgrade, summoning reservists to their units for yet another Balkan War, as the Serbian government continued to pack up for its move to Niš, farther south.

These moves did not go unnoticed by the staff of the Austrian embassy in Belgrade. By the time the Serbian Prime Minister, Nikola Pašić, arrived at the Austrian embassy to personally hand deliver Serbia's response, at 5:55 PM, just minutes before the expiration of the deadline, the Austrian ambassador had a pretty good idea that Serbia's response will be something less than complete capitulation.

Pašić didn't want to go himself, but no one else in the cabinet volunteered, so here he was. He handed the Serbian response to Giesl and said, "Part of your demands we have accepted...for the rest, we place our hopes in your loyalty and chivalry..." Whatever degree of loyalty and chivalry Giesl might have borne has to be weighed against his instructions from foreign minister Berchtold in Vienna: either the Serbian government concedes in full, or else you are to break off diplomatic relations at once and return to Vienna.

In fact, Giesl and the embassy staff were already packed, and the statement was already prepared for his signature. Within minutes, the embassy code books had been burned, and everyone was out the door and in the cars. At 6:30 PM, about half an hour later, the train for Vienna was pulling out of the Belgrade station, with all the Austrians aboard. Ten minutes after that, the train was over the river, across the border, and making its first stop in Hungary. Giesl left the train long enough to send a telegram to the foreign ministry in Vienna, informing them that he had left Serbia. Less than three hours later, the Austrian Kaiser ordered the mobilization of the Austrian military. Conrad ordered Plan "B," a mobilization against Serbia only.

The following day, Berchtold, the Austrian foreign minister, met with Chief of Staff Conrad to ask when the Army will be ready to attack Serbia. Apparently, he was not paying attention. Conrad had already said the 25th was the earliest a mobilization could begin, and since Austrian mobilization plans required 16 days, that meant the Austrian Army would be ready to attack Serbia on...August 12. But Berchtold was beside himself. The Germans were pressing him to get on with it as soon as possible, and here's Conrad talking about a date more than two weeks away. Berchtold decided that a declaration of war must come sooner than that, whether Conrad is ready to fight or not, but he did decide to postpone the formal declaration for a time to get a read on Serbian and Russian intentions. As reports of what looked an awful lot like a Russian

mobilization began trickling in, Berchtold asked the Kaiser to sign a formal declaration of war, and the Kaiser did on July 28.

This left Berchtold, the foreign minister, in a dilemma. He had no official means of communicating the declaration of war to Serbia, since the ambassador to Serbia, Giesl, and the embassy staff and dramatically and ostentatiously left Belgrade last Saturday evening. The German embassy was supposed to be representing Austrian interests in Belgrade now, but the Germans refused to convey the declaration on Austria's behalf, since Germany is still publicly claiming not to be involved in the crisis and unaware of Austrian intentions. So Berchtold was forced into the odd position of sending the news in a telegram to the Serbian Prime Minister, Nikola Pašić. This put Pašić in an odd position. No one in the history of diplomacy has ever declared war by telegram. Was this some kind of joke? He wondered if it was a deception, meant to trick Serbia into attacking first, and thereby providing Austria with an excuse to retaliate.

It was not until reports came in from the Serbian embassies in Paris and St. Petersburg, confirming the declaration of war, that Pašić knew for certain that it was true. Further confirmation came the next day, when Austrian artillery shelled Belgrade, just to prove Austria really means it.

[music: "Pathétique Symphony"]

With all these embassies and foreign ministries buzzing with activity in Vienna and Belgrade and St. Petersburg, Berlin makes quite a contrast as an island of relative calm. You will recall that the German Kaiser went off on his summer cruise along the coast of Norway, and many high-ranking German military officers, including Chief of Staff von Moltke and Admiral von Tirpitz have also left town on their summer vacations. This wasn't because Germany didn't know or care about the unfolding confrontation in the Balkans. It was partly an attempt to mislead Europe into thinking the Austrians have gone off on Serbia on their own, without consulting with Germany. It was also a calculated effort to keep a lid on the pot. It was well known that Germany had the largest army and the fastest and most ambitious mobilization schedule in Europe. If anything, other European powers tended to overestimate what the German Army was capable of. Any hint that Germany was preparing for a war would likely make the rest of the continent go "tilt," so the German government studiously avoided anything that hinted at concern over the confrontation in the Balkans.

The official German diplomatic line, as you have already seen, had been, first, to deny any knowledge of what Vienna might be up to prior to the announcement of the ultimatum, and then afterward, to keep a low profile and encourage other countries to do the same, hence the repeated diplomatic refrain that other powers should just keep out of this confrontation and let Austria and Serbia work it out among themselves. But no one was buying that line. Keeping out basically meant standing by as spectators while Austria crushes Serbia.

But of course, another component of this plan was for Austria to move so quickly that other powers wouldn't have time to react—and Germany would play the part of one more great power blindsided by the lightning Austrian response to the assassinations. But it didn't play out that way, much to the private frustration of the German Chancellor and other officials. Besides worrying that the delay might give other powers an opportunity to intervene, or for diplomacy to do its work, the Germans also seem to have been afraid that the delays were a sign that the Austrians were chickening out. But when Austria finally provided a copy of the ultimatum to the Germans, Kaiser Wilhelm declared himself pleased with its expansive demands. "Well, what do you know?" he said. "It *is* a firm note, after all."

Yet as it became increasingly clear that the Austrian response was going to be anything but rapid, you might expect the Germans to rethink the strategy behind all this. They didn't. The Germans took the fatalistic view that, on the one hand, to abandon Austria now would gravely undermine both Empires, while if the Russians pressed a confrontation to the brink of war, it merely meant that Russia was determined to have it out with Austria and Germany sooner or later, and that being the case, sooner was better, rather than waiting until the Russians have completed their rearmament program.

Ironically, in St. Petersburg, they are looking at things the same way. To abandon Serbia would end that nation's independence and gravely weaken Russia, while if an aggressive response to the Austrians leads to a war, well, that just means that war is what Germany and Austria were angling for all the while.

But I have to say, too, that the evidence suggests that throughout the first half of July, "on vacation or out to lunch" wasn't just a calculated pose. The German government truly is not worried. They do not seem to believe that the risk is very high that the Balkan situation would escalate to the point where Germany must intervene.

The first crack in the German façade, unsurprisingly, is Kaiser Wilhelm himself. On July 19, still on vacation aboard his yacht in Norway, Wilhelm received a routine telegram informing him that July 23 would be the date the ultimatum would be given and added that provisions were being made to keep in close communication with the Kaiser, in case a mobilization should be necessary. This telegram apparently rattled Wilhelm, as it brought home that war was a real possibility. On Sunday, July 26, Wilhelm ordered his yacht and the German High Seas Fleet to return to Kiel. That same day, French President Poincaré ordered the battleship *France* to return to France. After leaving St. Petersburg, the French President and Prime Minister had been scheduled to stop at the three Scandinavian capitals: Stockholm, Copenhagen, and Kristiania. But after Stockholm, they changed plans and headed straight for home. The crisis was heating up, and the Germans were jamming radio signals between *France* and France, making it difficult for the French government to respond to the escalating crisis.

Wilhelm returned to Germany on Monday, July 27. The following morning, on the one-month anniversary of the assassinations, the Kaiser was shown the Serbian response for the first time. He was thrilled with it. “An excellent result...! This is more than we could have expected! This does away with any need for war.” Okay, then, so why is Austria mobilizing? And the news coming out of Russia is not so good, either. German military intelligence had teams of volunteers, ordinary German citizens, known as *Spannungreisende*, or “tension travelers,” and this was the kind of situation they had been trained for. Their missions involved taking short trips across the borders into Russia and France, as business travelers or tourists on holiday, and keeping an eye open for military movements, and reporting anything out of the ordinary back to Berlin. It wasn’t long before the tension travelers began to report what looked suspiciously like a Russian mobilization, even though Russian diplomats were telling their German and Austrian counterparts that no military action had been taken. German intelligence correctly deduced that the Russian government had declared “a period preparatory to war.”

Anyway, the Kaiser told Moltke and the foreign secretary his view that the Serbian response eliminated any basis for war, and instructed the foreign secretary to advise Vienna that war was no longer necessary and that Germany was willing to serve as mediator between Austria and Serbia, if the Austrians wished. Ironically, the Social Democrats were for once in complete agreement with the Kaiser—they were demonstrating in Berlin against the looming war.

Now, getting the Kaiser onto his yacht and out of the country had actually been part of the plan privately agreed to by his ministers. You may have already noticed if you’ve been following along with me on this podcast, that Wilhelm has already demonstrated a tendency to get cold feet in a crisis, exhibits “A” and “B” being the two Moroccan crises. They figured something like this would happen. And so, though this message from Kaiser Wilhelm might have ended the crisis, if it had been received in Vienna in time, it was never sent. And later that day, July 28, Austria declared war on Serbia.

Meanwhile, in St. Petersburg, Russian military intelligence reports that the Austrian mobilization is a general mobilization, as in, not restricted to a war with Serbia. The Austrians are apparently contemplating war with Russia as well. Decrees are prepared for the Emperor to sign. One is for a partial mobilization against Austria alone; the other is for a general mobilization. The Emperor has not yet decided which one to sign, if either.

On Friday, the 24th, while the Austrian ultimatum was still on the table, the British Cabinet met, mostly to discuss the worrisome situation in Ulster. Even at this stage of the crisis, the prevailing view in the British government and the nation was that if there was a danger of the British Army being sent into combat, the danger lay in Ireland, and not in the faraway Balkans. Grey did brief the Cabinet on the Balkan situation, and the Cabinet voted to endorse Grey’s idea of calling a Great Power conference to resolve the dispute. On Saturday afternoon, Grey, apparently still not grasping how dangerous the situation was becoming, left London a few hours before the Austrian deadline lapsed, to go fishing at his country estate outside Winchester.

In Italy, meanwhile, the government in Rome struggled with its response to the Balkan crisis. The Italian public had no love for Austria, a nation still remembered as an enemy of Italian nationhood and an oppressor of ethnic Italians still living under Austrian rule in places like the Tyrolean Alps and Trieste. On the other hand, Rome valued her alliance with Berlin and was not keen to antagonize the Germans. And add to this the fact that Italy has just fought a costly war with the Ottoman Empire: episode 66. The Army is still trying to cope with guerilla fighters in the Libyan interior, and the Italian Navy is understandably unenthusiastic about taking on the French and British Mediterranean fleets.

But Italy has an “out,” which is this: the Triple Alliance is a defensive alliance. Austria is the one declaring war here, so the alliance commitment doesn’t apply. Privately, however, Italian diplomats are putting out feelers to Austria. If Austria wants Italian support, it can have it—in exchange for ceding to Italy those Italian-speaking territories Austria still rules. Oh, and don’t forget that Italy has territorial claims on the Dalmatian coast as well, so if Austria expands in the Balkans, she’s going to have to make sure Italy gets a piece of the pie.

As you might guess, Vienna found these demands...excessive. Under prompting from Germany, the Austrian government on August 2 offered Rome a vague promise that if it entered the war, it could share in the spoils in the Balkans. That doesn’t amount to much of a promise, especially considering that Vienna is also loudly foreswearing any interest in the acquisition of territory as a result of this confrontation, and a share of nothing is nothing, right? That must have been how the Italian government saw it, because the next day, Italy formally announced its neutrality.

[music: “Pathétique Symphony”]

On Monday the 27th, Sir Edward Grey returned from his weekend in the country to the news that his proposal for an international conference of Great Powers to resolve this latest Balkan crisis had been rejected all around. He also got a chance to see the Serbian reply to Austria for the first time, and was surprised at how reasonable it was. At the Cabinet meeting that day, Grey for the first time raised the question of whether the British government was prepared to intervene militarily in the event of a German attack on France. The Cabinet was hostile to the idea. Several ministers threatened to quit the government if that happened, and the meeting ended with no decision taken, although the First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, alerted the Royal Navy that war was a possibility, and the home fleets went out to sea.

The British Cabinet met again on July 29, following the Austrian declaration of war. Grey asked again whether the Government would be willing to go to war to defend France against a German attack. Only four Cabinet ministers were willing to support the idea: Grey, Herbert Asquith, the Prime Minister, Richard Haldane, the Lord Chancellor, and Winston Churchill. It’s worth mentioning here that while the specifics of the German war plan were not known, it was commonly understood that the German strategy for dealing with a two-front war would be a rapid attack on France, something like the great victory of 1870, with the goal of neutralizing

France before huge, lumbering Russia has had time enough to mobilize and begin an offensive. Hence these questions about defending France.

The subject of Belgium came up at this Cabinet meeting also, because it was also generally known, or at least generally suspected, that a German attack on France might come through Belgium. Even here, there was no stomach for military intervention. Yes, Britain was a signatory to the treaty guaranteeing Belgian neutrality, as was Germany and several other major powers, but all that meant was that the great powers of Europe had agreed *collectively* to guarantee Belgium's neutrality. It did not necessarily mean that any *individual* power, like Britain, was obligated to enforce Belgian neutrality by itself, even at the risk of becoming entangled in a continental war. Or at least, that was the view of the Cabinet. As they pored over a map of Belgium, David Lloyd George explained that if the Germans moved through Belgium, they would likely restrict themselves to the southern part of the country, south of the River Meuse. This is the most direct invasion route into France, and also the least densely populated part of Belgium. Surely *this* was where a German invasion would take place. And it followed logically that the Belgian Army, rather than meet the Germans head on, would pull back to defend Belgium's major cities farther north: Liège, Namur, Louvain, Brussels. And the Germans would wisely choose to bypass the Belgians and their major cities, and press on to the west, leaving the Belgians in control of the most important parts of their country.

Many British ministers were actually sympathetic to the view that geography and strategy all but demanded a German violation of Belgian neutrality. As long as the Germans didn't come too far north, Britain could look the other way. Even as hawkish a minister as Churchill said, "I don't see why we should come in if they go only a little way into Belgium."

If the Germans pressed farther north, well, that would be different. The greatest concern to the British was the important Belgian port city of Antwerp, which gave access to the North Sea not far from the British coast. If the Germans marched into Antwerp, that would be quite another matter, far more threatening to British interests. But why would the Germans want to do that, when their goal is an offensive into France?

We shouldn't be surprised if Liberal ministers are anti-war, because that's part of the Liberal manifesto. The Labour Party was even more staunchly opposed to getting involved in the continental crisis, and was contemplating calling a general strike. Most of the British press also wanted to keep out of continental disputes. On July 29, the same day as this Cabinet meeting, the *Daily News* editorialized, "The most effective work for peace that we can do is to make clear that not a British life shall be sacrificed for the sake of Russian hegemony of the Slav world." The following day, the leader in the *Manchester Guardian* would famously declare, "We care as little for Belgrade as Belgrade does for Manchester."

In the evening of July 28, the day Austria declared war, the two Emperors Wilhelm and Nikolai, unwittingly sent each other telegrams just a few minutes apart. These are the first of the well-

known “Willy” and “Nicky” telegrams, so called because the Imperial cousins communicated in English, a language they both knew well and had in common, and signed their cables “Willy” and “Nicky.” They will not see each other’s messages until the following morning, but in brief, Nikolai asked Wilhelm to intervene to restrain the Austrians going any further, while Wilhelm offered Nikolai his help in restraining the Austrians. So, so far, so good, right?

The following morning, July 29, when the two Emperors finally read each others’ telegrams, each of them felt encouraged by the other’s conciliatory tone, which raised hopes that war could still be averted. Their optimism was not shared by their ministers, however. In Berlin, the German Foreign Secretary and Chief of Staff were cabling their counterparts in Vienna, demanding that Austria do something, anything, to get her war with Serbia going before the diplomats had a chance to kill it. And so, this was the day the Austrian Army shelled Belgrade. Kaiser Wilhelm was not fully aware of the extent to which his own ministers were pressing forward with war while he was trying to use his family connections to put a stop to it, but he was feeling a growing sense that his instructions were not being followed. He chewed out his Chancellor, moving Bethmann-Hollweg to cable Vienna himself and suggest that the Austrians cancel their mobilization order and open negotiations with the Russians. In Vienna, a very perplexed foreign minister Berchtold got that telegram and remarked, “Who rules in Berlin—Bethmann or Moltke?” As for the mobilization, it continued.

[music: “Pathétique Symphony”]

In St. Petersburg that morning, the German ambassador had met with the Russian foreign minister, Sazonov, to follow up on the Kaiser’s telegram from last night. He asked the Russian government to hold off on mobilization and give peace a chance. Sazonov countered that it would be easier for Russia to stand down if the Austrians would halt *their* mobilization. Afterward, Sazonov wondered whether the Germans were sincere, or whether this was a stalling tactic, meant to delay Russia’s already ponderous mobilization and buy the Austrians time. By the end of the day, Sazonov’s worst fears seemed confirmed when the Russian government received word of the artillery bombardment on Belgrade, as well as a telegram from Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg in Berlin, warning that a Russian mobilization would compel Germany to mobilize also.

Sazonov shared his view with Emperor Nikolai that evening, and asked permission to begin a full mobilization. Nikolai, struggling to reconcile the threatening telegram from Bethmann with the much friendlier one he himself had received from the Kaiser, reluctantly approved full mobilization. Nikolai then cabled Wilhelm, asking for an explanation, and suggesting that the dispute between Austria and Serbia be turned over to the Court of Arbitration in The Hague, which, you’ll recall from episode 30, came out of Nikolai’s own peace initiative of 1899, 15 years ago.

Less than an hour later, “Nicky” received a telegram from “Willy.” In it, the Kaiser reiterated his offer to mediate, but noted that mediation would become impossible if Russia mobilized.

Actually, this telegram is in reply to yesterday’s telegram, not the one the Emperor just sent a little while ago, but Nikolai didn’t realize this, and so he rescinded his mobilization order, over the vehement objections of his war minister and the army chief of staff. The ministers of both Empires seemed hell bent on war, but both Emperors are coming down with cold feet, and for a brief moment, it looked like that would be enough. There was a time in Europe’s past when the wills of two monarchs alone might have been enough to stop a war. But that time has passed.

In place of the full mobilization, the Emperor ordered that partial mobilization along the lines that had been discussed five days ago, saying, “I will not be responsible for a monstrous slaughter.” It’s a revealing moment, as it suggests the Emperor sees general mobilization as strongly pulling his Empire into a war, whereas a partial mobilization is a more diplomatic gesture, sending a warning, rather than embarking toward a conflict. But his ministers are still worried about the partial mobilization. They still think that in the end there’s going to be a general mobilization anyway, and this partial mobilization will only slow down the mechanism, if not gum it up.

Later that night, Nikolai sent a third telegram to the German Kaiser, thanking him for his speedy and conciliatory reply. And then he made a fatal slip. The Kaiser had said he would not be able to mediate if Russia mobilized. Nikolai replied that the military measures Russia had taken so far had been in the works for five days and were purely defensive. Apparently, he meant to convey that no *additional* measures were being taken, but when Wilhelm read the telegram the following morning, he was beside himself. The Russian Emperor had just admitted to the German Kaiser an inconvenient truth. Five days ago was July 24, which was even before Serbia had answered the ultimatum. To Wilhelm, what this meant was that Nicky had been secretly preparing for war all along, even while he was sending pleasant telegrams to Willy talking about negotiation.

Moltke was also beside himself. The Russians were getting a leg up on the mobilization race! Germany’s war plan depends on defeating France rapidly, before the Russians had a chance to fully mobilize. To concede a mobilization head start to Russia could fatally undermine the plan. So Moltke cabled Conrad, in Vienna, and asked him to switch his mobilization plan from Plan B to Plan R, full mobilization against Russia. Conrad agreed to this, but actually he only switched from Plan B to Plan BR, war against both. This will be a catastrophically bad decision, but we’ll come back to that in a future episode.

Moltke also asked the Kaiser to approve *Kriegsgefahrzustand*, or “State of Imminent War,” which was the German equivalent to the Russian “Period Preparatory to War,” which was already underway in that country. But the Kaiser and the Chancellor weren’t ready to take that step yet. Instead, they worked on a reply to the Russian Emperor’s second telegram, the one in which he asked for an explanation of the very different messages he was getting from Willy and from the German ambassador. The Kaiser replied that there was no contradiction; Austria had

mobilized against Serbia only and was not threatening Russia. If Russia mobilized, then Austria would have no choice but to mobilize against Russia as well and Kaiser Wilhelm would no longer be in a position to mediate.

Kaiser Wilhelm's telegram, in so many words, placed the responsibility for deciding between peace and war entirely on Nikolai's shoulders. This was fully intentional. If there was to be war between Russia and Germany, it was vital for domestic German political opinion that the war be framed as a Russian provocation, not a German one.

It had been a long and stressful night for Nikolai. The following morning, July 30, his ministers conferred among themselves. The agriculture minister, Krivoshein, still the biggest hawk in the government, asked for a meeting with Nikolai. The Emperor refused. The war minister and the chief of staff continued to insist that a partial mobilization does more harm than good, but the Emperor will not back down. At last, the Army Chief of Staff, Yanushkevitch, met with the foreign minister, Sazonov. He stressed to Sazonov that it is not too late to undo the damage, if a full mobilization were ordered today, July 30. To wait any longer, though, would create exactly the kind of logistical tangles that the Army was warning everybody about. Sazonov tried to get a meeting with the Emperor, and the exhausted Emperor finally agreed to see him at 3:00 that afternoon.

Meanwhile, in London, the galleries at the House of Commons are packed. Today is the day the Commons are scheduled to debate Irish Home Rule. This issue that Parliament has been wrestling with for more than thirty years now. After all the debates, the votes, the split in the Liberal Party, the Lords' Veto, the Parliament Act, and two years of the Lords voting "no" even under the Parliament Act have all led up to this moment. Weapons are being smuggled into Ireland and fears of violence, even civil war, are very real. At this dramatic juncture, the Prime Minister, the Right Honorable H.H. Asquith, rises in the House...and asks to postpone the debate, citing the escalating crisis in Europe. The audience in the galleries gasps.

We'll have to stop there for today. Thanks for listening. The *When Diplomacy Fails* podcast is now five years old, and Zack Twamley is celebrating the anniversary with a boatload of new episodes, including new looks at old topics and conversations with other history podcasters. He invited me on to talk about the Russo-Japanese War, and we spent an hour talking about that, about history podcasting, and about whatever else came into our heads. That podcast is now posted, and you can find it in the *When Diplomacy Fails* podcast feed, wherever fine podcasts are distributed. And be sure to visit the website, wdfpodcast.com.

And I hope you'll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we continue the story of the July Crisis. We'll eavesdrop on the Russian Emperor's 3:00 meeting and listen together in dismay as Europe slides into a general war. That's next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. When the British Prime Minister asked the House of Commons to postpone the debate on Irish Home Rule, he already knew that a majority of the House would agree. He had conferred privately with the Conservative Leader, Andrew Bonar Law, and the Irish Parliamentary Leader, John Redmond, and both had already consented. The Conservatives were all for challenging the Germans, and as for John Redmond, well, now that passage of a Home Rule bill was almost within reach, the last thing he and the Irish Parliamentary Party wanted was to appear disloyal to Britain. Herbert Asquith's biggest problem is his own Liberal Party, which is still mostly opposed to getting involved in the developing Balkan war.

[music: "Pathétique Symphony"]