

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 78

“The Lamps Go Out II”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

In the afternoon of Thursday, July 30, 1914, the Russian Emperor was in seclusion as his ministers conferred and schemed to convince him to rescind his partial mobilization and issue instead a full mobilization order, while there was still time.

In London, the British Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, met with the German ambassador. He did not let on that the British Cabinet was currently divided 16-4 against intervention in the not-yet-declared continental war. Instead, he warned the ambassador that Britain would probably stay neutral if the conflict were confined to the Balkans, but if Germany attacked France, then Britain would be likely to enter the war in support of her entente partner.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 78. The Lamps Go Out, Part Two.

At 3:00 on the afternoon of July 30, Foreign Minister Sazonov arrived for his meeting with the Emperor to discuss the mobilization order. In the meanwhile, “Nicky” has read the latest telegram from “Willy.” This is the telegram that the Emperor mistook last night’s telegram for, the one in which Kaiser Wilhelm says there is no contradiction between what he says and what his ambassador says, and that if Russia mobilizes, mediation will be impossible. Nikolai is thinking hard about how Wilhelm is focusing on Russia’s mobilization as an obstacle to peace, while refusing to take any steps to stop the Austrian mobilization that is already underway. Now, you could argue, and the Germans and Austrians would argue, that the Austrian mobilization is directed against Serbia only, not against Russia or any other Great Power, and is therefore less serious a threat to peace than a Russian mobilization directed against Austria, a fellow Great Power.

Except that Nikolai is also remembering how the last time the Austrians mobilized, nine months ago, during the crisis that arose around Serbian withdrawal from Albania, the Austrians had managed to place substantial forces along their border with Russia before Russian intelligence had discovered them. Maybe that was happening again. Maybe Austrian troops were secretly massing on the Russian border, even as Willy was telling Nicky that a Russian mobilization would end the last chance for peace.

It may seem a little silly, in hindsight, to fear the Austrian Army so deeply, in view of what's going to happen in the next few months. But in July it seemed reasonable. Austria had a strong military tradition. Russian intelligence had tended all along to overestimate them.

Then Sazonov met with the Emperor. The meeting lasted fifty minutes, and Sazonov gave the speech of his life. He didn't bother with the logistical argument against partial mobilization, rather, he made the case for his view that, whatever the German Kaiser may be saying, Germany and Austria were privately agreed on a plan to provoke a war. How else to explain Austria's intransigence, and Germany's peculiar unwillingness to press Austria to hold off on mobilization and pursue diplomacy instead, even as she, um, presses Russia to hold off on mobilization and pursue diplomacy instead. A Russian mobilization, Sazonov argued, should not be viewed by the Emperor as triggering a war. It was now a question of whether Russia would be prepared for the war that was already coming, or whether she would be taken unawares. Did the Emperor wish to keep his Empire for himself, and to bequeath it to the Crown Prince? Then he would have to act, or else see it all taken away from him.

Just before 4:00 that afternoon, the Emperor gave in and reluctantly approved a full mobilization. Sazonov hurried to a telephone to tell the chief of staff, Nikolai Yanushkevich, of the Emperor's decision, adding, "Now you can smash your telephone!" That was a little joke between the two of them, since the Emperor had approved and then called off a full mobilization just last night, Sazonov was jokingly suggesting that Yanushkevitch break his phone so that even if the Emperor had a change of heart once again, this time he wouldn't be able to stop the full mobilization.

In Berlin the following morning, Friday, July 31, the German chief of staff, Helmuth von Moltke, already suspected a Russian mobilization was underway, but he couldn't prove it just yet, and the German government is going to want proof. Confirmation finally came in just before noon, in the form of a telegram from Germany's ambassador in St. Petersburg. Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg telephoned the Kaiser and read the telegram to him. The Kaiser approved a declaration of a State of Imminent Threat of War. In fine Prussian tradition, this declaration was made public by a unit of German soldiers, who marched from the Palace to Unter den Linden, the grand Berlin boulevard, struck their drums, and read the proclamation aloud to a bemused citizenry.

Berlin sent an ultimatum to St. Petersburg. Russia must cancel her mobilization within 12 hours, or Germany will declare war. To France was sent a similar ultimatum. France had 18 hours to declare its neutrality in the coming conflict with Russia, or Germany will declare war. France was also kindly requested to turn over control of its frontier forts at Toul and Verdun to be occupied by German soldiers for the duration of the conflict. As an earnest of French good faith, you understand.

The German government also invited the Ottoman Empire, Greece, and Rumania to join in the war against Russia.

Over in Austria-Hungary, the reaction was...disturbing. Austria had mobilization plans in hand for a war against Serbia, or Russia, or both. They had even planned for the contingency of a war in which their army begins by attacking Serbia, but pivots following a Russian intervention and redeploys against Russia. Only, the Austrians weren't pivoting. The Austrian Chief of Staff, General Conrad, was mobilizing additional forces to cover the Russian front, yes, but they were still deploying for a full-on assault against Serbia, which made no sense, now that Russia was the main threat. Kaiser Wilhelm sent a telegram to his Imperial brother, Kaiser Franz Josef, arguing that Serbia was now secondary, Russia the main concern, and for Austria to split her forces would prove disastrous.

Nevertheless, Conrad continued to mass on the Serbian border a force deemed sufficient to take Serbia in a quick offensive, at the cost of undermining Austria's eastern front. Austria was splitting her forces, and it would indeed prove disastrous.

In London that day, Friday July 31, the British Cabinet met again. Paul Cambon, the French ambassador, has been vigorously pressing Sir Edward Grey, the British Foreign Secretary, for assurances that in the event of war between Germany and France, that Britain will support her entente partner. This Cabinet meeting marks the first time in the ten-year history of the Anglo-French entente that the full British Cabinet was fully appraised of the level of commitment that Grey and the War Ministry have been promising to the French. Apparently, no record of this meeting survives, but it must have been really interesting. In terms of votes, though, nothing has changed. Asquith, Grey, Haldane, and Churchill are the only four Cabinet ministers in favor of supporting France. The other sixteen ministers stand by the traditional Liberal Party aversion to war, including David Lloyd George, whose influence in the Party rivals the Prime Minister's.

It appears several ministers were ready to resign from the government in the event of Britain taking sides in the war. At best, this would be an embarrassing repudiation at a time when the government badly needs a show of support. At worst, it might bring the government down altogether. Winston Churchill begins sounding out members of the opposition Conservative Party, who support a hard line against Germany, and Churchill wondered whether intervention would engender enough Conservative support to keep the government in office. The Irish

Parliamentary Party is also ready to support entry into the war. The Labour Party is dead set against it.

In the end, the Cabinet took no action, and Grey is forced to tell Cambon, the French ambassador, who took that news very badly. But Grey has an idea. The British ambassador in Berlin had previously reported on a conversation he had had with the German Chancellor, Bethmann-Hollweg. The ambassador had asked the Chancellor if he would guarantee that Germany would respect Dutch neutrality in the event of a war. Bethmann-Hollweg readily offered that guarantee. Then the British Ambassador asked for the same guarantee regarding Belgium. This time, the German Chancellor gave an elliptical and awkward answer. If Belgium did not align itself with Germany's enemies, then Germany would respect Belgian territorial integrity after the war was concluded.

Okay, that was weird. Why not simply give the same unambiguous answer? This answer sounds instead an awful lot like an implicit admission that Germany does not intend to respect Belgian territorial integrity *before* the war is concluded. The British and French already suspected as much. But here is an opportunity to Grey to break the Cabinet deadlock and discredit the pro-German or pro-neutral elements in the Liberal Party. Grey drafted identical telegrams to the French and German foreign ministries, asking each one to make an unequivocal pledge to respect Belgian neutrality in the event of a war. Naturally, the French give a favorable reply immediately. The German foreign ministry did not.

The following day, August 1, was a Saturday. It is not usual at this time for high-level officials of any of the Great Powers to work on Saturdays, but this is no ordinary Saturday, and the crisis continued to unfold. Lower level officials in the major capitals are already sleeping in their offices, and now cabinets and parliaments across Europe will be holding Saturday meetings. Even Sir Edward Grey has stayed in London. You'll recall that Grey went off on a fishing trip last weekend, just as the Austrian deadline was expiring. Yes, and it's hard to believe that was just a week ago. This weekend, the topic on everyone's mind is less Austria's quarrel with Serbia and more Germany's quarrel with Russia, and where France and Britain stand.

In Paris, the French Cabinet met to discuss mobilization. Some good news came in a dispatch from Rome: the Italian government has given France private assurance that in the event of war, Rome intends to remain neutral. This frees the French from the obligation to garrison the Italian border, and means the entire army can deploy north of Switzerland.

The German ambassador in Paris met with Viviani in his capacity as foreign minister to ask for a reply to the German request for a commitment of French neutrality. Viviani gave an ambiguous answer. "France will act in accordance with her interests." The German ambassador pointed out that France had an alliance with Russia. Viviani replied, "*Evidemment*," or "evidently." The ambassador reported this conversation back to Berlin, where it was read as a sign that French support for Russia was wavering.

In fact, the French Cabinet would agree to call a mobilization. By 5:00 in Paris, the news is public and bands are playing “La Marseillaise” and “God Save Our Noble Czar.” They are also playing “Rule Britannia,” although this might just be wishful thinking.

In London, the British Cabinet is also holding a rare Saturday meeting. In light of the French response, and the German non-response, to Grey’s inquiry on the neutrality of Belgium, Grey is asking the Cabinet for permission to send Germany an ultimatum: that if Germany violated Belgian neutrality, Britain would declare war. Despite an hour-long harangue from Winston Churchill and personal appeals to Lloyd George and some of the other holdouts, the Cabinet is still unwilling to give Foreign Secretary Grey the authority he is asking for. Now it is Grey who is threatening to resign from the Government. If he does, there’s a good chance that, too, would bring down the Liberal government, perhaps install a minority Conservative government with some Liberal support, which would lead to Britain declaring war anyway.

After a heated debate, the Cabinet agreed on a compromise. Grey may tell the German ambassador that if Germany continues to refuse to commit to Belgian neutrality, then “it would be very hard to restrain public feeling in this country.” Yeah, that’ll show them.

The French ambassador in London, Paul Cambon, was on the verge of apoplexy. After the Cabinet meeting, Grey met with him to brief him on the Cabinet’s decision, if decision you call it. Cambon pointed out that as a result of France’s informal naval agreement with Britain, the entire French Navy is now deployed in the Mediterranean, in reliance on Britain’s implicit promise to guard her Channel coast. If Britain remains neutral, the French coast will be vulnerable to bombardment by the German High Seas Fleet. Which was true, although it has to be said that even a French Navy stationed in the Channel would have been in no position to defend her coast against the Germans. Germany outnumbers France 19-4 in dreadnoughts at this time. Cambon would grumble later that “I wonder if the word ‘honor’ should be stripped from the English vocabulary.”

[music: *Cello Concerto in E Minor*]

The same morning the French and British Cabinets were meeting, the German Chancellor, Bethmann-Hollweg, appeared before the Bundesrat, the upper house of the German Parliament. The government needs the support of the Bundesrat, but not the Reichstag, the lower house, to declare war. The Chancellor announced to the Bundesrat that Russia was mobilizing and France appeared ready to do the same. He told them of the ultimatums the German government had sent both, and asked consent to declare war if Russia and France refuse to back down. The vote authorizing war was unanimous.

The German deadline for Russia to end her mobilization came and went at noon with no reply from St. Petersburg. Kaiser Wilhelm and Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg were still reluctant, but the pressure on them from the minister of war, from Moltke, and from Admiral Tirpitz was growing. Even the Kaiserin told her husband to “be a man.” At five o’clock that afternoon, the

Kaiser signed the order for a general mobilization. Keep in mind that the German mobilization plan is a combined mobilization and offensive, meaning that the first German soldiers are even now receiving orders to cross into a neutral country: Luxembourg. Forget Serbia. Forget mobilizations. The first border crossing is going to be made not by Russia or Austria. It is going to be made by Germany, and against a small neutral country that has done no one any wrong, and whose borders, like Belgium's, have been guaranteed by the Concert of Europe. The world will remember this, and it will see Germany, not Austria, not Russia, as the country that ignited the catastrophe.

Minutes later, the German ambassador in St. Petersburg was ushered into the office of Russian Foreign Minister Sazonov. The ambassador asked whether the Imperial government could give him a favorable reply to the German request that Russia end its mobilization. Sazonov told him no. The ambassador drew a document from his pocket and asked again, with visible agitation. Sazonov, suspecting the worst, answers "no" once again. The ambassador asks a third time, almost begging. Sazonov says simply, "I have no other reply to give you." The ambassador hands over the document, cutting diplomatic relations between the Empires, an action tantamount to a declaration of war. They have a brief argument over which of their countries is to blame, then embrace. The German ambassador will leave St. Petersburg tomorrow morning.

Meanwhile, back in Germany at the Kaiser's palace, the ink is barely dry on the mobilization order when the foreign secretary informs Kaiser Wilhelm of a telegram just received from Germany's ambassador in London. According to the telegram, the British foreign secretary was making a dramatic offer. If Germany would pledge not to attack France, Britain will pledge in return not only her own neutrality, but would guarantee France's neutrality as well.

This news dropped like a bombshell. Kaiser Wilhelm was elated. Germany against the Triple Entente was a dicey proposition, but he felt confident of his chances against Russia alone. He turned to his Chief of Staff, Moltke, and said, "So we simply deploy the whole army to the East!" The mood quickly turned sour when Moltke explained that there was no mobilization plan against Russia only. The mobilization plan currently in motion can't be completely rewritten on the fly. Moltke said, "[I]f His Majesty insisted on leading the entire army to the East, then he would have not an army that was ready to strike but a messy heap of disorderly armed men without supplies."

Wilhelm lost his temper and let loose the nastiest burn he could think of. "Your uncle would have given me a different answer." He is referring of course to Moltke's uncle and namesake, the great Moltke, mastermind of the war of 1870. Moltke never really recovered from this confrontation. His leadership was lackluster thereafter, his health would deteriorate, and he would die in less than two years. His wife speculated he may have had a mild heart attack or stroke this night.

In hindsight, Germany might have been better off with the “reverse Schlieffen plan,” directing the bulk of its army against Russia. Was it really true that it was already too late to change course? After the war, the man who was the head of the General Staff’s Railway Department at the time published a book in which he laid out an argument that, had the order come, he and his staff could indeed have devised an alternative mobilization plan. But the order never came.

In truth, German soldiers were already crossing into Luxembourg. Kaiser Wilhelm ordered them pulled back. The mobilization would continue, the Kaiser decreed, but the Army would not cross into Luxembourg, Belgium, or France until the attitudes in Paris and London became clearer.

But later that evening, clarification would come in the form of another telegram from London. The previous telegram had been a misunderstanding. In fact, the British were asking Germany not to cross any border, not Belgium, not France, not even Russia. The Kaiser summoned Moltke at 11:00 PM and told him, “Now you can do as you please.” The mobilization is on again, the orders rescinding the advance into Luxembourg are themselves rescinded.

The Kaiser went to bed while his ministers were still debating over whether a formal declaration of war was necessary or desirable. The Chancellor wanted one. Recall that the Social Democratic Party is the largest party in the Reichstag and vehemently anti-war. Bethmann-Hollweg believed the only way to get the largest party to support the war is to make Germany appear the victim, reluctantly going to war in response to Russian provocation.

On Sunday, August 2, the situation looks like this: Austria, Russia, Germany, and France are all mobilizing. Austria has declared war on Serbia. Germany has effectively declared war on Russia. German troops are entering Luxembourg, and Russian cavalry are now testing the German defenses in East Prussia. In Washington, President Wilson’s wife is dying, and he is spending most of his time at her side, although the US government is sending offers to mediate to the Great Powers in Europe. These offers are being ignored. The most important question left unanswered now is, what is the position of the British?

The German ambassador in London dropped by Number Ten at breakfast time to plead once more for British neutrality. The Conservative Leader, Andrew Bonar Law sent Asquith a letter urging support for France and pledging that the Conservatives will back the government.

[music: *Cello Concerto in E Minor*]

At 11:00 that morning, the British Cabinet held a Sunday meeting for the first time in, well, anyone’s memory. The Cabinet reluctantly authorized Grey to tell the French that Britain will protect their Channel coast. Cabinet recesses, then comes together again at 6:30 that evening. With the news coming in that the Germans have occupied Luxembourg, it looks increasingly likely that Belgium will be next. Some of the anti-war ministers are wavering, as Germany looks increasingly like the aggressor. Others hold to the argument that geography all but forces Germany to send some of her army through Belgium, and that as long as the Germans keep to

the Ardennes, in the south of Belgium, the incursion would be at least tolerable to Britain. It also depends on how the Belgians react. If the Belgians capitulate and allow the German Army to pass through their territory, however reluctantly, well, you can hardly expect Britain to go to war over that. Even the Prime Minister is forced to acknowledge that Britain cannot be more Belgian than the Belgians.

In Brussels, an American diplomat remarked that a week ago, the crisis was all about Serbia. Now, it seems, it's all about Belgium. So far, the Belgians are looking distinctly plucky. Belgium began mobilizing its own army last Friday, July 31, even before the Germans did. The German government, however, is still hopeful that Belgium will bow to the inevitable and allow the German Army to pass through. Of course, there may have to be some token combat, just to make clear that Belgium's cooperation is unwilling, but after that, the smart move is for the Belgians to stand aside. Isn't it?

That evening, at 8:00 in Brussels, the German ambassador visited the Belgian Foreign Ministry with an ultimatum. France, he said, was already attacking across the border into Germany, and the German government had reason to believe that the French Army would shortly move into Belgium. Neither of these claims were true. But the ambassador went on to argue that the security of the Fatherland required the German Army to now send troops through Belgium in her own self-defense. The Belgian government should not regard this as a hostile act. If Belgium does not interfere with the German incursion, then Germany would promise in return a complete withdrawal from Belgian territory just as soon as the war with France was concluded, along with a promise to respect Belgian independence thereafter and to pay Belgium compensation for her losses as a result of the German Army's actions. But if Belgium resisted the German invasion, she would be treated as an enemy of the Empire. The ultimatum concluded with a demand that the Belgian government give Germany an unambiguous reply to its demand within twelve hours, that is to say, by 8:00 AM the following morning, Monday, August 3.

In Berlin, it was an uneasy night. German officials knew of the wavering in the British Cabinet. A German invasion of Belgium would put Germany in the worst possible light just at the time her diplomats in London were pressing for British neutrality. There was also the military consideration: the Schlieffen Plan was devised with, shall we say, an optimistic view of Belgian attitudes. It was essential to the Plan to get the German offensive into France as quickly as possible. If the Belgians decided to resist wholeheartedly, precious time would be lost.

The Belgian Council of State met from 9:00 PM to midnight that night. There was little enthusiasm for accepting the German offer. Belgium would resist. Under orders from Berlin, the German ambassador even went back to the foreign ministry in Brussels at 1:30 AM to try one last time to convince the Belgians it was in their best interest to cooperate. He could not.

That morning, Monday, August 3, at 8:00 AM sharp, the Belgian reply was delivered to the German Embassy. At the same time, the Belgian King Albert, took formal command of the

Belgian Army and issued orders to demolish railroad bridges and tunnels on lines entering Belgium from Germany or Luxembourg.

[music: *Cello Concerto in E Minor*]

The 39-year old King Albert had assumed the Belgian throne four and a half years ago, following the death of King Leopold II. The young King was a breath of fresh air after the long and not particularly proud reign of his uncle. You will remember from episodes 19 and 20 Leopold's horrifying rule of the Congo Free State, as well as his shameless greed, his deplorable treatment of his family, and his scandalous womanizing, often with prostitutes and/or underage girls. His griping about how unlucky he was to get stuck as monarch of a bunch of losers like the Belgians also did little to endear him to his subjects.

Albert, by contrast, was to all appearances happily married, an exemplary husband and father, a King who lived on a much more modest scale, and actually seemed proud to be Belgian. Unlike his predecessor, he took his coronation oath not only in French, but in Flemish, too. All of this made him much more popular than Leopold had ever been. But the Great War was surely Albert's finest hour. He staunchly opposed any talk of collaborating with the Germans and stood up for Belgian independence, this in spite of the fact that he and his wife were both distant relatives of Kaiser Wilhelm. And the public rallied behind him. By the morning of August 3, the King and the government's unapologetic "no" to the German demands was common knowledge. Crowds cheered. Flags flew everywhere. Even the Belgian Socialist Party released a statement calling for Belgian workers to fight for freedom and democracy against German barbarism.

Albert also sent a cable to the British King George V, another royal cousin, asking for help in resisting the German aggression. The British Cabinet met that morning, and Herbert Asquith was moved to remark, in his own understated way, that the ferocious Belgian response "simplified matters." The harshness of the German ultimatum to Belgium shocked and offended the British Cabinet and the public. Belgium is awfully close to Britain, and preserving Belgium as a neutral buffer state between France and Germany—and in some sense between Britain and Germany—is seen by many as an important British national interest.

Two Cabinet ministers have already resigned, but the Prime Minister invited them to come to the Cabinet meeting anyway. Significantly, David Lloyd George, the most prominent Cabinet member to oppose British intervention, has changed his position. He now favors fighting Germany. The two resisters are unpersuaded, and two more Cabinet members tender their resignations, in spite of Lloyd George's plea that the doubters at least hold on for a little while longer. Grey is going to ask the Commons for support for war. Asquith's government is hanging by a thread, but he knows he has enough opposition votes in the Commons to prevail.

Grey is scheduled to speak before the House of Commons at 3:00 that afternoon. At 2:00, he left the Cabinet meeting to give himself some time to have a bite to eat and prepare his remarks. Grey has never been much of a public speaker. The German ambassador came by the Foreign

Office to meet with Grey one final time and make one final plea for neutrality. He asked Grey if the Cabinet had voted to enter the war. Grey told him no, but they had set conditions. He couldn't tell the ambassador what those conditions were, of course, not until after he had had a chance to brief Parliament. The ambassador asked whether Belgian neutrality was one of the conditions. Grey would not answer the question.

Parliament was packed. The galleries were jammed full of spectators, and crowds filled the streets outside. For the first time in twenty years, every single Member of Parliament is present. Grey spoke for ninety minutes. He insisted, as always, that Britain had made no binding commitment to France. Still, France had trusted in Britain enough to remove her fleet to the Mediterranean. Could Britain stand by and do nothing as the French channel coast was bombarded by an enemy in a war France had not sought and had not been the aggressor?

And then there was the case of Belgium. Belgium, like most of the smaller states in Europe, wanted nothing other than to be left alone. Will Britain honor its guarantee? Perhaps it could be said, Grey concluded, that the wiser move might be for Britain to stand aside and husband its strength as the other Great Powers battered each other in a Great War. She might come through with her strength intact, but if she lost her moral standing and respect, of what value would might alone still have?

Grey's speech was greeted with loud cheers and applause. Andrew Bonar Law spoke next, and pledged the Conservative Party's support. John Redmond, leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party also gave his support. And more than that, he told the House that although Ireland seemed to be on the verge of armed conflict, and the British Army was needed to keep order, that the government could now feel secure in withdrawing every British soldier from the island, and know that Catholic Nationalists and Protestant Unionists would band together to defend Ireland from foreign foes.

Ramsay McDonald, speaking for the Labour Party, continued to support neutrality, as did a couple of dozen Liberal Members. But it was clear a majority of the House was ready to go to war. Even two of the rebel Cabinet ministers had a change of heart and withdrew their resignations. But Asquith and his government did not ask for a vote. As Parliament adjourned, even Winston Churchill asked, "What happens now?"

Grey returned to the Foreign Office. One of his undersecretaries visited him to congratulate him on his speech in the Commons. Grey responded by banging his fist on the table and saying, "I hate war." Later that evening, as he watched the lamplighters light the gas lamps in St. James' Park, Grey made his famous observation, "The lamps are going out all over Europe; we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime."

[music: *Cello Concerto in E Minor*]

That same evening in Paris, the German ambassador delivered a declaration of war to the French foreign ministry. This declaration repeated the false claim that France had already attacked Germany. President Poincaré would later write, “It is a hundred times better that we were not led to declare war ourselves, even on account of repeated violations of our frontier. It was imperative that Germany, fully responsible for the aggression, should be forced to admit her interests publicly. If France had declared war, the alliance with Russia would have become controversial and French unity and spirit broken, and Italy might have been obligated by the Triple Alliance to come in against France.”

The following morning, Tuesday August 4, the French Prime Minister, René Viviani, spoke before the Chamber of Deputies to announce the declaration of war. Germany was the aggressor, he said, and called upon all French political parties to join in a sacred national union. The Deputies responded with cries of “*Vive le France.*”

In Belgium, German soldiers were already advancing toward Liége. In Berlin, the Chancellor, Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg, spoke to the Reichstag. While the Reichstag’s approval is not necessary to declare war, under the German constitution, the Reichstag has to approve the funding. Mirroring Grey’s speech to Parliament yesterday, the not notably eloquent Bethmann-Hollweg surprised the Reichstag with his moving arguments for war. He recalled the Russian mobilization. He repeated the claim that French soldiers were already crossing the frontier, in spite of France’s pledge to keep them at least ten kilometers back. As for Luxembourg and Belgium, Bethmann-Hollweg is surprisingly frank. “We were forced to ignore the rightful protests of the governments of Luxembourg and Belgium.” He concedes Germany is in the wrong in that regard, but argues necessity, and pledges that Germany will compensate the two small countries for the harm done to them.

The big question mark here is the German Social Democratic Party, the SPD. Recall from episode 18 that the SPD is by now the largest single party in the Reichstag, as well as the largest socialist party in Europe and a linchpin of the Socialist International. The socialists had always vowed to oppose the capitalists’ wars. How will the SPD vote now?

In fact, the SPD deputies had caucused yesterday to discuss this very question. Although a substantial minority of the caucus wanted to oppose the war, the majority was swayed by the argument that Germany was merely defending itself against a hostile Russia and, perhaps more persuasive, the argument that German workers were already being called up and sent to the front; can the workers’ party justify stranding them there without support and funding? And, as was SPD practice, once the party position was decided, every deputy would vote for it. The entire SPD caucus would vote in favor of financing the war, as would the rest of the Reichstag.

Meanwhile, in London, the British Cabinet met again. The Cabinet voted to authorize deployment of the British Army to the continent. The Prime Minister appoints Lord Kitchener as War Secretary. You may remember him from the Boer War episodes 10 through 12. Kitchener is

the most famous and respected military officer in Britain at this time. The Cabinet also authorized Grey to demand a German withdrawal from Belgium. At 11:00 AM London time, or noon in Berlin, Grey sent the German government an ultimatum to withdraw from Belgium and pledge not to invade again. The deadline is twelve hours, midnight Berlin time.

At the expiration of the deadline, the British ambassador in Berlin called on the Chancellor and requested his passport. The implication is clear. Britain is breaking diplomatic relations with Germany, implicitly declaring war. The ambassador asked one more time if Germany could see its way clear to respect Belgian neutrality. The Chancellor exploded, uncharacteristically, haranguing the ambassador. Britain was about to make war on a kindred nation, he said, one that wanted nothing other than to be friends with her. Britain could have restrained Russia, or France, and ended the crisis. But she had stood aside, and now threatened war with Germany. And over what? Neutrality? “A scrap of paper.”

That one remark, reported back to London by the ambassador, will cost Germany dearly in world opinion.

As Big Ben chimed 11:00 PM that evening, the Cabinet waited at Number Ten. Someone called the Foreign Office to check for any German reply. There was none. Britain was now at war. Winston Churchill sent telegrams to the fleet commanders: COMMENCE HOSTILITIES AGAINST GERMANY. Outside, in Whitehall, Londoners gathered and sang patriotic hymns.

Two days later, Serbia will declare war on Germany, and Austria will declare war on Russia, completing the circle. And so began the war that would end Western civilization as we have known it. In its place would come a new and chastened civilization, less confident, less arrogant. The killing of human beings would become industrialized, and proceed on a scale unimagined. War and revolution would lead to new ideologies and new nationalisms that in turn would bedevil the planet for the rest of the twentieth century and beyond.

We'll have to stop there for today. Thanks for listening.

So here we are. The Great War has arrived. Before we begin with the opening moves of the war, though, I'm going to want to review the war plans of the major powers, because you can't understand the opening moves until you know what it is each nation's military is trying to accomplish. Some of these plans were more than a decade in the making, and the Great War probably began with more planning than any war in history. Of course—spoiler alert!—no one will succeed in what they are trying to accomplish, but that's the whole point.

That will begin in two weeks' time, but before that, I hope you'll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we spend an episode pondering how we got here. Lessons learned, next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. When Kaiser Wilhelm signed the German mobilization order on August 1, he signed it on a desk made of wood from Admiral Nelson's flagship, HMS *Victory*, a gift from his British cousins. When he signed the order, he is reported to have remarked, "To think George and Nicky should have played me false! If my grandmother had been alive, she would never have allowed it!"

[music: Closing Theme]