

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 85

“Serbien muß sterbien”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

The proximate cause of the Great War was the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand, the Crown Prince of Austria by a Serb nationalist extremist, and Austria’s wish to punish Serbia for the murder.

Austria’s declaration of war against Serbia set off a series of events that led to a massive German offensive through neutral Belgium, which captured the world’s attention, not least because on the Eastern Front...nothing was happening.

It took the Austrian Army two weeks to mobilize in preparation for an assault on Serbia. But now, at last, 45 days after the assassination, Austria is ready to take her revenge. Or so she thinks.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 85. *Serbien muß sterbien*.

The sentence *Serbien muß sterbien* translates into English as “Serbia must die.” Now, if you’ve studied German, you probably know that the German word for “die” is *sterben*, not *sterbien*, but this is a case of poetic license for the sake of the rhyme. It was part of a jingle popular in Austria in the early days of the Great War. There are different versions, but a typical one would go something like this: “Bullets for the Russians, shots for the French, hits for the Brits, and Serbia must die.” Catchy.

The Austrian grievance against Serbia triggered the Great War, but as we have seen, it was far from the only grievance now bursting into open warfare. It was just the spark. French revanchism, German resentment at a perceived encirclement, a Russian desire to maintain a stake in the Balkans and stymie Austria, and the traditional British opposition to allowing any one nation to dominate continental Europe, these were the kindling that fed the flames.

Nevertheless, this Austrian grievance against Serbia remains for the Austrians the main focus of the war. You’ll recall that the Austrian Chief of Staff, Field Marshal Franz Conrad von

Hötzendorf had been agitating for war against Serbia for years. You'll also recall Oskar Potiorek, the governor of Bosnia and now commander of the Austrian forces arrayed against Serbia. He was sitting in the car with the Archduke and Duchess when they were killed. He would say afterward that he felt God had spared his life so that he could be the instrument of Austria's retribution upon Serbia.

But you know who nobody in Austria wants to fight? Russia. But Germany wants Austria to fight Russia. The Schlieffen Plan is in full operation now, and most of the German army is off in the West, fighting the French. There are only ten German divisions in East Prussia. The Russian Army has 114 divisions, although it will take time to mobilize them, and only about 98 are going to be available to fight Germany and Austria.

Still, that's pretty lopsided. Austria's 48 divisions help plug the gap, but even so, the Central Powers are collectively on the short side of a 98-58 ratio. That's the bad news.

The good news, at least according to Conrad's mobilization plans, is that Austria can mobilize in just sixteen days, much faster than the Russians, almost as quickly as the Germans. It is widely believed that Austria can bring its army to bear on the Russian frontier much faster than the Russians can deploy to oppose them, and, at least for the early weeks of the war, achieve numerical superiority. So the idea is for the Austrians to rapidly mass a large army on the Russian border and go on the offensive before the Russians are ready, knocking their larger opponent off balance and giving Germany the extra time it needs to finish off France and then redeploy to the east. It is widely believed that after France capitulates, Russia will soon follow. And if she doesn't, it won't take long for those 70 redeployed German divisions to persuade her.

I've been saying "It is believed..." "The idea is..." When I say that, what I mean is, this is what the German General Staff believes. This is the plan of the German General Staff. It's not Austria's plan. It is not Conrad's plan.

The fact is, for these two nations to have any hope of winning the speedy victory they are counting on, they are going to have to coordinate their military actions carefully. But they never got around to doing that. There never was the kind of close consultation and planning between the two powers that this situation demands. The Germans didn't trust the Austrians with their most sensitive military planning, because the Germans believed, quite rightly, that Vienna was riddled with Russian spies. Conrad was equally resistant to sharing his thinking with the Germans, partly because he didn't trust them; partly because he had a low opinion of them. A lot of people in Europe believed Conrad was the greatest military genius of the age, and foremost among these people was...Conrad.

A quick review of what we learned in episode 79: the Austrian mobilization and deployment plan divides the Austrian Army into three forces. The Austrian First, Third, and Fourth Armies, designated Echelon A and totaling about 28 divisions, would deploy immediately to the Russian front. The Fifth and Sixth Armies, two smaller formations with about eight divisions between

them, would deploy to the Serbian front. This force was designated the Balkan Minimal Group, as it was deemed the minimum force necessary to defend the Serbian frontier against any incursion by Serbia into Austrian territory.

The wild card in the plan was the Austrian Second Army. It was about twelve divisions, and the Austrian mobilization plan allowed for it to be deployed either to the Serbian front, if Conrad chose to go on the offensive against Serbia, or to the Russian front, if Conrad deemed Russia the greater threat and chose to downgrade the Serbian front to a defensive stance until after Austria dealt with Russia.

Moltke and the German military were pressing Conrad from literally day one of mobilization to go all out against Russia. There would be plenty of time to deal with Serbia later, the Germans insisted. The war was going to be decided on the Eastern front, not in the Balkans.

But this was not Conrad's view. In spite of all the good reasons to do exactly as the Germans were begging him to do, Conrad decided he could have it all. The mobilization plan called for the Second Army, designated Echelon B, to remain in the rear, where it could be ordered either to the east or to the south, depending on how the situation developed. But when the time came to order a mobilization, Conrad made a last-minute decision to attempt an immediate, all-out effort to crush Serbia in the opening weeks of the war, before the Russians had time to finish mobilization.

This was a rash decision, and to this day it remains unclear exactly what set Conrad on this unexpected path. He was still writing love letters to his darling Gina every day, and in those letters he expressed the hope that if he came home from the war a hero, she would finally make up her mind to divorce her husband and marry him. These letters have moved some historians to go so far as to blame the upcoming fiasco entirely on Conrad's adolescent mooning over Gina. As a rule, I'm skeptical of simple answers to big historical questions, but in this case it's tempting, because alternative explanations are hard to come by.

Whatever the motive, it was a spectacularly foolish decision. Conrad ordered Echelon B, the Second Army, to deploy south against Serbia immediately, rather than waiting in the rear the way it was supposed to. And he went further, ordering additional divisions stripped from Echelon A, the formation that would be deployed against Russia, and adding those into the Serbian offensive as well. The reduced Echelon A would in no way be capable of offensive operations against Russia, and Conrad wasn't even going to try. Instead of moving Echelon A right up to the Russian border, which is what the mobilization plan called for, he ordered it sent into defensive positions, behind rivers and into fortifications, as far as a hundred miles *behind* the Russian border, where its role would simply be to hunker down against the inevitable Russian onslaught.

In other words, Conrad was all but double-crossing his German allies, and he was doing it to make sure that whatever else might happen in this war, *Serbien muß sterben*. And because the

Austrian mobilization plans didn't even cover this contingency, Conrad's own staff had to beg for extra days to mobilize against Russia, because this unplanned rapid deployment of the Second Army against Serbia was going to use up additional time and trains that were originally planned for deploying troops east. Conrad gave them permission to slow down the mobilization, because, hey, what's the rush?

Then came July 31, the day Russia and Germany both ordered full mobilizations, and it finally became clear to Conrad what he should have seen from the get-go. Russia was really and truly in the war, and the full weight of the Russian Army was really and truly about to come down on Austria like a hammer. Conrad asked his staff if perhaps maybe the Second Army couldn't be deployed against Russia after all...? The staff was appalled. They had been working round the clock to improvise a last minute offensive against Serbia; now they were forced to explain to Conrad that no, they couldn't reverse what was already set in motion. The trains were already on their way south, and to try to turn everything around now would only lead to chaos.

Conrad's inability to decide on a prudent strategy and then stick to it amounts to the worst blunder made by a commander of the Central Powers in the entire war. Arguably, Conrad lost the war for Austria *and* Germany right here, because the result of Conrad's shilly-shallying will be about as bad as you can imagine: crushing defeats on both fronts. We'll look at Austria's crushing defeat in the East a few weeks from now, in episode 90. Today, we'll focus on Austria's crushing defeat in the Balkans.

Oskar Potiorek was in overall command of the war against Serbia. Needless to say, he was very pleased when he learned that he would be getting not only the Fifth and Sixth Armies but the Second Army, and even, wonder of wonders, a wholly unexpected gift of a few extra divisions diverted from the Russian Front. And then you can imagine how he felt a few days later, when he learned that Conrad had changed his mind again, and that the Second Army and those extra divisions will be headed to the East after all. But since the Second Army now can't be redeployed to the east until after the rest of the mobilization is completed, Conrad gave Potiorek the green light to use his enhanced army against Serbia for the first week of the offensive...just as long as everyone here is clear that Second Army is going to have to disengage and move east after that first week is over. Because that's how long it's going to take to sort out the mess Conrad has created. So overall, the Austrian mobilization will require far more time than the 16 days Conrad had promised the Germans, because of all of these last minute changes.

This also means, of course, that Second Army is not going to be available on *either* front during a critical period when it will be badly needed *both* places. So, good show, Conrad. Conrad himself would head east, to oversee the fighting against Russia, leaving Potiorek to manage Serbia. Potiorek spent a lot of his time in the early weeks of the campaign writing twenty page daily reports of his activities and sending them off to Vienna, because he fully expected the war to be over by Christmas, and the army staff in the capital to be hard at work writing the official history of the war by January. Among the insights Potiorek sent north to enlighten future

generations of Austrian officers was this gem: “The only difference between an army commander in war and peace is that in war the commander spends even more time behind his desk and speaking on the phone.” Deep.

The terrain between Bosnia and Serbia is mountainous. The Drina River flows north from these mountains, where it joins the Sava River, which then flows east into the Danube. These three rivers—the Drina, the Sava, and the Danube—form most of the frontier between Austria-Hungary and Serbia. The confluence of the Sava and the Danube is where the Serbian capital of Belgrade lies, just across the river from Hungary.

Serbia has just fought in two Balkan wars, and the Serbian Army is exhausted and underequipped. On the other hand, all this fighting experience does make it one of the best-trained light infantry in Europe, and to the Serbs, this is an existential war. They are fighting for the survival of their hard-won Serbian state, and are not ready to go back to being a subject people in someone else’s Empire. So motivation and morale are high. The US ambassador in Belgrade marveled that you can “[g]ive a Serbian soldier bread and an onion, and he is satisfied.”

The Austrian Army looks big on paper, but as we’ve seen, it has been chronically underfunded for decades now. How do you keep a big army going when it’s chronically underfunded? Well, you scrimp on equipment, you keep salaries low, and you give your soldiers minimal training. Cutting corners on any of these things would be bad for morale. In spite of these handicaps, Austrian officers and soldiers alike begin this campaign reasonably confident in the outcome, and firm in the conviction that their side was in the right, since after all, they were avenging a dastardly Serbian assassination. So Austrian morale isn’t what you would call “low,” but it is brittle. A few setbacks on the battlefield and it will begin to crumble. Austria-Hungary’s traditional stinginess with the Army, like Conrad’s indecision, has set them up for failure.

[music: “Christmas Concerto”]

The initial Austrian offensive into Serbia began on August 12. The attack into Serbia came from the northwest, from Bosnia, where most of the Austrian Army was deployed. The Second Army attacked south across the Sava River, while the Fifth and Sixth Armies attacked from farther west, across the Drina.

It might have made more sense to attack from further east, across the Danube, and make straight for Belgrade, the Serbian capital that lies just on the other side of that river. But the Danube is a very wide river, easily defended. And north of the Danube lay Hungary, which doesn’t trust the Austrian Army and has been exerting all of its considerable clout within the Dual Monarchy to keep the Army out of Hungarian territory. And so, the assault will come across the much narrower Sava and Drina Rivers, from Bosnia.

The Serbian Army commander, 67-year old Field Marshal Radomir Putnik, was a veteran of the Balkan Wars. He had led the Serbian Army to victory twice in the past two years, and he was

revered in Serbia. He was also the obvious choice to command the army in its third war in two years, if you're willing to overlook that fact that he's 67 years old and suffering from emphysema and pneumonia. But he managed to command the Serbian Army successfully for over a year, a year mostly spent lying on a cot in a specially heated room, from which subordinate generals carried out his instructions.

Putnik had recognized that the twelve divisions of the Serbian Army were not enough to adequately screen Serbia's entire border with Austria-Hungary. So he made the careful decision to group the Serbian Army together, in a central location some distance behind the frontier, where it could move against an Austrian attack from any direction. When the attack finally came, Putnik must have been marveling at his good luck. The Austrians were coming across the Drina, into the mountainous country of the Serbian northwest. Not only had the Serbian Army been training in those mountains for years, not only did they know every road and every valley, but the rugged terrain favored the sort of light infantry hit-and-run guerilla-style tactics that suited the Serbian Army far better than the conventionally armed and trained Austrian Army.

Potiorek was anxious to get his offensive going. Not only was Conrad going to take the Second Army away from him in a week, but also, August 18, six days from now, is the Emperor's 84th birthday, and Potiorek dreamed of handing Franz Josef some grand victory against Serbia as a birthday present. Potiorek, you'll recall, was also governor of Bosnia, and so he was also directing the invasion of Serbia from Sarajevo, because he was also working on the investigation into the Archduke's murder. His trying to do two important assignments at once, and from so far behind the front lines, means he's not going to be able to give either one the attention it deserves.

It was August, and the weather was stiflingly hot. The Austrian mobilization plan hadn't provided Potiorek's units with enough bridging equipment. Worse still, on the Serbian side of the Drina, the wooded terrain rises rapidly from the river bank, giving the Serbian Army great cover for their snipers, machine guns, and light artillery. Austrian uniforms were *hechtgrau*, a color that in English we call "cadet gray." It's a bluer shade of gray than the German *feldgrau*, which is a touch greener. *Hechtgrau* worked great in the rocky Austrian Alps, but in the green fields and forests of Serbia, not so much. And though the uniforms may not have been green, the Austrian soldiers sure were; they tended to panic whenever they came under Serbian fire. Most of the time they couldn't even see where the Serbian soldiers were positioned, and the nervous Austrians tended to respond to gunshots by firing wildly in every direction, quickly burning through their modest stockpiles of ammunition.

The intense fire of twentieth century warfare makes it challenging to advance an army as quickly as their 19th century forebears managed. Austrian officers urged their soldiers forward, in spite of all these difficulties, sometimes threatening them at gunpoint. The Austrians regarded digging trenches as cowardly and a waste of time, so when a firefight came, Austrian soldiers were never as well protected as their enemy.

These Serbian guerilla tactics quickly got under the skins of the Austrian soldiers. As is often the case when regulars fight against guerillas, they became suspicious of Serbian civilians, who were sometimes caught poisoning wells or setting booby traps for the Austrians. Serbian soldiers sometimes dressed in captured Austrian uniforms and approached Austrian units claiming to be Croatian Austrian soldiers, and then opening fire when they got close. The Austrian soldiers took their revenge by torturing, raping, and killing Serbian civilians and POWs, shocking the consciences of their own commanders, who were unable to keep their soldiers under control.

Putnik had gotten word from French and Russian intelligence that the Austrian Second Army would shortly be redeploying eastward. On the night of August 15, he ordered the first Serbian offensive of the war, against the Austrian Fifth Army, gambling that the Second Army was about to withdraw and therefore wouldn't be able to come to the aid of its neighbor. He figured right. Serbian soldiers drove Austrian advance units off the top of Mt. Cer that night, and were able to hold the position and drive the Austrians farther back, opening a gap in the Austrian line.

The Emperor did not get any birthday presents from Serbia on August 18. By the 20th, the Second Army was on its way to the Russian front, and the Fifth Army was in a disorganized retreat all the way back across the Drina and into Austrian territory. Austria lost some 7,000 soldiers killed, 30,000 wounded, and 4,000 captured, against 3,000 Serbian soldiers killed and 15,000 captured.

The Sixth Army, meanwhile, had never gotten very far into Serbian territory in the first place. Potiorek ordered it to advance, hoping it would draw Serbian forces away from the retreating Fifth. But the advance of the Sixth was too little, too late.

These Serbian victories were embarrassing to the Austrians, who did their best to hush them up. The Austrian foreign ministry was working overtime to try to persuade Austria's neighbors—Italy, Bulgaria, and Romania—to join in the war against Serbia. Austrian diplomats kept claiming the Serbs were on the ropes and were going to collapse any day now. These other countries weren't buying it. In Italy, they were seeing anti-Austrian demonstrations, including one group that marched past the Austrian Embassy in Rome whistling "Le Marseillaise." Somehow, I don't think Italy is going to be the one coming to Austria's rescue.

In fact, the Serbian victory was a big morale boost to the Entente, coming as it did just after the French debacle at the Battle of the Frontiers, which we talked about in the previous episode, and the bungled Russian offensive into East Prussia, which we are going to talk about two episodes from now. This was the first Entente victory of the war, and heroic Serbia joined plucky Belgium as the small nation heroes of Entente propaganda.

As the situation grew bleaker on the Western Front, France and Russia began pressing Serbia to go on the offensive and raid Austro-Hungarian territory in the hope of relieving some of the pressure on Serbia's bigger allies. The Serbian Army attacked across the Sava into Hungary in early September, in response to these calls. They attacked the location where the Second Army

had been and no longer was, which scored some propaganda points for the Entente, but in military terms, the offensive was a failure. The Serbian Army suffered 6,000 casualties to about 3,000 Austrian casualties.

[music: *Cello Suite No. 5*]

By mid-September, as the Austrian position on the Russian Front was collapsing, Potiorek resolved to attempt another offensive against Serbia. Like most Austrian military decisions so far, this one was a big mistake. By September, Austria, like most countries fighting the Great War, was beginning to feel shortages of ammunition and supplies, especially artillery shells. Modern artillery can fire very rapidly, but all the combatant nations were having difficulty manufacturing shells and shipping them to the front lines fast enough to keep up with the demand. So this new Austrian offensive is going to have to compete with Conrad's forces in the East for supplies. And don't forget that Potiorek is down to what we used to call the Balkan Minimal Group, that is, the minimum force necessary to defend Austrian territory against Serbian incursion. This small force had never been thought sufficient to defeat Serbia on its own. But Potiorek was going to try anyway.

This second offensive into Serbia began September 7, and continued through most of the month. The shaken Fifth Army had trouble at first, but the fresher Sixth Army soon gained some ground. Serbian forces pulled back from the rivers into the mountains and entrenched. Weeks of bloody and indecisive combat followed. The Austrians continued to fight poorly, but now the Serbs were suffering from a lack of supplies and ammunition themselves. Trenches aren't much good if you don't have any bullets. Serbia's domestic economy was exhausted. There was no more money, and Serbia had little in the way of domestic military production. Russia and France sent what aid they could, but Serbia is landlocked and difficult to reach. And the weather was getting cold and damp. Serbian fighters were going into battle in their underwear, because that was all they had, and shod in opanaks, a traditional kind of shoe made from leather straps that is, as you might guess, not waterproof, making it hard on men fighting from muddy trenches. The Austrians at least had proper uniforms and waterproof boots.

After the initial advances, the Austrian offensive bogged down, and Potiorek was forced to call it off on October 4. Casualties were about the same on both sides, perhaps 18,000 killed and an equal number wounded. Once again, Austria had been humiliated. By now, the strategic situation was getting dire. The German offensive in the West had failed. The Russians were gaining in the East. And Germany and Austria couldn't even get a line of communication open to their soon-to-be ally, Constantinople, because Serbia stands in the way. Italy, Greece, and Romania were all leaning toward joining the Entente, and even Bulgaria, the country that had lost the Second Balkan War and had the strongest incentives to join the Central Powers, was frightened off by Austria's inability to subdue Serbia.

Potiorek, meanwhile, kept insisting, with some reason, that the second offensive had reduced the Serbian Army to a pathetic remnant, and that one more good push would finish it off. The Austrian Kaiser and his ministers had grave doubts about Potiorek's competence by this time, but this much was inescapable: Austria needs a victory and the Serbian front was the only place where such a thing was even remotely possible.

So in mid-October, Potiorek was granted the materiel and permission to begin a third offensive. And the early results were good. The weather was getting colder, the ground muddier, snow was falling in the mountains, and Serbian morale was beginning to crack. Eager ministers in Vienna began drawing up plans for dealing with Serbia after her defeat. The Austrian pledge not to annex any part of Serbia made back in July, was now forgotten. A military governor was lined up to be installed in Belgrade after Serbia's fall, and plans made to annex the Danube valley, turning Belgrade into an Austrian fortress. The rest of the country would be granted to Romania and Bulgaria as incentives to join the war.

The Austrian offensive went well at first, and the Austrians easily captured Serbian towns that had seemed hopelessly out of reach during their earlier offensives. They drove forward toward Niš, now the capital of Serbia and an important rail junction for supplying the Serbian Army. The capture of Niš would effectively divide Serbia—and her army—into two parts. By early November, Marshal Putnik was advising the Regent and the Prime Minister to sue for peace.

But although the Serbian Army was retreating, the mud slowed the Austrians down and saved the Serbian forces from encirclement. Potiorek couldn't resist peeling off a portion of the Fifth Army to send westward to capture Belgrade. That city was no longer the capital of Serbia and was by this time largely rubble, but to capture it would make great PR.

The first Austrian unit to enter Belgrade on December 2 got shelled by Austrian artillery for their troubles, because no one had notified the artillery that the city had been taken. December 2 was also the 66th anniversary of the Kaiser's coronation, and Potiorek finally had a suitable gift for his Emperor.

But as the Serbians withdrew toward Niš, their supply lines were shortening, and the French and the Russians were now coming through with ammunition and supplies. The Austrians advancing deeper into muddy, mountainous Serbia were having the corresponding problem of supply shipments slowing down. On December 2, the same day that the Austrians took Belgrade, Putnik ordered a Serbian counteroffensive. The undersupplied and unprepared Austrians reeled.

This Serbian offensive lasted ten days in all, but it was the first two that did most of the damage. Austrian morale, which had been rising, plunged again, and units went into disorganized retreat. Even the weather seemed to favor the Serbians. The Austrian offensive had been met with pouring rain and mud, but on December 4, the weather turned sunny and clear, aiding the Serbian advance. Hundreds of Austrian prisoners were being taken every day, most of them unwounded. So many Austrians were surrendering that the Serbian soldiers gave up escorting

them to the rear; now they merely pointed to the telegraph wires and advised the Austrians to follow them until they reached Serbian headquarters.

By December 9, the Serbian Army had driven a wedge between the two weakened Austrian armies, and Potiorek ordered a withdrawal. He also ordered that it be referred to as a “backward maneuver.” On December 15, the Serbian Army took back Belgrade, the Kaiser’s jubilee present, less than two weeks after it had been given to him. Austrian forces were entirely withdrawn from Serbia.

The full Serbian campaign to date cost Austria about 28,000 killed, 122,000 wounded, and 74,000 captured. Serbia lost 22,000 killed, 96,000 wounded, and 45,000 missing. Serbia also lost tens of thousands of civilians, and a typhoid epidemic that winter would take many more lives.

So Serbia too is exhausted, and in no condition to pursue the Austrians across the border. Which is fortunate for the Austrians, whose two understrength armies have been so diminished they had to be reorganized into one army. The Serbian front would remain quiet for most of the next year, as both sides need the time to recover, and Austria will soon be distracted by the entry of Italy into the war. It will not be until October 1915 that the Central Powers take up again the war against Serbia.

After Belgrade fell, the Palace notified Potiorek that “the Emperor is not pleased.” That is a Habsburg way of saying, “You are toast.” Potiorek was forced into retirement on December 22. He returned to Vienna for the customary exit interview, to be met at the train station by army officers who explained to him that this meeting with the Emperor had been “indefinitely postponed” and he might as well proceed to his home town of Klagenfurt. The snub was unmistakable. Potiorek never did get his courtesy meeting with the Emperor. He spent the remainder of his life in Klagenfurt, passing away in 1933, at the age of 80.

We’ll have to stop there for today. Thanks for listening, and thank you to listener Tony for becoming a patron of the podcast. If you enjoy *The History of the Twentieth Century* and have a few bucks a month to spare, why not become a patron? Head on over to [patreon.com/markpainter](https://www.patreon.com/markpainter), or visit the podcast website, [historyofthetwentiethcentury.com](https://www.historyofthetwentiethcentury.com) and click on the Patreon button. You can also make a one-time contribution there, via the PayPal button, and thank you to listeners William and Markus for your recent contributions.

You can also help out the podcast by leaving a rating and review at the iTunes store, and by spreading the word among your family and friends who might also enjoy listening.

I’m back from the Confluence science fiction convention, where I sat on a couple panels alongside listeners Steve and Tom, and also got to meet the aunt and uncle of the podcast’s biggest fan in Utah, so that was nice, too. It’s great to hear from listeners, too. You can reach me via email, Facebook, or Twitter.

And I hope you'll join me next week on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we turn our attention back to the Western Front. With the French and their British allies in retreat from Le Cateau to Mulhouse, the Schlieffen Plan is unfolding right on schedule. Paris Cannot Hold Out, next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Strangely enough, back on July 23, when the Austrians issued their ultimatum to Serbia—remember the Austrian ultimatum?—it had caught Marshal Putnik entirely by surprise. Not only by surprise, but on holiday at an Austrian spa in the Alps, where he had gone to treat his emphysema. When the ultimatum dropped, Putnik scrambled to hop a train back to Belgrade, hoping to slip out of the Empire before the Austrians figured out that the supreme commander of the Serbian Army was within their grasp.

Unfortunately for Putnik, the Austrians did indeed figure it out, and they caught up to him at the train station in Budapest, where he was waiting to change trains for the last leg of the trip back to Belgrade, on July 25. The Austrian Army threw him into prison and were no doubt quite pleased with their good fortune...until the Kaiser Franz Josef intervened. In a display of very old-school gallantry, the Austrian Emperor ordered Putnik released and sent home.

Okay. So, ten out of ten for style, but minus several million for good thinking, huh?

Putnik contracted pneumonia on top of his emphysema during his detention, but he was back in Serbia on August 5, a week before the Austrian offensive got going. He had asked to be relieved of his command because of his poor health, but the King refused his resignation.

The Serbian Army had had to mobilize during the period of Putnik's detention in Austria, and when the time came, it occurred to the Serbian General Staff that the only copy of the Serbian mobilization plan was in the safe in Putnik's office, and the only person who knew the combination to the safe was, um, Marshal Putnik, who was in Austrian custody. But the Serbian generals were able to get the safe opened in Putnik's absence by the strategic application of finesse, and when I say finesse, I mean of course, dynamite.

[sound effect: explosion]

[music: Closing War Theme]