

Fritz Fischer

1914: Germany Opts for War, "Now or Never"

Fritz Fischer, professor emeritus at Hamburg University, rocked the history profession in 1961 with his first book, *Griff nach der Weltmacht*, in which he argued that Germany, inspired by economic interests, sought to achieve world power. More, Fischer suggested that there was continuity in German aims from 1900 to the Second World War. In his second book, from which this selection is taken, based in large measure on the two-volume documentary record published by his student Imanuel Geiss, Fischer presented his argument in even sharper tones, insisting that Germany took Austria-Hungary "on the leash" in its aggressive, expansionist war policy during the July crisis of 1914.

The Occasion Is Propitious — The First Week in July

On 26 June, the German publicist Viktor Naumann traveled to Vienna. He had paid a call at the Foreign Office immediately before his departure and had been informed in detail by Wilhelm von Stumm about the general political situation, the crisis in the Balkans, and the indecisive foreign policy of Austria-Hungary.

When, after the assassination of the Archduke on Sunday, 28 June, at Sarajevo, Naumann repeatedly advised the Austrian foreign minister [Berchtold] and other leading officials at the Ballhausplatz to use the opportunity to "settle accounts" with Serbia, he undoubtedly knew that the same general views of the situation were held by the German Foreign Office. In conversations with Berchtold and Hoyos, Naumann sought to convince Austro-Hungarian politicians that the destruction of Serbia was a matter of life and death for Austria-Hungary. Vienna should present the idea to Berlin in a suitable

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form. He was certain that, unlike the year before, in addition to the military, the Foreign Ministry and the emperor no longer objected to a preventive war against Russia, and furthermore, that public opinion would force the government into a war. Also unlike the year before, England's neutrality in a European war was now assured, as was that of Rumania and Greece; one could count upon the cooperation of Bulgaria and Turkey. In the Foreign Office, "one considered the moment propitious in order to bring about the great decision." Naumann warned that if Austria-Hungary did not seize this opportunity, Germany would drop Austria as an ally. Naumann's line of argument corresponded to that of the Foreign Office in the days and weeks ahead.

Like Naumann, German ambassador von Tschirschky also made it clear from the beginning in conversations with Berchtold and in an audience with Emperor Franz Joseph that Germany would support Austria-Hungary if it took forceful action against Serbia, and also promised to protect Austria's rear against Russia — provided that Austria-Hungary formulated a clear and firm plan of action and presented it to Berlin. On 2 July, Tschirschky informed Berchtold: "As the minister knows, Germany repeatedly had announced during the crisis that with regard to Balkan policy, it would always stand behind us (Austria-Hungary)." He pointed out "that in his view only forceful action against Serbia could bring success." That same day, he assured Emperor Franz Joseph that he "could count on finding Germany solidly behind the Monarchy when it came to defense of one of its vital interests." And even if it must be left up to the Monarchy to decide what steps were to be taken, as Tschirschky respectfully put it, he nevertheless could "only repeat that [Emperor Wilhelm] would stand behind every firm decision on the part of Austria-Hungary." This declaration already anticipated the essential points of the promise that Emperor Wilhelm made to the Austrians on 5 July.

On the evening of the same day, 2 July, Franz Joseph signed his personal letter to Wilhelm II, which his special envoy, Count Hoyos, took to Berlin two days later — and in which was stated the intention to eliminate Serbia as a political power factor in the Balkans, to isolate it, and to reduce it in size.

While grave decisions were in reality being considered in Berlin and a feverish activity took place behind the scenes, official Berlin sought to deceive its own populace as well as foreign diplomats by

presenting the picture of a city in the midst of summer vacations. Only Under-Secretary of State Zimmermann stayed on at the Foreign Office, and he continuously conducted reassuring talks with foreign diplomats; the State Secretary of the Imperial Navy Office, Tirpitz, and the Chief of the General Staff, Moltke, likewise were on holidays. German officials kept up the comedy even with regard to their Austrian ally. For, when on the morning of 5 July, Ambassador Szögyény handed the chef-de-cabinet Franz Joseph's handwritten letter for Emperor Wilhelm, which had been brought up by Count Hoyos, the Germans pretended to Szögyény that before being able to answer Austria, the emperor would first have to consult Bethmann Hollweg, who was at his estate of Hohenfinow and whom he was recalling to Potsdam for this purpose for the first time since 29 June. But in fact, Bethmann Hollweg had spent every day of the period between 29 June and 5 July — with the exception of 1 and 3 July — at Potsdam and had discussed the political situation with the emperor there.

Various witnesses attest that from the week of the assassination at Sarajevo (Sunday, 28 June) to the Austrian ambassador's audience with Wilhelm II (Sunday, 5 July), government circles in Berlin were of the opinion that the moment was propitious for a European war. On Thursday, 2 July, the Saxon ambassador at Berlin, Salza und Lichtenau, learned at the Foreign Office that the Serbo-Austrian conflict was not thought likely to develop into a Serbo-Austrian war; however, should it prove impossible to avoid such a war, Russia would mobilize "and the world war . . . could no longer be averted." [Salza reported to Dresden,]

The military are now urging once again that we should let it come to war, given that Russia is not yet ready.

However, Salza could not imagine that Wilhelm II would allow himself to be "inveigled" into a war. At the Foreign Office, people were optimistic with regard to the military preparedness of Germany's neighbors:

France is too occupied with its domestic affairs and its financial calamity. There may be sabre rattling in Russia, but the only reason for this seems to be that Russia, if at all possible, would like to receive this year already the 500 million that France has promised for next year, because it, too, suffers from a shortage of money.

England also does not want war because it fears for its trade, has difficulties with its colonies, and respects the German fleet as a "factor with which England now must reckon."

On Friday, 3 July, the Saxon military plenipotentiary at Berlin, Leuckart, had a conversation with the Quartermaster-General of the Great General Staff, Count Waldersee. The latter indicated "that we could be involved in a war from one day to the next. Everything would depend upon the attitude that Russia took toward the Austro-Serbian affair." Leuckart came to the conclusion that the General Staff "thought that it would be quite propitious were a war to come about now. The situation and the prospects would not improve for us." However, according to Leuckart's information, the emperor allegedly "had expressed himself in favor of preserving the peace." Wilhelm II's marginalia of the same day on a report from Tschirschky show that this rumor was false. "Now or never. . . . We must make a clean sweep of the Serbs, and soon," the emperor demanded. Salza's contact at the Foreign Office had linked the prospect of preserving the peace with there being *no* war between Serbia and Austria-Hungary. But two days later, on 4 July, Austria-Hungary was again urged to take precisely this step. On that day, the Viennese correspondent of the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, Ganz, on the instructions of the German ambassador Tschirschky, declared at the Foreign Ministry in Vienna:

Germany would support the Monarchy through thick and thin, regardless of what the latter would decide to do against Serbia . . . the sooner Austria-Hungary started, the better. Yesterday would have been better than today, but today is better than tomorrow.

So as not to leave any doubt about the determination of the German government, Ambassador Tschirschky underlined this promise:

Even if the German press, which today is totally anti-Serb, were again to trumpet peace, one should not become confused in Vienna; Emperor and Empire will stand by Austria-Hungary unconditionally. One Great Power could not speak more frankly to another.

Count Hoyos was thus able to travel to Berlin certain in the knowledge that Franz Joseph's inquiry, which the Austrians had been encouraged to make by Berlin, would receive a favorable reply. This inquiry, put forth in the imperial handwritten letter as well as in a memorandum concerning a new Balkan policy on the part of the

Triple Alliance, did not contain a specific military proposal for a war between Austria-Hungary and Serbia. . . . Rather, the documents contained suggestions for a long-term Balkan policy for the Triple Alliance aimed at reducing Russia's influence in the Balkans by drawing Bulgaria into the Triple Alliance, by making Rumania abandon its growing friendship with Russia and Serbia, by reconciling Greece with Bulgaria and Turkey, and by attracting it also to the Triple Alliance so as to isolate Serbia, the bulwark of anti-Austrian agitation. This regrouping could only be achieved if "Serbia . . . is eliminated as a political power factor in the Balkans." The absence of concrete measures in the memorandum is due to the fact that it had been prepared before the assassination [of the Archduke]. . . . After the assassination, the memorandum was revised once more. Above all, greater weight was now put on the arguments that emphasized the threat not only to Austria-Hungary, but also to Germany. The picture of an incessantly growing, heavily armed Russian colossus and of a France lusting for revenge was now stressed:

For, if Russia, assisted by France, tries to unite the Balkan states against Austria-Hungary . . . then this hostility is directed not just against the Monarchy as such, but no less against the ally of the German Empire, against the most vulnerable part of the Central European bloc, which is most exposed due to its geographical situation and internal structure and which blocks the realization of Russia's world political plans.

This line of argument was designed precisely to appeal to Wilhelm's thought. After all, he was afraid that Germany's world position would be blocked by a pincer movement by the Franco-Russian alliance.

Having for days had his chancellor and the military impress upon him that Austria-Hungary needed to use the situation for a reckoning with Serbia — even at the risk of a European war because now was a propitious moment — Wilhelm II interpreted the memorandum to mean that Austria had decided upon military action. He admitted to the Austrian ambassador "that he had expected serious action by us [that is, by Austria] against Serbia," yet he had realized that this action could lead to "a serious European complication," but that even then, "Germany with its customary loyalty would stand at our [that is, Austria's] side." At the same time, he attempted to reassure his ally that Russia was by no means ready for war, and that it

would think twice before "appealing to arms." That is why, however much he respected Franz Joseph's well-known love of peace, he would very much regret it, "were we [that is, Austria] to let the moment, which is so propitious for us, pass." The emperor reassured his (Austrian) ally concerning Rumania's attitude: "King Carol and his advisers [will] behave correctly."

On the afternoon of 5 July, Bethmann Hollweg, having studied the memorandum at the Foreign Office that noon, briefed the emperor at Potsdam. He officially seconded the imperial assurance and thereby gave it the constitutional sanction that the Austrian ambassador deemed necessary. . . .

After Austria-Hungary had been committed to military action against Serbia on 5 and 6 July by its official inquiry and the German emperor by his reply to Vienna, the chancellor decided to calm world opinion by sending the military on leave and the emperor on his North Sea cruise. With the emperor's departure from Berlin, Bethmann Hollweg moreover had eliminated one unpredictable factor in German policy. How much the emperor saw himself as such was confirmed by him during a conversation that he had on the evening of 6 July in Kiel with his friend Krupp von Bohlen und Halbach, during which he told him of the impending Austrian action and the German promise. During the course of the conversation, as Krupp noted with embarrassment, [Wilhelm] assured Krupp three times: "This time I shall not cave in." "The repeated imperial assurance that this time no one could again accuse him of irresolution had an almost comic effect." Wilhelm swore that he would respond to a Russian mobilization (which could be expected as a result of the Austrian action against Serbia) with war.

Bethmann Hollweg himself returned to Hohenfinow on the evening of 6 July, in order — linked with Berlin by a telegraph station, which had been specially installed and which was now in operation for over four weeks — to await the Austro-Hungarian action, which, in his view, should happen as quickly as possible.

In evening conversations, as noted by his personal secretary Riezler, his thoughts circled around the recently undertaken weighty decisions. On the one hand, he feared the unreliability of Austrian policy (6 July). . . . But on the other hand, the threatening power of Russia swam before his eyes — the military power of Russia was growing rapidly (6 July) and "the future belongs to Russia, which

grows and grows and presses on us as an increasingly more menacing nightmare" (7 July). . . . In spite of his personal scruples, there is no doubt that in the summer of 1914 the imperial chancellor had included a European war in his political calculations, and that he regarded the constellation as especially propitious insofar as this time it was Austria-Hungary and not (as during the Moroccan crisis) the German Empire that was the power primarily affected. . . . Bethmann Hollweg clearly calculated the European war as the first alternative in his policy, and [viewed] a mere diplomatic success only as a second, less desirable, alternative. . . .

"Landgrave, Stand Firm": 8–23 July

While the German government had been determined since early July 1914 to exploit this favorable opportunity in order to wage war against France and Russia, the government at Vienna, while decided on firm steps against Serbia, nevertheless was looking for ways to avoid a military intervention by Russia — although all ministers were convinced that this was unavoidable. At the meeting of the Joint Ministerial Council in Vienna, which took place on 7 July after Count Hoyos's return from Berlin, all ministers spoke in favor of a settling of accounts with Serbia. With the exception of the Hungarian minister president, Tisza, all those present regarded a war against Serbia as the best solution, even at the risk of Russian intervention. . . .

The Chief of the General Staff, Conrad, who was present at various stages of the meeting in order to answer military questions, advocated an immediate war against Serbia and, if necessary, also against Russia. Berchtold, who likewise had expressed himself in favor of a war against Serbia, had doubts because of Rumania's likely behavior and because of probable Italian demands for compensation. Yet, at the same time he was under heavy German pressure. On 8 July, Tschirschky sought him out again to tell him "most emphatically" that "one expects an action against Serbia in Berlin." Berchtold understood from Tschirschky's remarks (as he told Tisza):

that in Germany any accommodation by us with Serbia would be interpreted as a confession of weakness, which could not but have repercussions on our position within the Triple Alliance and on Germany's future policy.

The Austrian prime minister, Stürgkh, had expressed a similar fear a day before at the Joint Ministerial Council:

[Austria ran] the risk that by a policy of hesitation and weakness . . . it would later on no longer be so certain of Germany's unqualified support.

On 9 July, Berchtold discovered that Franz Joseph also approved of energetic action against Serbia. He was "worried that weak behavior would discredit our position vis-à-vis Germany." . . .

In order to overcome this opposition and delay in Vienna, German ambassador von Tschirschky . . . almost daily called at the Ballhausplatz. . . . While Tschirschky continued to point out threateningly that Berlin would interpret Austrian hesitation as a sign that the Great Power Austria-Hungary was resigning its position, the Foreign Office tried to reassure and to encourage the Austrian ambassador in Berlin, Szögyény, that the opportunity was uniquely favorable also for a war against France and Russia: on 12 July, Szögyény explained in a lengthy report why the emperor and the "German circles that count" were "one might almost say, forcing" their Austro-Hungarian ally "to take possibly even military action against Serbia." The German government regarded the present moment as "politically the right one" also from the German point of view.

According to the German point of view, there are general political considerations and in particular factors resulting from the assassination at Sarajevo that speak for the choice of the present moment.

For, one is convinced [in Berlin] that Russia is arming for war and had "made direct provision for it in its calculations for the future, but was not planning it for the present moment, or put better, was not yet sufficiently prepared for it at the present moment." But should Russia decide nevertheless in favor of military intervention in behalf of Serbia,

it is at present not nearly militarily ready or as strong as it is likely to be in a few years.

Moreover, the German government believed that it saw signs

that at present, England would not take part in a war that started over a Balkan country, not even if it led to an armed clash with Russia, perhaps also with France. . . .

Tisza as well as Berchtold . . . concurrently informed Tschirschky that the handing over of the ultimatum would be postponed until 25 July. They stated that this delay had been decided upon so that delivery of the ultimatum would not proceed precisely while French president Poincaré was in Petersburg. . . .

Important preparations in case of mobilization were set afoot in all ministries in Berlin on 18 July. The preparations of the Great General Staff were already complete by then. On this day, the chancellor invited the Prussian ministers responsible [for mobilization] and secretaries of state of the Reich ministries for consultations under the chairmanship of the State Secretary of the Ministry of the Interior. "Guidelines for the treatment of Social Democrats, Poles, and Danes" were "to be prepared" immediately. Moreover, Bethmann Hollweg expressed the fervent hope that it would not be necessary to put the entire Empire on a war footing immediately upon proclamation of mobilization. . . . On 20 July, Delbrück, State Secretary of the Interior, accordingly fixed 24 July for the first meeting "on the limitation of the declaration of the state of war and other measures preliminary to mobilization." . . . [Bethmann Hollweg announced that it] was necessary to "emphasize the defensive war." In order to assure a united domestic front, it was essential that Russia was at all cost blamed for the coming conflict. Already now, on 23 July (that is, one day after the Austrian ultimatum had been delivered in Belgrade), the chancellor calculated on a Russian general mobilization in response to the Austrian measure:

Should war break out, it will be the result of Russian mobilization ab irato, before possible negotiations. In that case, we can hardly remain calm and negotiate any longer because, if we are to have any chance of winning at all, we have to strike at once.

The Mediation Attempts of the European Concert of Nations

On Friday morning, the ultimatum delivered on Thursday afternoon (23 July) in Belgrade was published in the Viennese press, and on the same day it was handed to the governments in the European capitals by the Austro-Hungarian ambassadors. The news hit like a bomb, because almost four weeks had passed since the assassination [at Sarajevo], and hence the severity of the demands was all the more

pronounced and less comprehensible. . . . British Foreign Secretary Grey immediately tried to mediate so that the conflict between Austria and Serbia would not erupt into a war between Austria and Russia, and thus into a European war. . . . But even though Grey had suggested mediation by the other Great Powers — not for the conflict between Austria and Serbia but only for a conflict between Austria and Russia — and had thus also wanted to "localize" the conflict, the German Foreign Office failed to respond to his suggestion — just as it had likewise rejected the request for an extension of the ultimatum to Serbia. . . .

The British Foreign Secretary continued his efforts to mediate in case of a threatening clash between Austria and Russia. . . . On Sunday, 26 July, Grey suggested a conference of the ambassadors of the noninvolved four powers in order to give Austria-Hungary satisfaction, and thereby to avoid a world war. Germany also rejected this proposal on the grounds that it could not haul Austria before a European court of justice. Instead, the German Foreign Office pointed out that channels already existed for a direct understanding between Petersburg and Vienna. On 27 July, Grey, during another conversation with Lichnowsky, for the first time voiced his suspicion that Germany was not seriously interested in mediation. . . .

Lichnowsky concluded his report with the observation that "all the world" in London was convinced

that the key to the situation lies in Berlin, and that in case one seriously wanted peace there, one would be able to prevent Austria from pursuing, as Sir Grey puts it, a foolhardy policy. . . .

In reality, Bethmann Hollweg merely sent Lichnowsky's telegram on to Vienna — incidentally, without the concluding remarks — and appealed to the Vienna government to bear in mind Germany's difficult situation. The instruction to Tschirschky corresponded in content to the chancellor's letter to the emperor. It expressly emphasized that "we [Germany] must give the impression of being forced into the war." Lest the government in Vienna was still confused concerning the determination of its German ally, Jagow had summoned the Austrian ambassador and prepared him for possible British mediation proposals.

The German government firmly guaranteed that it in no way identified itself with the proposals, that it in fact was decidedly opposed to

considering them, and that it was passing them on only in response to the British request. . . .

After Austria-Hungary had declared war on Serbia the next morning, 28 July, at Germany's urging, Berchtold officially rejected the British proposal with diplomatic courtesies on the grounds that

a state of war already exists between the Monarchy and Serbia at the very moment that Germany is making this move, and that the Serbian reply has therefore been overtaken by events.

The declaration of war on Serbia had been decided on 27 July for 28 or 29 July "primarily in order to knock the props out from under any attempt at intervention."

Even before this Austrian action against Serbia had made the outbreak of a European war still more likely, feverish activity had begun in the various ministries in Berlin. Moltke, Waldersee, and Tirpitz had returned to Berlin on 26 July, the emperor on 27 July. Immediately, on 26 July, Moltke had sent the Foreign Office the draft of the ultimatum to Belgium for examination and information. Mobilization orders even for civilian authorities were prepared for the emperor's signature. Admiral von Müller, upon returning from the North Sea cruise, summarized his impressions of the situation in Berlin as follows:

Tendency of our policy: stay calm, let Russia put itself in the wrong — but then, do not shy away from war.

The Austro-Hungarian naval attaché in Berlin had the same impression on this same 27 July. He wrote

that people here await all possible complications with utmost calm and regard the moment for a big settling of accounts as highly favorable.

Neither the Foreign Office nor the General Staff were thrilled with the emperor's early return because it was feared that Wilhelm II might disrupt the government's carefully planned concept with proposals of his own. In fact, these fears were realized; for, when the text of the Serbian reply was presented to the emperor — albeit, only on the morning of 28 July — he regarded this note as a Serbian "capitulation of the most humiliating kind" and decided: "There-with, there no longer exists *any reason for war.*" . . .

Crisis in Berlin: 29 and 30 July

The tension in Berlin reached its zenith in the late afternoon of 29 July. Following the Austrian declaration of war on Serbia and the shelling of Belgrade, the only news received was that of the partial mobilization of the four southern military districts — despite all the threats from Petersburg that Russia could not possibly accept the Austrian provocations with equanimity. The General Staff and the War Ministry urged that the critical gain in time should not be wasted, and insisted that a state of imminent war should be declared immediately. . . .

The . . . Saxon military plenipotentiary in Berlin . . . Leuckart reported to his government on the same day: he had heard from the minister of war that "nothing vital had been decided" so far at the Crown Council.

There is no doubt that the Chief of the General Staff favors war, whereas the Imperial Chancellor is holding back. General von Moltke is alleged to have said that we will never again find a moment as favorable as the present one, when neither France nor Russia have finished expanding their military.

Leuckart came to the conclusion:

After all this, I believe — even if the situation can be described as more peaceful and less tense — that it will still come to a general war.

The military, first and foremost the Chief of the General Staff, at this stage of the crisis thought exclusively in terms of the minute details of the military-strategic timetable [Schlieffen Plan]; Bethmann Hollweg, on the other hand, regarded the Russian publication of general mobilization as the indispensable prerequisite for corresponding measures by Germany. Russia needed officially to seize the initiative before Germany could launch a war against France and Russia. The argument on the afternoon and evening of 29 July concerned whether Russia's partial mobilization against Austria sufficed to provide Germany with the *casus foederis* in the eyes of the European public; it was not over any fundamental reservations on the part of the imperial chancellor regarding the decision taken in early July to launch the war at this given moment.

Bethmann Hollweg took the view that Russia's partial mobiliza-

tion did not suffice to give Germany cause to activate its alliance commitments.

We must wait for this [that is, the casus foederis] because otherwise we will not have public opinion either here or in England on our side. . . .

Despite Moltke's urgent plea that a state of imminent war be declared, Bethmann Hollweg managed to bring about a further delay on that evening of 29 July. . . .

At the Crown Council at Potsdam on the afternoon of 29 July, at which the proclamation of the state of imminent war was on the agenda, the question of English neutrality in this war was also discussed in detail. Wilhelm II was convinced that England would remain neutral. The English king had given this assurance to his brother, Prince Heinrich, who had just returned from England. The emperor brushed aside the doubts expressed by State Secretary Tirpitz, who was also present, with the comment: "I have the word of a king, that is enough for me." After Bethmann Hollweg's return from the Potsdam discussions, he attempted, probably under pressure from the military, which was urging that the military timetable be preserved, to reap the fruits of his many years' wooing of the English. He invited the English ambassador to the Chancery and offered him a German-British neutrality agreement for the impending war of Germany and Austria against Russia and France. In return, he extended to the English government the assurance that Germany would not violate France's territorial integrity. Bethmann Hollweg gave no firm reply to the ambassador's question concerning the French colonies.

Had Bethmann Hollweg known that at this very moment the Foreign Office was deciphering a report from Lichnowsky containing a clear warning from Grey that England could under no circumstances remain neutral if Germany attacked France, he undoubtedly would not have taken this step, which revealed the intentions of the German government.

Lichnowsky's news had an alarming effect in the Foreign Office, especially since the imperial chancellor had stuck his neck out so far in his talk with Goschen. But Lichnowsky's telegram did not alter the German government's decision to go to war. Given the power relationships in Berlin, the chancellor and the Foreign Office could not have gone back on the decision, even if they now had opted against

war. To be sure, Bethmann Hollweg tried immediately, during the night of 29–30 July, to persuade the Austrian ally not to reject all offers of mediation too curtly. . . . In explaining this warning, which must have surprised his ally, Bethmann Hollweg stressed that while the German government was fully prepared to honor its alliance obligations, it refused "to be drawn by Vienna into a worldwide conflagration without regard for our advice." Should Vienna reject all offers of mediation, Germany and Austria-Hungary would face four Great Powers (England, Russia, France, Italy), in which case Germany would have to shoulder the main burden of the war on account of England's involvement.

These famous "world-on-fire-telegrams" were the reaction of Bethmann Hollweg and the Foreign Office to the news that the continental war that Germany had contemplated — without involving England — could not now be fought.

That same night, Moltke also sent a telegram to Vienna. He informed his Austrian colleague Conrad von Hötzendorf that Russian *partial* mobilization was no cause for German mobilization, but that Germany needed to wait for a state of war to exist between Russia and Austria-Hungary. Moltke gave the instruction: "Do not declare war on Russia, but await Russia's attack." The military and the political leadership were therefore unanimous in demanding that Austria-Hungary should under no circumstances appear as the aggressor, but that it be left to Russia to take the decisive step that would lead to war. . . .

On the morning of 30 July, Bethmann Hollweg drafted a telegram for Wilhelm II to send to the Tsar. Therewith, the chancellor sought to detail the likely consequences of Russian mobilization in order to make the Tsar responsible for all ensuing developments; Germany was presented as prepared to negotiate to the end. But the emperor, deeply embittered by the Russian partial mobilization of which he had not been informed until the morning of 30 July and by the "betrayal" of England, this "miserable lot of shopkeepers," had already firmly refused to continue his role as mediator. For this reason, Bethmann Hollweg appealed to Wilhelm II's vision as a statesman by prophesying that "this telegram will become an especially important document for history." . . .

The suspenseful anticipation as to whether the German concept, according to which Russia would assume the role of aggressor,

could still be realized, was reflected in a speech that Bethmann Hollweg delivered as Prussian prime minister at a meeting of the Ministry of State at 5 P.M. Optimism and pessimism balanced each other therein. In a brief survey of the present political situation, he stressed Germany's efforts to bring about an understanding between the governments in Vienna and Petersburg; he emphasized German and English cooperation aimed at avoiding a European war, and the military measures of Russia and France that threatened the peace. Germany, on the other hand, had not yet declared the "state of imminent war" at his, the chancellor's, instigation, because this would make war inevitable. His disappointment over England's attitude was revealed once more when he skeptically noted that "the hope of England [was] equal to zero. England will probably take the side of the Dual Alliance." Even Italy's attitude was unpredictable. There was no counting on Rumania and Bulgaria.

On the other hand, Bethmann Hollweg reassured his Prussian ministerial colleagues about the nation's unity:

The general mood in Germany is good (which was confirmed by all present). Nothing of substance was to be feared from Social Democracy and the Social Democratic party executive, as he had been led to conclude from his negotiations with the Reichstag deputy Südekum. A general strike . . . or sabotage were out of the question.

. . . Shortly after 9 P.M., Bethmann Hollweg, Moltke, and Falkenhayn held a meeting at which the military forced the decision that a state of "imminent danger of war" be proclaimed not later than the following noon, 31 July — a measure that in Germany inevitably brought mobilization with it. With this decision, which was taken before news of the Russian general mobilization had been received, Berlin had fixed the beginning of the war for the first days in August — in fact, even without the government having been driven to this by Russia's general mobilization. By postponing the mobilization for fifteen hours, the chancellor had at any rate gained time in which the Russian government might yet take a step that would put it in the wrong in the eyes of the world, and allow him to realize his original plan.

Around 11 P.M., the first rumors concerning the ordering of general mobilization in Russia arrived in Berlin. . . . The issue discussed at this meeting in Berlin, after receipt shortly before midnight of the first news concerning the Russian general mobilization, was German mobilization. The military demanded an immediate decision; Beth-

mann Hollweg, on the other hand, demanded that the mobilization be delayed until Russia had time to reject an ultimatum that Germany had given it. Quartermaster-General Waldersee wrote in a letter to Jagow of July 1926 concerning Moltke:

With us, his collaborators until the outbreak of the war, he had stipulated that he only desired to bring about mobilization, for the war would then start of its own accord — a declaration by us would only do harm.

As Bethmann Hollweg has attested in a letter to Jagow of August 1919, Moltke had not only favored an immediate mobilization, but concurrently the start of military operations. But the chancellor's view prevailed; namely, that if military actions were to be taken without an announcement [of war], then there was no reason to issue an ultimatum to Belgium . . . and that otherwise — as he put it to Ballin — "he could not carry the Socialists with him."

Thus, even this night the chancellor once more managed to prevail against the military and to get a hearing for his arguments in favor of a perfect preparation for starting the war. The decision to proclaim the "state of imminent war" at noon on 31 July was upheld. The proclamation of German mobilization, on the other hand, was delayed for yet another day. First, an ultimatum to cease armed measures would have to be sent to Russia. Bethmann Hollweg was able to bring about this last postponement not least because his prophesy that Russia could be made to appear the aggressor seemed at last to be coming true.

Following this second meeting on 30 July, Moltke cabled the Austrian Chief of the General Staff the go-ahead:

Wait for Russian mobilization; Austria must be preserved, must mobilize immediately against Russia, Germany will mobilize. Italy must be forced to honor its alliance obligations through compensations.

The Austro-Hungarian military attaché in Berlin at the same moment sent off a similar telegram after a discussion with Moltke. It contained the following additional demands:

Reject any new moves by England to preserve the peace. Perseverance with the European war [is] the last means with which to preserve Austria-Hungary. Germany is definitely coming in.

Like Tschirschky, who had been given instructions to pass along to the Ballhausplatz, Conrad was now also instructed not to take further steps leading to mediation. Thus, there existed unanimity on this point between the political and the military leadership in Germany. These telegrams clearly spelled out that Germany demanded an Austro-Hungarian mobilization against Russia, relegating the Austrian war against Serbia to second place, precisely as Bethmann Hollweg demanded of Vienna the following afternoon: "We expect from Austria immediate *active* participation in the war against Russia." . . .

31 July/1 August: "Mood Brilliant" in Berlin

On the morning of Friday, 31 July, English ambassador Goschen delivered the English government's rejection of the German demand for neutrality. Not for a moment, Goschen informed the chancellor, had the English government considered the German proposal. England would not commit itself to stand idly by "while French colonies are taken away and France is beaten."

From the material point of view, such a proposal is unacceptable because France could be so crushed as to lose her position as a Great Power and to become subject to German policy — without additional territory in Europe being taken from it.

Nor could the English government agree to bargain away its obligations and interests concerning Belgium's neutrality.

Bethmann Hollweg received this disclosure in silence. It appeared to the ambassador as if the chancellor was so preoccupied with the news concerning Russian military measures along the German border that he was unable immediately to comprehend the English response fully. . . . The chancellor was concerned to make it clear to the English government that Russia was responsible for the war and that Germany was only reacting to this provocation. . . .

When the Russian general mobilization was officially announced around noon and the Austrians concurrently proclaimed total mobilization, all military and diplomatic actions prepared in Berlin began to be implemented according to plan. The appeals to Vienna, to pretend to be willing to negotiate, had in fact been abruptly halted the

previous night. That same morning, 31 July, Berlin did not raise the question of mediation anew, whereas feverish activity ensued in London, Petersburg, Paris, and even Vienna in a final attempt to prevent the outbreak of the great European war.

The "state of imminent war" was declared in Berlin at 1 P.M. Wilhelm II and Bethmann Hollweg justified these measures in solemn and pathetic addresses to the nation with the *leitmotif* that Russia had forced the war upon the German nation. . . .

At 3 P.M., Wilhelm II approved the text of the ultimatum to Russia and the "inquiry" to France.

The Bavarian ambassador, Lerchenfeld, that afternoon of 31 July sent his government a telegram report of laconic brevity on the situation in Berlin:

Two ultimata are currently in circulation: Petersburg 12 hours, Paris 18 hours. Petersburg inquiry into reasons for mobilization, Paris inquiry whether it will remain neutral. Naturally, both will be answered in the negative. Mobilization at the latest Saturday, 1 August, around midnight. Prussian General Staff look ahead to war with France with great confidence, expects to defeat France within four weeks; poor spirit, few howitzers, and inferior guns in the French army. . . .

Around 7 P.M., Moltke cabled Conrad: "Will Austria leave Germany in the lurch?" In place of Germany's customary *Nibelungentreue* to Austria, there now appeared the demand for Austrian military help in a war of the German Empire. . . .

The chief of the press section of the Foreign Office, Hammann, on 1 August also gave the press the guideline that Russia's general mobilization was the factor responsible for starting the war. . . . The emperor and the German nation were [depicted as] determined opponents of preventative wars. Rather, Germany, in tandem with England, had tried unceasingly to find a peaceful solution.

Russia alone forces war upon Europe, which no one except Russia wanted; Russia alone must bear the full weight of responsibility.

This guideline was consistently upheld in the German White Book at the outbreak of the war on 2 August, as well as in Bethmann Hollweg's Reichstag speech of 4 August.

The real state of affairs in Berlin circles, however, was radically different from the picture that Hammann tried to paint for the for-

eign press — of an emperor in despair because of the outbreak of the war and of a German government unhappy over the failure of peace negotiations. The Chief of the General Staff, Moltke, had pleasant memories of 1 August: "There prevailed, as the saying goes, a joyful atmosphere." And Admiral von Müller wrote in his diary on 1 August:

The morning papers carry the addresses of the emperor and the chancellor to the enthusiastic people assembled in front of the imperial palace, and the chancellor's residence, respectively. Mood brilliant. The government has skilfully managed to make us appear the attacked. . . .

30 July/1 August: Uncertainty in Vienna

. . . On the morning of 31 July, the Joint Ministerial Council met in Vienna in order to discuss the English mediation proposal of 29 July (mediation by the Great Powers not directly involved) and to consider compensations for Italy. There was agreement at this session that it would be impossible to halt Austrian hostilities against Serbia. It would not suffice for Austria simply to occupy Belgrade without defeating the Serbian army, "even were Russia prepared to consent to this." But, at the suggestion of Hungarian minister president Tisza, it was decided not to reject the English proposal outright, but to agree to it on two conditions: namely, that operations against Serbia be continued, and that the Russian mobilization be halted. . . .

The session of the Ministerial Council is proof of the fact that Austria-Hungary was determined not to lose the opportunity, once it had been seized, for a thorough reckoning with Serbia, even at the risk that this could precipitate a European war. Indeed, since the early hours of this day, it had also been the urgent advice of the German ally not to bow to any mediation offers, but rather to proceed with the already launched venture. Nevertheless, Vienna was not yet firmly convinced of the inevitability of war with Russia, and therefore searched for a suitable opportunity to prevent Russia from intervening militarily in the Austro-Serbian war. In Conrad's telegram to Moltke on the evening of 31 July it still says: ". . . we are not sure yet whether Russia is merely threatening, and hence we could not allow ourselves to be diverted from the advance against Serbia." Conrad

then added: "A totally different situation arises if Germany declares that it wishes to press the war *at once*. Request relevant notification." Even after the world war, Quartermaster-General Waldersee complained in a letter to Jagow: Austria had vacillated far too long; "people [in Vienna] still wished to avoid the armed clash with Russia. This was very damaging for us with regard to the opening of the war." . . .

"Bombs on Nürnberg" . . .

. . . In his speech to the Reichstag [on 4 August], the chancellor pilloried Russia as responsible for the war, certain of the anti-Russian mood that had been fomenting for months among the German public:

Russia has hurled the torch into the house. We are engaged in a war with Russia and France that has been forced upon us. . . .

After listing the alleged French border violations by bombers, cavalry patrols, etc., which proved that France had attacked Germany, [the chancellor] justified the entry of German troops into Luxemburg and Belgium through reference to the state of emergency in which the German Empire found itself, and he closed his speech with the proclamation:

Our army is in the field, our fleet is ready for action — behind it stands the entire German Volk! — the entire German Volk (down to the Social Democrats) united to the last man!

Of the two central goals of Bethmann's concept for a war against Russia and France, one was realized on 4 August: the Social Democrats' vote for war credits. . . . Bethmann Hollweg's other goal, to keep England neutral in this war, proved illusory that same day.

Shortly after the chancellor's speech, the British ambassador presented himself at the Chancery in order to hand over an ultimatum regarding Belgian neutrality. When Bethmann Hollweg and Jagow could offer no other explanation than the one they had previously given, Goschen, in accordance with his instructions, asked for his passports and declared that England regarded itself as being at war with Germany as of midnight, Central European time.