

July Crisis: The World's Descent for War, Summer 1914

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As April turned to May, the world stood on edge. From 1914-18, a worldwide conflagration claimed the lives of 16 million people and produced an additional 20 million wounded. Despite the end of hostilities on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month of 1918, a final peace remained elusive – and the suffering continued. Beyond an Allied blockade that imposed daily hardships on the civilian population of defeated Germany, influenza continued to ravage the globe in a profound historical moment of hope and anxiety. On Wednesday 7 May, the German delegation was presented with the Versailles Treaty at the Paris Peace Conference. As representatives of the vanquished power poured through the terms in the following hours, a palpable measure of shock and exasperation filled their quarters. Aside from losing their colonies and being subject to a heavy war reparations schedule, Germany was required to accept Article 231 – stipulating that the war was ‘imposed [upon the Triple Entente] by the aggression of Germany and her allies’. In response to the apparent charge of being ultimately responsible for setting the world on fire in August 1914, German Foreign Minister Ulrich von Brockdorff-Rantzau replied ‘Such a confession in my mouth would be a lie’. His pronouncement echoed the exasperated sentiment of most of his countrymen.⁽¹⁾

The question of whether or not Germany masterminded the outbreak of the First World War has been a source of significant contention among historians for nearly a century. While conventional scholars assign the locus of blame on Kaiser Wilhelm II and his military clique, revisionists tend to view the conflict as a result of either a meltdown of the international system or a catastrophic failure of Continental diplomacy. In *July Crisis: The World's Descent into War, Summer 1914*, T. G. Otte has rearticulated the revisionist argument in a thought-provoking study of supreme erudition and produced a worthy addition to the grand historiography of the First World War.

To The July Crisis

Before the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor by the Empire of Japan on 7 December 1941, the first ‘day of infamy’ for the Western world in the 20th century occurred with the assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo on Sunday, 28 June 1914. While the news disconcerted officials across Europe and in Washington, the demise of the Archduke at the hands of Serbian nationalist Gavrilo Princip did not

provoke an instantaneous crisis. At the same time, however, the fatal act of violence belied larger, longstanding concerns for both Vienna and Berlin. After the forging of the Dual Alliance on 7 October 1879, which had been consecrated originally as a defense pact against St. Petersburg, Germany and Austria-Hungary closely monitored the expansion of Russian influence in the Balkans. In annexing Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1908, Austria-Hungary incited a vitriolic backlash among Serbian nationalists within its expanded borders and sparked the creation of *Narodna Odbrana* (National Defense) – an organization dedicated to protecting and uniting the greater Serbian population in the region.

Three years later in 1911, a clandestine, militant society *Unification or Death* – popularly known as *The Black Hand* – formed to promote pan-Serbian ambitions through violence. Princip, a member of a related revolutionary group – *Young Bosnia*, had come under the influence of Black Hand leader Colonel Dragutin T. Dimitrijevic (known as ‘Apis’) and his plan to eliminate the Archduke before he could enervate pan-Slavic ambitions by federalizing the structure of government to (ironically) allow a larger degree of self-rule for the southeastern portion of the empire (p. 9–38). If the assassination had been an isolated case of radical activity, it is unlikely that war would have ensued. As the plot had origins inside elements of the Serbian government, the paramount question for Vienna and Berlin at the heart of the July Crisis became: How ought Austria-Hungary respond to what was widely-regarded by Europe as state-sponsored terrorism? Through seven richly-detailed chapters on the fatal month, Otte bolsters the historiographic slant of the revisionists by minimizing the role of the Kaiser and the German elite over the spiraling course of events and relocating the trigger of war eastward.

Otte and The July Crisis

In chronicling the frenzy of diplomatic activity in Berlin and Vienna after the assassination in the second chapter ‘Sarajevo and its echoes: 28 June to 5 July’, Otte portrays Austria-Hungary rather than Germany as the more aggressive member in the Dual Alliance. In the absence of Franz Ferdinand, who had acted to restrain the influence of militant members of Austrian government such as Finance Minister Leon Ritter von Bilinski and – more importantly – Foreign Minister Count Leopold Berchtold, the ‘war party’ in Vienna began to gain ascendancy in the first week after Princip’s act of violence. According to Otte, the military links between Berlin and Vienna were subordinated to civilian leadership, and the ‘blank cheque’ issued to Austrian General Chief of Staff Franz Conrad von Hotzendorf from his German counterpart Helmuth von Moltke, which allowed Vienna to resolve its Balkan crisis through force, initially incubated as a tacit understanding rather than an openly defined policy. Even more significantly, Otte claims that Moltke acted ‘to restrain the hotheads at Vienna’ (p. 60). If true, the German Chief of Staff may have become suddenly unrecognizable to the Kaiser and the military establishment. Was this the same man who promised the full backing of the German army to Conrad in the event Austria decided to attack Serbia in January 1909 – or the same person that supported the German Army Bill of 1913 and began to seriously consider the advantages of launching a preventive war?(2)

On the diplomatic track, Count Heinrich von Tschirschky, the German Ambassador to Vienna, pursued a resolution to the burgeoning Austro-Serbian crisis through negotiations. In the margins of a memo composed by the Count at the end of June (1914), Wilhelm caustically scrawled ‘Let Tschirschky be good enough to drop this nonsense! The Serbs must be disposed of, and that right soon!’(3) Unlike conventional historians such as John Rohl, Annika Mombauer and others who view Germany and its leader as the pre-eminent instigator of the July Crisis and the subsequent world conflict, Otte largely considers the war-mongering bluster of the Kaiser as nothing more than a collection of visceral outbursts that amounted to – in the words of German Admiral Georg von Muller – ‘practically zero’ (p. 88). Indeed, the Admiral’s view of the Kaiser as a master of empty rhetoric was in response to one of the most historiographically disputed episodes in pre-war Germany – the supposed ‘War Council’ of 8 December 1912. In a meeting akin to a strategy session, Wilhelm and his military entourage, including Moltke and Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz – the head of the Imperial Navy, listened to the Kaiser declare, ‘Austria must deal energetically with the foreign Slavs (the Serbs), otherwise she will lose control of the Slavs in the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. If Russia supports the Serbs, which she evidently does then war would be unavoidable for us to’. For his part, Moltke flatly

pronounced 'I believe a war is unavoidable and the sooner the better' and then suggested 'But we ought to do more through the press to prepare the popularity of a war against Russia, as suggested by the Kaiser's discussion'.⁽⁴⁾ For Rohl and Mombauer, the Wilhelm-Moltke dialog during the 'War Council' is the smoking gun that demonstrates the ascendancy of the military in foreign policy – if not an admission of possessing the intent and wherewithal to launch a European war through Vienna.⁽⁵⁾ In contrast, Wolfgang Mommsen, Otte, and other revisionists regard the 1912 'War Council' all but moot as Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg, in their opinion, still exerted effective control over the government.⁽⁶⁾

A similar divide exists over the Kaiser's words at Potsdam on 5 July and in Berlin on 6 July – conceded by the author to be 'an important turning point during the events of the summer of 1914' (p. 102). As related in his narrative, belligerent Austro-Hungarian diplomat Count Alexander Hoyos utilized his persuasive powers to obtain consent from the German leadership for military action in the form of an explicitly stated 'blank cheque'. In concluding that 'Berlin had abdicated any kind of influence' at that juncture, Otte may be understating – if not vastly understating – the pivotal role of the Kaiser and German military leaders in the making of the evolving crisis (p. 103). Indeed, Wilhelm displayed none of the qualities of a passive observer in emphatically arguing for punitive measures against Serbia even in the event of 'serious European complications' (an expanded conflict) and urged Vienna 'not to delay its action'.⁽⁷⁾ It seems no coincidence that after the Kaiser wielded his rhetorical leverage inside the Dual Alliance, Austrian Emperor Franz Joseph, Foreign Minister Count Leopold Berchtold and others partial to war in the Ballhausplatz (the site of the Austrian chancellery and foreign ministry) triumphed in their campaign to pursue a provocative, hard line policy against Belgrade.

Contrary to the accounts of conventional historians, Otte presents the Kaiser as a tempestuous yet responsible actor throughout the July Crisis due to his promotion of two peace initiatives. In a subchapter unequivocally titled 'The Kaiser decides that there is no need for war', Otte presents the 'Halt in Belgrade' plan proffered by the German Emperor as a genuine means of restraint upon Vienna (p. 343–8). Instead of an all-out attack, Wilhelm proposed that Austria-Hungary limit its military action to an occupation of Belgrade until Serbia fulfilled the demands of its 23 July demarche – an ultimatum that called for the dissolution of 'the Narodna Odbrana and all other anti-Hungarian societies and their branches' and for the Serbian government 'to take measures of judicial inquiry against the accessories of the plot on the 28th of June (to assassinate Franz Ferdinand) who might be found on Serbian soil'.⁽⁸⁾ In the process, Austro-Hungarian officials would be allowed to conduct investigations inside the country. If 'Halt in Belgrade' was an attempt to localize the conflict and prevent Russia from entering the fray on the side of Serbia, however, it nevertheless legitimized military action and the subordination of Serbian sovereignty. Moreover, the Kaiser's proposal was transmitted *after* Vienna declared war on its recalcitrant southeastern neighbor – not before.⁽⁹⁾

By the end of the month, a Continental catastrophe clearly loomed. As diplomatic efforts crumbled, a sense of fear drifted across Europe. According to Otte, a series of telegrams dispatched by the Kaiser to European leaders beyond the 11th hour constituted a second attempt to contain hostilities between Vienna and Belgrade. Yet, was the German Emperor truly sincere in his second and final quest for peace? The benign interpretation offered by Otte in chapter seven – 'Escalation: 29 July to 4 August' – of the Kaiser's half-hearted and hastily abandoned role as mediator fails to appreciate the possibility of a concocted ruse by the German leadership. Not only did his messages follow the war declaration of its partner in the Dual Alliance but the language employed by Bethmann-Hollweg on behalf of Wilhelm in a telegram to his cousin, Tsar Nicholas II of Russia, appears contrived and disingenuous. In declaring 'The whole weight of the decision lies solely on you[r] shoulders [and you now bear] the responsibility for Peace or War', the Kaiser and his cohort may have been far more interested in escaping culpability than averting the impending conflict. From his responses, the Tsar may have engaged in a similar late-round of diplomatic duplicity (p. 418–9).⁽¹⁰⁾

If not the Kaiser and his provocative militaristic foreign policy, then how did the Austro-Serbian dispute develop into an all-out world war? Similar to many (if not most) historians in the early 21st century, Otte considers Russia's mobilization of its armed forces (a partial mobilization at the outset) as the decisive act

that ‘changed the direction of travel towards war’ (p. 432). Instead of skillful diplomacy, Count Berchtold of Austria-Hungary, Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg of Germany, and Foreign Minister Sergei Sazonov of Russia all accelerated the escalation of the crisis, according to the author, due to ‘the poor intellectual quality of [their] decision-making’ and/or their outright, reckless brinksmanship (p. 511). In shifting the Continental *casus belli* to Vienna and St. Petersburg, Otte has bolstered an emerging scholarly consensus that casts Wilhelm as a feckless, intemperate bystander during the slide toward a world at arms and has thus further standardized the revisionist interpretation among scholars.[\(11\)](#) Will the pendulum swing back toward implicating the Kaiser as the power broker in the Dual Alliance and as one of the long-determined, central plotters of a European war to achieve German supremacy on the Continent if not also the world – as famously argued by Fritz Fischer in *Germany’s Aims in the First World War* (1967) and *World Power or Decline* (1974) and in the works of his acolytes (i.e. Rohl, Mombauer)? More than likely, the last word in the debate over the etiology of the First World War has not yet arrived.[\(12\)](#)

Through highly contested historiographical terrain, Thomas Otte has delivered a meticulously constructed and engagingly interpreted monograph. Beyond a significant contribution to the expansive literature of the period, *July Crisis: The World’s Descent into War, Summer 1914* (2014) is a masterpiece of diplomatic history. As such, it merits due consideration from all scholars and students of the era.[\(13\)](#)

Notes

1. Margaret Macmillan, *Peacemakers: The Paris Conference of 1919 and the Attempt to End War* (London: John Murray, 2001), pp. 473-476.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Annika Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke and the Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 108-111; Marilyn Shevin Coetzee, *The German Army League: Popular Nationalism in Wilhelmine Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 37.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Gordon Martel, *Origins of the First World War* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 110-111 (Document 22).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. John C.G. Rohl, *Wilhelm II: Into the Abyss and Exile, 1900-1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 909-910; Martel, *Origins of the First World War*, pp. 106-108 (Document 19).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke*, p. 142.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. William Mulligan, *The Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 122.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Richard F. Hamilton and Holger H. Herwig, *The Origins of World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 176.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Briggs Davenport, *A History of the Great War: The Genesis of the War, June 1914-August 1915* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1916), pp. 95-6.[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Rohl, *Wilhelm II*, 1035, 1055-1058. In a telegram to his foreign secretary on the morning of 28 July, the Kaiser proposed his ‘Halt in Belgrade’ plan in the following manner: ‘The Serbs are Orientals, therefore liars, tricksters, and masters of evasion... This should be arranged that Austria would receive a HOSTAGE (Belgrade), as a guarantee for the enforcement and carrying out of the promises (in fulfillment of the ultimatum), and should occupy it.’ From the thrust of his statement, Wilhelm seems to have been more concerned with extracting punitive justice from Belgrade with military force than de-escalating the crisis. See Martel, *Origins of the First World War*, pp. 121-122 (Document 31).[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. Hamilton and Herwig, *The Origins of World War I*, 180. Bethmann-Hollweg advised the Kaiser to send a telegram to the Tsar for the purpose of ‘[exposing] Russia’s guilt in the most glaring light.’ See Rohl, *Wilhelm II*, p. 1065.[Back to \(10\)](#)
11. For recent revisionist accounts of the July Crisis, see Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*

(New York: HarperCollins, 2013) and Sean McMeekin, *July 1914: Countdown to War* (New York: Basic Books, 2013).[Back to \(11\)](#)

12. See John W. Langdon, *July 1914: The Long Debate, 1918-1990* (New York: Berg, 1991) for a readable review of the historiography of the July Crisis from the end of WWI to the fall of the Berlin Wall.[Back to \(12\)](#)
13. One of the many accomplishments of *July Crisis* is the rightful rehabilitation of British Foreign Minister Edward Grey. Perhaps no one more than Otte is poised to deliver a balanced, new biographical assessment of the often misunderstood and maligned diplomat.[Back to \(13\)](#)

The author read the review with the greatest interest and is grateful to the reviewer for his thoughtful comments and observations, but would note that the German angle is only one part of the story of July 1914.

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