‘I have often thought that things would be better if the whole truth were known. The difficulty was to tell people the truth, and make them believe that they really knew the whole truth. They were apt to think that there was a great deal more than they had been told.’ Sir Edward Grey writes to Britain’s ambassador to Russia, 8 July 1914.[[1]](#footnote-1)

By 14 July, Count Leopold von Berchtold had managed to achieve a measure of unity in Habsburg foreign policy. With Stefan Tisza on side, Austria and Hungary would now proceed with a united policy against Serbia. The plan was as bold as it was controversial. Serbia would be presented with an ultimatum, demanding concessions from her government which would be plainly unacceptable if she wished to remain a sovereign state. Once Serbia rejected the ultimatum, Austria-Hungary would declare war. Yet, remarkably, this was the limits of the Austrian war plan. Details on what would be done to Serbia, how she would be treated in the aftermath of the victorious war, and, critically, the question of what was to be done if Russia intervened, were all left in the air. As we will see in this episode, the vagueness of the Austrian plan was one problem which left the Germans deeply concerned. Another problem was the issue of secrecy. Berchtold recognised the importance of leaving Europe in the dark. Should Serbia’s allies in St Petersburg discover what Austria intended, they would have longer to plan their reaction, and might mobilise the Entente.

This was believed particularly dangerous, since the French President and Russian Tsar were scheduled to meet in person from 20 July. If word reached the two allies of Austria’s plans while the two allies were embracing in St Petersburg, it could foster a sense of unity which would surely guarantee a wider war. To preserve the limited war Vienna wanted, secrecy was thus essential. Yet, astonishingly, by the time the French President and Russian Tsar did meet, Austria’s scheme against Serbia had become one of the worst kept secrets in Europe. In this episode we will examine this leakage, as well as the further evidence of Austro-German conversations which points to Berlin’s increasing anxiety around Austria’s vaguely defined plan. In my original analysis of this leakage in our JCAP, I noted how the secret escaped into the open, but I may have somewhat understated just how epic a failure this commitment to secrecy had been. From almost the very beginning, Austria had been compromised, and rumours swirled across all the major capitals. This forced Austria to deny its plans, but additional schemes for persuading newspaper readers of the Entente that Serbia was in the wrong provide a further example of just how far the conspiracy went.

On 15 July 1914, Joseph Redlich, an Austrian historian, author, politician and advisor to the government was able to write on the situation in his diary.

Today half an hour with Alek Hoyos; he told me highly confidentially that the war was as good as decided on. But patience was needed, there were important reasons for a delay. In 14 days time he would tell me the secret and most interesting story of the last two weeks. Berchtold is of the same opinion as Tisza, [Austrian Premier] Sturgkh, [Tisza’s advisor] Burian. [Finance Minister] Bilinski pretends the same! The Kaiser [Franz Josef] himself is entirely ready for war. Hoyos thinks: ‘if this leads to the world war, it does not matter to us.’ … Hoyos says: ‘If our army is no good, then the Monarchy cannot survive anyway for it is today the only cohesion of the Empire.’ … The news that Conrad and [War Minister] Krobatin are going on holiday is intended to obscure our intentions… I tell Hoyos that I did not wish for Serbia’s independence to be removed by us. Her reduction and the lessening of her independence would suffice… Here in Vienna nobody believes in the possibility of war; very noticeable are the three bad days on the stock exchange last week and this week.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Count Hoyos – who had been instrumental in securing the blank cheque – did not seem particularly concerned about the possibility of a wider war. An element of fatalism seems to have come over his thinking, yet we also see another problem emerging as a result of this commitment to secrecy. To maintain the ruse, key military personnel went on holiday, but this absence of key military figures meant that if Germany wished to learn more about the intended war plans, they would have a hard time acquiring the information. The commitment to secrecy arguably undermined Austrian strategy, if indeed a strategy existed at this point at all beyond the insistence that Serbian independence would not be compromised. If Germany wished to discuss the anticipated war, they would be reduced to discussions with subordinates, who might not have the whole picture, and lacked the authority to shape events. That same day the German military attaché in Vienna wrote home to Berlin on this dilemma, following conversations he had had with Conrad’s deputy, Franz von Hofer:

Hofer did express a concern known to me already from the last trip to Scutari. Apart from the long duration of the mobilisation, which gives the other powers time for possible intervention, there is the possibility that the Serbian forces, two-thirds of which are now distributed in the new southern areas, would approach very slowly, or rather, which would be the worst case scenario, would in any case only present themselves for battle in the southernmost old-Serbia… It could then take perhaps three weeks after the declaration of mobilisation for decisive battles to occur. The financial aspect is also important in this.

Hofer, as Deputy chief of staff, here depicted a scenario where Serbian forces withdrew deeper into the country and denied Vienna the decisive battle it longed for. The imperative of short, decisive war against Belgrade would thus be denied, and European powers would then have time to intervene. If a fait accompli was to be possible, it was essential that Serbia’s army was quickly destroyed. Yet, this note of concern was immediately followed by Hofer’s extremely positive reading of Serbia’s strategic situation, and a belief that a third Balkan War might erupt to Austria’s advantage. As the German attaché continued:

Should the Serbs present themselves for battle in the lower Morava, then the general staff here confidently expects that there will be an uprising in all of Macedonia and that the new areas will want to free themselves of the hated Serbian yolk. The question is then if Greece and also Bulgaria will want to profit from this. Then Romania would likely turn against Bulgaria.

Hofer proceeded to offer additional positive spins on further events in Europe. On 13 July 1914, in an address to the French Chamber, Senator Charles Humbert delivered a stunning speech wherein he revealed the sheer extent of the deficiencies in the French army compared to its German opponent. Specifically, Humbert identified France’s inferior field artillery, its shortage of officers, its obsolete siege artillery, its inability to launch an offensive over the key rivers, and the fact that key fortresses like Verdun had not been updated since the 1870s. The speech caused deep concern within French society, as we will see later, but they also worried the British, who we will recall had committed to consultations with the French army in the event of a wider war. Would these publicised deficiencies jeopardise Entente war plans? Naturally, what was bad news for the Entente was good news for the Triple Alliance. The deputy chief of staff thus considered the inner meaning of the revelations, as the attaché continued:

According to the newest revelations from Senator Humbert, which are very timely for us, about the not so good state of French armaments chances are increasing that Russia will not intervene. Poincare will most likely not have too rosy a reception [in Russia]. I seek in vain for reasons why just at this moment this really rather dirty French linen is being washed in public. Perhaps a deliberate peaceful hint for the Russian address, if it is not a domestic lever for higher military credits.

Although the Three Year Law had enhanced the size of the French army, the inferiority of its artillery in particular was a serious problem, as Hofer and the attaché clearly understood. Once more, we see the Austrian expectation of Franco-Russian non-intervention be taken for granted. Evidence to this effect was underlined, while evidence to the contrary was ignored. Regarding the practicalities of this secret Austrian process, moreover, the German attaché had more to say to his chiefs:

The old Emperor, says Berchtold, will see things through to the end. The note to be delivered to Serbia will be finished next Sunday [19 July], then Berchtold will drive to Ischl for an audience [with the Emperor]. On 25 July the note is to be delivered in Belgrade and the other powers will be notified. As I have heard today, the note is going to be designed in such a way that an acceptance is entirely out of the question. But what if the second case scenario occurred, that following initial refusal of the note and mobilisation immediately afterwards the Serbian government succumbs to the pressure, what then? Should this great run-up again come to nothing? Berchtold fears such a turn of events. In my opinion the military leaders will then have to ensure that there can be no turning back. Getting paid for the costs of the mobilisation and the turning back would hardly amount to getting half the job done. From I hint I conclude that Belgrade will be bombarded with heavy artillery.

The attaché’s observations gel with what we’ve learned so far about the Austrian mood. After what had transpired in recent years, Berchtold appeared to fear that Serbia would back down, granting Austria only a diplomatic victory. To demonstrate Austrian resolve and restore her prestige, it was asserted that only a military campaign would suffice. This assertion informed the contents of the ultimatum, or note, as the attaché called it above. If a diplomatic win was all Vienna wanted, an unacceptable ultimatum would have been avoided. That Austria intended to make war on Serbia either way was thus clear to the attaché by this point, and was known in Berlin as well. Indeed, in Berlin it was also hoped that it would come to war, since this was the only true way for Austria to dispel the shadow of gloom and decline which hung over her. Yet, even with these factors pushing Vienna towards war, an element of disbelief remained ingrained in the mind of this attaché. He concluded:

As regards the military measures one has to assume that they will work out, something which in this country usually cannot be taken as given. In the last five years people have had nothing else to do but busy themselves with ‘Mobilisation Balkans and Russia’ in practice and in all war games. Only it will all come off slowly, with the here usual lethargy about which one could fill volumes in everyday life… If Russia intervenes, the operations against Serbia will not be continued, but all corps will be deployed against the main enemy. The General Staff seem much occupied with this dynamic and as a result fear that the Serbs might at first present themselves only far in the south.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Notwithstanding the confidence expressed by many in the Austrian military – including, of course, Conrad von Hotzendorff – it was clear that a war against Serbia would not be without risk or potential complications. Yet the underlying tone captured by the German attaché in Vienna appears to be a mixture of disbelief in war, a refusal to accept the possibility of Russian intervention, and a generally rosy impression of the strategic situation. Regarding the point of French unpreparedness for war, as revealed by Senator Charles Humbert in the French Chamber of Deputies, it may be useful to consider what French officials thought of such explosive details.

The same day the above report was sent to Berlin by the attaché, Alfred Dumaine, the French ambassador to Vienna, sent a scathing critique of Senator Humbert’s actions to French Premier Rene Viviani. Dumaine discerned the use which Austrian newspapers were already making of these developments, interpreting them as a signal of France’s peaceful intentions, which would rub off on the Tsar. As Dumaine put it, ‘with their capacity for harbouring comforting illusions, the Austrians thus already do not consider Russia and France to be in a position to have their say in European affairs,’ which would ‘assure the Dual Monarchy, supported by Germany, many opportunities to subject Serbia to whatever regime she wants to impose upon her.’ As was customary among ambassadors, Dumaine talked with his Serbian counterpart in Vienna, to gauge his impressions of Austria’s intentions. The Serbian ambassador to Vienna was heavily critical of Austrian policy to this point, yet insisted that if Vienna ‘asks us politely, by treating us with the consideration that is customary between independent states, to help with her enquiries, to support her protection measures, we will not refuse.’ However, the Serb ambassador added, ‘if she compromises our national dignity, then she will find us ready to stand up to her.’[[4]](#footnote-4)

Of course, Berchtold was planning just such a compromise of Serbian national dignity; the ultimatum was designed to put the Serbian government in the impossible position of choosing between a ruinous war or a humiliating capitulation. No politeness was to be expected. To attain the goal of preserving the limited scope of the war, Berchtold tried to influence British newspapers, such as *The Times* and *Westminster Gazette*, but the articles published on 16 July still contained warnings against the use of force, even if they were critical of excesses in the Serbian press. As Thomas Otte put it, ‘Rarely was so much effort expended for so little achievement.’ Austrian efforts to influence the information space failed badly, particularly in the face of counterarguments diffused through the Entente capitals in recent weeks, including the Russian narrative of the late Archduke as a warmonger. Berchtold’s requests to influence the British press made their way to Lichnowsky, the German ambassador in London. Lichnowsky was more pessimistic, who warned his Austrian contacts that ‘sympathies here would shift immediately and vigorously towards Serbdom as soon as Austria resorted to force.’ Jagow, the German Foreign Minister, advised Lichnowsky that the current situation was ‘possibly the last opportunity to deliver the coup de grace to pan-Serbdom, under relatively advantageous circumstances.’ This may have been so, but Lichnowsky regarded efforts to influence the press in Britain as entirely futile.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Lichnowsky, alone among Germany’s European ambassadors, maintained a wholly negative view of the Austrian attack on Serbia. Though he was not informed of the details of the blank cheque, and kept out of the loop of the developing conspiracy in Vienna, Lichnowsky knew enough to warn Jagow in Berlin and even Sir Edward Grey in London. On 16 July, Britain’s ambassador to France Sir Francis Bertie was in London to meet his Foreign Secretary, and he wrote a memorandum after his conversations with Grey which are worth considering. Bertie wrote:

I saw Grey by appointment this afternoon. The German ambassador has again interrogated Grey on the subject of the alleged Anglo-Russian naval convention. Grey thinks that the leakage of information concerning the Anglo-Russian conversations has been due to boastings by Izvolsky. Grey has not denied to Prince Lichnowsky that there have been military and naval conversations with France during the past eight years, and that recently there have been conversations with Russia; but these conversations have not impaired England’s liberty of action. She is quite free from any binding engagements.[[6]](#footnote-6)

These purported naval conventions between London and St Petersburg were a topic of concern for Berlin in the final weeks of peace. Bethmann Hollweg had reason to suspect that Britain and Russia were strategically dividing the seas between them, as Britain had done with France. In April 1914, Grey agreed in principle to the idea of a naval convention, though the contents had not been developed by the time war broke out. The idea was largely the product of Eyre Crowe and Sir Arthur Nicolson, two pro-Russian subordinates in the Foreign Office we have encountered before. ‘We must not quarrel with Russia’ had been Nicolson’s guiding principle, seeing in St Petersburg’s recovery both an opportunity and a potential threat to British Imperial security in Asia. As Grey was then distracted by the Home Rule crisis in Ireland – and more on that in a future episode – he was more likely to agree to the initiatives of these subordinates. The talks included some disputes in Persia, left over from the 1907 Convention, and both Crowe and Nicolson anticipated that they could serve as the basis for a new modus vivendi between the two powers, though there was a long way to go yet.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Bethmann Hollweg acquired this information from a German spy in London’s Russian embassy, and the news hit him like a bomb in May 1914 once he was clued in. William Mulligan noted that the German Chancellor overreacted to the news of the convention, writing:

Just four days before the assassination of the Archduke, Grey held out the prospect of continued [Anglo-Russian] cooperation in the Balkans. The proposed naval convention was largely symbolic, one of the nods, to paraphrase Churchill, which propped up the international system. The convention would hardly have adjusted, let alone overturned the international system. After all, the members of the Triple Alliance were busy discussing naval and military cooperation in 1913… The tightening of the bonds of the Anglo-French entente in November 1912 had not elicited such a strong reaction from Germany.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Even if the results of the naval talks were worse in the German imagination than in reality, they contributed to the sense of encirclement and gloom, particularly regarding Russia, which outspent Germany on its own navy for the first time in 1913-14. The German spy had acquired a particularly juicy detail – that in the event of war, Anglo-Russian forces could possibly cooperate to arrange a Russian naval landing in Pomerania. Yet we should bear in mind that all such talks remained in the conception stage, and nothing concrete had been decided.[[9]](#footnote-9) Nonetheless, as Mulligan continued, Bethmann Hollweg’s perceptions of these talks had a dramatic effect:

Bethmann Hollweg’s perception of the importance of the convention led him to reorientate German policy. He believed that it marked the end of détente and of cooperation on specific issues, especially in the Balkans. His faith in Britain’s ability to restrain Russia and France, to act as the leader of the Triple Entente, was shaken. Finally, it weakened the Chancellor’s position against his rivals for influence with the Kaiser, particularly the generals and Tirpitz.[[10]](#footnote-10)

For all the angst and anger they caused in Berlin, the supposed naval convention was largely a red herring. Sean McMeekin went so far as to call the naval convention ‘mostly imaginary.’ The agreement had yet to be properly formulated, and certainly lacked the far-reaching implications of the Anglo-French naval conversations. This had been explained to Lichnowsky, but once Bethmann Hollweg learned of the talks in May 1914, they were picked up by the German press, which ran with them as a major scandal and as a literal Anglo-Russian naval agreement which threatened German security. Yet, in another case of misinterpretation exacerbated by communication failures, McMeekin asserted that the talks were not aimed at Germany at all, but at the Ottoman Empire:

Her diplomats’ main priority in naval negotiations with London was not coordinating actions in the Baltic, but rather staving off the threat to Russia’s position in the Near East posed by Britain’s modernization of the Ottoman navy. Had Germany’s leaders known how worried the Russians were about the Turkish dreadnoughts that were about to make Russia’s Black Sea fleet obsolete and close off the “Straits window” forever, they might have laughed off the most recent press hysteria. Bethmann Hollweg may not then have been so paranoid about the “growth of Russian power” in July 1914. But how could he have known this? Not even the British knew what the Russians were really afraid of.[[11]](#footnote-11)

If it is the case that key officials in the great powers had got their wires crossed by the summer of 1914 – just in time for the latest crisis – then this was by no means unusual when compared to previous years. A multitude of factors had nonetheless convinced key figures like Berchtold, Bethmann Hollweg and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Sazonov that it was time to pursue a more assertive foreign policy, even if that ran the risk of war. The context of the preceding years informed these impressions; that it was essential to act decisively now, to prevent a loss of influence, prestige or power in the future. Remarkably, and tragically, each of these key figures in the former Holy Alliance perceived extreme danger in a policy which looked like a retreat. The game of chicken, in other words, had become substantially more dangerous, as neither believed they could afford to blink. William Mulligan thus summarises this concoction of difficulties:

By the eve of the assassination of the Archduke, the structures, assumptions, and practices that had underpinned peace for the previous three years were undermined. Berchtold, Sazonov, and Bethmann Hollweg now favoured a more assertive foreign policy. They did not want war, but their changing assumptions suggested that they were more willing to risk one than in early 1913. The changes in their policy came about for different reasons, but significantly each power saw itself as getting progressively weaker. The consolidation of alliances, the shattering of détente, and the failure of the Concert to manage effectively the international system con- tributed to the changes in policy. There were too many changes in the policies and structures of the international system before 1914 to argue that the shift that took place from the second half of 1913 would be a permanent or even long-term feature of great power politics. It was the coincidence of the July crisis with the adoption of more assertive policies in Vienna, St Petersburg, and Berlin from October 1913 onwards, which caused the outbreak of war.[[12]](#footnote-12)

London and St Petersburg may have been vexed at the leakage of their secret talks, but a far juicier secret was also spreading across the continent at this time. From the moment Berchtold had decided on war with Serbia after the assassination, it had been clear that Europe must be kept in the dark about what Vienna would do next. In line with this, on the government’s orders, the Habsburg press had virtually dropped all talk of Serbia, deceiving the public and European onlookers into a sense of calm. In a stroke of luck, Sazonov departed St Petersburg for a short vacation from 14 July, and would not return until the French arrived on 20 July. Could the Russian Foreign Minister be safely excluded while taking in the country air, this would enhance Vienna’s chances of success. Conversely, if the truth of Austrian intentions leaked out, it could have a devastating effect on Austria’s military and political plans.[[13]](#footnote-13) Telegraphing the Austrian attack on Serbia would enable Russia to plot its intervention, France to converse with the Russians, and Britain to potentially suggest a new conference. None of these possibilities were acceptable to Berchtold, which begs the question, how did the secret leak out after all?

In fact, the first leak came courtesy of Berlin. The German Foreign Minister Jagow passed on details of the Austrian plot to Ludwig von Flotow, Berlin’s ambassador to Rome. Flotow then informed the Italian Foreign Minister, San Guiliano that ‘Austria will ask Serbia to take measures against Pan Serbian propaganda and that, if Serbia resists, Austria will use force.’ Flotow told San Guiliano that he ‘does not think that the aim of Austria is territorial expansion,’ and he requested the Italian ‘wield some influence on our press so that it champions the localisation of the eventual conflict.’ This serves as a further reminder of German intentions to avoid a greater war – in contravention of the regular narrative which paints Germany as attempting to launch the First World War. When San Giuliano forwarded this information to Italy’s embassies in St Petersburg, Budapest and Vienn, he warned these ambassadors that ‘we consider a territorial expansion of Austria is against our interests and that we shall do whatever possible to prevent it.’

If, San Giuliano warned, Austria’s demands were ‘excessive and reactionary,’ then both Italian papers and public opinion would be ‘unanimous against Austria and if the press lets itself be induced into supporting the localisation of the conflict, this certainly shall not persuade Russia to let Serbia be crushed.’[[14]](#footnote-14) This decision by Flotow, the German ambassador to Rome to share the details of Austria’s intentions towards Serbia must be considered a major error. Fortunately for him, the French ambassador to Italy was then on leave, and thus unable to learn of the details which were then swirling around Rome. There is reason to suspect that Berchtold held this leak against his German allies. Austria had broken the Italian code, and thus learned that its secret had spread, but this was cause for great anxiety because the Russians were also renowned for their codebreaking abilities. If Vienna was able to read Italy’s mail, it was likely St Petersburg was doing so as well.[[15]](#footnote-15)

But if Berchtold was irritated at his ally’s carelessness, for the second leak he had nobody to blame but himself. This came courtesy of Count Heinrich von Lutzow, former Austrian ambassador to Rome. Lutzow was regarded by Berchtold as a kind of wise man figure, and the Austrian Foreign Minister welcomed his input. This was perhaps Berchtold’s gravest error to this point. Lutzow was no government loyalist. During a 13 July meeting where he was present and informed of the plot against Serbia, Lutzow warned Berchtold that the prospect of localising an Austro-Serb war was tantamount to fantasy. He did not stop there. Lutzow returned to his country estate still mulling over the explosive implications of what he had heard, and he felt unable to keep the secret any longer. As if to illustrate Berchtold’s fatal mistake, Lutzow was the neighbour of the British ambassador to Vienna, Maurice de Bunsen. Lutzow had lunch with Bunsen on 15 July, and therein he ‘put on a serious face and said he wondered if I realised how grave the situation was.’ Lutzow warned the British ambassador that Austria-Hungary ‘was not going to stand Serbian insolence any longer,’ because ‘No great power could submit to such audacity as Serbia had displayed, and keep her position in the world.’ Lutzow explained that ‘a note was being drawn up and would be completed when the Sarajevo enquiry was finished, demanding categorically that Serbia should take effective measures to prevent the manufacture and export of bombs, and to put down the insidious and murderous propaganda against the Dual Monarchy.’ Lutzow advised that ‘No futile discussions would be tolerated,’ and ‘If Serbia did not at once cave in, force would be used to compel her.’[[16]](#footnote-16)

Armed with this dynamite piece of evidence, what could the British ambassador do but immediately telegraph home to his chief? On 16 July indeed, Bunsen authored two telegrams on the subject. Once these communiques were sent to London, arriving on 20 July, it was only a matter of time before Austria’s plans were entirely exposed. Bunsen explained that ‘From language held by the Minister for Foreign Affairs [Berchtold] to a friend of mine’ – the friend being former ambassador Lutzow – ‘I gather that the situation is regarded at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs in a serious light and that a kind of indictment is being prepared against the Serbian government for alleged complicity in the conspiracy which led to the assassination of the Archduke.’ Bunsen proceeded to explain additional details, revealing in the process how much Berchtold had shared with Lutzow, and how much Lutzow had shared with him. The Serbian government, according to Lutzow:

…will be required to adopt certain definite measures in restraint of nationalist and anarchist propaganda, and that Austro-Hungarian government are in no mood to parlay with Serbia, but will insist on immediate unconditional compliance, failing which force will be used. Germany is said to be in complete agreement with this procedure, and it is though that the rest of Europe will sympathise with Austria-Hungary in demanding that Serbia shall adopt in future more submissive attitude… I asked if Russia would be expected to stand by quietly in the event of force being used against Serbia. My informant said that he presumed that Russia would not wish to protect racial assassins, but in any case Austria-Hungary would go ahead regardless of results. She would lose her position as a great power if she stood any further nonsense from Serbia.[[17]](#footnote-17)

In his second letter sent later that day, we see Bunsen searching for evidence to back up what Lutzow had just told him, and he examined Tisza’s speech in the Hungarian parliament. There, Bunsen noted that Tisza’s speech from 8 July had warned of Vienna’s intention to strike a balance between ‘the interests involved in the maintenance of peace,’ and ‘those great interests which are bound up with the existence and prestige of the Monarchy.’ Bunsen discerned a much firmer tone in Tisza’s parliamentary speech delivered the previous day on 15 July. ‘He said that a clear understanding must be reached with Serbia,’ Bunsen wrote. ‘How this would have to be done, in what direction and by the use of what form of words, he was not yet in a position to state.’ Although Bunsen wrote that ‘They did not believe that the settling of accounts with Serbia would necessarily lead to war.’ Still, Bunsen quoted Tisza as saying that ‘Every nation should be in a position to make war as a last recourse.’ Revolutionary agitation in Bosnia was rendering Habsburg authority there unsustainable, and for this reason alone the agitation had to be forcibly combatted. This roused the expectation that ‘a diplomatic protest would be addressed to Serbia,’ which would foreshadow ‘a period of great tension leading possibly even to war, if the desired object proves unattainable by other means.’ Significantly, Bunsen observed that the Hungarian parliament – both government and opposition representatives – were united on ‘the necessity of calling Serbia to account.’[[18]](#footnote-18)

From these two sources, word of Austrian intentions was bound to spread across Europe, and where hard facts were hard to come by, sinister rumours could fill in the blanks. Britain’s charge d’affairs in Belgrade was sufficiently informed to remark on the mood in Serbia. The Serbian government was ‘prudent and conciliatory,’ he said, and was ‘prepared to comply at once with any request for police investigation and to take any other measures compatible with dignity and independence of state.’ However, the charge d’affairs warned that:

A demand on the part of Austro-Hungarian government for appointment of a mixed commission of enquiry, for suppression of nationalist societies or for censorship of press, could not be acceded to, since it would imply foreign intervention in domestic affairs and legislation.[[19]](#footnote-19)

That Belgrade should be aware of the existence of such a demand suggests that the Austrian secret was spreading fast. Although the finer details of the developing ultimatum were not widely shared, the Serb government evidently expected the above demand, which infringe on Serbian sovereignty and could not be accepted. This was the gist of the fifth point of the ultimatum, which demanded Austrian and Hungarian officials ‘assist in Serbia in the suppressing of the subversive movement directed against the territorial integrity of the monarchy.’[[20]](#footnote-20) Indeed, only this fifth demand out of a total of ten was rejected by Serbia as unacceptable by 25 July. From this we can assume that Serbia was apprised of Austrian plans, and its Russian ally was similarly well-informed. Clark points out that this gave these powers ample time to prepare a response to the anticipated ultimatum; Serb Premier Nikola Pasic was able to warn his ambassadors on 19 July that ‘we cannot accept those demands which no other country that respects its own independence and dignity would accept.’

The Russian ambassador to Vienna had also learned the truth, sending it straight to Sazonov, the Russian Foreign Minister. The Tsar added a significant comment to this telegram, to the effect that ‘In my view, no country can present demands to another, unless it has decided to wage war.’ Such comments are doubly revealing. Not only were the Tsar and his ministers unwilling to permit Austria to acquire any satisfaction, they were also clued in on the secret well in advance. Sazonov’s later claim that the ultimatum struck him as a terrible shock is thus, in Clark’s words, ‘nonsense.’[[21]](#footnote-21) While the Austrian plot was becoming Europe’s worst kept secret, among some German contemporaries, a sense of disbelief in Austrian seriousness still hung over the proceedings. On 17 July the head of the Saxon legation in Berlin thus wrote that Vienna ‘seems only with some difficulty to be summoning up the requisite energy for a demarche,’ adding that

…energetic measures would be welcomed since it is held that this would enhance the prestige of Austria-Hungary abroad, especially with the Balkan States, and resolute action would be a suitable means of retarding, for some time at least, the inner decomposition of the Monarchy… Austria can now well afford to show a firmer hand. Efforts are therefore being made over here [in Berlin] to ensure that the press, too, presents the idea of an Austrian intervention as a kind of mandate from Europe, to perform the praiseworthy task of clearing up the nest of anarchists in Belgrade.

Evidently, senior German officials believed that enough was enough. Yet, even though the ground was being prepared in Berlin to portray the Austrian action as a noble and just endeavour, the language the Saxon used suggests a sense of disbelief in the prospect of war, twinned with rosy impressions of the prospects for localisation:

If, contrary to expectations, Austria-Hungary should be compelled upon to take measures against Serbia, officials here count upon a localisation of the conflict, as England is altogether peacefully disposed, and France and Russia seem to be equally free from any belligerent inclinations… To sum up, there is no pessimistic view here of the situation and it has therefore also been decided not to disturb the holiday and travelling arrangements of the decisive people; after all one is prepared for eventualities.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Within the higher levels of the German government, however, an Austro-Serb war was eagerly anticipated. On 17 July German Foreign Minister Jagow wrote to ambassador Tschirschky in Vienna. Therein, Jagow revealed his careful balancing act; he did not wish to deter the Austrians from acting, but he felt compelled to ask for the umpteenth time what the actual war plan was. When Hoyos had come to Berlin to acquire the blank cheque, he had claimed Serbia would be partitioned, a position which Tisza insisted was his personal opinion only. As Jagow wrote though:

Count Berchtold and Count Tisza remarked on this that this declaration represented only the personal view of Count Hoyos, and have therefore expressly not identified themselves with it; but they have not apparently expanded any further on their own territorial plans.

In perhaps the understatement of the year, Jagow advised Tschirschky that:

For the benefit of the diplomatic handling of the conflict with Serbia it would not be unimportant to know from the beginning what the ideas of the Austro-Hungarian statesmen concerning the future shape of Serbia really are, as this question will have a substantial influence on the attitude of Italy and on the public opinion and attitude of England. That the plans of the statesmen of the Danube Monarchy may be influenced and modified by the course of events is, of course, to be regarded as self-evident; at the very least we must assume that the Vienna Cabinet has in mind some sort of picture of the aims to be sought, even in the matter of territory.

Tschirschky was tasked with requesting more information on this matter from Berchtold ‘while avoiding any impression that we are attempting to put any obstacles in the path of Austrian activities or that we are trying to prescribe certain limits or aims.’ ‘It would merely be useful for us,’ Jagow said, ‘to be informed to a certain extent about where the road is likely to lead.’[[23]](#footnote-23) We might wonder why Jagow was not more direct – did Germany not have a right to know Austria’s war plans in greater detail, since it was she who would protect Vienna from any of the consequences? Maurice de Bunsen, the British ambassador to Vienna, reported on 17 July that he ‘cannot yet believe Austria will resort to extreme measures, but I think we have an anxious time before us.’ In this telegram to Grey, Bunsen provided his chief with a survey of foreign opinion within the Austrian capital:

Tschirschky I feel sure is doing nothing to restrain this country. He confessed to me lately that he did not believe in the possibility of improved relations between Austria and Serbia, and that the German military attaché does not conceal his belief that the hour of…punishment for Serbia is approaching. [the Russian ambassador to Vienna Nicolai] Schebeko told me this. Schebeko says Russia would inevitably be drawn in, if this happened… [Serbian ambassador to Vienna Jovan] Jovanovic came to see me again this morning. He can get nothing out of the Ballhausplatz and rather dreads the end of the ominous silence which now prevails there. He says Serbia will do anything that can be reasonably asked to put down crime, but that it is useless to ask for the suppression of sentiments felt by every Serbian.[[24]](#footnote-24)

If Entente officials were eager to warn Austria to step back from the abyss, then we should not imagine they were ignorant of the potential consequences. A French intelligence report drafted on 17 July 1914 assessed a striking variety of information then available. It was suspected that Vienna would seek to use the results of the investigation to justify its demands, but if Austria acted without this justification, and sought instead the destruction of Pan Slav propaganda, this would be a far trickier campaign. ‘If they were to succeed in proving to Serbia that she was responsible for arming assassins, she would have to humble herself before Austria and the whole of Europe,’ but ‘if they order her to gage Serbian nationalism, they strongly provoke the patriotic fervour that has been consolidated by the victories of the two Balkan Wars and is running very high at the moment.’ Should this latter eventuality occur, then ‘Instead of a criminal convicted of murder, we have before us a state whose dignity and sovereignty has been threatened.’

We hear it said ‘Nothing will be done; there will be no demarche: passions will calm down: after which a general communique will announce that the observations presented by the Cabinet of Vienna have been received with courteous goodwill and that they response provides the required guarantees.’ This is only conceivable if Austria-Hungary gives way and accepts the decline of her prestige, or if she has been warned by her allies that she will not be supported in any way. We do not believe her to have fallen to that level; as for the attitude of her allies, at least of Germany, it is quite the opposite.

Significantly, the French intelligence report anticipated that while Austria was waiting, this ‘intermediary period could last four months,’ and perhaps because of this, the French government did not read this report until 22 July. By that point, the French President and Russian Tsar were meeting in person.[[25]](#footnote-25) If the French were somewhat out of the loop or slow to recognise the significance of these leaks, Sazonov the Russian Foreign Minister was much clearer on what it all meant. On 18 July he told Sir George Buchanan, the British ambassador, that ‘the Pan Serb agitation in Austria was an internal growth,’ and ‘blame could not be thrown on Serbia any more than Germany could be held responsible for the Pan German or Italy for the Italian propaganda that was carried on within the Austrian Empire.’ Sazonov warned Buchanan that ‘anything in the shape of an Austrian ultimatum at Belgrade could not leave Russia indifferent, and she might be forced to take some precautionary military measures.’[[26]](#footnote-26) These Russian military measures, indeed, were as controversial to the historiography of the First World War as they were instrumental in widening the conflict.

By now Serb Premier Nikola Pasic had telegraphed his ambassadors on the news which had reached him of Austrian intentions. An action directed against Serbia was expected, but its precise form was not yet known to Belgrade.[[27]](#footnote-27) In a remarkable illustration of how widely known the Austrian plans had become, on 18 July Hans von Schoen the Bavarian charge d’affairs in Berlin wrote an extensive telegram to Georg von Hertling, the Bavarian Prime Minister. Therein, Schoen recounted conversations he had had with Zimmermann, the undersecretary of state for foreign affairs, and advised his chief of the prevailing commitment to secrecy in Berlin, although Tisza had ‘somewhat lifted the veil of secrecy by his statement in the Hungarian House of Deputies.’ Schoen was able to list the three core features of the Austrian ultimatum – Belgrade’s rejection of the Pan Serb movement; Austrian participation in an enquiry into the assassination; the arrest of all Serb participants – and he also noted on the mood within Germany:

Here they are absolutely willing that Austria should take advantage of this favourable hour, even at the risk of further complications. But whether they will actually rise to the occasion in Vienna still seems doubtful to Jagow and to Zimmermann. The undersecretary of state made the statement that Austria-Hungary, thanks to her indecision and desultoriness, had really become the sick man of Europe as Turkey had once been, upon the partition of which the Russians, Italians, Romanians, Serbians and Montenegrins were now waiting. A powerful and successful move against Serbia would make it possible for the Austrians and Hungarians to feel themselves once more to be a national power, would again revive the country’s collapsed economic life, and would suppress foreign aspirations for years.

Evidently, there were many positive reasons for pressing for maximalist aims against Serbia – by Schoen’s description it seems the ultimatum would be tantamount to a silver bullet for all of Vienna’s problems. That Jagow still could not quite believe in Austria’s determination to push matters to war should be underlined. Zimmermann’s claim that only by acting against Serbia could Austria cease to be the sick man of Europe also affirms what those in Vienna already believed to be self-evident. Zimmermann claimed that ‘it is almost embarrassing to the always timid and undecided authorities at Vienna not to be admonished by Germany to caution and self-restraint,’ and ‘it would have been preferred here if they had not waited so long with their action against Serbia, and the Serbian government had not been given time to make an offer of satisfaction on its own account, perhaps acting under Russo-French pressure.’ According to the view in Berlin, Schoen wrote that ‘What attitude the other powers will take towards an armed conflict between Austria and Serbia will chiefly depend,’ on ‘whether Austria will content herself with a chastisement of Serbia, or will demand territorial compensation for herself.’

This explains Jagow’s quest for more information in the telegram examined before; Austria’s decision in this regard could influence the course of the war. It was also clear that ‘the attitude of Russia will, above all else, determine the question whether the attempt to localise the war will succeed.’ Russia could justify non-intervention by renouncing the assassins who felled the Archduke, while Britain and France were indifferent to Serbia and wished to avoid war. Schoen discerned that Zimmermann was ‘counting on the fact that “bluffing” constitutes one of the favoured requisites of Russian policy,’ and that ‘while the Russian likes to threaten with the sword, he does not like very much to draw it on behalf of others at the critical moment.’ This was a lesson learned from the Balkan Wars, where Russia restrained its Serbian and Montenegrin allies. Yet it did not seem to occur to Zimmermann or Schoen that just as Austria felt compelled to act against Serbia to erase the recent history of inaction, so too would Russia feel forced to defend those Slav allies she had left to fend for themselves the previous year. The prestige of both Vienna and St Petersburg, in other words, was perceived to be at stake, and bluffing could no longer cut it.[[28]](#footnote-28) This view was reinforced by the head of the German embassy in Vienna, who wrote to Jagow on 18 July that:

If this action again ends up like a storm in a teacup and remains nothing but a so-called diplomatic victory, then the view already taken here that the monarchy is no longer capable of any expression of vigour will be confirmed. The results that this would have, both at home and abroad, are obvious.

Yet, additional wrinkles in the plan had by now developed. The question of Italy was perceived particularly important. If Italy remained passively neutral in an Austro-Serb war, so much the better. However, if Italy intervened, either throwing its moral weight behind Serbia or demanding compensation from Austria to remain loyal to her, this could encourage Russian intervention. Perhaps if Italy was compensated with the Trentino, a region in the south of the disputed Tyrol, Rome would permit Austria to annex what she wanted from Serbia. But did Austria desire such annexations? And was Berchtold willing to swallow his pride and grant these concessions to Italy? The picture was not entirely clear, yet it was now certain that Serbia would be presented with demands which were ‘really of such a nature that no nation that still possessed self-respect and dignity could possibly accept them.’[[29]](#footnote-29)

Austria could not afford to settle for a mere diplomatic victory; Russia could not accept the spectacle of its Slav brother being crushed under Habsburg arms; Italy could not accept further Austrian expansion in the Balkans. If more pessimistic German officials like Lichnowsky in London regretted his country’s dilemma in this standoff, Foreign Minister Jagow was eager to remind him that under the current circumstances, Germany had little choice. ‘But we have the alliance with Austria,’ Jagow wrote to Lichnowsky on 18 July, ‘And we may certainly discuss whether with the alliance with the more and more decaying entity on the Danube we will achieve our aims,’ but Jagow retorted with with the poetic phrase ‘“If you do not like this company, choose a different one, if you can.”’ This was the crux of the matter; Berlin could not afford to undermine its ally – the only true ally she had. ‘We did not drive Austria into this decision,’ Jagow asserted, but ‘we cannot and must not now stay her hand.’ If Germany did so, she would only accelerate the ‘process of Austria-Hungary’s decay and internal collapse.’

Jagow’s guiding aim remained localisation, not prevention. Should Russia nonetheless intervene, the foreign minister was clear: ‘We would then find ourselves in what one could not call “proud” isolation. I do not want a preventive war, but if the opportunity offers itself, we must not shirk it.’ Whether we regard these expressions as unforgivably naïve or reckless, they nonetheless provide us an accurate picture of Jagow’s views. He was now hopeful of localisation, but perhaps no longer convinced that it was possible. As Thomas Otte wrote, ‘A sense of honour and obligation towards the Austrian ally and a fear of isolation strengthened his resolve. But Germany would not disengage, nor would she restrain Austria-Hungary.’ As useless as Berchtold’s maintenance of the secret had been, Jagow and his colleagues in Berlin were equally useless at controlling the situation.

The intention was to avoid placing on restrictions on Vienna which might undermine her efforts, while creating the false impression that Germany had neither the knowledge nor the influence to steer her course, and was as ignorant as the other powers. Ironically such claims would later be rejected, and the judgement of history laid down by Versailles condemned Germany for all that later transpired. There was a grain of truth to this, as from mid-July – perhaps in recognition of the leaky nature of European courts – Berchtold refrained from sharing anything with his ally. As we have also seen, Germany was still kept in the dark regarding the military campaign to be directed against Serbia. These were all the indirect results of Germany’s abdication of responsibility, where ‘Apparent ignorance was thus purchased at the price of impotence,’ in Otte’s words.

We can at least conclude that this approach was not evidence of a desire to launch a great power war; quite the opposite. German isolation meant it was forced to rely on a weak ally; its weakness compelled Berlin to support her, for fear of what might happen if Vienna once again withdrew from the threat of force. However overblown these fears were, such assumptions informed the German decision to stand back and stand by, with the consequence that the strong was now being led and misled by the weak. *Where* were they being led to was another question, which could not be answered until the Rubicon was crossed, and Serbia was presented with the ultimatum much of Europe now expected.[[30]](#footnote-30) The following day on 19 July, Austro-Hungarian officials would meet to finalise the details of the ultimatum. Thanks to contemporary carelessness and intrigue, the act of the ultimatum would no longer be a secret, even if its contents were not entirely known. Thanks to military and diplomatic concerns, the process was anything but hasty. Yet even if Vienna failed to be quick or quiet with its demarche against Serbia, perhaps the striking sight of the Habsburgs finally striking against its decline would fix these problems; perhaps the Russian bluff would be called; perhaps the Austro-Serb war would be localised after all. Perhaps, but these hopes relied to a great extent on the supposedly pacific dispositions of the Russian court. As we will see in the next episode, with the French President on his way to St Petersburg, and the Austrian cat peeping out of the bag, Russia was watching Vienna like a hawk, and her response purported to be anything but passive.

1. Quoted in Otte, *July Crisis*, p. 146. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 15 July 1914, Redlich Diary in Mombauer, *Documents*, pp. 250-251. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 15 July 1914, Kageneck to Waldersee in *Ibid*, pp. 251-254. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 15 July 1914, Dumaine to Viviani in *Ibid*, pp. 254-256. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Otte, *July Crisis*, pp. 163-165. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 16 July 1914, Memorandum by Sir Francis Bertie in Mombauer, *Documents*, p. 257. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Keith M. Neilson, ‘'My Beloved Russians': Sir Arthur Nicolson and Russia, 1906-1916,’ 546-547. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Mulligan, *Origins*, p. 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, pp. 421-422. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Mulligan, *Origins*, p. 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See Sean McMeekin, *Russian Origins*, pp. 39-40. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Mulligan, *Origins*, p. 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. McMeekin, *July 1914*, pp. 123-124. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. 16 July 1914, San Giuliano to Avarna, Bollati, Carlotti and Squitti in Mombauer, *Documents*, p. 262. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, p. 427. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See McMeekin, *July 1914*, pp. 126-127. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. 16 July 1914, Bunsen to Grey in Mombauer, *Documents*, p. 258. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. 16 July 1914, Bunsen to Grey in *Ibid*, pp. 259-260. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. 17 July 1914, Crackanthorpe to Grey in *Ibid*, p. 263. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Quoted in Martel, *Month that Changed the World*, p. 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, pp. 427-428. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. 17 July 1914, Biedermann to Vitzthum in Mombauer, *Documents*, pp. 263-264. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. 17 July 1914, Jagow to Tschirschky in *Ibid*, p. 265. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. 17 July 1914, Bunsen to Grey in *Ibid*, pp. 266-267. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. 17 July 1914, French military intelligence report, *Ibid*, pp. 267-270. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. 18 July 1914, Buchanan to Grey in *Ibid*, pp. 271-272. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See 18 July 1914, Pasic to Serbian Ministers in *Ibid*, pp. 283-285. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. 18 July 1914, Schoen to Hertling in *Ibid*, pp. 272-276. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. 18 July 1914, Stolberg to Jagow in *Ibid*, pp. 277-279. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Otte, *July Crisis*, pp. 170-173. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)