‘On news being received in Belgrade of the strange circumstances attending the Russian Minister’s death, sinister reports were at once circulated to the effect that Mr Hartwig had taken a “cup of tea” at the Austrian Legation. I merely mention this as affording an indication of the somewhat mediaeval morals prevailing in this city.’ Britain’s chargé d’affairs in Belgrade writes to the British Foreign Secretary, 13 July 1914.[[1]](#footnote-1)

By the time the first week of July 1914 had come to an end, Austria-Hungary appeared locked into a policy of war with Serbia. Austro-Hungarian Foreign Minister Count Berchtold had acquired the support of the Emperor, and the entirety of the Cabinet, with one notable exception. The Hungarian Minister President Stefan Tisza continued to frustrate the straightforward plan. His insistence on a three step plan requiring demands, an ultimatum and then satisfaction through diplomatic concessions struck Berchtold and the rest of his fellow statesmen as woefully inadequate for the gravity of the moment. The ultimatum had yet to be written, though Berchtold did begin drafting it on 9 July, as we will see, still unsure of how much he could get past Tisza. It would surely be easier to adjust Tisza himself, rather than adjust the ultimatum, and the Austrian Foreign Minister persevered over the days that followed, while tensions and whispers of murderous conspiracy whipped through Belgrade.

It was highly likely Serbia would not accept the ultimatum either way, but to Berchtold, this was not good enough. He wanted to guarantee this outcome. He also wanted the certainty which came from a government all on the same page, and this required persuading the Hungarian to accept an ultimatum which was so unacceptable so as to guarantee war. Tisza’s three-step plan would have to go, and the best way to achieve this was to persuade him of the need for war. This dilemma was understood among Habsburg officials. Summarising the dispositions of the government, on 8 July the section chief of the Austro-Hungarian Foreign Office wrote to the ambassador in Rome:

The Minister [Berchtold] is determined – if this word can be applied to him – to use the horrible deed of Sarajevo for a military clearing up of our impossible relationship with Serbia. The Austrian government, as well as of course the military and Bilinski are in favour. Tisza is rather opposed, wants to make only such demands of Serbia which will humiliate her but whose acceptance is not totally impossible, perhaps pose an ultimatum and only mobilise afterwards. With Berlin we are in complete agreement. Kaiser and Reich Chancellor etc. as decided as never before; they take on board complete cover against Russia, even at the risk of world war which is not at all ruled out, they consider the moment as favourable and advise to strike as soon as possible without asking or consulting the two other allies Italy and the more than dubious Romania in any way.[[2]](#footnote-2)

For the next few days, Berchtold was focused solely on convincing Stefan Tisza to give way, to bow to the will of the majority, to see sense, to consider the implications of division at such a pivotal moment for the Dual Monarchy. A major lever Berchtold could use to apply this pressure came from Berlin, which had signalled its wish for a swift policy that would crush Serbia in a localised Balkan War. This, to be sure, was what Vienna wished for as well. So far, the Ballhausplatz had covered its tracks well, for the most part. As we have seen, expectations, extending even to certain sections in Berlin, continued to believe that Austria would not fight, not against Serbia, and certainly not in a European war. Yet, as with so many other aspects of the July Crisis, it would be reductionist to suggest that all contemporaries felt or spoke in the same manner. One German official seemed to have been at least partially clued in on the fact that Austria fully intended to bite, and unlike his German peers, this possibility left him deeply troubled. Prince Karl Max Lichnowsky, the German ambassador to London, had been in Berlin on 4 July, the day before Count Hoyos arrived from Vienna to secure the blank cheque. When he returned to Britain on 5 July, he was apparently so moved by what he had heard back home that he came to British officials in a state of great excitement. This was observed by British Minister for War Lord Haldane, who Lichnowsky saw first, and who reported the meeting to Sir Edward Grey, the Foreign Secretary, as follows:

[Lichnowsky] appears to be very worried about the state of opinion in Germany. Austria he says is in a white heat of indignation over the murder of the Archduke and is contemplating drastic action. I asked him if he meant by this war, and he replied that that would depend on Serbia, but that Austria felt strongly that Serbia must be publicly humiliated. The general feeling in Berlin was, he said, that Serbia could not be allowed to go intriguing and agitating against Austria and that Germany must support Austria in any action she proposed to take. There was naturally apprehension in Germany that Russia would support Serbia and that led him on to say that he had heard the opinion expressed in authoritative quarters that we had entered into a naval treaty with Russia. I told him that that was nonsense and advised him to see you at once and tell you what he had told me. He brought me a letter from [Alfred] Ballin [a Berlin shipping magnate], which was the reason for his visit and Ballin too takes a pessimistic view and evidently thinks that Austria may drag Germany into trouble.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Taking Haldane’s advice, Lichnowsky did meet with Grey shortly after this meeting. Their conversation provided yet another eerily accurate prediction of what would follow in Europe if the alliance obligations of the powers were triggered by an Austrian attack on Serbia. Yet as we will notice, not even Lichnowsky was privy to all the relevant information, as Grey recalled:

He [Lichnowsky] explained that the murder of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand had excited very strong anti-Serbian feeling in Austria, and he knew for a fact, though he did not know details, that the Austrians intended to do something and it was not impossible that they would take military action against Serbia. I said that surely they did not think of taking any territory? The Ambassador replied that they did not wish to take territory, because they would not know what to do with it. He thought their idea was that they must have some compensation in the sense of some humiliation for Serbia. The situation was exceedingly difficult for Germany; if she told the Austrians that nothing must be done, she would be accused of always holding them back and not supporting them; on the other hand if she let events take their course there was the possibility of very serious trouble. The Ambassador earnestly hoped that, if trouble came, we would use our influence to mitigate feeling in St Petersburg… I was disturbed by what the Ambassador had told me about the form that anti-Serbian feeling might take in Austria. If trouble did come, I would use all the influence I could to mitigate difficulties and smooth them away, and if the clouds arose to prevent the storm from breaking.[[4]](#footnote-4)

How was it possible that the German ambassador to London had a clearer picture of Austrian intentions than so many other contemporaries? Moreover, how it was possible that Lichnowsky was able to discern Austria’s determination to strike, and Germany’s awareness of this determination, the day before Hoyos had even arrived? These question are not easy to answer, but they do suggest an information space which was open to some contemporaries, while being closed off or manipulated for others. Much to his astonishment, Sir Edward Grey was now included in this space, as one of the precious few who was positioned to understand the context of the alliance system and the significance of Sarajevo for the Dual Monarchy. This contributes to a wider debate about Grey’s behaviour during the July Crisis. To some historians, and indeed many contemporaries who later wrote their memoirs, Grey’s ignorance of the European situation cost Britain dearly, as he plunged the country into war while missing opportunities to hold back the ‘vials of wrath’, to use Churchill’s expression.[[5]](#footnote-5) As Annika Mombauer wrote:

Sir Edward Grey was variously 'a false rascal', 'mad or an idiot', or a 'scoundrel'. This vitriol had its roots in misunderstandings during the July Crisis when the German leaders hoped for British neutrality in a continental war. Their bitter disappointment led to feelings of betrayal, and Sir Edward Grey became one of the focal points of this German resentment.[[6]](#footnote-6)

We will certainly have reason to return to this question of Grey’s character, his responsibility, and his decisions in later episodes, but for now it is important to bear in mind that in the first week of July 1914, the British Foreign Secretary was one of the few contemporaries who appeared to take the threat of a Russo-German war seriously. Lichnowsky’s account of the atmosphere in Germany after the assassination over 5-6 July, and the expectation that Austria would act in some way, must have left an impression. Yet, the above record Grey took of his conversation with the German ambassador also reveal something else. By dropping this bombshell, Lichnowsky seemed to hope that, just as they had in the Balkan Wars, Anglo-German diplomacy could have a mediating effect on the aggrieved parties, and prevent a catastrophe. Grey’s understanding of Vienna’s difficulties, and the deeply felt need to strike against Serbia, revealed that his grip of diplomacy was not constrained by the inflexibility or hostility harboured by many in the French and Russian camp. Perhaps, with Grey’s help, Austria-Hungary *could* get a fair hearing?[[7]](#footnote-7)

In the aftermath of the blank cheque, and Austria’s decision for war, there was clearly only so much Grey could do. Yet he maintained an active relationship with London’s cast of European ambassadors. On 8 July he spoke with Benckendorff, the Russian ambassador to London. Benckendorff, who happened to be Lichnowsky’s cousin, enjoyed a candid conversation with the Foreign Secretary, revealing Grey to be more perceptive than many of his contemporaries. Grey appreciated that spirits continued to run high in Vienna, and that public opinion ‘might be swept off their feet,’ in light of the outrage. Though he lacked the full picture, Grey suspected that Vienna now possessed some evidence linking Serbia to the assassination. To Grey, the key was how Germany would react, particularly if Russia felt compelled to defend the Serbs. He urged Benckendorff to impress upon St Petersburg that Russia ‘should do all in their power to reassure Germany, and convinced her that no coup was being prepared against her.’

Grey appreciated that the balance of power in military terms was tilting against Germany, and that under these circumstances ‘the more valuable will be the Austrian alliance for Germany, and the more leverage Austria will have over Germany.’ Little could Grey have known that by now Berlin had granted the blank cheque. Yet, his perception of limited options, for both Austria and for Germany, was remarkably accurate, and was a point few of his contemporaries managed to notice. This included Ambassador Benckendorff, who asked whether the situation truly was as serious as Grey claimed. In reply, Grey asserted:

The idea that this terrible crime might unexpectedly produce a general war with all its attendant catastrophes – after all the great efforts in recent years to avoid it, and after things on the whole got back onto an even keel again – made his hair stand on edge.

To make the message more effective, Grey spoke with Paul Cambon, the French ambassador, impressing upon the Frenchman that in the event of an Austro-Serb war, Britain and France ‘must do all we could to encourage patience in St Petersburg.’[[8]](#footnote-8) Had the Kaiser been appraised of such exchanges, he would have been reassured that Berlin’s confidence in British non-intervention had been correct. But Grey wanted to make it clear that whatever occurred, Britain would not be excluded from developments. On 9 July he spoke again with Lichnowsky, and the latter recorded the contents of the conversation, which opened as follows:

England wished to preserve an absolutely free hand, in order to be able to act according to her own judgement in the event of continental complications. The government had to an extent obligated itself to Parliament not to commit itself to any secret liabilities. In no case would the British government be found on the side of the aggressors in the event of continental complications.

These comments were interesting in themselves, as Grey would come under serious fire from Parliament on 3 August when he revealed the extent of Anglo-French military planning in the previous years. This, his critics declared, committed Britain to the Entente behind the back of Parliament. Grey elaborated further, as Lichnowsky continued:

But as he did not wish to put me on the wrong track…he at once added that his relations to the said Powers had nonetheless lost nothing of their earlier intimacy. Thus, even if there exists no agreements which imposed any obligations, he did not wish to deny that from time to time ‘conversations’ had taken place between the naval or the military authorities on both sides, the first of them as early as the 1906, then again during the [1911] Morocco crisis, when they had believed here, he added, laughing, that we had intended to attack the French. But even these conversations, about which he knew nothing more definite, had absolutely no aggressive edge, as English policy, now as before, was aimed towards the maintenance of peace, and would find itself in a very embarrassing situation if a European war were to break out.

It was certainly striking that the 1905 and 1911 Moroccan crises which had so damaged Anglo-German relations were now a source of amusement to Grey. It also suggests a sense of disbelief in the very notion of a war between London and Berlin by 1914. Still, while he rejected the necessity or inevitability of such a conflict, Grey spoke to Lichnowsky about his personal efforts to clarify and assuage continental anxieties. Germany, Grey insisted, had nothing to fear from Russia or France, as Lichnowsky’s telegram concludes:

Since our last conversation…he had informed himself thoroughly about the mood in Russia towards us, and had found no reason for a concerned view; he also seemed quite ready, if we should so desire, to use his influence in some way on the attitude of Russia. He had also already been endeavouring, in case the Vienna Cabinet should find itself compelled as a result of the murder at Sarajevo to adopt a sterner attitude towards Serbia, to persuade the Russian government to adopt a more peaceful view and to assume a more conciliatory attitude towards Austria. Very much would of course depend, Sir Edward thought, on the kind of measures that were under consideration, and on whether they might no arouse Slavic sentiment in such a fashion as to make it impossible for Mr Sazonov to remain passive. In general, the Minister was certainly in a confident mood, and declared in cheerful tones that he saw no reason for taking a pessimistic view of the situation.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Grey’s own account of this conversation to the British chargé-d’affairs in Berlin made much of the positive impact Anglo-German diplomacy had made in the Balkan Wars, and the Foreign Secretary would thus consider war to be a failure of these efforts. These efforts represented a remarkable and underrated mediation campaign, from a Foreign Secretary whose plate was then filled with concerns about the situation in Ireland. By leaning on the French and Russians to grant Austria a degree of leeway, and suggesting to the Germans that Britain intended to cooperate with her again, Grey may have believed that he was heading off a potential disaster. In many respects, this was a rerun of his policy during the Balkan Wars. Now, however, he faced private ridicule for these efforts. Arthur Nicolson, the permanent undersecretary at the Foreign Office – whose son would later write a magisterial personal account of the Paris Peace Conference – thought his chief exaggerated the gravity of the situation. In a conversation with French ambassador Cambon, Nicolson explained that France should not heed Grey’s warnings; the Foreign Secretary was merely anxious at Germany’s discontent towards Anglo-Russian cooperation.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Nicolson may be criticised for failing to grasp the gravity of the moment, but Grey was not fully clued in either. Nor even was Lichnowsky, who by this point was unaware of the blank cheque. Events since the assassination had turned the old assumptions on their head. Where the lesson from the Balkan Wars appeared to be the value of joint mediation led by uninvolved powers, a secondary lesson was that Austria was Germany’s second, who would be led and directed depending on Berlin’s interests. This impression, indeed, was one which those in Vienna sought to shatter after 28 June. Now, armed with the blank cheque and seizing the initiative to develop a strike on Serbia, it was Austria-Hungary that was leading Germany, not the other way around. Even with the assumption that Vienna had become more important to Berlin, thus reducing German freedom of action, it was above Grey’s imagination to suppose that he was already too late to halt the march to war with Serbia. Austria’s need for satisfaction went further than Grey realised, as did Austrian fears of lost prestige and the recent damage done to the German alliance. On 25 June Grey had written to Sir Francis Bertie, British ambassador to Paris, advising him that

He would continue the intimate conventions and consultations with France and to a lesser degree with Russia and consult with Germany so far as it might be expedient so as to be the connecting link between Germany and the Triple Entente and a restraint on the hastiness of Austria and Italy.

Grey was mindful of the growing power of Russia, and consequently anxious that Germany might ‘bring on a conflict with Russia at an early date before the increases in the Russian army have their full effect and before the completion of the Russian strategic railways.’[[11]](#footnote-11) Such considerations had already been factored into Austro-German thinking, inducing their general staffs to perceive that if the Austro-Serb war could *not* be localised, it was better to take this risk now when the failed gamble would result in a war they still had the capacity to win. Furthermore, Kaiser Wilhelm was in on this scheme, and did not believe Britain had any right to anticipate its results. This plot; a mixture of fatalism, premeditation, risk assessment and naivety, was reaching a new phase. The German ambassador to Vienna, Heinrich Tschirschky, was able to write to the German Foreign Office on 10 July regarding Berchtold’s gradual progress. Berchtold, in a conversation with Ambassador Tschirschky, had told him of a recent meeting he had had with Emperor Franz Josef. The Emperor, Berchtold said, was now convinced of the necessity of war with Serbia, and only the maddening Tisza now stood in the way. Tschirschky wrote

Count Berchtold advises me as follows regarding his audience with H. M…Franz Josef at [Bad] Ischl. The [Emperor] discussed the state of affairs with great calmness. He first expressed his warm gratitude for the attitude of our Most Gracious Master and of the Imperial Government, and stated that he was quite of our opinion that it was necessary now to come to some decision, in order to put an end to the intolerable conditions in connection with Serbia. Count Berchtold added that His Majesty was quite clear as to the gravity of such a decision. The Minister then informed the [Emperor] of the options under discussion here as to the approaching action against Serbia. H. M. seemed to think that the difference between them might perhaps be bridged.

These ‘options under discussion’ was an allusion to those differences existing between Berchtold and Tisza, the latter of whom had still not been converted to the war party. What followed from Tschirschky’s account is revealing. It contained the core tenets of the ultimatum Austria would present on 23 July, and it is somewhat chilling to see its explosive contents discussed in such a matter-of-fact way. Tschirschky continued:

On the whole, however, H. M. tended towards the view that concrete demands should be made of Serbia. [Berchtold] did not want to deny the advantages of such an approach. The odium of an unexpected attack on Serbia, which would otherwise fall upon the Monarchy, would thus be avoided and Serbia would be put in the wrong. Also this procedure would make it much easier for Romania and England to adopt a neutral stance at least. At present the formulation of appropriate demands on Serbia constituted the main worry here, and Count Berchtold stated that he would be glad to know what was thought about it in Berlin. He thought that among other things, one could demand than an agency of the Austro-Hungarian government be established at Belgrade in order to keep an eye from there on the Greater Serbian machinations, perhaps, also, to insist upon the dissolution of the associations and the dismissal of some compromised officers. The time limit for the reply must be short, probably 48 hours. Naturally even this short time frame would suffice to enable Belgrade to get advice from St Petersburg.

Here was an allusion to that key demand – for a cross border agency to be established in Serbia which would investigate the assassination. This demand was the only one Serbia felt unable to accept, on the grounds that it would infringe upon Serbian sovereignty. Here also we see the 48-hour deadline, an aspect of the delivery which roused suspicions even further in Europe once it was known of, since as deadlines stood it was strikingly short, intimating the intention of war lay at the heart of it. If these terms were not explosive enough though, Berchtold informed Tschirschky that he was still working on the ultimatum’s precise language and terms, as the ambassador recorded:

Should the Serbs accept all the demands made of them then this would be a solution which was ‘very agreeable’ to him, and he was still pondering which demands one could make which would make it absolutely impossible for Serbia to accept. Finally, [Berchtold] again complained about Count Tisza’s attitude, which made an energetic procedure against Serbia difficult for him. Count Tisza maintained one had to proceed ‘like gentlemen’ however this was hardly appropriate where such important interests of the state were concerned and particularly against such an opponent as Serbia. [Berchtold] would be glad to follow the suggestion of the Imperial government…already now to influence public opinion in England against Serbia via the press. Only in his opinion this must be done cautiously in order not to alarm Serbia prematurely.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Evidently, Berchtold was running out of patience with his Hungarian peer. On the 9 July he had begun to draft the ultimatum, yet so long as Tisza remained opposed to a policy of war, it was doubtful he could craft the kind of document he truly desired. His expressions of frustration about Tisza’s recalcitrance were met by those of the Kaiser. Wilhelm II, as he had before, commented in the margins of Tschirschky’s telegram, referring to Tisza’s insistence that one had to proceed ‘like gentlemen’ as ‘nonsense.’ Regarding the idea that Austria should make impossible demands on Serbia, Wilhelm suggested Austria should demand the Serbs ‘evacuate the Sanjac!’, a portion of territory bordering Montenegro and Bosnia. ‘Then the row would be on at once! Austria,’ Wilhelm commented, ‘must absolutely get that back at once, in order to prevent the union of Serbia and Montenegro and the gaining of the sea by the Serbs.’ Interestingly, in the section of the telegram detailing Berchtold’s efforts to formulate ‘appropriate demands on Serbia,’ Wilhelm scribbled ‘they have had enough time for that.’ The Kaiser was belligerent and blustering, but he was also impatient. In an earlier telegram, we may recall, an eight-day timeframe was anticipated from the moment the blank cheque was issued. What had Vienna been doing all this time?[[13]](#footnote-13) Berchtold was on the verge of tearing his hair out, but on 10 July a sudden incident in Belgrade momentarily caught his attention and those of his colleagues.

By 10 July 1914, Belgrade shimmered in an atmosphere of nervous anticipation. Serbian Premier Nikola Pasic had already been informed of the mood in Vienna. The Serb ambassador stationed there had warned him that excitement over the assassination had not diminished, and that rumours swirled regarding Austrian intentions. There was little doubt that Vienna would do something, but what? If Pasic worried about Austria, an ally was at hand to reassure him that Russia would stand by Serbia no matter what transpired. Nikolai Hartwig had been Russian ambassador to Belgrade since 1909. Hartwig had been instrumental in orchestrating the Balkan League, the coalition of Serbia, Greece, Bulgaria and Montenegro, which transformed the balance of power in the region, and arguably even in Europe itself. Serbia was enlarged, and now endowed with formerly Ottoman territory. Even the subsequent Second Balkan War and the fight over the spoils could not dampen this achievement, or Serbia’s gains. It had been an expensive and anxious risk to upset the apple cart of centuries of Turkish rule in the Balkans, yet it had paid off.

The confrontations and crises with Austria-Hungary which followed these triumphs did see Serbia back down, and refrain from stealing a march on Albania to acquire an Adriatic port, but all the same, Hartwig had good reasons for feeling happy with his work. ‘After the question of Turkey,’ Hartwig reportedly exclaimed in late 1913, ‘it is now the turn of Austria. Serbia will be our best instrument. The day draws near when…Serbia will take back *her* Bosnia and *her* Herzegovina.’[[14]](#footnote-14) The ambassador demonstrated his anti-Habsburg credentials further once he learned of the Archduke’s assassination. He played bridge that night on 28 June, and told all who listened that Franz Ferdinand’s removal would be good for the Monarchy, since the Archduke was a reactionary warmonger – a claim we know to be entirely untrue, though widely subscribed to in some Entente circles. Hartwig coldly refused to fly the flag at the Russian embassy at half-mast, and was ridiculed by his Austrian counterpart for this act of disrespect.

There is some debate over how much was known about the Sarajevo plot, including suggestions that the Russian military attaché had told Dragutin Dimitrijevic, head of Serbian military intelligence and key architect of the plot: ‘Just go ahead! If you are attacked, you will not stand alone.’ The attaché strenuously denied he had said this when the historian Luigi Albertini interviewed him and others for his towering account of the origins of the First World War, yet Albertini did record the attaché’s view that ‘in the little Belgrade of the time, where public life was conﬁned to a very few cafés, the plot could not have been kept secret.’ The attaché was, he claimed, in daily conversation with Apis, and Albertini argued that he was informed of the plot, if not by Apis, then by another informant. Similarly, there is reason to believe Hartwig was aware of it too, even if he may have been sure of its precise details. We should recall, after all, that Serbia warned Vienna of some version of the plot shortly before the spectacle took place, so awkward questions still swirl around the question of who knew what and when – one of many themes of the July Crisis.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Regardless of Hartwig’s complicity or foreknowledge, he did not give the appearance of one who mourned the Archduke’s death. This extended to the formalities of the time. Incredibly though it sounds for 1914 diplomatic protocols, the Russian ambassador only arrived at the Austrian embassy to pay his respects for the assassination in the evening of Friday 10 July. Perhaps Hartwig had come to realise that his hostility to the Habsburgs had gone too far. After all, before the assassination he was counselling Pasic to adopt a moderate course, advice the beleaguered Premier did not need to be told twice. Serbian exhaustion and its pressing need for a period of recovery was widely known within and without of the country, and is one of the reasons Austria expected her rival to roll over once she attacked.

Hartwig’s tactic was to deny any and all rumours of hostility towards the Habsburgs, or coldness towards the unfortunate Archduke. He had not played bridge on the night of 28 June; he had not prevented the Russian flag being flown at half-mast; he had not been jubilant or cheerful in the aftermath, and had observed the proper mourning behaviour. To the Austrian ambassador Giesl von Gieslingen, Hartwig was charming, articulate, and conciliatory. Hartwig, nonetheless, did take the time to ask what Vienna intended to do in light of the assassination. Would Serbia be attacked? Giesl, ever the politician, replied that the investigation was ongoing, but that if certain Serbian individuals were identified, Serbia would not itself be subject to collective punishment. He assured the Russian that ‘Serbia’s sovereignty would not be touched, and that, with some good will on the part of the Serb government, a mutually satisfactory solution will be found.’ ‘Thank you, you have relieved me,’ Hartwig replied, ‘and now one more thing but also as a friend…’ With these final words, Hartwig slumped into his chair, let out a heavy sigh, and died of a massive heart on Giesl’s couch.[[16]](#footnote-16) As Sean McMeekin wrote:

As if in penance for his sins against the peace of Europe, at about 9:20pm that night the notoriously bellicose Russian minister collapsed and died of a massive heart attack (unless, that is, he had been murdered by the Austrians inside their legation, as much of the Serbian press immediately concluded).[[17]](#footnote-17)

The subsequent conspiracy virtually wrote itself. The Serb press recast the unassuming Giesl as a criiminal mastermind who lured the Russian ambassador to his lair, before executing him with a disguised electric chair. It is difficult to predict how the July Crisis would have developed if Hartwig had remained in post; like the Archduke, he was another high-profile contemporary who had the misfortune to die at a pivotal moment. Once Giesl composed himself, he sent for Hartwig’s daughter, who entered the embassy room where her father had died. Giesl recorded Ludmilla Hartwig’s cold, hostile manner, but also her suspicion, as she searched for incriminating evidence. She examined books and bags, peered into vases, and paid particular attention to a bottle of cologne she suspected of containing poison. When Giesl made it known that Hartwig had not eaten or drank anything, she took the butts of the two cigarettes he had smoked, saving them for evidence. Giesl did turn away a Serb policeman, on the grounds of diplomatic immunity, however, and this perfectly normal act of diplomatic propriety was later turned against him.

Hartwig, the hero of the Balkan Wars, was now a martyr to Austrian tyranny. The outrage was fanned by the press, who indulged in every species of rumour, and by 12 July the mood was such that anti-Habsburg demonstrations erupted across Belgrade. The contrast between the reaction to Franz Ferdinand’s death and that of Hartwig would not have been lost on Giesl. More revealing information was to come. The Italian ambassador met with Giesl shortly after, and confirmed that Hartwig had lied to his face – Hartwig had indeed been spotted playing bridge on the night of 28 June, and the Russian legation had neglected to fly their flag at half-mast after all. The combination of insults meant that any latent sympathy Giesl may have had for the late ambassador now vanished forever.[[18]](#footnote-18)

North of Belgrade, Austrian Foreign Minister Count Berchtold was then continuing his quest to persuade Stefan Tisza of the need for war with Serbia. The hostile demonstrations in the Serb capital certainly cast a shadow over Austria’s decision-making process. Once more, that inveterate enemy was manipulating the truth, and baying for her blood. These events made an impact on Tisza’s lonely stand against the Serb war, but of far greater importance was Berchtold’s own campaign, and the pressure he applied with the direct and indirect help of the German ambassador, Tschirschky. On 11 July, the German ambassador was able to present another report of his latest conversations with the Austrian Foreign Minister. Tschirschky explains that he ‘took the opportunity again today to discuss the proceedings against Serbia with Count Berchtold,’ with the aim ‘principally to impress upon the Minister once more, emphatically, that quick action was called for.’ Once again, the German ambassador emphasised that time was of the essence. But Berchtold, according to Tschirschky, was mindful of this imperative, and seemed to have some good news:

A closer agreement had been arrived at since yesterday with [Tisza] concerning the note to be directed to Serbia, and he hoped by Tuesday [14 July] to be able to determine the final version of this document. So far as he could say, the principle demands on Serbia would consist of the requirement that the King should officially and publicly proclaim, in a formal declaration and through an order to the army, that Serbia discarded her Greater Serbian policy; secondly, the institution of any agency of the Austro-Hungarian government to see to the strict keeping of this promise would be required.

A change had apparently come over Tisza, or at least Berchtold felt confident that it would soon. Tisza had been summoned to Vienna for Tuesday 14 July, by which point the ultimatum would be finalised, and the Hungarian Minister President persuaded. Berchtold seemed to believe his pressure campaign was working, and he thus turned Tschirschky’s attention to the practicalities of the ultimatum, including its delivery. Tschirschky wrote:

The question was now, at what time would it be best to deliver the note. He believed it would not be advisable to deliver the note at the time when Mr Poincare was in St Petersburg, and thus give the French and the Russians the opportunity of discussing their attitude together before the departure of Mr Poincare from Paris or after his departure. The latter date might perhaps be preferable on account of the fact that at that time the harvest work in the Monarchy would be finished, lightening the difficulties of mobilisation and preventing great losses from an economic point of view.

Here the plot for the ultimatum’s delivery adopted a shadier veneer, which contemporaries were quick to pick up on once it was made public. The ultimatum was to be timed to maximise its impact, and it was believed wise to hold back from its delivery while the Franco-Russian heads of state were together. To avoid the possibility that this plot might leak out though, Berchtold impressed upon Tschirschky the importance of keeping quiet, and of avoiding official channels. Russia’s reputation for cracking their enemy’s cipher was one factor, though Berchtold likely did not realise how extensive this security and communications failure was for Austria at the time. Still, Berchtold…

…begged me not to telegraph in regard to the preceding and very confidential information, but to mention it only in private letters, in order that absolute secrecy may be assured. I got the impression that the gentlemen feared a leak here in Austria if I should telegraph in cipher.[[19]](#footnote-19)

These concerns for secrecy would prove well-founded, as we will see. Berchtold would have been reassured by a telegram from his ambassador in Berlin the next day. Ambassador Szogyeny, who had taken part in the approach to secure the blank cheque from Germany over 5-6 July, wrote home to Berchtold on the 12 of that month. Szogyeny emphasised support across the German Crown and government, noting that both Wilhelm and ‘all the other persons in authority’ were

…encouraging us most emphatically not to neglect the present moment, but to treat Serbia most energetically, so as to clear out the revolutionary conspirators’ nest once and for all, and are leaving it entirely up to us which means we consider appropriate to choose.

This loaded message, containing both a request for urgency and an insistence that Austria-Hungary had a free hand, reads like a reiteration of the blank cheque. Szogyeny explained the atmosphere in Berlin, and why the Germans were so favourable towards a military solution with Serbia:

According to the German way of thinking, entirely shared by myself, general political considerations, and specific ones inspired by the murder of Sarajevo, form the conclusive argument for choosing the current moment in time. Germany has recently found her conviction confirmed that Russia is preparing for war with her western neighbours, and that she no longer regards that war as a future possibility, but positively includes it in the political calculations of the future. But only her *future calculation*, that is to say that she [Russia] intends waging war and that she is preparing for it with all her might, but that she does not propose it for now, or we should rather say, is not adequately prepared for it at the present time.

These German fears of a Russian attack, manifesting in a Russo-German press war in the spring of 1914, were strong enough that they reached all the way to Sir Edward Grey, who as we have seen reassured Lichnowsky that St Petersburg was planning no such thing. Yet, the military imbalance was the key issue, and it was to anticipate this imbalance that senior German military and civilian figures urged Austria forward now, as Tschirschky elaborated:

It is therefore anything but certain that if Serbia were engaged in a war with us, Russia would assist her with an armed hand; and should the Tsar’s Empire decide on war it would not be ready from a military point of view, and not by any means as strong as it will be in a few years’ time. In addition, the German Government believes that it has certain signs that England would not take part in a war caused because of a Balkan country, not even if it were to lead to a war with Russia, perhaps also France. Not only have the relations between England and Germany improved so far that Germany believes she no longer needs to fear direct hostilities on England’s part, but England just now desires anything rather than a war and is not at all willing to bail out Serbia or, in the last instance, Russia. When all is said it must be admitted that the political constellation is at present as favourable as it possibly can be.

Szogyeny provided this interpretation of German strategic considerations, before concluding with his own impression of why Austria-Hungary was required to settle with Serbia urgently. The Austro-Serb relationship, Szogyeny believed, had now fundamentally changed, and in the midst of this change, the time to act presented itself:

Whereas until now a large part of our population refused to believe in the anti-monarchic separatist tendencies of a part of our Serbs, and expressed doubts that Serbia’s intrigues reached across the frontier to us; all are now convinced and there is a general outcry for an energetic treatment of Serbia which will finally suppress all agitation for a Greater Serbia. In a similar manner the eyes of the whole civilised world have been opened and every nation condemns the bloody deed of Sarajevo and all understand that we must make Serbia responsible for it. And if Serbia’s foreign friends will not adopt a stance against the Kingdom for political reasons, they will most likely not stand up in favour of her (at least not with force of arms) in the current moment. These I believe to be the political reasons why the German Empire, with a clear perception of the opportunity offered, unreservedly encourages us to clarify our relationship with Serbia, which she also considers to be untenable, in such a manner as to stop Pan-Slav agitation for all time.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Under such strong words of encouragement and reassurance, Berchtold could now proceed with added confidence. By 12 July 1914, the public in Belgrade may have been up in arms at the false Austrian conspiracy to murder Nikolai Hartwig, yet a very real conspiracy was now underway. With Tisza teetering on the edge of persuasion, and with German encouragement expressed in such emphatic terms, Berchtold put in the screws, conceiving of an audacious scheme insulated by a tight web of silence and deception, down to the very moment of its delivery. Unfortunately for Berchtold, such a juicy secret could hardly remain quiet for long.

1. 13 July 1914, Crackanthorpe to Grey in Mombauer, *Documents*, p. 245. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 8 July 1914, Forgach to Merey in Mombauer, *Documents*, p. 224. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 5 July 1914, Haldane to Grey in *Ibid*, pp. 196-197. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 6 July 1914, Grey to Rumbold in *Ibid*, pp. 203-204. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. W. Churchill, *The World Crisis 1911-1918* (London, 2007), pp. 3-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Mombauer, ‘Sir Edward Grey, Germany, and the Outbreak of the First World War: A Re-Evaluation,’ *International History Review*, 38, 2 (April 2016), 301-325; 303. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Otte, *July Crisis*, p. 145. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Ibid*, p. 146. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. 9 July 1914, Lichnowsky to Bethmann Hollweg in Mombauer, *Documents*, pp. 225-226. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Zara Steiner and Keith Neilson, *Britain and the Origins of the First World War*, 2nd ed. (London, 2017), pp. 235-236. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See Otte, *July Crisis*, pp. 148-149. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. 10 July 1914, Tschirschky to German Foreign Office in Mombauer, *Documents*, pp. 227-230. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Ibid*, pp. 228-229. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Quoted in Sean McMeekin, *The Russian Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge MA, 2011), p. 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See *Ibid*, pp. 47-48. McMeekin denotes that the historian L. F. C. Turner considered it ‘impossible’ that Hartwig was not informed of the assassination plot in advance. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See Otte, *July Crisis*, p. 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. McMeekin, *Russian Origins*, pp. 48-49. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See McMeekin, *July 1914*, pp. 118-119. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. 11 July 1914, Tschirschky to German Foreign Office in Mombauer, *Documents*, pp. 233-234. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. 12 July 1914, Szogyeny to Berchtold in Mombauer, *Documents*, pp. 235-237. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)