‘I am still pessimistic about the outlook, but we are doing our best to localise the conflict. The Irish trouble is not likely to have serious results, but it is impossible to be sure. Fortunately, the Prime Minister and Grey are very fit and in good physical trim – very necessary when we are in a double crisis like this.’ Herbert Samuel, British Cabinet member, writes to his wife on 27 July 1914.[[1]](#footnote-1)

By Monday, 27 July 1914, the possibility that Britain would soon involve itself in war was scarcely whispered among the British press, let alone within the political establishment. Yet, within a week, Sir Edward Grey was giving his famous speech before the House of Commons on 3 August, and the day after that, Britain declared war on Germany. From Monday 27 July to Monday 3 August, in other words, the situation deteriorated dramatically. Implicit in this is the fact that Britain, like every other power that hoped for peace in the July Crisis, failed in its efforts to preserve it. But how effective were British peace-making efforts; how sincere were they, and were they informed by accurate intelligence, or pre-existing biases among the British cabinet? To address these questions, it is necessary to take this episode looking at the crisis from Britain’s perspective, because 27 July was an eventful day in London. Sir Edward Grey spoke to the Commons about the crisis for the first time, the Cabinet met to consider the crisis for the first time, and telegrams continued to fly across the desks of Britain’s key ambassadors.

Although hints did exist which suggested which way Britain would go, painful divisions within the British Cabinet recommended a careful approach, and the preservation of European peace remained the primary goal. The crisis was placed in much sharper relief because in the morning, the Serbian ambassador to London finally provided the government with a copy of Serbia’s reply to Austria’s ultimatum. Its details had been reported on by ambassadors and the press – and Austria’s departure from Belgrade confirmed that Vienna did not believe Serbia had gone far enough – but now that they the full copy of the Serbian reply before them, Sir Edward Grey’s subordinates like Sir Arthur Nicolson felt more able to weigh in on the situation. Nicolson reported on the delivery of the Serbian reply in a telegram to Grey:

So far as I could gather from a simple perusal it practically concedes all the Austrian demands, and it is difficult to see how Austria can honestly proceed to hostile operations when Servia has yielded so much. I am glad to see that our military attaché at Vienna reports that mobilization will not be finished till Friday and concentration near Servian frontier completed by Wednesday week, so we have a few days ahead of us. The Servian Minister was instructed to say that his Government hoped that after reading the reply H.M. Government would be ready to assist Servia towards a pacific issue. I told him I would transmit his message to you, and that he could understand that we were anxious to see a peaceful solution.

As was the norm, other figures in the Foreign Office provided their impressions in the minutes of this telegram. Senior Clerk in the Foreign Office’s Eastern Department, the suitably named George Clerk, thus judged that:

A careful comparison of the Austrian note and the Servian reply shows that the latter has been read at Vienna with a fixed determination to find it unsatisfactory, for it swallows nearly all the Austrian demands “en bloc,” and it is difficult not to consider such reservations as are made quite reasonable.

To this, Nicolson added:

The answer is reasonable. If Austria demands absolute compliance with her ultimatum it can only mean that she wants a war. For she knows perfectly well that some of the demands are such as no State can accept, as they are tantamount to accepting a protectorate.[[2]](#footnote-2)

But what would Britain do if it came to this, and Austria was opposed by Russia? What was to be done if this Austro-Serb quarrel became an Austro-Russian, and thus a European, concern? There were no straight answers to this question, because within the British Cabinet of nineteen ministers, eleven were said to be against intervention. This non-interventionist camp existed in Cabinet, but also within the wider British political and press opinion. It was dominant at this point, reflected in the fact that among the great newspapers, only *The Times* had maintained a consistent pro-interventionist line. Indeed, that morning on 27 July, *The Times* had run a controversial leading story entitled ‘Europe and the Crisis’, which read as follows:

Our friendships are firm, as our aims are free from all suspicion of aggression. While we can hope to preserve peace by working with the Great Powers who are not immediate parties to this dangerous quarrel, we shall consider that end above all else. But should there arise in any quarter a desire to test our adhesion to the principles that inform our friendships and that thereby guarantee the balance of power in Europe, we shall be found no less ready and determined to vindicate them with the whole strength of the Empire, than we have been found ready whenever they have been tried in the past. That, we conceive, interest, duty, and honour demand from us. England will not hesitate to answer to their call.[[3]](#footnote-3)

This was a good deal further than most in Cabinet wished to go. The suggestion that British interest, duty and honour would compel it to take this step was also bound to unsettle. Where did British honour lie, since it had not formed any alliances with France and Russia, and was under no legal obligation to fight for them? As Grey and a select few understood, Britain had become embroiled in military agreements which placed a great onus on mutual cooperation and defence. The French had left naval security in the North and Channel Seas in Britain’s hands, and in return France would cover the Mediterranean – this agreement had come into force in 1912. Did it not compel Britain to defend France if her coasts were attacked? And in military talks, with the landing the British Expeditionary Force factored into the plans of the French military, how could the British government conceivably claim it was not tied to France? Keep these contradictions in mind as Grey and others spoke so loudly about Britain’s free hand; the Foreign Secretary was able to make such claims about British freedoms because he had yet to share the details of this military cooperation with the Cabinet, and for the next week, Grey managed to keep this under wraps.

If these details were revealed, they were so explosive, they had the potential to split the Cabinet and topple the government. Until that time came though, articles like that from *The Times* had the potential to do more harm than good. To continental readers unfamiliar with the newspaper industry, but knowing of *The Times*’ reputation, they might incorrectly construe this piece as representative of the Cabinet’s opinion.[[4]](#footnote-4) Grey was tasked with challenging this impression, and to do this, it was necessary to address the Commons and explain British policy to this point. Grey did this later in the afternoon, but first, he had to absorb the multitude of telegrams sent by his ambassadors abroad. For most, the main event was the Serbian reply, which had just been provided to the major European courts. Where once the contents of this reply had been speculated upon or briefly perused, now contemporaries could pour over the Serbian reply in great detail. Serbia had picked the right moment to publicise its reply to Austria’s ultimatum; it meant that the reply was the talk of most courts. Sir George Buchanan was on hand in St Petersburg to provide a useful account of the mood in Russia, and he recorded the exchange between Sazonov and Szapary, the Austrian ambassador, which went as follows:

Minister for Foreign Affairs had yesterday a long conversation with Austrian Ambassador, in which latter tried to explain away objectionable features of Austria’s recent action. Minister for Foreign Affairs said that he perfectly understood Austria’s motives, but ultimatum had been drafted in such a form as to render it impossible for Servia to accept it as a whole. While some of demands were reasonable enough, others were not only incompatible with Servia’s dignity as an independent State, but could not possibly be put into immediate execution, as they entailed revision of her existing laws. Russia, his Excellency added, was object of such suspicion in Austria that it would be useless for her to offer her good offices at Belgrade. He thought, however, England and Italy might be willing to collaborate with Austria with a view to putting an end to present tension.

Sazonov still seemed eager to contain the crisis, by leaning on potential mediators like Britain or Italy. These two powers, on the edge of their respective blocs, could have a positive impact on the deteriorating mood. Yet, Sazonov was willing to press Buchanan to do more. To the Russian Foreign Minister, it made sense that Germany would be deterred if Britain publicly signalled its intention to stand with the Entente. To Buchanan, notwithstanding his Entente sympathies, this was impossible, as he explained to Grey:

In reply to question Minister for Foreign Affairs addressed to me, I said that I had…correctly defined attitude of His Majesty’s Government, and that you could not promise to do more. His Excellency was wrong in believing that we should promote cause of peace by telling Germany if she supported Austria by force of arms she would have us to deal with as well as France and Russia. Such a menace would but stiffen her attitude, and it was only by approaching her as a friend anxious to preserve peace that we could induce her to use her influence at Vienna to avert war.

Buchanan was not optimistic that Britain could compel Germany to back down in this manner, and only by adopting a friendly tone shorn of menace could Berlin or Vienna be expected to listen. Although a Russophile, wedded to the improvement in Anglo-Russian relations, Buchanan refused to recognise these agreements as militarily binding, a message which Grey had repeatedly set out. That said, Buchanan clarified that if this scheme was to work, Russia would have to avoid giving any provocation to the Central Powers, and this included mobilisation. Contrary to some accounts, London was well-versed in the progress and possible dangers of Russian mobilisation. Thus far, only the period preparatory to war had been proclaimed, but it was known that the imperial ukase or decree for greater mobilisation measures had been floated, and Buchanan insisted that for peace to work, this ukase must remain on the table. Buchanan recorded that he told Sazonov that for mediation to succeed, Russia ‘must do nothing to precipitate a conflict, and I therefore trusted that mobilisation ukase would be deferred as long as possible, and that when it was issued troops would not be allowed to cross frontier.’

Sazonov disputed this interpretation – lessons of the last few years had taught him that Germany responded only to the threat of force, and thus he ‘did not believe that we should succeed in winning over Germany to cause of peace unless we publicly proclaimed our solidarity with France and Russia.’ Sazonov did confirm that ‘No effective steps towards mobilisation could be taken until Imperial ukase was issued,’ but warned that ‘if it was deferred too long Austria would profit by delay to make her military preparations complete, while Russia could do nothing.’ Could a compromise be reached? Sazonov suggested that ‘Order to mobilise might perhaps be accompanied by a statement that troops would be retained on this side of the frontier.’ Sazonov could not confirm when the ukase announcing mobilisation would be issued, but he ‘spoke of day on which Austrian army entered Servia as a likely date.’

The telegram ended on this warning from Buchanan, which subsequent events validated. It suggested that if Austria made war on Serbia, Russia would intervene, or would at least begin mobilisation which could provoke a reaction from Germany. Eyre Crowe, the assistant undersecretary in the Foreign Office, provided his impressions of Buchanan’s account in the minutes, wherein he warned his colleagues that ‘the real difficulty to be overcome will be found in the question of mobilization.’ This was certainly prophetic, and Crowe added that

Austria is already mobilizing. This, if the war does come, is a serious menace to Russia who cannot be expected to delay her own mobilization, which, as it is, can only become effective in something like double the time required by Austria and by Germany. If Russia mobilizes, we have been warned Germany will do the same, and as German mobilization is directed almost entirely against France, the latter cannot possibly delay her own mobilization for even the fraction of a day.

Already, London was mindful of the potential chain reaction which mobilisation could cause, and it understood that this process would be initiated by Austria. It was thus good news that this war was not expected for another few weeks, though thanks to information provided by other ambassadors, which we will see below, Crowe was now convinced that ‘it seems certain that Austria is going to war because that was from the beginning her intention.’ ‘If that view proves correct,’ Crowe advised, ‘it would be neither possible nor just and wise to make any move to restrain Russia from mobilizing.’ If Britain could not stop this train from rolling down the tracks, this meant ‘that within 24 hours His Majesty’s Government will be faced with the question whether, in a quarrel so imposed by Austria on an unwilling France, Great Britain will stand idly aside, or take sides.’ The question, Crowe stressed, was ‘a momentous one, which it is not for a departmental minute to elaborate.’ But this would not stop him making a point. An avid reader of earlier nineteenth century history, Crowe offered what he believed was a parallel of Prussia’s position during the period of Napoleonic triumphs:

It is difficult not to remember the position of Prussia in 1805, when she insisted on keeping out of the war which she could not prevent from breaking out between the other Powers over questions not, on their face, of direct interest to Prussia. The war was waged without Prussia in 1805. But in 1806 she fell a victim to the Power that had won in 1805, and no one was ready either to help her or to prevent her political ruin and partition.[[5]](#footnote-5)

This was to prove representative of the views of Grey’s underlings during the crisis. Both Arthur Nicolson and Eyre Crowe – respectively Grey’s number two and number three in the Foreign Office – had form when it came to appraising Russian and French policy. Nicolson, a former ambassador to Russia, had played a pivotal role in the Anglo-Russian convention of 1907. Crowe, lest we forget, was an Anglo-German immigrant who had warned of the danger posed by the country of his birth since around the same time, usually in long memoranda which recommended closer cooperation with the Entente. Neither Nicolson nor Crowe, in short, would have accepted British neutrality in a war pitting the Entente against the Central Powers; Eyre Crowe particularly was determined to press this upon Grey in the next few days, as we will see. Grey’s proposal for a conference involving Britain, Germany, France and Italy depended on the maintenance of peace between Austria and Serbia, but as ambassador Maurice de Bunsen recorded in Vienna, the Austrian mood was for war, not peace:

After conversations with all my colleagues of the Great Powers, I believe that Austria-Hungary is fully determined on war with Servia, that she believes her position as a Great Power is at stake, that her note was drawn up so as to make war inevitable, and that she is unlikely to listen to proposals for mediation until punishment has been inflicted on Servia. If Russian Ambassador is rightly informed, effort of Germany to isolate conflict must fail, as he believes that Russia will be compelled to act. Postponement or prevention of war with Servia would undoubtedly be a great disappointment in this country, which has gone wild with joy at prospect of war.

Bunsen recorded conversations he had had with the ‘greatly concerned’ Italian ambassador in Vienna, who was ‘casting about for a means of circumscribing conflict which he regards as inevitable.’ The Italian suggested that Austria reiterate its commitment to annex no Serbian territory, and she wished merely ‘to obtain guarantees for the future.’ Bunsen did record his Italian colleague’s gratitude towards Grey’s conference idea, though the latter warned that including Russia in this scheme might be unacceptable to Russia. In the minutes, we see Eyre Crowe once more offering his opinion on these developments. ‘The suggestion of the Italian Ambassador seems to me too vague for any practical purpose,’ Crowe judged. The wording of the Italian suggestion was difficult, because ‘If Austria proposes neither to annex nor to crush Servia nor to deprive her of her independence, then it is difficult to know what meaning to attach to the alternative of “obtaining guarantees for the future.’’’ ‘The outlook is bad,’ Crowe warned. ‘All now depends on what line Germany may be prepared to take.’[[6]](#footnote-6)

The Italian route was certainly of value. Rome had not overcome its horror of Austria’s actions, nor had its government supported the hardline against Serbia. Nicolson reported on a conversation he had with the Italian ambassador in London, who assured the undersecretary that Italy fully supported the conference plan, and would stress the necessity of Russia, Austria and Serbia from holding back in their military measures to the Germans.[[7]](#footnote-7) But Grey received more urgent information from his Italian ambassador, Sir Rennell Rodd. Rodd reported on a conversation he had with San Giuliano, the Italian Foreign Minister, who advised Britain to press ahead with the conference proposal, and to use it as leverage against Serbian intransigence:

[San Giuliano] greatly doubts whether Germany will be willing to invite Austria to suspend military action pending conference, but had hope that military action may be practically deferred by fact of conference meeting at once. He does not, as at present informed, see any possibility of Austria receding from any point laid down in note to Servia, but believes that if Servia will even now accept it Austria will be satisfied, and if she had reason to think such will be advice of Powers, Austria may defer action. Servia may be induced to accept note in its integrity on advice of four Powers invited to conference. This would save her face in allowing her to think she had yielded to Europe and not to Austria alone. This is also view of Servian agent here, provided some explanation could be given as to how points 5 and 6 of conditions would be applied.[[8]](#footnote-8)

This was not exactly optimistic, even if it did confirm that Italy was on the side of the peacemakers. There was a clear sense of urgency implicit in these talks with the Italian government. Matters were running ahead of the diplomats, and only by establishing a conference now could Britain hope to get ahead of things. A further wrinkle in this scheme soon emerged. After recording his conversation with Sazonov from 26 July, Buchanan sent another telegram from St Petersburg in the afternoon of 27 July, where the Russian position was laid out. Although wishing for peace, Russia seemed more hopeful of a result through bilateral communications with Austria, since the resident German ambassador had by now warned that this would be more effective than a pan European pressure campaign against Vienna. As Buchanan recorded:

I found [Sazonov] this afternoon very conciliatory and more optimistic. He did not, he said, know whether Austria would accept friendly exchange of views which he had proposed, but, if she did, he wished to keep in close contact with the other Powers throughout the conversations that would ensue. He would, he said, use all his influence at Belgrade to induce Servian Government to go as far as possible in giving satisfaction to Austria, but her territorial integrity must be guaranteed and her rights as a sovereign State respected, so that she should not become Austria’s vassal. He suggested that, in order to safeguard Austria against any revolutionary Servian propaganda in future and to dispose her to renounce some of her extreme demands, Powers might come to a private understanding to instruct their Ministers at Belgrade to keep in constant touch with each other, and to interchange all the information which any one of them might receive with regard to any Servian machinations or plots directed against Austria. In the event of any such information reaching them, they should be empowered to exercise pressure on Servian Government with a view to preventing such plots maturing. While there should be no question of their being invested with character of an international commission, Ministers would be able by co-operating together to maintain close supervision over any anti-Austrian movements.

This appeared like a slightly vague, though arguably well-meaning proposal from the Russian Foreign Minister, and Buchanan continued to detail the Russian justification for involving itself in the crisis:

[Sazonov] again referred to fact that obligations taken by Servia in 1908, to which reference was made in Austrian ultimatum, were given to the Powers. On my enquiring whether he intended to put forward proposal to above effect, his Excellency said that it would be very difficult for him to do so. He would greatly prefer that it should come from you, and he asked me to say that if you approved he would be grateful if you could put it forward. I then asked if he had heard of your proposal with regard to conference of the four Powers and, on his replying in the affirmative, I told him confidentially of instructions which you had sent me and enquired whether he would prefer direct exchange of views, which he had proposed, to such a conference. German Ambassador, to whom I had just spoken, had expressed personal opinion that former would be more agreeable to Austria. His Excellency said he was perfectly ready to stand aside if conference was accepted by other Powers, but he trusted that, if it took place, you would keep in touch with Russian Ambassador.[[9]](#footnote-9)

It may have been reassuring that Russia did not appear to be contemplating any aggressive moves which would worsen the crisis, but it was also somewhat disappointing that Sazonov seemed to place a higher value on bilateral talks. If this suggested an opportunity to step back from the brink though, then it was illusory. Neither Russia nor Austria – the two powers who could have most to talk about in a bilateral negotiation process – were willing to give ground. By now it was becoming plain that Vienna and St Petersburg did not believe they could afford to back down, having done so recently. Resolving such impasses was supposed to be the duty of the Concert of Europe, which had reduced the temperature during the Balkan Wars, even as Austria and Russia mobilised against one another. But times were different now; France had backed Russia, and Germany had issued its blank cheque to Vienna, meaning a last-minute rescue by their ally was becoming less and less likely. In the afternoon, Grey received another telegram from Maurice de Bunsen in Vienna. Bunsen had bad news for those optimists who claimed that Austria and Russia would not go to war over such a trivial matter:

The Russian Ambassador [to Vienna] has had today a long and earnest conversation with Baron Macchio, Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. Having just returned to his post from St. Petersburg he said that he was well acquainted with the state of Russian public opinion and with the views of the Russian Government. He could assure Under-Secretary of State that if actual war with Servia began it would be impossible to localise it, for Russia, which had yielded on previous occasions, and especially during annexation crisis in 1909, was not prepared to give way again. He earnestly hoped, therefore, that something might be done before an actual invasion of Servia took place.

Here was Russia’s position stated in stark terms; she could not afford to yield, lest the Russian public might themselves revolt in protest at the disgrace. Nikolai Schebeko, the Russian ambassador to Vienna who Bunsen quoted above, was apparently eager to preserve peace then, but he was equally eager to clarify that Russia would not be stepping back, and that war with Serbia would mean war with Russia. The appeals to Austria to step back from further belligerent steps were politely rejected, however, as Macchio, the Austrian undersecretary, claimed that a Serbian skirmish had already taken place. This was in fact untrue, and no evidence exists to support it, but it was widely believed in Vienna, and later used as an excuse for not participating in an international conference.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Very well, ambassador Schebeko said, then he would ‘do his utmost to keep the Serbians quiet pending any discussions that might yet take place,’ and Schebeko assured Bunsen that he would ‘advise the Russian Government to induce the Servian Government to fall back before the Austrian advance when it takes place, and to avoid any conflict as long as possible.’ As Belgrade straddled the Austrian border, it was likely that Serbian forces would make their stand further in the interior, so this was not likely to strategically weaken its client. By delaying the clash between Austria and Serbian armies, this would gain time for a settlement. Schebeko then repeated what Sazonov had said about Austria’s demands, wherein grounds for optimism, he believed, did exist:

[Sazonov] had agreed that much of the Austro-Hungarian note to Servia was perfectly reasonable, and in fact an understanding was practically reached between them as to guarantees Servia might be reasonably asked to give to Austria-Hungary for her future good behaviour. Russian Ambassador urged that Austrian Ambassador at St. Petersburg should be furnished with full powers to continue discussion with the Russian Minister for Foreign Affairs, who was very willing to advise Servia to yield all that Austria Hungary could fairly ask of an independent Power. Under-Secretary of State promised to submit this suggestion to Minister for Foreign Affairs.[[11]](#footnote-11)

This seemed to suggest that was a measure of wiggle room present in Vienna. All she had to do was retract the more egregious demands, and Russia would be willing to broach the remaining demands with consideration and respect. Austria, of course, had no intention of backing down in this manner. The controversial demand for Austrian officials to preside over investigations into the Archduke’s murder was designed to be impossible to accept. Nor did Berchtold or his peers wish for Serbian acceptance; despite all reasons for taking a contrary course, Austria would persist in demanding the maximum adherence to the ultimatum, and a refusal could only mean war. If Grey was unclear about Austrian intransigence, the scales soon fell from his eyes when he spoke with Count Mensdorff, the Austrian ambassador to London. Grey wrote to ambassador Bunsen in Vienna describing the conversation he had with the Austrian ambassador, the details of which highlighted how fixed the Austrian course was. Grey recalled ambassador Mensdorff’s comments, which read:

Servia showed that she did not intend to abandon her subversive aims, tending towards continuous disorder in the Austrian frontier territories and their final disruption from the Austrian Monarchy. Very reluctantly, and against their wish, the Austrian Government were compelled to take more severe measures to enforce a fundamental change of the attitude of enmity pursued up to now by Servia. As the British Government knew, the Austrian Government had for many years endeavoured to find a way to get on with their turbulent neighbour, though this had been made very difficult for them by the continuous provocations of Servia. The Sarajevo murder had made clear to everyone what appalling consequences the Servian propaganda had already produced, and what a permanent threat to Austria it involved. We would understand that the Austrian Government must consider that the moment had arrived to obtain, by means of the strongest pressure, guarantees for the definite suppression of the Servian aspirations and for the security of peace and order on this southeastern frontier of Austria.

This was a familiar recollection of Serbian sins, now complemented by the expressions of reluctance and sorrow which Austria felt for this course it was forced to adopt. Its patience had been exhausted, and Serbia had forsaken so many opportunities to placate the Habsburg interest in the past. The determination to punish Serbia was a question of justice, not revenge, and Britain could not begrudge Austria for this quest, could it? Implicit in these lamentations was the rejection of any four-power mediation scheme, for Austria had been burned by these initiatives before, and now felt forced as a consequence to draw the sword, as Grey repeated the Austrian claims:

As the peaceable means to this effect were exhausted, the Austrian Government must at last appeal to force. Their action, which had no sort of aggressive tendency, could not be represented otherwise than as an act of self-defence. Also they thought that they would serve a European interest if they prevented Serbia from being henceforth an element of general unrest such as she had boon for the last ten years. The high sense of justice of the British nation and of British statesmen could not blame the Austrian Government if the latter defended by the sword what was theirs, and cleared up their position with a country whose hostile policy had forced upon them for years measures so costly as to have gravely injured Austrian national prosperity. Finally, the Austrian Government, confiding in their amicable relations with us, felt that they could count on our sympathy in a fight that was forced on them, and on our assistance in localising the fight, if necessary.

This read very much like an apology for a war they were about to fight. Mensdorff elaborated further that Serbia’s massive growth in recent years had changed the calculations; it was no longer possible to ignore the succession of pin pricks from Belgrade, because she was now dangerous enough to pose a serious challenge to Austrian authority. Do not forget, Mensdorff stressed, Austria had committed to annex no Serbian territory. Did this not prove justice was her main motive? Yet, to this, Grey could challenge Austria’s justifications as he had the Serbian reply in his hands, and pressed that Vienna could find satisfaction within this reply if it had wished to. As Grey recalled:

I said that I could not understand the construction put by the Austrian Government upon the Servian reply, and I told Count Mensdorff the substance of the conversation that I had had with the German Ambassador this morning about that reply. Count Mensdorff admitted that, on paper, the Servian reply might seem to be satisfactory; but the Serbians had refused the one thing-— the co-operation of Austrian officials and police — which would be a real guarantee that in practice the Serbians would not carry on their subversive campaign against Austria. I said that it seemed to me as if the Austrian Government believed that, even after the Servian reply, they could make war upon Servia anyhow, without risk of bringing Russia into the dispute. If they could make war on Servia and at the same time satisfy Russia, well and good; but, if not, the consequences would be incalculable.

Ambassador Mensdorff was not lying when he insisted that the points Serbia rejected were key to a successful resolution of the dispute, though he was surely not surprised that Serbia had rejected them. Unfortunately for Vienna, Grey did not grant that her behaviour was justified. Because its ultimatum had been so harsh, and because Serbia had accepted so much of it, pushing further made Vienna appear belligerent and determined on war. Mensdorff heavily disputed this, though we know it to be true, but Grey’s comments that it would be ‘well and good’ if Austria could localise the war with Serbia affirmed that Britain was watching for any sign of a widening of the war. An Austro-Serb quarrel where Russia remained neutral, in short, was not likely to draw British intervention, but this was precisely why Austria was being urged not to provoke Russia to intervene. Still, Austria’s policy was unsatisfactory, Grey concluded, because it ruptured the pacific assumptions in St Petersburg, following Serbia’s partial acceptance of the ultimatum. Grey explained to Mensdorff, in conclusion, that Austrian behaviour was exacerbating the crisis, and to drive this home, he informed the Austrian that Britain was making preparations for certain contingencies:

I feared that it would be expected in St. Petersburg that the Servian reply would diminish the tension, and now, when Russia found that there was increased tension, the situation would become increasingly serious. Already the effect on Europe was one of anxiety. I pointed out that our fleet was to have dispersed today, but we had felt unable to let it disperse. We should not think of calling up reserves at this moment, and there was no menace in what we had done about our fleet; but, owing to the possibility of a European conflagration, it was impossible for us to disperse our forces at this moment. I gave this as an illustration of the anxiety that was felt. It seemed to me that the Serbian reply already involved the greatest humiliation to Servia that I had ever seen a country undergo, and it was very disappointing to me that the reply was treated by the Austrian Government as if it were as unsatisfactory as a blank negative.[[12]](#footnote-12)

In this mood of disappointment, Grey was more likely to lean on the Germans, in the hope that Berlin would return to the Anglo-German cooperation of recent years, even at its ally’s expense. This was a forlorn hope, considering the blank cheque, but Grey identified with Lichnowsky, the German ambassador to London, who seemed in equal parts alarmed and determined to spell out the danger to his chiefs. Lichnowsky met Grey in the early afternoon, and he reported the conversation to Jagow in Berlin, writing:

It appeared from the reply that Serbia had agreed to the Austrian demands to an extent such as he would never have believed possible; except in one point, the participation of Austrian officials in the judicial investigation. Serbia had actually agreed to everything that had been demanded of her. It was plain that this compliance of Serbia’s was to be attributed solely to the pressure exerted from St Petersburg. Should Austria fail to be satisfied with this reply, or rather should this reply not be accepted by Vienna as a foundation for peaceful negotiations, or should Austria even proceed to the occupation of Belgrade, which lay quite defenceless before her, it would then be absolutely evident that Austria was only seeking an excuse for crushing Serbia. And thus that Russia and Russian influences in the Balkans were to be struck as through Serbia. It was plain that Russia could not regard such action with equanimity, and would have to perceive it as a direct challenge. The result would be the most frightful war that Europe had ever seen, and no one could tell where such a war might lead.

This was a stark prophecy, since the train of events Grey warned of played out almost exactly as he described. Something else worth noting is Grey’s view, apparently backed by the Foreign Office, that Serbia had done enough to placate Vienna, and had swallowed Austrian demands. Belgrade was humiliated, but if Vienna refused to see this, and proceeded to go further for some undefined objective, Russian intervention was inevitable. There could be no mistaking St Petersburg, Grey warned; she was not going to allow Austria to destroy the network of pro-Russian interests resident in the Balkans. Yet Grey also reminded Lichnowsky that Britain had tried to urge moderation in the Tsar’s court, even though this provoked a negative Russian reaction, now the Foreign Secretary was cashing in on this reserve of good will Germany owed to her. Grey requested ‘that we should make use of our influence at Vienna either to get them to accept the reply from Belgrade as satisfactory or as the basis for negotiations.’ Grey said he was convinced ‘that it lay in our hands to bring the matter to a settlement by means of the relevant representations,’ and Grey would interpret it ‘as a good augury for the future if the two of us should once again succeed in assuring the peace of Europe by means of our mutual influence on our allies.’

Lichnowsky was struck by Grey’s change in tone. The Foreign Secretary may simply have been worn out – he still had to speak in the Commons and assemble the Cabinet – or he may have become impatient with Germany’s policy. Why had she not cautioned moderation at Vienna, if she did not want a war? Did Germany not understand where this would lead? Lichnowsky did not sugarcoat these exchanges, and he sincerely hoped that his chiefs in Berlin would absorb the warnings he sent them. The Anglophile German ambassador had gone native, but he had also grown disenchanted with his country’s policy, and saw no good to come from a closer relationship with Austria. As Lichnowsky recalled:

I found the Minister irritated for the first time. He spoke with great seriousness and seemed absolutely to expect that we should successfully make use of our influence to settle matter. He is also going to make a statement in the House of Commons today in which he is to express his point of view. In any event, I am convinced that in case it should come to war after all, we should no longer be able to count on British sympathy or British support, one would perceive every evidence of ill-will in Austria’s procedure. Also, everybody here is convinced, and I hear it also from the mouths of all my colleagues, that the key to the situation is to be found in Berlin, and that, if peace is seriously desired there, Austria can be restrained from prosecuting, as Sir Edward Grey expresses it, a foolhardy policy.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Would Jagow or his colleagues hear these warnings, and pull Austria back from the brink at the eleventh hour? Grey was reassured by Lichnowsky, though he was unaware that the ambassador was in the doghouse among his compatriots. He took Lichnowsky’s assurances at face value, believing the ambassador did speak for Berlin. A telegram was sent to ambassador Goschen in Berlin testifying to the merits of this conversation, and reiterating the warnings Grey had issued to the anxious Anglophile ambassador. He asserted that German moderation at Vienna would be key to averting catastrophe, and stressed if Germany did not do this, it meant she agreed with Vienna’s plot to destroy Serbia, and Britain would take the necessary conclusions. Grey informed Goschen that

If Austria put the Servian reply aside as being worth nothing and marched into Servia, it meant that she was determined to crush Servia at all costs, being reckless of the consequences that might be involved. Servian reply should at least be treated as a basis for discussion and pause. I said German Government should urge this at Vienna. I recalled what German Government had said as to the gravity of the situation if the war could not be localised, and observed that if Germany assisted Austria against Russia it would be because, without any reference to the merits of the dispute, Germany could not afford to see Austria crushed. Just so other issues might be raised that would supersede the dispute between Austria and Servia, and would bring other Powers in, and the war would be the biggest ever known; but as long as Germany would work to keep the peace I would keep closely in touch. I repeated that after the Servian reply it was at Vienna that some moderation must be urged.[[14]](#footnote-14)

With this warning delivered in language as firm and unmistakeable as he dared, Grey then chatted with the Russian ambassador, who immediately irritated the Foreign Secretary by claiming that Vienna and Berlin believed Britain would remain neutral. How was this possible? Britain had warned the Central Powers that she would see to her own interests, and would not look lightly upon a clear Austro-German plot to destroy Serbia and humiliate Russia. Certainly, she had advised that she would not intervene in an Austro-Serb quarrel, but was this not always accompanied by invitations to a conference which would mediate the crisis? Perhaps Benckendorff, the Russian ambassador, was merely trying to egg Grey on, and force him to commit himself? Grey then turned to the one act of military preparation Britain had engaged with – the fleet had not been dispersed after its test mobilisation. Would a determinedly neutral actor take such a step? Perhaps it was because Grey accompanied this reminder with the qualifier that this mobilisation of the fleet did not mean ‘that we promised anything more than diplomatic action.’ Grey then pushed back against the Russian ambassador, as he wrote to ambassador Buchanan:

I also observed that we hear from German and Austrian sources that they believe that so long as Austria agrees not to take Servian territory Russia will not take any action. I added that it would be absurd for us to appear at Berlin and Vienna to be more Servian than the Russians are.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Just as Benckendorff had used his impression of Austro-German assumptions against Grey, now Grey used it against him. Berlin and Vienna thought Russian non-interference assured so long as Serbian territory was maintained, and if this was true, and Russia did not intend to intervene, how could Britain do otherwise, for a cause which barely resonated with the British public? These were careful exercises in sounding out political opponents, but they served a serious purpose. The web of communications between ambassadors, foreign affairs ministries, Cabinet ministers, and heads of state meant that all telegrams and all lines of communication were not created equally. It was well to chat with foreign diplomats, but the key decisions were made in the relevant capitals, and an ambassador’s promises were not always reliable. Differences in time could mean that an ambassador’s commitment in one hour was made obsolete in the next, all without that ambassador’s knowledge. A case in point came just minutes after Grey had sent this telegram recording the conversation to Buchanan. Buchanan’s telegram from earlier in the day was then received, and it seemed to spell the end of any prospect of Russian support for a conference. Buchanan reported:

French Ambassador informs me that since my conversation with Minister for Foreign Affairs, reported in my immediately preceding telegram of today his Excellency has decided to propose direct conversation between Vienna and St. Petersburg as to modifications to be introduced into Austrian demands.

As Buchanan underlined, where only hours before Sazonov had offered Grey a choice between a conference or bilateral negotiations, here the Russian Foreign Minister seemed to have made the choice for him. If Russia would not agree to a conference then there was hardly any point in urging Germany to participate either. Austro-Russian relations would also rob Britain of any chance to offer arbitration or external judgements – devices useful for reducing the temperature. It also meant that Grey would lose control over negotiations, and the consequences if they broke down. Could Austria and Russia really be relied upon to diplomatically resolve their dispute? Who could be found that might be willing to bet the peace of Europe on their success? The minutes written undersecretary Nicolson after this update capture this sense of frustration, as even the normally Russophile official appeared to tire of Sazonov’s policy. Nicolson wrote:

This is confusing. In three consecutive days M. Sazonov has made one suggestion and two proposals all differing from each other. 1. [July 25] The suggestion. — If Servia were to appeal to the Powers, Russia would stand aside and leave question in hands of England, France, Italy and Germany. 2. July 26. — Proposal to Austrian Ambassador that England and Italy should collaborate with Austria with a view to putting an end to present tension. 3. July 27. — Proposal that Russia will converse directly with Vienna. One really does not know where one is with M. Sazonov and I told Count Benckendorff so this afternoon.[[16]](#footnote-16)

What did the Russians want? Grey could no longer claim to know the answer, nor could his underlings. There was scant time to absorb this disappointment though, as news continued to filter in from additional ambassadors. From Francis Bertie in Paris, Grey learned that Baron Schoen, the German ambassador, had held conversations with Bienvenu Martin, the acting French Foreign Minister. Schoen’s request was interesting; he wanted to defuse the tension emerging in the Franco-German press, by getting the French to issue a public statement which would indicate closer cooperation during the crisis. Yet the French were not biting. The best Bienvenu Martin would offer was the following milk toast announcement: “German Ambassador and Acting President of the Council have had a fresh conversation, in the course of which they considered what measures could be taken by Powers for maintenance of peace.” Unsurprisingly, as Bertie recounted, ‘German Ambassador is much dissatisfied,’ and Baron Schoen then

…expressed his desire for stronger wording and for phrase indicating “solidarity” between the Powers and for description of conversation as “very friendly.” Ministry for Foreign Affairs propose to do no more. German Ambassador constantly repeats that all depends on Russia, and Ministry for Foreign Affairs look upon this as a bad sign.

Why were the French driving such a hard bargain? Did they not want to defuse the tension between themselves and Germany? Perhaps they worried that if they did, the Russians would have this example of moderation leveraged against them. Was this perhaps part of a German plot to isolate Russia, and was France right to be dubious? Revealingly though, Bertie ended the telegram with the remark ‘I think we ought to urge French Government to issue notice suggested by German Ambassador.’ Evidently, Bertie believed there was value in making such tentative steps towards calm. Even more revealingly, he was apparently overruled by Grey’s underlings. Eyre Crowe penned a lengthy minute wherein he speculated on the French behaviour:

There is probably more behind all this than meets the eye. The German hardly concealed endeavour is to get all the Powers to declare that the quarrel between Austria and Serbia in no way concerns any third parties. This no doubt is what [German ambassador to Paris] … Schoen means by the “solidarity” of all the Powers. I imagine the French are afraid that if they agree to such an announcement of “solidarity,” this will be exploited at Berlin and used at St. Petersburg to prove to Russia that France is a lukewarm supporter.

Crowe then turned to why urging the French to go ahead with German quests to moderate its press tone would be a bad idea:

There may of course be some other explanation of the difference between the Acting French M.F.A. and the German Ambassador. But whatever the explanation is, I doubt whether we should be wise in mixing ourselves up in this journalistic controversy or giving unpalatable advice to the French Government in a matter in which it is at present difficult to see clear, but which cannot, I think, be of really great importance.

Arthur Nicolson agreed: ‘We cannot suggest to the French Government how they should word their "communique” of conversations in which we had no part. We certainly had far better not interfere in these matters.’[[17]](#footnote-17) But what of the general French position? If Paris was unwilling to place a public break on press antagonism, did this suggest her policy was not one of accommodation? Sir Francis Bertie, Britain’s ambassador to France, provided a bittersweet account of the mood in Paris, which both affirmed French alignment with the conference plan, and Austrian opposition even to the mention of the word conference. Could any headway be made with Vienna under these circumstances? Only if Germany was included in this pressure campaign, as Bertie explained:

French Government accept your proposal and have sent instructions accordingly to French Ambassador in London, who returns there this evening. French Ambassador in Berlin instructed to concert with British Ambassador as to advisability of joining him in speaking to the German Government. French representatives at Vienna, St. Petersburg and Belgrade have also received necessary instructions, but Ministry for Foreign Affairs thinks that it would be dangerous for Entente Ambassadors to speak at Vienna until it is known that Germans have done so with some success. Ministry for Foreign Affairs gathers from German Ambassador that Austrians are particularly suspicious of words “intervention,” “mediation” and “conference” and suggests therefore that care should be taken to speak of conversations, moderating advice, &c.[[18]](#footnote-18)

The French government, shorn of its key decision makers, was apparently trying to tread lightly on Austria’s feelings. There was an appetite for joint Entente representations, but these had to be tempered with caution. Such solidarity could produce results, but it could also pressure the Austrians into a corner if they felt all of Europe was against them. If German representations at Vienna had no effect, in any case, was there any utility in trying? It was evidently necessary to apply a certain gloss to these proceedings, because if the Austrians were as wary of conferences and mediations as Baron Schoen in Vienna suggested, this would pose many problems for peaceful resolution. But Ambassador Bertie in Paris provided additional context on the French mood. Later on 27 July he sent another telegram, revealing his concern at Russia’s stance and her efforts to leverage pan Slavic movements to her advantage:

I am sure that the French Government do not want to fight and they should be encouraged to put pressure on the Russian Government not to assume the absurd and obsolete attitude of Russia being the protectress of all Slav States whatever their conduct, for this will lead to war. I do not believe that the German Emperor and Government were accessories before the fact to the terms of the Austrian note. If they had been the Emperor would not have been away yachting. The demonstrations in the streets here are nothing compared with those at Berlin where the attitude of the populace is not reassuring. [Russian ambassador to France] Izvolsky is expected back here today or tomorrow and he is not an element of peace. If you get together meetings between yourself and the French, German and Italian Ambassadors call them consultations for the Austrians would resent a sort of repetition of the London reunions which ended in being dubbed the London Conference. They would consider that they were being treated as a Balkan Minor State.[[19]](#footnote-19)

This was more critical of Russia than other ambassadors tended to be. Bertie’s willingness to accept the German explanations for Austria’s ultimatum is also noteworthy. But was Bertie on to something? Austria would not agree to a conference, but would she consent to ‘consultations’ if they provided her with satisfaction? Izvolsky, the Russian ambassador to France, was a known proponent of war with Austria, or at least at not backing down – since his humiliation in the Bosnian Annexation Crisis, Izvolsky was believed eager for revenge. Bertie intended to use French offices to contain the crisis, and was plainly anxious at Russian efforts to increase the danger through pressuring France. At the same time, Bertie let it be known that President Poincare had cancelled his visit to Norway, and that he planned to arrive in Dunkirk on 29 July.[[20]](#footnote-20) That was two days away, and Bertie was arguably feeling this vacuum at the top of the French government. If Poincare returned though, could he really be expected to take this moderate line, or would he weigh in solidly behind Russia?

By the afternoon of 27 July, Grey had not received much positive news for his conference proposal. The Russians seemed to prefer bilateral talks, after spending much of the day debating it. The French were anxious at applying too much pressure on Austria, and warned against any mention of the word conference. The Austrians refused to recognise the authority of such a conference. The Italians gave it their enthusiastic approval, but an Anglo-Italian venture was of limited value if others did not buy into it. Then there was Germany. Grey had repeatedly stressed to Lichnowsky that this conference was Britain’s core plan, and that Germany would incur British gratitude if she went along with it. Lichnowsky had dutifully passed these messages to Berlin, and had been given instructions to agree to them. However, these were hardly ringing endorsements of his policy.

To Grey, it was necessary to advance the cause of the conference by publicising it. This would put pressure on the Germans to moderate at Vienna, and affirmed to the Entente that Britain would not remain indifferent to what transpired next. In his address to the Commons in the mid-afternoon, Grey spent just 700 words summarising the situation up to now. It should be noted that this was the first update on the July Crisis Grey had provided the country, and it was also the last time he would provide such an update for another week.[[21]](#footnote-21) Grey began his short summary by recalling the ultimatum, and then expressed that ‘as long as the dispute was one between Austria-Hungary and Servia alone, I felt that we had no title to interfere,’ but that ‘if the relations between Austria-Hungary and Russia became threatening, the question would then be one of the peace of Europe: a matter that concerned us all.’ Grey then explained how his four power mediation scheme came into being:

I did not then know what view the Russian Government had taken of the situation, and without knowing how things were likely to develop I could not make any immediate proposition; but I said that, if relations between Austria-Hungary and Russia did become threatening, the only chance of peace appeared to me to be that the four Powers—Germany, France, Italy, and Great Britain, who were not directly interested in the Servian question—should work together both in St. Petersburgh and Vienna simultaneously to get both Austria-Hungary and Russia to suspend military operations while the four Powers endeavoured to arrange a settlement.

This then developed into a more sophisticated conference scheme, where third party powers would attend, and the belligerents would cease all military activity as they worked for peace. Yet Grey reported that ‘To that I have not yet received complete replies, and it is, of course, a proposal in which the co-operation of all four Powers is essential.’ Grey warned that ‘In a crisis so grave as this, the efforts of one Power alone to preserve the peace must be quite ineffective,’ and he also complained that

The time allowed in this matter has been so short that I have had to take the risk of making a proposal without the usual preliminary steps of trying to ascertain whether it would be well received. But, where matters are so grave and the time so short, the risk of proposing something that is unwelcome or ineffective cannot be avoided.

Grey then gave a barely veiled warning to Austria, as he argued that the Serbian reply ‘should at least provide a basis on which a friendly and impartial group of Powers…should be able to arrange a settlement that would be generally acceptable.’ Finally, Grey warned about the implications if the Austro-Serb quarrel was widened, concluding his speech:

It must be obvious to any person who reflects upon the situation that the moment the dispute ceases to be one between Austria-Hungary and Servia and becomes one in which another Great Power is involved, it can but end in the greatest catastrophe that has ever befallen the Continent of Europe at one blow: no one can say what would be the limit of the issues that might be raised by such a conflict, the consequences of it, direct and; indirect would be incalculable.

Grey evidently believed that if the war ceased to be contained, it would become a European concern. Whether this was intended as a warning to Russia to hold back, or for Austria to moderate its demands of Serbia, may be debated, but these amounted to red lines for the British Foreign Secretary. He was eager to see peace work, and this could only be achieved if the powers refrained from escalating the tension. Grey finished by taking a question about Germany’s stance; he recorded his impression that Berlin approved mediation, but had yet to consent to a conference.[[22]](#footnote-22) Grey also managed to straddle a difficult line. He did not allude to the inflammatory reports in *The Times*, though he did not dispute them either. He did not mention the fact that the fleet was still mobilised. He did not attempt to present the worsening crisis as of no interest to Britain. He also did not consider British military plans; indeed, Grey avoided the thorny issue of British military intervention by simply not mentioning it at all.[[23]](#footnote-23)

If the country was hoping for a more detailed description of Britain’s policy, they were to be disappointed. Yet, Grey may have benefited from the prevailing crisis in Ireland – the *real* crisis, according to many British contemporaries – and the fact that many were too preoccupied with the prospect of civil war to focus on the Balkans. This was reflected in the Commons itself; shortly after Grey’s ramble through Europe, the leader of the Irish Nationalist Party John Redmond protested the previous day’s tragedy at Bachelor’s Walk, where three Dubliners were killed. Contrasting this prosecution with the inaction as the Unionists oversaw gunrunning in Larne earlier in the year, Redmond criticised British officials on the ground in Dublin, and the subsequent debate stretched nearly twenty thousand words.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Grey was not present during Redmond’s diatribe; he and his colleagues assembled for a Cabinet meeting, where again, Ireland took centre stage. With barely minutes remaining, the Cabinet then discussed the crisis and Britain’s position. The Cabinet were alerted to pressure applied by France and Russia for Britain to declare itself unequivocally on the Entente side, which Grey rejected. Though favouring mediation, Grey stressed that by keeping British policy vague, the other powers would be more likely to take her efforts seriously. As one Cabinet member explained it

If she [Britain] kept aloof from France and Russia we should forfeit naturally their confidence forever, and Germany would almost certainly attack France while Russia was mobilising. If on the other hand we said we were prepared to throw our lot in with the Entente, Russia would at once attack Austria. Consequently our influence for peace depended on our apparent indecision.[[25]](#footnote-25)

This logic seemed to impressed the Cabinet. It was always fortunate when the best policy prescribed doing nothing, and Grey’s recommendation to refrain from making decisions on military interference met with favour from the non-interventionists in Cabinet. Grey may have wished to press the obligation owed to the French, yet he recognised that forcing this through so early would only rouse resentment. A further reason for delaying a definitive decision was thus the maintenance of Cabinet unity; Grey did not dream of forcing his colleagues to choose, as a split was expected between the interventionists and non-interventionists. This conflict between the two camps of opinion in the British Cabinet would later escalate, but Asquith also noted that Grey did not even mention Belgium, so determined was the Foreign Secretary to preserve Cabinet unity and maintain what he claimed was Britain’s free hand.[[26]](#footnote-26) But what had this free hand truly achieved? Grey had publicised his intention to advocate the conference option, even as the powers had either rejected it or granted lukewarm approval. That Germany remained in favour of it was one reason to keep going, but once the Cabinet had dissolved and Grey returned to his duties that evening, his conference plan received its final death blow, in the form of a late telegram from ambassador Goschen in Berlin. The mood in the German government, Goschen said, had shifted against a conference, and preferred bilateral mediation instead. Once again, Grey had been bypassed by the great powers, as Goschen wrote:

Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs [Jagow] says that conference you suggest would practically amount to a court of arbitration and could not, in his opinion, be called together except at the request of Austria and Russia. He could not therefore, desirous though he was to co-operate for the maintenance of peace, fall in with your suggestion. I said I was sure that your idea had nothing to do with arbitration, but meant that representatives of the four nations not directly interested should discuss and suggest means for avoiding a dangerous situation. He maintained, however, that such a conference as you proposed was not practicable. He added that news he had just received from St. Petersburg showed that there was an intention on the part of M. Sazonov to exchange views with Count Bechtold. He thought that this method of procedure might lead to a satisfactory result, and that it would be best, before doing anything else, to await outcome of the exchange of views between the Austrian and Russian Governments.

This must have been a bitter disappointment for Grey, and also somewhat embarrassing since he had publicised Germany’s willingness to accept mediation in the Commons. And could those vaunted bilateral relations between Vienna and St Petersburg produce any result? Goschen continued by describing the remainder of his talks with Jagow, who now turned to the matter of mobilisation:

In the course of a short conversation Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs said that as yet Austria was only partially mobilising, but that if Russia mobilised against Germany latter would have to follow suit. I asked him what he meant by “mobilising against Germany.” He said that if Russia only mobilised in south Germany would not mobilise, but if she mobilised in north Germany would have to do so too, and Russian system of mobilisation was so complicated that it might be difficult exactly to locate her mobilisation. Germany would therefore have to be very careful not to be taken by surprise.

This should perhaps have awakened British attention to the central importance of mobilisation. If German support for any kind of peaceful venture was to be presumed upon, it was essential Berlin did not feel provoked by Russian military preparations. It placed a premium on key details like the location of Russian districts to be mobilised, yet Jagow also warned of complications, and the fog of war which made acquiring accurate information difficult. The German fear of a surprise Russian mobilisation was clearly set out, but Eyre Crowe was not impressed with the German position, as he raged in the minutes:

So far as we know, the German Government has up to now said not a single word at Vienna in the direction of restraint or moderation. If a word had been said, we may be certain that the German Government would claim credit for having spoken at all. The inference is not reassuring as to Germany’s goodwill. At the same time the rapid succession of fresh proposals and suggestions coming from St. Petersburg made it easier for Germany to find fresh excuses for her inactivity.[[27]](#footnote-27)

In fact, Germany was anything but inactive. She was instead doing her best to balance her desires, which included Austria’s crushing of Serbia, the localisation of the war, and the maintenance of good relations with other powers, Britain foremost among them. In this episode we have seen how involved Britain was in this phase of the crisis, and the sheer length of this episode reminds us that this was a period of incredibly intense activity. But now the conference proposal was apparently dead – rejected by both Russia and Germany in favour of alternative negotiations. Could these avenues preserve peace, or facilitate the kind of war the Central Powers wanted? Lest we forget, contemporaries in Berlin, London and elsewhere had by now been led to believe that they still had time – had it not been established that the Habsburg army would not be ready until 12 August? Somehow, then, Vienna had decided to throw caution to the wind, and take the ultimate step towards escalation by formally declaring war. How did this happen, and what occurred on 27 July to persuade Vienna that it could no longer afford to wait? In the next instalment looking at this packed day, we will grapple with these questions, and the behaviour of the misguided and misinformed, who somehow believed that they could have their war and win it too.

1. Quoted in Otte, *July Crisis*, p. 323. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 27 July 1914, Memo by Nicolson, no. 171 in *British Documents*, XI, p. 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *The Times*, 27 July 1914. Cited in Newton, *Darkest Days*, p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Newton, *Darkest Days*, pp. 40-42. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 27 July 1914, Buchanan to Grey, no. 170 in *British Documents*, XI, pp. 120-121. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 27 July 1914, Bunsen to Grey, no. 175 in *Ibid*, pp. 123-124. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 27 July 1914, Nicolson to Grey, no. 189 in *Ibid*, p. 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. 27 July 1914, Rodd to Grey, no. 202 in *Ibid*, p. 141. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. 27 July 1914, Buchanan to Grey, no. 198 in *Ibid*, pp. 138-139. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Otte, *July Crisis*, p. 315. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. 27 July 1914, Bunsen to Grey, no. 199 in *Ibid*, pp. 139-140. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. 27 July 1914, Grey to Bunsen, no. 188 in *Ibid*, pp. 129-130. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. 27 July 1914, Lichnowsky to Jagow in Mombauer, *Documents*, pp. 379-381. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. 27 July 1914, Grey to Goschen, no. 176 in *British Documents*, XI, p. 124. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. 27 July 1914, Grey to Buchanan, no. 177 in *Ibid*, p. 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. 27 July 1914, Buchanan to Grey, no. 179 in *Ibid*, pp. 125-126. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. 27 July 1914, Bertie to Grey, no. 184 in *Ibid*, pp. 127-128. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. 27 July 1914, Bertie to Grey, no. 183 in *Ibid*, p. 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. 27 July 1914, Bertie to Grey, no. 192 in *Ibid*, pp. 133-134. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. 27 July 1914, Bertie to Grey, no. 186 in *Ibid*, p. 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Newton, *Darkest Days*, pp. 39-40. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Sir Edward Grey, HC Deb 27 July 1914, cc. 936-939. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Newton, *Darkest Days*, p. 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See HC Deb 27 July 1914, cc. 1022-1066. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Newton, *Darkest Days*, p. 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. *Ibid*, pp. 42-43. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. 27 July 1914, Goschen to Grey, no. 185 in *Ibid*, pp. 128-129. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)