‘Before anything else we must ask Germany whether she intends to back us up against Russia or not.’ Conrad von Hotzendorff to Count Berchtold, 1 July 1914.[[1]](#footnote-1)

As Count Berchtold struggled against the resistance of his Hungarian counterpart Stefan Tisza, and the Emperor, the central importance of Germany to any war policy became more and more apparent. As this episode will show, Austro-German military cooperation and planning in the years before 1914 had established certain principles, including a growing desire to remove the Serbian complication from future conflict with the Entente, but a degree of angst remained on both sides. However, since we know that by 5 July, Austria acquired what became known as the ‘blank cheque’ from her German ally, it is necessary to explain both the immediate German reaction to the Archduke’s murder, and the divisions in Berlin’s policymaking which followed it. Since any confrontation with Serbia ran the very high risk of Russian involvement, Germany was the key to what Austria did next. This was understood in Berlin as well, and Germany’s ambassador to Vienna, Count Heinrich von Tschirschky, was thus a critical link to Berlin in the days immediately following Franz Ferdinand’s demise.

There were reasons to be positive about Germany’s stance. To begin with, the investigations in Bosnia had uncovered some startling links between the Serbian government and the assassins, all but one of whom were now in custody. Major Tankosic had by now been fingered as a key mover in the plot, identified by the assassins as responsible for training them and getting them towards the border in the days before the Archduke’s murder. The Habsburg military attaché in Belgrade continued to feed rumour and verified reports back to Vienna, including a passing reference to Apis, the head of Serbian military intelligence. The link between such a pivotal Serb and the atrocity in Sarajevo was not yet confirmed, but Tankosic was now known, and this was sufficient for Austrian officials to make a persuasive though incomplete case for action.

These pieces of evidence, alongside documents like Tisza’s reworked memorandum, would accompany Berchtold when he met Kaiser Wilhelm in person for the Archduke’s funeral service. If he played his cards right, Berchtold could harness Wilhelm’s rage at losing his friend to such dastardly agents, and thereupon direct this wrath against Belgrade. Tisza was similarly preparing to confront the Kaiser with his plan to diplomatically encircle Serbia by expanding the Triple Alliance. It would have been a tense, emotional meeting, and a trying one for the German Emperor. Yet, on 2 July, when the embalmed bodies of the unfortunate couple were on their way to Vienna, word came from Berlin that the Kaiser would not be attending the funeral service. He was suffering from lumbago, it was claimed, and was in too much pain to attend. In fact, a secret telegram of 2 July, directed by German Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, revealed the true reasons for Wilhelm’s absence:

As a result of warnings I have received from Sarajevo, of which the first dates all the way back to April of this year, I have been obliged to request His Majesty the Kaiser to abandon his trip to Vienna.

Sean McMeekin denotes the damning nature of this private justification. It was no wonder the Kaiser had given a surface reason for his absence; it was plainly an embarrassing admission and a condemnation of Austrian security protocols. On the one hand, Bethmann-Hollweg’s apparent reluctance to risk another assassination suggested German awareness of Serb agency; yet, on the other, the Chancellor had not mentioned Serbia by name, and refrained even from stating this link to Sarajevo. Notwithstanding the evidence already uncovered, Berlin would need greater proof of Serbian guilt before any combined effort would be approved by them.[[2]](#footnote-2) Since the Kaiser would not be feted in Vienna – and, indeed, the funeral service contained no notable European dignitaries – this granted ambassador Tschirschky greater importance as the most prominent German link. For the first few days of July 1914, his calendar was likely to be filled with anxious meetings with Berchtold, Tisza, and of course, Emperor Franz Josef. The key difference between Berchtold’s brand of belligerence towards Serbia and those of his famously aggressive colleagues – such as chief of staff Conrad, the war minister, and the finance minister – was his insistence on acquiring German support first. In this he saw eye to eye with the Emperor.

Although the fear of total German abandonment was not given serious weight, recent experience of German diplomacy had suggested that the Dual Alliance was not united. The Balkan Wars saw the emergence of a restraining Anglo-German diplomatic thrust, aimed at preventing the regional conflict from triggering a wider war. In practice, this meant Austria frequently had to swallow some bitter truths, courtesy of its German ally. In February 1913, as the Balkan Wars raged and Austro-Russian tensions increased, the German Chancellor wrote a private letter to Berchtold. ‘If Austria-Hungary drifts into a conflict with Serbia,’ Bethmann-Hollweg wrote, in an eerily prophetic judgement of what was to come, then it would be ‘impossible for Russia, with her traditional relations with the Balkan states, to watch passively a military campaign by Austria-Hungary against Serbia without enormous loss of prestige.’ Also emphasised was the new turn in Anglo-German relations, which Bethmann-Hollweg believed he could use to their advantage: ‘Today England is a mediating element, through which we have always been able to exercise a calming and restraining influence on Russia.’ There were good grounds for reasoning that this mediating influence could grow, to the detriment of the Triple Entente, and particularly the recent Anglo-Russian conventions. In anticipation of this hope, the Chancellor was crystal clear that Vienna must avoid all semblance of aggression against Serbia which could undermine British diplomatic efforts, for as long as the Balkan Wars continued. His telegram of February 1913 concluded:

I should regard it as a mistake of incalculable consequences to bring about a military solution – even if some interests of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy point towards it – at a moment when there is for us a prospect, though distant [of a reorientation of British policy] to wage the conflict under significantly more advantageous circumstances.[[3]](#footnote-3)

This Anglophile tilt in German diplomacy, palpable also in Prince Lichnowsky’s earnest efforts as German ambassador to London, may seem in retrospect to be tantamount to a pipe dream. Yet, there were sound reasons for suspecting that the Entente was not built on as solid foundations as the Triple Alliance. A general improvement in Anglo-German relations, which some historians have described as a détente, was made possible by the British victory in the naval race, increased communications during the Balkan Wars – where Berlin and London found common ground – and plans to divide the troubled Portuguese Empire between themselves. In such an atmosphere, could Vienna hope to still have its voice heard, or would it be regarded as an inconvenient drag on German diplomatic freedom, which seemed only to bring costly and unrewarding tensions in the Balkans, a region where Berlin was far less strategically interested than Vienna?

Even the Chief of the German General Staff, Helmut von Moltke, nephew of the famed generalissimo who had facilitated Bismarck’s three triumphant wars, was mindful of the need to reign in Austrian war policy, lest it complicate Germany’s position at an inopportune moment. ‘For us,’ Moltke wrote to Gotlieb von Jagow, the German Foreign Minister, in February 1913, ‘it is undoubtedly extremely awkward to have become dependent on Austria to a certain degree on account of our treaties and of the necessity of having to preserve Austria.’[[4]](#footnote-4) The Dual Alliance between Austria and Germany which formed the heart of the Triple Alliance was, after all, a defensive arrangement, though some caveats had been created. One of these was the product of meetings between Moltke and his Habsburg counterpart, Conrad von Hotzendorff, where the two agreed in 1909 to cooperate offensively if Vienna had no alternative but to march against Serbia. Even at that early stage, it was recognised that Russian intervention in an Austro-Serb war was likely, a scenario which would guarantee German involvement in response.

Such conventions and secret rendezvous between allied general staffs is not evidence of a conspiratorial smoking gun, nor was it a uniquely Austro-German activity; the British, French and Russians conducted similar meetings in the years before the war, all of which were aimed at ratifying their military cooperation, and easing some of the vagueness which surrounded the Entente’s terms. Anglo-French military staff talks had been a common feature of the Entente, and recently, Anglo-Russian meetings suggested a greater uniformity in planning and cooperation. In fact, rumours of this Anglo-Russian naval convention, whereby Russia would contain the Baltic, leaving Britain freer in the North Sea and the Channel, were so concerning to the Germans that a miniature crisis emerged from it.

In mid-November 1912, barely a month into the First Balkan War, Austria-Hungary and Germany formalised their terms of support in a two-pronged meeting. Franz Josef journeyed to Berlin to meet with the Kaiser, and while this was happening, Moltke met with the Austrian chief of staff. As Conrad was at this point relieved of his duties, his temporary successor was Field Marshal-Lieutenant Blasius Schemua. Schemua travelled to Berlin in civilian clothes to preserve some semblance of secrecy, and the report he wrote after the event provides fascinating insights at the context of the Austro-German alliance by late 1912. By November 1912, a Serbian army was surging towards the Adriatic, Vienna had signalled its opposition to Serbian expansion, Russia signalled its unwavering support of Serbia, both were on the verge of coming to blows, and all the while the fall of Constantinople seemed imminent. The offer of such a dual meeting was eagerly accepted by the Habsburgs, and the news of their cooperation reached St Petersburg, where Sergei Sazonov, the Foreign Minister, withdrew from the precipice, toning down his encouragement of Serbia’s quest to gain an Adriatic port.[[5]](#footnote-5) Schemua wrote of his recollections as follows:

Moltke showed complete understanding for the assessment of our situation vis-à-vis Russia and Serbia and also expressed that he was entertaining the thought of certain preparations on the German-Russian border, namely requesting a possible calling up of reservists. He also promised me not just passive support, but an active offensive action in parallel with ours. He emphasised repeatedly the ally’s faithful attitude, that we could absolutely count of Germany’s support if Russia threatened us, and that it was also for Germany of imminent interested that we were not weakened.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Schemua continued, recollecting Moltke’s strategic mindset, and revealing a remarkable consistency between what was planned in 1912 and what took place in the first weeks of August 1914:

[Moltke] was aware of the seriousness of the situation, Germany’s mobilisation would automatically result in that of France, and mobilised armies side by side was an impossible situation which would necessarily result in a clash. In that case it was naturally the first intention to defeat the opponent in the west first – which he hoped for in 4-6 weeks – and then to deploy the surplus of power eastwards.[[7]](#footnote-7)

This was the Schlieffen Plan in its purest form – a knockout blow in the west followed by a surge to the east – Germany’s main plan to knock out its enemies and cut the Gordian Knot of a two-front war before the odds became too great. The Kaiser was also crystal clear that there could be no question of hesitating to back its ally against the Russian threat:

According to the European, especially the English press it appears that in general Austria is considered as being the provoked party. With this the situation that I wish is reached. Should Russian counter measures or demands follow which might force Francis Joseph to declare war, then he has right on his side and I am ready…to accept the *casus foederis* in its fullest meaning and with all its consequences.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Also present for these meetings was the Archduke, who recorded his meeting with the Kaiser in November 1912:

Conversation with Emperor William came out extraordinarily well. Emperor William was especially gracious, and declared he was willing to support us in everything. Full security in this respect. Absolutely against conference of the powers. Have clearly defined our standpoint. Emperor William says that as soon as our prestige demands it we should take energetic action in Serbia, and we can be certain of his support. According to his…opinion it would be necessary to state definitely to the powers, especially to England, our standpoint, that we absolutely would not permit a port and corridor [in Albania]. Met with great sympathy and agreement here; in respect to Russia rather an irritated attitude.[[9]](#footnote-9)

The Austrian Ambassador to Berlin, Szogyeny, provided a still more solid picture of German support, based on a scenario in which Austria attacked Serbia for the sake of her prestige:

Emperor William had assured him [Franz Ferdinand] that should it be a question of prestige for Austria-Hungary, he would not fear even a world war, and that he would be ready to enter into a war with all three of the Entente powers. In regard to the position Serbia was taking the German Emperor expressed himself caustically.[[10]](#footnote-10)

In the weeks immediately after these meetings, conflicting reports emerged in some German newspapers which appeared to challenge this idea of unconditional German support for Austria, and in a bid to resolve this uncertainty, in early December 1912 Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg made as clear a statement as possible in the Reichstag:

Should there be – which we do not hope – insoluble differences [when it comes to settling the affairs of the Near East] it will be a matter for those powers which are directly interested in that specific case to see that their interests are recognised. That holds also for our allies. If, however, in making good their interests they are, contrary to expectation, attacked by a third party, and their existence is thereby threatened, then we, true to our alliance obligations, would have to step resolutely to the side of our ally.[[11]](#footnote-11)

It is important to view these extracts in the context of the wider Austro-German relationship. These were not suggestions of an extension of the Triple Alliance’s terms, but a confirmation of solidarity. They reinforced the Schlieffen Plan, which was to fail so spectacularly on the Marne, as Germany was forced to improvise and defeat its enemies in reverse order, while Austria occupied itself with Serbia, clinging on against the Russians until German forces arrived in significant numbers by spring 1915.[[12]](#footnote-12) They also demonstrate is the high levels of angst, particularly in the Austrian position, of the complicating factor of Serbia and the possibility that Germany would not support her in a war with that power. These concerns were somewhat eased by a striking German recognition that Habsburg prestige might require an attack on Serbia, reminding us of the prevalence of national honour in these considerations. When Austrian prestige did receive such a direct wound in Sarajevo, there was every reason to expect that these conversations would be put into action. Clearly, we should not view the Serbian problem in Austrian calculations as a new phenomenon. In the crisis over Serbia’s quest for an Adriatic port, in the region that became Albania, even the British were mindful of the potential of Serbia to trigger hostilities, and potentially pull the concerned powers into a great war neither party truly desired.

Caution was the byword of British advice to the European powers, but in the view of the Dual Alliance, the best guarantee for caution was to ensure security, and this could be ensured by harmonising and coordinating the military preparations they had. In their final meeting before the July Crisis, Moltke and Conrad met on 12 May 1914. As he tended to do in his reports, Conrad recorded the exchange between he and the German Chief of the General Staff. Their conversation makes for revealing reading about the concerns and priorities each had. In short, Conrad desired greater securities for Austria while German forces went west to knock out France, per the Schlieffen Plan, suggesting Romanian support, while Moltke tried to ease these worries, possessing full confidence in the minutely managed timetable which underpinned German military plans. The conversation, according to Conrad, went as follows:

We initially discussed the political situation and the adherence to our previous agreements in case of a joint war. In addition to that I expressed: ‘We would no longer be able to count on the Romanians as allies, but would possibly have to consider them even as an opponent.’ General von Moltke objected that Romania would initially remain neutral and wait.

This was indeed what occurred; Romania did not enter the war on the allied side until 1916, by which point it was crushed in a campaign aided by Bulgaria. Conrad proceeded to set out their exchange:

Conrad: ‘This does not alter our intention to march into Galicia with the bulk of our forces. However, I must stress all the more how desirable it would be if a bit more were done on the German side for the Russian theatre of war than is currently intended.

Moltke: ‘Twelve divisions – perhaps a bit more – East of the lower Vistula.’

Conrad: ‘The Russian offensive will also be directed against the province of Prussia, and you have such few forces there.’

Moltke: ‘There will then be even fewer Russian forces there.’

Conrad: ‘You cannot count on that. Russia will turn against us, but it is also not far from Warsaw to Berlin; I would like you to consider what would happen if *we* get into an unfavourable situation. Then the road would be clear for Russia. What will you do if you have no success in the West and the Russians attack your rear in the East in this way?’

Moltke: ‘Yes, I will do what I can. We are not superior to the French.’

With this revealing claim, the two generals then discussed the likelihood of war in the near future:

General von Moltke felt that any delay would amount to a reduction of our chances; with Russia one could not risk being in competition about masses. He continued: ‘Here they unfortunately always expect a declaration from England that she will not participate. Such a declaration will never be given by England.’

Conrad: ‘Germany’s attitude in the past years has allowed the favourable opportunities to go unused. In 1908 we committed the grave error of not tackling Serbia; and again last year.’

Moltke: ‘Why did you not strike?’

Conrad: ‘At the last moment His Majesty was against it.’ […]

Before I left, I asked General von Moltke again how long, in his opinion, it would take until Germany, in a joint war against Russia and France, would be able to turn to Russia with strong forces.

Moltke: ‘We hope to be finished with France in six weeks from the beginning of operations, or at least so far that we can move the bulk of our troops against Russia.’

Conrad: ‘So for at least six weeks we have to lend our back against Russia.’

I took my leave from General von Moltke, unaware that I would shake his hand for the last time.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Hindsight tells us that Moltke was impossibly optimistic in these exchanges. It was no wonder Conrad’s nervousness is palpable throughout the conversation; Germany would in fact take several months before it was in a position to focus its greater energies on Russia. Only once the Western Front stabilised, and German troops could dig in, could a new strategy be put into practice. Contrary to Moltke’s expectations, an enormous Russian army did appear outside East Prussia in late August 1914, though the subsequent triumph at Tannenberg meant that this cardinal error in calculation was glossed over. Perhaps, though he would not explicitly state it to his German counterpart, Conrad was becoming concerned at the capacity of the Central Powers to defend themselves against the encirclement. This explains his references to Romania and Bulgaria, and his increasing uneasiness about Italy. When matters were so precisely calculated and so tightly balanced, the slightest upset could tip the scales against them, and lead to disaster.

The Entente could have no inkling of these concerns, but by late 1912, following a tense month for Anglo-German relations, and the development of the Balkan Wars, there was little good news to be found. This brings us to an important point about these primary sources quoted above. We will note that Moltke and Conrad, in their own way, criticised their governments. This reminds us that these belligerent generals were not the governments; though they provided their views with blistering frequency, aggressive, expansionist statements from their mouths or pens is not evidence of a similar intent in the governments they represented. We should not be surprised that generals wished for a war in which they could test the mettle of their soldiers, and acquire glory for themselves. At the same time, the Kaiser’s fulminations are not enough alone to demonstrate the existence of a vast conspiracy bent on war eighteen months in advance. Nor should we look at documents before 1914, and the pessimistic expressions within them, as proof that the contemporaries of the July Crisis were powerless to prevent what happened next. Of course, it is not difficult to find expressions of doom and gloom in this pre-war period; Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson, Director of Operations in the British War Office, and later to plan the BEF’s strategy, wrote in his diary on the last day of 1912 that:

The news tonight is not good…The year opened in gloom and closes in deeper gloom. The Peace Conference of the Balkan States is sitting in St James’ Palace, but it looks like breaking up, and the Great Powers are grouped in veiled hostility. It seems possible, though I think not by any means certain, that we shall have a European war this next year. And in spite of all I have written and worked during the whole year, we are *not* ready. It is disgusting and scandalous.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Wilson was of course incorrect; 1913 saw the conclusion of one Balkan War, the outbreak of another, several confrontations between Austria and Russia, and the Austro-Serb rivalry nearly come to blows. And yet, notwithstanding the Kaiser’s hurt feelings, we have seen in our background episodes that by this point in the pre-war period, Anglo-German diplomacy proved an effective calming influence. Indeed, by early 1914, the experience of traversing these crises and maintaining the peace arguably left the powers *overconfident* that upon news of the Archduke’s murder, the same well-intentioned diplomacy could preserve peace once again. That it would be business as usual for the troubled Balkans may have engendered a sense of complacency, though it is important not to generalise in this. Still, by 2 July 1914, we find the French ambassador to Austria concluding the following about the potential Habsburg response to the assassinations:

Within Austrian military circles and for all those who are not resigned to letting Serbia retain the position she has won in the Balkans, the crime of Sarajevo incites the most hateful bitterness. The enquiry into the cause of the assassination, which is being insisted upon under intolerable conditions for the dignity of Belgrade’s government would, if refused, give rise to grievances that would allow for a military intervention. But it is said that the Austrian Emperor disagrees with this kind of provocation because of his old age and the ever-mounting problems in Albania; once again they will probably have to do with mere threats.[[15]](#footnote-15)

This ambassador was far from the only contemporary to understate the desire for military action among the upper echelons of the Habsburg government, yet it is still striking that while this optimistic Frenchman assumed it would be business as usual, Vienna was by then consumed with feverish plotting and conspiracy. Its statesmen were also consumed with the German question, and the sentiments expressed by the Tschirschky, the German ambassador, cannot have filled them with confidence. On 30 June 1914, Tschirschky wrote to the German Chancellor about the situation in Vienna, and his own role in attempting to moderate the Habsburg response:

Count Berchtold told me today that everything pointed to the fact that the threads of the conspiracy to which the Archduke fell victim ran together at Belgrade. The affair was apparently so well thought out that very young men were intentionally selected for the perpetration of the crime, against whom only a mild punishment could be decreed. The Minister spoke very bitterly about the Serbian plots. I frequently hear expressed here, even among serious people, the wish that at last a final and fundamental reckoning should be had with the Serbs. The Serbs should first be presented with a number of demands, and in case they should not accept these, energetic measures should be taken. I take opportunity of every such occasion to advise quietly but very impressively and seriously against too hasty steps. First of all, they must be certain of what they want, for so far I have heard only very imprecise expressions of opinion. Then the chances of any action should be weighed up, and it should be kept in mind that Austria-Hungary does not stand alone in the world, that it is her duty to think not only of her allies, but to take into consideration the entire European situation, and especially the attitude of Italy and Romania on all questions that concern Serbia.

This telegram was not allowed to stand on its merits, though, as the Kaiser read it, and added his own comments in the margins. One example was his comment ‘now or never,’ beside Tschirschky’s impression that Vienna sought a ‘final and fundamental reckoning’ with Serbia. Most noteworthy, however, was Wilhelm’s forceful critique of his ambassador’s efforts to preach moderation: ‘Who authorised him to act that way?’ Wilhelm scribbled:

…that is very stupid. None of his business, as it is solely Austria’s matter what she plans to do in this case. Later, if it goes wrong, it will be said that Germany did not want it! Let Tschirschky be good enough to drop this nonsense. The Serbs must [be] sorted, and that right soon.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Annika Mombauer and Thomas Otte disagree on the extent to which these chidings from his Kaiser influenced Tschirschky’s later behaviour. Mombauer notes that Tschirschky’s tone changed upon seeing Wilhelm’s notes, but Otte explains that by the time the ambassador absorbed this criticism, he had already begun urging Austria to take a firmer line.[[17]](#footnote-17) Otte reminds us that ‘Superlatives were that monarch’s natural form of expression. Tone-deaf to nuances and colour-blind to the shades of grey that dominate political life, he was given to exuberant outbursts.’[[18]](#footnote-18) In the immediate aftermath of the assassinations, the Kaiser was at his most wrathful and impulsive. Considering the preceding years of tensions and frustrations towards Serbia, it should not surprise us to see Wilhelm wanting to solve this problem once and for all.

If this is the case, how do we explain Ambassador Tschirschky’s approach to the crisis? He began by urging moderation, yet within a few days was urging a more Austrian active policy, albeit one which first secured the Habsburg flanks by acquiring assurances from Italy and Romania, and, above all, crafting a coherent plan for dealing with Serbia both during and after any potential confrontation. Considering this palpable shift in tone in the ambassador between 30 June and 4 July, Otte discerned that Tschirschky’s approach ‘was certainly not entirely coherent.’[[19]](#footnote-19) In fact, it was arguably contradictory. ‘It is difficult to avoid the conclusion,’ Otte wrote,

that Tschirschky was pursuing his own private, twin-track diplomacy. Having urged caution on Vienna, and having intimated to Berchtold that Germany’s stance was largely dependent on Vienna formulating a strategic plan, he then pressed the Habsburg government for immediate action.

Tschirschky achieved this breathtaking about face by utilising an important contact, Hugo Ganz, a journalist for the Frankfurter Zeitung with liberal sympathies who was a well-known confidant of the German embassy in Vienna. Ganz met with Vienna’s press department, and claimed to have just come from a conversation with Tschirschky, who had ‘stated emphatically and repeatedly…that Germany would support the Monarchy through thick and thin,’ no matter what course Austria adopted. ‘The sooner Austria-Hungary moved, the better,’ Ganz quoted Tschirschky as saying, ‘Yesterday would have been better than today, but today is better than tomorrow,’ and concluding, ‘One Great Power could not speak more openly to another than that.’ It is certainly interesting that the German ambassador did not feel able to say these things to Berchtold, Conrad or even Tisza directly, using an intermediary to preserve some plausible deniability for himself. But these comments did make an impression on Berchtold, who passed them onto the Hungarian Minister President and Emperor Franz Josef.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Whatever the reasons for Tschirschky’s confusing and complex strategy, it is important to note that at least before 5 July, the idea that Austria would wage war on Serbia, or that Germany would resolutely support her in this conflict, was seen not merely as a minority position, but also an extremely unlikely outcome. The messaging emerging from the German Foreign Office, and disseminated to those present in Berlin in the days immediately following the assassination, points towards an expectation that it would be business as usual for the Triple Alliance partners. Thus, on 30 June, the same day Tschirschky sent off his telegram to Berlin, the Italian ambassador to Berlin recorded the concerns of Arthur Zimmerman, undersecretary of the German Foreign Office:

Zimmerman detects as the principle danger that the legitimate indignation breaking out in Austria-Hungary against Serbia could lead to measures too severe and provocative for the neighbouring kingdom. And he foresees for the German government a continuous and laborious task of restraining the Cabinet in Vienna from compromising decisions.[[21]](#footnote-21)

You may know Zimmerman from the ill-advised attempt he made to entice Mexico into the First World War, but before this cardinal error took place, he was also a rising star in the German Foreign Office. Ironically, the American ambassador to Berlin upheld Zimmerman as ‘one of the ablest men in Germany today.’[[22]](#footnote-22) As it happened, since the early days of July were a quiet part of the political season, he was one of the few significant decision makers present in Berlin at the time. By now Bethmann Hollweg was enjoying a brief holiday, Gotlieb von Jagow, the German Foreign Minister, was on his honeymoon, and Moltke was on sick leave for his acute liver disease. It was thus up to Zimmerman to inform those dignitaries present in Berlin as to the likely consequences of the assassination for Germany, and in this, caution was the watchword. The Saxon ambassador to Berlin thus recorded the following impressions on 2 July:

The German Government has advised the Serbian government to afford the maximum cooperation in this matter in which it finds all Europe against Serbia, and the Russian ambassador to Berlin has also been approached to influence Serbia accordingly, which has been promised. In the German Foreign Office they believed that a war between Austria-Hungary and Serbia will therefore be avoided. Should it break out nonetheless, Bulgaria would immediately declare war on Greece – the dispute between Greece and Turkey fortunately having been settled – Russia would mobilise and world war could no longer be prevented. There is renewed pressure from the military side fro allowing things to drift towards war while Russia is not yet ready, but I do not think that His Majesty the Kaiser will allow himself to be induced to this.

Evidently, this Saxon ambassador got the Kaiser wrong, but he was capable of gauging the predictable desire of the military to settle the score. It could be argued that if the Kaiser’s default position was caution, his outburst after the assassination was something of an aberration, which would pass as he cooled off during his naval manoeuvres planned for July. That the Kaiser would be a check on his own army was a scenario that occurred later in the crisis, but as was his emotional style, immediately after the assassination Wilhelm was perhaps the most important, and dangerous, wildcard. The Saxon continued to insist on the unlikelihood of war between Austria and Serbia, reasoning that Franco-Russian domestic distractions were pressing, and that Russia was only ‘rattling the sabre’ because she wished to ensure that the 500 million francs would be sent from Paris, since ‘she, too, is suffering from a lack of money.’ Anglo-German relations had improved, and Britain would not sabotage its economic or imperial interests for the sake of war, nor could London ignore the threat posed by the German fleet.[[23]](#footnote-23) The Saxon military plenipotentiary in Berlin recorded a similar mood; the General Staff was pro-war, as expected, but neither the Kaiser nor the German Foreign Office agreed.[[24]](#footnote-24)

These comforting claims were not contradicted by the British chargé d’affairs in Berlin, who on 3 July wrote to Sir Edward Grey, the British Foreign Secretary:

You are aware that, since the Balkan Wars, doubts have sprung up in Germany as to the extent to which she can reckon on military assistance from her neighbour in the event of a general war. The idea is that Austria-Hungary would be hampered by having to prepare for eventualities on the Serbian frontier. This idea has been strengthened by the recent crime at Sarajevo… The attitude of the Austro-Hungarian government at this juncture is therefore being watched with anxious interest, as people here have had little doubt from the first that the plot which led to the death of the Archduke was hatched in Serbia.[[25]](#footnote-25)

These perceptive assessments of Austria’s strategic difficulties are worth noting, but the lack of knowledge on what Vienna intended to do next clearly set contemporaries on edge. Would this be yet another non-crisis, solved in the eleventh hour by a negotiated compromise, or a conference? By 4 July, Austrian officials were mindful of the need to approach German decision-makers in person. It had originally been hoped they would have this opportunity once all gathered for the Archduke’s funeral service, yet this had been hosted without intrigue or much fanfare on 3 July. A direct diplomatic mission to Berlin was thus desirable. In this we must return against to Ambassador Tschirschky, who Thomas Otte discerns made use of yet another intermediary to spell out the importance of the moment. This time, the intermediary was the journalist Victor Naumann, a well-known writer and commentator.

On 1 July, Naumann met with Count Alexander Hoyos, Berchtold’s chief of staff at the Austrian Foreign Ministry. In that meeting, when the generally hawkish Hoyos argued for the necessity of swift and forceful action, Naumann agreed, asserting that it had become ‘an existential question for the Monarchy that the crime [Sarajevo] was not left unpunished, but also that Serbia should be destroyed.’ Further, Naumann added that Kaiser Wilhelm was ‘aghast at the bloody deed of Sarajevo,’ and that ‘if one spoke to him in the right manner, he would give us every assurance and would this time persevere’, even to the point of war. War would itself be a ‘liberating deed,’ Nauman argued, and ‘Austria-Hungary would be lost as a monarchy and as a Great Power if she did not exploit this moment.’[[26]](#footnote-26) Again, we see Tschirschky covering his tracks with an intermediary, and Hoyos did not have to be told twice. The exchange reiterated the need to approach Wilhelm in person, and for this task Hoyos appeared the best man for the job.

As head of his private staff, Hoyos was well-attuned to Berchtold’s thinking, understanding the need for swift action, but also for preliminary investigations gauging Serbian responsibility for the murders to complete. The Kaiser would be furnished with two key documents, including the revised memorandum we touched on before, and a personal letter dictated by Franz Josef to the Kaiser. Samuel Williamson Jr. goes into some interesting detail on these two items, making some noteworthy points. To begin with, the memorandum was known to Habsburg officials as the Matscheko memorandum after senior section chief and Balkan policy expert in the Austrian Foreign Office, Franz von Matscheko. This Matscheko memo had by now been reworked several times, but Berchtold ordered it be fixed up again, yet there still existed one conspicuous omission from the text, as Williamson Jr. discerned:

The changes in Matscheko's June memorandum placed more urgency upon action without, however, incorporating the word 'war' into the text. In the revision, Franco-Russian aggressiveness was emphasized and Rumanian fickleness given additional attention. The Austro-German alliance was, in the words of the document, in a life-or-death struggle with Russia and, by association, France.

The Emperor’s letter ‘stressed the Russian danger and blamed the assassination on Russian and Serbian Pan-Slavists.’ Williamson Jr. wrote that Franz Josef asserted plainly that the assassination was plotted in Belgrade, but he also sounded an uncertain tone, requesting German help in guaranteeing Bulgarian and Romanian friendship, if not assistance. Significantly, as Williamson Jr. continues,

The venerable monarch also avoided using the word 'war', though he clearly stated that the 'band of criminal agitators in Belgrade' could not go 'unpunished'. Taken together, the memorandum and the private letter could have left little doubt in Berlin that this time Vienna would act.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Why the hesitation to explicitly mention war? Perhaps there was an element of squeamishness, or caution, which prevented Berchtold or the Emperor going further. There was also a sense that Berlin could hardly misunderstand what Vienna meant by terms such as ‘punishment’ for Serbia, or ‘urgent action.’ It may have been too much for Franz Josef to express his desire for war without first gauging the German position for himself. German support was a key requirement for Austrian policy, as the Emperor made clear in his conversations with Berchtold, yet aside from Tschirschky’s two-faced communications strategy, there was not a guarantee; and certainly not enough to launch a war with. The Emperor wanted German support and proof of Serbian involvement; by acquiring the former, Berchtold could bank on the possibility that greater light would be shed on the latter. In addition, this support could then be used to pressure Tisza, who would never grant approval without it. Lacking from either of these documents, however, and from Berchtold’s own behaviour, is any reflection on the kind of policy Austria would adopt. It was still not clear what Vienna wanted to do to Serbia during or after the war. A clear plan in this respect was what Tschirschky had requested, yet again, Berchtold prioritised the potential of German support as a way of reducing the acute problems of what to do with Serbian land, or what concrete proof existed to directly implicate the Serbian government and justify Austria’s war with her.[[28]](#footnote-28)

It would have been easier, and quicker, to telegraph these documents to Ambassador Szogyeny in Berlin. Indeed, on the evening of 4 July Szogyeny was informed both of Hoyos’ visit and of the documents he would bring; the idea was that both Hoyos and Szogyeny would meet Zimmerman and the Kaiser individually, but also interchangeably, to reinforce the Habsburg line before Wilhelm set off on his North Sea cruise. There was also distinct value in an in-person meeting. As Otte discerned, although the seventy-three-year-old Szogyeny was professional and dedicated to the German alliance, he had been ambassador to Berlin since 1892. Some new blood could guarantee the messaging, and send a strong signal of Austrian intentions. Further, it would make up for the opportunity to see the Germans face to face which had been lost following German fears of ineffectual Habsburg security measures at the Archduke’s funeral. The third and final motive for going in person was to keep Stefan Tisza out of the loop. On the expectation that he would object to the contents of the documents, Tisza was only given them as Hoyos was departing, meaning his recommendations for toning down certain aspects of Franz Josef’s letter were received too late for implementation. As we have spent so much time looking at German dispositions, it is important to remember that while Berchtold urgently wished to clarify German support, he was also aware that Tisza could block any initiatives even if he acquired it. By this approach, Germany could be covertly sounded out, and the Hungarian could be presented with the evidence after the event to prove the importance of swift action.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Alexander Hoyos emerges as the one who originally suggested that he go to Berlin, rather than permit the important documents to be sent by the usual channels. This struck Berchtold as a good idea, but we should not imagine that he was carried along by events. As Samuel Williamson Jr. discerned, the Austrian Foreign Minister had been convinced that Vienna had to strike against Serbia. What mattered was acquiring German assurances that she would not be alone in this policy, as Williamson noted:

In any event, by late afternoon on 30 June Berchtold had committed himself to a belligerent approach. A steady stream of reports from Sarajevo and Belgrade also buttressed his conviction of the need to act, as did the views of his own subordinates. And his decision was his decision, not forced by the Germans or by a war party. It did not take the famous conversation of Viktor Naumann of 1 July with Berchtold’s chef de cabinet, Alexander Hoyos, to prod the Habsburg minister to action; he was already there.[[30]](#footnote-30)

With Hoyos and Berchtold seeing eye to eye on this question, the firmest step yet in the direction of war with Serbia was now taken, a week after the assassination had rocked Vienna to its core. In the evening of Saturday, 4 July, Count Alexander Hoyos made his way to Berlin. It would prove to be the most productive step yet made in the direction of war, and simultaneously, the most infamous act of his career.

1. Quoted in McMeekin, *July 1914*, p. 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See *Ibid*, pp. 44-45. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Otte, *July Crisis*, pp. 57-58. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Quoted in *Ibid*, p. 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See E. C. Helmreich, ‘An Unpublished Report on Austro-German Military Conversations of November, 1912,’ *Journal of Modern History*, 5, 2 (Jun., 1933), 197- 207; 197-198. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 22 Nov 1912, Schemua’s report about meeting Moltke and Wilhelm II in Mombauer, *Documents*, p. 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Ibid*, p. 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Quoted in Helmreich, ‘An Unpublished Report,’ 199. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Ibid*, 199-200. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Ibid*, 200. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Ibid*, 203. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Norman Stone, ‘Moltke-Conrad: Relations between the Austro-Hungarian and German General Staffs, 1909-14,’ *Historical Journal*, 9, 2 (1966), pp. 201-228; 201-202. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. 12 May 1914, Conrad and Moltke meet in Karlsbad in *Ibid*, pp. 130-131. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. 31 Dec 1912, Henry Wilson’s Diary in *Ibid*, p. 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. 2 July 1914, Dumaine to Viviani in *Ibid*, p. 177. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See 30 June, Tschirschky to Bethmann Hollweg in Mombauer, *Documents*, pp. 170-172. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See Mombauer, *Documents*, pp. 171-172, footnote 13; Otte, *July Crisis*, p. 71, and footnote 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Otte, *July Crisis*, p. 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *Ibid*, p. 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See *Ibid*, p. 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. 30 June, Bollati to San Giuliano in Mombauer, *Documents*, p. 173. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Otte, *July Crisis*, p. 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. 2 July 1914, Lichtenau to Vitzthum in Mombauer, *Documents*, pp. 175-176. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. 3 July 1914, Leuckart to Carlowitz in *Ibid*, p. 178. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. 3 July 1914, Rumbold to Grey in *Ibid*, pp. 179-180. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Otte, *July Crisis*, p. 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Williamson Jr., *Austria-Hungary and the Origins of the First World War*, p. 194. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Samuel Williamson Jr., ‘Leopold Count Berchtold: The Man Who Could Have Prevented the Great War,’ *From Empire to Republic: Post-World War I Austria,* eds Günter Bischof, Fritz Plasser and Peter Berger (New Orleans, 2010), pp. 33-34. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Otte, *July Crisis*, p. 74. See also Samuel Williamson Jr., *Austria-Hungary and the Origins of the First World War*, p. 195. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Samuel Williamson Jr., ‘Leopold Count Berchtold: The Man Who Could Have Prevented the Great War,’ p. 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)