‘I should like to remark that here in Berlin it is generally regarded as certain that an unsatisfactory answer by Serbia will immediately be followed by our declaration of war coupled with military operations. Here every delay in the beginning of military operations is seen as signifying danger that other powers might interfere. We are urgently advised to proceed without delay and to place the world before a fait accompli.’ Austrian minister to Berlin, Count Szogyeny, reports to his chief on the mood in the German government, 25 July 1914.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Serbia gave its answer to the ultimatum shortly before 6PM on 25 July 1914. In the last episode we examined the prelude to its answer, and its contents, but one key actor was conspicuous in its absence. Serbia would have provided a very different answer had Russia signalled its inability to intervene. It was thus fortunate for Belgrade that, by noon on 25 July, telegrams reached Serbia from St Petersburg describing the decision to begin military preparations, known as the period preparatory to war. With this confirmation that its benefactor planned to stand by its side, it was hardly a surprise that Serbia did not capitulate to all of Austria’s demands. But this brings us to some other important questions. If Russian preparations for war with Austria were underway, what did these preparations look like, and what do they suggest about contemporary responsibility for the war? Was the Tsar’s government willing to fight a great war in defence of Serbia, or was it assumed that Austria would back down if Russia applied sufficient pressure? What role could foreign statesmen have in this equation, and were they truly apprised of accurate information, or was Russia already trying to hide the truth?

The answers to these questions are typically complicated. Some of the details we go into here will also seem dense, and even of limited relevance to the overall narrative. But the devil is in the detail, and the question of Russian mobilisation is among the most important in the historiography of the July Crisis. Depending on your interpretation of Russia’s actions, she was either directly responsible for escalating the war, or forced, in her mind, to demonstrate her firmness to the Central Powers through mobilisation. Either way, Russia’s decision to begin the period preparatory to war and mobilise four military districts was a crucial step towards escalation, and if its details were more widely known, it would have left a sobering impression of contemporaries who still believed that war could be localised, or avoided altogether. Something which historians do not deny, though, is that the Russians began implementing these military measures within hours of Austria and Serbia. Russia was also discussing its military response in some detail before Serbia’s response to the ultimatum was even given.

At 3PM on 25 July, mere hours before the deadline expired, Russia’s Council of Ministers declared its intention to implement the period preparatory to war. All that was needed was the Tsar’s approval of this measure, and Russia could organise itself in time for what might come next. The 25 July edition of the Special Journal of the Council of Ministers described the situation:

In response to the present turn of the diplomatic negotiations and in order that all departments may take the necessary measures for the preparation and smooth extension of the mobilisation of the army, the navy and the fortresses, as well as the deployment of the army on the frontiers opposite the threatened opponents, the Council of Ministers now considers it advisable from 26 July of this year to enforce throughout the entire empire the order for the period preparatory to war laid down in both schedules, while at the same time it empowers the War Minister to solicit the gracious consent of our Imperial Majesty to the implementation in the military department of other measures not provided for in the aforementioned schedules such as he may consider necessary in the circumstances and on the condition that he subsequently informs the Council of Ministers of the measures taken.[[2]](#footnote-2)

To persuade the Tsar of the necessity of these measures, it was vital that Russian statesmen pressed a sound strategic argument, and that they possessed sufficient proof of the sinister intentions of the Central Powers. By now, official Russian communiques were emphasising the flagrant injustice of Austria’s behaviour, while denying at the same time that she had any reason to seek satisfaction from Belgrade. A July 25 report by Sazonov, the Russian Foreign Minister established the boundaries of Russian policy towards the crisis. The report began by criticising Austria’s actions:

The demands made by Austria in Belgrade bear no relation either in form or in content to those omissions for which a measure of blame might possibly be imputed to the Serbian government. Though it was admissible to request the latter for an enquiry to be instituted in Serbia on the basis of the facts brought to light in Austria-Hungary by the enquiry into the murder in Sarajevo, there can nevertheless be no justification for the posing of political demands which would be unacceptable to any state. The clear aim of this procedure – which is apparently supported by Germany – is the total annihilation of Serbia and the disturbance of the political equilibrium in the Balkans.

Russia was evidently unwilling to accept official Austrian explanations for its policy. It emphasised Serbian rights, rather than considering Austria’s right to justice, and the report concluded with an ominous reading of Russia’s options:

If Austria persists any longer with this line of policy, Russia will not be able to remain indifferent and the possibility of grave international complications will have to be taken into account. It is to be hoped that in this event Russia and England will both find themselves on the side of right and justice and that the disinterested policies of Russia, whose sole aim it is to prevent the establishment of Austrian hegemony in the Balkans will find active support on the part of England. It is absolutely essential to see beyond the limits of the present complications and to face the fact that it is now a question of maintenance of the balance of power in Europe which is seriously threatened. It is to be hoped that England, whose policies for centuries have been directed at the maintenance of this balance, will likewise now remain faithful to the legacy of the past.[[3]](#footnote-3)

From this we can note that first, there is a broad commitment to supporting Serbia regardless of the consequences, owing to the threat to the balance of power. Second, in line with this, was the repeatedly expressed hope that Britain would accept that the moment to defend this balance of power had arrived, and weigh in behind Russia. It might be worth reflecting on whether Sergei Sazonov cared all that much about the balance of power; it was certainly a familiar theme, but would the defeat of Serbia truly rupture the European balance? Perhaps this interpretation was adjusted for British audiences; it would be less effective for Sazonov to declare that Russia could now permit another retreat, and that for the sake of her status and prestige, she had to defend her friend. It would have been even less palatable for British readers if he had referred to the Straits, a major obsession of the Russian government and Sazonov in particular since the Balkan Wars. Regardless of the subtext, with military measures accounted for and Austrian behaviour contextualised, it was time to approach the Tsar to guarantee his support.

At the town of Krasnoe Selo, southwest of St Petersburg, the Tsar met his Ministers for a council meeting decked in the white uniform of his guard hussars. In a splendid chateau with French doors leading to a picturesque park, this unlikely setting was the scene for one of the most consequential decisions of the July Crisis. Sazonov began the meeting by highlighting the dangerous situation, asserting that Austria’s policy represented a direct challenge to Russia. The Russian Foreign Minister leaned into the Pan Slav imperative, but also insisted that military measures would have to suffice where diplomacy had been insufficient. Russia had to demonstrate its determination to stand up for Serbia, lest the latter would be consumed by Habsburg expansionism. War was not explicitly mentioned, and the Tsar remained very calm, but the meeting gave Sazonov what he wanted. The Tsar approved both the period preparatory to war, and the mobilisation of four south-western military districts – Kiev, Moscow, Kazan and Odessa – indicating an Austrian focus to its mobilisation plans.[[4]](#footnote-4) The Russian General Staff committee published its report of the meeting, which reflected on the necessity of these measures:

The Chief of the General Staff informed the members of the General Staff Committee that His Majesty the Emperor deigned to declare that it was necessary to support Serbia, even if that required declaring mobilisation and starting acts of war, however not before Austrian troops had crossed the Serbian border. According to news received some preparatory actions for mobilisation were already being conducted in Austria-Hungary and Italy. Thus his Majesty the Emperor deigned to confirm the decree of the Council of Ministers that the period prior to mobilisations will commence in the night from 25 to 26 July. Should it prove necessary to declare mobilisation, it is ordered by the highest authority, due to the fact that one had to restrict oneself to actions against Austria alone, to mobilise the military districts of Kiev, Odessa, Kasan and Moscow. The other military districts will only mobilise in case of Germany joining Austria, no sooner, so that greater diplomatic entanglements can be avoided.[[5]](#footnote-5)

There are two points that require highlighting in this extract, and across Russia’s military preparations thus far. We have now encountered the Period Preparatory to War and the policy of partial mobilisation, and it is important to clarify what these policies meant. Each have since become laced with controversy, but also confusion, so we’re going to do our best to cut through the noise. To begin with, the Period Preparatory to War had been established in Russian law in spring 1913, to make the mobilisation of Russia’s creaking military quicker and easier. This was a pre-mobilisation period similar to those adopted by other European powers. Indeed, the Russian model was based on that of Germany, and formed part of Russian efforts to modernise and reform its armed forces. At its core, the Period Preparatory to War was a complex suite of measures designed to prepare Russia for war, as the name suggests, and it was applied across the entirety of Russia. The historian Bruce Menning elaborates further on what this process looked like in practice:

The purpose of the Period Preparatory to War was to initiate readiness measures short of actual mobilization and war declaration. These measures included the imposition of military censorship, the recall of furloughed ofﬁcers to their units, the veriﬁcation of unit military records and the stores required for possible mobilization, the retention on active duty of reservists scheduled for rotation to inactive status, the recall of troops training in the ﬁeld to their quarters, and the elevation of fortresses to wartime readiness levels. Within on-going budgetary limits, the commanders of frontier military districts were authorized to conduct limited call-ups of local reservists to relieve ﬁrst-line troops of security and support functions. These commanders were also authorized to deploy reconnaissance and covering forces under the guise of manoeuvres and exercises.[[6]](#footnote-6)

On the surface, these actions appear inflammatory and extensive. Indeed, the historian Sean McMeekin highlights these measures as akin to mobilisation itself, and notes that through them, Russia may have readied as many as 1.1 million men for service.[[7]](#footnote-7) This has been heavily disputed since, and McMeekin is mostly on his own in making this argument. I would not go so far as to say he was confused between the period preparatory to war and mobilisation, but McMeekin does appear to have missed certain nuances which undermine the claim that by 25 July, Russia was both preparing for war and doing so in complete secrecy. For the sake of accuracy, let alone the question of responsibility, we should make clear that the period preparatory to war did not equate to mobilisation. As Bruce Menning noted, the period preparatory to war ‘equated with neither covert nor partial mobilisation.’ To mobilise the army, the Tsar would have to issue an *ukase* or decree, a pivotal step for Russian authority and legitimisation, yet no such decrees, accompanied by the necessary ministerial signatures, appeared until the 29 to 30 July. Further, restrictions during this period prevented Russian generals in the key districts from moving troops between them. Provision was made for the limited call-up of reservists, but this was limited to thirty percent of the unit’s size, and did not account for the fact that much of the pool of reservists were already on active service.

The implementation of this process was also not accompanied by the essential steps required for army mobilisation. No muster points were established or staffed with the usual compliment of NCOs and physicians, while the millions of horses for the cavalry were not sequestered, and no extra veterinarians were acquired for them. Russia had learned the dangers of mobilising its army without sufficient preparations during the Russo-Japanese War. Idle soldiers represented a fundamental threat to the regime, and efforts were made to avoid this situation at all costs. The period preparatory to war was thus intended to do exactly what it said on the tin, no more, no less. Yet the whole process was complicated by poor Russian infrastructure, most glaringly in their rail networks. Despite many years of French investment, Russian rail was still insufficient for the immense strains which such a vast empire and large population placed upon it. This brings us to another technical detail which is worth considering. If the Russian railways were to facilitate partial mobilisation, they would require up to twelve days for the lines to shed their old stock and gather the necessary volume. Thus, it has been noted that Russian rail did not transport any significant numbers of troops during the period preparatory to war; to do so would have hampered any official efforts which might be necessary later.[[8]](#footnote-8)

We might note with some trepidation that the period preparatory to war was applied to the whole of Russia, but this was an operational necessity rather than a sinister indication of Russia’s desire for war. As we have surely learned by now, Russia needed as much help as it could get when it attempted to leverage its military advantages. Recent army reforms – the Great Program of annual increases to the army size among them – had aimed at resolving the most glaring problems, but some of the more chronic issues highlighted even during the 1912-1913 standoff with Vienna had still not been addressed. Russian soldiers would be dependent on a few key railway lines to reach their destinations. It may seem natural for us if a country wished to show its might, to engage in partial mobilisation and then to resort to general mobilisation when the initial process failed to send the message, but although the option existed on paper, in practice the shortcomings in infrastructure forced Russia to choose. As the chief of the mobilisation section of the Russian army put it, ‘given the slowness of our operational work and the difﬁculty of any changes in mass railroad transits, the partial mobilization of four districts was in general staff perspective completely impermissible and threatened catastrophe should general mobilization follow partial mobilization.’[[9]](#footnote-9)

In practice, Russian military planners would have to decide if they intended to fight against Austria alone or the Central Powers as a bloc, and an error in judgement could prove catastrophic. If, for instance, Russia mobilised partially, against only Austria, and directed the bulk of her forces to the Galician border, what would happen if Germany entered the war, and these Russian forces had to be hurriedly redirected? Thomas Otte perceived that in this nightmare scenario, the Russian rail network would be overstrained, and this would result in a gridlock of the entire transport system. This meant that if Russia was to mobilise at all, a full mobilisation, rather than a partial one against a single opponent, would be key to the country’s sustainability of any war with the Central Powers. Yet this highlights an important question –if partial could not precede general mobilisation without dangerous levels of disruption, why had the Tsar just approved of a partial mobilisation for those four districts near Austria’s border? Moreover, why did Russia’s general staff allow the Tsar to do this?[[10]](#footnote-10)

The Tsar was not entirely blameless in making this error. He had experienced the shame of defeat following the ignominious performance of Russian military organisation against Japan, but he had also been present for key debates with his ministers during the mobilisation standoff with Austria precipitated by the Balkan Wars. The Russians had learned a lot from their mistakes, but they still lacked strategic flexibility thanks to their underdeveloped rail infrastructure. One solution, posited in September 1913, was to adjust Russian mobilisation plans, so that there was still room to redirect soldiers from Austria towards Germany. This, again, depended on a rigid rail timetable, and was incredibly risky for that reason, but the Tsar appears to have internalised the lesson that he could partially mobilise a few districts for up to ten days before the question of a general mobilisation would have to be confronted. If he waited any longer than that, the greater demands of the general mobilisation program would be undercut by the measures already taken, and resources already ringfenced for use.

Two perks would nonetheless emerge from this approach; by avoiding general mobilisation, and electing only for the partial program, Russian measures could go broadly under the radar, and Russia could continue to wait on see on events. In line with this, Russia would acquire a measure of political flexibility, even if behind the scenes, military imperatives would require the pronouncement of general mobilisation by the end of the week. Weighing the pros with the cons, historians have been critical of both the Tsar’s misreading of Russia’s capabilities, and the willingness of his underlings to go along with them. Did the generals not understand that military plans would be compromised by an incomplete mobilisation? Two military figures were key in permitting partial mobilisation to remain in play for as long as it did. The first was the War Minister and former chief of the general staff, Sukhomlinov, and the second was the current Chief of the General Staff, Yanushkevitch. Bruce Menning provides several reasons for why Sukhomlinov allowed partial mobilisation to proceed: He did not wish to offend the Tsar by rejecting a measure he had approved; he may have presumed upon war and regarded Russia’s policy as immaterial either way; he did not see the need to plant his flag of opposition when the measures had only been agreed in principle; and finally, he believed that these partial measures could buy time and clarify uncertainties around German intentions.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Thomas Otte provided further explanations – both the war minister Sukhomlinov and Yanushkevitch, the chief of staff, were inexperienced, lacking in specialist knowledge and deficient in professionalism. Yanushkevitch, for instance, had only been installed as chief of staff in March 1914 – hardly enough time to acquire a good grasp of extremely complex mobilisation minutiae. Sukhomlinov had fewer excuses; he had been war minister since 1909, and chief of the general staff for a year before that. The life and times of Vladimir Sukhomlinov could easily fill their own podcast – he was imprisoned by the Tsar’s regime in 1916 on charges of corruption and mismanagement, and imprisoned again by the provisional government in 1917. Although he escaped the purges of the Soviets, the revolution shattered his fortunes forever, and in 1928 he died an ignominious death from exposure while sleeping rough during a cold Berlin winter.

Perhaps if he had handled his duties better, Sukhomlinov could have had a different fate, but as a friend to the Tsar and in a position of immense privilege, it seems he failed to grasp the importance of key details like mobilisation, failures which arguably, in the end, cost this Russian statesman his life. Then again, Sukhomlinov swam in a rich soup of failures. Evidently, some Russian officials did not even understand the deeper nuances themselves. Sazonov, for instance, had pressed for partial mobilisation since the meeting of 24 July. Yet, for Russia as in other powers, a disconnect did exist between the civilian and the military spheres. Berchtold was in a similar position; he had pressed for a warlike response from an early stage, clueless as to the true complexity of what he was asking. As Otte deduced, ‘As a civilian operating in an environment in which the military elements were hermetically sealed from the rest of the governmental apparatus, the [Russian] foreign minister was largely ignorant of military planning.’[[12]](#footnote-12)

The mistakes and misjudgement made by these figures cost Europe its peace. I alluded above to Sean McMeekin’s view of the period preparatory to war, and how he is largely alone in seeing the process as akin to mobilisation. Yet, this does not mean that Russia’s behaviour in implementing this policy – six full days before Germany declared war – was anything but incredibly provocative, and arguably irresponsible. They were responsible not necessarily for what they meant on the ground for Russia, but what they suggested to Germany. Try not to look surprised, but news of the period preparatory to war was quickly leaked to the German General Staff, and to a military machine concerned with precise timetables and established predictions, Russia’s behaviour threw an enormous spanner in the works, In our analysis to come, we will see how obsessed the Germans were with Russia’s preparations, and there is good reason to suspect that this act was something of a turning point for Berlin. As the historian David Stevenson explained, when assessing whether the war erupted accidentally, the intent of Russia’s actions were less important than Germany’s interpretation:

The Russian Preparatory Period measures and general mobilization were the most important proximate cause of Germany's decision to start a European war. At first sight Russia fits much better than does Germany the model of inadvertent war entry occasioned by ill-thought military steps. This is particularly true for the Preparatory Period regulations, whose purpose was to satisfy demands from the army and from Russia's powerful agriculture minister, Alexander Krivoshein, for ensuring military preparedness whatever the diplomatic consequences. General Yanushkevich, the CGS, ordered the regulations to be applied fully and energetically and even exceeded, although as of July 26 the Russians had no evidence of extraordinary precautions in Germany.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Even if we cannot accuse Russia of taking these steps with the intention of launching a world war, as we have seen, this does not mean we cannot criticise her for, essentially, jumping the shark. As Stevenson continued:

It was the Russian civilian leaders who approved the Preparatory Period in the council of ministers on July 24 and in a crown council on July 25. Similarly, it was the civilian foreign minister Sazonov who won over Nicholas II to general mobilization after the czar had refused to listen to Yanushkevich. The record of Sazonov's and Nicholas's meeting on July 30 supports [the] assertion that even if general mobilization was technically distinct from opening hostilities, the Russian leaders authorized it in the expectation that they were, as Nicholas put it, sending thousands and thousands of men to their deaths.[[14]](#footnote-14)

This is all to say that even in something as technical as mobilisation, there exists shades of grey which add yet more complexity to the July Crisis. At the risk of jumping the shark myself, I should warn you that the period 25 – 30 July may be viewed as the last chance saloon for peace. It was during those five days that contemporaries, for a variety of reasons, became disillusioned with the options before them, and resigned themselves to the catastrophe. In fact, as David Stevenson concludes, once the decision was made to defend Serbia it would have been extremely difficult to avoid the war:

Although in principle the czar had the alternative option of avoiding war by abandoning Serbia to its fate, this choice was highly unattractive. To have taken it would have spelled catastrophe for Russia's international standing and perhaps for its internal stability, and for these reasons Sazonov and his colleagues ruled it out. Except possibly during the few brief hours when Bethmann wavered after Grey's warning to Germany on July 29, little scope existed for compromise between Berlin and Vienna's determination to crush Serbia and Russia's willingness to fight rather than let them do so. By July 30 Bethmann may have been trapped in a logic of his own making, but for Sazonov too his own choices made war inescapable.[[15]](#footnote-15)

This question – of whether contemporaries could have made different, better choices, to avoid the war – has become a defining part of the July Crisis historiography. There is still a lot we can say about the actual options which were on the table, but because the belief had set in that further retreats were impossible, the powers were more constrained than in previous crises. We may view the Russian reaction as a pivotal step towards escalation, but we should not write Russian concerns off as a mere excuse for fighting the war they wanted. Just like the Austrians, Germans, and French to some extent, Russian policy was animated by fear. A fear among the generals, that they could not plead powerlessness after doing so since 1909. A fear among the Pan Slavists, that if they failed to defend Serbia, her credit as liberator of South Slavs would be lost. A fear among strategists, that between the Ottoman rebuilding of its navy and the extension of Habsburg influence into Serbia, the Straits could slip forever from Russia’s grasp. A fear among statesmen, that if Russia failed to defend her interests when buoyed by French support, the Entente might crumble altogether.[[16]](#footnote-16)

By declaring the period preparatory to war, Russia recognised that ‘a period of diplomatic tension which precedes the beginning of war operations’ had begun. The Tsar had given his approval for additional preparations in key military districts, and to this he had added the Black and Baltic Sea fleets, which suggests a willingness to coerce the Germans at sea while confronting Austria on land. During a meeting at 8PM on 25 July, Russian generals went further still. They placed additional fortresses on a war footing, tightened censorship and security, horses were precured and wagons constructed, harbours were to be mined, and St Petersburg and Warsaw were declared to be in a ‘state of extraordinary protective activity.’[[17]](#footnote-17) For now, as we recall, Russia restricted its operations to Austria alone, and it was affirmed that Russia would not commence military operations until Serbia was attacked. Yet even in their peaceful preparations for war, the Russians were doing more than enough to discomfort the Central Powers. The Russians were deluding themselves; it did not matter to Germany if Russia mobilised only against Austria, she could never accept an attack upon her ally, particularly after the blank cheque. Nor was the Russian decision military useful. Its partial mobilisation was ‘grossly impractical and potentially dangerous,’ in Christopher Clark’s view, but it would take another few days for this to dawn on the Russian generals.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Still, by the evening of 25 July 1914, Russia had at least confirmed its stance. This would not be a rerun of 1909 or 1913; Russia was powerful enough to take a stand, and with the French providing their full support, there never seemed a better time to call the Austrian bluff. News of Russia’s actions under the guise of the period preparatory to war quickly leaked out, despite the tight censorship and ban on reporting of military measures. Eyewitnesses in each of the key districts could provide troubling accounts of great enthusiasm among the officers, calling up of officers, and the movement of soldiers to railway hubs. The anxiety gradually increased in line with the increased volume of despatches and reports, and rumour filled in the blanks where the facts could not be verified. This information trickled into Berlin and Vienna, until by the eve of war it had become a flood. Unsurprisingly, it was difficult for Austrians and Germans to tell the difference between the period preparatory to war and full mobilisation, and this had diplomatic utility for Sazonov.[[19]](#footnote-19) He would now be in a stronger position, and the Central Powers might be more inclined to believe in his words, while the Serbians would be inspired to resist. We should note that at this point Sazonov’s main weapon was not yet this threat of force, but diplomacy.

Sazonov first tried to partake in the British goal of extending the Austrian deadline. When his agent arrived in Vienna in the early morning of 25 July though, he learned that Berchtold had gone to his Emperor to wait out its expiry. For Sazonov, an approach to Germany seemed the most useful, but he had already received discouraging noises from Pourtalès, the German ambassador. Pourtalès had emphasised that the conflict should be localised, and he had roundly rejected the idea of mediation, since hauling Austria before a ‘European tribunal’ would represent a humiliation. What was the point in lining up the different powers on opposite sides of this trial? This would turn the conflict into a European war, and surely Russia did not want that? Sazonov rejected this argument, and he warned Pourtalès of dire consequences if Austria ‘devoured’ Serbia. In Sazonov’s view, only by pressuring Germany could Austria be expected to extend the deadline, and this pressure would be more effective if laced with the threat of war.

Little could Sazonov had realised that the technicalities of his language would be heavily scrutinised. The demand to not devour Serbia was viewed as a vindication of Stefan Tisza’s insistence on no annexations of Serbian territory; if Austria did not devour the country through a total annexation, in other words, was Sazonov signalling that Russia would not intervene? Interestingly, at this point Tisza had fully embraced the war party, and was urging his Emperor to proclaim general mobilisation as soon as Serbia rejected the demands. ‘Given the contents of our note it seems to me there is no other possible way,’ Tisza concluded. ‘The slightest hesitation or wavering would severely impair the impression of the Monarchy’s energy and her ability to act,’ it would ‘influence the attitude of our friends and our opponents as well as those undecided elements,’ and ‘would result in potentially fateful consequences.’[[20]](#footnote-20)

Clearly, Vienna had not got the memo that Russia was serious this time, and would not allow Serbia to be attacked. In Austria’s defence, Russia had not communicated its next steps publicly. There would surely have been value in making things clearer to Austria, and the announcement of military measures would have placed the ball in Vienna’s court. As Sazonov recognised, there were also drawbacks to making its preparations public. Britain had previously warned against mobilisation, and Sazonov suspected that defying this request would make it harder to get Britain on side, since Grey might identify Russia as the main provocateur. It was also likely that such a public statement would draw an equally firm declaration from Germany to meet the challenge, reducing options further. Of course, by these decisions, Sazonov was making a direct contribution to the escalation of the crisis, even if he refused to recognise this. Above all, the period preparatory to war seemed specifically designed to send the Germans into a paranoid spiral of anxiety. The very lack of official information from St Petersburg meant that the Germans were bound to assume the worst, and since even allied ambassadors like Paleologue could remark that the measures looked to him like mobilisation, how were the Germans to know otherwise?[[21]](#footnote-21)

In another important respect, Sazonov was being misled. Maurice Paleologue effectively spoke for France so long as President Poincare continued his journey back home, but Paleologue was not an entirely honest actor. Poincare had learned of the ultimatum in the afternoon of 24 July, and shortly afterwards had read Sazonov’s advice to Serbia which had urged conciliation. Poincare took this as a worrying sign that Russia would adhere to its policy of timidity seen during the Balkan Wars. He warned that France could not be ‘more Slav than the Russians,’ and he anticipated that ‘Poor Serbia’ had ‘a good chance of being humiliated.’ Poincare was misinformed about Russia’s determination to stand firm, but this was thanks to Paleologue, as Thomas Otte noted:

The ambassador’s reports contained carefully calibrated doses of selective information, calculated half-truths and positive untruths. It proved a toxic mixture. In what he told his political masters as much as in what he omitted to tell them, Paleologue misled them. It was the ambassador, not Poincare’s and Viviani’s preferred mode of transport, who ensured that they were all at sea until the end of July. And it was Paleologue who determined France’s policy towards Russia, the alliance with whom remained the principal concern of French diplomacy.[[22]](#footnote-22)

How would Paleologue shape this policy? Upon learning of the period preparatory to war, Paleologue assured Sazonov that he had received several reports from Paris and ‘not one of them displayed the slightest sign of hesitation and he was in a position to give His Excellency the formal assurance that France placed herself unreservedly on Russia’s side.’ But such reports had never reached Paleologue’s desk, because they did not, in fact, exist. While crafting these fabrications, the ambassador also shielded Sazonov from any warnings his British colleague, Buchanan, had given him. The British, Paleologue claimed, were firmly on board, and he stressed the importance of Entente solidarity and the willingness to show its force. Paleologue continued to claim that Pourtalès, the German ambassador, was more menacing in his discussions than he had been. He put the finishing touches on his fabrications by portraying Sazonov as conciliatory and pacific, despite all evidence to the contrary.

With the picture Paleologue had painted of his allies and his enemies, it is hardly surprising that Poincare felt no need to rein in Russia, and was unaware of Russian military preparations. Paleologue informed Paris about the supposedly conditional nature of Russia’s mobilisation, which would only follow Austria’s declaration of war, but he failed to mention the period preparatory to war at all, despite being an eyewitness for its results. How could the French President view Russia from these reports, except as a beleaguered ally which needed to be encouraged?[[23]](#footnote-23) For the British as well, it was not realised just how far Paleologue had strayed from the official French government line; the acting Foreign Minister in Paris suggested that France would not support Russia unconditionally, yet its ambassador asserted that it would. Who was to be believed? The old British strategy of using France to mollify Russia, and Germany to mollify Austria, could not be applied as during the Balkan Wars. Foreign Secretary Grey wished to extend the deadline of the ultimatum, and avoid encouraging a hardline position in the Entente courts. He could at least take solace from the words of Austria’s ambassador to London, who had informed Grey that the ultimatum was not in fact an ultimatum – insofar as war would not commence immediately upon the expiry. This was a demarche, the ambassador said, and there might still be space to breathe even when the deadline ran out.[[24]](#footnote-24)

But this breathing space was gradually being suffocated. The period preparatory to war was a legally required step Russia had to take before engaging in war, but did this mean she was bound to make war, or that she merely wished to signal her seriousness to push matters towards war if the situation required it? The lack of clarity was extremely unhelpful, because even with so many questions hanging over the process, it was bound to appear provocative and escalatory to the Germans. If the period preparatory to war was necessary, then the partial mobilisation of key districts, and the intention to focus on Austria alone, was a grave strategic mistake. Some advantages could nonetheless be accrued from what Russia had done or committed to do by the end of 25 July. By laying down the gauntlet, German intentions could be clarified, and the Central Powers would be informed that Russia would not permit Serbia’s destruction. Whether room existed in a grey area, which would allow Austria to gain satisfaction, and Russia to maintain its status as the defender of Slavs, did not seem likely.

But peace had appeared in jeopardy before, only to be saved at the last moment. With the expiry of the ultimatum and the departure of the Austrian legation from Belgrade, it appeared the ball was in Vienna’s court. But what would Austria do? Not even the Germans could be sure. By 25 July, Austria had not mobilised, but she had been fed on a steady diet of urgent telegrams from her ally, stressing the critical role of speed. We will recall, Germany had wanted Austria to attack Serbia quickly, and reiterated this theme constantly once the blank cheque was issued. Nearly three weeks later, German messaging had not substantively changed, even if the situation had. Italy was also a concern, and the Italian government had signalled its discontent with the ultimatum which they had been surprised by as much as the other powers. Rome wished to gain some measure of compensation, and Italian Foreign Minister San Giuliano advised Italy should ‘work in silence, say little, do not be in a hurry, and be as far from Rome as possible.’ The Kaiser was unimpressed with Italian dealings – ‘the little thief just has to have something to swallow as well,’ he fumed – but Berlin could not afford to ignore the possibility that Italy would veer towards the Entente if it was left in the lurch.[[25]](#footnote-25)

The solution was for an Austrian fait accompli which would cut through the noise and anticipate Entente objections. Berlin had no control over what this would look like, and it wasn’t certain Austria knew itself what it would do. Had the last few weeks not suggested that Vienna was incapable of moving quickly or covertly? Perhaps it had, but by now Germany was in too deep to contemplate retreat. The localisation of an Austro-Serb conflict remained the driving mission in Berlin, no matter what the British tried to do. Since Grey could not penetrate these schemes, his mediation plan was bound to fail. The British remained uninformed of these German imperatives, just as he was misled by Paleologue’s spirit defence, but by far the greatest grey area was in respect to Russia’s actions. Whether the period preparatory to war represented a Russian effort to prepare for war or simply to demonstrate its seriousness may be debated, but the policy inflicted great damage. On the other hand, this shows the extent to which the Central Powers had miscalculated. Having assured themselves of Russian neutrality, despite all evidence to the contrary, it would become increasingly difficult to ignore reports of her preparations. As we will see though, finding evidence of her actions was one problem, another was persuading the other European powers that Russia was making the crisis worse, and had to restrained. If they would not do so, then Berlin would put Russia in her place once again, whatever the cost.

1. 25 July 1914, Szogyeny to Berchtold in Mombauer, *Documents*, p. 351. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 25 July 1914, Special Journal of the Russian Council of Ministers in Mombauer, *Documents*, pp. 340-341. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 25 July 1914, Draft report of the Russian Foreign Minister for Nicholas II in Mombauer, *Documents*, pp. 343-344. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Otte, *July Crisis*, p. 241. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 25 July 1914, Journal of the Russian General Staff Committee in Mombauer, *Documents*, pp. 356-357. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Bruce Menning, ‘Russian Military Intelligence, July 1914,’ *Historian*, 77, 2 (SUMMER 2015), 213-268; 239. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. McMeekin, *July 1914*, p. 215. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Menning, ‘Russian Military Intelligence,’ 241-242. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Ibid*, 244. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Otte, *July Crisis*, p. 243. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Menning, ‘Russian Military Intelligence,’ 245-246. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Otte, *July Crisis*, p. 243. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. David Stevenson, ‘Militarization and Diplomacy in Europe before 1914,’ *International Security*, 22, 1 (Summer, 1997), 125-161; 153. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Ibid*, 154. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Ibid*, 154. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Hermann, *The Arming of Europe*, pp. 214-215. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Martel, *Month that Changed the World*, pp. 190-191. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, p. 476. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *Ibid*, pp. 478-480. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. 25 July 1914, Tisza’s report to Kaiser Franz Josef in Mombauer, *Documents*, p. 352. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Otte, *July Crisis*, pp. 245-246. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. *Ibid*, p. 248. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. *Ibid*, pp. 249-253. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. *Ibid*, pp. 261-263. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. *Ibid*, pp. 274-275. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)