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| The July Crisis: 19 Steps to Disaster |

On Sunday morning, 28 June 1914, in Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia, a province of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Bosnian Serbs assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Empire, and his wife.

(1) Serbian military officers and government officials instigated the assassination plot.

On his own initiative, Colonel Dragutin Dimitrijvic, the Head of Serbian Military Intelligence, master-minded the plot to assassinate Archduke Franz Ferdinand. Serbian officers and officials gave the six assassins guns, bombs, money, and training, and provided safe passage across the Serbian border into the Austro-Hungarian province of Bosnia.

The Serbian government knew there was a plot of some kind but did not have the political power to investigate it properly and stop it. They warned the Austro-Hungarian authorities but in such a vague way no action was taken.

(2) Austria-Hungary decided to invade and break up Serbia giving parts to its neighbors and turning what was left into a client state of the Empire.

In attempting this Austria-Hungary went beyond punishing Serbia for involvement in the Sarajevo crime and set out to solve the larger problem of Serbian claims to territory and its threat to the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

* *Controversy: Why did Austria-Hungary decide on such an extreme measure? Was it justified?*

(3) Germany gave unqualified support to Austria-Hungary, the so-called “blank check”, in full knowledge of what the Austro-Hungarians intended to do.

Austria-Hungary could not have acted the way it did without German support. Germany took a calculated risk believing the conflict between Austria-Hungary and Serbia could be kept local and would not bring in Russia in defense of Serbia AND Russia's allies in the Triple Entente, France and Britain, would restrain Russia.

Germany advised Austria-Hungary to move against Serbia quickly and present Europe with a fait accompli.

* *Controversy: What did the German leaders expect and hope for in risking a European war?*

(4) Austria-Hungary moved slowly and issued an ultimatum to Serbia.

Initial opposition of the Hungarian Prime Minister and military unpreparedness, as many regular troops were on harvest leave, meant several weeks went by before Austria-Hungary could take action and when they did it looked like a calculated power play rather than a reaction to the crime in Sarajevo.

Austria-Hungary decided first to issue an ultimatum to Serbia with a 48-hour time limit making demands to be met in full which they believed the Serbs would reject, thus giving Austria-Hungary an excuse to invade. It made 10 demands, two of which infringed Serbian sovereignty by demanding Austro-Hungarian officials operate and carry out investigations in Serbia.

(5) France supported Russia.

Diplomatic leaks gave the Russians and French advance notice that Austria-Hungary was going to make extreme demands on Serbia.

By coincidence the French President, prime minister, and head of the Foreign Office were on a State visit to St Petersburg from 20-23 July. During the visit both governments affirmed the importance of their alliance. During a diplomatic reception, the French President warned the Austro-Hungarian ambassador that Serbia had a friend in Russia and Russia had an ally, France.

* *Controversy: What was the extent of French support? Did the French give the Russians their equivalent of a blank check? How important was it to Russia? What motivated the French?*

(6) Russia resolved to defend Serbia and immediately after the delivery of the Austro-Hungarian ultimatum to Serbia at 6.00 pm on 23 July, on the following day, started military preparations as well as diplomatic efforts to solve the crisis.

Russia initiated its "Period Preparatory to War" and decided it would order partial mobilization if Austria-Hungary invaded Serbia. This was mobilization of the Russian forces facing only Austria-Hungary.

Sazonov, the Russian Foreign Minister, recognized that Serbia had a case to answer and proposed direct talks between Russia and Austria-Hungary to discuss how the demands on Serbia could be restated without infringing Serbia's sovereignty.

The Austro-Hungarians took several days to reply and eventually, after their declaration of war on Serbia, agreed to talk but only about general relations between Austria-Hungary and Russia itself.

* *Controversy: Why did the Russians decide immediately to take military steps? Was their proposal for talks genuine?*

(7) Serbia gave an unsatisfactory reply to the Austro-Hungarian ultimatum. Austria-Hungary broke off diplomatic relations and began to mobilise against Serbia.

Though the Austro-Hungarians designed the ultimatum expecting it to be rejected, it couldn't be blatantly unacceptable and the Serbs might have accepted it.

It is possible they considered this because the country was very weak after the Balkan wars but they believed they would get Russian support, and composed a clever reply accepting most of the Austro-Hungarian demands with qualifications, in effect, not accepting them, but giving the impression they were being contrite and reasonable.

* *Controversy: Did the Russians have an undue influence over the Serbian reply? Could the Serbian reply have been used as the basis of a solution? The Kaiser thought so. (See #9)*

(8) Britain initially tried to play a neutral role.

Grey, the British Foreign Secretary, put forward the idea of the Great Powers not directly involved in the crisis - Italy, Germany, Britain and France - holding an ambassadors' conference in London to mediate a solution. The idea of a conference was accepted by Russia but turned down by Austria-Hungary and Germany.

Grey was stuck between supporting Russia and France and possibly encouraging them to be too bold or advising them not to take any risks.

Warning Russia in this way would have upset the delicate relationship between Britain and Russia concerning their imperial interests in Persia and southern Asia. The Russian Foreign Minister made clear that Britain's behavior in the crisis would affect this relationship.

(9) Germany played a double game pretending to support mediation to solve the crisis but all the time encouraging Austria-Hungary to act quickly against Serbia.

On 27 July, in response to a British request, Germany forwarded another British mediation proposal to Vienna after telling Vienna it could be ignored and was only being forwarded to please the British in the hope they would stay neutral. Germany kept pressing Austria-Hungary to act quickly.

On the following day the Kaiser himself, having only just seen the Serbian reply, now believed there was no cause for war, proposed that Austria-Hungary should accept it but occupy Belgrade (what became known as "Halt in Belgrade") until its demands were met, any remaining differences being settled by negotiation.

The German Chancellor forwarded his version of this proposal to Vienna but in such a way to make the Austro-Hungarians believe if they rejected it they would still have full German support.

* *Controversy: Were the Kaiser and Chancellor pulling in different directions? Was the Kaiser's proposal a way out of the crisis allowing negotiation and meeting the needs of both Austria-Hungary and Russia?*

(10) Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia on 28 July, two weeks before it could complete mobilization and invade.

It did this in response to German pressure and to pre-empt diplomatic efforts to solve the crisis. The Austro-Hungarian Foreign Minister also thought the declaration of war would cause Serbia to change its mind and accept the ultimatum in full. As Serbia now had Russian support there was no chance of this.

The declaration, and brief bombardment of Belgrade that followed it, alarmed the Russians even more. They thought a full scale invasion was underway and it spurred them to further military preparations.

* *Controversy: How far did German pressure persuade Austria-Hungary to take this precipitous action?*

(11) Russia announced its mobilization within 36 hours of the Austro-Hungarian declaration of war on Serbia.

The Russians decided on general mobilization which threatened Germany as well as Austria-Hungary. The military argued that partial mobilization, only on the borders with Austria-Hungary, would dislocate a general mobilization if one became necessary, and in any case Germany was behind Austria-Hungary's actions and war with Germany was highly likely.

At the last moment, following a message from the Kaiser saying he was trying to influence Vienna, the Tsar changed this to partial mobilization against Austria-Hungary only, and this was the announcement made late on Wednesday, 29 July.

Following further arguments from the military and the Russian Foreign Minister, the Tsar changed back to general mobilization and this was announced at 5 pm on Thursday, 30 July, less than 24 hours later.

For Russia, mobilization did not mean war. The Russian army could remain standing ready within Russia's borders.

* *Controversy: Would it have made a difference if the Russians had waited longer or mobilized against Austria-Hungary only?*

(12) France did not restrain Russia.

The French leaders were at sea returning from their state visit to Russia. Poor radio communications meant they were not fully aware of how quickly and seriously the crisis was developing. They did not get back to France until 29 July.

During this time on several occasions the French ambassador in St Petersburg assured the Russian government of France's full support. He was also unclear in his messages to the Foreign Ministry in Paris about the exact nature of Russia's military preparations.

The French themselves started to take military precautions and the French President once back in Paris approved the military measures and continued to back Russia.

* *Controversy: Did the French ambassador exceed his authority and fail to keep the French government fully informed? With better and timelier information would the French have restrained the Russians?*

(13) Britain delayed for too long to make clear to Germany that it would support France and Russia.

In issuing the German blank check at the beginning of the crisis and risking war with Russia, the German Kaiser and the civilian leadership believed Britain would remain neutral, and they were confirmed in this impression by George V saying to the Kaiser's brother as late as the 26 July, that he hoped Britain would be neutral.

And, in fact, the Liberal British cabinet was overwhelmingly against joining a European war in support of France or Russia concerning Serbia.

* *Controversy: Would an early warning to Germany that Britain would fight on the side of France in the event of a European war have deterred Germany from risking war? Could Grey have ignored or got round the objections of his cabinet colleagues? The Conservative opposition was in favor of supporting France.*

(14) Germany realized that a European war was going to break out. Russia was mobilizing, and Grey had finally made it clear that Britain would be drawn in and would support its Entente partners, France and Russia.

The German Chancellor made a third and, this time, an apparently genuine attempt to persuade Austria-Hungary to modify its policy. He put forward a British version of the "Halt in Belgrade" idea.

This happened as military considerations were becoming paramount. Germany's own military were pressing for action.

* *Controversy: Was it too late? Was it genuine? Germany wanted to appear as the peaceful party and for Russia to make the first military move so it could be blamed if war broke out. This was important to get the support of the socialists, the largest party in the Reichstag.*

(15) The German military took control of policy and an ultimatum was sent to Russia.

The German military had only one plan which depended on critical timing and great speed. It was based on Schlieffen's ideas.

As Russia and France had a military alliance it assumed if Germany fought Russia it would have to fight France at the same time. Thus it was best first to defeat France quickly in the west, which involved an immediate invasion of France through Belgium, and then turn on Russia in the east.

German mobilization took 16 days and opened with an immediate surprise attack in the west. Full Russian mobilization took more than three weeks.

The German Chief of Staff, who had supported the Chancellor's efforts to keep the conflict local and to exhaust diplomatic efforts, suddenly changed his mind and demanded Germany immediately declare a "State of Imminent Danger of War" which led within 48 hours to German mobilization.

Germany sent an ultimatum to Russia saying that if Russia did not stop its mobilisation within 12 hours and demobilize, Germany would mobilize.

* *Controversy: Why did the German Chief of Staff change his mind? Could Germany have waited another two or three days to exhaust the "Halt in Belgrade" solution? Why did the German Chancellor give in to the military?*

(16) Austria-Hungary adhered strongly to its original objective to invade and break up Serbia.

Austria-Hungary ignored the last-minute call from the German Chancellor to modify its aims. At no time during the crisis did Austria-Hungary consider modifying its plans. It feared the loss of prestige and believed anything less than a complete invasion would not solve the Serbian problem.

The Austro-Hungarian Chief of Staff also received a message from the German Chief of Staff, acting independently of the Chancellor, saying Austria-Hungary should mobilise against Russia and send the bulk of its forces north to fight Russia rather than Serbia.

For Germany it was highly important that Austria-Hungary threw its full weight against the Russians in the east to weaken and further slow the Russian attack on Germany.

Austria-Hungary announced the mobilization of all its forces.

* *Controversy: Why did the Austro-Hungarians ignore the German Chancellor's advice? What would have happened if they had accepted it? Would it have been too late?*

(17) Russia ignored the German ultimatum.

Russia told Germany it could not stop mobilization and mobilization was only a precautionary measure.

* *Controversy: The Tsar might not have realized German mobilization led immediately to war unlike Russian mobilization, and that of the other Great Powers, which involved the call up of reservists and the preparation of the army, but not actual war.*

(18) Germany mobilized, declared war on Russia and then on France, and immediately invaded Belgium.

For Germany mobilization meant an immediate cross-border attack, the seizure of the Luxembourg railways and the capture of the Belgian forts at Liège blocking the invasion route to France. The attack on Liège was carried out by regular troops at peace-time strength.

* *Controversy: Were there other military options for Germany and could they have made a difference?*

(19) Britain joined the conflict.

Despite detailed naval and military understandings between the two countries, Britain had no treaty obligation to go to the aid of France.

Only two cabinet members, Grey and Churchill, implicitly supported by Asquith, the prime minister, argued it was right for Britain to join in the defence of France in a European war.

The German invasion of Belgium, a neutral country, roused public opinion and persuaded the majority of the cabinet led by Lloyd-George to support military action. Two members resigned in protest.

At 11.00 pm (London time) on 4 August 1914, Britain declared war on Germany.

* *Controversy: Did Britain do the right thing?*