‘We began the war, not the Germans and even less the Entente – that I know.’ Leopold von Adrien-Werberg, former Austrian Consular General at Warsaw, in his memoirs, December 1918.[[1]](#footnote-1)

With German support for any measures against Serbia which Austria-Hungary saw fit to take, we may have expected – and, it seems, the Germans expected – that Vienna would proceed quickly towards the logical conclusion of these conversations. A sudden strike against Serbia, swift enough to serve as a fait accompli, would outmanoeuvre the Russians, and would ensure that the conflict remained localised in the Balkans. That Belgrade was right on the Austrian border, and in striking-distance of artillery, appeared to recommend such an attack, which would overwhelm and overawe Serbia before Europe had a chance to realise what was happening. This optimistic view of Austria’s plan was twinned with an equally positive picture of Austria’s prospects. If she acted in this manner, it was conceivable that she could reverse the downward trend in Habsburg prestige, demonstrate to the Balkans that the dynasty was here to stay, and seize from the Serbs or any other Slav power the mantle of revolutionary liberator. This was the best possible outcome – indeed, it was believed to be the only possible outcome. Weakness and timidity would be ruinous; bluff or mere threats would not be taken seriously. Only war with Serbia would be sufficient to destroy the conspiracy set against Austria-Hungary. Risky though it was, Vienna would have to use its military force to regain the initiative in the Balkans, and acquire satisfaction for the unjust atrocity in Sarajevo.

However, even as Austrian officials left Germany with new guarantees in hand, a great deal of uncertainty clouded what should have been a moment of clarity. How could Austria move as one against its southern foe without unity at home? Specifically, how could Austrians persuade their Hungarian counterparts that a war against Serbia – in the name of a slain Archduke who was known to have loathed the Hungarians – would be to their benefit? Would a triumphant war against Serbia not entail the further expansion of the Habsburg realm, to the detriment of Hungary’s influence among the multitude of demographics and ethnicities? Despite ostensibly playing for the same team, then, the Hungarian Minister President Stefan Tisza was expected to be the greatest hurdle in the way of the decisive mission which most in Vienna wanted, and which Germany had sanctioned. Getting Tisza out of the way, or convincing him that this war was essential for Habsburg longevity and security, would thus become Leopold von Berchtold’s primary mission.

On the morning of 7 July, a joint Council of Ministers met in Vienna in a session which lasted the entire day. Present were the usual Austrian officials, but now they were joined by their Hungarian counterparts, and the meeting was chaired by Berchtold. Before it took place though, Berchtold met with Stefan Tisza, Count Hoyos and Ambassador Tschirschky. While taking stock of the situation, Hoyos let it be known that he had told Zimmerman of Austrian plans to partition Serbia. Outraged, Tisza demanded Tschirschky inform Berlin that ‘everything that Count Hoyos said…is to be regarded as his own personal opinion. This limitation refers particularly to the fact that Count Hoyos stated that a complete partition of Serbia was under consideration here.’ As we saw on 5 July, Hoyos only made this claim in the first place because he wanted to be seen as having a plan, a plan which Tschirschky had previously intimated would be essential for Berlin to take Vienna’s war plans seriously. Now it seemed Austria had no war plans, and no idea what to do with Serbia once the war was won. It was apparently more important to Tisza that Germany was told what Austria-Hungary would *not* do, rather than what it would do. This lack of plan remained a defining characteristic of Austrian policy throughout the July Crisis.[[2]](#footnote-2)

With this exchange, Tisza reaffirmed the limits of his support for Austrian war plans. He was by this point still not convinced that war was even necessary, as the subsequent meeting proved. This Joint Council Meeting opened in the morning of 7 July, and was the most fully-attended gathering yet of Austro-Hungarian statesmen, including the Austrian Premier, Hungarian Premier, Joint Finance Minister Bilinski, Joint War Minister Krobatin, the chief of staff Conrad, and a Vice-Admiral. The aim of this meeting, as Berchtold explains, was to ‘advise on the measures to be taken for addressing the evils which in Bosnia and Herzegovina have resulted from the catastrophe of Sarajevo,’ adding ‘there should be clarity whether the moment had not come whether a show of force would deal with Serbia once and for all.’ It was essential for Habsburg policymakers to gather and take stock of the situation in light of German assurances, and Berchtold discerned that ‘A decisive stroke of this kind could not be dealt without previous diplomatic preparation, and for this reason he had contacted the German Government.’ Berchtold declared that the outcome of the two-day trip to Berlin had ‘a very satisfactory result,’ since ‘both Kaiser Wilhelm as well as Herr von Bethmann Hollweg had emphatically promised us the absolute support and aid of Germany in the eventuality of a warlike complication with Serbia.’ Addressing the Russian elephant in the room, Berchtold acknowledged ‘that a war with Serbia could lead to a war with Russia.’ However, he continued:

Russia’s present policy was in the long run aimed at a league of the Balkan States including Romania, which it could at a suitable moment play out against the Monarchy. It was his belief that we must take into account that in the face of such policy our situation must deteriorate as time goes on, all the more because our own South Slavs and Romanians would interpret any inaction as weakness, and it would give credence to the persuasions of the two neighbours bordering our frontier. The logical result of what has been said would be to get in advance of our foes and by a timely reckoning with Serbia, to stop the development of the process at present going on, which we would not be able to do later.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Having made his piece, Berchtold gave way for Tisza to speak his own mind. The Hungarian was within his rights to feel somewhat bitter; the recent mission of Count Hoyos to Berlin had been organised to deliberately bypass him and his objections. Yet Tisza’s tone was conciliatory; he did not criticise his colleagues or suggest that no grounds existed for hostile action against Serbia. Yet he argued that it was ‘absolutely necessary that we formulated demands for Serbia and only issued an ultimatum if Serbia did not meet them. These demands should be hard, but not impossible to meet.’ This formed the crux of Tisza’s position, and differentiated him from his colleagues until he was later persuaded. Tisza insisted that Vienna should make demands of Serbia, and, only when these demands were refused, issue an ultimatum. As Tisza clarifies, the ultimatum should be harsh, but not impossible to meet. This clashed badly with his colleagues, who, if they were willing to accept that an ultimatum should be issued before the war, wanted it to be impossible to accept, thus making war with Serbia inevitable. But Tisza maintained a victory by diplomatic means could be just as effective as a military triumph:

If Serbia accepted them, we should have a tremendous diplomatic success and our prestige in the Balkans would increase immensely. If our demands were not met, he would also be in favour of warlike action, but even now he had to stress that by means of a war we could aim to reduce the size of Serbia, but we could not completely annihilate it, because on the one hand Russia would fight to the death before allowing this, and also because he, as Hungarian Premier, could never consent to the Monarchy’s annexing any part of Serbia. It was not for Germany to decide whether we ought to strike against Serbia now or not. Personally, he held the view that it was not absolutely necessary to wage a war at the present moment.

This three-step plan of demands, ultimatum, success – or, possibly, demands, ultimatum, war – was based on recent diplomatic experiences and Tisza’s estimation of the Dual Monarchy’s strategic situation. The inclusion of Bulgaria in the Triple Alliance would counterbalance the Serbs, particularly once Turkey and Greece were persuaded to join, and this would also neuter Romanian aspirations. Tisza also considered the unequal birthrates of Germany and France, which saw the former grow in population at a much greater rate than the latter. This French problem was indeed acute, and its consequences were felt throughout the twentieth century and into the Second World War, particularly once the First World War had destroyed much of the French youth that had been born in the decades immediately for the war. For Tisza, these developments were reassuring, and he declared that ‘despite the crisis in Bosnia,’ he ‘could not make up his mind in favour of war,’ yet ‘still thought that a marked diplomatic success – which would cause a deep humiliation of Serbia, would be suitable decidedly to improve our situation and allow an advantageous policy in the Balkans.’[[4]](#footnote-4)

In response, Berchtold was as direct as he dared to be. He made the point that recent diplomatic victories – above all in October 1913, when Serbia backed down from Austrian threats during the Albanian Crisis – had not reduced Serbia’s power or appetite in the region, and had in fact increased tensions between Vienna and Belgrade. Further, Berchtold disputed the notion that Romania would attack Austria while she dealt with Serbia. He also countered Tisza’s point about the favourable birthrate in Germany by underlining how Russia more than made up the manpower difference. The Austrian Minister President or PM, Count Karl Sturgkh, agreed with Berchtold’s assessment. He added input from Oskar Potiorek, the feckless governor of Bosnia, who told Sturgkh that local repressive measures against rebellious Slavs were ineffectual so long as Serbian agitation existed across the border. Such conclusions, Sturgkh asserted,

…make it imperative to ask whether we are at all able to stop the subversive activity which originates in Serbia, and whether we are able to keep the two provinces in question if we do not promptly deal a blow to Serbia.

Strugkh agreed with Tisza that it was for Austria, not Germany, to decide how and when to act, yet it was noteworthy that their ally had given them support to act against Serbia. Tisza, Sturgkh argued, ‘should consider this circumstance and remember that by a weak and hesitating policy we might risk not being so certain of German support at some future time.’ This captured the anxieties of both Dual Alliance partners, who were each worried that the other would abandon them if they failed to demonstrate their support now. If a sneak attack was inadvisable, then Sturgkh insisted that something had to be done. He addressed the question ‘whether it was absolutely necessary to have a war or not,’ and emphasised that for him and others ‘the prestige and the existence of the Monarchy were decisive, whose South Slav provinces he considered lost if nothing happened.’ Sturgkh concluded by agreeing with Berchtold that diplomatic victory would not be enough, and ‘if forgoing diplomatic action is therefore resorted to for international reasons, it should be taken with the firm resolve that this action can only end in war.’[[5]](#footnote-5) The ethnically Polish joint Finance Minister, Bilinski, spoke next. He piled the pressure onto Tisza, declaring that ‘the decisive fight was unavoidable sooner or later.’ Coming to Tisza’s diplomatic solution, Bilinski again used recent history to make his case:

The ultimatum which we presented to Serbia last autumn had made the mood in Bosnia worse and had increased hatred against us. There was general talk among the people that King Peter [of Serbia] would come and free the country. Serbs only respond to violence, a diplomatic success would make no impression in Bosnia whatsoever and would rather be damaging than anything else.

Krobatin, the joint War Minister, added to this consensus, insisting that ‘diplomatic success would be of no value at all,’ and that ‘a success of this kind would be interpreted as weakness.’[[6]](#footnote-6) Regarding the military situation, Krobatin stressed that ‘it would be better to go to war immediately, rather than at some later point, because the balance of power would in future change to our disadvantage.’[[7]](#footnote-7) Krobatin made the point that in both the Russo-Japanese War and recent Balkan Wars, the aggressors had not issued any ultimatum, but had launched a premeditated attack. He suggested Austria should mobilise against Serbia, waiting to see what Russia did before mobilising all her forces entirely. Krobatin warned that Vienna had lost two previous opportunities to take Serbia down, and if she lost this third chance, her weakness would reverberate throughout the Balkans, causing ‘a strengthening of the agitation against us.’ Krobatin concluded that

…it was desirable that the mobilisation should be carried out immediately and as secretly as possible, and that an ultimatum should be addressed to Serbia only when the mobilisation was complete. This would also be advantageous with regard to the Russian forces, as just now the Russian border corps are incomplete due to harvest leave.[[8]](#footnote-8)

This should have drawn Conrad forward to reiterate that the Habsburg army was also required to go on harvest leave, but if this point was made, it did not make the minutes. Instead, Tisza acquired a kind of victory once war aims were properly discussed. It was now formally accepted that Serbia could not be annihilated, only reduced in size, and this was done largely to accommodate Russia. Some suggested deposing the Serb dynasty in place of a more pliable dynasty, perhaps from a branch of the Habsburgs. Serbia should also be made more dependent upon Vienna, though the details of this plan were not fleshed out. Tisza again intervened, reminding his peers of ‘the terrible calamity of a European war under the present circumstances.’ He reiterated his support for the much-maligned diplomatic solution, suggesting one could not foresee what might transpire in the near future which would grant further opportunities to capitalise. Berchtold spoke in reply: ‘There was no time for such developments,’ he said, since ‘our enemies were preparing for a decisive conflict with the Monarchy and…Romania was lending a helping hand to the diplomacy of Russia and France.’ Berchtold ran through the wider Balkan situation in more detail; Franco-Russian influence was then rife in Turkey; Bulgaria was not a reliable counterweight to Romania; the failure to tie additional Balkan allies to Austria’s side could only be reversed by a firm policy which would punish the Serbs and shatter the air of gloom which enveloped the Monarchy.

Yet, these valid counterpoints did not matter so long as Tisza was unmoved. Despite the clear majority in favour of war, the 1867 Compromise meant that they, in fact, must compromise with Tisza. He managed to acquire a consensus to the effect that mobilisation would not occur until the ultimatum had been sent, and rejected. This prevented any surprise attacks, which could very easily outpace political efforts.[[9]](#footnote-9) And yet, Tisza continued to press for his three-step plan and emphasise the value of a diplomatic victory. The meeting ended with a form of stalemate; Tisza accepting he was in the minority. We imagine the atmosphere would have been extremely tense, and for Tisza, extremely difficult. The minutes make it clear that all except Tisza viewed a diplomatic solution as ineffective. They also demonstrate Tisza’s determination that the ultimatum should not be obviously impossible to accept, as this would defeat the whole purpose of the political act preceding the military act. In the event that he was not permitted any input on the ultimatum, Tisza remarked that he would ‘draw the consequences’, in other words, resign.[[10]](#footnote-10)

When the meeting resumed in the afternoon, it dealt with more military questions, but per Conrad’s request, the details were not written down. These were the vital strategic questions – could Austria mobilise against Serbia and only mobilise against Russia if the Russians moved; could several divisions remain in Transylvania to intimidate Romania; how to fight Russia, and where to bring the fight first if circumstances required it. The devil is in the details, yet even on the ultimatum, there was no concrete decision made. The minutes merely say that ‘No definite decision was made regarding these points; they were only formulated so as to give a clear idea of what might be asked of Serbia.’ The German recommendation of a swift strike against Serbia was thus rapidly fading from view; Tisza had ensured that an ultimatum would have to precede any such attack, and mobilisation could only follow Serbia’s rejection of it. If Tisza had his way, the ultimatum would be worded to be just acceptable enough to Serbia to avoid war, and since he requested – and was entitled to – veto power over this ultimatum’s terms, clearly Berchtold had much more work to do. The demand for an ultimatum preceding mobilisation also removed any element of surprise – an arguably pivotal ingredient considering how close Belgrade was to the Habsburg border. Yet, Berchtold could still conclude with a degree of positivity that:

…though there remained differences of opinion between members of the Council and Count Tisza, still an agreement had been arrived at, since even the proposition of the Hungarian Premier [the issuing of an ultimatum with very harsh terms] would in all probability lead to a war with Serbia, the necessity of which he and all the other members of the Council had understood and admitted.[[11]](#footnote-11)

This was technically true, but Berchtold was putting the most positive spin he could on it. The earlier effort to bypass Tisza had not worked; the Hungarian had not been convinced of the wisdom of war simply because the Germans were fully supporting them. He had also fought extremely hard for the diplomatic solution, and only relented when it became clear he was the only one in the room standing in the way of military action. Still, Tisza had technically accepted that war with Serbia would come soon; the ultimatum he prescribed would have to appear sufficiently palatable for war to be avoided, but it was highly unlikely Serbia would accept its terms.[[12]](#footnote-12) In that event, Tisza maintained, European impatience at Serb intransigence and its sympathies for Austria-Hungary’s loss at Sarajevo would facilitate a military success – but only if it came to that. That the only possible military course Tisza would accept was one which guaranteed a slow, methodical pace did not seem to occur to Berchtold; the Austrian Foreign Minister seemed to have lost all sense of urgency. He had just insisted there was no time to wait on events, yet no decision was made here to formulate even a draft of the ultimatum, and the Council members appeared instead to resort to spit-balling – should the Serbian monarchy be deposed; should Austria mobilise against Romania; how likely was Russian intervention – details vital to Austrian security were placed on the backburner.

We might wonder at the German reaction had one of their officials been present in the meeting. Would they have been horrified at the complacency, or the ability of Tisza to forestall any immediate military action? Yet, in Berlin as well, there was a remarkable disconnect between the significant implications of the blank cheque, and preparations to underwrite it. As Thomas Otte wrote:

Decision making in the two [Dual Alliance] capitals ran along parallel lines but remained separate. Imbued with a vague sense of German military superiority, the Kaiser and the civilian leadership had embarked on a policy, the course and consequences of which they had not calculated. Germany was a giant with a brain made of clay. But nor was there proper strategic guidance at Vienna. Berchtold and his advisors were determined to have a war with Serbia, the aims and ramifications of which they had not considered either. The Habsburg Empire was a lesser giant than its northern ally, but its head, too, was made of clay. And this Empire now set the direction and pace of events.[[13]](#footnote-13)

One could argue that at this point, the most radical and dramatic act was the only possible way Vienna could have emerged from Sarajevo with something resembling a victory. It is easy to criticise this decision in hindsight, and to lambast these Habsburg officials for failing to reflect on the consequences of their actions. It is easy in retrospect to argue that Vienna should have anticipated Russian intervention, and should have known that the Tsar could not have permitted Serbia to be crushed in a localised war. Tisza’s claim that by rejecting a Serbian partition, Russia would be placated, holds little water, and may have been a cover explanation for his true wish not to expand the national demographics of the Empire further. When trying to understand the psychology behind those men who made these weighted decisions, it is vital that the context is kept in mind. Recent experiences of issuing ultimatums to Serbia, of Russian non-intervention, and of limited diplomatic victory in 1913 clearly shaped Tisza’s arguments, and Berchtold’s counterarguments. But considering Tisza’s technical adherence to the war party, albeit with several caveats, it is worth reflecting on why war was decided upon now, when according to Samuel Williamson Jr., Austria had rejected war four times since autumn 1912.[[14]](#footnote-14)

A wide range of interests and concerns had helped to legitimise Austria’s war policy. Oskar Potiorek, the disgraced military governor of Bosnia whose failings facilitated the Archduke’s murder, advocated for war with Serbia on the basis that unrest had flared up in Bosnia-Herzegovina since 28 June. He asserted that this unrest would spread, unless Vienna crushed its source, and by this logic domestic concerns were wedded to foreign policy. It should be noted that Potiorek exaggerated the extent of this unrest for his own reasons, and certainly had something to prove after watching Franz Ferdinand die in front of him. Perhaps in this war, he could restore his shattered reputation? Still, Potiorek’s contribution proved decisive in shaping the impressions of the situation in the Balkans. During the above meeting, Tisza did attempt to criticise Potiorek’s reliability in this respect, arguing that ‘he has the highest opinion of the current Governor as a military man, but as regards the civilian administration it could not be denied that it had failed utterly and that a reform was urgently needed.’ Tisza did not understand why ‘the affairs in Bosnia could not be substantially improved by a thorough reform of the administration.’[[15]](#footnote-15) But his colleagues did not see matters this way; they accepted Potiorek’s logic, that the Balkan provinces would never be quiet so long as Serbia agitated on the border.[[16]](#footnote-16)

We should also not underrate the impact of the Archduke’s sudden loss. It shocked Berchtold, who had worked closely with him, and helped distinguish previous crises from the current one. The Archduke had been marginally more cautious than the Foreign Minister, and this check was now gone. Also gone were the chief of staff’s concerns that Franz Ferdinand might replace him with someone less belligerent, as had happened before when Conrad was dismissed for insisting on war with Italy in late 1911. It was not just that the most high-profile cautious influence was now absent, but also that Franz Ferdinand had left a troubling succession situation behind him. With Franz Josef old and ailing, the new heir was the inexperienced and unimpressive Karl Franz Josef. Considering Franz Josef’s widely lauded role as a unifying figure for the Empire’s disparate nationalities, who could predict what would happen when he died, and the throne passed to that twenty-six-year-old non-entity? Would this represent the beginning of the end for the Habsburg Monarchy? As Samuel Williamson Jr., argued, ‘If one worried about the future and believed decisive action might revive sagging Habsburg fortunes, then the pressures for a confrontation with Serbia had dramatically increased.’[[17]](#footnote-17)

Germany’s blank cheque certainly had an impact. Unlike previous confrontations with Serbia, Montenegro or Russia in the Balkans, Austria-Hungary now enjoyed unconditional support from its ally. This could only have roused Habsburg statesmen to go further than they otherwise would have, but it is important to clarify that Berlin did not push Vienna into war. By 30 June, as we have seen, this decision was already at the forefront of Austria’s potential policy choices. The following days clarified the terms of this choice, but contemporaries were unwilling or unable to add precise details. Nor were they willing to reflect on a key request in German instructions – speed. Placing ourselves in the minds of these decision makers in 1914, we must also bear in mind the sense of decline expressed in both Vienna and Berlin. Having harboured impressions of the need to revive Habsburg fortunes, the assassination would have seemed like a death blow to the Empire’s position. Samuel Williamson Jr. makes the point that, in light of 9/11, the fact that Vienna prioritised a swift punitive response, yet neglected to consider the details or consequences, may be easier for us to understand than it would have been for previous generations of historians. As he put it, ‘Sometimes enough is felt to be enough, whether or not that feeling is wise.’ As a great power, at risk of losing its great power status, we must also consider Vienna’s concerns for its declining prestige, as Williamson wrote:

Considerations of prestige were at stake. Vienna and Budapest had to act like a great power and defend their position in the international system. A successful war might also convince Berlin of the Monarchy’s value as an ally. The Habsburg ministers got their war but none of their objectives.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Berchtold was convinced of these imperatives, and was determined to act as the minister of a great power by doing great power things. Great powers did not allow insults from lesser states to go unanswered; if they did, it would be assumed that Vienna was not as powerful and capable as her representatives claimed. This perception of weakness would contaminate the policy of Austria, but also of the entire Triple Alliance. On 8 July, the day after the joint council meeting, Berchtold thus wrote to Tisza in light of conversations he had to this effect with ambassador Tschirschky:

Tschirschky has just left me, who told me that he had received a telegram from Berlin by which his Imperial Master instructs him to declare emphatically that in Berlin an action of the Monarchy against Serbia is expected and that in Germany it would not be understood if we were to neglect this opportunity without striking a blow… The Ambassador’s further remarks showed me that Germany would consider further negotiating with Serbia a confession a weakness on our part, and that this would not be without repercussions for our position in the Triple Alliance and Germany’s future policy.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Berchtold urged his counterpart to see sense, reminding him of what was at stake, and insisting again that the diplomatic initiative Tisza had clung to in the meeting would simply not suffice. Berchtold sought adjustments; Serbia would not be greeted with demands, and Vienna would skip to the ultimatum which would contain such harsh terms as to be impossible for any sovereign state to accept, guaranteeing war. Tisza had been opposed to this, believing that Austria’s rivals would see through the cynical document as window-dressing for its war, rather than as a diplomatic lever which could be exerted to gain satisfaction. Still, in reading the room during 7 July meeting he had moved from his uncompromising anti-war position, and this suggested he might move further into the war camp if enough pressure was applied. Perhaps expecting the Hungarian could be moved further, Berchtold did not pause, but continued to act as though war was inevitable. When Berchtold met with the Emperor on 9 July, he was reassured that there was now no going back. Indeed, Franz Josef, no doubt now furnished with the preliminary results of the investigation in Bosnia, agreed with Berchtold that the ultimatum should be impossible to accept, and would be a mere formality preceding the war. This adjustment being made, with the Emperor on side, and war with Serbia now inevitable, Stefan Tisza was the only man in the Habsburg Empire who stood in the way.[[20]](#footnote-20)

In all of these deliberations, we are confronted with the question of *why*. Why were those in attendance at the Joint Council meeting of 7 July so unanimous – Tisza aside – that war was their only option, particularly when one considers how previous crises had transpired? To answer this question, it is worth considering what some historians have concluded on this decision. This requires an introduction to a useful piece written by Paul Schroeder, who argued that by 1914 the system had become rigged to Austria’s detriment, and that being unable to get a fair hearing from her neighbours in the aftermath of Sarajevo drove her to the riskiest, most drastic course. Schroeder’s analysis is more conceptual than we may be used to, but it is worth reflecting on to add additional texture to our narrative. Schroeder discerned that it is not enough to condemn Austria’s decision for war with Serbia either as a great crime or a terrible blunder. Only by placing ourselves in the shoes of Austria-Hungary’s statesmen in 1914 with the full context of the situation in mind can we come close to understanding and explaining it.

To begin with, Schroeder noted that this was far from the first time Austria had precipitated a war it had avoided for several years, only to bring disaster down upon itself. Consider 1809, when Austria attacked Napoleon without allies, and suffered disastrous consequences. Or 1859, when Vienna issued an unacceptable ultimatum to Sardinia, and then provoked a war with France. Or even 1866 – a war which seemed less dangerous on the surface, yet still wrought transformative consequences for the Habsburgs, which reverberated all the way to 1914.[[21]](#footnote-21) In each of these instances, Austria was aware of its difficulties and the threats surrounding it; years of restraint were retroactively categorised as a mistake, and a swift policy to reverse these trends recommended itself. In each of these failed efforts – 1809, 1859 and 1866 – public and private bluster was not accompanied by a coherent military strategy or even an accurate appraisal of the military-strategic challenges which would face them. Yet, members of the peace party were sufficiently discredited so that no other option seemed available at the time, and the call for moderation was silenced – in 1914, literally silenced by the murder of the Archduke.

Bearing these experiences in mind, Schroeder argues that in 1914, Austria’s policymakers were extremely limited in the choices available to them. In fact, Schroeder argues further, asserting that the international system was rigged against Vienna, thanks to advent of a new imperialism in European diplomacy which both increased competition, and dismissed Austria’s legitimate quest for satisfaction against a power which had attacked her. By 1898, Schroeder discerns, the imperialist competition for territories outside of Europe was transferred back to Europe, increasing tensions and reducing the willingness for compromise, and had reached its peak by 1907. In this new imperialism, there were no consequences for those powers that violated the peace or seized new territory for themselves, and it was clear that the old strategy of cooperation, arbitration and international conferences had been dispensed with.

The Concert of Europe, Schroeder says, collided with this new imperialism, with the result that Austria-Hungary could no longer acquire a fair hearing in its quest for justice. An example of how the old Concert was supposed to work can be seen in Austro-Russian efforts to maintain the status quo in the Balkans between 1897 and 1907. Before the Serbian question presented itself, the Macedonian question dominated, based on the anticipation that Serbia and Bulgaria would fight each other to acquire Macedonian territories. In that time, Schoeder wrote, the Austro-Russian agreement in the Balkans saw Vienna

…cooperating with its most dangerous rival in the area of their sharpest historic competition in order to manage a critical problem, keep their rivalry within bounds, and preserve the general peace, even while the Austrians knew that this policy offered their opponent the opportunity to make gains elsewhere that would enhance its overall power.[[22]](#footnote-22)

The reward for Russia was a free hand in the Far East, which led to a disastrous war with Japan, and for Austria, it was able to project its power further into the Balkans, while upholding its reputation and security. The drive of this new imperialism moved Italy to attack the Ottomans in September 1911, and compelled the Balkan League to seize the opportunity the following October. We might note that it was encapsulated in its purest form in the Japanese attack on Russia’s fleet. Yet, where Japan seized the moment by launching an undeclared war against Russia to force her back from its Asian sphere of interest, Austria-Hungary adhered to the traditional system from 1909, even as Russia continued to pile on the pressure, encouraged by Serbia, Romania, Italy, France, and Britain. As Schroeder put it:

The Japanese saw that under the current imperialist system it was foolish to look over the fence, see a thief preparing to steal horses one coveted oneself, try to reach an agreement on shared theft, and failing this fall back on the hope that the horses would not be stolen after all or that one could simply steal a few oneself without fighting the other thief. The rational though risky course was to attack the other thief first, drive him off, and then steal the horses oneself. And that policy worked.[[23]](#footnote-23)

It may have worked for Japan, but in Schroeder’s view, Austria was still operating according to the old system between 1909-1914. It missed the chance for a pre-emptive war between 1904-06, when Russia collapsed under the weight of its foreign and domestic woes. It also did not strike in the aftermath of the Bosnian annexation in 1909. It was actively held back and discouraged from striking throughout 1913, despite the costly mobilisations designed to show how serious it was. We saw these trends play out in our background episode, while underlining another negative trend. Russia cleaved with a renewed enthusiasm to its Entente partners, and Austro-German efforts to reassure the Tsar’s regime during the shaky aftermath of the Russo-Japanese war were rewarded by a new period of Russian hostility, complete with an abandonment of the old cooperation in the Balkans.

But, critics might challenge, did Austria not attempt to flex its imperialist muscles as well, by annexing Bosnia-Herzegovina and instigating a new crisis? The Bosnian annexation, elevated to a crisis between Vienna and St Petersburg between 1908-1909, had in fact been privately arranged by both sides, and Russia only cried foul when it became apparent that the move was unpopular among the Pan Slav faction at home.[[24]](#footnote-24) To this it should be added that Austria’s right to annex the territories had been implicit in the 1878 Berlin Treaty. Austria’s neighbours acknowledged her right to annex Bosnia-Herzegovina throughout the 1880s, and the British particularly tried on several occasions to undermine the Austro-Russian agreement on the provinces for their own ends – only to cry foul themselves in 1908 when Austria violated the Berlin Treaty.[[25]](#footnote-25) Schroeder thus concludes:

Austria-Hungary wanted to restore the earlier nineteenth century rules for obvious self-interested reasons; it depended on those rules or something like them for survival. Never throughout its history as a great power since the late seventeenth century had Austria been able to meet its many dangers and threats solely or mainly by its own power. It security had always depended not only upon powerful allies, but also on international consent – what I have called elsewhere ‘negative Austrophilia’, meaning thereby not positive support for Austria from other powers or their active willingness to defend it, but at least their grudging, half-contemptuous recognition that whatever its virtues and shortcomings, Austria fulfilled functions in the European system difficult or impossible to replace by anything else and that it therefore needed to be accepted and at least minimally support and kept alive… The Bosnian Crisis is significant therefore not simply because more than any other crisis it started Europe’s final descent into the maelstrom, but even more because it involved the last serious attempt to turn European politics around by reviving its previous spirit and ethos, and the attempt not merely failed miserably but confirmed and accelerated the trend it was meant to reverse. As a result, Austria-Hungary was bound to conclude that it must do something drastic to change a system that was slowly but surely strangling it. In 1914 as in 1809, it waited too long.[[26]](#footnote-26)

If the above analysis from Paul Schroeder seems a bit too conceptual, Christopher Clark also noted the tendency by 1914 to regard Austria-Hungary as a declining power, which under the new imperialist system should be permitted to collapse in a survival of the fittest, rather than as a power which, like its fellow states in Europe, had a right to expect fair treatment:

Most important of all was the widely trafficked narrative of Austria-Hungary’s historically necessary decline, which, having gradually replaced an older set of assumptions about Austria’s role as a fulcrum of stability in Central and Eastern Europe, disinhibited Vienna’s enemies, undermining the notion that Austria-Hungary, like every other great power, possessed interests that it had the right robustly to defend.[[27]](#footnote-27)

In response to this, historians have argued that by making war on Serbia, Austria-Hungary’s behaviour constituted the most flagrant violation of the international concert. When considering culpability for what transpired after 28 June, Matthias Schulz upheld that Vienna *did* have alternative options it could have pursued. He wrote:

By suggesting that a conference be held to preserve peace, the Austrian government might conceivably have had an opportunity to score a diplomatic victory without having to risk a catastrophe. It would have been legitimate and in accordance with Concert practice to demand the establishment of an international surveillance commission charged by the European concern to observe the Serbs’ search for those who facilitated the assassination. If the Serbians had produced no results, backtracked, or hampered such a commission, the majority of the powers in the Concert might have given Austria some diplomatic support, whatever that might have amounted to.[[28]](#footnote-28)

This, in my view, somewhat overstates the extent of the options available to Vienna at the time. In Schulz’ view, a conference *might* score a diplomatic victory; the European powers *might* have helped Austria get justice if the Serbs were recalcitrant – but there was no guarantee any of this would work. In fact, it was extremely unlikely that the Tsar would allow his Entente partners to pressure the Serbs into cooperating, and judging by their reaction to the assassination, neither Britain nor France seemed particularly interested in helping Austria acquire any measure of satisfaction. Conversations reported by the Austrian and German ambassadors in St Petersburg testified to Russian hostility and suspicion. When told that Vienna might seek redress for the murders by launching an investigation within Serbia, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Sazonov issued a stern warning to the Austrian ambassador: ‘Do not engage yourselves on that road, it is dangerous.’ When the German ambassador attempted to sound out Sazonov’s position, reminding him of the monarchical principle, it was noted that ‘Sazonov could not but agree to this remark but with less warmth than I usually find [on this subject].’ This apparent indifference was explained by Sazonov’s ‘irreconcilable hatred of Austria-Hungary, a hatred which here more and more clouds all clear, calm judgement.’[[29]](#footnote-29)

With this palpable hatred came an understanding of Russian strategy, particularly as regards Serbia. On 8 July, the Serbian ambassador to Vienna wrote home to Belgrade, warning that ‘the excitement continues undiminished,’ and that although a public face of calm was put on the deliberations, ‘it is impossible to determine what attitude the Government will adopt towards us.’ The ambassador discerned the importance for the Habsburgs in solving ‘the question of the so-called Greater Serbian agitation within the Habsburg Monarchy.’ ‘The ultimate decision,’ the ambassador said, would be based on the investigation’s evidence, and involved two possibilities:

Austria-Hungary has to choose on the following courses: either to regard the Sarajevo outrage as a national misfortunate and a crime which ought to be dealt with in accordance with the evidence obtained, in which case Serbia’s cooperation in the work will be requested in order to prevent the perpetrators escaping the extreme penalty; or, to treat the Sarajevo outrage as a Pan-Serbian, South-Slav and Pan-Slav conspiracy with every manifestation of the hatred, hitherto repressed, against Slavdom. There are many indications that influential circles are being urged to adopt the latter course; it is therefore advisable to be ready for defence.[[30]](#footnote-30)

In fact, the investigations had proceeded with greater speed than the Serb ambassador realised. Within a week of the act, the terrorists had been successfully interrogated, and all, including Princip, had fingered their comrades and superiors. The trail of evidence led to the Serbian border, where an official must have aided the conspirators in their crossing, having recruited and trained them. By 5 July, Oskar Potiorek was able to inform Berchtold that Serbian Major Tankosic had been explicitly named by the assassins. He had recruited, trained and transported them, and there was no reason to believe the conspiracy ended there. This evidence would be shown to Tisza in due time, but it was by this point undeniable that Serbian officials were involved in some capacity.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Although he may not have been informed of the progress of Vienna’s investigation, Serb Premier Nikola Pasic was well aware of his country’s need for ready defences. The aftermath of the Second Balkan War saw the Kingdom exhausted, in need of replenished military stocks, and a diplomatic policy adjusted to the fractious relationship with Vienna. From late 1913, Pasic also began to lean heavily on the Russians, requesting urgent military support from them. In spring 1914 these requests became more anxious, and concerned small arms, heavy guns, ammunition, uniforms, but also telegraph, wireless, and other communication equipment. There was a clear expectation in Serbian government circles that Habsburg hostility might soon escalate to war. Remarkably, two days after the assassination, and under pressure from the Tsar, the Russian General Staff did approve the transfer of 125,000 rifles and 120 million rounds of ammunition to Serbia.[[32]](#footnote-32) Even at this early stage, Serbian defence was a priority for St Petersburg, but in fact, Russian policy on an official and unofficial level went further than this.

Christopher Clark points out that within a week, a contrary narrative of the assassination had developed. The Russian government treated the act as an ‘internal Austrian affair’, ignoring or hiding all evidence of Serbian involvement. The Archduke was recast as a leader of the Habsburg war party; he was an unpopular, belligerent figure whose blundering belligerence got him murdered. The assumption that Franz Ferdinand got what was coming to him, and had been killed as a consequence of Habsburg expansionism in the Balkans, was frequently echoed in Entente correspondence. Entente partners, in particular the Russians, maintained that Serbia was an innocent party, uninvolved with the act, yet cynically blamed by Vienna.

In this view, the assassination was just desserts for Austrian imperialism; the Archduke had been felled by a madman’s bullet, yet Serbia would be blamed, because Austria, pushed by Germany, was desperate for a pretext to attack its Slav neighbour. Figures such as Nikolai Hartwig, the Russian ambassador to Belgrade, insisted that Serbs were not jubilant at news of Franz Ferdinand’s death – they had responded with sombre expressions of sympathy. Hartwig went further, denying any existence of a conspiracy which pointed to senior Serbian officials, despite the evidence which was then being extracted by the investigation’s interrogations. The Austrians, Hartwig charged, were manufacturing evidence to get what they wanted. Further, it would be unfair to hold all of Serbia responsible even if some Serbs had been involved. And, besides, this was the work of Germany, egging its partner on, to seize the opportune moment for a strike. By this misinformation campaign, the Russians did not merely muddy the waters, they also separated the Serbian government from what had occurred, thus justifying their own intervention on Serbia’s side, to defend their ally who was innocent of all wrongdoing.

The British and French adopted a version of the Russian line as well, or at least humoured its claims. Sir Edward Grey’s conversations with Russian and French ambassadors contained the expectation that Germany would restrain Austria, placing the onus on their rivals, rather than on themselves. All evidence which might contradict this narrative was ignored; Russia’s ambassador to Vienna asserted that no Croats or Bosnians had protested at the Serb embassy after the murders. This was the work of Bulgarian agitators, he claimed. Implicit in these efforts to change the narrative of Sarajevo was, first, an attempt to deny Vienna any semblance of satisfaction and, second, to portray Belgrade as the victim of Habsburg intrigues, which would be rigorously defended by her Entente friends. As Clark concludes on the deception:

An unpopular, warmongering martinet had been cut down by citizens of his own country driven to frenzy by years of ill-treatment and humiliation. And now the corrupt, collapsing and yet supposedly rapacious regime he had represented intended to blame his unregretted death of a blameless and peaceful Slav neighbour. Framing the event at Sarajevo in this way was not in itself tantamount to formulating a decision for action. But it removed some of the obstacles to a Russian military intervention in the event of an Austro-Serbian conflict.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Considering this atmosphere of hostility and suspicion surrounding the assassination, Habsburg contemporaries must have known that a fair hearing in any kind of arbitration was unlikely, and any prospect of collective European efforts to acquire justice more unlikely still. As Paul Schroeder’s above analysis underlines, the old mechanisms for preserving peace and securing justice were no longer in operation. That Austria was within its rights to seek satisfaction yet was denied any such justice is perhaps the clearest indication that a new imperialism of competition and suspicion had replaced the old system. Thus, the true limits of Austro-Hungarian options become clearer, and the decline of international, Concert-led initiatives to maintain peace becomes more tangible.

The European reception to the assassination was troubling, but Austrian statesmen also had to consider the possibility that if they appealed to a diplomatic solution, this would affirm the air of weakness and decline which had hovered over Vienna in recent years. Great Powers did not wait for the assent of their neighbours in their pursuit of justice – they acted firmly, powerfully, and without hesitation. To dispel these impressions of lost prestige, Austrian decision makers had little option other than to act as they did. Consider parallel fears in the German partnership; Vienna was mindful of the need to show its worth to Berlin through a swift, forceful policy, and even advised against mere negotiation as a viable solution to the problem. Not that Berchtold or his colleagues – aside from Tisza – ever seriously considered such a diplomatic solution to be sufficient.

This is not to excuse what was in retrospect an incredibly naïve and irresponsible act, yet engaging in a confrontational policy with an offensive neighbour was by no means unprecedented in the history of Great Power behaviour. Nor was the astonishing risk Austria took in issuing the ultimatum, or the lacklustre preparations it had made in anticipation of its delivery unprecedented in the history of Habsburg policy. It is important to be realistic when we consider the immediate context of Austria’s decision for war with Serbia. Accepting that her options were limited does not mean we approve of the decision she took; we do not have to approve of a policy decision to understand it. When Russia was attacked in 1904, it transformed the power balance between the two blocs, albeit temporarily; when Italy attacked the Turks in 1911, it spurred the Balkan Wars into motion. There was no telling what would follow if Vienna now took this initiative herself, as the first Great Power to make war on a European rival since Russia’s attack on Turkey in 1877. Austrian officials were aware of the significance of their decision, but they were perhaps convinced, as Molden’s memorandum also underlined, that a policy other than war could be more damaging still. The international system had left Vienna burned before; she had learned that the Concert of Europe was prejudiced against her, and she was desperate to break out of this downward trend lest she fulfil her portrayal as Europe’s second sick man.

Crucially, however, this quest to reverse Austria-Hungary’s downward spiral had already encountered several roadblocks. Foremost among these was the question of time. Tisza’s requirement of a three-step plan involving demands, an ultimatum and then satisfaction ruined any possibility of an immediate military strike, of the kind Conrad had wanted. Thomas Otte suggests that if Vienna had acted with greater speed, inflicting the kind of swift military strike against Belgrade Conrad had wanted, then no world war could have followed. Risky though it would have been to mobilise and command the Habsburg army into Serbia, objections and recriminations would have been balanced with the evidence Austria now had. If the campaign was concluded quickly and conducted well, this could have discouraged any opportunists. The resulting sympathy or at least appreciation of the Habsburg dilemma may have lessened the appetite for war, particularly if the invasion was successful and completed in a few days.[[34]](#footnote-34)

But Conrad was not blameless either. In his repeated demands for ‘war, war, war,’ the chief of staff failed to mention that the Austro-Hungarian army would be on harvest leave during the summer months. Astonishingly, Conrad only realised on *6 July* that units normally stationed at Graz, Bratislava, Zagreb, Cracow, Innsbruck and Budapest were then gathering the harvest, and would not be available for service until 26 July. Prematurely ending this leave and recalling the men to the colours would not merely let the cat out of the bag in Europe, it would also overload the rail network and jeopardise the grain supply. Conrad did cancel leave for other units, but these circumstances meant an ultimatum could not be issued until 23 July, the same time, incidentally, that the French President would be incommunicado and at sea, complicating plans for a scheme to take advantage of communication difficulties.[[35]](#footnote-35) Of course, any delay was risky in of itself. The longer Austrian military deliberations and preparations were drawn out, the more suspicions would be raised across Europe. Also, the further the assassination faded from memory, the less sympathetic or rational a Habsburg war policy would appear.

Yet, despite the dangers inherent in a delayed policy of revenge, Habsburg contemporaries embraced it, and could not or would not reflect on its many shortcomings. Neither the Emperor nor Berchtold nor Conrad paused to imagine how the practicalities of harvest leave or the ultimatum threw a wrench in their plans, warping the original conception of the plot first communicated to Berlin. Perhaps it was not so much the *policy* of war that was the problem, but its execution. As Otte remarked, ‘In its own peculiar, consensual and ponderous manner, Habsburg policy thus moved at the pace of an arthritic snail.’[[36]](#footnote-36) Incredibly, despite the sense of urgency expressed in the Joint Council meeting of 7 July, a full three weeks would pass before the declaration of war was made on Serbia. This process characterised the first half of the July Crisis, and in the next episode, it reaches a new climax with the dramatic death of a key anti-Habsburg agitator – the Russian ambassador to Belgrade, Nikolai Hartwig.

1. Quoted in Wank, ‘Desperate Counsel in Vienna in July 1914,’ 281. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Samuel Williamson Jr., ‘Aggressive and Defensive Aims of Political Elites? Austro-Hungarian Policy in 1914,’ in *An Improbable War? The Outbreak of World War 1 and European Political Culture Before 1914* eds. Holger Afflerbach and David Stevenson (London, 2012), p. 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 7 July 1914, Minutes of the Joint Council of Ministers for Common Affairs in Mombauer, *Documents*, p. 211. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Ibid*, pp. 212-213. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Ibid*, pp. 214-215. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Ibid*, p. 215. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Ibid*, pp. 215-216. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Ibid*, p. 216. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Ibid*, pp. 216-217. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Ibid*, p. 217. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Ibid*, p. 218. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Otte, *July Crisis*, p. 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Ibid*, p. 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Samuel Williamson Jr., ‘Aggressive and Defensive Aims of Political Elites? Austro-Hungarian Policy in 1914,’ p. 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Stefan Tisza, quoted in 7 July 1914, Minutes of the Joint Council of Ministers for Common Affairs in Mombauer, *Documents*, p. 215. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Samuel Williamson Jr., ‘Aggressive and Defensive Aims of Political Elites? Austro-Hungarian Policy in 1914,’ p. 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *Ibid*, p. 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. *Ibid,* pp. 72-73. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. 8 July 1914, Berchtold to Tisza in Mombauer, *Documents*, p. 223. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Otte, *July Crisis*, pp. 114-115. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Schroeder, ‘Stealing Horses to Great Applause,’ p. 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. *Ibid*, pp. 30-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. *Ibid*, p. 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. *Ibid*, pp. 35-36. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. *Ibid*, p. 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. *Ibid*, p. 38; p. 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, p. 558. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Matthias Schulz, ‘Did Norms Matter in Nineteenth Century International Relations? Progress and Decline in the “Culture of Peace” before World War 1,’ in *An Improbable War? The Outbreak of World War 1 and European Political Culture Before 1914* eds. Holger Afflerbach and David Stevenson (London, 2012), p. 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. See McMeekin, *July 1914*, pp. 56-58. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. 7 July 1914, Jovanovic to Pasic in Mombauer, *Documents*, pp. 221-222. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. McMeekin, *July 1914*, pp. 106-107. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. *Ibid*, pp. 58-59. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, p. 412. For the largely Russian efforts to reframe the assassination, see *Ibid*, pp. 407-412. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Otte, *July Crisis*, p. 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Williamson Jr., *Austria Hungary and the Origins of the First World War*, pp. 199-200. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Otte, *July Crisis*, p. 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)