

THE ORIGIN OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR ON THE GERMAN MAGAZINES

TEXT 1:

The assassination.

“The global conflagration, that puts an end to Europe's peaceful bourgeois era, starts with two shots of a young fanatic in the Balkans. When a Serbian nationalist murders the Austrian heir apparent on June 28th, 1914, a fatal interplay of threats and pledges of allegiance is triggered off in the capitals of the Old World. In Berlin, Vienna, Paris and St. Petersburg the military leaders use the assassination as a pretext to urge war. And the politicians and monarchs let themselves get urged - driven by fear that the one who strikes second will lose”.

Jaenecke, Heinrich, “The assassination”, in *GEO-EPOCHE*, 2004, No. 14, 24-27.

TEXT 2:

Weeks of decisions.

“The Austro-Hungarian authorities did little or nothing to secure the safety of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife. There was hardly any police or military on side of the streets along the route. There was minimal escort protection for the vehicles. Therefore, an attacker managed to throw a bomb without hindrance, which missed the target but injured two officers. Even after that incidence, security measures had not been strengthened. The young student Gavrilo Princip finally took the opportunity and shot the Archduke and his wife.

However, the war that broke out one month later was by no means a “war against terror”. The assassination was only the trigger of intrigues, however essential, that in the end set all of Europe on fire.

In Vienna, there was little mourning about the Archduke's death. The old Emperor Franz Joseph did not shed a tear about his unloved nephew and his wife Sophie, whose family background he considered to be unfitting. But for some leading political figures, the assassination served as an opportunity to realise long-preserved plans.

On 5 July, Emperor Wilhelm II invited the Austro-Hungarian ambassador Szögyény for lunch at the New Palace in Potsdam. The German Emperor, who had a cordial relationship to Franz Ferdinand, was outraged about the cowardly murder and promised full support for an action against Serbia. As it remained undecided what the action should be like, it was a blank cheque for Vienna.

Bethmann Hollweg, in his castle Hohenzirnow near Berlin, was on tenterhooks. He was considered to be a weak Chancellor. Especially the increasing strength of Russia caused him quite a headache. In late May 1914, Chief of the General Staff Moltke insistently suggested a pre-emptive war, referring to the threatening situation and the defeat against France and Russia in the arms race which was to be expected by 1917 at the latest. As even hopes ceased for British neutrality in case of a conflict with France, Bethmann said on 6 June 1914: “We are drifting towards a world war.”

However, it would be wrong to understand Bethmann's policy regarding the July Crisis as an expression of a fatalistic attitude. He did not leave things in the lap of the Gods, instead he turned into a key figure. Bethmann took advantage of the opportunity for a risky game. There are strong indications that he deliberately decided to go the whole way and to risk a general war – after all, Moltke promised that it could still have been done at that point.

On 23 July at 6 p.m., an ultimatum was delivered to Serbia. But the Serbian government saw it coming. They reacted smartly with friendly reservation and merely objected to the direct interference in the country's internal affairs. Therefore, there seemed to be no reason for war anymore.

Russia had been supporting Serbian ambitions already for years. But the murder of the Archduke did not exactly please the Romanow government. However, in case Vienna wanted to take advantage of the situation in order to start an attack, Russia could by no means back off from pressure from Germans like it did in 1909.

At that point, the French government was almost unable to act. Since 1871, France had felt almost permanently threatened by the German Reich. The aggravated arms race in the previous years has caused a severe domestic crisis. Moreover, the French government was aware that, in case of a European war, France would be the first target of the German army. Therefore, it was of utmost importance for the French policy to maintain the alliance with Russia at any costs: They hoped that a quick attack of East Prussia by the Russians would ease the situation. Right on 27 July, Chief of the General Staff Joffre wrote to Saint Petersburg on that matter and demanded the full mobilisation of the Russian army. The French did not try anything to de-escalate.

Unlike the British government. The relationship with the German Reich had been difficult since at least the turn of the century, to which the construction of battle fleets by the Germans was conducive. A general war would have brought no advantages for the Empire. Therefore, the Foreign Minister Sir Edward Grey suggested on 26 July in Berlin to help mediating in the crisis. But Bethmann turned down the offer on 27 July, in order not to disturb Austria's preparations for the war.

By turning down Britain's offer to mediate, the German Imperial Chancellor has missed the last chance to disarm the ticking bomb

At the last minute, Russian leadership actually delivered the desired pretext. After a tough struggle, Sasonow succeeded in convincing the Tsar to turn the partial mobilisation into a full mobilisation. With this, the die was cast. On 31 July, when the Russian mobilisation started, an ultimatum by the Germans was delivered to Saint Petersburg. The following day, the German Reich mobilised as well; according to the plan, this entailed an immediate invasion of Belgium and therefore the war in the West. This violation of international law provided enough arguments for the British Cabinet to enter the war and to support France, contrary to the majority view within the Liberal Party. This is how World War I started.

When the war was over, article 231 of the treaty of Versailles imposed the exclusive responsibility for the disaster of 1914 on Germany. Put that way, this accusation was unfair. After all, Serbian authorities were involved in the assassination in Sarajevo. Despite that, the Russian leadership supported Serbia and fuelled the crisis by their militant course. The French government did nothing to ease the tension. Only the British foreign minister made a faint-hearted try to mediate, but Great Britain's rapprochement with Russia and France had already stalemated the German Reich. Considering the events leading up to World War I, the responsibility was in fact shared more evenly. But the immediate culprits were indeed in Vienna and Berlin.”

Förster, Stig, “The July-crisis 1914, Weeks of decisions”, in *DAMALS*, 2004, No. 5, 14-19.