



The July Crisis and the Outbreak of War

This is a transcript of the [July Crisis and the Outbreak of War](https://www.mrallsophistory.com) podcast from www.mrallsophistory.com

The previous three podcasts have outlined a series of rising tensions that were present within Europe in the late 19th and early 20th Century. Bearing in mind the fact that historians identify these causal threads as being responsible for the outbreak of the First World War, it's important to remember that all of them – colonialism, nationalism, militarism, the alliance system, and hostility within the Balkans – had actually been around for a number of years without causing a major European war. They had, however, created a situation in Europe so dangerously close to war that some people likened it to a 'powder-keg' ready to explode. In this podcast we will explore the immediate spark that ignited the so-called 'powder-keg' of Europe that these tensions had created, the spark which ultimately triggered the First World War.

We can't downplay the historical and political importance of the crisis that followed the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand on 28th June 1914. The assassination itself wasn't actually anything new – the Habsburgs had already suffered the assassinations of 2 other members of the family in the preceding 20 years. What was different was the way the politicians of Europe handled the diplomatic process that followed.

The six weeks from the assassination to the early days of August have been analysed in great detail to determine ultimate responsibility for causing the war ever since. Luigi Albertini, an Italian Historian, has even dedicated two massive books to the study of just this six-week period of the July Crisis. However, as an A Level or IB History student, you really aren't expected to go into such intricate detail. Instead, you should aim to see the July Crisis as part of a larger web of causes. Therefore, when thinking about the role of the July Crisis in causing the outbreak of war, try to consider what the European nations each hoped to achieve through their diplomatic actions, and what background factors were influencing their behavior. You may also think about identifying the point at which war became inevitable, and try to justify your decision.

Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austro-Hungary was shot dead on 28th June 1914 by Gavrilo Princip, a Bosnian Serb terrorist from the Serbian Black Hand movement. The leader of the Black Hand movement was a colonel in the Serbian army, and thus the Serbian government was indirectly associated with the assassination.

Austria was keen to use the assassination as an opportunity to attack Serbia, but first sought reassurances from Germany that they would be as supportive of Austria as in other Balkan crises outlined in my previous podcast. Austria couldn't risk taking on Serbia alone, especially since the Serbs would probably receive the support of Russia. Consequently, the Austrians met with the German government to discuss their concerns, and on 5th July received the so-



called “blank cheque” from the German government. This promised total German support for any Austrian action against Serbia.

The German offer of the “blank cheque” was followed by an enormous delay on the part of Austria-Hungary. It meant that the Austrian government missed the opportunity to present a counter-attack on Serbia as a shock reaction to the assassination. Instead, the Austrian government began to draw up an ultimatum to present to Serbia before taking military action. Their idea was to make the ultimatum so severe that the Serbian government would have to reject its terms, which would then give Austria-Hungary a more obvious excuse to attack. The problem was that it took nearly 3 weeks to write the ultimatum. This made it obvious to everyone that, by the time Austria-Hungary presented the ultimatum to Serbia on July 23rd, the response had been planned and was about more than just the assassination.

Another reason for the delay was because French representatives had arrived in Russia on 20th July. Austria-Hungary delayed the ultimatum to Serbia, as they didn't want to deliver it while Russia – Serbia's key supporter – had the chance to directly discuss the situation with its own French ally. Consequently the Austrian government waited until the French delegation left Russia on 23rd July. However, France had already confirmed to Russia that they would support any Russian action in the Balkans.

When the ultimatum was finally delivered on 23rd July, Austria-Hungary gave Serbia 48 hours to respond. Russia was shocked by the terms, but Serbia was keen to calm the situation and so accepted virtually all of the provisions on 25th July. Even the German Kaiser suggested that Serbia's response removed the 'cause for war', although the offer of the blank cheque remained. Austria-Hungary, however, had already made up its mind. On 28th July, supported by Germany, the Austro-Hungarian army mobilized and declared war on Serbia.

Russia, against the backdrop of its previous humiliations in the Balkans, decided to take firm action. On 30th July the Russian army was mobilized against Austria-Hungary. The next day, the 31st July, Germany presented its own ultimatum to Russia in which it demanded that the Russian mobilization be called off. This didn't happen, and so on 1st August Germany declared war on Russia while warning France to stay away. Germany knew that, if France refused to remain neutral, the Schlieffen Plan dictated that France had to be invaded. Consequently, when France mobilized its troops, Germany declared war on 3rd August. Meanwhile, Britain had stated that it intended to stand by the 1839 Treaty of London, which said it would defend Belgian neutrality. Germany then declared war on Britain on 4th August. This meant that all the major power of Europe – except Italy – were now engaged in war with each other.

The individual diplomatic decisions made during the July Crisis may have seemed appropriate and even rational in isolation, but they suggest a complete unawareness on behalf of the politicians to foresee the consequences against the broader historical backdrop. It is



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important, however, to avoid using the benefit of hindsight to judge the politicians too critically. You may argue that there appears to be an inevitability about the process, but we should be careful not to project those views onto the politicians themselves. After all, every other time the European powers had come close to a large war in the preceding years, it had been avoided. The First World War ultimately came about due to a complex web of factors that stretched from middle of the 1800s right up to the summer of 1914.

In the next podcast I'll be looking at historiography of the causes of the First World War. Visit my website at www.mrallsophistory.com to download it.