‘Today’s news sound serious enough. As was to be expected, Russia has placed herself on Serbia’s side, and the Austrian envoy in Belgrade will depart this evening, if the ultimatum has not been answered satisfactorily. This will almost certainly mean war. We are all ready to go home, and we actually should do it straight away. I do not understand why this is not happening. Instead [Wilhelm II] is torturing himself here. Our fleet, too, is still dispersed up here, however I assume that it will sail home soon and that we will follow speedily.’ Moritz von Lyncker, chief of the Kaiser’s military cabinet, reflects on the mood in the German fleet, 25 July 1914.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Austria’s ultimatum to Serbia would expire at 6PM on Saturday 25 July 1914. Contemporaries were running against the clock, yet even with such a daunting deadline, uncertainty also reigned. It was suspected, but not certain, that when the deadline expired, Austria would prepare for war. Could she be dissuaded? Could even the deadline be extended, to give mediation efforts a better chance of success? What did these initiatives look like, and what do they tell us about these last-ditch efforts to save the peace? There were also ominous signs emerging that the Austrian scheme of a localised Serbian war might be denied by Russia, since unbeknownst to most, Russian partial mobilisation had already begun. If 24 July was an eventful one, then 25 July was positively dense with activity. Indeed, so much was happening that it makes sense to divide this day’s events into two episodes. This first part looks at the wider narrative of the looming deadline, European efforts to pre-empt it, and the scene in Belgrade when the deadline expired and Austria’s legation left the city. In the next episode, we will address the controversial question of mobilisation, including Russia’s reasons for mobilisation, what mobilisation actually meant in practice, and why Russia’s actions have become the source of great controversy in the historiography of the July Crisis.

Having orchestrated the ultimatum’s delivery to coincide with the absence of the French government, Austrian Foreign Minister Berchtold took himself away from Vienna and embarked on a conveniently timed holiday. Having deliberately made himself unavailable, peacemakers would have to overcome this obstacle and find a way to settle the controversy before matters escalated. It may seem like an impossible task to us in retrospect, considering the pressures of time and the air of inevitability which hangs over this tragic saga, but contemporaries had reason to believe that if anyone could prevent war, it was these same figures who had done so on so many occasions before. From Britain, Sir Edward Grey and his Ministers had pulled their gaze from Ireland just long enough to recognise that a major crisis had arrived. Grey’s mission was twofold – both to increase the 48-hour deadline attached to the ultimatum, granting peace-making efforts more flexibility, and then to apply these efforts to reach a mediated settlement.

Opinions differed as to how this mediation would proceed and who would be involved, but if Austria was to be pulled back from the brink, Grey asserted that the four ‘uninvolved’ powers, as he called them, would be instrumental. Britain, France, Germany and Italy could vouch for their allies while also working behind the scenes to moderate their actions in the name of peace. But was everyone earnestly working for peace? Was it really believable that Germany had known nothing of the ultimatum before it had been delivered? If she had been involved, why would Germany aid in the peaceful resolution of the question now? Trust may have been a rare commodity, but without German help there was no question of pulling Austria back from the brink. Then again, did Austria truly want war, or just to coerce Serbia into compliance? After all, contemporaries could easily recall events from the previous year, when in August 1913 Austria issued two ultimatums in as many weeks to get its way without the use of war. Was this not more of the same?

If contemporaries did assume it was business as usual, Russia’s decision to engage in mobilisation so early in the crisis appears more rational. She had engaged in similar behaviour during the Balkan Wars, mobilising against Austria as the two powers glared at one another while the Balkan peninsula was transformed. On the other hand, if the ultimatum really did represent the march to the abyss which contemporaries had for long fretted and warned about, Russia’s mobilisation might draw a German response, and then ignite a regional dispute into a full-scale war. By now the ultimatum had been absorbed, and its ten points poured over, leading some to conclude that it had been deliberately crafted to make Serbian acceptance impossible. The sheer volume of materials pinged across Europe on 25 July testify to a deep sense of anxiety over the situation, yet this was accompanied by an air of unreality, that everything would work itself out, and a lack of up-to-date information. Ambassadors in foreign courts would be working overtime to fill their governments in, but there was no guarantee that any officials they spoke to either had the facts to hand, or were telling the truth.

Into this chasm seeped a fatal undercurrent of distrust, and with good reason. From the very beginning, we should clarify, the order of the day in Berlin was to deny that Germany had played a role in Austria’s ultimatum policy. This was true only to an extent; the German government was not kept informed of each of the ten points, but Berlin had been informed of the timeframe and Austria’s intention to push matters into war with Serbia. The German government could give no indication that it wished Austria to make war against its unruly neighbour. But it could emphasise the justice in Austria’s quest, and press the argument that the ultimatum was a matter between Austria and Serbia, signifying their support for their ally, and their intention to pre-empt any Russian decision to intervene. In the planning phase, the possibility that Russia would get involved had been repeatedly discounted. It was assumed that Russia would act as it had done in the past, with strong language but little in the way of action.

The recent context of deteriorating Russo-German relations perhaps should have awakened Berlin to the strong possibility that Russia would intervene now to make up for past retreats, in a similar vein to how Austria felt it had to act with force to account for its failure to do so in the past. But Germany exercised no such consideration for the Russian psyche, and the Central Powers took what they wanted from the official and unofficial communications from St Petersburg. Count Szapary had relayed Sazonov’s warnings to Vienna not to devour Serbia, and the Russian Foreign Minister was said to be sad and depressed, but not belligerent. Sazonov merely threatened that Austria would incur the combined displeasure of the Entente; he remained tight-lipped about preparations behind the scenes which would enable Russia to advocate for Serbia with greater force than it had in the past.

And then there was the question of France; with its leaders at sea, coordination between the allies was difficult, and it was far from certain that Poincare would approve of a policy which would draw France into the Balkans. The Caillaux affair absorbed the attention of Parisians and the French reading public more generally, and recent revelations in the Senate concerning the unreadiness of the French army would surely have a sobering effect. The Franco-Russian alliance stipulated cohesion if a partner were attacked, but Russia and France had not been attacked, and Austria showed no intentions of doing so. Serbia was not tied to the alliance, even if Poincare and the Tsar had worked to include that theatre in their calculations. Similarly, Britain had given no sign that it would intervene, and its domestic problems were well known. The Foreign Secretary seemed more interested in calm deliberation and mediation than in making any display attesting to Entente solidarity. Indeed, Grey anticipated that the Germans would again be key to any diplomatic initiatives, even if their true inclinations could not yet be known. There were thus reasons to be optimistic that the fait accompli against Serbia could be achieved with minimum complications. But there was also several hours left before the ultimatum expired. Perhaps more could be learned of the scheme in the meantime, and more could be gleaned from conversations with Austro-German statesmen.[[2]](#footnote-2)

When the French ambassador to Germany Jules Cambon attempted to sound out the German Foreign Minister on what Berlin actually knew of the ultimatum in advance, it led to a tense meeting between them. Cambon asked Jagow ‘if it was correct, as announced in the newspapers, that Austria had presented a note to the powers on her dispute with Serbia. I asked if he had received it, and what view he took of it.’ Jagow replied that ‘the note was forcible and he approved of it, the Serbian government having for a long time exhausted Austria’s patience, who had already put up with so much.’ This was ‘a domestic problem for Austria,’ Jagow claimed, and ‘he hopes it will be localised.’ Cambon then changed tactic, professing to speak on a more personal level with the German Foreign Minister. This was where the mood shifted, as Cambon recalled:

I asked him if the Berlin Cabinet had really been entirely ignorant of Austria’s requirements before they were communicated to Belgrade, and as he confirmed this was so, I expressed my surprise at seeing him thus undertake to support claims, the scope and limits of which he was ignorant. Herr von Jagow interrupted me, and said “It is only because we are talking between ourselves personally that I allow you to say that to me.” “Certainly,” I said, “but if [King] Peter [of Serbia] humiliates himself, domestic trouble will probably break out in Serbia: that will open the door to fresh possibilities, and do you know where you will be led by Vienna?” I added that the language of the German newspapers was not the language of people indifferent to, and unacquainted with the affair; rather, it announced active support. Finally, I pointed out that the shortness of the deadline given to Serbia to submit would make a bad impression in Europe.

Cambon’s stance was entirely valid. It objectively made little sense for the risk-averse Kaiser to defend something he had not read in advance; surely if they had been taken by surprise, German statesmen would have been every bit as anxious as the other powers. The German claim that their government had known nothing of the ultimatum was thus coming under intense scrutiny. If the Entente could smell a rat, it would be far less likely to remain aloof once Austria sought satisfaction. His denials may have been somewhat clumsy and unconvincing for the French ambassador, but there was little Jagow could do other than lie his head off; to do otherwise would have confirmed that the fix was in. Suspicion of Germany was a developing theme, but another was frustration and alarm at the 48-hour deadline Austria had insisted upon. But in this conversation with the French ambassador, Jagow was forced to maintain the official line, as a suspicious Cambon recorded:

Herr von Jagow replied that he had quite expected a little excitement, but that he hoped that Serbia’s friends would give her good advice. “I have no doubt,” I said to him, “that Russia will endeavour to persuade the Cabinet in Belgrade to make acceptable concessions; but why not ask from one what is being asked of the other, and if one allows that advice will be given at Belgrade, it is not legitimate to allow, on the other hand, that advice will also be given in Vienna?” Jagow went on to say that that depended on circumstances, but immediately checking himself, he repeated that the problem ought to be localised. He asked me if I really though the situation serious. “Certainly”, I answered, “because if what is happening is the result of due reflection, I do not understand why all the bridges have been burnt.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

When Jules Cambon sent this telegram from Berlin it was in the early hours of 25 July; he, like many contemporaries, must have experienced 24 July as one of the longest days in his career. The 25 July promised to be just as eventful, with the expiration of Austria’s deadline on everyone’s minds. When Cambon returned to work the next morning, he had a conversation with Belgium’s ambassador to Berlin, Baron Beyens. Beyens was as dubious about German claims as Cambon had been, and the conversation between the two ambassadors is worth recording:

[Beyens] appears very anxious about the course of events. He is of opinion that Austria and Germany have decided to take advantage of the fact that, owing to a combination of circumstances at the present moment, Russia and England appear to them to be threatened by domestic troubles, while in France our military system appears shaken. Moreover he does not believe in the feigned ignorance of the government of Berlin on the subject of Austria’s demarche. He thinks that if the form of it has not been submitted to the Cabinet at Berlin, the moment of its despatch has been cleverly chosen in consultation with that Cabinet in order to surprise the Triple Entente at a moment of disorganisation.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Baron Beyens was closer to the truth than he may have realised, and this encounter between the two highlights yet another flaw in the Austro-German approach. Jagow and Bethmann Hollweg may have assumed upon having a degree of plausible deniability, but by July 1914 the Russians and French perceived it simply impossible that Austria could take such a seismic step without its ally’s foreknowledge. No matter how many times he might deny it, Jagow could never overcome the Entente impression that Austria did not act alone. Indeed, this assumption steeled the Russian and French governments, and reduced trust at a point when coordination between the blocs was the sole path to peace.[[5]](#footnote-5) Jules Cambon sent another report to Paris in the afternoon of 25 July, reporting on a conversation he had with the British chargé d’affairs. This official did profess himself convinced by Jagow claim to have known nothing, but ‘he could not refrain from expressing his surprise at the blank cheque Germany had given to Austria.’ Jagow replied ‘that this was a domestic matter for Austria,’ but ‘the British chargé d’affairs remarked that it had become exceedingly international.’[[6]](#footnote-6)

So long as it was internationalised, the crisis could be resolved by the major powers. Between them, perhaps they could mollify Austria’s policy? One method was to increase the deadline; 48 hours was scarcely enough time to take stock of the situation, let alone defuse tensions sufficiently that a compromise could work. Writing to Sazonov from Berlin on 25 July, the Russian chargé d’affairs described how the British in particular were angling for this extension, and he also appealed to Gottlieb von Jagow, the German Foreign Minister, regarding this option:

[Jagow] told me that the English government had likewise requested him to recommend an extension of the time limit to the Vienna government; he had telegraphed Vienna about this, and would also telegraph on the subject of our move but feared that his telegrams would be of no avail, on account of Berchtold’s departure for Ischl and since insufficient time remained besides, he is in doubt whether it would suit Austria to give way at the last moment and whether it might no increase Serbia’s self-confidence.

Berlin had no intention of slowing down its ally now. The imperative of war with Serbia, and the mission to keep it localised, was Austria’s policy by this point, and unbeknownst to this chargé d’affairs and his peers, there could be no turning back. Yet, the Russian charge d’affairs still tried to appeal to Jagow, as he recorded:

I replied that a Great Power such as Austria could give way without damage to her prestige and cited all the relevant arguments in support of this but could obtain no more definite promises. The Foreign Minister stated…that we must be satisfied with the assurance given…yesterday that Austria was not seeking any territorial acquisitions; perhaps Giesl [the Austrian ambassador to Serbia] forthcoming departure after the expiry of the time limit indicated that the encounter would not follow immediately. Austria had, however, requested the German government to assume responsibility for the protection of the interests of Austrian subjects in Serbia in the event of a diplomatic rupture, and this it had consented to do. In reply to vague hints that pressure would have to be exerted on Vienna for the avoidance of possible threatening consequences, the Foreign Minister each time answered evasively that he did not even want to think about such matters.[[7]](#footnote-7)

This was a common Russian claim, to the effect that Austria did not need to resort to such policies, and that mechanisms existed for her to acquire justice peacefully. These mechanisms were not described, because they did not exist, and Russia had spent the last few weeks denying that Austria had anyone to blame but herself for the assassination. If Vienna was to rely on Europe for justice, the prospects for a fair hearing were certainly grim. Still, it was legitimate to point to mediation as a way out of the crisis. Though we might scoff now at the prospect of Austria setting its war aside for the sake of an arranged settlement, contemporaries viewed the crisis through the prism of past incidents. Had the Balkan Wars not been resolved without intervention, thanks to the Ambassadors’ Conference Grey had hosted in London, from late 1912 to August 1913? If this conference could be reassembled, or even if Britain could take the lead in mediating between Austria and Serbia, this was one avenue where peace could be preserved. From London, Sir Edward Grey was not optimistic at the prospect of Britain mediating alone. As he explained in a telegram to his charge d’affairs in Berlin, joint mediation provided the best opportunity to preserve the peace:

We should now apparently be soon confronted by a moment at which both Austria and Russia would have mobilised. The only chance of peace would be for the four Powers, Germany, Italy, France and ourselves, to keep together if Russia and Austria did both mobilise, and to join in asking Austria and Russia not to cross frontier till there had been time for us to endeavour to arrange matters between them.

This reveals two points about Grey’s mindset by this point. The first is that he assumed he could resurrect the joint cooperation of the powers seen during the Balkan Wars. The second is that Grey appears to have misunderstood the meaning of mobilisation. If Austria and Russia did mobilise against one another, it did not matter if no soldiers crossed the border, because mobilisation was perceived as a step towards war, indeed, as a part of war, in these courts. The mere threat of military action which mobilisation implied was sufficient to move contemporaries into action. This is explored more in the next episode, but the misunderstanding over what mobilisation meant, and the contrast between how civilians or military personnel interpreted it deserves emphasis. Yet, speaking with Lichnowsky, the German ambassador, Grey believed that this course had a good chance of success:

[Lichnowsky] read me a telegram from German Foreign Office saying that Germany had not known beforehand and had had no more than other powers to do with the stiff terms of Austrian note to Serbia, but that having launched the note Austria could not draw back. The Ambassador said, however, that what I contemplated was mediation between Russia and Austria; this was a different question, and he thought Austria might with dignity accept it, and he expressed himself personally favourable to what I had suggested. I endorsed his observation, saying that between Serbia and Austria I felt no title to intervene, but as soon as the question became one between Austria and Russia it was a question of the peace of Europe, in which we must all take a hand. I impressed upon him that if Austria and Russia mobilised the participation of Germany would be essential to any diplomatic action for peace. We could do nothing alone. I had no time to consult the French government, who were travelling at the moment, and I could not be sure of their views, but if the German government were prepared to agree with my suggestion I was prepared to say to the French government that I thought it the right thing to do.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Lichnowsky wrote several feverish telegrams to Berlin on 25 July, reflecting on the mood in London and the necessity of German participation in Grey’s four power mediation. If Berlin did not participate in this effort, Lichnowsky warned that ‘confidence in us and our pacific intentions will be finally shaken here.’ Lichnowsky wrote to Jagow on the mediation scheme that ‘I see in it the only means of averting a world war, in which for us there would be much at risk and nothing to gain.’ The German ambassador to London was not naïve, but he was far from complementary about Germany’s policy. Germany, Lichnowsky warned, should adopt ‘a friendly and largely neutral position,’ and ‘participate hand-in-hand with England in averting the threatening European thunderstorm.’ If Berlin did not do so, Britain could be pushed into the military schemes of the Entente. As an Anglophile, dedicated to peace, and suspicious of claims of Russian aggrandisement, Lichnowsky was the perfect candidate to serve as the conduit of a peaceful German polcy.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Unfortunately for Grey, Lichnowsky was perhaps not the most accurate weathervane of Berlin’s position at this point. So long as she continued to wish for Vienna to acquire its satisfaction through a punitive strike on Serbia, it was to be expected that scant cooperation in a mediation policy would come from Germany. But Grey did not know this yet. He also had to respond to repeated requests from St Petersburg. Sazonov was in favour of mediation, and he telegrammed Ambassador Benckendorff in London and a legation counsellor at Belgrade – Hartwig’s replacement not yet having arrived. ‘Due to England’s special position, whose impartiality in the matter in question is without doubt,’ Sazonov wrote, ‘the war between Austria and Serbia could perhaps still be avoided if the Serbian government were to turn to the English government with a request for mediation and if the latter were to accept this role.’ Sazonov suggested this option be highlighted to Pasic, the Serb Premier, and instructed Benckendorff to aid the Serbs if they attempted this policy in London.[[10]](#footnote-10) Sazonov also furnished supplemental instructions to Benckendorff, reinforcing the importance of Britain’s status as a disinterested actor in the Balkans. Could Britain not leverage this in Belgrade and Vienna? Yet in the same telegram, Sazonov urged his ambassador to acquire a British condemnation of the ultimatum, and he assured Benckendorff that Britain would join the Entente if it came to war:

It would be very desirable that England should declare clearly and firmly that she condemns Austria’s action which is not justified by circumstances and exceedingly dangerous for European peace, particularly as she could easily achieve by peaceful means those of her demands which are grounded in law and compatible with Serbia’s honour.

Sazonov did not describe precisely what Austria could do to ‘easily’ achieve its demands. He might have reflected that the reason Austria had become wedded to this course was because it felt it had no other choice. This may be viewed as further evidence of the Russian Foreign Minister’s refusal to accept that Austria had legitimate grounds for complaint, yet had so few legitimate options to satisfy these complaints. As he reflected in conclusion to Benckendorff, there was no doubting what Britain would do in the event of war:

In case of further worsening of the situation which might possibly lead to corresponding steps of the Great Powers, we anticipate that England will not hesitate to place herself definitely on the side of Russia and France in order to maintain the balance of power in Europe for which she has also always stood up in the past and which, should Austria be triumphant, would doubtless be disturbed.[[11]](#footnote-11)

It evidently did not matter to Sazonov what kind of war Austria planned; nor did he notice that Austria’s rejection of any kind of annexation was a direct nod to Russian concerns. To Sazonov, even the act of defeating or humiliating Serbia would constitute a threat to the balance of power, or at least, he wished for the British to believe that Russia thought so. Whether Sazonov was driving a hard bargain or whether he was genuinely convinced that Russia could allow no attack upon Serbia of any kind may be debated, but Sazonov may have been frustrated to learn that Grey intended to pursue a much more nuanced foreign policy.

Indeed, Grey’s behaviour during these anxious days remind us of his overriding aim to preserve peace, even if that meant uncomfortable questions for the Entente. On 25 July, Grey thus wrote to his ambassador in St Petersburg, Sir George Buchanan, to explain where he stood, and the complications he anticipated. The Russian ambassador, Benckendorff, was very anxious at any spectacle of joint mediation, since ‘this could give the impression that France and England were detached from Russia.’ Grey replied that in his mediation proposal, France and Britain would be no more detached from Russia than Germany would be detached from Austria. He reiterated that German participation in the mediation was an ‘essential condition’ and that ‘surely the situation was not made unsatisfactory for Russia if France and England held their hands, provided that Germany also held hers.’ Benckendorff urged Grey to ‘give some indication to Germany to make her think that we would not stand aside if there was a war.’ Grey responded with his most fulsome account yet of the current crisis, and where he saw it going if mediation was not allowed to succeed:

I said that I had given no indication that we would stand aside; on the contrary, I said to the German ambassador that, as long as there was only a dispute between Austria and Serbia alone, I did not feel entitled to intervene; but that, directly it was a matter between Austria and Russia, it became a question of the peace of Europe, which concerned us all. I had furthermore spoken on the assumption that Russia would mobilise, whereas the assumption of the German government had hitherto been, officially, that Serbia would receive no support, and what I had said must influence the German government to take the matter seriously. In effect, I was asking that, if Russia mobilised against Austria, the German government, who had been supporting the Austrian demand on Serbia, should ask Austria to consider some modification of her demands, under the threat of Russian mobilisation.

This was by now familiar; Grey was already looking ahead, anticipating the established agreements and understandings and gauging how they might escalate matters beyond containment. Yet, Grey was by no means planning to apply pressure on Germany alone. He acknowledged that for Germany to pressure Austria to step back was ‘not an easy thing for Germany to do, even though we would join at the same time in asking Russia to suspend action.’ Grey was nonetheless clear of the importance of this element of restraint among the powers, as he continued:

I was afraid, too, that Germany would reply that mobilisation with her was a question of hours, whereas with Russia it was a question of days; and that, as a matter of fact, I had asked that if Russia mobilised against Austria, Germany, instead of mobilising against Russia, should suspend mobilisation and join with us in intervention with Austria, thereby throwing away the advantage of time, for, if the diplomatic intervention failed, Russia would meanwhile have gained time for her mobilisation.[[12]](#footnote-12)

This was certainly an accurate appraisal of the stakes and inclinations of the powers, but it was also somewhat naïve. What Grey was asking of Germany amounted to the abandonment of the blank cheque; one can only imagine the furore if after promising such support to Vienna, she backed away from her in favour of joint mediation. True, this would place Russia’s mobilisation in different light, but the extent of these measures were not yet known outside of Russia, and it was also incredibly risky for Berlin. As Grey noted, in the event that Germany did embrace mediation and ceased its mobilisation measures, only for the mediation to fail, she would have to make up for a great deal of lost time. Was it not asking too much to expect Berlin to take such a risk on the mere commitment of mediation which had no guarantee of success? In the Russian view, this proposal was also insufficient for the moment; while the Central Powers reared up against the Entente, the best course was not to work around the edges, but to confront it directly with military measures and allied solidarity. Benckendorff tried to work towards this end in London, but as he confessed to Sazonov, Grey remained tight lipped over what Britain would do if war did break out:

Grey continues to be of the opinion that Berlin, more so than Vienna, is the centre of action, to such an extent that mediating action can only have a serious outcome via Berlin. As regards an articulated position which might resemble an alliance, my talks with Grey today have once more convinced me that England will not declare herself before a general war has been declared and thus the European balance of power is being questioned. Until then it will maintain the position which in its mind conforms with the role of keeper of the peace.[[13]](#footnote-13)

There was one potential complication – the Austrian ultimatum ‘exploded like a bomb in London,’ Benckendorff discerned in a follow up telegram later in the day. Grey, among others, doubted German claims to have known nothing of the ultimatum beforehand, though he carefully steered clear of any pronouncements that a conspiracy was afoot. To Benckendorff’s chagrin, Grey’s conversations with Mensdorff, the Austrian ambassador that morning had pulled Britain further from declaring itself:

When Mensdorff appeared this morning this morning to declare that military measures would not follow immediately after the expiration of the ultimatum he was able to instil in Grey the idea that the attitude of Austria and Germany perhaps contained a certain amount of bluff. Then arrived your [Sazonov’s] suggestion to increase the period of truce, which Grey immediately supported in Vienna. Thus in Grey’s mind the suggestion could emerge to stop the other mobilisations – apart from the Russian and the Austrian – which could, in his mind, be a means to feel Germany’s pulse and perhaps, if the will for war was not so completely real in Berlin as certain symptoms seem to suggest, a peaceful solution without humiliation for Serbia might be found. I think that he reckons little as to the effectiveness of the solution he has thought up. He doubts – and this he has confessed to me in confidence – that Germany would give up on the advantage of the speed of her mobilisation. But he maintains that if it were possible at least momentarily for Germany to loosen her ties with Austria a chance for peace would develop again, and he feels obliged to continue on this path.

Benckendorff did provide some good news; in his view, he ‘had not observed a single symptom’ which would suggest that ‘England seriously intends to remain neutral. My observations,’ Benckendorff concluded, ‘lead me strongly to the opposite conclusion.’[[14]](#footnote-14) Did this judgement of British inclinations compel Sazonov to drive a harder bargain? In fact, there is reason to be believe that the Russian Foreign Minister had already signalled his intention to resist. In conversations with the Serbian ambassador, which the latter duly forwarded to Belgrade, Sazonov relayed the conclusions of the Council Meeting in the afternoon of 24 July. In that meeting, we recall, mobilisation of Russia’s key military districts was advised. Sazonov roundly criticised the ultimatum as impossible to accept, while counselling moderation, and thus hinted that Russia would mobilise to defend its friend. These telegrams had arrived in Belgrade by noon of 25 July, and gave those Serbians crafting the response to the ultimatum a great deal to mull over. If it was certain that Russia would defend Serbia, there was no need to accommodate Austria. If Vienna’s bluff was called, perhaps she would satisfy herself with limited acceptance of the ultimatum’s points, rather than risk war.

Weighing the Russian contribution, Serbian officials still attempted to craft as diplomatic a response as possible. Their response, due at 5PM Serbian time, was only completed an hour before the due date. The final draft was laced with so many corrections and contributions, it had become virtually illegible. One Serbian contemporary recalled this anxious process:

At last after 4PM the text seemed finally settled and an attempt was made to type it out. But the typist was inexperienced and very nervous and the typewriter refused to work, with the result that the reply had to be written out by hand in hectographic ink, copies being jellied off. The last half-hour was one of feverish work. The reply was corrected by pen here and there. One whole phrase placed in parenthesis was crossed out in ink and made illegible.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Serbia’s official reply to the ultimatum was handed to Premier Nikola Pasic fifteen minutes before the deadline expired. From here Pasic carried the reply to Ambassador Giesl, aware that as he did, many of his colleagues were already finalising plans to leave the exposed Serbian capital for the interior. Pasic handed the ultimatum to Giesl five minutes before the deadline expired. ‘Part of your demands we have accepted,’ Pasic barked in broken German, ‘for the rest we place our hopes on your loyalty and chivalry as an Austrian general.’ Giesl cast his eye over the response, recognised it fell short of a total capitulation, and implemented the next phase of the plan – his imminent departure from Belgrade.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Much has been written about Serbia’s response to the ultimatum, and Austria’s refusal to accept it. I distinctly remember a high school textbook, which noted that Austria was bent on war, and thus rejected Serbia’s conciliatory reply. This seems to be the consensus. We should recall that Berchtold’s intention had always been to craft an unacceptable ultimatum, the rejection of which would serve as the pretext for war. Yet, we should not be so quick to accept this version of events. By this point in the crisis, the Serbian government could be quietly confident that whatever reply they gave, Russia would not allow her to be crushed by Vienna. The response she gave was thus designed to be read as conciliatory and contrite, although on closer inspection, as Christopher Clark discerned,

The claim often made in general narratives that this reply represented an almost complete capitulation to the Austrian demands is profoundly misleading. This was a document fashioned for Serbia’s friends, not for its enemy. It offered the Austrians amazingly little. Above all, it placed the onus on Vienna to drive ahead the process of opening up the investigation into the Serbian background of the conspiracy, without, on the other hand, conceding the kind of collaboration that would have enable an effective pursuit of the relevant leads. In this sense it represented a continuation of the policy the Serbian authorities had followed since 28 June: flatly to deny any form of involvement and to abstain from any initiative that might be taken to indicate the acknowledgement of such involvement.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Was this analysis fair? Fortunately, we have access to the actual Serbian reply, so it is worth bringing the details of this document forward, to judge its contents and implications for ourselves. It began with a lengthy preamble, before responding individually to each of the ten points. The preamble would be published in the government’s official journal, contributing to the impression that Serbia was trying to be accommodating. But what did the preamble say? It was a mixture of absolution and accommodation, since on the one hand, Serbia ‘cannot be held responsible for manifestations of a private character, such as articles in the press and the peaceable work of societies – manifestations which take place in nearly all countries in the ordinary course of events,’ and which ‘as a general rule, escape official control.’ Nonetheless, Serbia condemned ‘all propaganda which may be directed against Austria-Hungary, that is to say, all such tendencies as aim at ultimately detaching the Austro-Hungarian territories which form part thereof,’ and Serbia deplored ‘the baneful consequences of these criminal movements.’

It regretted that ‘certain Serbian officers and officials should have taken part in the above-mentioned propaganda’ and the Serb government now considered it its duty ‘formally to warn the officers, officials and entire population of the kingdom that henceforth they will take the most rigorous steps against all such parsons as are guilty of such acts, to prevent and to repress which they will use their utmost endeavour.’ But if Vienna trusted Serbia to act in such a way, the ultimatum would never have been crafted in the first place. This was why, Vienna claimed, it insisted on direct Austrian participation in the investigation, even to the point which superseded Serbia’s authority and sovereignty. The further reactions to each of the ultimatum’s points reads similarly; reluctance acceptance, preceded by protest and demands for actual proof.

The response began with some promise for Austria; Serbia would implement a new law, adjusting its constitution, to allow for the persecution of any person or organ ‘which is directed against the territorial integrity of Austria-Hungary.’ The second point noted that Austria ‘possess no proof,’ nor did the ultimatum provide any, that the organisation Serbian Defence or its equivalents ‘have committed up to the present any criminal act of this nature through the proceedings of any of their members.’ Nevertheless, the response continued, ‘The Royal [Serbian] government will accept the demand of the Imperial and Royal Government and will dissolve [Serbian Defence] and every other society which may be directing its efforts against Austria-Hungary.’ Third, Serbia would ‘undertake to remove without delay from their public educational establishments in Serbia all that serves or could serve to foment propaganda against Austria-Hungary,’ although crucially, this would be done once Vienna ‘furnish them with facts and proofs of this propaganda.’ Continuing in point four, Serbia committed to remove all guilty personnel from its armed forces who had worked against Austria, but they expected the Habsburgs ‘to communicate to them at a later date the names and the acts of these officers and officials for the purpose of the proceedings which are to be taken against them.’

The Serb response then went from conditional accommodation to principled opposition. In reference to point five of the ultimatum, which demanded Serbian assistance in the suppression of hostile organisations, the Serbian government professed its ignorance, and claimed to ‘not truly grasp the meaning or scope of the demand,’ Vienna made, but they committed to ‘admit such collaboration as agrees with the principle of international law, with criminal procedure, and with good neighbourly relations.’ This word salad was in fact akin to window-dressing, and an effort at maintaining a veneer of accommodation; both Vienna and Belgrade understood that international law had nothing to say about such a process. But point six was the most significant – the Austrian demand for direct involvement in a judicial enquiry held on Serbian soil. Here Serbia replied that

As regards the participation in this enquiry of Austro-Hungarian agents or authorities appointed for this purpose by the Imperial and Royal government, [Serbia] cannot accept such an arrangement, as it would be a violation of the constitution and of the law of criminal procedure; nevertheless, in concrete cases communication as to the results of the investigation in question might be given to the Austro-Hungarian agents.

Once again, Serbia laced its defiance with a nod towards legal devices, but this was nonetheless the most blatant rejection of Austria’s demands. Point seven, demanding the arrest of Major Tankosic and Milan Ciganovic, both fingered in the Austrian investigation, was deflected with the assertion that the latter had not been found. Regarding Tankosic, Belgrade claimed he had already been arrested, but required evidence of his guilt before it would prosecute him. In fact, by now Coganovic had been secretly smuggled out of Belgrade. For point eight, regarding charges of corruption among its border guards, Serbia committed to prevent all illicit traffic and to punish all frontier officials who failed in their duty ‘and allowed the crime of Sarajevo to pass.’ In point nine, concerning inflammatory statements by Serbian officials, Serbia would ‘gladly give explanations of the remarks made by their officials whether in Serbia or abroad, in interviews after the crime which…were hostile towards the Monarchy,’ but only when Vienna ‘communicated to them the passages in question in these remarks,’ and proved Serb officials had said them. Finally, for the tenth point, regarding general compliance, Serbia would inform Vienna of any measures it took to satisfy the ultimatum’s demands, yet the response concluded that

If the Imperial and Royal Government are not satisfied with this reply, the Serbian government, considering that it is not to the common interest to precipitate the solution of this question, are ready, as always, to accept a pacific understanding, either by referring this question to the decision of the International Tribunal of the Hague, or to the Great Powers.[[18]](#footnote-18)

This ‘highly perfumed rejection,’ in Christopher Clark’s assessment, went as far as Nikola Pasic could go, but he was never able to truly satisfy Vienna. For the Serbian government to denounce all irridentist organisations was akin to insisting on impossible political surgery. Since at least the Bosnian Annexation Crisis of 1909, Belgrade had burned for revenge, and its official opinion upheld Balkan expansion as a nationally ordained mission. This mission gained additional legitimacy following the triumphs of the Balkan Wars. We know, for instance, that in Belgrade’s Ministry of War, a large map attesting to show all the natural regions of Serbia was displayed for all to see, including those provinces still to be liberated from Habsburg rule. A latent sympathy with the goal of uniting all Slav lands under Serbian rule was widespread among the population and statesmen, and was enthusiastically supported by the press. This did not mean all approved of the assassination, but separating those agents from the hostile Serbian body politic would be a formidable task even for a Premier that wished sincerely to appease Vienna, which Pasic hoped to not have to do.

We should not forget that the ultimatum had been designed for rejection; Berchtold and his Ministers understood the gravity of what they were demanding. The real shock, to contemporaries, was that Serbia’s reply went as far as it did. Although a deeper analysis of the reply reveals far more conditions and obfuscation, as we have seen, when contemporaries read the Serbian response, they were pleasantly surprised. But Pasic understood that it had not gone far enough. He had been preparing for the worst since the afternoon. The country’s archives and gold reserves were then being evacuated, alongside its diplomatic corps, and the city garrison had occupied the heights around Belgrade in anticipation of an attack. More interestingly, general mobilisation had been in effect since 3PM, as clear a sign as there could be that Pasic expected war.[[19]](#footnote-19) But if war came, what would Serbia’s main protector, Russia, actually do? Even before Serbia’s response was delivered, deliberations in Russia suggested that she would respond with mobilisation, and a far more resolute stance than past crises. Russia’s policy and the controversy surrounding it constitutes our focus for the next episode, so if we haven’t scared you away yet, I hope to see you all then, soon.

1. 25 July 1914, Lyncker to his wife in Mombauer, *Documents*, p. 358. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Gordon Martel, *The Month that Changed the World*, pp. 185-191. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 25 July 1914, Jules Cambon to Bienvenu-Martin in Mombauer, *Documents*, pp. 335-336. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 25 July 1914, Jules Cambon to Bienvenu-Martin in *Ibid*, pp. 336-337. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See 25 July 1914, Pourtalès to Sazonov in *Ibid*, p. 342. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 25 July 1914, Jules Cambon to Bienvenu-Martin in *Ibid*, p. 339. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 25 July 1914, Bronevski to Sazonov in *Ibid*, p. 349. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. 25 July 1914, Grey to Rumbold in *Ibid*, pp. 350-351. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Thomas Otte, *July Crisis*, pp. 265-267. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. 25 July 1914, Sazonov to Strandtmann and Benckendorff in Mombauer, *Documents*, p. 345. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. 25 July 1914, Sazonov to Benckendorff in *Ibid*, p. 344. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. 25 July 1914, Grey to Buchanan in *Ibid*, pp. 345-346. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. 25 July 1914, Benckendorff to Sazonov in *Ibid*, p. 347. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. 25 July 1914, Benckendorff to Sazonov in *Ibid*, pp. 347-348. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Quoted in Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, pp. 463-464. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Ibid*, p. 466. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *Ibid*, p. 466. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. The Serbian response to the ultimatum is provided in 25 July 1914, Serbian government to Giesl in Mombauer, *Documents*, pp. 352-356. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, pp. 466-467. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)