

### The illusion of limited war: chancellor Bethmann Hollweg's calculated risk, July 1914

Jarausch, Konrad H.

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Jarausch, K. H. (2012). The illusion of limited war: chancellor Bethmann Hollweg's calculated risk, July 1914. *Historical Social Research, Supplement*, 24, 53-79. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-379196>

#### Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY Lizenz (Namensnennung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.de>

#### Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY Licence (Attribution). For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

# The Illusion of Limited War: Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg's Calculated Risk, July 1914 [1969]

Konrad H. Jarausch\*

**Abstract:** »Die Illusion eines begrenzten Krieges: Bethmann Hollwegs Politik eines kalkulierten Risikos in der Julikrise 1914«. The central figure in the Fischer controversy about Germany's responsibility for the outbreak of the First World War was the imperial chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg. On the basis of the controversial diary of his personal assistant Kurt Riezler, this article revisits the policy of the civilian leader of the German government, characterized by a "defensive aggressiveness." Fearing the growth of Russian power and closer Anglo-French cooperation, Bethmann was willing to run a "calculated risk" by backing a local Balkan war in which Austria could defeat Serbia, while risking a continental war with Russia and France in order to split the Entente. This gamble failed due to the Russian decision for general mobilization, German military pressure to invade Belgium and the British entry into the conflict that expanded the conflict to a European war which Berlin was unlikely to win. With such arguments the article tries to sketch a complex intermediary position between critics and apologists of German "war guilt."

**Keywords:** World War One, Fischer controversy, Bethmann Hollweg, Riezler, calculated risk, German war guilt.

The responsibility for the outbreak of World War I weighed heavily upon Imperial Germany's fifth Chancellor, Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg. "This war torments me," he confessed to the Liberal Conrad Haussmann during the struggle. "Again and again I ask if it could have been avoided and what I should have done differently." This soul searching led Bethmann to believe that "all nations are guilty; Germany, too, bears a large part of the blame."<sup>1</sup> Arguing that "our fate is too colossal to have its origins in singular events," the Chancellor stressed the larger causes of the conflict. Imperialist rivalry, the anti-German coalition, the growing isolation of Berlin, and Vienna's relative decline, "all that forced us to adopt a *policy of utmost risk*, a risk that increased with each repetition, in the Moroccan quarrel, in the Bosnian crisis, and then

---

\* Reprint of: Jarausch, Konrad H. 1969. The Illusion of Limited War: Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg's Calculated Risk, July 1914. *Central European History* 2: 58-76.

<sup>1</sup> Note by Conrad Haussmann, Feb. 24, 1918, about his visit to Hohenfinow; Hauptstaatsarchiv Stuttgart (cited HStA Stuttgart), J 47, NH 114. Cf. W. Steglich, *Die Friedenspolitik der Mittelmächte, 1917-1918* (Wiesbaden, 1968), p. 418.

again in the Moroccan question.”<sup>2</sup> But he also admitted candidly: “Lord yes, in a certain sense it was a preventive war,” motivated by “the constant threat of attack, the greater likelihood of its inevitability in the future, and by the military’s claim: today war is still possible without defeat, but not in two years! Yes, the generals,” he repeated. “It could only have been avoided by a rapprochement with England, that is still my conviction. But after we had decided for a [common] policy with Austria, we could not desert her in such danger.”<sup>3</sup> Suspecting that “it borders on a preventive war,” Bethmann silenced his conscience by denying that “we *encouraged* Austria to attack Serbia, which sounds as if we had taken the initiative. That is absolutely false.”<sup>4</sup>

For fifty years historians have endeavored to resolve the contradictions inherent in Bethmann’s self-justification. Returned from the sword to the pen, Entente and German scholars attacked one another so violently that the ex-Chancellor cautioned in 1920: “The war guilt question must be treated *objectively* by all. Any other method is suspect. The partisan polemics are beginning to nauseate the public.”<sup>5</sup> But his call for moderation went unheeded and during the inter-war period the *Kriegsschuldfrage* became a symbolic focus of nationalist sentiments.<sup>6</sup> The Second World War confirmed the verdict of Versailles, but in the early 1950’s the questioning of nationalism produced a Franco-German declaration, assigning a share of the responsibility to all.<sup>7</sup> More recently Fritz Fischer’s rediscovery of Bethmann’s annexationism reopened the old wounds, allowing East German and Western historians to affirm what they had long suspected: The war “was deliberately provoked, not stumbled into.”<sup>8</sup> Most

<sup>2</sup> Bethmann to Bülow, June 10, 1915; Bundesarchiv Coblenz (cited BA Coblenz), Nachlass Bülow. Cf. O. Hammann, *Bilder aus der letzten Kaiserzeit* (Berlin, 1922), pp. 122ff.

<sup>3</sup> Conrad Haussmann, *loc. cit.*

<sup>4</sup> Bethmann to Jagow, June 11, 1919; Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes, Bonn (cited AA Bonn), Nachlass Jagow.

<sup>5</sup> Bethmann to Rassow, Aug. 18, 1920; Privatnachlass Rassow, courtesy of Mrs. P. Rassow, Cologne.

<sup>6</sup> A. von Wegerer, *Bibliographie zur Vorgeschichte des Weltkrieges* (Berlin, 1934), and M. Gunzenhäuser, “Die Bibliographien zur Geschichte des ersten Weltkrieges,” *Schriften der Bibliothek für Zeitgeschichte* (Frankfurt, 1964). See also P. Renouvin, *Les Origines immédiates de la guerre* (Paris, 1925); S. B. Fay, *The Origins of the World War* (2 vols., New York, 1928); B. E. Schmitt, *The Coming of the War* (New York, 1930); A. von Wegerer, *Der Ausbruch des Weltkrieges* (Hamburg, 1939); and L. Albertini, *Le origini della guerra del 1914* (3 vols., Milan, 1942-43).

<sup>7</sup> James A. Corbett, “France and Germany Agree – on the Past,” *Historical Bulletin*, XXVII (March, 1955), 158-62.

<sup>8</sup> Fritz Fischer, *Griff nach der Weltmacht* (Düsseldorf, 1961; 3rd ed. 1963), now translated as *Germany’s Aims in the First World War* (New York, 1967); “Deutsche Kriegsziele,” *Historische Zeitschrift*, CLXXXVIII (1959), 249-310; “Kontinuität des Irrtums,” *ibid.*, CXCIX (1960), 83-100; “Weltpolitik, Weltmachstreben und deutsche Kriegsziele,” *ibid.*, CXCIX (1964), 265-346; *Weltmacht oder Niedergang?* (Hamburg, 1965). Cf. K. Epstein, “German War Aims in the First World War,” *World Politics*, XV (1962), 163-85. The most judicious summary of the controversy is W. J. Mommsen, “The Debate on German War Aims,” in

West German scholars, led by Egmont Zechlin, rallied behind their dean, the late Gerhard Ritter, claiming in spiritual defense of their fatherland that it was not a preventive but a defensive war.<sup>9</sup> Now historians must once more face the perennial question: Did Germany unleash the war deliberately to become a world power or did she support Austria merely to defend her weakening ally?

Curiously enough, one of the obvious avenues of investigation has hitherto been neglected: the study of Germany's constitutionally responsible statesman, Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg. A fascinating new document, the diary of his personal *adlatus* in the *Wilhelmstrasse*, Kurt Riezler, offers fresh perspectives on the motives of Bethmann's policies in the July crisis.<sup>10</sup> Scion of a family of prominent South German scholars, Riezler worked as a free-lance writer after completing his doctorate and entered the imperial foreign service in 1909. Three years later this gifted and spirited young man was detailed to serve as Bethmann's special assistant, drafting directives and helping to shape and clarify policy. To systematize his experience Riezler wrote two books on world politics before 1914, arguing for the necessity of a unified theory of international relations and sketching the general outlines of German *Weltpolitik*. Source of ideas, partner for thought-provoking discussions, and confidant of the Chancellor, he lacked any firm place in the governmental hierarchy. Hence his diary is an artistic record of moods, feelings, and conversations, rather than

---

the enlarged paperback edition of *Journal of Contemporary History*, I, No. 3 (1966), 45-70. See also E. W. Lynar, *Deutsche Kriegsziele 1914-1918* (Berlin, 1964), and K. Barthel, "Beobachtungen am Rande der Kriegszieldiskussion," *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht*, XVI (1965), 83-88. For the East German view see F. Klein, "Die westdeutsche Geschichtsschreibung und die Ziele des deutschen Imperialismus im Ersten Weltkrieg," *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, X (1962), 1808-36, and W. Gutsche, "Erst Europa – und dann die Welt," *ibid.*, XII (1964), 745-67.

<sup>9</sup> Gerhard Ritter, *Staatskunst und Kriegshandwerk*, II, III (Munich, 1960, 1964); *Der Schlieffenplan* (Munich, 1956); "Der Anteil der Militärs an der Kriegskatastrophe von 1914," *Historische Zeitschrift*, CXCIII (1961), 72-91; "Eine neue Kriegsschuldthese?" *ibid.*, CXCIV (1962), 646-08; "Bethmann Hollweg im Schlaglicht des deutschen Geschichtsrevisionismus," *Schweizer Monatshefte*, XLII (1962-63), 700-708. Unfortunately Zechlin's contributions are scattered: "Deutschland zwischen Kabinettskrieg und Wirtschaftskrieg," *Historische Zeitschrift*, CXCIX (1964), 347-458; "Friedensbestrebungen und Revolutionierungsversuche," *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, supplement to *Das Parlament* (1961), Nos. 20, 24, 25; (1963), Nos. 20 and 23; "Probleme des Kriegskalküls und der Kriegsbeendigung im ersten Weltkrieg," *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht*, XIV (1963), 533-55.

<sup>10</sup> The author wishes to express his indebtedness to Kurt Riezler's daughter, Mrs. M. White, for making the diary available to him. Cf. K. D. Erdmann, "Zur Beurteilung Bethmann Hollwegs," *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht*, XV (1964), 525-40, and *Die Zeit*, Jan. 16, 1968. See also F. Stern, "Bethmann Hollweg and the War: The Limits of Responsibility," in L. Krieger and Fritz Stern, eds., *The Responsibility of Power* (Garden City, N.Y., 1967), pp. 252-85, and *Die Zeit*, Jan. 2, 1968.

a systematic exposition of fact; but precisely its intuitive quality helps resolve the enigma of Bethmann's aims in the July crisis.<sup>11</sup>

Grandson of Bismarck's liberal opponent Moritz August von Bethmann Hollweg and younger son of the gentleman farmer Felix, Theobald was born in 1856 on the family estate of Hohenfinow, barely two hours from Berlin.<sup>12</sup> Raised more freely than a typical Junker, he was tutored at home and sent to the elite school Schulpforta where he graduated as *primus omnium* in 1875. After the customary year with the dragoons, he studied law at Strasbourg, Leipzig, and Berlin and entered the Prussian civil service in 1884 as *Landrat* in

---

<sup>11</sup> Theodor Heuss, "A Word in Memory of Kurt Riezler," and L. Strauss, "Kurt Riezler, 1882-1955," *Social Research*, XXIII (1956), 1-34. Recently Riezler's writings have been rediscovered: *Die Erforderlichkeit des Unmöglichen: Prolegomena zu einer Theorie der Politik und zu anderen Theorien* (Munich, 1913) and, under the pseudonym J. J. Ruedorffer, *Grundzüge der Weltpolitik in der Gegenwart* (Stuttgart, 1914). Cf. A. Hillgruber, "Riezlers Theorie des kalkulierten Risikos und Bethmann Hollwegs politische Konzeption in der Julikrise 1914," *Historische Zeitschrift*, CCII (1966), 333-51, and H. Pogge-von Strandmann and I. Geiss, *Die Erforderlichkeit des Unmöglichen* (Hamburg, 1965). To prove the inaccuracy of the latter's charge that the *Grundzüge* are pan-German, one only has to point to their condemnation by "Sg" [Franz Sonntag] in *Alldeutsche Blätter*, XXIV, Dec. 19, 1914, and XXV, Jan. 16, 1915. According to Bethmann's son Felix, the relationship was that of a bright young man and a skeptical elder statesman whose difference in age, temperament, and responsibility made for scintillating discussions while riding in the Tiergarten. But Riezler's liberal imperialist writings cannot simply be taken to express the Chancellor's more cautious foreign policy. After resigning from the diplomatic service, Riezler was a professor of philosophy at Munich, *Rektor* at the University of Frankfurt, and emigrated to the U.S. in 1939 where he taught at the New School for Social Research until 1952.

<sup>12</sup> There is no biography of Bethmann. The editor of *Die Grosse Politik*, F. Thimme, gathered material for such a work and wrote numerous articles on the Chancellor until his premature death in 1938. "F. Thimme zum Gedächtnis," W. Frauendienst, *Berliner Monatshefte*, XVI (1938), 821-26, and the Thimme Nachlass, BA Coblenz. The material in Bethmann's personnel files in the Deutsches Zentralarchiv, Merseburg (cited DZA Merseburg) and, after 1905, the BA Coblenz is disappointing. The Chancellor's *Nachlass* was destroyed in 1945 in Hohenfinow. Except for the adulatory H. Kötschke, *Unser Reichskanzler* (Berlin, 1916), and G. Egelhaaf, *Der fünfte Reichskanzler* (Stuttgart, 1916), contemporary accounts are virulent diatribes against him: "Junius Alter" [pseud. for Franz Sonntag], *Das deutsche Reich auf dem Wege zur geschichtlichen Episode* (Munich, 1919); W. Kapp, *Die nationalen Kreise und der Reichskanzler* (Königsberg, 1916); and H. von Liebig, *Die Politik Bethmann Hollwegs* (Munich, 1919). The unpublished dissertations by B. Haberland, "Die Innenpolitik des Reiches unter der Kanzlerschaft Bethmann Hollwegs 1909-1911" (Kiel, 1951); R. Koschnitzke, "Die Innenpolitik des Reichskanzlers von Bethmann Hollweg im Weltkrieg" (Kiel, 1952), and Johanna Schellenberg's just completed thesis (East Berlin) lack full documentation. More serious contributions are H. G. Zmarzlik, *Bethmann Hollweg als Reichskanzler, 1909-1914* (Düsseldorf, 1957), and K. H. Janssen, *Der Kanzler und der General, 1914-1916* (Göttingen, 1967). To date the best monographs are the *Habilitationschriften* by W. Gutsche, "Die Beziehungen zwischen der Regierung Bethmann Hollweg und dem Monopolkapital in den ersten Monaten des Weltkriegs" (East Berlin, 1967), and W. J. Mommsen, "Bethmann Hollweg und das Problem der politischen Führung, 1909-1914" (Cologne, 1967).

Freienwalde upon completion of a doctorate of jurisprudence. Repeated hunting visits of William II brought him to the attention of the provincial administration which called him to Potsdam in 1896, where he rose rapidly. In summer 1899 Bethmann became *Regierungspräsident* of West Prussia and in the fall of the same year, *Oberpräsident* of the Mark Brandenburg. Having declined it two years earlier, he accepted the Prussian Ministry of the Interior in 1905, and after Posadowsky's fall, Bülow made him Vice-Chancellor and Imperial Secretary of Interior in the summer of 1907. Because of Bülow's estrangement from William II over the *Daily Telegraph* affair, Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg was appointed Chancellor on July 14, 1909, to continue his predecessor's policies without his personal liabilities.<sup>13</sup>

The popular stereotype of "the philosopher from Hohenfinow" described merely Bethmann's outward appearance. Despite his anachronistic "humanitarianism, his seriousness, and his incapacity for ostentation," Riezler recognized that "he is not at all unequivocal. His cunning is as great as his bungling. Both alternate." It was "totally wrong" to consider him only a clever and cultured bureaucrat. "In breadth and independence of vision he is a great man." In sharp contrast to his contemporaries "his judgment forms quite independently. He says only things unsaid and unheard." Bethmann's assistant was continually puzzled by "this curious man. He is not at all winning, except with excellent wine, music, and deep conversation. But he has much that is ethically engaging. However, that has no appeal for our politicians. Unbearable in many details, he is admirable in great things." Riezler was often exasperated by "his personal difficulties, his handicaps in dealing with people." Despite his rhetorical gifts, Bethmann lacked charisma, and preferred cabinet diplomacy to mass appeals. Contrary to general opinion he possessed an instinct for power strong enough to outlast such rivals as Falkenhayn, Tirpitz, and Bülow. Though blessed with "a great mind," he was "unable to cope with the routine of politics." Statesmanlike in fundamentals, "the Chancellor has absolutely no talent for dealing with the military, for impressing them and getting information from them."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Bethmann's own writings failed to make his historical image more distinct, since he disdained to engage in the ugly postwar polemics of his erstwhile adversaries: *Betrachtungen zum Weltkriege* (2 vols., Berlin, 1919-21); *Kriegsreden*, ed. F. Thimme (Berlin, 1919); "Das Friedensangebot von 1915," *Preussische Jahrbücher*, CLXXVIII (1919), 114-16; "Friedensmöglichkeiten im Frühsommer 1917," *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, Feb. 29, 1920; *Friedensangebot und U-Boot-Krieg* (Berlin, 1919).

<sup>14</sup> Riezler diary, July 13, 20, 27, Aug. 21, Oct. 10, 1914. According to Hammann, Bethmann's "most difficult struggle was against himself." *Bilder*, pp. 66ff. In the *Deutsches Biographisches Jahrbuch für 1921*, pp. 21-41, F. Hartung called him "a Hamlet personality," and in the *Neue Deutsche Biographie*, pp. 188-93, W. Frauendienst maintained: "He was basically not a *homo politicus*." Cf. G. P. Gooch, "Bethmann Hollweg," *Dictionnaire Diplomatique* (Paris, 1954), pp. 103ff.

In foreign policy Bethmann Hollweg's lodestar was "*Weltpolitik* but no war!"<sup>15</sup> A sincere patriot, occasionally even a nationalist, he nevertheless loathed the pan-Germans: "With these idiots nobody can conduct a sane policy," he angrily complained to his cousin Pourtalès, German Ambassador in St. Petersburg.<sup>16</sup> Above all, Bethmann strove for a rapprochement with Great Britain. "Like you," he confided to Eisendecker, a close friend, "I believe our most urgent task is a *modus vivendi* with England. In the last analysis even Morocco was intended to facilitate this." Provoked by Lloyd George's belligerent Mansion House speech, he warned:

We should do everything our finances allow for our defenses on land and sea, but we must work as quietly as possible, not threaten boisterously. Only then can we improve our relations with London and prevent a new naval law from leading to war.<sup>17</sup>

As eastern counterpart, Bethmann prided himself on "having reestablished and reconfirmed intimate and friendly relations with St. Petersburg in the *entrevues* of Berlin and Baltischport."<sup>18</sup> Far from dreams of an *Endabrechnung* with the Slavic and Romance peoples, as was demanded by the military writer Bernhardi, the Chancellor worked for a Bismarckian peace. "We must keep France in check through a cautious policy towards Russia and England. Naturally this does not please our chauvinists and is unpopular. But I see no alternative for Germany in the near future."<sup>19</sup> Though sometimes committing minor *faux pas* in protocol, Bethmann understood the basic structure of European diplomacy more clearly than his nationalist critics. During the Balkan wars, he pushed for moderation in Vienna, but in the spring of 1914 he paused: "Future developments cause me some concern. Rumania is quite irritated at Austria and Russia braces itself strongly in case of a renewed flare-up in the Balkans." Perceptively he predicted: "If the *Ballplatz* again pursues a policy of prestige without backing it up, the situation can become very serious." The Chancellor had no illusions about the Austrian Foreign Minister, Berchtold: "Vienna continues to flirt with Sofia – of course without success if the chips are down, cannot get along with Serbia, and does not understand that it will eventually have to gain access to the Adriatic in any case." As a result "in a real conflict Austria will

---

<sup>15</sup> Anon. [Hans Plehn], *Weltpolitik und kein Krieg!* (Berlin, 1913), inspired by the liberal imperialist diplomat Kühlmann. For Bethmann's pre-war foreign policy cf. the unpublished dissertations of F. Strigel, "Die deutsch-englischen Flottenverhandlungen in den Jahren 1909-1911 unter Bethmann Hollweg" (Würzburg, 1935); A. Kessler, "Das deutsch-englische Verhältnis vom Amtsantritt Bethmann Hollwegs bis zur Haldane Mission" (Erlangen, 1938); and H. J. Henning, "Deutschlands Verhältnis zu England in Bethmann Hollwegs Aussenpolitik 1909-1914" (Cologne, 1962).

<sup>16</sup> Bethmann to Pourtalès, July 30, 1912; AA Bonn, Nachlass Pourtalès.

<sup>17</sup> Bethmann to Eisendecker, Dec. 26, 1911; AA Bonn, Nachlass Eisendecker.

<sup>18</sup> Bethmann to Eisendecker, July 22, 1912; *ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Bethmann to Eisendecker, Mar. 23, 1913; *ibid.*

have except for Russia [sic] the entire Balkans, possibly even Turkey against it. We must not allow such a fate to overwhelm us. But resisting it is hard." Despite such dire predictions, Bethmann was not resigned to the catastrophe, hoping for a breakthrough in colonial negotiations with Whitehall: "Progress continues with England. But London is unyielding in its desire not to alienate France which takes offense at the most trivial incident."<sup>20</sup>

This slow but steady Anglo-German rapprochement was abruptly cut short by Princip's shots at Sarajevo. "The dynasty of Habsburg-Lorraine truly is a house of Atrides, tottering from catastrophe to catastrophe," Foreign Secretary Jagow wrote to a friend on July 6, 1914.

The political effects are difficult to foresee, because too little is known about the new successor. The old Emperor's life is ebbing, his will power and resolve, never very strong, are exhausted – and the heir is quite young. Meanwhile the Empire dissolves more and more, losing prestige and coherence internally and externally. A strong hand is needed to gather the reins. Will the young prince [Charles] possess it?<sup>21</sup>

The initial response of the German government to the assassination was hesitant, groping, and generally peaceful. Old Count Tschirschky, German ambassador to the Hofburg, affirmed Berlin's support of the alliance, but "used every opportunity in order to warn quietly but seriously and emphatically against precipitous steps."<sup>22</sup> Remembering Franz Ferdinand's warm hospitality only three weeks earlier, the impetuous Emperor called for a showdown with Serbia "now or never," reprimanding the ambassador for his timidity.<sup>23</sup> Count Tschirschky must have heard of the royal displeasure since he assured Francis Joseph several days later "that Germany would firmly back Austria, if its vital

---

<sup>20</sup> Bethmann to Eisendecker, Apr. 7, 1914; *ibid.* Cf. also England 78 No. 3 secr., vols, I-XX; Deutschland 131 secr., vols, XIV ff. Deutschland 131, vols, XXXI ff., for his Russian and British policies. On June 4 Bethmann had a long conversation with Bavarian Ambassador Lerchenfeld: "He bluntly called our diplomatic situation bad." Even if England did not engage in provocative measures, "this would not prevent it from joining our enemies in case of war." Bethmann did not fear France, but "Russia was becoming more dangerous," since pan-Slavism might lead to war. The Chancellor rejected a preventive strike, because it "would topple several thrones." Lerchenfeld gathered the impression that Bethmann viewed "the general political situation not at all optimistically." Lerchenfeld to Hertling, June 4, 1914; Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, Munich (cited Bayr. HStA Munich).

<sup>21</sup> V. Dedijer, *The Road to Sarajevo* (London, 1967). Jagow to Gerhard (Meyer), July 6, 1914: AA Bonn, Nachlass Jagow.

<sup>22</sup> Tschirschky to Bethmann, June 30, 1914; AA Bonn.Wk vol. 1. I. Geiss, *Julikrise und Kriegsausbruch* (2 vols., Hanover, 1963-64), is a useful compilation of the printed sources. For his views on the July crisis see: "The Outbreak of the First World War and German War Aims," *Journal of Contemporary History*, enlarged paperback edition, 1, No. 3 (1966), 71-87.

<sup>23</sup> William II's marginalia on Tschirschky to Bethmann, June 30; AA Bonn, Wk vol. I. Cf. also P. S. Thielen, "Die Marginalien Wilhelms II," *Die Welt als Geschichte*, XX (1960), 255ff.



interests were imperiled.” The envoy’s emphasis on a concerted plan of action foreshadowed a firmer German stand, but the Chancellor was still vacationing at Hohenfinow and Foreign Secretary Jagow was on his honeymoon.<sup>24</sup>

On July 5, William II recalled Bethmann to Berlin to consider Francis Joseph’s appeal for help, transmitted by the hawkish Austrian diplomat Count Hoyos. “The Emperor received me and Undersecretary of State Zimmermann in the Park of the *Neues Palais* in Potsdam. No one else was present,” the Chancellor later recalled. Having read the strongly worded Austrian memorandum,

the Emperor declared that he could not deceive himself about the grave danger in which the pan-Serbian propaganda had placed Austria. But it was not up to us to advise our ally how to react to the bloodbath of Sarajevo. Vienna herself had to decide that.

William recommended a three-fold response: “We should abstain from direct influence and advice, since we should work with all our means towards the goal of not letting the Austro-Serbian quarrel become an international conflict.” But “Emperor Francis Joseph should know that we will not desert Austria-Hungary in this serious hour. Our own vital interests demand the preservation of Austria” as a great power. And following Berchtold’s advice, “he considered it desirable to draw Bulgaria [into the alliance] as long as that would not alienate Rumania.” Bethmann accepted this analysis since “these opinions of the Emperor coincided with my own.”<sup>25</sup> Later the same afternoon the hastily recalled military advisers of William minimized the gravity of the expected risk. Summarizing the informal discussions between Bethmann, Zimmermann, Minister of War Falkenhayn, and the chief of the military cabinet Lyncker, Adjutant General Plessen jotted into his diary: “The opinion prevails that we should move against Serbia *the sooner the better*, and that the Russians – although friends of Serbia – will not intervene.” But Falkenhayn reassured Moltke, Chief of the General Staff: “The Chancellor, who was also in Potsdam, seems to believe as little as I that the Austrian government is serious about its recently more forceful language.”<sup>26</sup>

With such military encouragement, Bethmann gave the Austrian ambassador, Count Szögyény, one of the most momentous assurances of European history the following morning:

---

<sup>24</sup> Tschirschky to Bethmann, July 2; AA Bonn, Wk vol. I. For the ambassador’s surprising about-face cf. H. Hantsch, *Leopold Graf Berchtold* (Vienna, 1963), II, 566ff.

<sup>25</sup> Bethmann Hollweg, *Betrachtungen*, I, 134ff., and II, 241ff. For his reply to the parliamentary commission of inquiry see *Stenographische Berichte des Untersuchungsausschusses* (cited UA), I, 3-23, 79ff.

<sup>26</sup> Geiss, *Julikrise*, I, No. 24a-c, Plessen diary, July 5, and Falkenhayn to Moltke, July 5: “Surely in no case will the next few weeks bring a decision.” For the myth of the crown council see G. Craig, *The Politics of the Prussian Army* (New York, 1964), p. 292.

Concerning Austria's relations with Serbia the German government believes that Vienna has to judge what has to be done to clarify this relationship; in this undertaking it can count safely on Germany's support of the monarchy as ally and friend – whatever its decision.

To bolster the war party in Vienna, Szögyény concluded his despatch energetically: "In the further course of the conversation, I realized that the Chancellor, like his imperial master, considers our immediate intervention against Serbia the most radical and the best solution of our Balkan difficulties."<sup>27</sup>

Why did Bethmann Hollweg depart so suddenly and fundamentally from his earlier policy of restraint towards Austria during the Balkan wars? The official documents contain no clue to his motivation. Conscious of Berchtold's desire for local war, the Chancellor gave more than a blank check. Prodded by William, Hoyos, and Zimmermann and encouraged by the generals, Bethmann formulated a coherent rationale, calling for a diplomatic offensive on the Balkans in which the Austrian punishment of Serbia would be just one part. Contrary to the tenor of the alliance with Rumania, Bethmann informed his ambassador in Bucharest that "H.M. understands that Emperor Francis Joseph considers reconciliation with Serbia impossible and attempts to counteract the dangers threatening his House and Empire from Belgrade through an alliance with Bulgaria."<sup>28</sup> The Sarajevo assassination gave Germany the historic chance for breaking the tightening vise of encirclement through a realignment of the south-eastern powers. The adherence of Bulgaria and Turkey to the Triple Alliance and the strengthening of dynastic ties with Rumania and Greece would isolate Serbia politically and militarily and eliminate Russian influence from the area. A quick diplomatic or if need be military triumph of Austria would restore the Central Powers' waning prestige. When the *Frankfurter Zeitung* predicted on July 9 that Vienna's "diplomatic and political action" against Belgrade would "probably be executed in *short, swift strokes*," Bethmann heartily agreed: "Very good."<sup>29</sup>

Back in Hohenfinow after the momentous decision, the Chancellor explained the reasons for his reversal to Riezler "at night on the veranda under the starry sky." Bethmann pessimistically regarded the rumored "Anglo-Russian negotiations for a naval agreement and a landing in Pomerania as the last link

---

<sup>27</sup> Szögyény to Berchtold, July 6; Geiss, I, No. 27. According to the Austrian ambassador, Bethmann "considers the present moment more auspicious than a later one," and pressed for reconciliation with Italy. Cf. also Bethmann to Tschirschky, July 6, in Zimmermann's handwriting. The Chancellor struck from the instruction that Germany would support Austria "in all circumstances," a small but significant difference from the more militant Undersecretary.

<sup>28</sup> Bethmann to Waldburg, July 6; AA Bonn, Wk. vol. I. For further references to the diplomatic offensive on the Balkans see Geiss, *Julikrise*, I and II, Nos. 6, 12, 21, 27, 34, 61, 138, 233, 513, 868, 998, 1063, and 1070.

<sup>29</sup> Bethmann marginalia on a clipping from the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, July 9; AA Bonn, Wk vol. 1.

in a chain.” Although the British Admiralty publicly denied these reports, the increasing military cooperation among the Entente distressed the Chancellor. Bethmann feared that the German ambassador to the Court of St. James, Prince Lichnowsky, was much too credulous and could easily be duped by the wily British. Recent general staff studies had reinforced Bethmann’s fear of “Russia’s quickly growing military might. After the completion of their strategic railroads in Poland our position [will be] untenable.” Austria was growing “weaker and more immobile” by the day. Vienna was “increasingly undermined from north and south-east, at any rate incapable of going to war for German interests as our ally.” The Chancellor dismally concluded his military assessment: “The Entente knows that we are, therefore, completely paralyzed.”<sup>30</sup>

The crime of Sarajevo called for “grave decisions.” Apparently “official Serbia [is] incriminated. Austria wants to pull itself together,” judging from “Francis Joseph’s mission to the Emperor inquiring about the *casus foederis*.” Now the Chancellor was confronted with our “old dilemma at every Austrian action in the Balkans. If we encourage them, they say we pushed them into it. If we discourage them, they say we left them in the lurch.” Despairingly he predicted: “Then they will throw themselves into the open arms of the Western powers and we lose our last important ally.” Fearing the break-up of the Dual Alliance, strained by German moderation in the Balkan wars, Bethmann considered his predicament “worse than in 1912, because this time Austria is on the defensive against Serbo-Russian intrigues” and could not be restrained so easily. Backing Vienna entailed considerable risks as well: “An attack on Serbia can lead to world war.” Any general conflagration “however it ends [will lead] to a revolution of all existing conditions.” But inaction was worse: “The future belongs to Russia which grows and grows, looming above us as an increasingly terrifying nightmare.” Under this heavy responsibility Bethmann decided on a leap forward. “Perhaps the old Emperor [Francis Joseph] will prefer not to fight after all,” the Chancellor consoled himself. “If war comes from the east so that we have to fight for Austria-Hungary and not Austria-Hungary for us, we have a chance of winning.” And better yet, “if war does not break out, if the Tsar is unwilling or France, alarmed, counsels peace, we have the prospect of splitting the Entente.”<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> Riezler diary, July 7. Two general staff studies, “The Completion of the Russian Railroad Network” and “The Growing Power of Russia,” were received by Zimmermann the day before his first conference with Hoyos; AA Bonn, Deutschland 121 No. 31 secr., vol. II.

<sup>31</sup> Riezler diary, July 8. The Chancellor was appalled by the conservative “nonsense” expressed by Heydebrand who was “reputed to have said that war would lead to a strengthening of the patriarchal order and spirit.” This fear of revolution contradicts A. Mayer’s theory of the “Domestic Causes of the First World War,” *The Responsibility of Power*, pp. 268ff.

Although uncertain about the likelihood of war, Bethmann resolved to run a calculated risk. Full support of Berchtold's desire for the punishment of Serbia could have three consequences: A local Balkan war would bring a diplomatic triumph, a realignment of the south-eastern states and the break-up of the Entente. Equally likely seemed a continental war, engulfing Russia, Austria, France, and Germany. In such a conflict, the general staff promised a good chance of winning. Less desirable than a localized conflict, a continental struggle might ease the Russian pressure from the east, revitalize faltering Austria and regain the diplomatic initiative in the Balkans. In Bethmann's mind only the last alternative was fraught with unacceptable danger: world war. The intervention of Britain or any other great power would upset the carefully balanced odds. Bethmann did not gamble frivolously, but because he considered "our position desperate," hoping only, "if war comes and the veils fall, the whole nation will follow, driven by necessity and peril." Riezler longed for "victory as liberation," since he was "too young not to succumb to the lure of the new, the great movement." But for Bethmann "this action is a leap in the dark and as such the most serious duty." While the pan-Germans were jubilant, the navy, army, and colonial leagues ecstatic, and the students feverish with misguided idealism, the aging Chancellor entered on the uncertain course with great reluctance.<sup>32</sup>

Bethmann's diplomatic gamble was not only endorsed but actively promoted by the other leaders of the Wilhelmian empire. The Emperor's early pro-war commitment prejudiced the issue before his Chancellor could advise differently. In the absence of the cautious Jagow, the energetic Zimmermann was swayed by Hoyos who considered the moment opportune for a *Rachezug* against Serbia, and when summarizing the Austrian memorandum Zimmermann counseled Bethmann to take resolute action.<sup>33</sup> Only two months earlier Moltke had told Jagow: "We must wage a preventive war to conquer our opponents as long as we still have a reasonable chance in the struggle."<sup>34</sup> The emotional impact of the murder on the sincere monarchist Bethmann at a time when he was still in mourning over the death of his wife was also severe. But there is no proof of industrialist pressure for war. On the contrary, English Ambassador Goschen stressed in a private letter to Sir Arthur Nicolson in London: "I hear in fact from all sides that the financial and industrial classes are dead against a war in any shape – but particularly against a war which in its origins does not

---

<sup>32</sup> Riezler diary, July 14. Bethmann was disturbed that "Italy is flirting with Russia," fearing Rome's desertion of the Triple Alliance, since "it only wants to feed on the corpses!"

<sup>33</sup> Soden to Hertling, July 9; Bayr. HStA Munich, MA III 2691/2. Zimmermann was so truculent since he "certainly believed that it would be possible to localize the war."

<sup>34</sup> "Gespräch mit General Moltke im Frühjahr 1914," pp. 82-86; AA Bonn, Nachlass Jagow, MS Politische Aufsätze. "Except for defense we had no war aims such as conquests that would have justified the heavy sacrifice of lives."

touch German interests.”<sup>35</sup> In the July crisis of 1914 Bethmann believed that he acted in keeping with his earlier rejected letter of resignation in protest against the naval race:

If war is forced upon us, we shall fight and, with God’s help, not perish. But to conjure up a war ourselves without having our honor or vital interests imperiled, this I would consider a sin against Germany’s destiny, even if human foresight would predict a total victory.<sup>36</sup>

After the fateful decision of July 5, Bethmann’s chief concern became the smooth execution of the diplomatic offensive in the Balkans. To be sure, the Chancellor had pledged his unconditional support, but Berchtold, the Hungarian Premier Tisza, and the old Emperor were still in control of their own actions. “In Vienna there seem to be differences over the method [of punishment] between Berchtold and Tisza,” Riezler recorded. “It is hardly possible to guide their hand from Berlin. Apparently they want a short ultimatum and in case of Serbian rejection, intervention. They seem to need an eternity to mobilize.” The Hofburg’s indecision “endangered” Bethmann’s diplomatic calculation, which relied upon “a rapid *fait accompli* and afterwards friendship towards the Entente, then the shock will be weathered. [We have] to expose the Serbian intrigues with solid and overwhelming evidence that cannot be questioned.”<sup>37</sup> The Chancellor remained in touch with Austrian intentions, but he did not intervene again until his return to the *Wilhelmstrasse* during the climax of the crisis. “Berchtold debates the timing, before or after Poincaré’s visit to Petersburg. Better before, because then there is a greater chance that France, suddenly frightened by the spectre of war, will counsel peace in Russia,” Riezler noted wishfully. “Austria has decided on this course today but the Hungarian harvest has to be gathered first.”<sup>38</sup> The *Wilhelmstrasse*, and more strongly the two ambassadors Tschirschky and Szögyény, urged Berchtold to take speedy action, lest Europe intervene in the Austro-Serbian quarrel. Such pressure strengthened the war party in Vienna, but the time it took to persuade Tisza of the need for war, the *Ballplatz*’s slow collection of the crime dossier, and Chief of Staff Conrad’s halting military preparations undermined Bethmann’s ration-

---

<sup>35</sup> G. P. Gooch and H. Temperley, eds., *British Documents on the Origins of the War, 1898-1914*, XI (London, 1926), No. 667. According to Goschen, “both the chancellor and Jagow would like to avoid a general war. As for the chancellor, if he makes war, it will be because he was forced into it.”

<sup>36</sup> Bethmann to William II, Mar. 6, 1912; DZA Merseburg, Rep. 89H, Reichssteuern II, vol. I.

<sup>37</sup> Riezler diary, July 11, 1914. On die 9th Bethmann briefed Vice-Chancellor Delbrück who reacted to the planned Austrian ultimatum: “That means war.” Bethmann was still confident: “To be sure he did not know the details of the supposed ultimatum but should serious consequences develop between Austria and Serbia, he believed they could be successfully localized.” C. von Delbrück, *Die wirtschaftliche Mobilmachung in Deutschland* (Munich, 1924), pp. 96f.

<sup>38</sup> Riezler diary, July 14.

ale.<sup>39</sup> Despite possible complications, Jagow reaffirmed the German strategy after coming back from his honeymoon: “In all circumstances, we want the conflict to be localized.” Berlin’s proddings in Vienna and attempts to shield Austria diplomatically were directed towards a quick punitive strike, but *not* towards a continental or world war.<sup>40</sup>

On the eve of the Austrian ultimatum tension mounted in Berlin. “We have unequivocally assured our support. The atmosphere is very serious. A heavy cloud of open mourning and of gravest responsibility hangs over men and conversations.” Bethmann marvelled at “Russia’s increasing demands and incredible dynamism.” The Chancellor feared that “it cannot be fended off any longer, especially if the present European constellation continues.” He wondered “how the current system of alliances can be toppled and remodeled. But is that possible? Only if Russia realizes that it has to reach an understanding with us because the Western powers did not back it to the hilt in the Serbian quarrel.” Now Bethmann began to ask himself if it had had to come to this. “Should he have, in 1912, insisted on his resignation, which had been submitted and refused after the Emperor had decided in favor of Tirpitz in the question of the three battle cruisers?” In order to keep the chancellorship from falling to the ambitious admiral and to prevent the empty prestige policy of the Right, Bethmann had stayed on.<sup>41</sup>

Although Zimmermann conveyed the tenor of the Austrian demands to the Bavarian ambassador on July 18, the Chancellor did not dictate the ultimatum to Berchtold.<sup>42</sup> Jagow did stress, in an instruction to Tschirschky, that the note would have to take European opinion into account, but the Riezler diary confirms that it did not originate in Berlin.<sup>43</sup> The *Wilhelmstrasse* was impatient with the Austrian *Schlamperei*, which made the *fait accompli* more difficult to shield, but it did not intervene directly. Bethmann only repeatedly urged the Emperor to continue his northern tour in order not to alarm the British Admiralty.<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> N. Stone, “Hungary and the Crisis of July 1914,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, enlarged paperback edition, I, No. 3 (1966), 147-64. See also A. J. May, *The Passing of the Habsburg Monarchy, 1914-1918* (Philadelphia, 1966), I, 54ff.

<sup>40</sup> Jagow’s instruction to Lichnowsky on “localization” of July 12 was already drafted on July 7, indicating that its rationale was an integral part of the July 5-6 decisions; AA Bonn, Wk vol. I.

<sup>41</sup> Riezler diary, July 20, 1917. Had Bethmann resigned earlier “then Tirpitz or some other politician of that stripe would have become Chancellor,” making war a virtual certainty. Cf. also AA Bonn, Nachlass Jagow, MS Politische Aufsätze, “Rücktrittsgedanken des Reichskanzlers Bethmann Hollweg, 1913.”

<sup>42</sup> Schoen to Hertling, July 18; Bayr. HStA Munich, MA III, 2691/2.

<sup>43</sup> Jagow to Tschirschky, July 11; AA Bonn, Wk vol. I. Tschirschky to Bethmann, July 21; AA Bonn, Wk vol. II.

<sup>44</sup> Bethmann to William II, AA Bonn, Wk vols, II-III, passim, and G. Müller, *Regierte der Kaiser?* (Göttingen, 1959), pp. 34ff.

In a private letter to the governor of Alsace-Lorraine, the Chancellor stressed that provocative measures on the French border should be prevented. His diplomatic calculation appears clearly in his hope: "If we succeed not only in keeping France itself quiet, but also in having it plead for peace in Petersburg, this turn of events will weaken the Franco-Russian alliance."<sup>45</sup>

On July 20, the Chancellor protested to the Emperor against the belligerent telegrams sent by Crown Prince William to pan-German writers. Bethmann implored William II to prohibit such public displays

which our enemies would consider as planned provocation after all that has transpired, while it is, according to Your Majesty's orders, our task to localize the Austro-Serbian conflict. The solution of this problem is so difficult that even a minor incident can tip the scales.

Unfortunately Bethmann's reprimand to the Crown Prince is not in the files, but according to Riezler it was a clear disassociation from the warlike elements of the German ruling classes.<sup>46</sup>

On the day of the Austrian ultimatum Bethmann began to contemplate the aftermath of the crisis.

The Chancellor tells me that [Russian Foreign Minister] Sazonov said to [the banker] Robby Mendelssohn the other day: '*Si l'Allemagne lâche l'Autriche, je lâcherai immédiatement après la France.*' He seems to toy with such possibilities. A lasting understanding with Russia would be preferable to an agreement with England. But its difficulties are far greater. Russia is far more exacting.

The alternative of sacrificing Vienna to a Russo-German accord was as quickly discarded as it had arisen. "We must maintain Austria proper. Were Russia to unleash the South Slavs, we would be lost." Any agreement short of partitioning the Habsburg Empire would be at best an uneasy truce, and to begin negotiations with Sazonov now would only give him new weapons in London and Paris. "If the Serbian quarrel passes without Russian mobilization, we can safely come to an understanding with the Tsar, [who will be] disappointed in the Western powers, once Austria is satisfied."<sup>47</sup> Despite such speculation, Bethmann reassured William II, "It is improbable that England will *immediately* enter the fray."<sup>48</sup>

Since local war now seemed likely, Bethmann had to ascertain the attitude of the Social Democrats. Unsure of their ideological course, bereft of the leadership of Bebel, the Socialists vacillated between an internationalist and a social-patriot posture. The Chancellor seized upon the opportunity for drawing

---

<sup>45</sup> Bethmann to Roedern, July 15; AA Bonn, Wk vol. I.

<sup>46</sup> Riezler diary, July 23. P. Herre, *Kronprinz Wilhelm* (Munich, 1954), p. 51. Riezler was upset about such "insane proposals."

<sup>47</sup> Riezler diary, July 20.

<sup>48</sup> Bethmann to William II, July 23; AA Bonn, Wk vol. III.

them completely into the Prussian fold “by insuring himself of their views, by negotiating with them in person, and by requesting guarantees from the military against the stupidities of red-baiters in uniform.” One should “emphasize the defensive war.” In order to assure a united front at home, Russia had to be blamed for the coming conflict at all costs. But Bethmann was at the same time sincerely convinced: “Should war break out, it will result from Russian mobilization *ab irato*, before possible negotiations. In that case we could hardly sit and talk any longer, because we have to strike immediately in order to have any chance of winning at all.”<sup>49</sup>

The Austrian ultimatum to Serbia had escalated the conflict. Still in Hohenfinow, the Chancellor was constantly on the telephone to Berlin, attempting to prepare for all eventualities, while trying to keep William II from cutting short his northern cruise. In a conference in the Prussian Ministry of War, Vice-Chancellor Delbrück forced the adoption of a moratorium of the planned arrests of the *Reichsfeinde*, making the later loyalty of many Socialists, Poles, Danes, and Alsatians possible.<sup>50</sup> First warnings to the merchant marine were issued and measures of financial mobilization discussed. But the *Wilhelmstrasse* feared “the Austrian note was clumsy, much too verbose.” Everyone was anxiously watching “the first telegrams on the reaction of the great powers to the Viennese *démarche* come in.” It was time for Bethmann to return to Berlin and take charge during the critical phase of the confrontation. Riezler speculated: “What does fate will? Alas, fate is blind, unconscious, and tangled in accidents. Whoever dares to seize it, holds it.”<sup>51</sup> Immediately after arriving at the *Reichskanzlerpalais*, Bethmann cabled the Emperor that the Austrians considered the Serbian reply inadequate and had broken off diplomatic relations. But he still maintained that “in Paris and London one is working for the localization of the conflict.” Would his calculated risk succeed?<sup>52</sup>

On July 26, William II decided to return with the German fleet, contrary to his Chancellor’s urgent advice. The Emperor feared another Port Arthur and curtly ordered Bethmann to report to him on the situation the following afternoon in Potsdam. But the Chancellor replied: “As long as Russia does not commit a hostile act, I believe that our stand, directed towards *localization*,

---

<sup>49</sup> Riezler diary, July 23. Cf. E. Zechlin, “Bethmann Hollweg, Kriegsrisiko und SPD, 1914,” *Der Monat*, XVIII (1966), 17-32, over-stressing domestic tactical considerations. See also David’s note on Aug. 1: “Our peace demonstration of Tuesday evening [the 28th] had been tolerated and even encouraged by Bethmann.” E. Matthias and S. Miller, eds., *Das Kriegstagebuch des Reichstagsabgeordneten Eduard David, 1914-1918* (Düsseldorf, 1966), pp. 5ff.

<sup>50</sup> C. Delbrück, *Wirtschaftliche Mobilmachung*, pp. 89ff.

<sup>51</sup> Riezler diary, July 24. The Chancellor’s assistant was frustrated: “Up to now we could do nothing in the open.”

<sup>52</sup> Bethmann to William II, July 25, telegrams Nos. 139 and 140; AA Bonn, Wk vol. IV.



must *remain* peaceful, too.”<sup>53</sup> First rumors of Russian mobilization spurred Bethmann to warn Lichnowsky:

Should they be confirmed, we would be forced to take countermeasures against our will. Even today we try to localize the conflict and keep peace in Europe. We therefore ask Sir Edward Grey [the British Foreign Minister] to use his influence in Petersburg in this direction.<sup>54</sup>

Bavarian Ambassador Lerchenfeld believed that “the policy of the German Empire is directed towards having our ally [Austria] emerge with a gain in prestige but also towards maintaining world peace.”<sup>55</sup> The goal of a Balkan victory but prevention of a general war inspired the Chancellor’s instruction to Ambassador Schoen in Paris: “We cannot mediate in the conflict between Austria and Serbia, but probably [we will do so] between Austria and Russia.”<sup>56</sup>

The initial reaction of the great powers to the ultimatum was not too discouraging.

It is of crucial importance that Sazonov, though angry, has avoided committing himself. Paris is aghast at England’s cold shoulder: an Austro-Serbian conflict does not concern me. Italy blackmails. [Vienna and Rome] have apparently not yet agreed. Everything depends upon Petersburg, will it mobilize immediately and be encouraged or discouraged by the West?

Now Bethmann grew pessimistic about the outcome: “The Chancellor sees a fate greater than human power hanging over Europe and our nation.” His dark forebodings were brushed away by the reaction of the people, milling around the *Wilhelmstrasse*:

At first the Chancellor thought only young men would delight in the opportunity for ruckus and excitement and parade their curiosity. But the crowds grew and grew, the songs rang truer, the Chancellor was finally deeply moved, touched and heartened, since similar news poured in from all corners of the Empire.

Riezler saw “an immense, if undirected drive for action in the people, a longing for great movement, for supporting a noble cause, for showing one’s valor.” A shy and retiring man, Bethmann was deeply moved by this wave of sympathy, which seemed to vindicate his perilous course.<sup>57</sup>

While the Chancellor supported mediation between Vienna and Petersburg, Grey suddenly jeopardized the essential precondition of his strategy: “England’s language has changed – apparently London finally realized that the

---

<sup>53</sup> Müller, *Regierte der Kaiser?* pp. 32ff., and Bethmann to William II, July 26; AA Bonn, Wk vol. V. Cf. also Bethmann’s draft circular of July 26, *ibid*.

<sup>54</sup> Bethmann to Lichnowsky, July 26; AA Bonn, Wk vol. V.

<sup>55</sup> Lerchenfeld to Hertling, July 29; Bayer. HStA Munich, MA III 2691/2.

<sup>56</sup> Bethmann to Schoen, July 26; AA Bonn, Wk vol. V.

<sup>57</sup> Riezler diary, July 27. Cf. F. Meinecke, *Strassburg – Freiburg – Berlin, 1901-1919* (Stuttgart, 1949).

Entente will be torn asunder if Whitehall is too lukewarm towards Russia. Lichnowsky has completely lost his composure.” Bethmann feared the grave “danger that France and England will commit their support to Russia in order not to alienate it, perhaps without really believing that for us mobilization means war, thinking of it as a bluff which they answer with a counterbluff.”<sup>58</sup> Grey’s declaration that he could no longer keep Britain aloof from the Austro-Serbian quarrel rendered localization impossible, since no one was left to mediate between the alliances. “As long as it remained Austro-Serbian” the British Foreign Secretary “would hold back. But now Grey sees himself forced to intervene, since the conflict threatens to become Austro-Russian and thereby European.” Although never completely sure of British neutrality, Bethmann had based his decision for a diplomatic offensive on the assumption of England’s cooperation in limiting the spread of a Balkan conflict, as in 1913.<sup>59</sup> Now Grey’s change in position, endangering localization, created “immense commotion in the *Wilhelmstrasse*. Nobody sleeps. I [Riezler] see the Chancellor only for seconds.” The sudden danger transformed him completely. “He has not a minute to ponder and is fresh, active, lively, and without anxiety.”<sup>60</sup>

Although on the day of the Austrian declaration of war the situation improved temporarily, Bethmann was becoming disgusted with his ally, since Vienna’s hesitation increased the likelihood of English interference.

This Austrian ambiguity is unbearable. They refuse to inform us of their program, saying *expressis verbis* that Count Hoyos’ suggestion to partition Serbia was purely private; in Petersburg they act like lambs, thinking no evil; and in London their embassy boasts about doling out Serbian territories to Bulgaria and Albania.”<sup>61</sup>

The Chancellor was desperately trying to control the crisis according to his original plan. Bethmann instructed Pourtalès to emphasize Vienna’s denial of territorial interests in Serbia to Sazonov in order to keep Russia from mobilizing, while Lichnowsky should stress in London that the conflict was not between the alliances but merely between two Balkan powers.<sup>62</sup> Simultaneously he was pressing the diplomatic offensive in Sofia and Constantinople to be in a better position, should a wider conflict arise.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Riezler diary, July 27.

<sup>59</sup> Bethmann to Lichnowsky, July 27; Lichnowsky to Jagow, July 27; AA Bonn, Wk vol. VI. The question is less whether England could afford to remain aloof than whether Bethmann believed so.

<sup>60</sup> Riezler diary, July 27: “All the news points to war. In St. Petersburg there are apparently heavy struggles over mobilization.”

<sup>61</sup> Bethmann marginalia on Lichnowsky to Jagow, July 28; AA Bonn, Wk vol. VII.

<sup>62</sup> Bethmann to Pourtalès; Bethmann to Lichnowsky, July 28; AA Bonn, Wk vol. VII.

<sup>63</sup> Bethmann to Wangenheim, July 28, transmitting the draft of a Turkish-German defensive alliance with a provision about “strict neutrality in the present conflict between Austria and Serbia.” Geiss, *Julikrise*, II, No. 586. Cf. U. Trumpener, “Liman von Sanders and the German-Ottoman Alliance,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, I, No. 4 (1966), 179-92.

On reading Serbia's conciliatory reply to the ultimatum, William II suddenly reversed his bellicose stand, deciding that Vienna should be content with a diplomatic triumph. This was a clear defection from the original strategy, which had considered a diplomatic victory insufficient, because of the internal malaise of the Habsburg monarchy.<sup>64</sup> Bethmann accommodated himself to the imperial *volte face* by communicating the British offer of mediation to Tschirschky, without endorsing it so as not to embarrass Berchtold. In the early morning hours of the following day the Chancellor instructed his ambassador to transmit the "Halt in Belgrade" scheme to Francis Joseph as a peaceful alternative or as an alibi, should everything fail. "It is of utmost necessity that the responsibility for the expansion of the conflict to the other powers should, in all circumstances, fall upon Russia." Despite the Austrian declaration of war, Bethmann hoped that British mediation would prevent the spread of the conflagration, as long as Vienna quickly seized Belgrade from Serbia and then negotiated with St. Petersburg before the latter could mobilize.<sup>65</sup>

The full effect of the Austrian declaration of war was felt only on the afternoon of July 29. By collaborating closely with Sir Edward Grey, Bethmann hoped to prevent Russian mobilization. In repeated conversations with Goschen and in numerous instructions to Lichnowsky, he tried to localize the conflict, while criticizing Grey's proposal for a conference of Ambassadors to mediate in the dispute, because it would mean a new Algeciras for Germany.<sup>66</sup> His difficulties increased when later the same day the news of partial Russian mobilization reached Berlin: "Now we had to work at top speed for five days in a row from five or six in the morning," Riezler complained. Russian pressure forced Bethmann to decide "to what extent Germany should meet the English proposal of mediation." Serious disagreements developed between the *Wilhelmstrasse* and Prince Lichnowsky, making it all the more difficult for the Chancellor to communicate with Grey. Moreover "it was clear from the very beginning that Italy would not go along. They twist and turn the alliance treaty and [Foreign Minister] San Giuliano claims not to have been informed in time."<sup>67</sup>

"Thank God, the Chancellor stepped in firmly," Riezler sighed in relief over the treatment of the Social Democrats. "Of course, there are generals who want to meddle immediately and shoot in order to 'teach the Reds a lesson.'" Over military protests, Bethmann succeeded in preventing the arrest of any Socialist

---

<sup>64</sup> William II to Bethmann, July 28; AA Bonn, Wk vol. VIII.

<sup>65</sup> Bethmann to Tschirschky, July 28; AA Bonn, Wk vol. VIII.

<sup>66</sup> Bethmann met Goschen on the 28th, twice on the 29th, on the 31st, and on the 4th. See AA Bonn, Wk vols, VII-XIV, and *British Documents*, XI, *passim*. Bethmann's instructions to Lichnowsky are *ibid*.

<sup>67</sup> Riezler diary, Aug. 15. During the climax of the crisis Riezler took no notes, but summarized the events two weeks later. Cf. also Prince Lichnowsky, *Auf dem Wege zum Abgrund* (Dresden, 1927).

leaders. “The Chancellor negotiated secretly with Südekum,” a revisionist Reichstag deputy. In an unprecedented move, Bethmann drew a leading Socialist into his confidence with a candid assessment of the international situation.<sup>68</sup> Later the same day Südekum answered for his party: “Your Excellency’s step of directly informing [us] in this critical moment has met with full sympathy.” Since Bethmann guaranteed that there would be no arrests, Südekum promised “that no action whatsoever (general or partial strike, sabotage, etc.) was planned or need be feared – especially because of our desire to serve peace.” Because of this agreement the Chancellor exhorted the Emperor: “In all events Russia must ruthlessly be put into the wrong.”<sup>69</sup>

When the military leaders clamored for immediate mobilization, Bethmann countered that only if Russia mobilized first would England allow Germany to mobilize without intervening. For the time being Moltke and Falkenhayn acquiesced, but late that night they forced the Chancellor to send warnings to Petersburg and Paris to desist from further military preparations.<sup>70</sup> Since British intervention was becoming more and more likely, Bethmann now seriously pressured Vienna to accept Grey’s proffered hand by stopping in Belgrade. “We are certainly ready to fulfill our obligations as ally,” he implored Berchtold, “but we clearly must refuse to be drawn lightly into a world conflagration by Vienna without consideration of our proposals.”<sup>71</sup> Riezler was even more disgusted with “the Austrians (bureaucrats gone mad, stubborn and dumb)” because of their reluctance in making territorial concessions to Rome in order to insure Italian neutrality. “All agree that if the *Ballplatz* had not procrastinated so long in its dealings with Rome and with the whole Serbian operation, everything would have ended in a diplomatic victory.” Revealing the Chancellor’s calculation, Riezler jotted down: “The Austrian action had to follow immediately ... in the wake of the murder, not as a premeditated act, not as a long-prepared humiliation.”<sup>72</sup>

Grey’s change of heart forced Bethmann to make a desperate move. Unable to achieve a clear picture of British intentions from the conflicting reports of

---

<sup>68</sup> Riezler diary, July 27, Aug. 15.

<sup>69</sup> Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus beim ZK der SED, *Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung* (Berlin, 1966), II, 403ff. Cf. also E. Zechlin, “Motive und Taktik der Reichsleitung 1914,” *Der Monat*, XVIII (1966), 91-95, and D. Groh, “The ‘Unpatriotic Socialists’ and the State,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, I, No. 4 (1966), 151-78.

<sup>70</sup> H. von Zwehl, *Erich von Falkenhayn* (Berlin, 1926), pp. 56f. On the same afternoon Moltke demanded in a long memorandum “to know as soon as possible whether Russia and France are willing to risk a war with Germany.” Geiss, *Julikrise*, II, No. 659.

<sup>71</sup> Bethmann to Schoen, Pourtalès, and Tschirschky, July 29; AA Bonn, Wk vol. VIII.

<sup>72</sup> Riezler diary, Aug. 15. Cf. W. J. Mommsen, “Die Italienische Frage in der Politik des Reichskanzlers von Bethmann Hollweg, 1914-1915,” *Quellen und Forschungen aus Italienischen Archiven und Bibliotheken*, XLVIII (1968), 282-308.

Lichnowsky and the Hamburg shipping magnate Albert Ballin,<sup>73</sup> the Chancellor decided to test Goschen with a formula reminiscent of the Haldane negotiations of 1912. “We can assure the English cabinet – *presupposing its neutrality* –” Bethmann beckoned, “that even in case of a victorious war, we will seek no territorial aggrandizement in Europe at the cost of France.” To assuage Whitehall’s fear of a fundamental shift in the continental balance of power, the Chancellor declared that he would respect Dutch territorial integrity though leaving open the fate of the French colonies. “Presupposing that Belgium does not take sides against us,” Bethmann was willing to guarantee its boundaries, but added: “We do not know which countermeasures French actions in a possible war might force us to take.” His studied silence regarding Belgian sovereignty implicitly revealed the threat to its neutrality contained in Moltke’s strategy of outflanking the French, following the Schlieffen Plan. But the Chancellor’s purpose was diplomatic rather than military: “England’s assurance of a neutral position in the present conflict,” his most cherished goal, “would enable him [to enter into] a general neutrality agreement in the future,” the reward of which – stricken on William’s insistence – would be a naval agreement.<sup>74</sup> On reading this “infamous” offer, the Germanophobe Crowe, Assistant to the Foreign Secretary, noted sarcastically: “The only comment that need be made on these astounding proposals is that they reflect discredit on the statesman who makes them.” Though consistent with his earlier policy, Bethmann’s blundering initiative was a desperate last-minute attempt to stave off British intervention with the crude promise of the territorial *status quo ante* in Western Europe, if London immobilized Paris, Brussels, and The Hague. British love for Berlin did not increase at gun-point and Jagow sourly conceded to Goschen the next morning that had Lichnowsky’s warning of Grey’s intention to keep his hands free arrived some hours earlier, Bethmann would not have taken this drastic step.<sup>75</sup>

The 30th of July offered a respite to the harried Chancellor. Before the hastily assembled Prussian Ministry of State, Bethmann defended his strategy: “*Germany and England have undertaken all steps to avoid a European war.*” Admitting that “we have lost control and the landslide has begun,” he nevertheless insisted: “As a *political leader I am not abandoning my hope and my attempts to keep the peace* as long as my *démarche* in Vienna has not been rejected.”<sup>76</sup> More than ever before he pressed the *Ballplatz* to accept English

---

<sup>73</sup> L. Cecil, *Albert Ballin: Business and Politics in Imperial Germany 1888-1918* (Princeton, 1967), pp. 205ff. On Aug. 1 Ballin repeated that Haldane had given him “the impression that England would only be induced to make a martial intervention if Germany were to *swallow* France, in other words, if the balance of power would really be altered by German annexation of French territory.”

<sup>74</sup> Note by Bethmann, July 29; AA Bonn, Wk vol. VIII.

<sup>75</sup> *British Documents*, XI. Nos. 293, 305 and 667.

<sup>76</sup> Staatsministerialsitzungsprotokolle, DZA Merseburg, Rep 90a B III 2b no. 6, vol. CLXIII.

mediation, but despite urgent long-distance calls, Berchtold refused any compromise. After a long internal struggle Russia now decided to mobilize. Frantic appeals to London and to Vienna to re-establish *pourparlers* with Sazonov were of little avail. The network of events had become too tangled to be unraveled without a major war. When the military demanded a deadline for the decision about mobilization, the reluctant Chancellor could do nothing but set it at noon on July 31.<sup>77</sup> Explaining his predicament to Lerchenfeld, he claimed that he had done his utmost: "This evening I have most energetically declared to the Viennese cabinet that Germany will not swim in Austria's wake in the Balkans. Should Vienna reply affirmatively I still do not despair for peace." But Bethmann was too realistic to deny the danger: "Sad to say, through quasi-elemental forces and the persistent poisoning of relations among the cabinets, a war desired by no one might be unleashed."<sup>78</sup>

When the news of the Russian general mobilization was confirmed at nine o'clock the next morning, the die was cast. "Strange that the unscrupulousness of the Russian grand dukes decided the issue in the enemy camp," Riezler mused four weeks later. "Perhaps they lied to the Tsar that Germany had already mobilized. At any rate they wildly exaggerated Russian strength, since they earn millions from war supplies." In deep sorrow he contrasted the "Chancellor's scruples" about his responsibility with the "icy hypocrisy" of Grey.<sup>79</sup> Now Bethmann could no longer hold out against Moltke's demand for mobilization. An unauthorized telegram from the German Chief of Staff to General Conrad, his Austrian counterpart, snuffed out the last hope for moderation. Military necessity took over, the state of impending war was proclaimed, and ultimatums were sent to St. Petersburg and Paris.<sup>80</sup>

The rest was anti-climactic. Bethmann and the Foreign Office went through the motions of last-minute compromise but they were directed more towards a closing of the ranks at home than towards peace abroad. A curious reversal had

---

<sup>77</sup> Bethmann to Tschirschky, July 30, and a host of other telegrams; AA Bonn, Wk vol. IX. On July 30 Bethmann only agreed to "purely defensive measures," and not to mobilization. Zwehl, *Falkenhayn*, pp. 57f., Delbrück, *Wirtschaftliche Mobilmachung*, p. 107, and F. Pourtalès, *Meine letzten Verhandlungen in St. Petersburg* (Berlin, 1927).

<sup>78</sup> Lerchenfeld to Hertling, July 30; Bayr. HStA Munich, MA III 2691/2. According to the Saxon ambassador "the Chief of Staff favors war, while the Chancellor holds back." His colleague from Würtemberg reported: "The Chancellor still believes in the possibility of a peaceful solution. But the reins are noticeably slipping out of the hands of the diplomats into those of the warriors." Geiss, *Julikrise*, II, Nos. 705-706.

<sup>79</sup> Pourtalès to Jagow, July 31; AA Bonn, Wk vol. X. Riezler diary, Aug. 18.

<sup>80</sup> H. von Moltke, *Erinnerungen, Briefe, Dokumente, 1877-1916* (Stuttgart, 1922), and Conrad von Hötzendorff, *Aus meiner Dienstzeit, 1906-1918*, IV (Vienna, 1922), 152. Bethmann to Schoen and Pourtalès, July 31; AA Bonn, Wk vol. X. Cf. L.F.C. Turner, "The Russian Mobilization in 1914," *Journal of Contemporary History*, III, No. 1 (1968), 65-88: "If Russia had refrained from ordering mobilization on 29 July, there is a real possibility that the impending catastrophe could have been averted" (p. 87).

taken place. What had begun as a limited diplomatic offensive had passed beyond the bounds of politics into the realm of the military. Not personal weakness but the hallowed *Kommandogewalt* reduced the Chancellor to the position of being only one of several advisers to the Emperor. This Bismarckian legacy dimmed Bethmann's voice of restraint. The declarations of war against Russia and France, and especially the violation of Belgian neutrality, were decided over his strongest protests. The logic of his diplomatic gamble had carried Bethmann to the point where he could only pray: "When the iron dice begin to roll, may God help us!"<sup>81</sup>

In this mood he took leave from the deeply agitated Goschen, who exclaimed repeatedly: "Oh, it is too terrible!" Bethmann reminded the British ambassador that it had been his foremost goal to establish closer relations with England: "All these attempts on which, as he well knew, I had worked incessantly, were wrested from me. And by whom? By England; and why? Because of Belgian neutrality!" The Chancellor refused to believe that his work of five peaceful years had been in vain:

Can this neutrality which we violate only out of necessity, fighting for our very existence, and with the express assurance that we will repay any damage, if Belgium lets us march through – can this neutrality and the way in which it is threatened, really provide the reason for a world war?

he queried. "Compared to the disaster of such a holocaust does not the significance of this neutrality dwindle into a scrap of paper?"<sup>82</sup>

His entreaties, colored by remorse, came too late. Bethmann had not accepted mediation soon enough. He had underestimated the British commitment to the Entente, based on the strategic importance of the channel coast, and had failed to consider that his own hand might be forced by the generals. Nevertheless, the Chancellor passionately repeated: "It is a crime that Russia has forced war upon us while we are still mediating between Vienna and Petersburg, and a

---

<sup>81</sup> Before the *Auswärtige Ausschuss* of the *Bundesrat* Bethmann pleaded: "We cannot bear Russia's provocation if we do not want to resign as a great power in Europe... We did not want this war, it has been forced upon us." AA Bonn, Wk vol. XI. Tirpitz gloated: "The reins have completely slipped out of the Chancellor's hand," surmising that "the march through Belgium was not known to him." A. von Tirpitz, *Politische Dokumente* (Berlin, 1926), II, 20f. E. Zimmermann, "Um Schlieffens Plan," *Süddeutsche Monatshefte*, XXVII (1921), 368ff., shows that Bethmann generally knew of the plan but failed to realize its full diplomatic implications. Cf. Bethmann's unpublished refutation of the admiral: "Bitter as they have become, these decisions had to be made, since the judgment of the highest military authority indicated that lack of initiative would have sealed our fate from the beginning." BA Coblenz, Kleine Erwerbungen, No. 342.

<sup>82</sup> Pencil note by Bethmann, Nov. 13, 1914; AA Bonn, Wk GHQ No 26. Cf. the report of the chief of the chancellery, A. Wahnschaffe, "Gesamtverantwortung," *Berliner Monatshefte*, XII (1934), 660ff. Goschen's initial dispatch did not contain the "scrap of paper" phrase, only the Chancellor's sigh: "But at what a price!" *British Documents*, XI, No. 667.

Franco-Russian war against Germany is enough of a disaster.” The calculated risk was leading to the third, most harmful alternative.

This war turns into an unlimited world catastrophe only through England’s participation. It was in London’s hands to curb French revanchism and pan-Slav chauvinism. Whitehall has not done so, but rather repeatedly egged them on. Now England actively helps them.

He protested movingly: “Germany, the Emperor, and the government are peace-loving. That the ambassador knows as well as I do. We enter the war with a clear conscience, but England’s responsibility is monumental.” Sir Edward broke into tears. After a few moments, the British ambassador regained his composure and left the chancellery.<sup>83</sup>

Only in one respect did Bethmann’s fears prove unfounded. The nation responded with great enthusiasm to what it considered a defensive war against Russia. “The incomparable storm unleashed in the people has swept before it all the doubting, half-hearted, and timid minds. The foreigners whom [Riezler] observed had tears in their eyes. The skeptical statesman was surprised by the nation.” After the grave disappointment in England, this unexpected response from the people was heartening. Riezler well sensed “the uncontrived but profound effect of Bethmann’s seriousness; the deep moral anguish from which every decision flows. Precisely that has called forth the best qualities of our inexhaustible nation.”<sup>84</sup> The upsurge of the masses, milling about Unter den Linden and singing *Heil Dir im Siegerkranz*, made Bethmann wax eloquent: “Should all our attempts [for peace] be in vain, should the sword be forced into our hand, we will go into battle with a clear conscience and the knowledge that we did not desire this war.” But more candidly he sighed to Wahnschaffe, one of his closest friends, after signing the mobilization order: “It is a misfortune that I could not prevent the war. Now we must muster all our strength to win it.”<sup>85</sup>

The crucial decision of July 5 represents not the policy of one man, one class, or one branch of government; it was rather a tenuous compromise be-

---

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.* A Conservative opponent of the Chancellor, Minister of the Interior Loebell, later claimed that “Bethmann was a broken man” upon receiving the British declaration of war; BA Coblenz, Nachlass Loebell, MS memoirs, pp. 160f. It seems more likely that both the ambassador and the Chancellor were moved in the highly emotional scene.

<sup>84</sup> Riezler diary, Aug. 15, 16: “War, war, the people have arisen – it is as if nothing had happened before and all of a sudden it is there, imposing and moving. Everybody has crawled out of his corner, seemingly the greatest confusion and yet the most purposeful order, and millions have already crossed the Rhine. The most unforgettable experience is the people themselves.”

<sup>85</sup> F. Thimme, ed., *Bethmanns Kriegsreden*, pp. 1ff. Wahnschaffe, “Gesamtverantwortung,” pp. 661ff. H. P. Hanssen, *Diary of a Dying Empire* (Bloomington, 1955), pp. 25ff. Bethmann exclaimed: “Whatever may be in store, we believe that August 4, 1914 will for all time remain one of Germany’s greatest days!” Cf. also E. Pickart, “Der Deutsche Reichstag und der Ausbruch des Ersten Weltkrieges,” *Der Staat*, V (1966), 47-70.



tween the conflicting views of the decision-makers, Bethmann, William II, Zimmermann, Falkenhayn and the military entourage. According to the Saxon ambassador “the Foreign Office believes that war between Austria-Hungary and Serbia will be avoided.”<sup>86</sup> But the Emperor, deeply shocked by the assassination of Francis Ferdinand, reacted impulsively, demanding: “The Serbs have to be straightened out, and *soon!*” William II prejudiced the issue by assuring Szögyény and Hoyos his support before consulting the Chancellor, although reserving his final decision until Bethmann could approve.<sup>87</sup> The military, represented by Prussian Minister of War Falkenhayn, chief of the military cabinet Lyncker, and Adjutant General Plessen, followed the imperial lead in pressing for strong punitive action. Aroused by Hoyos, Undersecretary of State Zimmermann and some of the younger officials of the *Wilhelmstrasse* also flirted with the use of force.<sup>88</sup>

Under this pressure, the Chancellor embarked upon a political offensive in the Balkans in order to break the noose of encirclement. In November 1913 Bethmann had warned that pan-German dreams might turn into nightmares: “In any future war, undertaken without compelling cause, not only the Hohenzollern crown, but the future of Germany will be at stake. Certainly our policy must be led boldly,” he admitted, “but to rattle the sword at every diplomatic entanglement without Germany’s honor, safety, or future being threatened is not only blind, but criminal.”<sup>89</sup> His sudden resolve for action in July 1914 need not be attributed to fatalism or personal weakness. It rather resulted from the Chancellor’s basic conviction that the pan-Slav agitation threatened the existence of Austria and thereby – according to Bismarck – Germany’s vital interests. The Sarajevo assassination gave him the chance to reverse the deterioration of the Central Powers’ diplomatic and military strength in one bold and dramatic stroke. Because of Europe’s revulsion against the crime a swift punitive strike against Serbia could succeed without great power intervention. However, this initial compromise hardly decided anything at all. Vienna was

---

<sup>86</sup> Lichtenau to Vitzthum, July 2; Geiss, *Julikrise*, 1, No. 12. “Deutschlands Lage und seine politischen Richtlinien 1913/1914”; AA Bonn, Nachlass Jagow, MS Politische Aufsätze, pp. 69-82. The Foreign Secretary maintains: “Imperialist goals such as world domination were far from our minds.”

<sup>87</sup> Imperial marginalia on Tschirschky to Bethmann, June 30; AA Bonn, Wk vol. I, and Szögyény to Berchtold, July 5; Geiss, *Julikrise*, 1, No. 21.

<sup>88</sup> H. Hantsch, *Berchtold*, II, 569ff.

<sup>89</sup> Bethmann to Crown Prince, Nov. 15, 1913, refuting General Gebattel’s pan-German proposal of a *coup d’état* and a foreign policy bordering on preventive war. In the Morocco crisis neither “Germany’s honor nor dignity was threatened by another nation. Whoever desires war without such cause, must do it for vital interests [*Lebensaufgaben der Nation*] so basic that they cannot be achieved without war,” as in 1864, 1866 and 1870. Deutsches Zentralarchiv, Potsdam (cited DZA Potsdam), Reichskanzlei No. 825. Cf. H. Pogge-von Strandmann, “Staatsstreichpläne, Alldutsche und Bethmann Hollweg,” *Hamburger Studien zur neueren Geschichte*, II (1965), 7-45.

still free to choose between diplomatic or military action, the generals could hope for the larger war, prepared so long, and the diplomats would strive unflaggingly to prevent the spread of the conflagration. Acceptance of the risk of local war and the possibility of continental war – should it prove unavoidable – was the crucial shift in the Chancellor's policy which Szögyény reported to the *Ballplatz*: "Hitherto Bethmann has always advised us to get along with Serbia, but after the recent events, he realizes that it is well-nigh impossible."<sup>90</sup>

If for three weeks Berlin spoke with a single voice, the precarious unity was shattered by two events: England's intervention and Russian mobilization. Torpedoing the strategy of localization, these unforeseen actions revealed a breach in the German leadership that made Berchtold utter in astonishment: "Who governs [in Berlin], Moltke or Bethmann?"<sup>91</sup> Though he endorsed local war, the Chancellor watched the drift into continental war with growing apprehension and as soon as he realized the serious danger of world war, he desperately pushed for negotiations in Vienna while the generals grew more and more impatient to fight. "The Chancellor told me last night," Goschen cabled on the 30th, "that he was 'pressing the button' as hard as he could and that he was not sure whether [the] length to which he had gone in giving moderate advice in Vienna had not precipitated matters rather than otherwise."<sup>92</sup> Fear of a general war was the motive behind the Chancellor's eagerness in seizing upon Lichnowsky's erroneous report that Britain might remain neutral after all. But the ambiguity of the original compromise had carried Bethmann to the brink of a world conflagration and transferred the final decision to the military. Only in this manner can the confusion of the *Wilhelmstrasse*, the consternation of the Chancellor and the complete lack of diplomatic preparation for war with France, Russia, and England be understood.<sup>93</sup>

The strategy of localization was an act of desperation for Bethmann, a necessary risk to preserve the empire. Psychologically the German stand was, indeed, *defensive*. But the means that were adopted, the diplomatic offensive in the Balkans, the encouragement of Austrian punitive action against Serbia, the effort to prevent the intervention of the great powers and the attempt to split the

---

<sup>90</sup> Szögyény to Berchtold, Berlin, July 6. Geiss, *Julikrise*, I, No. 27. According to Werner von Rheinbaden, *Kaiser, Kanzler, Präsidenten* (Mainz, 1968), pp. 96, 108f., it was Wilhelm von Stumm, then in charge of the British desk in the *Wilhelmstrasse*, who minimized the risk of London's intervention and strongly counseled Bethmann to act before the historic promenade on July 5. After the war he remorsefully told Rheinbaden: "I erred in 1914 and advised Bethmann falsely."

<sup>91</sup> Conrad von Hötzendorff, *Aus meiner Dienstzeit*; IV, 152f.

<sup>92</sup> Goschen to Grey, July 30; *British Documents*, XI, No. 329.

<sup>93</sup> Lichnowsky to Jagow, Aug. 1; AA Bonn, Wk vol. XI. Zwehl, *Falkenhayn*, pp. 58f. Moltke, *Erinnerungen*, pp. 19f. Müller, *Regierte der Kaiser?* pp. 38f. Tirpitz, *Politische Dokumente*, II, 19f. AA Bonn, Nachlass Jagow, MS Politische Aufsätze, "Der Durchmarsch durch Belgien," reports an abortive attempt of the diplomats to force revision of the Schlieffen Plan in 1913.

Entente were *offensive*. Among the probable outcomes of the crisis Bethmann clearly preferred local war, was willing to gamble on continental war, but he abhorred world war. Believing that he had no alternative, the Chancellor decided on a “leap into the dark.” As so often the concept of limited war proved elusive and drew Germany deeper and deeper into the vortex. Technically Austrian procrastination largely produced Grey’s intervention and Russian mobilization. But after a generation of rampant imperialism, the risk of war could no longer be calculated in terms of cabinet diplomacy. Yet when reminiscing under the burden of defeat, Bethmann saw no other way. “We were severely handicapped by the war of [18]70-71 and by our geographical position. Since the coronation of Emperor [William II] we often did the opposite of that which would have lightened our burden,” he admitted frankly. But

surely imperialism would have triumphed even without our help, and it remains highly questionable if, even with the most reasonable policy, we could have prevented the natural French, Russian, and English opposition from uniting against us. We have become guilty,

he confessed, “but only universal and collective guilt has brought about the world catastrophe.”<sup>94</sup>

“I am no war chancellor!” Bethmann protested in deep anguish to Jagow when the bloodshed had become inescapable.<sup>95</sup> “By God, we did not want this war,” he repeated again and again to his moderate supporters at home and abroad.<sup>96</sup> Though exaggerated, his recurrent claims contain a kernel of truth, because the Chancellor was drawn into the maelstrom of imperialism not as a rabid pan-German expansionist but as a traditional nationalist. Despite the failure of his calculated risk, to Riezler “the Chancellor is the only one who has gained new stature during the crisis. I have learned to revere him because of his conduct, so self-effacing, self-denying, and unostentatious. How silently he bears the burden of having to lead the German people into war.”<sup>97</sup> In spite of his insistent disclaimers, the shadow of this responsibility pursued Bethmann to his deathbed. During the height of the fighting he sighed to the liberal journalist Theodor Wolff: “When assessing the responsibility for this war – we have to

---

<sup>94</sup> Bethmann to Eisendecker, July 12, 1919; AA Bonn, Nachlass Eisendecker. In his political testament, a letter to Prince Max von Baden, Bethmann emphasized the general causes of “imperialism, nationalism and economic materialism” and the “special circumstances” flowing from the Bismarckian foundation of the Empire. But “all governments are guilty because they did not find a peaceful solution in July 1914” E. Zechlin, *Historische Zeitschrift*, CXCIX, 451-58.

<sup>95</sup> “Rücktrittsgedanken des Reichskanzlers,” AA Bonn, Nachlass Jagow, MS Politische Aufsätze, p. 67.

<sup>96</sup> Bethmann to Weizsäcker, Aug. 30, 1914; Nachlass Weizsäcker, courtesy of Mrs. Weizsäcker, Lindau.

<sup>97</sup> Riezler diary, Aug. 15.

confess honestly that we bear a share of the guilt. If I said this thought oppresses me, I would say too little – this thought never leaves me. I live in it.”<sup>98</sup>

---

<sup>98</sup> Theodor Wolff, *Der Krieg des Pontius Pilatus* (Zurich, 1934), pp. 142f. “We believed that we had to strengthen Austria at a moment when it decided on an active policy. We could not leave it in the lurch,” Bethmann pleaded with his visitor on Feb. 5, 1915. He still believed that “Grey could have prevented the war had he declared at the beginning that England would not participate,” but he admitted that “we have lived in lies in our domestic and foreign policy.” Although “the insane hatred” of the chauvinists had forced his hand, Bethmann concluded, “the war did not arise out of single diplomatic actions, but rather is a result of popular passion. Here lies part of our guilt, part of the responsibility of the pan-Germans.” For the issues transcending the scope of this article, see my biography, *The Enigmatic Chancellor: Bethmann Hollweg and the Hubris of Imperial Germany* (New Haven, 1973).