



MAP 1 Europe in 1914

The Iron Dice: World War I

If the iron dice must roll, may God help us.

Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg
German chancellor, August 1, 1914

The emperors and generals who sent their men to war in August 1914 thought in terms of weeks, not months, let alone years. “You will be home before the leaves have fallen from the trees,” the German Kaiser told his troops in early August; at the same time, members of the czar’s Imperial Guard wondered whether they should take along their dress uniforms for their victorious entry into Berlin or have them brought to the front by the next courier. Few foresaw the world catastrophe that would snuff out the lives of an entire generation and consign the next to disillusion and despair. When it was all over, no one was who he had been and, as D. H. Lawrence said, “all the great words were cancelled out.” In one of history’s consummate touches of irony, one of the few who did see the shadow of war lengthening into years was the chief of the German general staff, Helmuth von Moltke, who predicted “a long and wearisome struggle,” but who also believed that sooner or later war was inevitable; on June 1 he saw fit to pronounce that Germany was “ready, and the sooner the better for us.”

This theme of inevitability is a haunting and pervasive one. Most of the statesmen who made the crucial decisions behaved like actors in a Greek tragedy. The terrible dénouement was foreseen, but somehow it could not be prevented. Time and again, people shifted responsibility from themselves to an impersonal God or Providence that was deemed to be in ultimate control. In the words of German chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg, on August 1: “If the iron dice must roll, may God help us,” or in those of Emperor Franz-Joseph of Austria-Hungary: “We cannot go back now.” Historians too have been affected by this fatalistic attitude. As one leading

scholar has summed up his analysis of the outbreak of the war: "All the evidence goes to show that the beginning of the crisis . . . was one of those moments in history when events passed beyond men's control."¹

The thesis of this chapter is that such a view is wrong: Mortals made these decisions. They made them in fear and in trembling, but they made them nonetheless. In most cases, the decision makers were not evil people bent on destruction but were frightened and entrapped by self-delusion. They based their policies on fears, not facts, and were singularly devoid of empathy. Misperception, rather than conscious evil design, appears to have been the leading villain in the drama.

In this analysis I shall not dwell on the underlying causes of the world war. Not only have these been discussed exhaustively by leading historians,² but I seriously question whether they can be related directly and demonstrably to the fateful decisions that actually *precipitated* the war. For example, historians are virtually unanimous in their belief that the system of competitive alliances dividing Europe into two camps in 1914 was a principal factor that caused the war to spread. This strikes me as a mechanistic view that undervalues psychological and personality considerations. On July 5 Germany fully supported her ally Austria-Hungary's desire to punish Serbia for the assassination of the Austrian crown prince. By late July, however, when Austrian policy threatened a general mobilization in Russia on Serbia's behalf, Germany attempted to restrain her ally. In this attempt she failed, and the result was world conflagration. But had the German Kaiser or his chancellor *succeeded* in restraining the Austrians, historians would have had to credit the alliance system with the *prevention* of a war. In other words, a study of the leading personalities of the time and the manner in which they perceived one another may be a more fruitful analysis than to postulate such abstractions as alliance systems, militarism, or nationalism.

The crucial events that led to—and over—the threshold of war are the German pledge of support to Austria in her policy toward Serbia; Austria's ultimatum to Serbia and rejection of the Serbian response; Germany's efforts to mediate and to restrain Austria; and the actual outbreak of general war on August 1, precipitated by Germany's declaration of war on Russia and the invasion of Luxembourg and Belgium.

The Kaiser's Fateful Pledge

Word of the assassination of the Austrian crown prince Franz Ferdinand on June 28, 1914, reached the German Kaiser on his yacht near Kiel. According to an eyewitness, Wilhelm II turned deathly pale as he heard the fatal news from Sarajevo.³ He had been drawn to the Austrian archduke and his wife and had just returned from visiting the couple at their castle. Franz Ferdinand's intention to marry a lady-in-waiting had aroused the sullen opposition of the aged emperor, Franz-Joseph, who had consented only on the condition that the marriage be a morganatic one, that is, that the couple's children would be deprived of the right of succession to the throne. This act of renunciation had embittered Franz Ferdinand, a condition further aggravated by the condescension of the Austrian court toward his wife, Sophie.

Kaiser Wilhelm was a moody man with a mercurial temper. The romantic predicament of his Austrian friend had appealed to him, and he had formed a deep and apparently genuine personal attachment to him. He was deeply shaken when he heard that the archduke's last words to his wife were, "Sophie, Sophie, do not die, live for our children,"⁴ before death claimed them both, and his fury and indignation toward the Serbians were thoroughly aroused; he described them as "bandits" and "murderers." In addition to his personal grief, he believed that the assassination represented a profound threat to the monarchical principle. Therefore it is not surprising that Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz reported in his *Memoirs* the Kaiser's conviction that the Russian czar would not support "the assassins of royalty."⁵ The crowned heads of Europe would have to take a common stand against the threat of regicide.

With characteristic impetuosity, the Kaiser wanted Austria to punish Serbia as quickly as possible. He was convinced that the entire civilized world, including Russia, would be sympathetic. He put it in no uncertain terms: "Matters must be cleared up with the Serbians and that soon. That is self-evident and the plain truth."⁶ On July 5 he took the fateful step of assuring Austria that she could count on Germany's "faithful support" even if the punitive action she was planning to take against Serbia would bring her into conflict with Russia. In other words, the Kaiser issued Austria-Hungary a blank check. Before he left on a vacation cruise the next morning, he exclaimed confidently:

"I cannot imagine that the old gentleman in Schönbrunn will go to war, and most certainly not if it is a war over the Archduke Franz Ferdinand."⁷

The incredible fact is that the German Kaiser had not the slightest idea of what the Austrians would do. Impelled by a generous impulse of loyalty to his dead friend, he offered what he thought would be moral support to the aggrieved party. That this guarantee would entail military support never seriously occurred either to him or to the German military and governmental apparatus that fully supported his move. Even more important, the Kaiser believed that a common loyalty to monarchy would be a stronger bond than the links of ethnic kinship; in other words, that the czar would support the Kaiser against his fellow Slavs in Serbia. On both these counts Wilhelm II proved to be terribly mistaken.

The Kaiser used a special term for his pledge to Austria: *Nibelungentreue*. There is no adequate English translation for this term. The *Nibelungenlied* was a collection of German sagas peopled with heroes whose highest virtues were honor, courage, and loyalty. The pledge of a *Nibelung* is a blood bond that is sacred and irrevocable; once given, it can never be retracted. Wilhelm's cousin Ferdinand I of Bulgaria understood its significance when he observed: "I certainly do not like my cousin Kaiser Wilhelm, but I feel sorry for him all the same. Now he will be dragged into the whirlpool, be entangled, and he will have to fight, whether he wants to or not. That is all he gets out of his *Nibelungentreue*."⁸

The Kaiser's decision to support Austria-Hungary under any circumstances demonstrated an extraordinary confusion of personal ethics and political judgment. His friendship with the archduke prompted him to place the fate of his nation in the hands of another power. His view of the Russian czar as a kindred-spirited fellow monarch led him to assume that such a relinquishment of control carried no risk whatsoever. And his romanticism robbed him of all flexibility in the emerging crisis.

It is not true, as many historians have stated, that the Kaiser wanted war. Nor is it true, as his definitive biographer has said, that he "succumbed to a power he had not reckoned with: the power of Fate; had it not been for that, the war would never have started."⁹ Such thinking is guilty of blind determinism. The Kaiser was indeed to blame. His flaw was both moral and political, for his form of loyalty demanded sacrifice beyond himself. It offered up the German nation,

and it emboldened the senile monarchy of Austria-Hungary to take a desperate gamble. The cliché of the saber-rattling Kaiser is misleading. What is closer to the truth is that he permitted others to rattle and ultimately use the saber for him.

The Austrian Ultimatum to Serbia

During the tense days of July 1914, the fate of Austria-Hungary was in the hands of three men: Emperor Franz-Joseph, his foreign minister, Count Leopold von Berchtold, and the chief of staff, Conrad von Hötzendorff.

At the time of the Sarajevo assassination Franz-Joseph was an exhausted old man. The wars he had waged in the past had ended in defeat or loss of territory. In his declining years he was embittered by personal disasters: the murder of his wife, the tragic death of his son, and now the murder of his nephew. "Everyone is dying around me," he said mournfully. There is little doubt that above all he wished his life to end in peace. Shortly after the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, he spoke of plans for a summer respite needed to regain his strength. Evidently he had no expectation of even a local war with Serbia. When Hötzendorff urged mobilization measures, after receiving Kaiser Wilhelm's promise of support on July 5, the emperor refused to approve them, pointing out the danger of an attack from Russia and the doubtfulness of German support. During the next three weeks, however, Franz-Joseph's strength began to fail, and his signature affixed to the crucial documents laid before him by his foreign minister revealed a trembling and uncertain hand. More important, the marginal annotations no longer showed the probing mind of earlier years. One distinguished historian even maintains that the foreign minister dispatched the crucial ultimatum to Serbia "without the knowledge or approval of Franz-Joseph."¹⁰ While this is difficult to prove, it is likely that the aged sovereign no longer fully grasped the consequences of the policies that Count Berchtold and his chief of staff were now pursuing.

Hötzendorff, who was also head of the militarist party in Vienna, believed passionately in the need to preserve his nation's status as a great power. Even before Sarajevo he feared the disintegration of the Habsburg empire from either internal decay or violent overthrow by its enemies. If Austria-Hungary accepted this final insult, then the dual monarchy would indeed become a "worm-eaten museum piece." Therefore Serbia had to be dealt a punishing blow quickly, before the

situation deteriorated even further. Hötendorff's own words are illuminating:

For this reason, and not as vengeance for the assassination, Austria-Hungary must draw the sword against Serbia. . . . It [is] not a question of [a] knightly duel with "poor little" Serbia, as she like [s] to call herself, nor of punishment for the assassination. It [is] much more the highly practical importance of the prestige of a Great Power. . . . The Monarchy ha[s] been seized by the throat, and ha[s] to choose between allowing itself to be strangled and making a last effort to prevent its destruction.¹¹

In the view of Austria-Hungary's chief of staff, then, the monarchy's status as a great power was in desperate peril. Both pride and prestige motivated his policy.

Count Berchtold was said by Sidney B. Fay to be "as helpless and incompetent a person as was ever called to fill a responsible position in time of danger."¹² The record of his behavior during the critical weeks of July 1914 reveals a striking difference between his attitude toward Serbia before July 5, the date of the Kaiser's blank check to Austria, and his approach to the problem after that date. When informed of the tragedy of Sarajevo, Berchtold vacillated. He hesitated to take military action against Serbia for fear that the Kaiser would not support him, but he shared Hötendorff's conviction that something had to be done to preserve Austria's great power status. The Kaiser's pledge served to resolve Berchtold's indecision, and the promise of German support enabled him to use the Sarajevo assassination as the final justification for clearing up Austria's Serbian problem once and for all. He drafted an ultimatum that he was certain Serbia would reject. Protected by Germany, he could then deal a mortal blow without fear of Russian intervention.

Count Berchtold's outstanding character trait seems to have been his duplicity. Though outraged by Sarajevo, he took no action until he received the German guarantee, and then went a great deal further than the Kaiser could possibly have wanted. Austria-Hungary's failing prestige could now be buttressed by a German guarantee. With the German *Nibelungentreue* translated into an ironclad commitment, Germany could thus be made to pay the price of Austria-Hungary's last and fateful effort to remain a world power.

Berchtold appears to have been the main, possibly even the sole, author of the Serbian ultimatum. He communicated its general tenor to Berlin, and the Kaiser, incredibly enough, did not demand to see the

precise text. Thus, when Berchtold transmitted the note to Serbia, Wilhelm was faced with a *fait accompli*. The terms of the ultimatum were stern and unyielding: they included demands for the dissolution of Serbian nationalist groups, the dismissal of key military officers, the arrest of leading political figures, and the right for Austria-Hungary to implement these measures to her complete satisfaction. Serbia was given forty-eight hours to respond or else face the consequences.

The Serbian prince regent Peter and his ministers were deeply shaken by the harshness of the ultimatum. They suspected that it was a pretext to eliminate Serbia as a sovereign state. After all, even though the assassins were Slav nationalists with Serbian ties, they were subjects of the empire, and the assassination itself had taken place on Austro-Hungarian soil. In desperation, the prince regent cabled the following plea to the Russian czar: "We are unable to defend ourselves and beg your Majesty to come to our aid as soon as possible. The much-appreciated goodwill which your Majesty has so often shown toward us inspires us with the firm belief that once again our appeal to your noble Slav heart will not pass unheeded."¹³

The Serbian ministers then began to work around the clock on their reply. They argued bitterly over the intent of the ultimatum. A minority felt that the demands were honestly calculated to exact punishment for the assassination and to guarantee Austria's future security, but the majority was convinced that the document had been framed deliberately to elicit a rejection. The final reply was actually conciliatory and accepted most of the Austrian demands. Only those that would virtually have abrogated Serbia's sovereignty were treated somewhat evasively. The consensus was reached within minutes of the deadline. To add to the tension, the only remaining typewriter broke down, and the final text was copied out in a trembling hand by a secretary.

Just before the deadline of 6 P.M. on July 25, Nikola Pashich, the Serbian interior minister, arrived at the Austrian embassy in Belgrade with the reply. Baron W. Giesl, the Austrian ambassador, was under strict instructions from Berchtold to break off diplomatic relations unless Serbia yielded on every point. He hurriedly glanced at the document, noted the Serbian qualifications on some of the demands, and immediately dispatched a note to Pashich informing him that Austria-Hungary had severed diplomatic relations with Serbia. The note overtook Pashich during his return to the ministry, and he found it there on his arrival. So great was Giesl's eagerness that he and the entire staff of the Austrian legation managed to catch the 6:30 P.M. train from Belgrade.

The news reached Emperor Franz-Joseph two hours later at his summer villa in Ischl. According to an eyewitness, the old man looked at the message, sank into a chair, and muttered in a choked voice: *"Also doch!"* (What did I tell you!).¹⁴ Berchtold then convinced the broken man of the need to order partial mobilization. On July 28 Austria-Hungary officially declared war on Serbia. One day later Belgrade was under bombardment.

During these fateful days the Kaiser was cruising on his yacht in the North Sea. He showed so little interest in the matter that he did not even ask to see the text of the Serbian reply until the morning of July 28, a few hours before Austria declared war. After reading it, he jotted the following words in the margin: "A brilliant performance for a time-limit of only 48 hours. This is more than one could have expected! A great moral success for Vienna; but with it every reason for war drops away, and Giesl ought to have remained quietly in Belgrade! After such a thing I should never have ordered mobilization."¹⁵ To his secretary of state, Gottlieb von Jagow, Wilhelm issued the following instruction: "I propose that we say to Austria: Serbia has been forced to retreat in a very humiliating manner and we offer our congratulations; naturally, as a result, every cause for war has vanished."¹⁶ A few hours later, however, when Austrian bombs fell on Belgrade, Kaiser Wilhelm was compelled to face the dreadful consequences of the heedless pledge to Austria he had made less than a month before.

The Closing Trap

The war that broke out on July 28 was a localized conflict between Serbia and Austria-Hungary. The Austrians gambled that it would remain so. Count Berchtold was convinced that there was nothing to fear from Russia; after all, the czar, who lived in fear of assassination himself, was sure to sympathize with a determined Austrian move against Serbia for the cause of monarchy. And even if this assumption were incorrect, then a swift and decisive military victory over Serbia would confront the czar with a *fait accompli*. But most important, Berchtold was sure that the Kaiser's guarantee to Austria would prevent Russian intervention and that therefore the war would remain localized and could safely be brought to a quick and successful conclusion.

It now becomes essential to this analysis to consider the actual situation in Russia at the time of Sarajevo. Russia's foreign policy rested on the shoulders of three men: Czar Nicholas II, the foreign minister, Sergei Sazonov, and the minister of war, Vladimir Sukhomlinov.

The czar, though kind and considerate in personal relations, was the epitome of apathy and indifference in matters of public policy. Barbara Tuchman offers a devastating vignette describing the czar's reaction to the news of Austrian and German plans for mobilization. "Nicholas listened," she writes, "and then, as if waking from a reverie, said gravely, 'God's will be done.'"¹⁷ His main conception of government was to preserve intact the absolute monarchy bequeathed to him by his father. The czarina had fallen under the spell of the magnetic personality of Rasputin, and the imperial court was totally out of touch with the people whom the monarchy was supposed to govern.

Sazonov, the czar's foreign minister, was a highly emotional man who had entered the diplomatic service when frail health forced him to abandon his original intention to become a monk. The German ambassador at St. Petersburg described him as "filled with glowing patriotism bordering on chauvinism. When he talk[ed] of past events in which he thought Russia suffered injustice, his face assumed an almost fanatical expression."¹⁸ According to another eyewitness, his lips trembled with emotion when he once remarked that he could not survive another defeat such as Russia had suffered in her war with Japan.¹⁹

The man responsible for Russia's preparations for war was Sukhomlinov, a pleasure-loving man in his sixties. Sazonov, who disliked him intensely, said that "it was very difficult to make him work but to get him to tell the truth was well-nigh impossible."²⁰ He held office at the whim of the czar and through the artful cultivation of Rasputin. Naturally lazy, he left his work largely to subordinates and, in the words of the French ambassador, Maurice Paléologue, kept "all his strength for conjugal pleasures with a wife 32 years younger than himself," whom he had married after a sensational divorce scandal. The evidence for the divorce was supplied by an Austrian named Altschiller, who then became a close friend of the minister. In January 1914 Altschiller was exposed as Austria's chief espionage agent in Russia. Totally unreceptive to new ideas, Sukhomlinov prided himself on not having read a military manual in twenty-five years. The phrase "modern war" irritated him. "As war was," he said, "so it has remained." As a result, he clung stubbornly to obsolete theories and ancient glories and believed unquestioningly in the supremacy of the bayonet over the bullet.

This, then, was the trio of men to whom the prince regent of Serbia appealed for help against Austria-Hungary. The popular response in Russia to the Austro-Serbian rupture was extremely heated. On July 26 crowds chanting, "Down with Austria," and, "Long live Serbia,"

marched through the streets of St. Petersburg. Hostile demonstrations were held in front of the Austrian embassy, and the police had to protect the diplomatic staff from being attacked by the incensed crowd. The czar, when informed of the ultimatum, displayed mild irritation and requested Sazonov to keep him informed. Sazonov's own reaction, however, was explosive: "*C'est la guerre européenne.*" He was convinced that the ultimatum was a pretext for Austrian aggression against Serbia. When Count S. Szápáry, the Austro-Hungarian ambassador at St. Petersburg, attempted to defend his country's action by emphasizing the need for a common stand against revolutionary agitation and regicide, Sazonov shouted heatedly: "The fact is, you want war and you have burned your bridges. You are setting Europe on fire."²¹ Sazonov was particularly infuriated by Berchtold's methods: the shortness of the time limit, the humiliating demands, and the infringements on Serbia's sovereignty. By the time the German ambassador, Count Friedrich von Pourtalès, called on Sazonov in support of his Austrian colleague, the Russian foreign minister had worked himself into a towering rage. His fury was such that Pourtalès expressed the fear that he was blinded by his hatred of Austria. "Hate," replied Sazonov, "is foreign to my nature. I do not hate Austria; I despise her." And then he exclaimed: "Austria is seeking a pretext to gobble up Serbia; but in that case Russia will make war on Austria."²²

General Sukhomlinov too had no doubt that Austria would invade Serbia after the time limit expired. He felt that war between Austria and Serbia would mean war between Austria and Russia and therefore between Germany and Russia. As one of his aides put it: "One does not send such an ultimatum except when the cannons are loaded."²³ These Russian perceptions of Austrian intentions produced the next logical step for Russia: mobilization.

In conjunction with its declaration of war against Serbia, Austria-Hungary had mobilized eight out of a total of sixteen army corps. By this action Berchtold hoped not only to administer a decisive military defeat to Serbia but also to frighten off Russia from intervening. Sazonov, however, viewed this partial mobilization as directed against Russia and so decided to order a partial mobilization of his own. He hoped that quick Russian action would deter Austria from attacking Serbia in the first place. Thus, both the Austrian and Russian decisions to mobilize a part of their armies were essentially bluffs designed to deter the other side.

When the Kaiser was informed of the Austrian declaration of war and the partial Russian mobilization, his indifference gave way to

growing panic. The implications of his blank check policy now became painfully clear. He decided to make a determined effort to localize the Austro-Serbian war and to act as mediator between Austria and Russia. In this attempt he was encouraged by Sir Edward Grey, the British foreign secretary, who was becoming increasingly nervous as tensions grew with every passing hour.

The Kaiser took the most direct possible route: He sent a telegram to his cousin Czar Nicholas II. The following excerpt reveals his conciliatory intent:

It is with the gravest concern that I hear of the impression which the action of Austria against Serbia is creating in your country. . . . With regard to the hearty and tender friendship which binds us both from long ago with firm ties, I am exerting my utmost influence to induce the Austrians to deal straightly to arrive at a satisfactory understanding with you. I confidently hope you will help me in my efforts to smooth over difficulties that may still arise.

Your very sincere and devoted friend and cousin.

Willy²⁴

In the past, direct personal messages of this kind had been helpful in steering the Russian and German ships of state through troubled waters. At the same time, Bethmann-Hollweg, acting on the Kaiser's instructions, dispatched to Berchtold another telegram asking him to halt the Austrian armies in Belgrade and not spread the war.

The Russian leadership too was eager to prevent the Austro-Serbian conflict from escalating into a Russo-German war. Sazonov told General von Chelius, the German military plenipotentiary in St. Petersburg, that "the return of the Kaiser has made us all feel easier, for we trust in His Majesty and want no war, nor does Czar Nicholas. It would be a good thing if the two Monarchs should come to an understanding by telegraph."²⁵ Accordingly, Nicholas sent to his German cousin the following telegram, which crossed that sent by Wilhelm:

Am glad you are back. In this most serious moment, I appeal to you to help me. An ignoble war has been declared on a weak country. The indignation in Russia shared fully by me is enormous. I foresee that very soon I shall be overwhelmed by the pressure brought upon me and be forced to take extreme measures which will lead to war. To try and avoid such a calamity as a European war, I beg you in the name of our old friendship to do what you can to stop your allies from going too far.

Nicky²⁶

Wilhelm's response to this telegram was another wire asking his cousin not to take military measures that "would be looked upon by Austria as threatening."²⁷ Nicholas wired back the following message:

Thank you heartily for your quick answer. The military measures which have now come into force were decided five days ago for reasons of defense on account of Austria's preparations. I hope from all my heart that these measures won't in any way interfere with your part as mediator which I greatly value. We need your strong pressure on Austria to come to an understanding with us.²⁸

This last communication, which was received by the Kaiser on July 30, completely destroyed his sense of balance. In growing panic, he wrote the following comments in the margins of the czar's wire:

According to this the Czar has simply been tricking us with his appeal for assistance and has deceived us. . . . Then I must mobilize too. . . . The hope that I would not let his mobilization measures disturb me in my role of mediator is childish, and solely intended to lure us into the mire. . . . I regard my mediation action as brought to an end.²⁹

In short, the Kaiser believed that the czar had used the German mediation effort to get a five-day head start in his own military preparations behind Wilhelm's back. The "Willy-Nicky" telegrams had simply bought time for the Russians. By the afternoon of July 30 the Kaiser's panic took on a quality of paranoia. At 1 P.M. a telegram arrived from Lord Grey, who warned that "if war breaks out, it [would] be the greatest catastrophe that the world has ever seen."³⁰ Wilhelm's response was to scribble in the margin: "This means they will attack us. Aha! The common cheat."³¹ In the Kaiser's view, England was combining threat with bluff "to separate us from Austria and to prevent us from mobilizing, and to shift responsibility of the war."³²

Wilhelm's response to both Austrian and Russian general mobilization was to place the blame on England. At the very moment when Lord Grey was desperately attempting to avert a general war, the Kaiser saw the British at the head of a plot to attack and destroy Germany. In an extraordinary and revealing marginal comment on one of Lord Grey's diplomatic notes, Wilhelm wrote:

The net has been suddenly thrown over our head, and England sneeringly reaps the most brilliant success of her persistently prosecuted, purely

anti-German world policy, against which we have proved ourselves helpless, while she twists the noose of our political and economic destruction out of our fidelity to Austria, as we squirm isolated in the net.³³

This British plot, which included Russia and France, to exterminate Germany was absolutely real to the Kaiser. The time to strike back had come. "This whole business must now be ruthlessly uncovered," the Kaiser exclaimed to Bethmann, "and the mask of Christian peaceableness publicly and brusquely torn from its face in public, and the pharisaical hypocrisy exposed on the pillory."³⁴ The entire world must unite against "this hated, lying, conscienceless nation of shopkeepers; for if we are to be bled to death, England shall at least lose India."³⁵

This was the basis on which Kaiser Wilhelm made his decision to strike first. On July 31 the Kaiser proclaimed a "state of threatening danger of war" and issued a twelve-hour ultimatum to Russia demanding demobilization. When the Russian leadership refused to comply, Wilhelm promptly ordered full mobilization. The iron dice had begun to roll.

The Iron Dice

As emperors and statesmen on all sides gradually lost control over the deepening crisis, generals and military staffs began to dominate the scene. During the final period before the outbreak of general war, one appalling fact becomes terrifyingly clear: the unrelenting rigidity of military schedules and timetables on all sides. All these had been worked out in minute detail years before, in case war should come. Now that it was imminent, each general was terrified lest his adversary move first and thus capture the initiative. Everywhere, then, military staffs exerted mounting pressure on their chiefs of state to move schedules ahead so as to strike the first blow. What each plan lacked to an astonishing degree was even a small measure of flexibility. In the words of the chief of the mobilization section of the Russian general staff, for example, "the whole plan of mobilization is worked out ahead to its final conclusion and in all its detail . . . once the moment is chosen, everything is settled; there is no going back; it determines mechanically the beginning of war."³⁶ This was not only an accurate description of the situation in Russia, but also of that in Austria, France, and, most particularly, Germany.

In Russia, the czar vacillated between full mobilization, which

would make retreat very difficult, and partial mobilization, which left some room for maneuver. When informed of the Austrian bombardment of Belgrade on the afternoon of July 29, he decided to order full mobilization. That evening, however, Wilhelm's telegram arrived in which he pleaded with the czar not to take the military measures that would precipitate a calamity. Pondering the telegram, the czar now felt that he had made a mistake in signing the ukase for general mobilization. He decided to cancel the order and substitute another one for partial mobilization. At this point the Russian generals became extremely alarmed. Minister of War Sukhomlinov, Chief of Staff General Ianushkevich, and Chief of Mobilization General Dobrorolski all were convinced that a suspension of general mobilization would give the enemy the opportunity to mobilize more quickly than Russia. The czar nonetheless remained firm, and toward midnight of July 29 the order for partial mobilization was released.

The three generals, however, refused to yield. On the following morning they won Sazonov over to their point of view. The foreign minister in turn promised to win over the czar. The chief of staff asked Sazonov to telephone him at once from Peterhof to let him know whether or not he had succeeded. If Sazonov's news was positive, the chief of staff would convert the partial mobilization to a general one and immediately thereafter "retire from sight, smash my telephone and generally take all measures so that I cannot be found to give any contrary orders for a new postponement of general mobilization."³⁷

It took Sazonov approximately one hour to convince the czar. The arguments he used were essentially those of the generals. The foreign minister telephoned the chief of staff as promised and added: "Now you can smash the telephone. Give your orders, General, and then—disappear for the rest of the day."³⁸

We have already seen Berchtold's role in persuading Emperor Franz-Joseph to agree to partial mobilization against Serbia. Berchtold, in turn, was under the influence of the Austrian chief of staff, Hötendorff, who hoped to deter Russia through a quick military victory and thus keep the war localized. Hötendorff was ready, however, to risk intervention by Russia, and so he insisted on the mobilization of eight army corps, or approximately half the Austrian armed forces. He also worked out a plan to convert partial to full mobilization with a minimum of delay, which in fact he did when the news of Russian general mobilization reached Vienna. Encouraged by a telegram from Moltke, the German chief of staff, urging

general mobilization, Hötendorff decided to push the button on July 31 instead of on August 1, the date agreed upon in an audience with Emperor Franz-Joseph. As head of Austria's militarist party, Hötendorff had great faith in the ability of his army to deliver a crushing blow to Serbia and, if necessary, to capture the initiative in a military campaign against Russia.

In Germany the Kaiser waited anxiously for a Russian reply to his ultimatum. When the deadline of noon on August 1 passed without word, Wilhelm's remaining balance collapsed and paranoia again took over. Hearing the news of the Russian mobilization, Wilhelm burst into a tirade without any connection to reality:

The world will be engulfed in the most terrible of wars, the ultimate aim of which is the ruin of Germany. England, France, and Russia have conspired for our annihilation . . . that is the naked truth of the situation which was slowly but surely created by Edward VII. . . . The encirclement of Germany is at last an accomplished fact. We have run our heads into the noose. . . . The dead Edward is stronger than the living I!³⁹

A short time before he decreed general mobilization at 5 P.M. on August 1, the Kaiser confided to an Austrian officer: "I hate the Slavs. I know it is a sin to do so. We ought not to hate anyone. But I can't help hating them."⁴⁰

Wilhelm's hatred of the Slavs kept his mind attuned to a war with Russia. But his general staff, in particular Moltke, its chief, thought differently. For several years, the German generals had been committed to the Schlieffen Plan—the product of Count Alfred von Schlieffen—one of the most illustrious disciples of the nineteenth-century Prussian strategic thinker Karl von Clausewitz. The Schlieffen Plan envisaged a German attack on France through Belgium as the most promising first strike in the event of the outbreak of a general European war. The fact that such a move would violate the neutrality of Belgium hardly bothered the German generals. Caught between his personal desire to begin a military campaign with a devastating blow against Russia and the plan of his general staff to invade Belgium and France, the Kaiser, like Bismarck before him, began to dread the specter of a two-front war. In the meantime, however, mobilization had been ordered, and the gigantic German war machine, prepared for years for this day, had begun to roll. Barbara Tuchman paints a vivid picture of this machine:

Once the mobilization button was pushed, the whole vast machinery for calling up, equipping, and transporting two million men began turning automatically. Reservists went to their designated depots, were issued uniforms, equipment, and arms, formed into companies and companies into battalions, were joined by cavalry, cyclists, artillery, medical units, cook wagons, blacksmith wagons, even postal wagons, moved according to prepared railway timetables to concentration points near the frontier where they would be formed into divisions, divisions into corps, and corps into armies ready to advance and fight. One army corps alone—out of the total of 40 in the German forces—required 170 railway cars for officers, 965 for infantry, 2960 for cavalry, 1915 for artillery and supply wagons, 6010 in all, grouped in 140 trains and an equal number again for their supplies. From the moment the order was given, everything was to move at fixed times according to a schedule precise down to the number of train axles that would pass over a given bridge within a given time. Confident in his magnificent system, Deputy Chief of Staff General Waldersee had not even returned to Berlin at the beginning of the crisis but had written to Jagow: “I shall remain here ready to jump; we are all prepared at the General Staff; in the meantime there is nothing for us to do!” It was a proud tradition inherited from the elder, or “great” Moltke who on mobilization day in 1870 was found lying on a sofa reading *Lady Audley's Secret*.⁴¹

With the momentum of mobilization directed toward the French frontier, the Kaiser's fear of a two-front war rose to a frenzy. Desperately he looked for a way out, and indeed it seemed that at the last minute the opportunity was offered to him. A colleague of Bethmann's suggested the proposal of autonomy for the French province of Alsace in exchange for a pledge of French neutrality. With France neutral, England would remain neutral as well, and the Kaiser could turn his forces against Russia. Prince Karl Max Lichnowsky, the German ambassador in London, did indeed report that England would observe neutrality if Germany refrained from attacking France.

The Kaiser seized this chance for a one-front war and immediately sent for Moltke, who had just put the mobilization order into effect. The trains had already begun to roll toward France as a car, sent out specially to fetch Moltke, brought the perplexed chief of staff to the imperial palace. Wilhelm quickly explained the situation and then announced to Moltke: “Now we can go to war against Russia only. We simply march the whole of our army to the East.”⁴²

Moltke, the successor of Schlieffen, had planned for this day for a decade. In 1914, at the age of sixty-six, he was still living in the shadow of his illustrious uncle, the victor over France in 1870. This burden

had taken its toll: the younger Moltke tended toward melancholy, was a poor horseman, and was a follower of Christian Science. Introspective by nature, he carried Goethe's *Faust* in a pocket of his military tunic and was an ardent reader of contemporary literature. Military decisions were agonizing for him, and he reached them only after searing self-doubt. The emotional cost of making them was so great that he found it next to impossible to alter them, let alone reverse them. In short, he totally lacked flexibility.

When the Kaiser told Moltke of his plan, the chief of staff was aghast. “Your Majesty,” he exclaimed, “it cannot be done.” When pressed for a reason, Moltke explained: “The deployment of millions cannot be improvised. If Your Majesty insists on leading the whole army to the East it will not be an army ready for battle but a disorganized mob of armed men with no arrangements for supply. Those arrangements took a whole year of intricate labor to complete and once settled, it cannot be altered.”⁴³ The vision of 11,000 trains wrenched into reverse was simply too much for Moltke to bear. He refused the Kaiser point-blank. “Your uncle would have given me a different answer,” Wilhelm said bitterly. This statement, Moltke wrote afterward, “wounded me deeply,” but did not change his opinion that the job “could not be done.”⁴⁴ In fact, it could have been done, as Barbara Tuchman reveals in *The Guns of August*: “The German General Staff, though committed since 1905 to a plan of attack upon France first, had in their files, revised each year until 1913, an alternative plan against Russia with all the trains running eastward.” General von Staab, the chief of the German Railway Division, was so shocked by Moltke's “it cannot be done” that he wrote a book about it after the war. In this work von Staab showed painstakingly how, given notice on August 1, he could have turned most of the armed forces around and deployed them against Russia by mid-August.

Be that as it may, Moltke convinced the Kaiser on that fateful August 1 that the German machine that had begun to roll toward the west could no longer be either stopped or turned around. The Kaiser made one final effort: He dashed off a telegram to King George of England informing him that due to “technical reasons” mobilization could no longer be countermanded; he also stated that if both France and England would remain neutral, he would “employ [his] troops elsewhere.” Simultaneously, Wilhelm ordered his aide-de-camp to telephone German headquarters at Trier, a point near the Luxembourg border where German troops were scheduled to cross the frontier at any moment. Moltke, according to his memoirs, thought that

his "heart would break."⁴⁵ The railways of Luxembourg were essential to his timetable, since they ran into Belgium and from there into France. He "burst into bitter tears of abject despair" and refused to sign the order countermanding the invasion of Luxembourg. While he was sulking, another call came from the Kaiser, summoning him to the palace. Upon his arrival there, Moltke was informed by the Kaiser that a negative response about the prospects of English neutrality had been received from Prince Lichnowsky. "Now you can do what you like," the Kaiser said to Moltke. The chief of staff later reported that he "never recovered from the shock of this incident. Something in me broke and I was never the same thereafter."⁴⁶

As it turned out, the Kaiser's final effort had been too late. His phone order to Trier had not arrived in time. German soldiers had already crossed the border into Luxembourg and had entered the little town of Trois Vierges, named for the three virgins who symbolized faith, hope, and charity.

At the same time, Count Pourtalès, the German ambassador at St. Petersburg, presented the Kaiser's declaration of war to Sazonov. According to Paléologue, the French ambassador, Sazonov responded by exclaiming: "The curses of the nations will be upon you!" to which the German replied: "We are defending our honor."⁴⁷ The night before, Admiral Tirpitz had wanted to know why the Kaiser had found it necessary to declare war on Russia at all since no immediate invasion of Russia was planned and the entire thrust of the German strategy was directed westward. To this question the naval minister never received a satisfactory answer. Nor can we know with certainty what would have happened if Moltke had acquiesced to the Kaiser's order to turn the army around and march toward the east. At the very least, however, valuable time would have been gained. Quite possibly, the outbreak of general war might have been postponed or even averted. But the unrelenting logic of a military schedule foreclosed that possibility.

In France a similar confrontation between a statesman and a general occurred. Premier René Viviani, haunted by the fear that war might erupt by accident, through "a black look, a brutal word, a shot," took an extraordinary step on July 30 and ordered a 10-kilometer withdrawal along the entire French-German border, from Switzerland to Luxembourg. In Viviani's words, France took a chance "never before taken in history." The French commander in chief, General Joseph Joffre, agreed but reached the opposite conclusion. Trained to seize the offensive, he regarded the withdrawal as suicidal and pleaded with the

premier to mobilize. By the morning of August 1, he had declared that since each twenty-four-hour delay before general mobilization would mean a 15- to 20-kilometer loss of territory, he would refuse to take the responsibility as commander. Several hours later, he had his way and the premier authorized full mobilization.

England was the only major European power that had no military conscription. The cabinet hoped to keep the nation out of war, but it also realized that England's national interest was tied to the preservation of France. As Sir Edward Grey put it in a typical understatement: "If Germany dominated the continent, it would be disagreeable to us as well as to others, for we should be isolated."⁴⁸ As the tension mounted, the cabinet became increasingly divided. The man who most clearly saw the imminent outbreak of war on the continent was Winston Churchill, first lord of the admiralty. On July 28 Churchill ordered the fleet to sail to its war base at Scapa Flow, and thus prepared it for possible action and probably saved it from a surprise torpedo attack. When Germany declared war on Russia on August 1, Churchill asked the cabinet to mobilize the fleet instantly. Encountering no opposition, he went to the Admiralty and promptly issued the order to activate the fleet.

We see, then, that the chiefs of state of every European nation involved in a military alliance were pressed by their general staffs to mobilize. The generals, under the relentless pressure of their self-imposed timetables, stridently demanded action lest even one crucial hour be lost to the enemy. The pressure on the brink was such that ultimately the outbreak of war was experienced not as a world tragedy but as a liberating explosion.

Conclusion

It is my conviction that during the descent into the abyss, the perceptions of statesmen and generals were absolutely crucial. For the sake of clarity and precision, I should like to consider the following dimensions of this phenomenon: (1) a leader's perception of himself, (2) his perceptions of his adversary's character, (3) his perceptions of the adversary's intentions, (4) his perceptions of the adversary's power and capabilities, and (5) his capacity for empathy with his adversary.

All the participants suffered from greater or lesser distortions in their images of themselves. They tended to see themselves as honorable, virtuous, and pure, and the adversary as diabolical. The leaders of Austria-Hungary probably provide the best illustration of this.

Berchtold and Hötzendorff perceived their country as the bastion of European civilization. They saw an Austria-Hungary fighting not only for its national honor but for its very existence against an enemy who had it "by the throat." The possibility of losing prestige and sinking to the status of a second-class power was anathema to the two Austrian leaders. Therefore, they deemed it essential to take a firm and fearless stand that, in their minds, would make a potential enemy back down. The fact that not only Serbia, but Russia too, perceived the Austrian action as aggression never seriously perturbed either Berchtold or his chief of staff. If aggression is defined as the use of force against the territory of another nation in violation of the wishes of that nation's people, then indeed the Austrian move against Serbia fits that definition. Yet the Austrians never saw their action in that light, and charges of aggression were simply ignored. In their zeal to defend Austria's honor and to ensure her status as a major power, Berchtold and Hötzendorff stepped over the edge of a precipice. Their sights were so set on their goal that they failed to pay attention to the world around them; they virtually ignored the reactions of their ally, Germany, and those of their potential adversaries, Russia, England, and France. In their eagerness to vindicate the image of Austria as a virile nation, they led their country to destruction.

Diabolical enemy images were rampant during the crisis, but probably the clearest and most destructive of these were entertained by Kaiser Wilhelm. Before the crisis had reached the boiling point, the Kaiser's efforts to mediate between Austria and Russia were carried out fairly rationally and constructively. But when the czar decided to mobilize, Wilhelm's deep-seated prejudices against the Slavic peoples broke through and sent him into a frenzy. As tensions mounted, this frenzy assumed paranoid proportions and was finally redirected, of all things, toward England, which at that very moment was making every effort to preserve the peace. Wilhelm saw devils in both Russia and England; this perception, more than any other, led to his decision to strike first.

All the nations on the brink of the disaster expected the worst from their potential adversaries. The Russian leadership provides a case in point. Because the czar and his generals felt themselves to be threatened by Austria, Sazonov, who "did not hate Austria, but despised her," responded with threats of hostile action. As Berchtold and Hötzendorff, and later the Kaiser, perceived the Russians' hostility, they too escalated their hostile behavior. These acts convinced the

Russians that their initial perceptions had been correct. Thereafter, the diplomatic exchanges became increasingly negative and threatening, and not even the "Willy-Nicky" telegrams were able to save the situation. When a nation designates another nation as its enemy and does so emphatically enough and long enough, the perception will eventually come to be true.

Perceptions of power during the crisis were particularly revealing. During the early phases, leaders notoriously tended to exaggerate their own power and describe their enemies as weaker than they really were. Wilhelm's pledge to Austria, for example, displayed a fundamental contempt for Russia's military power and an exaggerated confidence in his influence on the Russian leadership. Similarly, the Austrians had contempt for Russia's military machine, which they perceived as more cumbersome and weaker than it actually was. As stress mounted, however, these perceptions gradually changed and were soon replaced by acute fears of inferiority. Interestingly enough, these fears did not deter any of the participants from actually going to war. At the boiling point, all leaders tended to perceive their own alternatives as more restricted than those of their adversaries. They saw their own options as limited by necessity or "fate," whereas those of the adversary were characterized by many choices. This may help explain the curiously mechanistic quality that pervaded the attitudes of statesmen everywhere on the eve of the outbreak: the "we cannot go back now" of Franz-Joseph; the "iron dice" of Bethmann; and the absolute determinism and enslavement to their timetables of the military leaders, who perceived the slightest advantage of the enemy as catastrophic.

Everywhere, there was a total absence of empathy; no one could see the situation from another point of view. Berchtold did not see that, to a Serbian patriot, Austria's action would look like naked aggression. He did not see that, to the Russian leadership, war might seem the only alternative to intolerable humiliation; nor did he see the fateful mood swings of his ally, the German Kaiser, from careless overconfidence to frenzied paranoia. Wilhelm's growing panic and total loss of balance made any empathy impossible. And the Russians' contempt for Austria and fear of Germany had the same effect.

Finally, one is struck with the overwhelming mediocrity of the people involved. The character of each of the leaders, diplomats, or generals was badly flawed by arrogance, stupidity, carelessness, or weakness. There was a pervasive tendency to place the preservation

of one's ego before the preservation of peace. There was little insight and no vision whatsoever. And there was an almost total absence of excellence and generosity of spirit. It was not fate or Providence that made these people fail so miserably; it was their own evasion of responsibility. As a result of their weakness, a generation of Europe's young men was destroyed. The sins of the parents were truly visited on the sons, who forfeited their lives. Of all the cruelties that people have inflicted on one another, the most terrible have always been brought by the weak against the weak.

NOTES

1. F. H. Hinsley, *Power and the Pursuit of Peace* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1963), p. 296.
2. See, for example, Sidney Bradshaw Fay, *The Origins of the World War*, 2 vols. (New York: Free Press, 1928–1930); Luigi Albertini, *The Origins of the War of 1914*, 3 vols. (London: 1952–1957); or Fritz Fischer, *Griff nach der Weltmacht* (Hamburg: 1961).
3. René Recouly, *Les Heures Tragiques d'Avant-Guerre* (Paris: 1923), p. 19.
4. *Origins of the World War*, Vol. 2, p. 126.
5. Alfred von Tirpitz, *My Memoirs* (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1919), pp. 241–242.
6. *Origins of the World War*, Vol. 2, p. 209.
7. Joachim von Kürenberg, *The Kaiser* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1955), p. 293.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 295.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 430.
10. *Origins of the World War*, Vol. 2, p. 253.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 185–186.
12. *Origins of the World War*, Vol. 1, p. 469.
13. *Les Pourparlers Diplomatiques* (Serbian Blue Book) 16/29 juin–3/16 août (Paris: 1914), p. 37.
14. Freiherr von Margutti, *Vom Alten Kaiser* (Vienna: 1921), p. 404.
15. Karl Kautsky (ed.), *Die Deutschen Dokumente zum Kriegsausbruch* (Berlin: 1919), p. 271.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 293.
17. Barbara Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), pp. 59–60.
18. Pourtalès to Bethmann, August 23, 1910, cited in *Origins of the World War*, Vol. 1, p. 265.
19. Mühlberg, German ambassador in Rome, to Bülow, June 11, 1909, cited in *Origins of the World War*, Vol. 1, p. 265.
20. *Diplomatische Aktenstücke zur Vorgeschichte des Krieges* (Austrian Red Book of 1919) (Vienna: 1919), p. 16.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Die Deutschen Dokumente*, p. 291.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 335.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 337.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 366.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 359.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 390.
29. *Ibid.*
30. *Ibid.*, p. 321.
31. *Ibid.*
32. *Ibid.*
33. *Ibid.*, p. 354.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 350.
35. *Ibid.*
36. S. Dobrorolski, *Die Mobilmachung der russischen Armee, 1914* (Berlin: 1921), p. 9.
37. Cited in *Origins of the World War*, Vol. 2, p. 470.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 472.
39. Cited in *Guns of August*, p. 75.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 74.
41. *Ibid.*, pp. 74–75.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 79.
44. *Ibid.*
45. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
46. *Ibid.*
47. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
48. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

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