

The Army Intervenes in the Crisis: Helmuth J. L. von Moltke to Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg (July 29, 1914)

Abstract

General von Moltke pushed for preemptive German mobilization against Russia. He accepted the likelihood that this step would bring the French into the fray. Moltke regarded a two-front war as inevitable. His thinking reflected a growing fatalism on the part of many military leaders who believed that Germany's position had weakened steadily since the beginning of the century.

Source

Berlin, July 29, 1914

An appraisal of the political situation

It goes without saying that no state in Europe would take more than a general human interest in the conflict between Austria and Serbia if this conflict did not carry the risk of a broader political engagement that today threatens to unleash a world war. For more than five years, Serbia has been the source of tension in Europe and has brought an almost intolerable pressure to bear on the political and economic life of its citizens. With a patience that at times verges on weakness, Austria has thus far tolerated constant provocations and subversive political activities aimed at destroying its continued existence as a state—activities pursued by a nation that has moved from killing a king in its own country to murdering a prince in an adjacent state. It was only after this last horrific crime that Austria took extreme action and used a red-hot iron to excise a tumor that was threatening to poison the body of Europe. One would have thought that the whole of Europe would be grateful, that it would have breathed a collective sigh of relief to see the disturber of the peace given the caning it deserved and to see peace and order restored to the Balkans; but Russia took sides with the rogue state. This has turned the Austrian-Serbian affair into a storm cloud that could break over Europe at any moment.

Austria told the European cabinets that it did not seek territorial acquisitions at Serbia's expense and that it did not intend to threaten the continued existence of this state. Austria only wanted to force its restive neighbor to accept the conditions that it deemed necessary for a continued co-existence—conditions that Serbia, as experience has shown, would never honor without the use of force, despite its solemn promises. As already mentioned, the Austrian-Serbian affair is a purely private conflict in which, had Russia not intervened, the European states would have taken no deep interest—and any interest shown by them would not have threatened but rather strengthened European peace. It was only Russia's intervention that gave this matter its menacing character.

Austria only mobilized part of its forces against Serbia, a total of eight army corps—just enough to carry out its punitive attack. By contrast, Russia is making preparations to mobilize a total of twelve army corps in a short period of time in the military districts of Kiev, Odessa, and Moscow. It has ordered similar preparatory measures to be taken in the north, namely, opposite the German border and on the Baltic Sea. It says that it intends to mobilize if Austria marches into Serbia since it cannot permit Austria to dismember this state, although Austria has stated that no such action is planned.

What will and must the consequences be? If Austria marches into Serbia, it will confront not only the

Serbian army but a vastly superior Russian force. Hence, Austria will not be in a position to wage a war against Serbia without first protecting itself from Russian intervention. This means it will also be forced to mobilize the other half of its army, for it cannot afford to place itself at the mercy of a Russia that is prepared to go to war. Nonetheless, the moment Austria mobilizes its entire army, a clash with Russia is inevitable, and this will be the *casus foederis* for Germany. If Germany does not wish to renege on its word, if it does not want its ally to be crushed by superior Russian forces, it must also mobilize. This will lead to mobilization in Russia's other military districts. Then Russia will be able to state categorically that it is being attacked by Germany. It will secure France's support, which is contractually bound to take part in a war if its ally Russia is attacked. The French-Russian Treaty, so often praised as a purely defensive alliance established only to counter German attack plans, will be activated, and the mutual destruction of the civilized states of Europe can begin.

One cannot deny that Russia has cleverly orchestrated this affair. Making continued assurances that it has not yet "mobilized" but is merely making preparations "just in case," that it has "thus far" not called up reservists, Russia has managed to make such comprehensive preparations for war that it will be ready to advance just a few days after announcing mobilization. This puts Austria in a desperate situation and means it will be forced to take the lead by protecting itself from any unforeseen action taken by Russia. Russia will say: "Austria, you are mobilizing against us. You want to go to war against us." Russia claims it does not intend to take any action against Germany, but the Russians know full well that Germany cannot remain on the sidelines in the event of a hostile clash between its ally and Russia. Germany will also be forced to mobilize, and, once again, Russia will be able to say to the world: "I did not want war; Germany is the cause." The matter will and must proceed in this manner if there is no last-minute miracle to avert a war that is destined to destroy, for decades to come, almost all of European civilization.

Germany does not want to be the cause of this egregious war, but the German government knows that it would fatefully violate the deepest bonds of national loyalty—one of the noblest features of the German psyche—that it would go against national sentiment if it did not come to its ally's aid just when this ally's destiny is hanging in the balance.

Current intelligence tells us that France also appears to be taking preparatory measures for a possible mobilization. It is clear that Russia and France are acting jointly in these actions.

So if the clash between Austria and Russia is inevitable, Germany will also have to mobilize and be prepared to fight on two fronts.

As for our intended military measures, it is extremely important to clarify as soon as possible whether Russia and France are willing to risk a war with Germany. As our neighbors proceed with their preparations, they will be in a position to carry out mobilization more quickly than us. As a result, the military situation is becoming less and less favorable by the day, which could have calamitous consequences for us if our probable opponents' preparations carry on unchecked.

Source: Helmuth J. L. von Moltke to Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg (July 29, 1914), in Walther Schücking and Max Montgelas, eds., *Die Deutschen Dokumente zum Kriegsausbruch*. 5 vols., Berlin, 1922, vol. 5, p. 349; reprinted in Imanuel Geiss, *Julikrise und Kriegsausbruch 1914*. 2 vols., Hannover, 1963–64, vol. 2, pp. 261–63.

Translation: Adam Blauhut

Recommended Citation: The Army Intervenes in the Crisis: Helmuth J. L. von Moltke to Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg (July 29, 1914), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/wilhelmine-germany-and-the-first-world-war-1890-1918/ghdi:document-802>> [September 26, 2025].