

The “Blank Check”: Ladislaus Count von Szögyény-Marich (Berlin) to Leopold Count von Berchtold (July 5, 1914)

Abstract

The assassination of the heir apparent to the Austro-Hungarian throne, Franz Ferdinand, by a Serbian nationalist on June 28, 1914, precipitated what has been known as the “July Crisis.” Suspecting Russian machinations on behalf of the Serbs, German and Austro-Hungarian leaders felt the need to react forcefully to this provocation. The following communiqué from the Austro-Hungarian ambassador in Berlin, Ladislaus Count von Szögyény-Marich, to Austro-Hungarian Foreign Minister Leopold Count von Berchtold suggests that the German Reich was willing to support the most aggressive Austrian response.

Source

Tel. no. 237

Berlin, July 5, 1914

Top secret

After I informed Kaiser Wilhelm that I had a letter from His Imperial and Royal Apostolic Majesty, which Count Hoyos delivered to me today to present to him, I received an invitation from the German Majesties to a *déjeuner* at noon today in the Neue Palais [New Palace]. I presented His Majesty with the exalted letter and the attached memorandum. The Kaiser read both papers quite carefully in my presence. First, His Majesty assured me that he had expected us to take firm action against Serbia, but he had to concede that, as a result of the conflicts facing our most gracious Lord, he needed to take into account a serious complication in Europe, which is why he did not wish to give any definite answer prior to consultations with the chancellor. When, after our *déjeuner*, I once again emphasized the gravity of the situation, His Majesty authorized me to report to our most gracious Lord that in this case, too, we could count on Germany’s full support. As mentioned, he first had to consult with the chancellor, but he did not have the slightest doubt that Herr von Bethmann Hollweg would fully agree with him, particularly with regard to action on our part against Serbia. In his (Kaiser Wilhelm’s) opinion, though, there was no need to wait patiently before taking action. The Kaiser said that Russia’s stance would always be a hostile one, but he had been prepared for this for many years, and even if war broke out between Austria-Hungary and Russia, we could rest assured that Germany would take our side, in line with its customary loyalty. According to the Kaiser, as things stood now, Russia was not at all ready for war. It would certainly have to think hard before making a call to arms. Nevertheless, it would attempt to turn the other powers of the Triple Entente against us and to fan the flames in the Balkans. The Kaiser said he understood full well that it would be difficult for His Imperial and Royal Apostolic Majesty to march into Serbia, given his well-known love of peace; however, if we really deemed a military operation against Serbia necessary, he (Kaiser Wilhelm) would find it regrettable if we did not seize the present moment, which was so favorable for us. As for Romania, the Kaiser said he would make sure that King Carol and his councilors acted properly. The idea of entering into a treaty with Bulgaria “is not at all agreeable” to him; he did not have any trust in King Ferdinand or his previous or current councilors. Despite this, he did not want to make the least objection to a treaty between the monarchy and Bulgaria, but precautions had to be taken that the treaty did not contain any barbs against Romania and that this state was duly informed of the proceedings (as was emphasized in the memorandum). Tomorrow morning, Kaiser Wilhelm intends to travel to Kiel before going on his northern voyage, but before this, His Majesty will confer with the

chancellor about the matter at hand. The chancellor has been summoned from Hohenfinow to the Neue Palais in the evening for this purpose. In any case, I will have the opportunity to consult with the chancellor tomorrow.

Source: Ladislaus Count von Szögyény-Marich (Berlin) to Leopold Count von Berchtold (July 5, 1914), in Ludwig Bittner, et. al., eds., *Österreich-Ungarns Aussenpolitik von der Bosnischen Krise 1908 bis zum Kriegsausbruch 1914*. 8 vols, Vienna, 1930, vol. 8, no. 10,058; reprinted in Imanuel Geiss, *Julikrise und Kriegsausbruch 1914*. 2 vols., Hannover, 1963–64, vol. 1, pp. 83–84.

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