

Kaiser Wilhelm II's Account of Events

July 1914

From his Memoirs

(From G-Text 'Kaiserreich')

After the arrival of the news of the assassination of my friend, the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, I gave up going to Kiel for the regatta week and went back home, since I intended to go to Vienna for his funeral. But I was asked from there to give up this plan. Later I heard that one of the reasons for this was consideration for my personal safety; to this I naturally would have paid no attention.

Greatly worried on account of the turn that matters might now take, I decided to give up my intended journey to Norway and remain at home. The Imperial Chancellor and the Foreign Office held a view contrary to mine and wished me to undertake the journey, as they considered that it would have a quieting effect on all Europe. For a long time I argued against going away from my country at a time when the future was so unsettled, but Imperial Chancellor von Bethmann told me, in short and concise terms, that if I were now to give up my travel plans, which were already widely known, this would make the situation appear more serious than it had been up to that moment and possibly lead to the outbreak of war, for which I might be held responsible; that the whole world was merely waiting to be put out of suspense by the news that I, in spite of the situation had quietly gone on my trip.

Thereupon I consulted the Chief of the General Staff, and, when he also proved to be calm and unworried regarding the state of affairs and himself asked for a summer leave of absence to go to Carlsbad, I decided, though with a heavy heart, upon my departure.

The much-discussed so-called Potsdam Crown Council of July 5th in reality never took place. It is an invention of malevolent persons. Naturally, before my departure, I received, as was my custom, some of the Ministers individually, in order to hear from them reports concerning their departments. Neither was there any council of Ministers and there was no talk about war preparations at a single one of the conferences.

My fleet was cruising in the Norwegian fjords, as usual, while I was on my summer vacation trip. During my stay at Balholm I received only meager news from the Foreign Office and was obliged to rely principally on the Norwegian newspapers, from which I got the impression that the situation was growing worse. I telegraphed repeatedly to the Chancellor and the Foreign Office that I considered it advisable to return home, but was asked each time not to interrupt my journey.

When I learned that the English fleet had not dispersed after the review at Spithead, but had remained concentrated, I telegraphed again to Berlin that I considered my return necessary. My opinion was not shared there.

But when, after that, I learned from the Norwegian newspapers -- not from Berlin -- about the Austrian ultimatum to Serbia, and, immediately thereafter, about the Serbian note to Austria, I started without further ado upon my return journey and commanded the fleet to repair to Wilhelms haven. Upon my departure I learned from a Norwegian source that it was said that a part of the English fleet had left secretly for Norway in order to capture me (though peace still reigned!). It is significant that Sir Edward Goschen, the English Ambassador, was informed on July 26th at the Foreign Office that my return journey, undertaken on my own initiative, was to be regretted, since agitating rumors might be caused by it.

Upon my arrival at Potsdam I found the Chancellor and the Foreign Office in conflict with the Chief of the General Staff, since General von Moltke was of the opinion that war was sure to break out, whereas the other two stuck firmly to their view that thing would not get to such a bad pass, that there would be some way of avoiding war, provided I did not order mobilization. This dispute kept up steadily. Not until General von Moltke announced that the Russians had set fire to their frontier posts, torn up the frontier railway tracks, and posted red mobilization notices did a light break upon the diplomats in the Wilhelmstrasse and bring about their own collapse and that of their powers of resistance. They had not wished to believe in the war.

This shows plainly how little we had expected -- much less prepared for -- war in July 1914. When, in the spring of 1914, Czar Nicholas II was questioned by his Court Marghal as to his spring and summer plans, he replied: "Je resterai chez moi cette année parce que nous aurons la guerre" ("I shall stay at home this year because we shall have war"). (This fact, it is said, was reported to Imperial Chancellor von Bethmann; I heard nothing about it then and learned about it for the first time in November, 1918.) This was the same Czar who gave me, on two separate occasions--at Björkö and Baltisch-Port--entirely without being pressed by me and in a way that surprised me, his word of honor as a sovereign, to which he added weight by a clasp of the hand and an embrace, that he would never draw his sword against the German Emperor -- least of all as an ally of England -- in case a war should break out in Europe, owing to his gratitude to the German Emperor for his attitude in the Russo-Japanese War, in which England alone had involved Russia, adding that he hated England, since she had done him and Russia a great wrong by inciting Japan against them.

At the very time that the Czar was announcing his summer war program I was busy at Corfu excavating antiquities; then I went to Wiesbaden, and, finally, to Norway. A monarch who wishes war and prepares it in such away that he can suddenly fall upon his neighbors -- a task requiring long secret mobilization preparations and concentration of troops -- does not spend months outside his own country and does not allow his Chief of the General Staff to go to Carlsbad on leave of absence. My enemies, in the meantime, planned their preparations for an attack.

Our entire diplomatic machine failed. The menace of war was not seen because the Foreign Office was so hypnotized with its idea of "surtout pas d'histoires" ("above all, no stories"), its belief in peace at any cost, that it had completely eliminated war as a

possible instrument of Entente statesmanship from its calculations, and, therefore, did not rightly estimate the importance of the signs of war...