July 1914: Countdown to War

(Sean McMeekin)

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For some years now, Americans have lived through a chaotic series of events unprecedented in modern times. Still, some say "nothing ever happens." They argue that these apparently dramatic crises, from the Russo-Ukraine War to Texas governor Greg Abbott's recent challenge to the federal government, are meaningless ephemera which change nothing about our underlying situation. Others argue, to the contrary, that such ferments are the foothills of the future, even if the massive changes we all desire and fear have not yet arrived. Sean McMeekin's *July 1914*, a very detailed analysis of the month before World War I began, shows that the latter group has the better claim, if history is any guide.

McMeekin, a realist historian, whose other excellent books include *The Russian Revolution* and *Stalin's War*, is both a Russian and Ottoman expert, who concentrates on the early- to mid-twentieth century. Of all his books, this has the tightest focus. It is a blow-by-blow account of both the public and the then-secret doings from June 28, 1914, the date of the assassination of the Austrian crown prince, the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, to August 4, when Britain entered World War I (which is traditionally dated as beginning July 28, when Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia). I don't think this is a book that appeals to everyone. You really need to be interested in diplomatic history, or at least appreciate the diplomatic machinations which lie, then and now, behind any substantial interaction among great powers. (McMeekin helpfully provides a who's-who, a list of *dramatis personae;* the reader can be expected to refer to it often.) On the other hand, I think it's a book from which everyone can benefit, because it shows the reader how the sausage is, or was, made in international relations.

In fact, I am very curious, but have no reliable way of determining in the sea of propaganda and lies which bathes us, how diplomacy is really conducted nowadays among the mighty of the Earth. Certainly, some elements have changed in the past hundred years, even if human nature has not. For example, the ability of a country to lie or dissemble about crucial physical facts, such as troop and ship movements, something very important in this book, has been largely obviated by technology.

Mass instantaneous media has presumably made public opinion a more important driver than in the past, though it does play a role in this book as well. And the caliber of the participants, at least those serving the Western countries which constitute the Regime, America and its satrapies, has dropped precipitously, in all of intelligence, wisdom, and education. Maybe under the surface the competent people are still in charge. Probably not—but as *July 1914* shows, anyway, mere competence is not enough to avoid disaster (no more than it was in *The Gravediggers*, a book I recently discussed about the final days of the Weimar Republic).

Most of the background history that matters in this book is forgotten today. The Austro-Hungarian Dual Monarchy (often, though technically incorrectly, called the Austro-Hungarian Empire, of which more later) had not been robust for some time, yet was still very large and had great power, while it frequently engaged in spats with both its more-powerful and its less-powerful neighbors. In 1908, in response to the awakening of the Turks from their Ottoman sclerosis, Austria-Hungary had annexed Bosnia-Herzegovina, which it had occupied and administered since 1878. (My great uncle, Gottlieb Ptacek, who came from Moravia, now part of the Czech Republic, was a young Austrian officer who served the Emperor in Bosnia at this time; I have pictures of him in uniform wearing a fez, which was apparently the standard practice for that time and place.) The occupation precipitated the First Bosnian Crisis, one of many crises in the years before the Great War, in which war between Russia and Austria was narrowly avoided.

Other European crises came before and after. The Russo-Japanese War of 1904 had resulted in a humiliating, and unexpected, loss by Russia. The First and Second Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913 had expanded Serbia at the expense of Turkey and Bulgaria, without, barely, triggering a wider war. The Moroccan Crisis of 1911 had involved a possible war between France and Germany, with the British involved as well. The Liman von Sanders Affair in 1914 was a conflict between Germany and Russia over the former's help in restructuring the Ottoman army, which interfered with Russian designs over the Black Sea and Constantinople. For the most part, all of these crises are obscure today, but at the time, they created an atmosphere very similar to our modern atmosphere—constant international instability, but each crisis resolved without widespread war, lending credence, no doubt, to those who argued at the

time that these crises were ephemera, and that an all-encompassing European war would never come. (Although not mentioned here, the classic example of this attitude was Norman Angell's 1909 book *The Great Illusion*, arguing that large-scale European war was near-impossible.)

When Gavrilo Princip, part of a group of assassins recruited and assisted by nationalist Serbs (with ties to the Serbian government), unhappy with the Austrian occupation of Bosnia, shot the Archduke and his wife, at first this seemed like just another crisis. A lurid event, to be sure, but not obviously the trigger for a general war. The immediate response, as always, was the spread of innumerable rumors, many of them wholly detached from reality. But the general, and correct, assumption was that Serbia was in some way behind the killing, and that a major response from Austria would necessarily follow. The problem, however, was that Russia, a Great Power, stood behind Serbia, and thus war with Serbia might mean war with Russia—and might also lead to war with France, and, less likely, Britain. Austria, with a weak and somewhat antiquated military, could not fight Russia alone, so would have to obtain German approval and agreement for any declared war against Serbia, or any action that might lead to war—what McMeekin calls Austria's "strategic impotence." Similar crises had been resolved peacefully, or semi-peacefully, before, however, and there was no reason to believe this one was any different.

The most prominent character in this book is a man of whom you have probably never heard—István Tisza, the prime minister of Hungary, a very powerful politician with a very powerful personality. The relationship between the Austrians and the Hungarians is today often not well understood, and it was the structure of the Dual Monarchy, and the power it gave Tisza, which dictated much of the course of the month after the assassination. The Habsburgs had ruled Hungary since leading the reconquest of Hungary from the Turks, in 1686. The Hungarians were never happy with their resulting subordination, both in their nature (Hungarians are proud and combative to a very high degree, though often in an impractical and self-destructive manner) and because they remembered the pre-Turkish era, when Hungary was one of the preeminent kingdoms of Europe. More than once they rebelled, and when they again rebelled in 1848, they were decisively defeated by the Austrians, aided by the Russians (one of the reasons, perhaps more so than Soviet

Communism, that Hungarians are historically anti-Russian, although that seems to be changing today, due to the pressure of circumstance).

After two decades of repression, the Austrians and Hungarians came to the Compromise of 1867, in which Habsburg rule was maintained, but the Hungarians gained a great deal of autonomy. The Emperor was no longer emperor over Hungary; he was separately the king of Hungary (hence, "Dual Monarchy"), which regained its own constitution. This arrangement was in essence a federal-type system (still unpopular with a great many Hungarians), with a joint foreign policy directed from Vienna, and internal self-rule by a separate Hungarian parliament, the consent of which was necessary for various crucial common matters, including military funding. It worked fairly well, in part because of the Emperor, Franz Jozsef. Now eighty-three, he had reigned since 1848. He spoke all fifteen official languages of his empire, and regarded himself as emperor of all the people in his realm. As a result, he was widely beloved and respected, but everyone knew that modernity was changing everything, and anticipated a different world upon his death. Hungary was three times the size it is now, and was able to contribute substantially to the Empire's finances, one reason the Austrians agreed to the Compromise. Yet tensions still simmered, both between Austrians and Hungarians, and between Hungarians and the ethnic minorities within the thousand-year-old borders of Hungary, the numbers of which grown greatly since the devastation of the Turkish wars and subsequent immigration.

Tisza was, in most ways, a moderate, even liberal (although mapping such terms onto past political situations is always hazardous), an Anglophile keenly focused on maintaining Hungary's position in the Dual Monarchy. This was largely a question of keeping Hungarian preeminence over its minorities, such that they did not also receive special status in the Empire. At the same time, ironically, Tisza relied on the votes of ethnic minorities; his Liberal Party was regarded as too pro-Austrian by many Hungarians. He managed this balancing act mostly by force of personality, but it was no doubt a struggle (he fought quite a few duels, as well). One of Tisza's major challenges had long been that Franz Ferdinand was very anti-Hungarian, and hated Tisza in particular, which meant Tisza had looked forward to his accession with trepidation. Thus, in a way the assassination was a gift, if a poisoned one.

The Hungarian prime minister understood perfectly the danger of war against Serbia. If it went well, and Serbian land was annexed, more ethnic minorities would enter the empire, complicating Hungary's position further. If it went poorly, the minorities, particularly the Rumanians, who had long coveted Transylvania and had outbred the Hungarians there since their immigration into Transylvania during the Middle Ages, might gain at the expense of Hungary. Tisza also knew that Germany would be the deciding element in whether there would be war. He preferred the Germans to the Austrians, seeing the latter as backward and the former as dynamic. Otto von Bismarck was his personal model, and (like Viktor Orbán) Tisza was Calvinist, a minority religion in Hungary more common in Germany. But he had no influence in Germany; both structurally and by personality, as well as because he and the Emperor were on excellent personal terms, he could only directly influence Austrian actions.

Thus, when the war council of the Dual Monarchy convened in Vienna, beginning on July 1, Tisza was the leading voice against war. Opposing him were most or all of the other participants, especially the Austrian army chief of staff, Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf, notoriously aggressive and eager for war, and not sympathetic to the Hungarians. Leopold von Berchtold, the Austrian foreign minister, was less aggressive, but keen to deter any appearance of Austrian weakness. The Emperor, closely involved in all discussions, did not say what course he favored.

Meanwhile, the Russians, the immediate potential opposition to the Austrians were they to attack Serbia, were also trying to figure out what to do. As McMeekin discussed in his *The Russian Revolution*, Russia was far from backward in 1914—it was a rapidly-growing economic powerhouse, which the Austrians and Germans correctly feared. One of the main arguments by those Austrians and Germans pushing for war, in fact, was that every year the position of Russia improved while the position of Germany and Austria eroded (although the low French birth rate meant that the French position was eroding even more). Yet at the same time, despite its power, Russia was extremely fragile, the result of problems and contradictions within its political system (very similar, in many ways, to the present-day American Regime). Moreover, the Russians also had divisions within the advisors to the Tsar, Nicholas II. The Russian diplomatic records are missing many key portions, but it

is clear that the Russians were not initially extremely concerned about the assassination, though they were perfectly aware that it might lead to war, and took initial steps to prepare for that eventuality. And the French, and even more the British, both Russia's allies in the Triple Entente, were not really paying much attention at all in early July. The French were consumed with internal politics and the scandal of the mistress of a prominent politician having shot and killed a journalist in his office. The British were focused on Ireland, and while they were bound to uphold Belgian neutrality, which would likely be violated by Germany in case of war, on the basis of an 1839 treaty, nobody thought much about it.

Thus, what happened next depended, almost entirely, on what the immediate German response would be. The Kaiser, Wilhelm II, erratic and emotional, was not as anti-Hungarian as Franz Ferdinand, but still had historically been sympathetic to the Serbs, and more generally to ethnic minorities in Hungary. Franz Ferdinand's death put an end to his hopes for a more accommodating policy in the Austro-Hungarian lands, and the mercurial Wilhelm lurched in the other direction, demanding punishment for the Serbs. In part, this was due to the unsurprising strong feeling among European monarchs that killing members of royal families needed to be deterred—although this argument never held much water with the Russians, despite repeated German and Austrian attempts to use it to convince the Tsar to not react to Austrian moves.

When Austria-Hungary's ambassador to Germany, the Hungarian László Szőgyény, met with the Kaiser on July 5, he was surprised that the Kaiser, although he had calmed down somewhat, strongly endorsed military action against Serbia, and quickly. Wilhelm reasoned that although a Russian response could be expected, if Germany backed Austria, Russia could be expected to confine its response to bluster. The German backing of action was confirmed to Szőgyény by Theobold von Betthman Hollweg, the Chancellor. Nobody in Germany, however, had been informed that Tisza stood strongly against war; the Austrian war-party plan was to use German backing to put pressure on Tisza. This plan worked very well in the end, but if it took some time, and the delay was, arguably, fatal to limiting the war. Among ministers consulted by the Emperor, Tisza continued to be the only one opposed to war. Given his strong personality, that didn't bother him; he was not susceptible to

pressure. In a meeting on July 7, he agreed to an ultimatum to Serbia—but only if he approved it prior to sending, and with the caveat it could not be completely unacceptable to the Serbs. The result was weeks of delay, exacerbated by other considerations, such as the harvest furloughs many of the rank-and-file of the Austrian army were on.

The rest of the book details the movements and machinations of all these men, operating with incomplete information and varying imperatives and impulses. As a result of the delay imposed by Tisza, most of what the Austrians were planning leaked out ahead of time, in whole or in part, allowing their opponents to anticipate and take at least some action. The Russians were cagey, but quickly began the process of activating troops for war when they learned an ultimatum to Serbia was being prepared, while denying doing so to the Austrians and Germans. In the end, the Austrians took the German blank check and ran with it, with Berchtold delivering an ultimatum, with a two-day deadline, to Serbia on the evening of July 23—one which was not approved by the Germans, or by the Austrian Emperor, although it appears Tisza, in the end, had grudgingly given his approval. The Russians, with some coordination with the French, aggressively backed the Serbs, both privately and publicly, and the Serbs, after initial waffling, rejected the Austrian demands.

The British finally began paying attention, mostly by adding ill-informed confusion to the mix, including changing suggestions for multi-power peace conferences (although Winston Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty, on his own initiative and authority gave orders to prepare the navy for war). The Germans began to wake up to what they had done, and the ministers hid the rising storm from the Kaiser, hoping any military action would be limited to that between Austria and Serbia. The monarchs of Germany and Russia tried, in their way, to avoid war, appealing to their kinship, but were stymied both by their own internal conflicts and by their own ministers. (As always, monarchs never have nearly the power some perceive they do. If there is a villain to McMeekin's book, it is Berchtold, the Austrian foreign minister, for manipulating the Kaiser and events to ensure war, which he regarded as inevitable and essential to get underway in order to avoid falling behind in mobilization.) Buying the falsehood sold by the French and the Russians that the Russians had mobilized after the Germans, the

British threw their support behind the French, and thus the Russians as well. Ultimately, both the Germans and the Russians fully mobilized their armies, the Russians first, which given the detailed war plans developed ahead of time necessarily meant war. Some attempted, even at the time, to make fine distinctions among types of mobilization, and at whom mobilization was directed, but such distinctions disappear in the moment, and nobody, in practice, could back down at that point. And on August 4, the Germans crossed the Belgian border.

At any point, the Great War could have been stopped. True, all the underlying conflicts and competing interests that led to war would have remained. McMeekin, in an epilogue, discusses the question of inevitability, as well as the question of responsibility. He thinks a war among the Great Powers might well have been avoided entirely. Franz Ferdinand, had he come to the throne, would have forced the Hungarians to cede power to their ethnic minorities; the British were moving toward rapprochement with Germany anyway, and the Irish question might have ended in conflict and totally preoccupied the British, thereby also reducing the French appetite for war. Yes, war hawks would still have existed in all countries, but they were not in charge, merely influential, at most. McMeekin blames Tisza for preventing a swift Austrian action that might have been limited. He had the best intentions, but that is not enough. (Tisza was assassinated in his home by Communists in 1918, with the connivance of Mihály Károlyi's brief "reform" government, a precursor to the 1919 Red Terror of Béla Kun, about which I am writing a separate long article.) McMeekin blames the Germans for writing a blank check and then not managing the situation, especially as most of the German decisionmakers believed they would lose a war. He blames the Russians for mobilizing before it was necessary, and then the French for dissembling about that mobilization. He blames the British for cluelessness and lack of a firm approach. Ultimately, contrary to the myth, nobody chose war (McMeekin rejects the obviously bogus idea of "German war guilt") but everyone was responsible.

We all know how it ended—in mass slaughter, and the destruction of Europe, completely visible now, a hundred years later. (A recent Substack by the peerless Darryl Cooper, aka @MartyrMade, offers some today-relevant insight into the war, and is well worth reading.) Perhaps Europe, and the West, was already doomed by the poison of the Left

that was injected into its nations by the so-called Enlightenment, and the war was just a dramatic part of the process. It is hard to tell. Given that the war came, could it have been any different in its ultimate result? Perhaps not; many men of the time, including Helmuth von Moltke, chief of the German general staff, perceived that the war would "annihilate the civilization of almost all of Europe for decades to come." Many counterfactuals are possible; it would seem that the United States should never have entered, for example—we were tricked into it by the odious Woodrow Wilson, whose ashes should be disinterred and thrown into a sewer—but we did, tipping the war against Germany, and that is that.

The war certainly destroyed Hungary, or at least historic Hungary, which to this day, with two-thirds of its territory stripped in 1919 by the victorious Allies, using the cover of supposed "self-determination," is a small and unimportant country dependent on today's Great Powers. I often bring up, in passing and always positively, Hungarian irredentism (my mother was born in Hungary, to a family which won a title of minor nobility in the Turkish wars, and I absorbed such irredentism early). It would certainly please me if all the historic ancient Hungarian lands were restored, but at this point, what would that even look like? The world would have to change utterly for that to make sense, totally aside from that the violence involved in such a reconquest today would be unconscionable, in part because such violence should instead be properly directed at the internal enemies Europe has let invade over the past sixty years. The exception, the only lands that might return to Hungary under today's circumstances, is Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia, after the thirty-five year history of "Ukraine" ends, due to their rulers' foolishness in becoming willing proxies of the Regime which rules the West in their failed attempt to bring Russia low. If Hungary is to ever regain any other of its lands, however, it would be a very long process. The nation would first have to first greatly expand its population, far outbreeding what once were its own ethnic minorities, and then the modes and orders of international relations would have to change beyond recognition, permitting a reshuffling of the deck, perhaps under some sort of federal system. Such a change, in the long run, is far from impossible; we are catechized that the so-called rules-based international order (really Left hegemony under American domination) is natural and forever, when it is a mere mote drifting on the sea of history, hopefully

soon to sink and disappear forever. But if any of this will happen, it is for our descendants to say.

And, more broadly, what does this book tell us about the America of 2024? The logical question to ask, in our time when crises are just as prevalent, is what crisis will lead to an existential conflict in our own time. Perhaps the recent attack on a Moscow entertainment venue will lead to Russia taking the gloves off in the Russo-Ukraine War, ending in some type of avoidable catastrophe that, nonetheless, materializes. Maybe someday soon we will be treated to pictures of a mushroom cloud rising into the sky, and we will realize, with the same sinking feeling that a great many men did in August 1914, that everything is different now. None of this is to be wished, but the lessons of this book are that, first, if wishes were horses, beggars would ride, and second, that just because any given crisis does not result in catastrophe does not change that catastrophe is inevitable. As is it said—all apocalypses are falsified, except the last.