

In 1914 Germany and Russia Talked About Avoiding War But Failed to Stop it

By Facing History, adapted by Newsela staff on 11.03.17

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Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany (center) rides with Czar Nicholas II of Russia (saluting). This photo was taken before World War I which broke out in 1914. Photo from Wikipedia

The spark that set off World War I came on June 28, 1914. A young man from Serbia shot and killed Archduke Franz Ferdinand of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The assassination took place in Sarajevo, a town in the territory of Bosnia-Herzegovina in southeast Europe. Austria had taken over Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1908. The assassin belonged to a group that wanted Bosnia to break away from Austria and unite with the Kingdom of Serbia.

Austrian military leaders saw the assassination as an excuse for a quick war with Serbia. They hoped it would end with Austria-Hungary taking over that country. After receiving a promise of full military support from Germany, the Austrian government presented Serbia with a list of demands.

Europeans now expected war, and Austria and Germany began preparing their armies to fight. Russia also began preparing its armies. It had promised to come to the aid of Serbia in any war. After Serbia failed to meet all of Austria's demands, Austria declared war on July 25, 1914.



Trying to avoid a bigger war

Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany and Czar Nicholas of Russia were cousins. They wanted to prevent full-out fighting. As the Austrian army began to invade Serbia, the two men exchanged a series of telegrams. These were messages that in the early 1900s were sent over wires in code.

The message exchanges took place in English. It began with a telegram sent by Nicholas shortly after midnight on July 29, 1914:

In this serious moment, I ask you to help me. A shameful war has been declared against a weak country. The outrage in Russia is enormous. Soon I will be forced to take extreme measures, which will lead to war. To avoid such a disaster I beg you in the name of our old friendship to do what you can to stop Austria from going too far.

On the evening of July 29, Wilhelm responded to Nicholas's message:

I received your telegram and share your wish to preserve peace. I think a direct understanding between your government and Austria is possible. My government is continuing its work to achieve this. Of course, military measures on the part of Russia would be looked upon by Austria as a disaster we both wish to avoid.

Frantic negotiations

At 1:20 a.m. on July 30, Nicholas wrote:

Thank you heartily for your quick answer. Russia's military measures were decided five days ago as a defense against Austria's preparations. I hope that these measures will not interfere with your job as negotiator, which I greatly value. We need your strong pressure on Austria to come to an understanding with us.

Wilhelm responded almost immediately:

Best thanks for your telegram. If Russia mobilizes against Austria, my job as negotiator will be in danger if not ruined. The whole weight of the decision lies solely on your shoulders now. You must bear the responsibility for Peace or War.

The next day, on July 31, Wilhelm sent a second telegram:

I now receive news of serious preparations for war on my Eastern frontier. For the safety of my empire, I must take measures to defend it. In my efforts to preserve peace I have done all I can.

The peace of Europe may still be maintained by you if Russia will agree to stop its military measures.

At about the same time, Czar Nicholas sent this telegram:

We do not want war. As long as the negotiations with Austria are taking place, my troops shall not attack. I give you my solemn word for this.

"Forced to prepare my army"

On August 1, the kaiser replied to the czar:

Thanks for your telegram. Yesterday I pointed out to your government the one way to avoid war. Although I requested an answer by noon today, no word from your government has reached me yet. I, therefore, have been forced to prepare my army.

Within hours, Germany declared war on Russia.

Britain's King George V tried to stop the fighting by sending several telegrams calling for peace, but neither side responded.

Armies across the rest of Europe began preparing for war.

Quiz

- 1 Why did Austria-Hungary feel it had the right to present Serbia with a list of demands?
- (A) Austria-Hungary had promised to support Russia, and Russian leaders were being threatened by Serbia.
 - (B) An Austrian leader had taken over Bosnia-Herzegovina, and he wanted to give it back to Serbia.
 - (C) Serbia had worked secretly with Russia, and had successfully taken Bosnia from Austria-Hungary.
 - (D) A Serbian man had killed an Austrian leader, and Austria-Hungary had the military support of Germany.
- 2 What was the relationship between Kaiser Wilhelm and Czar Nicholas?
- (A) Wilhelm and Nicholas were leaders of countries that were being threatened by the army of Austria.
 - (B) Wilhelm and Nicholas were cousins who tried to negotiate peace between two countries they supported.
 - (C) Wilhelm was trying to convince Bosnia to break away from Austria, but Nicholas wanted it to stay.
 - (D) Wilhelm was trying to defend Archduke Franz Ferdinand, and Nicholas let him be assassinated.
- 3 Read the section "Frantic negotiations."
- Which detail from this section BEST supports the conclusion that Czar Nicholas believed that Kaiser Wilhelm had the power to prevent war?
- (A) Russia's military measures were decided five days ago as a defense against Austria's preparations.
 - (B) We need your strong pressure on Austria to come to an understanding with us.
 - (C) If Russia mobilizes against Austria, my job as negotiator will be in danger if not ruined.
 - (D) As long as the negotiations with Austria are taking place, my troops shall not attack.

4 Read the section "Forced to prepare my army."

Which sentence from the section shows that other leaders were unable to stop the war once Germany and Russia had started preparations?

- (A) Yesterday I pointed out to your government the one way to avoid war.
- (B) Although I requested an answer by noon today, no word from your government has reached me yet.
- (C) Britain's King George tried to stop the fighting by sending several telegrams calling for peace, but neither side responded.
- (D) Armies across the rest of Europe began preparing for war.