



37 Days: Countdown to World War One

25 July: Serbia concedes, but...

Prof Christopher Clark:

It was to here to the New Palace in Potsdam that Wilhelm II returned after his Scandinavian cruise on 27 July, and it's here in Potsdam that he first read the Serbian reply to the Austrian ultimatum. His response to the Serbian reply was to say the least unexpected: 'This document does away with any need for war' he commented. And his next step was to contact the State Secretary for Foreign Affairs Von Jagow and to urge him to press upon Austria the need to stop short of a full scale invasion of Serbia. And in the last minute of the July crisis the Kaiser was trying to apply the brakes. And this was something that his military critics had always foreseen: that this man though he could be very arrogant and aggressive in words would, when push came to shove, and a real war was in the offing would press for peace.

Wilhelm II now urged Chancellor Bethmann and Foreign Secretary Jagow to call off the Austrian assault on Serbia. He seemed desperate to avoid the imminent conflict as the Minister of War recalled; 'The Emperor made confused speeches which give the clear impression that he no longer wants war and is determined to avoid it even if this means leaving Austria-Hungary in the lurch.'

But it was too late. Chancellor Bethmann was thinking in terms of localising the conflict not of preventing it. The Austrians had already declared war against Serbia. Bethmann hoped the Austro-Serbian conflict would run its course without international complications. He was determined to protect his policy against interventions from the sovereign. That he succeeded in doing so is evidence of the Kaiser's weakness at this decisive moment in the crisis. Had the Kaiser really possessed that plenitude of power that is sometimes attributed to him by historians his intervention might have changed the course of world history.