



Cousins on the Brink: The Correspondence of Kaiser Wilhelm II and Tsar Nicholas II on the Eve of the First World War – Between History and Historiography

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Abstract. This article analyses the correspondence between Kaiser Wilhelm II and Tsar Nicholas II during the final days of the July Crisis in 1914, from historical and historiographical perspectives. It first reviews older historiography, particularly the Fischer Kontroverse, which highlighted the manipulation of the telegrams by Wilhelm's court and their role in debates over German war responsibility. The article then reassesses the correspondence in light of contemporary scholarship on the origins of the First World War, situating the exchanges within the broader diplomatic and political context of late July 1914. Finally, it surveys recent historiographical perspectives, which interpret the telegrams not as decisive factors but as one episode in a broader web of interactions during the July Crisis. In this view, the correspondence illuminates the interaction between personal monarchy and bureaucratic statecraft at the twilight of Europe's dynastic age.

Keywords: *First World War, Historiography, July Crisis, Kaiser Wilhelm II, Tsar Nicholas II, Diplomacy.*

Anotacija. Straipsnyje nagrinėjama Vokietijos kaizerio Vilhelmo II ir Rusijos caro Nikolaus II korespondencija telegramomis paskutinėmis 1914 m. Liepos krizės dienomis iš istorinės

ir istoriografinės perspektyvos. Pirmiausia straipsnyje aptariama ankstesnė temos istoriografija, ypač Fischerio kontroversija, kurioje korespondencija buvo matoma kaip kaizerio dvaro manipuliacija, siekiant išvengti Vokietijos atsakomybės dėl karo pradžios. Toliau straipsnyje korespondencija analizuojama šiuolaikinės Pirmojo pasaulinio karo kilmės tyrimų kontekste, siejant ją su platesne diplomatine ir politine aplinka 1914 m. liepos pabaigoje. Galiausiai pristatomos naujausios perspektyvos, kurios telegramas laiko tik vienu iš daugelio epizodų, o ne lemiamu veiksmu kilus krizei 1914 m. liepą. Šiuo požiūriu korespondencija tampa langu pažvelgti į personalinės monarchijos ir biurokratinės valdysenos sąveiką pačiame dinastinės Europos saulėlydyje.

Esminiai žodžiai: *Pirmasis pasaulinis karas, istoriografija, Liepos krizė, kaizeris Vilhelmas II, caras Nikolajus II.*

The correspondence between Kaiser Wilhelm II and Tsar Nicholas II in the final days before the outbreak of the First World War is a widely known episode in modern history. Exchanged during the critical last days of the July Crisis—when the diplomatic confrontation triggered by the Sarajevo assassination reached its most acute and dangerous phase—the so-called *Willy–Nicky telegrams* have been discussed in most serious studies of the crisis or of the war’s origins, though quite often with only minimal attention. Yet, more than a century after 1914, historians remain divided over their meaning. The central question is whether these exchanges represented a sincere attempt by the monarchs to restrain the crisis’s escalation and preserve peace, or were no more than a bluff—an exercise in manipulation designed to ensure that each ruler could later claim the moral high ground once war proved unavoidable.

The character of the documents themselves only heightened this ambiguity. Signing as “Willy” and “Nicky,” the two emperors corresponded in English and adopted an informal, at times even intimate tone. Their publication caused a sensation. In September 1917, the journalist Hermann Bernstein, reporting from revolutionary Russia, first released the texts in the *New York Herald*; four months later, they appeared in book form with a foreword by former U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt.¹ At once dynastic and political, private in form yet public in impact, the telegrams caused multiple layers of interpretation from the outset.

Already in the interwar years, the correspondence figured in scholarly debates on the origins of the Great War, though it was only one of the thousands of sources that were exploited in the wider disputes between revisionists and anti-revisionists of the

¹ BERNSTEIN, Herman. *The Willy-Nicky Correspondence: Being the Secret and Intimate Telegrams Exchanged Between the Kaiser and the Tsar*. With a Foreword by Theodore Roosevelt. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1917 (1918).

Versailles Treaty. In this sense, they became a reference for historians seeking either to defend or to contest the Versailles settlement and its assignment of German war guilt. Yet what is striking is that, despite their ubiquity, the Willy–Nicky telegrams have never been examined in isolation from a strictly historiographical perspective.²

Historiography from Versailles to Fischer

Harry Elmer Barnes, one of the early representatives of revisionist historiography, presented the Willy–Nicky telegrams in his 1925 book *The Genesis of the World War* as a sincere dialogue between the two monarchs. Barnes emphasised that the Tsar's telegram to the Kaiser on 28 July 1914 effectively acknowledged Nicholas's helplessness within his own environment—particularly at court and within the military leadership—in restraining the bellicose factions.³ According to Barnes, Wilhelm interpreted the Tsar's vacillation as a sign that the Russian monarch was weak and unable to control events. This interpretation essentially supported the revisionist view that Germany was not the sole agent responsible for escalating the crisis.⁴

Sidney Bradshaw Fay, whose work, a historian of historiography, John Langdon, has described as the first attempt to produce a broadly impartial study of the causes of the war⁵, also devoted considerable attention to the telegrams. Fay stressed that in the past, the Willy–Nicky correspondence had reinforced Prussian (*sic!*)–Russian friendship and that, in 1914, it was hoped that it might help resolve the crisis. He analysed the first telegram, prepared by the German Foreign Office, which the Kaiser adjusted before sending at 1:45 a.m. on 29 July.⁶ Fay likewise noted the Tsar's weakness—although Nicholas was personally conciliatory, he could not resist pressure from Russian militarists to

² The main research on the historiography of the origins the First World War: MOMBAUER, Annika. Introduction: The Fischer Controversy 50 years on. *Journal of Contemporary History, Special Issue: The Fischer Controversy after 50 Years*, 2013, Vol. 48, No. 2; MOMBAUER, Annika. *The Causes of the First World War: The Long Blame Game*. London–New York: Routledge, 2024; MOMBAUER, Annika. *Guilt or Responsibility? The Hundred-Year Debate on the Origins of World War I*. Central European History, 2015; MOMBAUER, Annika. *The Origins of The First World War: Controversies and Consensus*. London: Taylor & Francis, 2002; LEHMANN, Hartmut. *Historikerkontroversen*. Göttingen: Wallstein, 2001; GEISS, Imanuel. *Studien über Geschichte und Geschichtswissenschaft*. Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972; DROZ, Jacques. *Les causes de la Première Guerre Mondiale*. Essai d'historiographie, Éditions du Seuil, 1973; LANGDON, John W. *July 1914: The Long Debate, 1918–1990*. New York, Oxford: Berg, 1990. A broader context of contemporary historiography on the origins of the First World War, as well as issues of guilt and responsibility, is examined in detail in the dissertation of the author of this article: ŽUKAS, Teodoras. *Pirmojo pasaulinio karo kaltės ir atsakomybės aiškinimai XXI a. Vakarų istoriografijoje*. Doktoro disertacija. Vilniaus universitetas, 2025. Thesis name in English: *Explanations of Guilt and Responsibility for the First World War in the 21st-Century Western Historiography*.

³ BARNES, Harry Elmer. *The Genesis of the World War*. New York: Howard Fertig, 1970 (1925), p. 332–333.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ LANGDON, John W. *July 1914: The Long Debate, 1918–1990*. New York, Oxford: Berg, 1990, p. 32.

⁶ FAY, Sidney Bradshaw. *The Origins of the World War*. New York, 1930, p. 426–436.

initiate general mobilisation. Fay argued that direct communication regarding military preparations angered the Kaiser, who believed he was sincerely mediating between Vienna and St. Petersburg, yet by this time, Russia already had a five-day head start in mobilisation.⁷ Ultimately, Fay concluded that after the Russian mobilisation telegram of 30 July at 6 p.m., there remained no realistic prospect of preserving peace.

A work that has long been neglected, yet remains in many respects an unmatched study of the July Crisis in terms of scope and depth, is Luigi Albertini's monumental account, published during the war and later expanded. Albertini treated the telegrams within the context of serious diplomatic efforts. While he recognised both the artificiality of diplomatic language and attempts to obscure the true nature of the Austro-Russian conflict, he considered the Willy–Nicky correspondence not merely propaganda but a component of real decision-making.⁸ In his view, the Tsar sought an exit right up to the very last days. Still, his weak will, combined with pressure from Russian Prime Minister Sergei Sazonov and the military, ultimately led to his resignation and acquiescence to mobilisation.⁹ Albertini's interpretation thus integrates the psychological dimension of individual agency with the significance of diplomatic communication. Paradoxically, as debates over the origins of the First World War increasingly shifted to Germany, Albertini's work was for a long time nearly forgotten.

The most significant turning point in the historiography of the origins of the First World War occurred in 1961, when Professor Fritz Fischer of the University of Hamburg published his book *Griff nach der Weltmacht*.¹⁰ Unlike the previously established compromise that attributed collective responsibility for the outbreak of the war, Fischer focused squarely on Germany. He argued that Germany deliberately sought a European war and used the Sarajevo incident as a convenient precedent. Fischer's book provoked a significant debate in Germany, known as the *Fischer Controversy*.¹¹

In this sense, Fischer's historiographical revolution of the 1960s–1970s radically shifted the field's focus. In his first book (*Griff nach der Weltmacht*), Fischer contended that Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg recognised the inevitability of war and deliberately sought to place the blame on Russia. According to Fischer, the telegrams sent in the Kaiser's name were used as instruments to construct a narrative of Russian culpability.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ ALBERTINI, Luigi. *Origins of the War of 1914*. London; New York, Oxford University Press, 1952–1957, Vol. II, p. 554–564.

⁹ Ibid., p. 574.

¹⁰ FISCHER, Fritz. *Griff nach der Weltmacht: Die Kriegszielpolitik des kaiserlichen Deutschland 1914–1918*. Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1961.

¹¹ SCHÖLLGEN, Gregor. Griff nach der Weltmacht? 25 Jahre Fischer-Kontroverse. In *Historisches Jahrbuch*, 1986, 106, p. 386–406.

He even described the Kaiser's declared efforts as "a theatrical performance"—the aim was not genuinely to prevent war, but to record Russia as the aggressor.¹²

In his second book, *Krieg der Illusionen* (1969), Fischer, *inter alia*, emphasised a longer-term strategic logic: German mobilisation was not a spontaneous act but had deeper roots. Within the context of the telegrams, he highlighted that the telegram prepared by the Chancellor on 30 July, which portrayed the Kaiser in an innocent light, was deliberately crafted as a document of particular historical significance.¹³ This demonstrates that the telegrams were part of a premeditated political and propagandistic strategy.

After the *Fischer Controversy* subsided, a nuanced "Fischer consensus" emerged during the latter half of the twentieth century—most Western scholars agreed that Germany bore primary responsibility for the outbreak of war in 1914. In this context, the telegrams were a significant instrument of political communication and the positioning of blame, even if emphases varied. John C. G. Röhl, one of the most meticulous biographers of the Kaiser, adopted and expanded Fischer's thesis: the telegrams were a conscious tool of the German political leadership during the final days of the July Crisis, aimed at shaping both domestic and international narratives of the events. Röhl illustrated this in his biographical analysis, showing in detail how Wilhelm and his entourage's rhetoric evolved while the ultimate objective remained to position Germany politically on the eve of war as the victim of Russia's aggression.¹⁴

Viewed against this historiographical panorama, the Willy–Nicky correspondence can now be examined as a historical fact within the July Crisis. Based on the latest historiography and source publications, the correspondence is analysed independently of other contemporary events better to illuminate its political, rhetorical, and circumstantial content. Once this step is undertaken, the question can be addressed of how modern historical studies qualitatively interpret and evaluate the Willy–Nicky correspondence in ways that differ from earlier scholarship.

My dear Nicky...

The correspondence between the Kaiser and the Tsar was conducted via telegraph, which in 1914 remained a relatively new instrument of rapid communication for diplomacy. Recent studies emphasise that the increased speed of communication afforded by the telegraph—whereby ministries and governments were inundated with messages

¹² FISCHER, Fritz. *Griff nach der Weltmacht: Die Kriegszielpolitik des kaiserlichen Deutschland 1914–1918*. Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1961. 79.

¹³ FISCHER, Fritz. *Krieg der Illusionen: Die deutsche Politik von 1911 bis 1914*. Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1969, p. 707.

¹⁴ RÖHL, John. *Wilhelm II. Der Weg in den Abgrund 1900–1914*. München: C. H. Beck, 2008, p. 1130–1134.

during a diplomatic crisis—hindered smooth decision-making in the July Crisis. The rapidity introduced by the telegraph thus constituted an additional factor that fueled confusion, anxiety, and heightened emotional tension.¹⁵ For example, on 27 July 1914, the French ambassador to Russia Maurice Paléologue noted in his diary that he was “overwhelmed by the number of telegrams and calls, my head is spinning.”¹⁶

Another distinctive innovation in the Kaiser–Tsar correspondence was its conduct in English. This was somewhat unusual, as French still dominated diplomacy in the early twentieth century. However, both monarchs were closely related to the British royal family: Wilhelm II was a grandson of Queen Victoria, and Nicholas II’s wife was also a granddaughter of Queen Victoria. This familial proximity to the British court meant that both rulers were fluent in English.

First, it is necessary to consider the dynamics, course, and key events of the July Crisis leading up to the first telegram, sent at the end of July¹⁷:

28 June: Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary and his wife Sophie Chotek are assassinated in Sarajevo.

5–6 July: The Austro-Hungarian delegation visits Berlin, where the German Kaiser and Chancellor grant Austria-Hungary a so-called “blank cheque,” confirming Germany’s support for whatever decision Austria chooses regarding Serbia. Most of Germany’s political elite leave for summer holidays.

14 July: Vienna decides to prepare an ultimatum to Serbia.

23 July: Austria presents the ultimatum to Serbia.

24 July: Russia begins a secret partial mobilisation in the Kazan, Odessa, and Kyiv military districts. The French ambassador to Russia, Maurice Paléologue, unilaterally supports Russia’s plans to defend Serbia, without prior confirmation from Paris.

25 July: Serbia accepts Austria’s ultimatum with one reservation: it refuses Austrian participation in the investigation of the assassination. Austria interprets this as a rejection of the ultimatum and announces mobilisation.

26 July: Great Britain proposes an international conference of ambassadors to manage the crisis.

27 July: Kaiser Wilhelm II returns to Berlin from a North Sea cruise.

Thus, at what stage was the crisis on 28 July 1914, when the Kaiser dispatched the first telegram to the Tsar? On the morning of 28 July, the Kaiser examined Serbia’s response to the Austro-Hungarian ultimatum and concluded that, in view of its content, any justification for Austria to initiate hostilities against Serbia had effectively lapsed

¹⁵ NICKLES, David Paull. *Under the Wire: How the Telegraph Changed Diplomacy*. London: Harvard University Press, 2003, p. 101–102.

¹⁶ PALÉOLOGUE, Maurice. *An Ambassador’s Memoirs*. London: Hutchinson, 1923, p. 37.

¹⁷ A Synthesis of the events and chronology of the July Crisis: WINTER, Jay; PROST, Antoine. *The Great War in History: Debates and Controversies, 1914 to the Present*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020, p. 37; STRACHAN, Hew. *The First World War*. London: Simon and Schuster, 2014, p. 9–31.

(*entfällt*).¹⁸ He proposed that Austria occupy Serbian territory near Belgrade, on the condition that the Serbs fulfil their commitments and comply fully with the ultimatum's demands.¹⁹ This came as a surprise—Berlin had, for some time, been pressuring Vienna to take military action as quickly as possible to contain the conflict, yet on this occasion the Kaiser indicated that war was no longer necessary.

As of that day, Berlin remained unaware of Austria's precise intentions or the timing of any actions against Serbia, whether these would involve occupation, annexation, or territorial redistribution with other states. For instance, the Kaiser was certainly unaware that Austria would declare war on Serbia later that very afternoon. German Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg did not transmit the full scope of the aforementioned Kaiser's directive to Vienna, which indicated that, following Serbia's response to the ultimatum, the justification for war had effectively vanished.²⁰

On that day, Bethmann Hollweg, moreover, rejected the British proposal for an international conference and instead suggested a bilateral meeting between Austria and Russia. He also assured London that Germany would do everything in its power to reach a negotiated understanding with Russia.²¹ Meanwhile, Austrian Foreign Minister Leopold Berchtold informed the British ambassador that he disagreed with the British assessment that Serbia's reply left room for diplomacy and rejected London's attempts to mediate.²²

At the same time, Austria declared war on Serbia in the middle of July 28. It remains an open question whether Vienna consciously disregarded the German Kaiser's instruction to refrain from overt military action, or whether this directive from Berlin had not been explicitly communicated to Vienna.

In the preceding days, Berlin had resumed contact with Russian Prime Minister Sergei Sazonov. Initially, he indicated a willingness to support negotiations with the Austrians; however, Sazonov's position shifted within a single day—on July 28, he informed the German ambassador that Austria had no intention of negotiating and that, in his view, Germany was encouraging Austria to adopt a hardline stance.²³

Upon learning of Austria's declaration of war on Serbia later that same evening, Sazonov immediately pressed the Tsar to initiate a general mobilisation. The Tsar, however, refused to order a full-scale official mobilisation, fearing that such a step

¹⁸ CLARK, Christopher. *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went To War in 1914*. London: Penguin Book, 2013, p. 512.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 523.

²¹ MARTEL, Gordon. *The Month That Changed The World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 269.

²² Ibid., p. 272.

²³ OTTE, T. G. *July Crisis: The World's Descent into the War. Summer 1914*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, p. 357.

would provoke Germany. Nonetheless, Russia authorised a formal partial mobilisation against Austria-Hungary.²⁴

By the end of 28 July, attention turns to the first telegram. It is clear that, amid the events of that day, German chancellor Bethman Hollweg was concerned about questions of war responsibility should a conflict erupt. He appears to have understood the situation fully: he likely knew that Austria would imminently declare war on Serbia and that this would probably provoke Russian involvement, potentially escalating into a Europe-wide conflict. Consequently, he inquired, following advice conveyed by the German military attaché in Russia, whether it would be prudent for the German and Russian monarchs to exchange their views directly via telegraph.²⁵ It is established that at least the first telegram was composed on behalf of the Kaiser by the Chancellor.

In this initial message, sent late on 28 July, the Kaiser acknowledged the implications of Austria's actions against Serbia for Russia. He emphasised that the monarchs should ensure that those responsible for the assassination were duly brought to justice. At the same time, the Kaiser recognised the difficulties the Tsar faced in managing domestic pressures. Drawing upon their longstanding and cordial personal friendship, the Kaiser affirmed his commitment to encourage Austria to seek an agreement with Russia.²⁶

During the night of 29 July, the Tsar replied to the Kaiser's message, characterising Austria's actions as a disgraceful war against a weak state. He emphasised that the indignation in Russia over Austria's conduct—"shared fully by me," he noted—was immense. Nicholas further indicated that he would soon face pressure to take radical measures. To avert the catastrophe of a European-wide war, the Tsar requested that Germany restrain its ally from overstepping.²⁷

However, under pressure from Prime Minister Sazonov and the Russian generals, the Tsar, immediately after sending this telegram, signed the order for the full mobilisation of the Russian armed forces. On 29 July, a stormy meeting of the highest officials took place in Berlin. The Kaiser reproached Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg for incompetence, holding him responsible for allowing the crisis to reach such a critical juncture. The German leadership subsequently resolved to wait and observe how Vienna would respond to the proposal to halt military action at Belgrade.²⁸ Vienna expressed acute concern over Germany's apparent reticence and calls for restraint, yet Austria declared that it did not intend to pursue any territorial annexation in Serbia. Concurrently, Germany received its first explicit warning from Great Britain: London emphasised

²⁴ MARTEL, Gordon. *The Month That Changed The World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 283.

²⁵ OTTE, T. G. *July Crisis: The World's Descent into the War*. Summer 1914. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, p. 354.

²⁶ 28 July: Wilhelm II to Nicholas II. In Annika Mombauer, *The origins of the First World War. Diplomatic and military documents* (p. 417). Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013.

²⁷ 29 July: Wilhelm II to Nicholas II. In Annika Mombauer, *The origins of the First World War. Diplomatic and military documents* (p. 418). Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013.

²⁸ MCMEKIN, Sean. *July 1914*. New York: Basic Books, 2013, p. 274.

that the previously maintained “friendly tone” did not imply that Britain would remain uninvolved. Through the German ambassador in London, the Chancellor was informed that, in the event of a general European war, it would be exceedingly difficult for Britain to maintain neutrality.²⁹

In his response sent on the evening of 29 July, the Kaiser asserted that he did not consider Austria’s actions against Serbia to constitute a “disgraceful war,” and that the measures Austria had already undertaken were necessary to ensure compliance with the ultimatum’s terms. At the same time, he emphasised that Austria did not intend to annex any Serbian territory, suggesting that Russia could remain merely a spectator to the Austro-Serbian conflict. Conversely, the Kaiser warned that any Russian military intervention would be regarded as a misfortune and would jeopardise Germany’s mediation efforts.³⁰

Upon receiving this telegram from the Kaiser, the Tsar rescinded his previous order for general mobilisation within 20 minutes and instead authorised mobilisation solely against Austria.³¹ This decision by the Tsar stands out as one of the most striking moments in the entire correspondence, illustrating how a single telegram could temporarily alter a political-military course of action. Later that same evening, around 20:30, the Tsar sent a telegram requesting clarification from the Kaiser regarding the position communicated to him by the German ambassador. In this message, the Tsar also suggested that the Austria–Serbia dispute might appropriately be referred to the Hague Conference.³²

That evening, Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg summoned the British ambassador and presented a proposal: if Britain remained neutral, Germany would respect Dutch independence and refrain from annexing French territory in the event of war. Strategically, this proved a tragically flawed offer, which London dismissed outright.³³ The proposal implied that Belgian sovereignty would be violated in the event of war, and, coupled with Germany’s ongoing mediation attempts with Austria, it could appear to London as a straightforward deception.

At 1:00 a.m. on July 30, having received no prompt reply from the Kaiser, the Tsar sent another telegram. In it, he emphasised that Russia’s mobilisation measures had been decided five days earlier and were intended to defend against Austria’s preparations—referring here to the partial mobilisation directed against Austria-Hungary. The

²⁹ Ibid., p. 278–279.

³⁰ 29 July: Wilhelm II to Nicholas II. In Annika Mombauer, *The origins of the First World War. Diplomatic and military documents* (p. 420). Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013.

³¹ CLARK, Christopher. *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went To War in 1914*. London: Penguin Book, 2013, p. 512.

³² 29 July: Nicholas II to Wilhelm II. In Annika Mombauer, *The origins of the First World War. Diplomatic and military documents* (p. 421). Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013.

³³ CLARK, Christopher. *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went To War in 1914*. London: Penguin Book, 2013, p. 497.

Tsar reiterated that he expected intense pressure from the Kaiser on Austria to reach an accord with Russia.³⁴

On July 30 at 3:30 p.m., the Kaiser emphasised that Austria had mobilised its forces solely against Serbia, while Russia had mobilised against Austria; consequently, Germany's role as mediator was at risk, if it had not already been undermined. The Kaiser stressed that "The whole weight of the decision lies solely on you[r] shoulders now, who have to bear the responsibility for Peace or War."³⁵

By midday in Saint Petersburg, Prime Minister Sazonov finally persuaded the Tsar to sign the order for general mobilisation. Sazonov argued that all of Russia's previous efforts to maintain peace had been rebuffed by Germany, leaving no hope of preserving peace and necessitating preparation for war. However, at this time, Paris advised that Russia should refrain from any actions that might provoke Germany into declaring mobilisation. Concurrently, France ordered its forces to withdraw several kilometres from the German border to avoid provoking Germany.³⁶

On July 31, in a telegram, the Tsar stated that it was technically impossible to halt Russia's military preparations, which had become necessary in response to Austria's mobilisation. He emphasised that, as long as negotiations between Austria and Serbia were ostensibly ongoing (although in reality they had ceased), Russian forces would refrain from any provocative actions: "I put all my trust in God's mercy and hope in your successful mediation in Vienna for the welfare of our countries and for the peace of Europe," the Tsar affirmed.³⁷

On the morning of July 31, Berlin received official notification of Russia's general mobilisation. By midday, the Kaiser declared a state of imminent war (*Kriegsgefahr*).³⁸

A few hours later, on July 31, the Kaiser, in a telegram to the Tsar, reported receiving credible information regarding significant Russian military preparations on the German Eastern Front. He emphasised that Russia still had the capacity to avert a tragedy affecting the entire civilised world.³⁹ He stressed that "Nobody is threatening the honour or power of Russia, who can well afford to await the result of my mediation."⁴⁰

Berlin issued an ultimatum to St. Petersburg, demanding that Russia cancel its mobilisation by 11:00 on August 1. Simultaneously, Germany sent an ultimatum to

³⁴ 30 July: Nicholas to Wilhelm II. In Annika Mombauer, *The origins of the First World War. Diplomatic and military documents* (p. 447). Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 448.

³⁶ FROMKIN, David. *Europe's Last Summer*. New York: Knopf, 2004, p. 233.

³⁷ 31 July: Nicholas II to Wilhelm II. In Annika Mombauer, *The origins of the First World War. Diplomatic and military documents* (p. 491). Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013.

³⁸ STRACHAN, Hew. *The First World War. To Arms!* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, Vol. I, p. 89.

³⁹ KRUMEICH, Gerd. *Juli 1914*. Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh GmbH & Co, 2013, p. 164.

⁴⁰ 31 July: Nicholas II to Wilhelm II. In Annika Mombauer, *The origins of the First World War. Diplomatic and military documents* (p. 491–492). Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013.

France, requiring confirmation of French neutrality in the event of a German-Russian war, with a deadline of 16:00 on August 1.⁴¹

Nevertheless, in the capitals, discussions continued regarding the formula for a halt at Belgrade that Germany had proposed to Austria a few days earlier, with British support: Austria would stop at Belgrade, Vienna would negotiate directly with St. Petersburg through German mediation, and in the meantime, Russia would suspend all military preparations. On that day, however, Austria received news of Russia's general mobilisation. Emperor Franz Joseph of the Habsburg Empire, in a telegram to the Kaiser, expressed gratitude for Germany's mediation efforts but emphasised that, in his view, there was no longer room for diplomacy.⁴²

Thus, 31 July marks a decisive turning point in the July Crisis. Austria refused to halt its operations against Serbia, Russia declined to demobilise, and Germany's ultimatum to Russia was set to expire the following day, shortly before noon, while Berlin simultaneously demanded French neutrality. After the 11:00 a.m. deadline on 1 August passed without any response from Russia, Germany declared mobilisation. The bulk of the German army began moving toward Luxembourg, where the first manoeuvres were scheduled to commence.

In a telegram sent on 1 August, the Tsar informed the Kaiser that he understood Germany's need to mobilise, but requested confirmation that these measures did not constitute a declaration of war and that negotiations aimed at preserving general peace were still ongoing.⁴³

On the same day, 1 August, the Kaiser wrote to the Tsar, noting that Germany had waited until noon for a Russian decision to revoke its mobilisation, yet no message had reached Berlin. Consequently, Germany had been compelled to mobilise its armed forces. The Kaiser emphasised that "Immediate affirmative, clear, and unmistakable answer from your government is the only way to avoid endless misery."⁴⁴

The correspondence between the Tsar and the Kaiser concluded at this point. On 2 August, Germany issued an ultimatum to Belgium, demanding the creation of a corridor for German troops to advance into France. On 3 August, Belgium rejected the ultimatum. The following morning, 4 August, Germany commenced its invasion of Belgium, and that same evening, Britain declared war on Germany.

⁴¹ MULLIGAN, William. *The Origins of The First World War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 220–221.

⁴² FROMKIN, David. *Europe's Last Summer*. New York: Knopf, 2004, p. 235.

⁴³ 1 August: Nicholas II to Wilhelm II. *The Willy-Nicky Telegrams*. Prieiga per internetą: <https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/The_Willy-Nicky_Telegrams>

⁴⁴ 1 August: Wilhelm II to Nicholas II. *The Willy-Nicky Telegrams*. Prieiga per internetą: <https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/The_Willy-Nicky_Telegrams>

Recent Historiography View

While the factual history of the Willy–Nicky correspondence has already been considered in the context of the July Crisis, it is now necessary to turn to recent historiography on the origins of the First World War. Broadly speaking, recent writing has stressed that the significance of these telegrams lies less in what they reveal about individual willpower or dynastic intimacy, and more in the ways they illuminate the structural realities of European diplomacy on the eve of war.

Among contemporary historians, the most influential figure is undoubtedly Christopher Clark, whose *Sleepwalkers* has been widely hailed as the most important study of the war's origins since Fritz Fischer.⁴⁵ Clark emphasises that the correspondence, although framed in intimate and familial language, was never genuinely private. Both the German and Russian foreign offices carefully vetted and shaped the exchanges, so that what appeared to be spontaneous personal appeals were in fact highly mediated instruments of state policy.⁴⁶ In Clark's interpretation, the telegrams constitute a form of "monarch-to-monarch signalling" that reflected the persistence of dynastic structures within European politics, but did not represent genuine sovereign autonomy. At most, they could delay decisions—such as Nicholas's brief hesitation over general mobilisation—but they were incapable of fundamentally altering the strategic positions of the two powers.⁴⁷ The correspondence was therefore of fleeting significance: symbolic, but never determinative.

It is worth noting that Clark does not adopt the sharper position advanced by John C. G. Röhl, who, as was said, argued that the exchanges amounted to little more than a German charade orchestrated to deflect blame onto Russia. Instead, Clark situates the telegrams within a broader structural analysis, where the monarchs functioned less as autonomous actors and more as transmitters of their respective governments' positions.

T.G. Otte, in a highly detailed analysis focused solely on the July Crisis, builds on this by stressing the hybrid character of the correspondence: simultaneously private and political, dynastic and governmental. The very fact that such exchanges were possible in 1914 reflected the persistence of royal prerogative within Europe's constitutional monarchies.⁴⁸ Yet Otte, like Clark, argues that these telegrams were part of the broader political machinery. The monarchs, especially in this case, functioned less as autonomous decision-makers than as vessels through which their governments projected policy.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ JONES, Heather. As the Centenary Approaches: The Regeneration of First World War Historiography. *The Historical Journal*, 2013.

⁴⁶ CLARK, Christopher. *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went To War in 1914*. London: Penguin Book, 2013, p. 512–513.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ OTTE, T. G. *July Crisis: The World's Descent into the War*. Summer 1914. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, p. 394–397.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 395.

Gerd Krumeich, historian of the older generation of German historians and the pupil of Fritz Fischer, sees the first telegram from Wilhelm II to Nicholas as marking a genuine turning point in German policy. Having initially refused to pressure Austria-Hungary, Berlin now began to contemplate a moderating role. By reminding Nicholas of dynastic solidarity and offering himself—albeit obliquely—as a mediator, Wilhelm signalled that Germany might not support Austria unconditionally.⁵⁰ Krumeich thus interprets the correspondence as a moment when Germany briefly reconsidered its rigid alignment with Vienna.⁵¹ Thus, this interlude complicates the image of Berlin as unwaveringly determined on escalation.

Gordon Martel, by contrast, situates the telegrams within a framework of calculated political strategy. He emphasises that Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg actively urged Wilhelm to appeal to Nicholas's sense of monarchical solidarity—not primarily as a genuine attempt to avert war, but rather as a means of ensuring that Russia would appear as the aggressor should conflict prove unavoidable. In this interpretation, the telegrams served a dual purpose: they functioned both as diplomatic signalling to St. Petersburg and as pre-emptive propaganda aimed at shaping European perceptions.⁵² Martel remains one of the relatively few contemporary historians to advance this interpretation of the correspondence.

Sean McMeekin stands out among recent historians for advancing one of the most radical reinterpretations of the July Crisis. More so even than Clark, McMeekin assigns Russia the central role of villain in the unfolding of events in 1914—a line of argument he had already outlined in his earlier work only on Russia⁵³ and later developed into a more comprehensive study devoted exclusively to the July Crisis. In this account, McMeekin underscores that the Willy–Nicky correspondence was never simply the product of the Kaiser's personal initiative.⁵⁴ The telegrams, he argues, were drafted mainly under the supervision of Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg and his officials, with Wilhelm's role confined to softening certain phrasings.⁵⁵ For McMeekin, the exchange vividly illustrates the gap between the appearance of dynastic authority and the reality of bureaucratic control. Even as the two emperors attempted to assure each other of their peaceful intentions, the structural forces driving Europe toward war—the Austrian ultimatum, Russian mobilisation plans, and Germany's binding commitment to Vienna—rendered their gestures futile.⁵⁶ In McMeekin's analysis, responsibility lay above all with the Russian leadership surrounding Nicholas II, rather than with the

⁵⁰ KRUMEICH, Gerd. *Juli 1914*. Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh GmbH & Co, 2013, p. 134–135.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² MARTEL, Gordon. *The Month That Changed The World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 268.

⁵³ MCMEEKIN, Sean. *The Russian Origins of the First World War*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011.

⁵⁴ MCMEEKIN, Sean. *July 1914*. New York: Basic Books, 2013, p. 255–259.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

Tsar himself. As he puts it, had the sovereigns' authority been as absolute in practice as it seemed on paper, they might have succeeded in averting disaster; instead, even as their "peace" telegrams were being exchanged, Russia was already preparing for war.⁵⁷

Notably, some recent historians—William Mulligan⁵⁸ among them—have downplayed or even omitted the Willy–Nicky correspondence from their accounts of the July Crisis. This absence is in itself revealing. Whereas older narratives often foregrounded the drama of two royal cousins, contemporary historiography tends to treat the telegrams as marginal or as part of the dense, chaotic web of communications that characterised the last days of July 1914.

There is, of course, no single consensus within the recent scholarship, but specific patterns can be discerned. The telegrams are generally seen as more revealing of appearances than of genuine agency. The prevailing trend has been to minimise their direct impact, regarding them less as lost opportunities for peace and more as reflections of the severely constrained role of monarchs within a system increasingly dominated by bureaucracies. In this light, the Willy–Nicky correspondence matters less for its immediate effects on the unfolding of the July Crisis and more for what it discloses about the waning—yet still resonant—authority of crowned heads in pre-1914 Europe.

Conclusions

Just as the broader interpretations of the causes of the First World War have undergone profound shifts over the past century, so too has the understanding of seemingly minor episodes such as the Willy–Nicky correspondence. In the interwar years, the telegrams figured only as a marginal episode within the larger debates between revisionists and anti-revisionists. Luigi Albertini, for example, interpreted the exchange as a sincere—if ultimately futile—attempt, above all by the weak-willed Tsar, to control the escalating crisis.

From the 1960s onward, however, the debate was decisively shaped by the Fischer controversy. In the wake of Fritz Fischer's *Griff nach der Weltmacht* (1961) and the subsequent scholarly disputes, Fischer's followers tended to read the Willy–Nicky correspondence as little more than political theatre staged by German decision-makers, who had already resolved upon war and now sought to shift responsibility onto Russia. This interpretation, with its emphasis on farce and manipulation, must be understood in the context of a historiographical climate preoccupied with establishing German *Schuld*. This search frequently drew upon essentialist notions of a German *Sonderweg* and a conspiratorial German propensity toward aggression.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 259.

⁵⁸ MULLIGAN, William. *The Origins of The First World War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Recent historiography, by contrast, has moved beyond this Fischerian paradigm. While the content of the telegrams was undoubtedly shaped by government and foreign office officials, the personal imprint of the monarchs is also evident. Nicholas II's temporary decision on 29 July to halt general mobilisation demonstrates that, however briefly, the Tsar's personal intervention could run counter to the dominant views of his senior advisers. Similarly, Wilhelm II's efforts to persuade Vienna not to advance beyond Belgrade, to avoid general mobilisation, and to leave open the possibility of dialogue with Russia appear genuine, if ultimately ineffectual, attempts at mediation. That said, by the time the Kaiser returned to Berlin on 27 July, he had already lost meaningful control over the crisis. Decision-making on both sides was increasingly driven by other actors—Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg's initiatives in Berlin, Vienna, and London on the German side, and Prime Minister Sazonov's shifting positions toward Vienna and Berlin on the Russian side.

It would therefore be misleading to interpret the Willy–Nicky correspondence as either a wholly private, autonomous exchange or, conversely, as mere stagecraft by governments that had already chosen war. The monarchs retained some capacity to intervene, even if their agency operated within the broader constraints of a Weberian bureaucratic politics characteristic of early twentieth-century Europe. For most contemporary historians, the telegrams appear significant only in the narrow context of Russian mobilisation, rather than as decisive turning points. They constitute just one episode among the countless diplomatic and political manoeuvres of late July 1914—illuminating, but not determinative.

What emerges from recent scholarship is a marked retreat from John Röhl's characterisation of the correspondence as simple farce. Instead, the new historiography treats it as a window into the complex interplay between personal monarchy and bureaucratic statecraft at the twilight of Europe's dynastic age. In this sense, the evolving interpretation of the Willy–Nicky correspondence is emblematic of a broader shift: the move into a post-Fischerian paradigm, in which there is no German culpability assumed *a priori*, and the July Crisis is seen, in the words of Christopher Clark, "as a modern event, the most complex of modern times, perhaps of any time so far."⁵⁹ The telegrams, once dismissed as theatre or inflated as decisive, now serve primarily as a reminder of how limited even Europe's most powerful monarchs had become in a world increasingly governed by alliances, bureaucracies, and modern political systems.

⁵⁹ CLARK, Christopher. *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went To War in 1914*. London: Penguin Book, 2013, p. xvii.

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Pusbroliai ant bedugnės krašto: kaizerio Vilhelmo II ir caro Nikolajaus II korespondencija Pirmojo pasaulinio karo išvakarėse – tarp istorijos ir istoriografijos

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Santrauka

Straipsnyje nagrinėjama kaizerio Vilhelmo II ir caro Nikolajaus II korespondencija Pirmojo pasaulinio karo išvakarėse, apimanti paskutines 1914 m. liepos krizės dienas, bei šio epizodo interpretacija istoriografijoje. Pirmiausia aptariama ankstyvoji istoriografija, kurioje telegramos nebuvo laikomos esminiu Liepos krizės epizodu. Kaip teigė Luigi Albertini, telegramos buvo nuoširdžios, tačiau bergždžios, ypač Nikolajaus II, pastangos suvaldyti besirutuliojančią krizę. Toliau straipsnyje aptariama Fritz Fischerio 1961 m. publikuotos monografijos įtaka ir kaip Fischerio tyrėjai pabrėžė kaizerio dvaro manipuliacinį vaidmenį bei laikė korespondencijas Berlyno politiniu teatru, siekiant išvengti Vokietijos atsakomybės dėl karo pradžios.

Teigiama, kad naujais tyrimais (istoriografija) peržengia šią dichotomiją. Nors telegramų turinį formavo patarėjai ir biurokratiniai mechanizmai, monarchų asmeninė įtaka taip pat matoma: caras Nikolajus II liepos 29 d. laikinai sustabdė visuotinę mobilizaciją, o kaizeris

Vilhelmas II siekė sušvelninti Vienos veiksmus. Vis dėlto liepos pabaigoje abu valdovai prarado realią kontrolę, esminę įtaką sprendimams turėjo Vokietijos kancleris Bethmannas Hollwegas, o Rusijoje – ministras pirmininkas Sazonovas. Liepos krizės sprendimų kontekste ši korespondencija svarbi daugiausia dėl Rusijos mobilizacijos.

Galiausiai teigiama, kad telegramų negalima laikyti nei visiškai autonomiškais, nei tik biurokratų inscenizuotais dokumentais. Korespondencija, be kita ko, parodo monarchų valdžios ir modernių politinių struktūrų sąveiką Pirmojo pasaulinio karo išvakarėse. Istorio grafinis interpretacijų poslinkis – nuo tarpukario, per Fischerio kontroversiją, postfischerinį pritarimą pirmutinei Vokietijos atsakomybei iki šiandienio kolektyvinės atsakomybės sugrįžimo – atskleidžia tiek Europos monarchų galios ribotumą, tiek Liepos krizės radikalų sudėtingumą.

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